



Pantelleria's perfect new place to stay

Weekend

SOLENT NEWS & PHOTO AGENCY

UK home to 23,000 jihadists

Manchester bomber escaped surveillance

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Intelligence officers have identified 23,000 jihadist extremists living in Britain as potential terrorist attackers, it emerged yesterday.

The scale of the challenge facing the police and security services was disclosed by Whitehall sources after criticism that multiple opportunities to stop the Manchester bomber had been missed.

About 3,000 people from the total group are judged to pose a threat and are under investigation or active monitoring in 500 operations being run by police and intelligence services. The 20,000 others have featured in previous inquiries and are categorised as posing a "residual risk".

The two terrorists who have struck in Britain this year — Salman Abedi, the Manchester bomber, and Khalid Masood, the Westminster killer — were in the pool of "former subjects of interest" and not now subject to any surveillance.

Anti-terrorism efforts came under renewed scrutiny when it emerged that Abedi, who murdered 22 people when he detonated a suicide bomb among crowds leaving a pop concert at Manchester Arena on Monday, had been a "former subject of interest" to MI5.

In a series of fast-moving developments yesterday:

● Assistant Commissioner Mark Rowley, the country's most senior anti-

terrorism police officer, said "significant arrests" meant that a "large part of the network" around Abedi had been wound up.

● Two key properties were identified: a flat in Blackley, north Manchester, where the explosives were made, and an Airbnb apartment in the city centre where the device was assembled. Police said that they had "much of the risk contained".

● It was announced that armed police would patrol some beaches this weekend as the threat level remained critical; there would also be a heavy police presence visible at hundreds of bank holiday events.

● World leaders at the G7 summit in Sicily called on internet companies to act urgently and "substantially increase their effort to address terrorist content". Theresa May said she was clear that "corporations can do more".

Ben Wallace, the security minister, told *The Times* that the existence of a database of 23,000 potential attackers was a stark illustration of the magnitude of the terrorist threat. "The figures reveal the scale of the challenge from terrorism in the 21st century," he said. "Never has it been more important to invest in intelligence-led policing."

MI5's capacity to investigate is limited to about 3,000 individuals at any one time. People are added to and removed from the group of "live" suspects depending on assessments of who poses the greatest risk. When an
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Making a splash James Bullen, 2, at Paultons Park, Hampshire, as temperatures hit 30C (86F) on the year's hottest day. The heatwave is set to continue. Forecast, page 25

IN THE NEWS

Trump refuses to get in line on climate deal

President Trump last night dug in his heels over committing America to the climate deal signed by his predecessor, citing fears that it could threaten US jobs. At the G7 meeting of leaders in Sicily, the Italian prime minister Paolo Gentiloni said Mr Trump was still to be convinced by the Paris agreement. **Page 32**

Australian abduction

An unsolved crime committed in Australia 47 years ago is close to being solved thanks to an elderly Nottinghamshire man's help, detectives believe. Cheryl Grimmer, a three-year-old British girl, was abducted from a beach. **Page 19**

Macron's union strike

Emmanuel Macron plans to break French unions' stranglehold on the country's economy while their militant leaders are snoozing on their holidays this summer as the new president pushes ahead with contested reforms. **Page 37**

New supersonic jet

Journey times between London and New York could be almost halved under plans by Aerion Corporation and General Electric for the first supersonic crossing of the Atlantic by a passenger jet since Concorde's retirement. **Page 20**

INSIDE TODAY

How to be a lazy Brit
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Luxury travel

Pantelleria's perfect new place to stay

The tiny island off Sicily has always had elegant villas, including one belonging to Giorgio Armani. Now there's an exquisite new hotel. Sean Thomas reports

It's an island beloved by celebrities, from Sting to Giorgio Armani, from Julia Roberts to Madonna, yet it's an island of which you've probably never heard. It's a place without beaches, yet it offers some of the strangest and loveliest bathing in Europe. Thirty-five thousand years ago it was entirely blanketed with the green-black volcanic glass obsidian, after an apocalyptic explosion; now it's mainly covered by vineyards, caper bushes, black basalt farmhouses, Byzantine rock tombs — and its first five-star, luxe hotel, the small but exquisitely formed Sikelia, which has just opened.

