



A House in Sicily

Daphne Phelps (Foreword) , Denis Mack Smith (Foreword)

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The captivating memoir of a resourceful woman who started life anew in the "most beautiful house in Sicily"

For fifty years, at Casa Cuseni in the small Sicilian town of Taormina, Daphne Phelps has extended her English charm and warm hospitality to seasoned travelers and professional escapists as well as to writers and artists like Tennessee Williams, Bertrand Russell, Henry Faulkner, and Roald Dahl. This memoir tells their story, and hers.

It begins in 1947 when, thirty-four years old and war-weary, a modest Englishwoman arrived in Taormina with little Italian, less money, and a plan to sell the property she had unexpectedly inherited. Instead, she fell in love, not just with the airy quarters of the golden stone house on a hillside but also with a community and its way of life. To save Casa Cuseni from certain demolition, Daphne converted her enchanting inheritance into the wondrous pensione that for nearly half a century she has run with the blessing of every Taorminan from the local silk-shirted godfather, Don Ciccio, to Concetta Genio, her steadfast cook, housekeeper, and friend.

"A loving portrait ... of a vanishing way of life." -- *New York Times Book Review*

"The often humorous clash of cultures ... [and] the stories of the ordinary Sicilian men and women who populate the pages that make this book, and this place, so special,... so thoroughly alive." -- *Chicago Tribune*

A House in Sicily Details

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Author : Daphne Phelps (Foreword) , Denis Mack Smith (Foreword)

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Grier says

3.5 stars

Michelle Coffey says

Daphne's tale in an interesting story that weaves history and culture. I learned about Sicilian customs and their evolution. I became more aware of affects of WWII. I loved the stories of the quirky characters, especially those whom I am familiar with.

Tina Gordon says

The charm of this memoir is its delightful narrator and her storytelling ability. Daphne Phelps tells the story of how she happened to inherit a home on a hilltop in the Sicilian town of Taormina. With virtually no money to care for the house and property, she turns the place into a small hotel and invites her friends from England to come and stay for a small fee. These friends include artists and literary luminaries such as the cranky Roald Dahl. Rumor has it that Greta Garbo once stayed in the house for a summer. The book is a series of vignettes about her guests, the struggle she had to keep the house and navigate through the Sicilian legal (or not so legal) system, and about the characters who inhabit Taormina. If you have been to Taormina, the book will make you want to go back. If you haven't, the book will entice you to go. Either way, it's worth reading. By the way, Casa Cuseni is still a hotel where you can stay. I, for one, am planning to do just that.

Gailmarie Goldrick says

Fun read with lots of good information about the area, the people who stayed there and the local culture. I couldn't put it down. Had so much fun reading it. I must say that we love Sicily and that added to the charm.

Kathleen Payne says

This was a delightful read of a true story of an Englishwoman that "acquired" a home in Sicily and spent most of her life in the town of Taormina, Sicily. To quote the back jacket of the book by the Irish Times, "A House in Sicily is going to become a classic of its time largely because, although she has spent 50 years in Sicily, Daphne Phelps has never lost one iota of her crystal clear Englishness and it is this collision of cultures that gives the book its special piquancy and hilarity, its splendid common sense." This sums up the book well. Daphne has a troupe of interesting characters that wander in and out of her life, many staying at her home, Casa Cuseni. They are eclectic, eccentric, and at times somewhat "crazy", but it helped create the

fun background of an interesting life in Sicily post WWII. My older sisters' life in San Miguel de Allende, Mexico is somewhat similar to her story.

Uribe says

An enjoyable read, I would have liked to hear more about her house as a writers retreat.

Becky Johnson says

Mostly anecdotal account of the author's 50+ years in Sicily. This book definitely made we want to travel there.

MyGoodBookshelf says

(This review also appears on Amazon.co.uk)

had expected from the outset that this memoir would be a fascinating, informative read and very different from some of the other 'place in the sun' type travelogues I am used to! Told by Daphne Phelps who inherits her late uncle's home in the Sicilian town of Taormina, it is initially set in the years post world war II. It chronicles her life from the arrival in the town and fifty plus decades of her inhabitation there and the changing face of the island. Warm and witty, it is a look at Sicily from an ex-pats perspective, but of a place steeped in proud culture and firm traditions, though Phelps' arrival does shake things up a little bit!

The narrative flows beautifully and is peppered with warm and humorous little anecdotes about Phelps and her day to day life in Sicily, as well as some of the trials and tribulations she has to overcome, including amongst other things, ingratiating herself with the local mafia! Though a lot of it contains a wealth of historical knowledge and local customs and traditions it is never dry. Phelps comes across as a warm hearted and gracious lady and it is clear just how highly she was regarded by her adopted town, as well as by some of the artist and writer friends she would later entertain at Casa Cuseni.

If I had to criticise anything about this book, I suppose it would be the fact that Phelps introduces a very large cast of characters and it does become confusing as to who is who at times and her relationship to them. Personally, I would have also liked to learn a little bit more about some of her more famous house guests - particularly Roald Dahl. I would have also liked to learn a little bit more about some of the Sicilian cuisine. This is only a very small criticism though, as on the whole I found this novel to be a charming and fascinating look at life in post-War Sicily, especially from an independent woman's point of view!

Though this author sadly died in 2005, this book nevertheless remains a wonderful testament to both her and her devotion to Casa Cuseni and Sicily itself. I would recommend it if you enjoy well-written travel writing or have a particular affinity with Sicily and its people.

Lisa says

With less than 100 pages till the end, moved this book to the recycle pile. It all sounded so self-serving, and there wasn't any worthwhile she dropped in between.

