

A CHANGE OF PACE

WILL HIDE gets into his stride on a walking holiday on the Aeolian island of Salina

On a one-week walking holiday for which the word 'stroll' figured prominently in the pre-departure bumb, the path up the dormant volcano on which I was currently striding certainly seemed rather steeper than I had been anticipating.

It was only half an hour after I had settled myself in a whitewashed piazza, where the usual sound of morning kisses smacking liberally on cheeks was replaced by elbow bumps and hearty cries of 'buon giorno'. Behind my sunglasses, I observed life in the small Italian village while polishing off a breakfast of *anguria e fichi d'india* (watermelon and prickly pear) granita with a generous dollop of whipped cream, alongside a plump brioche and couple of cappuccinos. So, after indulging, I had only myself to blame for the huffing and puffing. But any trip to Italy should be about indulgence and, quite frankly, what is the point of going if you cannot pause for an ice cream, a cannoli or a Cinzano, this year of all years?

On the Aeolian island of Salina, an hour-and-a-half's hydrofoil ride north of Sicily, it was possible to half close my eyes on a gorgeously warm autumn day and cut out the woes that have been enveloping us all. On the remote, well-maintained hiking trails on this drop in the Mediterranean, which measures six and a half kilometres by four, there were no crowds and no litter. The only reminder of a world on pause was a cactus into which someone had carved the words: 'Andrà tutto bene' ('Everything will be all right'). Waves crashed beneath us and, above the terraced hillside, soared a pair of Eleanor's falcons – named after Eleanor of Arborea who, in the 1300s, granted protection to birds against illegal hunters.

I had joined a small, jolly group of friends from Shropshire as well as a jovial Anglo-Scottish couple based in East Sussex on the first outing of Bellini Strolls, the brainchild of Italy travel specialist Emily FitzRoy. The initial departure had been due to take place in May, which was then pushed back because of Covid-19 to June, then became early September and now, at last, it was late autumn and we were here. Our guide was Rudston Steward, from Maremma Safari Club, who specialises in hiking along some of Italy's more off-the-beaten-path paths.

'When you are on the Aeolian islands, it's easy to forget you're still in Europe,' he told me as we set off, planting our hiking poles determinedly alongside a small grove of olive trees. 'Salina feels like an exotic destination. You don't need to fly halfway round the planet to access extraordinary travel experiences.' Outside high season, it was easy to get a sense of the

languid charms that lured filmmakers here to shoot the movie *Il Postino* almost three decades ago.

Our walks were not particularly long – about eight kilometres each – but nor were they particularly flat, going up and around two extinct volcanoes, 860-metre-high Monte dei Porri and 962-metre Monte Fossa delle Felci. We departed early to beat the heat, but still there was time to pause to observe wild goats scrambling on cliffs in the distance and to smell artemisia and sea squill.

