



Sicily to Besanceuil



by Rob & Margaret Norington from Spence ACT, Australia - La Dolce Vita Tour [2017]

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“If I start by telling you that while in Sicily, Bob took about 1900 photos, I don’t want you to become alarmed that this letter with photos will cause your server to go into meltdown. We have chosen photos judiciously, and written some words, in the hope that you will be inspired to think about taking a trip to that island or if you already have, to think about returning...”



Dear Friends and Rels,

If I start by telling you that while in Sicily, Bob took about 1900 photos, I don't want you to become alarmed that this letter with photos will cause your server to go into meltdown.



We have chosen photos judiciously, and written some words, in the hope that you will be inspired to think about taking a trip to that island or if you already have, to think about returning.

And Spring is in our view THE time

to be there. The flowers were astonishing. The colours, the abundance, the variety, the vibrancy. In fields, along the roadside, on our walks... We decided, along with our travelling companions, that the flowers would be a major highlight and lasting memory of Sicily. Here is just one of many possible photos to set the scene.

But before going there, I'll start in another place that we found interesting and certainly engaging. Just to keep our mini-tradition of visiting Islamic cultures while en route to Europe, we had a couple

of days in Kuala Lumpur, and very much enjoyed the experience. It would be our last opportunity to indulge in authentic spicy Asian food before our return to Australia - we did that mainly via a foodies' walking tour in the city's Chinatown and Bangsar/Brickfields area with its strong Indian influences.

We had a great guide, an adventurous group, and over a few hours ate and drank what the locals eat every day, and learned something of the history and culture of the city.





We also indulged our interest in Islamic decorative arts and architecture via a visit to the excellent Islamic Arts Museum Malaysia. The building itself is lovely with lots of natural light and decorated dome plasterwork. It has a wide collection of the best of paintings, carpets, textiles, Qurans and manuscripts, ceramics, jewellery, weaponry, wooden and inlay wear, costumes and architectural styles from Islamic countries and cultures, all beautifully displayed with descriptions both in Malay



and excellent English. One gallery contained detailed models of mosques and mausoleums from across the Islamic world. A few very happy and satisfying hours. It had been recommended to us by many friends and we pass on that recommendation.

Back to Sicily and some context, a place we have long been interested in visiting, because of its rich and varied history, its geology and its islands. So when our dear friend Linda invited us to join her on a 14-day gourmet walking tour, we gladly accepted,

to walk, eat, explore, learn, enjoy. Accompanied by our guide, Gabriella, and two other Australians, Gill and Virginia, the tour took us into four quite different environments. At the end of the tour the three of us spent an extra five days exploring the south and south-eastern parts of the island.

In Palermo, where we had planned to begin our visit in Linda's company, we in fact started without her. By the time our delayed flight had arrived she was already in bed. So off to a nearby restaurant without her to begin our acquaintance with Sicilian food, and drink. The latter included an introduction to Sicily's three types of grappa, culminating in, according to our host, the pinnacle of its kind, a brand of grappa barrique (aged in oak barrels) of which an Italian politician gave Donald Trump four bottles to celebrate his election success (no names provided, but we thought the surname might start with a "B"). That news was almost enough to end our sampling, but not quite. Instead that grappa became Bob's benchmark for the rest of our time in Sicily.

So the next morning the three of us did set off to explore Palermo. The city has a reputation for being a major centre of Mafia activity, though other places further south may be equally important. And like many European cities and towns, it has an old central area, with little streets, laneways, and piazzas (and I'll come back to that common feature later - we experienced that in many locations). Palermo is steeped in



history which is reflected in its architecture. As with most of Sicily, from time immemorial, everyone visiting that part of the Mediterranean has left their mark, especially those with imperial ambitions.

