

Inside Sikelia, a New Resort on Italy's Secret Island

by Alexandra Kirkman August 10, 2016



Courtesy Sikelia

Half the suites at Sikelia face the hotel's palm-filled central courtyard overlooking the free-form pool.

The ultimate off-the-grid resort offers travelers one of the most relaxing and luxurious experiences available in Italy.

A towering, ten-foot brass door, gleaming in the midday Mediterranean sun, marks the entrance to [Sikelia](#). It's a gateway fit for Roman gods—one weighing 1,500 pounds and designed by Rome's own Francesco Alessandrelli—and seems to tempt those who approach. What could lie beyond that door? Is this really just a resort?

High on a hill on the Italian island of [Pantelleria](#), 62 miles southwest of Sicily and some 40 miles from Tunisia, newly opened Sikelia is the passion project of Giulia Paziienza Gelmetti, a former professional basketball player and financier. Long captivated by Pantelleria's rugged landscape—all black-lava cliffs, craggy coastline, and arid farmland—the ebullient Paziienza Gelmetti, whose hearty laugh is as striking as her six-foot height, has created a 20-suite hideaway out of ancient Arab dammusi, the island's iconic stone dwellings. It's both reclusive and exclusive, with the same insider cachet that has long made Sicily's largest satellite island a haven for Italian cognoscenti like [Giorgio Armani](#).

This off-the-grid appeal, combined with a windswept, sun-baked climate, underpin Pantelleria's rough-hewn charm. Once home to the Phoenicians, Carthaginians, and Romans, among others, the island became an agricultural stronghold more than 1,000 years ago with the arrival of the Arabs, who cultivated cotton, figs, and olives and designed the dammusi with gently domed roofs to collect rainwater. Pantelleria's nutrient-rich volcanic soil has helped the flora adapt to the sparse rainfall; evidence of its fiery origins, which date back some 250,000 years, lingers in the hot springs studding the seabed just off the coast, and Benikulà Cave, a natural sauna near the resort.



Courtesy Sikelia

The resort is made up of just 20 suites.

The island's steadfast gales—its Arabic name is Bent el Rion, meaning “daughter of the wind”—keep trees and vines from rising tall. Local farmers carefully manicure olive trees like oversized bonsais to buffer them from the battering breezes, while Zibibbo grapes, grown nowhere else in the world, thrive low to the ground in small hollows that retain moisture and provide shade. Harvested by hand, the muscat grapes—whose meticulous cultivation is the only agricultural practice on the [UNESCO World Heritage list](#)—are used to make the island's famous dessert wine, Passito di Pantelleria. You can sample it, and wander through meticulously terraced vineyards and olive groves, at [L'Officina di Coste Ghirlanda](#), Paziienza Gelmetti's winery and one of the island's most popular destinations, a 10-minute drive from the hotel.

Arabic and North African elements—including capers, another Pantescan specialty, whose flowered plants blanket the island—appear in the Italian dishes at Sikelia's [Themà](#) restaurant, a partnership with Milan's renowned Il Ristorante Trussardi della Scala. Executive Chef Roberto Conti serves up swordfish with gazpacho, creamy risotto with scampi, and for dessert, bacio

Pantesco, a wheel of crunchy fried pastry atop rich lemon cream. Coste Ghirlanda's [wines](#) flow freely: One vintage, named Silenzio, pays homage to Pantelleria's prevalent soundtrack. At dusk, guests take their aperitivos—perhaps a spritz locale made with elderflower liqueur—and climb a short stairwell to the roof to watch the sun fade, a blaze of pink and violet.



Courtesy Sikelia

Spot pieces by acclaimed Italian artist Gennaro Avallone in the rooms and common areas of the hotel.

Sikelia's suites, all different, reflect Paziienza Gelmetti's impeccable eye. It's all in the detail: embroidered Frette linens and sculptural Gessi fixtures nod to Italy's knack for functional luxury, while pieces by acclaimed Italian artist Gennaro Avallone accent both the rooms and Sikelia's common areas. Half the suites face the hotel's palm-filled central courtyard overlooking the free-form pool, and others offer [panoramic views](#) of the sea (and, on a clear day, Tunisia).

Paziienza Gelmetti, whose boundless energy is contagious (she spent mornings during our visit landscaping in Converse sneakers, then flitted between tables at lunch chatting up guests), is hard at work on other enhancements, including a "rock club," a secluded enclave on the coast with platforms [for sunbathing](#), just minutes away. The spa—for which she's developing a product line inspired by a majestic pink peppercorn tree at Coste Ghirlanda—is under construction, and will offer treatments incorporating Zibibbo grapes and the island's volcanic mud.

"Nothing about this island is easy, but it's such a special place," says Paziienza Gelmetti, recounting the countless delivery delays during the resort's creation. "I want to share it with people who care about the finer things."