

## Get lost in the charms of Sicily's Donnafugata Resort and Spa

They say to find a man's true character, you must play golf with him... a frightening prospect for anyone unfortunate enough to be paired with this lumberjack.

A ghastly 90° shank off the first, a frantic 20-minute search in deep rough and rule number one regarding etiquette (language that may be rude or offensive and contravenes the spirit of the sport) broken already. Golf holidays, eh? What's not to love?

"Keep your head down," comes the instruction from softly spoken club pro, Davide Terrinoni, with no more than a nanosecond's thought.

"Maybe it's the foursome on the opposite fairway you should be telling that to," I muttered in reply as my opening effort whistles past a guy in trousers as blue as Bombay Sapphire.



Luckily, it's before 8am. I'll be spared a gallery of onlookers... and the gallery might just be spared too. There's been enough lives needlessly lost around these parts already.

Truth be told, most are still in bed with hangovers this morning; the grappa di Cerasuolo di Vittoria is famous here and boasts a feisty 43% volume but I'd still rather a clunk from one of my heinous hacks any day.

Donnafugata has two championship courses and according to locals — who are all tanned and beautiful, they're among the finest courses on the island. A bold statement for a nation that prides itself on appearance.

The par 72 Gary Player-designed Parkland track (6,530), which wraps neatly around the hotel and spa, hosted the 2011 Sicilian Open while the slightly longer (6,674) Links equivalent (also par 72), starts a good pitching wedge away from the clubhouse and has been the venue for numerous professional events.



The latter is an absolute brute — testing mind as much as body with plenty of hills, narrow fairways and a stiff breeze blowing in off the Mediterranean coast — though this is welcome in the height of summer. Oh, and there's a whopping 66 bunkers to negotiate. If only the flags were placed here, I might have stayed in double figures for the round, I thought.

Luckily, I was able to iron out the one or two kinks in my game at the Darren Clarke Centre of Excellence afterwards. It's a cracking on-site facility featuring 70 tees with chipping as well as putting greens where you can be lectured on how awful you are for as little as €65 an hour.

Or, if you can take flak for a whole week, you've that option too. Though to be fair to Davide, he's really excellent at his job and after two lessons with him, the casualty rate on the course was markedly lower.

The best way to describe the courses here at Donnafugata is they appear so raw, yet so beautiful. Very little obvious augmentation. Subtle and serene. More Rachel McAdams. Less Katie Price, if you will.



A round on either course, by the way, is €150 for non-hotel guests, but if you're lucky enough to be staying, €60 will get you 18 holes on either course. And THAT is a good deal by Irish comparisons.

When you've had enough of it though — and to toast your seven on the 500-yard par five 5th — a retreat to base, stash the clubs, grab the robe and head for the spa.

I'd hoped to see a sports psychologist about my frustrating streak of four-putts, but opted instead for an Abhyanga Ayurvedic massage which purports to offer relief from physical AND more importantly, psychological problems. (Or, in short, a round on the Links course).

The spa is absolute bliss and has all the usual stuff like saunas and steam rooms, a fairly basic gym and the requisite treatment rooms where fellow trainee pros are gently poked and prodded.

In the pool areas, there's no screaming, no water slides, no waves every 20 minutes, and definitely no chewing gum glued to the floor. Instead, there's green tea, freshly squeezed juice, complimentary fruit and wine, if you must. Yes. WE must. Because we're in Italy.

The golf — if a round of 120 and 12 lost balls counts — is something done to work up an appetite and pass the morning. The afternoon is a time of relaxation. The evening is a time for anything but.



The beauty of Donnafugata is its location. It's 20 minutes from Comiso International Airport and unless you're planning to stay at the resort — which is perfectly possible for a long weekend — you'll want a car.

And when you've mustered the courage to take to the deserted capillary network of roads, your first stop has to be the town of Modica, 40 minutes away.

Like other towns in Sicily's rugged Val di Noto region, Modica was all but destroyed during a momentous earthquake in 1693.