Settlers from the east during the Palaeolithic, Neolithic and Bronze Ages were followed by others from Greece, mainland Italy and North Africa, including the Carthaginians. Then came the Romans, various vandals from central Europe, the Byzantines from early 500 CE, and the Arabs about 300 years later. The Normans took over around 1060 and stayed pretty much in place until 1261 when the Pope handed Sicily to the French Angevins.

Next in line were the Spanish who took control in 1410 and stayed until removed by Garibaldi in 1860 as part of the unification of Italy. Evidence of these periods in Sicily's history can be seen today - in its archaeological sites or museums, in its architecture, in





its food and culture, or even in its street names.

Back to Palermo. In perfect sunny weather (which was to continue for most of the three weeks - fine weather, clear skies, and around 19-23° on most days - perfect walking conditions), we wandered those streets and laneways, finding within a short distance of our B&B, an oratorio built in the late 1500s, with female statues representing the virtues dressed à la mode (though why Humility had a dove on her head was a tad puzzling). It is still maintained by the Knights of Malta. Another find was Piazza Pretoria with an enormous fountain in which these white marble naked figures were the main feature. We had only walked about half a kilometre by this stage but were already aware that churches abounded - large and small, dominating

piazas or tucked into narrow spaces between buildings. The ones we looked at tended to be rather dark and gloomy, though we could see mosaics and lots of statuary.

After coffee and pastries (with Linda taking her first step to fulfil her ambition to have a cannoli a day), we finally made it to one of our destinations - the Cathedral, a long edifice in golden limestone dating from 1072, with a facade



and the external wall of the apse in Norman style. Later additions such as the domes disrupt the harmony of the Norman design, but it is still an impressive building. The combination of both



Baroque and Neo-classical elements in the design of its interior we would later find to be a common feature of Sicilian churches, but in this case, we thought it a bit overblown. Much more to our liking was the Easter floral display to which this guy was adding the final touches. The walkway along the roof provided excellent views over the city and surrounding mountains.

And further up the Corso Vittorio Emmanuel (there appeared to be one of these in every town!) we reached the Palazzo dei Normani - the Norman royal palace built on the foundations of a 9th century Saracen building.

In the central tiered courtyard (a much later Spanish addition) one wall was covered in mosaics providing us with an introduc-





tion to what was to come - in the Capella Palatina. Originally the private royal chapel, its cupola, nave and three apses are covered in gloriously coloured and intricate mosaics. The overall design acknowledges different cultures and religions of the period - predominantly Islamic and Byzantine. We were quite speechless. The Royal apartments were an anticlimax after that.

We thought we had seen enough for the day (and there is much more to see in Palermo), and started to work our way back to the B&B. Linda pointed out a photographic exhibition that might be worth dropping in on - and we are glad we did. It provided us with insights into another aspect of Sicilian culture. Given it was Easter week, the numerous large photos were of Easter processions in towns across the



island and in Andalusia - Pasos e Misteri. Lots of rituals, silent or hysterical crowds, graphic religious statues, costumes (KKK in style). For us, rather strange. We then joined the throng engaging in the late afternoon tradition of la Passacaglia, with Bob spotting a super leather handbag store. We indulged!

And yet another introduction to what would become a pattern - aperitivos (the first of our many Aperol spritz) and snack food at sunset. We had this near the marina, enjoying the view of water, yachts and the impressive mountains that form the background to the city. And grappa.



Our walking and eating tour started the next day, which we spent initially up in those mountains at Monreale, where there is another large mosaic-decorated Norman church, considered to be one of Sicily's finest, and a charming cloister with 216 decorated twin columns (with every



design unique and where once again the Arabic influence was dominant). Being Easter Sunday, serial masses were being said in the jam-packed church.

