

# Worth its salt

In the shadow of a cluster of volcanoes, **Stephanie Drax** discovers vineyards and olive groves, a salt lake and stunning views on the tranquil Aeolian island of Salina

**I**t's a flight to Catania, a 90-minute drive to Milazzo, followed by a 90-minute hydrofoil ride before we ultimately land on Salina, but this is an island that can afford to play hard to get. One of seven islands in the Aeolian archipelago off the Sicilian coast, its steep twin mountains - once volcanoes - are swathed in lush vegetation, blossoming trees and wildflowers. Though Salina has been inhabited intermittently since the Bronze Age, nature here is raw and unspoilt; on docking at the petite port of Santa Marina, there's an instant aura of tranquillity. We've arrived, but also retreated millennia.

Salina was christened by the ancient Romans and named after the salt lake in Lingua. Today, the island is synonymous with juicy capers and golden Malvasia, a sweet wine that is produced here. Hire a moped and follow the two roads that connect the clusters of inhabitants across 10 square miles - in Santa Marina, Lingua, Malfa, Pollara, Leni and Rinella. On your journey, you'll pass vineyards and olive groves, lemon and orange orchards, caper bushes and cacti. Just try not to let the indigo Tyrrhenian Sea and the island of Stromboli distract you; Stromboli's active volcano regularly spurts smoke and sparks into the air.

The primeval sight of a smouldering Stromboli is best absorbed from the expansive lounge terrace at Capofaro. A serene retreat set amid a working Malvasia vineyard, it is Salina's only five-star hotel. Low buildings are subtly embedded in the sloping landscape, and pittosporum bushes perfume the air with a jasmine-like scent. In July and August, the resort thrums with low-key glamour, guests milling about around the decked pool or in the cool of their white, minimalist rooms with cane-shaded terraces.

Another treasured Salina hideaway is Hotel

Signum, which is a huddle of rose and yellow houses converted from a small hamlet in Malfa. Owned by the Caruso-Rametta family, it feels like a charming, sprawling home - albeit with a geothermic spa, infinity pool and a cracking restaurant. Martina, the 25-year-old daughter and resident chef, routinely astonishes guests with her culinary inventions, such as delectable codfish cannoli or a biscuit sandwich of salty caper ice cream.

An epic view is standard for most restaurants on Salina. Take the Al Cappero farmhouse in Pollara, the village made famous as the beach location for the film *Il Postino*. In the spring and autumn - when you have the island almost to yourself - you can lunch simply on caponata, melanzane parmigiana and caper-pesto spaghetti. In the summer, you have to book well ahead to dine in unison with the sunset.

At Porto Bello restaurant in Santa Marina, it's not just the twinkling lights of Lipari Island opposite that dazzle. Guests can arrive by tender at its private shoreline via a tunnel in the sea wall and stop for a cocktail and sushi appetiser at its seductive Sea Lounge. Upstairs, the open-air restaurant serves exquisite seafood and fish, while bougainvillea frames the terrace. The nearby island of Panarea may be renowned for its summer party vibe, but this corner of Salina has bottled its own brand of chilled-out chic.

Over the saddle between the inactive volcano peaks lies Rinella, a tiny port where fishermen are found untangling lobsters from their nets. From there, you'll see Mount Etna looming over Sicily. However, for sheer enchantment, there's a sunset spot on a peak above Pollara that must have pulled at heartstrings for eons. But then, every corner of Salina stirs the soul □

## WAYS AND MEANS

Stephanie Drax travelled as a guest of Bellini Travel (020-7602 7602; bellinitravel.com). A seven-night trip costs £1,090 per person, including four nights at Capofaro Malvasia & Resort and three nights at Hotel Signum, both B&B, and transfers, but excluding flights. British Airways (ba.com) flies daily from Gatwick to Catania from £111 return. Rent Bongiorno (rentbongiorno.it) hires out mopeds from £25 a day.

A view of the Aeolian islands of Salina, Lipari and Alicudi in the Mediterranean Sea