And like the other delightful hamlets dotted about the area, it was rapidly rebuilt in the flamboyant architectural style of the time, the result so striking that it is now a World Heritage Site.

Waste no time in heading for the alley opposite Duomo di San Pietro for one of the town's oldest and most famous chocolate shops; Antica Dolceria Bonajuto. Let the crowds direct you. Or the aroma.

It's a delightfully creaky place, wood-panelled walls lined with displays of production techniques. The only thing worth noting before you devour 1,000 calories is the hilly terrain of Sicily, which means staircases and flights of steps are everywhere, and a bit of work. Ladies, leave the heels at home.

Next, head a short distance to Ragusa — one of the few places the Mafia, apparently, weren't bothered with. Hardly surprising this baroque gem is the capital of a province whose crime rate is not only the lowest in Sicily, but also one of the lowest in the whole of Italy.

The reason is partly geographical. Much of the area is a plateau that has in the past been cut off from the rest of the island. Accordingly, it is often referred to as un'isola in un'isola, or "an island within an island".

Much of the landscape around here is jaw-droppingly stunning, and a match for anything in Tuscany. The food and wine are sublime too and for a lasagne, garlic bread, unlimited wine, you'll be surprised to hear you'll get change from a tenner. Ah wine. It's surely evening time now?

Okay, for something once off, head to the Michelin Star Locanda Don Serafino restaurant in the historic boutique hotel.

This hidden gem is for the real clientele. The dress code was big hair, lots of make-up, cleavage and fur for the women, while the men sported slick-back hair and very dark glasses — totally unnecessary in the well-lit caverns. One looked like an extra for a gangster movie. Maybe he wasn't acting.

The wine cellar downstairs boasts more than 1,000 different types and the most expensive costs just over half the average industrial Irish wage.

## **GETTING THERE**

### **Flights**

Fly direct to Comiso from Dublin (flight time three hours — around €115 return), the service will begin in June, with a Thursday and Sunday option. The resort is 20 minutes from the airport. If that doesn't suit, go via London Stansted flying out Friday evening and back Monday evening for around €40 one way. Palermo is the island's main airport but that's over two hours away driving at Italian speeds.

### **Accommodation**

A three-night stay at Donnafugata ([www.donnafugatagolfresort.com](http://www.donnafugatagolfresort.com)) in June in the Classic double room for two adults, including buffet breakfast, will cost in the region of €600. The more salubrious Suite rooms — almost big enough for nine holes — come in at around twice that price. There are also Deluxe and Superior options.

### **What to do**

Take a guided tour of Ragusa Ibla; eat chocolate in Modica; explore the baroque architecture of Scicli — a UNESCO site since 2002; drink Cerasuolo di Vittoria in Cantina; take a cable car to the top of the lunar-like landscape of Mount Etna (€23) — Europe's most active volcano; hang out by the pool at Donnafugata; relax with any one of the treatments on offer; eat at the Carrubo restaurant in the resort.

### **The sights**

You can't go to Italy without taking in a winery so check out the family-owned Valle Dell'Acate. There's a museum, the vineyards and of course, wine tasting included in a two-hour tour. For beach lovers head to Marina di Ragusa a short drive from Donnafugata. Walk the esplanade, people watch, lay on the beach, drink coffee or sample something from any one of the myriad gelaterias.

### **Getting around**

Car hire is expensive but by far the best option. All of the main cities; Palermo, Catania, Messina, Syracuse, Agrigento, Taormina and Trapani have rail links but buses are cheaper, more frequent and go to more out-of-the-way places. Motor scooters are cheaper and can be hired in Comiso, but do you want to risk it?

### **When to go**

As it gets year-round sunshine, any time is good but September through November is particularly so. It's not stiflingly warm and prices are cheaper. (*Brian Canty*)

Link: <http://www.irishexaminer.com/lifestyle/travel/bigread/get-lost-in-the-charms-of-sicily-donnafugata-resort-and-spa-314967.html>