We did feel like interlopers. From



there we headed south through rolling countryside, with orchards and vineyards to Selinunte on the south coast. It was once the site of a large city, established around





the 5th century BCE by the Phoenicians and Greeks. Apart from the impressive surrounding walls, it is the few remaining temples (there were 13 of them originally) set high above the coast that

required to source, transport and create these edifices. Remarkable what a steady supply of slaves and animals can achieve! And also, not for the last time, we enjoyed the abundant flowers.

ground to celebrate Linda's birthday, then a super dinner that featured across the six courses, seafood, various pastas, ricotta, lamb and hard-boiled eggs (an Easter tradition). And local wines. Very acceptable, and served with charm. Breakfast the next morning included a wide range of options, including one that would continue to be a favourite for the rest of our time in Sicily, perhaps the sweetest, most flavoursome strawberries we have ever eaten.



we had come to see. And we were impressed by the size and grandeur of the most intact temple and the remains of many others, destroyed by enemies further north, then the Carthaginians and finally earthquakes in the 3rd century BCE. Not for the last time we were taken with the sheer size and weight of the column blocks, and the organisation and power



North again to our base for the next few days, a lovely hotel near San Vito Lo Capo, on a peninsula to the west of Palermo. Drinks on the terrace with the impressive Monte Cofano and the sunset as back-





The first of our walks took us along the shoreline, up on to a ridge with lovely views over the Golfo del Cofano. The landscape was almost African - small palms, carob, almond and fig trees, and flowers, including white ranunculus on the surface of a small lake. The views on the other side were over another golfo, and a village

along a beach. Marble quarries were above us on the left and the jagged bulk of Monte Cofano on the right. Down on sea level again, we walked through verdant flower-filled fields (with large black cows and bulls - we kept a steady eye on the latter) to a series of caves inhabited from Palaeolithic times up to the end of WW2. My knee was grizzling a bit so I sat in the shade to wait while the others explored, and was rewarded with a glass of the local red by a friendly guy, who in typically generous style shared his wine with the others when they returned. The return walk took us on the coastal path around the base of Monte Cofano, with waves crashing below, past more caves, watchtowers and little shrines along the way till we reached the substantial remains of a tonnara, a tuna processing factory. More sunny weather for our walk in the Reservation Naturele dello Zingaro the following day with stunning views down to and along the coastline of the large Golfo di Castellammare. The reserve

was established in 1980 largely because of sensible locals and others objecting to the building of a coast road to link two towns through an area important for bird nesting, plant species and archaeological remains. And we enjoyed the result, with our walk taking us up high, and to this stunning lunchtime halt, a renovated farm complex with views across banks of yellow daisies towards the sea far below. Then along and down to one of the beaches with crystal clear water. Virginia was the only one of us to succumb to the lure of being wet and cool - though I think she admitted to its being rather cold. On the way, back to our minibus we passed through a section of coastal vegetation with lots of prickly pear, quite widespread in Sicily where we even saw it growing on dry tiled roofs.





After dinner, Marilù, our hostess, sang a couple of folk songs, accompanying herself on an old simple accordion, and using one of the metre-high traditional puppets that decorated the dining room, demonstrated its workings. More super food and wines including a goat's cheese mousse with an aubergine sauce (the recipe of which Linda gained the next day from the chef, and has already shared with the rest of the group). Super couple of days.



There were yet more views the next morning in Erice, a small walled town built on a spur high above the surrounding plains, with medieval gateways, cobbled streets and laneways, piazzas, little pasticceria selling a wide range of biscuits, many with pistachio fillings, and Fruitti di Martorana, highly coloured and usually fruit-shaped little marzipan sweets - and the remains of a Norman castle.

to reconcile with how we might think about such things today, but the Romans were so favourably impressed that they adopted the idea. It was rather cool on the exposed site so we adjourned to a cafe for pastries and hot drinks. The hot chocolate was so thick, the teaspoon stood upright in it!



It was built on more ancient remains of a temple where amongst other things, the priestesses and pilgrims practiced "sacred prostitution". Perhaps hard

On the way to our next destination we stopped at Segesta, another Hellenic site, with two impressive features - a theatre high on the hill, with stunning views into the surrounding countryside, and a partially completed Doric temple.





