

ANCIENT SITE IN SICILY

Myths and Charm on the Rock

BY EDWARD PLACIDI

CEFALU, Sicily—Like the legendary Colossus of Rhodes that stood guard over that powerful Greek city, the Rock casts its protective shadow over the red-shingled roofs of this fishing town. It's on a rocky point of a small bay washed by the blue Tyrrhenian Sea on Sicily's north coast.

Over the last three decades a steady growth in tourism has brought an increasing number of French, Belgian, German and Scandinavian tourists here. They come to walk the ancient cobblestone streets, explore the ruins and frolic in the sand and sea by day and the nightclubs and bars by night.

But they also are lured by the Rock, which always has symbolized Cefalu and given it a special personality. Ancient civilizations built fortresses and temples upon it, myths engulf its vague history and the incomparable, romantic panorama of Spanish-Norman Cefalu under the massive promontory has inspired poets, writers and artists.

Cefalu's origins are unknown. It may have been founded by Chalcidians, Syracusans, Phoenicians or refugees from nearby Himera after it was destroyed by

the Carthaginians. Over the centuries it fell under the domination of many peoples.

Cefalu was "the promontory of Hercules" to the Phoenicians and they dedicated altars to him. It was called "the city of the promontory" ("Kefale," from which Cefalu is probably derived) by the Greeks and they built a temple to Diana. The temple is one of the few identifiable ruins on the Rock, which is strewn with the crumbled remnants of old walls, foundations and a 13th-century castle.

Cefalu's old center is nearly all of 15th-century Spanish vintage, although a rich Norman legacy also endures, such as 13th-century churches and a 12th-century palace. The remains of a Spanish fortress, built on the ruins of megalithic walls, and houses built on and alongside Spanish bastions protect the northern perimeter of Cefalu from the sea.

A medieval washing place, Il Fiume, dating from the Arab epoch, still is fed by springs of sweet water that have been surfacing since antiquity.

The Arab-Norman cathedral, Cefalu's most revered and impressive monument, known as "columns in the sky" for its great spires that dominate the town's sky-

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ROCK OF AGES—Symbol of ancient Cefalu, Sicily, is huge promontory veiled in history.

Photo by Edward Placidi

SICILY ROCK

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line, was built in the 12th century purportedly on a pledge by Roger II, a Norman ruler of Cefalu. Caught at sea in a terrible storm, he implored God, "If I am saved from the waves, and not become bait for the fish, if I am not broken on the rocks, if safe and sound I shall reach any shore, in your honor and to your glory I shall construct a temple."

Pastel-painted, wrought-iron balconies, buried in potted plants, flowers and hanging laundry, pervade Cefalu's streets that slope down from the cathedral (at the base of the Rock) to the sea. Arched wooden doorways left ajar reveal small stone courtyards with fountains in the centers and grass growing between the stones.

Down at the Molo Marina (seaside wharf) at the most seaward end of town, fishermen apply fresh paint to their multicolored boats or spread out their nets for repair. Cefalu's traditional livelihood is fishing, symbolized in the town's crest: three large fish supporting a sphere.

Men wearing blue berets and handlebar mustaches ply the streets daily with carts fashioned from wheelbarrows and loaded with fish for sale they weigh with hand-held scales. Clothing hawkers with goods draped over their backs and outstretched arms walk the street like human display racks. Street salesmen abound in Cefalu, some remaining in one place, some working the streets, many bellying prices and their specialty of the day.

Meeting Place

Cefalu's narrow main street, Corso Ruggiero, is the town's lifeline. Most stores line this bustling strip and display their wares on the sidewalk—giant boxes of soap, travel bags, fruits and vegetables, exquisite, colorful, hand-painted ceramics, newspapers, and postcards. It also is the all-hours-of-the-day meeting place, especially in the early evening when young and old promenade in shoulder-to-shoulder crowds, a few honking cars trying to edge their way through.