Sitting at a sunny table in one of the cream stone courtyards of her low-slung, arched-and-domed, Moroccan-Berber-meets-Italian-Bauhaus retreat, the owner, Giulia Paziienza Gelmetti, a professional basketball player turned financier, explains her love for this remote island, Pantelleria, 60 miles south of Sicily — and why she chose to build Sikelia.

"People think I am a little bit crazy, because Pantelleria is difficult to get to. Sometimes it is so windy they have to tie down the planes at the airport or they'd blow over. And don't even think about getting a boat from the mainland." She makes a theatrical, you'll-likely-vomit expression. Then she bursts into a happy smile and gestures to the gentle valley, which descends to the beaten-silver shimmer of the sea, and distant Tunisia. "But I have been coming to Pantelleria for years, and I fell in love with the silence, just like everyone else. I thought, 'This place needs its first really great hotel, not just private villas for billionaires.'"

She's not wrong about the silence. We arrived an hour ago, on the 30-minute flight from noisy, vivid Palermo (there are no direct flights from the UK, but you can fly from various Italian cities). As we sip the crisp white wine, made from the local, unique zibibbo grape, all I can hear is the whir of the soft, homeless wind in the palms, a wind that rustles the wild rosemary and stirs the scented myrtle. If I closed my eyes, and drank another fat glass of zibibbo, I could probably hear the capers growing in the lava-walled fields of the collapsed caldera, it is that quiet.

That afternoon my girlfriend has a soothing massage in the walled Sicilian citrus garden. Someone has to do it.



Meanwhile, I admire the subtly lavish architecture at this 20-room boutique retreat, including the 10ft, almost-Homeric brass door, specially designed by the Roman artist Francesco Alessandrelli. Then I take a dip in the curved little pool and flop back in the sun. Maybe I should have another siesta, in my serene cream and white suite? Is three too many in one day?

It turns out I don't have time because Pepe the guide has arrived in his Fiat. Pepe is a native Pantellerian, and an expert on his homeland; he can even speak the obscure native dialect (which resembles Maltese as much as Italian). As he guns the engine, and motors giddily along the narrow, stone-hedged, almost west-Cornish roads, Pepe explains what makes Pantelleria special.

"I like to think of Pantelleria as a black place with a green soul. Some terrible things have happened here — the island is strategically located, everyone wanted to invade; you can find Punic tombs in modern buildings, Roman bricks in farmyard walls. In 700 the Arabs came here, and killed everyone." As he says this he yanks the steering wheel, so as not to kill two Pantellerian pensioners who are collecting wild asparagus from the hedgerows — everything grows in abundance on this humid, dewy island, despite the severe lack of rain. "Then the Pisans and Venetians kicked the Arabs out. And Basques like me came later, settled by the Spanish. Let me show you the main town, I'm afraid it's not very nice."

He's right, the island's only town is no looker. This is probably because no one felt the need to build grand boulevards, given that, until its recent incarnation as a

luxury hideaway, Pantelleria has variously been a Roman penal colony, a Vandal bolt hole and a military base for Byzantines. In the last century it was a fascist battlement pulverised by Allied bombs. Workers in the vineyards still occasionally unearth unexploded ordnance.

The irony, of course, is that this history of remoteness and hostility is precisely what preserved Pantelleria's unique rural beauty: that particular harmony of blue sky, black stone and green cacti, of rhyolite walls guarding ancient vines, interspersed with profusions of wild roses and scarlet poppies, nodding and dreaming in the pure and angled light.

It's time to go back to hushed and dreamy Sikelia and eat spicy caponata and grilled amberjack and Giulia's very own light-as-you-like gnocchetti, sitting outside, under dark heavens. Pantelleria's cloudless skies are famously good for stargazing; as we feed ourselves silly, the Milky Way streams above us, as if a team of criminal angels raided a diamond mine and spilt their loot as they escaped.

The next day is windy and even a little chilly. A sirocco is blowing across the sea from the Sahara, depositing orange sand and making eerie yellow sea mist. We were meant to be going scuba diving (there are fine archaeological ruins under the waters), or maybe doing a boat tour around the cliffs and coves, where the sea thins to translucent green, but it's too choppy.

