

World



by  
**i Team**

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## Sicily provides a beacon of hope for refugees by welcoming them



Migrants and refugees wait to disembark in the Sicilian port of Messina (Photo: GIOVANNI ISOLINO/AFP/Getty Images)

### The Italian island can teach the world how to treat new arrivals, says Dr Michael Scott

It is a well-established cycle, Sicilian coastguard captain Commandante Monaco told me. Traffickers set off a boat full of migrants and refugees from the Libyan coast, telling the person at the tiller to run for 10 hours and then call a number saved in a mobile phone they're handed. It's the emergency number for the coastguard, who then are mandated by the law of the sea to respond.

Because it takes about eight hours to reach the area from Lampedusa, the small island 100 miles from Sicily that has become famous on the front line of the migrant crisis, the coastguard dispatch their boats in advance anyway – knowing that there will be people to rescue. And because the traffickers know this, they send more and more boats.

We arrived to work with the Lampedusa coastguard as summer drew to a close last year, while filming our series on the history of Sicily for the BBC, with several thousand needing to be rescued in one day. The working of saving these people is highly emotional, as well as technically difficult.

We spoke with one coastguard who freely admitted to being in tears when he rescued 100 refugees on his first day on the job. Now, he said, they work fast enough to rescue 100 people in 10 minutes. But still that is not fast enough. Five thousand immigrants drowned in the waters off Libya in 2016, when help simply could not reach them in time.



Migrant rescuers carry a baby in the port of Messina (Photo: GIOVANNI ISOLINO/AFP/Getty Images)

### Sicily's proud history

As we sat in the control room in Lampedusa with Commandante Monaco overseeing the entire operation that day, he explained why Sicilians in particular have it in their blood to welcome outsiders. Their island's history is a kaleidoscopic mix of cultures coming and going from the island, thanks to its central Mediterranean position.

While many claim continual arrival and conquest has given Sicilians a sad countenance, neither the captain – nor any of the other Sicilians we spoke to – seemed sad.

They were proud of their “mixed” blood from so many places – Greeks, Romans, Arabs, Normans, Spanish, French to name a few. Indeed as the Captain put it, Sicilians felt that they improved themselves through contact with others.

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That's why Sicilians are doing more than simply saving immigrant lives at sea. The active policy of Leoluca Orlando, mayor of the island's capital Palermo, is to welcome everyone who wants to come. When we spoke to him, he put it very bluntly. "Welcome is the best guarantee of safety," he said, backing it up with the claim that 400,000 refugees had come to Sicily since 2014 and not one act of intolerance had been committed as a result.



Coffins are loaded in Trapani after the drowning of 22 migrants in July 2016 (Photo: STR/AFP/Getty Images)

### **A beacon of hope?**

It was not just intolerance towards new arrivals that Orlando claimed this attitude had prevented, but also acts of terrorism by these new arrivals against Sicily.

New arrivals, he argued, felt a part of their new Sicilian home thanks to their warm welcome and so worked alongside native Sicilians to protect it from any dangerous outsiders who did arrive.

Of course, many immigrants don't want to settle in Sicily; they have their sights set on Germany, France or the UK. However welcome, they will not stay. But Orlando sees Palermo as an example to the rest of Europe – and Donald Trump.

That is something Italy seems to be backing up: just last week, Palermo was declared Italy's capital of culture for 2018.

Sicily has had a successful multicultural past to be sure. But soon many more migrants are likely to be arriving, when spring arrives and the numbers making the journey from Africa increase once again. Can this island now be a beacon for a successful multicultural future, with a city like Palermo – born from the era of the Arab occupation of Sicily in the 9th century – leading the way?

**'Sicily: The Wonder of The Mediterranean' is on BBC2 on Tuesday at 9pm. Dr Michael Scott is the author of 'Ancient Worlds: An Epic History of East and West' (Windmill, £9.99)**