

The holiday that helps fight the Mafia

By Stephanie Holmes
BBC News, Corleone

Francesco Galante throws open the shutters, revealing a view of fields of bright green and deep brown in the Sicilian hills.

Inside the building, built of local stone, sits a new wood-burning oven, tables and chairs, their cushions still wrapped in protective plastic.

But Mr Galante's new restaurant is no ordinary venture - it sits on land confiscated from the island's Mafia, the Cosa Nostra.

The fertile ground where the lentils and wheat that will feature on the organic menu grow once belonged to the man known as "the boss of bosses" - Salvatore Riina.

Confiscated by the state, it is being managed by Libera Terra Mediterraneo, a co-operative that supports at least 20 local businesses.

The estate sits just a few miles away from the town of Corleone - mythologised in film and fact and a place of pilgrimage for tourists fascinated by Sicily's dark and bloody past.

But Mr Galante and his fellow anti-Mafia campaigners are hoping that a new breed of socially conscious and ethically aware tourists will be drawn to the island for the right reasons.

"The point is that the state is returning these places to the people, where they can be enjoyed by everyone. We don't own this place, we just run it. It belongs to everyone," he says.

Intimidation

In a converted stable off a track lined with cyprus trees, are a series of simple rooms. Here, guests can sleep easy on land where the man known as "the Beast", currently serving multiple life sentences, once kept his animals.

" Just last week the police found a Mafia boss and lots of people gathered to celebrate his arrest, clapping for the special officers who arrested him "

Tour guide Eduardo Zaffuto

Looking around, there is nothing to immediately suggest the Mafia's presence, indeed the young lavender plants and talk of perhaps building a swimming pool to take the edge off the summer's searing heat, make it seem like any other rural retreat.

But Mr Galante says that when his co-operative was initially assigned the site, whose transformation was partially funded by the European Union, there were acts of mafia intimidation - two fields were burnt and a tractor stolen.

That very morning, he says, four people were arrested in a little town nearby, suspected of being involved in a Mafia killing. He admits too he rarely visits Corleone, where Riina's relatives still live.

He is more worried by a proposed change in the law that would allow such state-seized former Mafia properties and land to be auctioned to the highest bidder.

The state has taken control of some 8,000 properties - everything from city centre apartments to crumbling villas, since the original law was introduced in 1982.

Many of them are now operated by campaigning and not-for-profits groups. In Sicily alone, 500 hectares (1,235 acres) of land have been re-assigned in this way.

But, as the recession bites, these properties are beginning to look like wasted assets.

"The Mafia will just buy them back if the state puts them up for auction - they are the only ones who have the money," Mr Galante says. "It will be state-authorized money-laundering."

Strength in numbers

In Palermo, the regional capital, tour guide Eduardo Zaffuto, of campaign group Addiopizzo, offers anti-Mafia tours that include not only the sites that form the backdrop to the island's struggle with the Cosa Nostra but also promote the shops and businesses that have publicly declared their refusal to pay the ubiquitous protection money, or "pizzo".

The tour includes the city's majestic cathedral, which sits in a piazza planted with orange trees. Its amber-coloured stone glows in the bright winter sunshine.

Today, teenagers flirt and eat snacks in the square where, in 1992, people broke through the police barriers to hurl insults at the politicians attending the funeral of a crusading anti-Mafia magistrate murdered by the mob, angry that the state had failed to protect him.

"We call them excellent cadavers - those murdered by the Mafia. Policemen, judges, magistrates, politicians, many of their funerals were held here," Mr Zaffuto says as he stands in the cathedral's shadow.

Taking a gamble

Just around the corner, he stops outside a nondescript building. "This is the police headquarters," he says. "Just last week the police found a Mafia boss and lots of people gathered to celebrate his arrest, clapping for the special officers who arrested him."

Addiopizzo has produced a map of the 400 companies who have joined their list, all of which display a sticker on their door.

Mr Zaffuto says the entire campaign began, almost by accident, with a similar sticker.

"We used to go out and put them up late at night, never before 3am. But the reaction we got was incredible. We really touched a chord. People started talking about it, and it came out into the open."

Though recent arrests reveal how the Mafia has been dramatically weakened in Palermo and beyond, the level of submission by businesses and shops in the city remains high, with an estimated 80% paying the "pizzo".

In some cases the sums involved are paltry but, symbolically, they have a far higher value - representing acquiescence, acceptance and fear.

Accepting to pay the "pizzo" can mean there is the understanding that you will buy from certain suppliers or offer jobs to certain candidates who are suggested to you, for example.

Critics worry that while the motivation behind anti-Mafia tourism might be positive, constantly reinforcing the connection in the mind of travellers between Sicily and the Mafia, is not.

The Mayor, Diego Cammarata, a member of Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi's centre-right People of Freedom party, acknowledges this is a gamble, but he supports the initiative. "It is a risk I am happy to take, if over the long term it finally changes the image of this city."

Story from BBC NEWS:

<http://news.bbc.co.uk/go/pr/fr/-/2/hi/europe/8380242.stm>

Published: 2009/11/26 14:10:59 GMT

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