And like many sites, it was used by various invaders- hence the large site also has the remains of a Norman castle and a mosque. The walk from the theatre down to the temple took us through acres of profuse flowers, wild celery and fennel.

By late afternoon we were in the Madonie Mountains not far inland from the mid-north coast, and the highest mountains in Sicily apart from Etna. Delightful views of valleys, perched villages, forested hills, craggy peaks - quite atmospheric. Our hotel was in Petralia Sottana which with other nearby villages was once an important Greek and Phoenician area, and later for the Romans who prized it for its abundant wheat production. Our village was full of little laneways and steps, churches and oratorios, piazzas, fountains. In the reception area of our hotel was an 11th century well belonging to the Norman castello, on whose foundations the hotel had been

built. We had asked for a meal that night with more vegetables. Well, we certainly got that!! From the antipasta course to dessert. The vegetables included cardoons which I have only ever seen in Europe, a member of the thistle family and quite delicious.

It was cold (or do I mean close to freezing?) with a biting wind when we arrived and for the next couple of days. However, appropriately clothed with layers, hats and gloves, and having driven up high, our walk took us through beech forests, meadows bordered with banks of snow, flowers aplenty, and to this thatched roof hut, a simple refuge, but no doubt a very welcome place to ride out a snow storm. Nearby was a more modern version owned by the Club Alpino Siciliano, where two guys were restocking the wood pile. In all the years Gabriella had been coming to the Madonie Mountains she had never seen anyone there. We jokingly wondered if they might offer us a hot chocolate. It was tea instead, with some of the biscuits, chocolate and Marsala we had with us, and a really warm welcome that matched the warmth inside the hut.

A couple more hours were spent walking uphill till we came to an ideal spot for lunch, a high but protected knoll with views across valleys to the sea. The route back took us through delightful grassy and flowery meadows, bordered by forests of beech or pine. Exhilarating! As we reached our mini-bus, the two guys from the hut drove past and asked if we had



drunk all the Marsala! We hadn't but that gave us the idea of stopping at a large hotel not far away (the area is popular with hikers and skiers) for hot chocolates (thick, hot and delicious) and some grappa (this version was more like rocket fuel but certainly when added to the chocolate livened it up).

We had noticed fresh snow on the summits above us on the walk. Overnight, there was much more to the extent that the next day's planned walk needed to be abandoned when the road up to the starting point proved to be





too icy and dangerous.

So a change of plan, which allowed Bob and me to visit the local museum, one of 21 in the area from Cefalù on the coast to the mountains, each with its own orientation and specialty. The Petralia Sottana museum focused on the rich trove of Greek and Roman pottery, jewellery, glassware and statuary found nearby. We also discovered there was a salt mine still operating near the village, and a large hole which in the past filled with ice over winter and was taken to the coast to the gelato producers (we are talking 1500s - no wonder the gelato is so good - centuries of practice!).

An interesting museum with keen students wanting to practice their English. We obliged.

The group minus me set off in the afternoon to look at some of the villages in the area. They became caught up in a rally (I could hear it roaring away most of the afternoon - we later learned 2 people had been killed). Most of their time was spent in Gangi, a typical hilltop town, as this photo shows.

Apparently, pizzas are de rigeur in the village on Friday nights because the restaurant was full and many takeaways were disappearing out the door. I hadn't realised how popular pizzas are, possibly all over Italy. Perhaps because they are a quick and tasty meal or snack, and in the blissful absence of McDonalds, Hungry Jacks etc., the only real option available. Our pizzas that night were huge, generously topped but given various ratings by our group. I had a super calzone (8/10) - I learned long ago that calzones don't tend go as soggy as fluffy based pizzas.