The chapter that promised a botanical hunt, had nothing of the local flora in it. The chapter titled "Archaeology" had nothing to say about the subject, other than so-and-so say this terracotta head of horse in such-and-such museum, so the author concludes it must have the object found in the well on the premises (before her occupation of it), then she goes on to accuse two locals.

I persisted in reading because a following chapter was titled, "Bertrand Russell" so I thought may have something literary significant to share. It was worthless. In fact, this was the most disappointing chapter, because it was all about the author knowing some privy fact of a liaison.

There is nothing between the covers. No local history or economy, outside of platitudes; no insight into the terrain, flora, fauna; nor any portrayals of local life or locals beyond how so-and-so spun in the author's orbit for a time.

Surprised to see its first printing was 1999--I thought it would be 1970s or earlier. Editorial parameters around the author's ethnocentricity is absent.

Elizabeth says

A wonderful, entertaining book of an English woman in Sicily. Having been to her house, Casa Cuseni in Taormina, I simply had to read the book she wrote about her life there. Anyone who lives in a country different to their home country can relate.

Linda Beuret says

Read this in preparation for a trip to Sicily. Highly recommend it for this purpose as the author married a Sicilian and the story of her life and adaptation to this country was educational as well as a good read. She currently lives and gives cooking lessons near Palermo. She has written several cookbooks on Sicilian food and its history.

Vicki Otanez says

I have to say that I picked up this book after visiting Taormina, Sicily. I loved the book--especially her insight on the people of Sicily. She could not have given a better description of this fabulous Island and just how wonderful and kind the Sicilians truly are. I sent a copy of the book to my best girlfriend, who traveled with me on all my trips to Italy; and she loved the book, also. In 2005 we decided to take another trip to Sicily and

see if we could actually find Casa Cusini in Taormina. We found it and rang the doorbell hoping that Daphne Phelps was still alive and could sign our books. To our amazement the housekeeper, a kind, very old man, came walking down the stairs and in our limited Italian told us that Daphne was sleeping; but if we left our books, he would have her sign them, and we could pick them up the next morning. We left our books and returned the next day; the books were signed by Daphne Phelps who was 94 years old at the time. It was a wonderful time, except we really did want to actually see Casa Cusini- but we couldn't. She passed away in November of 2005- so, we felt so blessed that we took the trip in early 2005. She was an amazing woman...and wrote a fabulous book. Taormina is heaven on earth...that is why she never left.

BJ says

"A House in Sicily" by Daphne Phelps was not exactly what I was expecting. It's the story of Casa Cuseni near Mt. Etna in Sicily which Daphne Phelps unexpectedly inherits when her uncle dies. She is 34 years old and speaks no Italian, yet she goes to Sicily to settle her uncle's estate and sell the house. Instead, she falls in love with the house, the town, and the people and ends up staying there. The book is written more like a series of short stories than a continuous story, so part of my not enjoying this book so much is that I don't particularly like reading short stories. I generally don't enjoy them. Each chapter was about a different person who stayed at the Casa (Tennessee Williams, Bertrand Russell, Roald Dahl and Henry Faulkner), Don Ciccio, the local mafioso who takes a interest in Daphne, local festivals, places she went within Sicily, animals she and/or her guests adopted, etc. However, there was no real time line. In one chapter the housekeeper had died, in the next chapter she was still alive. It just didn't flow for me. It was easy to put down and pick up something else, but I did keep going back to it and eventually finished it. I actually started it as my February pick for Italy in Books, but didn't finish it until March.

GoldGato says

In general people know two things about Sicily - both of them alarming: Etna and the Mafia.

Ahh, yes, but thankfully this book taught me so much more about the island few know. It is in Sicily where Zeus trapped Typhon the monster, and they say you can still hear his rage whenever Mount Etna lets loose. Conquered by every Tom, Dick, and Harry through the ages, Sicily has maintained its own identity, albeit one heavily influenced by Mafioso lore.

But when Daphne Phelps had to take over the gorgeous villa her uncle had built, she found a dry, poverty-stricken place filled with myths and superstition. It is her remembrances of her famous house and equally famous guests that make this book a winner. Each chapter focuses on a specific person or event and they really seemed to build to the best passages as the end came near. Caitlin Thomas and Bertrand Russell roll through, but the best is saved for Henry Faulkner and his menagerie of cats, dogs, goats, and ducks.

Wherever had these three (Tennessee Williams-Ezra Pound-Henry Faulkner) met? Could it have been in a mental hospital? It seemed likely.

Phelps writes in a dry style and her adventures with the local authorities are enlightening. When she travels to Kentucky to visit Faulkner, for instance, she discovers the mountain dialect and states that Shakespeare would have felt at home, given the language had not been altered in centuries. The chapter on a poor local

Sicilian widow brought tears to my eyes, just as the chapter on a theatrical butler made me laugh.

I didn't want to finish the book, because I was enjoying it so much. As Sicily gets dragged into shopping malls and fast trains, much of what Phelps loved has disappeared, so the pages provide images of past simpler days. This isn't a travelogue or one of those snappy selfies about look-where-I-am-now. It's a story of a house, an uncle, and a loyal niece who stayed. Casa Cuseni is now a B&B, with that stunning view of Mount Etna.

As a child, when I hated the world and felt that the world hated me, it was my dog in whom I confided - and he told me I was unique and wonderful.

Book Season = Summer (reds and yellows and oranges)

Pearson, says

interesting read about life in Sicily for an English woman who comes to sell a family home only to remain for at least 50 years!
