

# 50 shades of green

Lifestyle

Travel

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The outdoor pool area, surrounded by lush greenery and vast grounds.

Silence is the most valuable luxury in life – and it doesn't cost any money. What will break your budget is travelling long distances to source, find and enjoy that silence.

And yet, half an hour away is Sicily – a land so savage, untamed yet a gateway to silent and natural beauty.

Beyond the gateway is Villa Neri Resort & Spa. Lying at the foot of Etna, and immersed in Etna's natural regional park, this stunning property is surrounded by a pristine natural habitat – it's a fusion of nature and luxury that comes together between the mountainous volcano and the Ionian sea, providing five-star bliss in a beautiful green hideaway.





Villa Neri's very own wine, which it produces together with a delectable extra virgin olive oil.

Now I have to confess that, prior to getting there, my excitement levels were not exactly sky-high. Going to Sicily, again, is hardly a bucket-list wish. What could I discover that was new? The answer to that, as it turns out, was plenty.

Upon arrival, I was immediately swept away by the greenery that surrounds the property. Such beauty makes it natural to immediately leave all cares behind and to give in to pure relaxation.

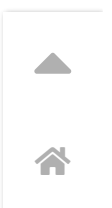
But first things first: I was at Villa Neri, in Linguaglossa, for a three-day familiarisation trip, a short break that turned out to be an amazing experience, with a luxurious stay in the resort. I was very lucky to be hosted in the Enoteca suite, which comes complete with more than enough bottles of local wines, and is carefully furnished in Sicilian traditional style, with maximum attention given to comfort.

Villa Neri offers a total of 24 rooms, including nine suites with terraces boasting sweeping views. The rooms are individually designed and all have plenty of character.

Of course, every day started the way all self-respecting breaks do, with a luscious breakfast that caters for hungry taste buds. Think mouth-watering Sicilian delicacies and breads, all prepared in-house. But this breakfast goes a step further – the Neri family have actually set up a live cooking station and deli counter to further wake body and soul with fresh local cheeses and cold cuts.

As if that weren't enough, the imposing Signora Etna serves as a mighty backdrop with its 50 shades of green covered hills. A glass of spumante sets the breakfast scene – that's a very good morning indeed.

Speaking of luxury, lunching barefoot on the lawns of Villa Neri is a whole new poolside experience. A light menu and a wide selection of drinks are all on the menu – including Volcano Gin, a locally made gin which, trapped in a gem of a bottle, complete with lava stopper, is a genie indeed.





Local delicacies are served from a deli counter and live cooking station.

Then, of course, there is dinner at the restaurant Dodici Fontane, a hallmark of fine dining quality indicating extraordinary cuisine where diners eat extremely well. Gourmet dishes typical of the region are precisely executed, using the finest local ingredients and are almost always a work of art, in their own right. It's no wonder the restaurant is listed on the Michelin Guide. Compliments to the chef Elia Russo.

“ There's a lot more to enjoy in the region other than food and wine ”

Almost 100 years of tradition within the Neri family, is also kept alive in the form of produce. On the privately-owned land, they cultivate olives and grapes, and this passion gives birth to their Neri extra virgin olive oil and the Neri Etna DOC wines. Both are organically produced, keeping the utmost respect to the surrounding nature and its fertile soil.

The Neri olive oil is estate grown and produced with the local variety of nocellara dell'Etna, coming from the earthly olive trees that surround the property. Needless to say, I went to town with an oil-tasting session that offered an unparalleled elegance and harmony on the palate. A herbal freshness, with hints of artichoke, green tomatoes and ripe almond,

together with a sweet presence of bitter and spicy aromas – these all formed part of the flavour of the Neri extra virgin olive oil, leaving a frisson of pleasure at the tip of our tongue.

The property also owns the Carricante and Catarratto vineyards, and five hectares surround the hotel. Great care is taken to produce the Etna Bianco Neri DOC and the 2018 vintage has produced an extraordinary level and quality of rare and expressive elegance, that the whites from Etna are able to offer.

Clean, yet sharp on the nose, with fascinating floral and citrus scents this Neri wine is a harmonic balance of mineral elements, fruitiness with prevalence of green apple and white peach. This year, production reached 5,000 bottles of white and red wine and, in five years' time 'Neri' is looking to produce 30,000 bottles.

But there's a lot more to enjoy in the region other than food and wine – though these are more than enough, of course. Art reaches people's hearts and minds and, only a few minutes away from the resort, in Linguaglossa, is a permanent exhibition of Salvatore Incorpora. Each wall in the six rooms is adorned with brilliantly coloured paintings, sculptures, cribs and drawings. The artist Incorpora takes on different aspects of life and, in his art, includes social themes, immigration, war and religion, all within the context of popular Sicilian traditions.

Partnered with Incorpora's exhibition, the works of Francesco Messina are also on show, albeit for a couple of months. Messina's themed sculptures of beautiful Ballerinas and Horses characterising his best works, stand elegantly on display. One of his most important bronze works of art, named Lo Stallone but known as Il Cavallo dello Rai, stands proud at the entrance of the art museum.

Also in Linguaglossa is the Pasticceria Barone – we're back to delicious food territory. Here, the speciality is the typical Sicilian almond pastries, the paste di mandorla. The original pastry shop was opened by the Barone family in 1939. In time, as the family grew, new recipes were introduced and the local handmade pastries were perfected with hazelnuts, pistachios and orange flavours.

Of course, a visit to Etna beckoned. The winding paths took us up Mount Etna's northern side and a small trek across the hilly lava trails, brought me to the first crater. The vast space, sheer splendour and variety of trees draping the hills across the majestic Etna, are sensational. This volcanic landscape experience is one not to be missed. Lunch on the sunny balcony of Monte Conca in Piano Provenzana is simply delicious with typical dishes and homemade specials served overlooking the lava filled slopes of Etna.



And to round it off, a spot of relaxation at Petra. The wellness spa within Villa Neri offers the path to ultimate bliss, with its sauna, Turkish baths, hydro massage pool, ice fountains, treatment rooms, and a relaxation room complete with heated water beds. A massage, or two, from the long therapeutic list on offer, is a must. Besides being most professional and effective, the therapists use products with ingredients that are typically Sicilian and the organic oils are also produced by the Neri family.

Daniela Said travelled to Sicily courtesy of Villa Neri Etna Resort & Spa. For more information visit <https://www.hotelvillanerietna.com/en/>



The beautiful façade of Villa Neri Resort & Spa at sunset.

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