A long, gradual descent from Petralia Sottana to Cefalù came next through narrow valleys with orchards, trees in much more leaf



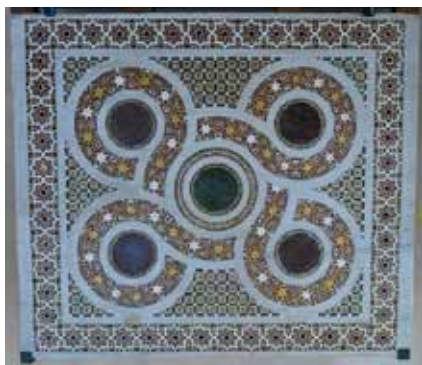
than higher up, lilies and irises, villages tucked into gorges, and enticing glimpses of the sea. Cefalù is a resort town with a pretty sandy beach and promenade, and an old town centre, criss-crossed with lanes, narrow houses with washing hanging out from balconies, courtyards and piazzas - an Arabic influenced place. We wandered through the little market, watching sugary slices being made, being tempted by pastries, and headed uphill to the large Duomo passing lots of boutiques, some with artisans at work, and a couple of buskers.

The Duomo is set behind a very large piazza which was filled with





tables and umbrellas and people enjoying their coffee and the sunshine. It is renowned for its mosaics but unfortunately for us, most of them were covered in scaffolding. A small section did show what we were missing. So we adjourned for lunch. More sea-



food - bucatelli con sarde (pasta with sardines, fennel, pine nuts, raisins and breadcrumbs, a new favourite!). More wandering the streets, with an investigation into some pottery spotted by Linda and me earlier on. A lot of what we had seen had no appeal - too OTT. But we had spotted some platters, hand painted in delicate

colours. They were bought (and carefully transported for the next couple of weeks).

Back in the bus, and the bumpy coastal autostrada with masses of tunnels, to Milazzo to the east. We didn't see a lot of that except for the petrochemical works, as we had little time before jumping on to a fast hydrofoil to take us to Lipari, the largest of the seven Aeolian Islands and our next base. All the islands are volcanic in origin and most are inhabited to varying extents and very popular with summer holiday makers. Many visitors only come to Vulcano for a day walk up to the still fuming crater.

Other islands like Panarea and Filicudi are especially popular with the rich and famous, while Salina is the most fertile, with vineyards, olive orchards and caper and caperberry production. And there is Stromboli, another still active volcano. Lipari has about 7000 inhabitants, lots of little villages, a main town with little ports, and

a long, important history as a trading base in obsidian, pumice, metals, and alum, so important in the dyeing industry.

Our accommodation on Lipari, in a huge hotel in a lovely location right on the water, proved to be a somewhat strange experience - we were almost the only guests there. And disappointingly, not very good food. Nothing quite like cold scrambled eggs for breakfast! The short walk into town in the morning took us



down laneways and steps, past the local church where the priest was saying mass. (I kept on seeing him over the next few days in all sorts of places. Either that or he had a twin!!). From the smaller of the two main ports we took a 30-minute boat trip via sea stacks, caves and arches to Vulcano, along with many others. We noticed the pervasive smell of sulphur almost immediately on landing. That didn't stop us enjoying the coffees, gelati and pastries at one of the many cafes on the waterfront (fuel for the climb we reasoned). The volcano is quiet currently, but has a reputation for being rather explosive and unpredictable. We noticed the monitoring equipment with leads down into the bottom of





the crater once we had made the climb, and wondered if the brave souls wandering about down there were high risk-takers or non-readers.

The climb was made all the more pleasant by the number of halts to enjoy the views over the island and beyond. Mostly cinders and ash on the pathway, then solidified lava. The idea of walking around the crater was scotched because of the nauseating sulphurous steam from the numerous fumaroles.

Back down at sea level, after a very pleasant seafood lunch, some more walking on the island, past hot mud baths (in which a dozen or so people were immersed), along black sandy beaches, then across old Lava fields to a promontory overlooking Lipari.