The charmingly effervescent Giulia, however, has an alternative. She is nothing if not resourceful. "You have to be," she says. "Pantelleria's beauty is never easy. It is complicated. And sophisticated. So today it is a little cold and I think you should go to the natural sauna. To Benikula."

An hour later, armed with suitable instructions, my girlfriend and I are hiking the stiff, uphill path from the village of Skauri, past prickly pears, purple bougainvillea, ancient caper terraces and groves of wizened olive trees (they are weighted down, and trained to grow horizontally, to survive the Pantellerian winds).

I have no idea what this "Benikula" might be. It turns out to be a deep cleft in the bare rock of a brooding mountain, into which you crawl before sitting and sweating along the ledges of the cave, in the dark and amniotic heat, while Mother Earth chain-smokes, blowing steam through the vents.

At night, it is said, people come here with candles, making trails of tiny lights up the hillside. Then they drink vino, get naked and sit in this same natural rock sauna once used by banished Roman princelings — and sometimes, perhaps, things go a little farther in one of the many rocky caverns concealed along the slopes.

Indeed, amorousness is a theme right across the island known as the "black pearl of the Mediterranean". Take the local farmhouses, the dark lava-stone



“As we sip the island's wine, all I can hear is the soft wind in the palms

dammusi, with their shallow-domed roofs. Everything about them is utilitarian, yet many of them are now rented as romantic hideaways. Then there's the excellent Pantellerian food, from the famous capers and organic honey, to intense clementine marmalades and superb sea-urchin risottos; it all has a faintly aphrodisiac effect. (The food is good everywhere here. Try Il Principe e Il Pirata on the north coast and Altamarea on the south. Both have superlative sea views, and very decent wine lists).



we decide to finish our Pantellerian idyll with the island's primary attraction, the Mirror of Venus. It's a cool volcanic lake, shining agate and turquoise, with mud floors as supple as melted butter, famous for making your skin soft and tingly. One corner of the lake has little rock basins filled with extremely hot water, converting the whole thing into a natural spa.

The weather has warmed, but it is still breezy. So we are the only people here. We swim in the lake, lie in the heated basins and rub ourselves with oozing mud. Then we drink sweet, heady, passito wine from the famous Donnafugata vineyards.

In time, the sun breaks through the clouds and the softening wind sighs in the palms. My girlfriend lies back and sighs; all else is silence.

Need to know

Sean Thomas was a guest of Sikelia, which is a member of Small Luxury Hotels of the World (slh.com/hotels/sikelia). Double rooms cost from £288 a night. Flights from Gatwick to Palermo cost from £166 return (easyjet.com). Flights from Palermo to Pantelleria cost from £115 return (alitalia.com).

In Palermo, stay at the Grand Hotel Villa Igia, which has original frescoes, a great restaurant and an enviable sea view. Rooms cost from €245 (£211) a night (villa-igia.com)

After a good lunch at one of the seashore restaurants, you could do many other things: rent a bike and follow trails to prehistoric graves, or hike to the top of the loftiest extinct volcano, Montagna Grande (take layers of clothes, it's breezy up there). You might be feeling lazy, and inclined to luxuriate in the natural, hot seaside baths in the verdant Gadir Valley, sipping fresh Silenzio white wine, straight from Sikelia's winery (Pantelleria's handpicked vineyards are Unesco-listed for their

unbroken traditions). If you do, don't be surprised if Armani turns up — his villa is round the corner.

Or you could visit Sikelia's sister restaurant, a bucolic retreat called Costa Ghirlanda. It's a mere ten minutes from the main resort, yet somehow deliciously lost: a tiny hamlet of converted *dammusi* half-asleep in a whispering valley. Giulia does wine tastings here, where hotel guests can sample wines from the vineyards that stretch all around. Or you might enjoy an alfresco lunch of swordfish

with piquant gazpacho, completed with the obligatory dessert: *bacio pantesco*, a melting whorl of lemon cream and scrumptious pastry.

In the soft, dulcet nights of high summer the staff light torches and lanterns around Costa Ghirlanda's lemon orchards, and palm groves, and little pavilions, and music is played under the luminous moon. The whole valley becomes a twinkling, nocturnal pleasure garden.

After three blissed-out days in Sikelia,

The elegant Sikelia hotel marries simple architecture with striking modernist interiors