

FROM OUR CORRESPONDENT

At the crossroads of the Mediterranean,
Sicily is trading on its past to seize
a vital role in the digital future

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PALERMO



The man in the understated office building was toying with a section of black tubing slightly thicker than a garden hose, from which six fibre optic cables emerged, each resembling a hair.

"The Romans, Normans and Arabs came through Sicily, trading food, spices and gold," he said. "Well, now we're trading megabytes."

Palermo is dotted with churches that meld Byzantine, Arab and Norman styles, testament to Sicily's strategic position as a crossroads in the Mediterranean and its history of being occupied by just about everyone who sailed by, from the Phoenicians to the Bourbons.

Even the cooking betrays Sicily's historic north African ties, from couscous to sweet and savoury dishes such as swordfish cooked with raisins and orange juice.

Now this crossroads is busier than ever as Sicily has become a key junction for undersea internet cables entering the Mediterranean through the Straits of Gibraltar and

out through the Suez Canal. Of 21 cables in the Mediterranean, 18 come ashore in Sicily, and 11 of those are controlled from the anonymous office run by **Telecom Italia Sparkle** in the suburbs of the Sicilian capital, next to a car wash and a bowling alley.

The cable that Alessandro Talotta, the company's chief executive, was holding is a section that the Italian company laid underwater and is capable of streaming 400,000 high definition films simultaneously along each of its six embedded fibre optic wires.

With demand for internet services in the Middle East and Africa rising by 42 per cent a year, Sicily has found itself in a digital sweet spot. The growth has encouraged companies such as Google to install data banks in the Palermo office, closer to the region, allowing users in Tehran and Algiers to search faster and make financial trades more speedily.

Saving one fortieth of a second by taking your data from Palermo instead of a server in northern Europe may sound meaningless but Mr Talotta said that it could provide a big trading advantage.

"The banks that made money on the sterling rate during Brexit were the fastest, and the difference between making a million or not can be two milliseconds," he said.

Heading down the hall, Mr Talotta entered a room packed with whirring, blinking columns of hard drives, each containing a terabyte

of information — part of the so-called cloud, remotely storing data for millions of people. "Those four columns there are one cloud," a technician said over the roar of the air conditioning. "Enough space for 40,000 HD films."

The next door down, an internet cable arriving from the sea bed was plugged into a 2,500-volt electrical amplifier to boost transmissions.

Once in a while something with the cables goes seriously wrong. They are severed with surprising regularity by earthquakes, or ships dragging anchors, or even by sharks, which can mistake the cables for prey because of the faint electro-magnetic radiation they emit and chew through them — what one might call a mega bite.

Intelligence agencies reportedly send submarines to place devices on the cables to intercept traffic, while another challenge is connecting countries at war, or who refuse to speak to each other. Mr Talotta said that he and his colleagues made good use of the diplomatic skills Italians have acquired down the centuries in trading posts like Sicily.

"If Qatar is isolated, it's easier for us to be a middleman with an emirate," he said.

"We are a bit like the Switzerland of the internet," he added.

Dal nostro corrispondente