Why anyone would want to expose themselves to the smell and radioactivity of the mud baths is beyond us. There are signs warning children, pregnant women, the old and infirm not to bathe. Though it doesn't say why I think we can work that out.

Dinner back on Lipari was at a super seafood restaurant, something of an institution in the islands, serving Aeolian specialties, with a delightful ambiance and attentive staff. Risotto with shellfish was popular - Nero for me - and filling. Virginia opted for the seafood soup and was not only rewarded with a delicious meal but was presented with the bowl (washed of course) afterwards. Hope it made it home intact. Lovely local wines and grappa and petit fours to finish.

For some reason, my back decided that it would seize up the next morning, and I had to watch Bob and the rest leave for their day on Panarea and Stromboli. Grrrrr.

A boring and uncomfortable day for me and an interesting one for the rest. However!! With the help of Gabriella and Gill (a retired physician), on Stromboli Bob was able to purchase some Voltaren, and on the pharmacist's recommendation some inhalable Arnica. Much to everyone's surprise, I was able to spring back into action the next day (Gill was convinced it was the Voltaren not the Arnica that made the difference!).

Fortunately, that day was a rest day for the group, so Bob offered his services as my tour guide and after spending the morning exploring Lipari town, we set off to repeat the group's previous day's outing.

As I mentioned, Lipari is historically interesting. Its upper town has a Parco Archeological with lots of Greek and Roman tombs, and the Museo Eoliano, an excellent museum housed in a number of former church buildings next to the Duomo, with its Norman cloisters. Lots of excavation sites nearby, in which archaeologists have found a rich treasure trove of artefacts from Neolithic to Roman times. Most of these are in the museum, along with material from various necropoli and boat wrecks.



We thought the displays of barnacle encrusted-amphorae particularly impressive. There were 11th century BCE burial urns, beautifully painted orange and black vases, funerary votives and the oldest and most complete set of miniature Greek theatrical masks in existence.



These were lovely and for those better educated than us in the Greek dramas, apparently easily recognisable as relating to plays by Sophocles and Euripides. In another building, material from the Bronze Age, including huge chunks of obsidian and the results of its transformation into weapons, tools and jewellery. A fascinating morning.



So off to tiny Panarea, the Milan A-listers summer vacation spot of choice. On the way, we encountered the biggest pod of dolphins we had ever seen - far too many to count. The way they cavorted around the boat, apparently revealing in the display of their prowess, gave the impression that they were quite happy we had entered their territory.



On arrival, we lunched opposite the port (excellent arancini - great way of using leftover rice) and met a fellow Australian. She was visiting the island from her home island of Salina where she has been living for 10 years.





She is married to a local and is engaged in photo journalism, having retired as a physiotherapist. We talked about living in another culture, becoming fluent in Italian, relationships with locals and with the need for trips back to Australia. A delightful and serendipitous meeting. Then we set off to see a little more of the island. Lots of charming villas with shady courtyards and swimming pools, cobbled narrow laneways, boutique shops, bougainvillea, palms. Looked pretty good to me. Transport is only via Vespas or these little 3 wheelers that are used as taxis and delivery vehicles.

Back on the boat and on to Stromboli which rises 824 metres out of the sea with sheer cliffs around most of its perimeter. We had a few hours ashore before we needed to reboard the boat for a sunset trip around the island. Our first impression was of the long black beach stretching away from the wharf which separated the village of Stromboli from the sea, probably the only beach on the island. Dozens of fishing boats were drawn up on the sand behind the beach reminding us of the age-old importance of fishing to the people of the Aeolian Islands, and of the source of much of what we had been eating. Both on Stromboli and Panarea there were guys around the ports with complexions and hands that spoke of long contact with the sea.

Then off we went from the port, with its hotels, restaurants, gelateri, pizzerias, further up to the main church, and lots of outdoor and trekking outfits from which one could hire clothing and boots for the 5-hour climb up and back to the edge of the volcano's crater in the late afternoon.





