

OVERVIEW OF TAORMINA - SICILY

53km (33 miles) N of Catania, 53km (33 miles) S of Messina, 250km (155 miles) E of Palermo, 97km (60 miles) S of Gioia Tauro (Calabria).

Taormina was just too good to remain unspoiled. Dating from the 4th century B.C., it hugs the edge of a cliff overlooking the Ionian Sea. The sea and even the railroad track lie below, connected by bus routes. Looming in the background is Mount Etna, an active volcano. Noted for its mild climate, the most beautiful town in all of Sicily seems to have no other reason to exist than for the thousands upon thousands of visitors who flock here for dining, bar-hopping, shopping, and enjoying the nearby beaches.

International visitors pack the main street, Corso Umberto I, from April to October. After that, Taormina quiets down considerably. In spite of the hordes that descend in summer, Taormina has remained charming, with much of its medieval character intact. It's filled with intimate piazzas and palazzi dating from the 15th to the 19th century. You'll find a restaurant for every day of the week, and countless stores sell everything from fine antiques to cheap trinkets.

You can always escape the throngs during the day by seeking out adventures, perhaps climbing Mount Etna, walking to the Castelmola, or making a day trip to Syracuse (see chapter 10). In summer you can hang out at the beaches below the town (although Taormina itself isn't right on a beach). At night you can enjoy jazz and disco or just spend time in a local tavern or restaurant.

Lots of people contributed to putting Taormina on the map. First inhabited by a tribe known as the Siculi, it has known many conquerors, such as the Greeks, Carthaginians, Romans, Saracens, French, and Spanish. Its first tourist is said to have been Goethe, who arrived in 1787 and recorded his impressions in his *Journey to Italy*. Other Germans followed, including a red-haired Prussian, Otto Geleng. Arriving at the age of 20 in Taormina, he recorded its beauties in his painted landscapes. These landscapes were exhibited in Paris and caused much excitement -- people had to find out for themselves whether Taormina was really that beautiful.

Another German, Wilhelm von Gloeden, arrived to photograph not only the town but also nude boys crowned with laurel wreaths. His pictures sent European high society flocking to Taormina. Von Gloeden's photos, some of which are printed in official tourist literature to this day, form one of the most enduring legends of Taormina. Souvenir shops still sell the pictures which, considered scandalous in their day, seem tame -- even innocent -- by today's standards.

In von Gloeden's footsteps came a host of celebs hoping to see what all the excitement was about: Truman Capote, Tennessee Williams, Marlene Dietrich, Joan Crawford, Rita Hayworth, and Greta Garbo. Always in disguise, sometimes as "Harriet Brown," Garbo used Taormina as a vacation retreat from 1950 until her last mysterious arrival in 1979. Garbo and many other stars stayed at a villa on the road to Castelmola owned by Gayelord Hauser, the celebrated dietitian to Hollywood stars of the golden age. In time, another wave of stars arrived, including Elizabeth Taylor and Richard Burton, Cary Grant, and the woman who turned Grant down, Sophia Loren.