On Corso Ruggiero a yellow sign labeled "Tiempo di Diana" points up a tiny lane leading to a stone stairway that mounts the first few hundred feet of The Rock. From there it's a winding dirt path through scattered pines; cactus and eucalyptus; yellow, violet and white wild flowers; wild fennel, ferns and lush greenery crawling over the ruins. The cool breezes and quiet peacefulness, broken only by singing birds, make it a pleasant getaway from the hot sun, beach and crowds below. According to local myth, Diana was so happy here that she will joyously wander forever on The Rock.

The summit is jagged, with little vegetation, but with magnificent panoramas in all directions. To the east is a long coastline of cliffs, small bays, arms of land reaching out to sea and villa-covered mountains rolling away from the shore. Immediately under the Rock, adjacent to Cefalu, are craggy Kaldura Point (a favorite scuba diving place) and the yacht harbor, where sailboat rentals and water skiing are available.

Cefalu's rooftops, boats riding the sea and the dim outline of the distant Aeolian Islands are to the north, while the crests of miles of hills are to the south.

To the west the view of more villa-covered, rolling mountains and Cefalu's half-mile stretch of clean white beach ends at the promontory of Santa Lucia Point (where the coast suddenly cuts south) with the sea in the background.

Santa Lucia Point is the home of the second in a chain of Club Mediterranee around the world. The sprawling complex with its own beach blossomed and prospered so in the 1960s that it was a major stimulus to Cefalu's growth as an international tourist resort and to the club's international expansion.

Cefalu was given the tourist-drawing billing of "The Mecca of Love" by Club Mediterranee because of the many young people on the beach here in summer, the nightlife

and the many single foreign females who come here on package tours.

When the hotels, Sanfilippo camping grounds and villas fill up in summer, Cefalu swells from 15,000 to 40,000. The sand and sea are almost hip-to-hip bikinis. Cefalu's seven nightclubs (the l'Acquarius, Surfside and Trappitu are most popular) are jammed into the early hours of the morning.

One basic ingredient of Cefalu life, never overlooked by the tourist hordes, is good food. Restaurants and trattorias specialize in scrumptious fresh fish dishes.

Some favorites: "pesce spada a ghiotta," swordfish in the pan in a tomato, onion, parsley and garlic sauce; "pesce ai ferri," fish of the day roasted in the oven with garlic, lemon and spices; "zuppa di cozze," mussel soup with garlic; tomatoes and onion; fried "calimare" (squid), "gamberi" (jumbo shrimp) or "frito misto" (mixed fish platter), and "pasta con le sarde," long, thick noodles in a sauce prepared with fennel, sardines, pine nuts and raisins.

Drink the strong, hearty Sicilian wines with your meals and try Malasia di Lipari, a 20% alcohol sweet wine (drunk as an aperitif) made from raisins.

Scenic Route

Cefalu is on the main train line from the Italian mainland to Palermo (the train boards a ferry to cross the narrow Strait of Messina to Sicily), but the best way to get there is by hydrofoil. The 46-mile, one-hour voyage from Palermo is along one of Italy's most picturesque coastlines of hilltop villages, rocky points, promontories and coves.

Accommodations range from good second-class hotels such as the Artu, Kalura, Le Calette and Le Sabbie d'Oro (with bath, about \$14 for a single and \$24, double), to comfortable third-class hotels, notably the Riva del Sole and Sesta d'Oro (with bath, \$8 to \$10, single, and \$11 to \$14, double), and pensions (most just under third-class rates, the cheapest about \$3 per person without bath).

It is wise to secure reservations through your travel agent for the May to October season. For information you may contact the Italian Government Travel Office (E.N.I.T.), 360 Post St., Suite 801, San Francisco 94108.

Cicero and the Arab geographer Edrisi remembered Cefalu's beauty in their writings. Roger II claimed, "Here I discovered the secret of life, here all is poetry." Cefalu artist Giuseppe Forte dedicated many canvasses to "his" Cefalu. Italian journalist Lorenzo Misurarca wrote, "If you are looking for an island of happiness, your destination is Cefalu."

Under the Rock, Cefalu's charm lives on.