We saw quite a few groups setting off to do just that. They all seemed to be younger than us... by a long way.... Our walk took us to the pharmacy (to show that Voltaren works!) and into the “suburbs” in which there were lovely gardens with kiwi fruit vines, orange and lemon trees, bougainvillea. We also visited the house in which Ingrid Bergman lived with Roberto Rossellini in 1949 while making the famous film *Stromboli: Terra di Dio*. I was amused by a large reproduction of a letter Bergman had written to Rossellini, introducing herself and saying how much she wanted to work with him. An offer apparently too good to refuse!

An early dinner in the same restaurant in which the group ate the day before, with both of us opting for the dish that Linda highly recommended - ravioli stuffed with grouper, served with a tomato and pistachio sauce, pipis, pine nuts and basil. Delicious, rich and filling! We waddled back to the boat, were of-

fered some pasta by the crew (!) which we refused, and set off for what we hoped might be an opportunity to enjoy Stromboli’s evening performance. It has a pattern of eruptions about every 10 or 20 minutes. Disappointment though, apart from puffs of smoke and a minor lava flare - there was more light from the camera flashes up on the rim. It hasn’t erupted seriously since 2010 so one imagines it might be overdue. Each major eruption of course greatly affects the residents who however live on the sides least likely to be in a lava flow’s path.

Back on the mainland the following day, and more autostrada and tunnels till we reached the closest point to the Italian peninsula, which is only a few kilometres away. Further south is Taormina, perched high on a hill overlooking the sea and apparently a well-known and popular resort. We all had some difficulty in understanding why. The beaches are small and way below the town, and the view looking up is dominated by large and rather ugly hotels. It has a long history of literary residents and visitors but that was some time ago. At the end of May its fame was

rekindled as the venue for the 2017 G7 summit, but ensuring security must have posed some real challenges. Access from sea level is via a series of steep hairpins, parking at the top is almost



non-existent, the main street is narrow and most adjoining side alleyways are steep and stepped.

That main street, a pedestrian precinct, is however redolent of a medieval town, with lots of palazzos, pretty courtyards and shops. It was a short walk up to the Teatro Greco, carved out of the hillside with good views over the town and the coastline (though partially obscured that day by mist or pollution). Now rather more Roman than Greek, having been rebuilt and enlarged (with the main addition blocking the main view), it is still used for performances. In fact, while we were there scaffolding was being hammered into place for an opera production later in the week.





Despite a very enjoyable seafood lunch, we were kind of happy to leave Taormina - very crowded and touristy with lots of large groups. We travelled further south with Mt Etna on our right, past Catania, with its major airport, large sea port, heavy industry, and petrochemical plants by the dozen along the shore of the Golfo di Augusta. It's a coastal strip known for its pollution - even with aircon going we could detect the chemical smell as we sped past.

We had a happier destination in store - Siracusa. Loved it. Especially the area in which we stayed, Ortigia, settled by Corinthians as early as the 8th century BCE, and now connected to the rest of the city by bridges. The approaches to the city were lined with orange and lemon orchards; there were palm trees and exuberant displays of bougainvillea.



Set us all up nicely. Of course, there were the inevitable narrow streets which according to Gabriella could be one way, or blocked, depending on the time of day or at the whim of the local police, or just because... There were lots of palazzos, and other interesting buildings including our hotel on the waterfront with waves crashing up against the promenade (love that sound). It is a former Ursuline convent tastefully converted inside into a comfortable, modern hotel with very welcoming and helpful staff. And it comes with a set of nuns. Yes, it's true! They are still the bosses.

