

travel



Half an hour's drive from Palermo, Cefala Diana is home to two surviving examples of Arab architecture on Sicily – a medieval castle and thermal baths. Photographs by Fiona Volquardsen for The National

In Sicily with Ibn Jubayr

Gail Simmons goes on the trail of a medieval Andalusian traveller and uncovers a distinctly Arab flavour to this southern Italian island

"Can you see anything?" I'm perched on Carmelina's shoulders and peering through a tiny window into an old stone building deep in the Sicilian countryside. We're at Cefala Diana Arab baths, a relic of the former Islamic Emirate of Sicily, and I'm standing on my friend Carmelina because, although newly restored and open to the public, the bathhouse today is closed. And the reason I'm here, surrounded by the delicate wildflowers of a Sicilian spring, is my quest to find out more about Sicily's Arab heritage, a little-known feature of this most Mediterranean of islands.

For years I'd been visiting Sicily, loving its dramatic mountain scenery, limpid seas and delicious food: so different in feel from mainland Italy. As I'd explored the island I'd begun to notice similarities with the Arab world – the food markets,

the flavours, the place names of Sicily had a familiar, eastern ring to them. But it was only when reading the memoirs of the Spanish Muslim traveller Ibn Jubayr, shipwrecked off the coast of Sicily in January 1185, that I began to learn about the Arab presence on this island. Ibn Jubayr had visited Cefala Diana en-route to Spain, describing "a large place with many thermal springs which God throws up from the ground ... we refreshed our bodies by bathing in it".

Sadly, we can't even get close to the water. "It's almost as if they don't believe anyone will want to visit," says Carmelina, before we decide to cut our losses and travel on to Agrigento, in the south of the island.

It had all started so well. Earlier that day I'd woken up to sunshine and breakfast in the whitewashed



courtyard of a *baglio*, a fortified farmhouse and now a small rural hotel surrounded by olive and citrus groves on Sicily's far western coast. It was this part of the island that the Berber Aghlabids from the north coast of what was then known as Ifriqiyya (Africa) arrived in the year 827, tempted by the natural

wealth, beauty and fertility of this land. As I'd tucked into homemade jams I was reminded of the *cortijos* – courtyard farmhouses of Andalucía, themselves echoing the enclosed houses I'd seen in North Africa and the Middle East.

Arab Sicily, continued on 7 →