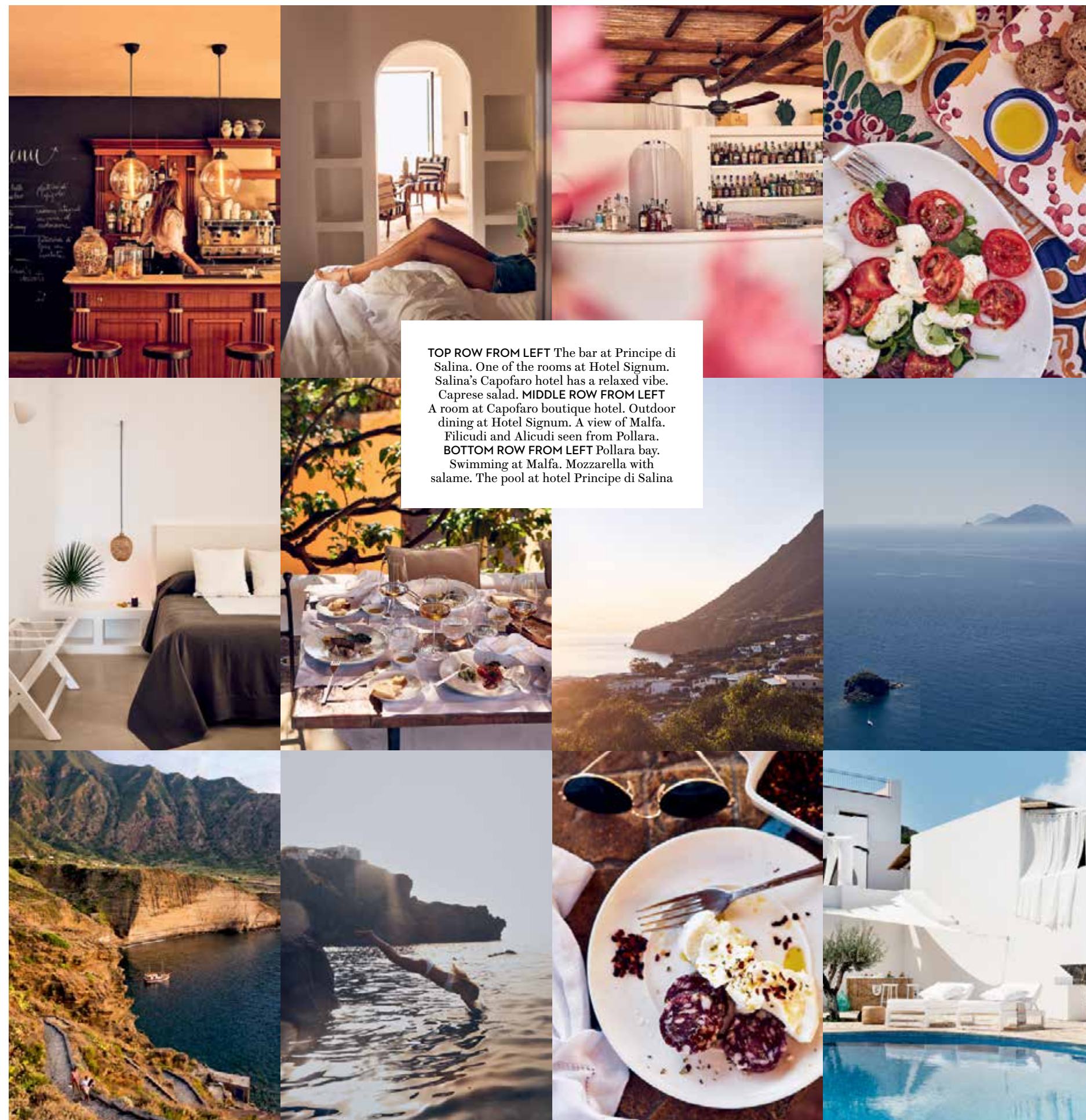
The stroll element of our trip was that there were only three days' hiking over the course of a week. In between, there was plenty of downtime by pools and on boulder-strewn beaches with cold beers, naps in hammocks, swims alongside octopuses and, of course, plentiful amounts of delicious Sicilian food and wine. At lunchtime, a typical snack might be panini stuffed with local cheese and Salinan capers, followed by juicy peaches. In the evening, we generally put aside menus and were happy to accept what came out of local hotel and restaurant kitchens – fish and pork, grilled pumpkin, pasta and tiramisu, for example. All of it mouth-wateringly delicious.

We would move to a new hotel most nights, many of them family affairs and stylish in their simplicity. My favourite was the Principe di Salina in the town of Malfa, run and owned by Anita, with her husband Filippo baking bread for guests and mother Silvana – until two years ago, a gastroenterological surgeon – supervising the kitchen. The latter would emerge with a big smile, carrying a huge pot of pasta, making sure that we all had second helpings. Would you refuse a Sicilian grandmother?

On our final evening, also in Malfa, we decamped to the terrace of the Hotel Signum. Alas, not enough time for seared tuna with figs and wild fennel or milk soup with coffee, chocolate and carob in its restaurant. But over Negronis, we had a picture-perfect view of fire spitting from the volcano on Stromboli, some 50 kilometres away across the Tyrrhenian Sea. Glasses clinked, stars twinkled, arancini were nibbled and, for a night, it felt that indeed *andrà tutto bene*.

WAYS AND MEANS

Will Hide travelled as a guest of Bellini Travel (bellini.travel.com) and Maremma Safari Club (maremma.safari.com). Similar five-night trips cost from £1,695 per person, based on two sharing, including most meals, three days' guiding, luggage transport, a massage and a donation to the Aeolian Islands Preservation Foundation. Flights to Palermo or Catania and the ferry from Sicily to Salina are not included, but they can be arranged □



TOP ROW FROM LEFT The bar at Principe di Salina. One of the rooms at Hotel Signum. Salina's Capofaro hotel has a relaxed vibe. Caprese salad. MIDDLE ROW FROM LEFT A room at Capofaro boutique hotel. Outdoor dining at Hotel Signum. A view of Malfa. Filicudi and Alicudi seen from Pollara. BOTTOM ROW FROM LEFT Pollara bay. Swimming at Malfa. Mozzarella with salame. The pool at hotel Principe di Salina

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