We settled in, then all adjourned to the Piazza Duomo for aperitivos (more Aperol spritz) and snacks. What a stunning place particularly with the lights slowly taking over from daylight as the sun set. The Piazza is a large traffic-free expanse surrounded by beautifully restored late Baroque buildings, including the Duomo. Dinner in a popular local restaurant that seemed to have attracted quite a few English tourists who from their adjacent tables, waxed lyrical about Siracusa and the food. We were already well on the way to joining them in their views. And there was something rather atmospheric about the walk back to our hotel, past palazzos undergoing renovations, brightly lit shops and people finishing their meals in little courtyards and piazzas. There is a sympathetic gentrification underway in Ortigia - and one can understand why. Apart from there being prime real estate aplenty, this small area



about 500m by 1km is packed with history and atmosphere. We were looking forward to seeing more of it over the coming days, especially investigating the strange side wall of the Duomo. Were they the curves of Greek pillars embedded in the stucco?

But it was Etna next. Gabriella had advised us to dress warmly but it was such a stunning sunny day that we were soon removing layers and applying sunscreen. And what was even better was Etna was performing. As we drove to-



wards it, we could see dark smoke belching out. By the time we had driven up through the solidified lava fields, caught the cable car up to 2500 m over moonscapes of lava and ash, then walked further up to 2650 m (the highest point considered safe that day), we could see much more clearly the top of the volcano and its activity, including the blue smoke rising from the lava flow below the cone indicating the presence of Sulphur.



We had a local guide (a requirement to ensure safety) called Marco who was a great source of information about the geology, history of eruptions and their effect on the mountain and local area, and conditions on the mountain throughout the year (it is a ski area in winter). He created models of the mountain using piles of lava granules to demonstrate the creation of cones, rifts and calderas, and the likely evolution of the volcano into the future. We peeked into a caldera about 1000m deep, marvelled at the lichen growing in such inhospitable conditions, walked across snow and ice speckled with ash, were shown rocks called lava bombs that are projectiles shot out of the volcano, and stood 49m above the roof of a hut buried by lava and ash during a recent eruption. Marco also pointed out examples of where lava had flowed over the top of layers of snow, in some cases unmelted and still in place, but which had also been responsible for a recent steam explosion which had injured several sightseers on the mountain. Over the centuries, Etna certainly has created havoc. Just in the past 16 years there have been a number of eruptions, a few causing major damage to infrastructure on the mountain, and surrounding villages.

The folks in Catania must wonder if the next one will be a monster. And the ash can travel considerable distances. Our host at the B&B in Ragusa told us that at times when Etna is active and the wind blows from the north, everything in the town is dusted with

black ash. And as the crow flies, Etna is 100 km away.

And all the while that dark grey and occasionally white smoke kept billowing out, as well as the fumes rising from the lava on the slope below which would glow red at night. Luckily for us the wind direction meant we were up-wind and the volcano's activity such that we were quite safe to be as high as we were. We could see two vehicles up higher - guards and volcanologists we were told. We did think again about the reliability of volcanologists' predictions. According to Marco, for Etna they are at about 90%. However, at 4 pm the day before our visit, the volcanologists' predicted that Etna would be quiet the following day. By 7 pm it was well and truly active.

What a treat to be there and experience it all.

To finish off a super day, why not dine in Siracusa's best restaurant? A great pleasure it was to be seated in the vaulted room of a 15th century former convent and for Linda, Bob and I to be eating a 5-course degustation seafood meal, while the others opted for à la carte. We were all very happy with our choices. Warning: for those of you not all that interested in food (!), skip to the following paragraph. Here's the menu (my photo of the restaurant's didn't turn out well): diced fresh mackerel with lemon marmalade and a celery and paprika salsa; red prawns marinated in gin on an oyster mayonnaise and juniper flavoured seaweed; spaghetti with a cream of mussels and botarga (dried fish roe)



sauce and diced tomatoes; raviolini stuffed with ricotta and herbs, served with cuttlefish cubes and ink, and pistachio crumbs; turbans of swordfish with a nut and chocolate (!) sauce, little balls of zucchini and a saffron sauce. WOW!!!! And 2 lovely dry white local wines. But there's more: three small desserts - a ganache covered chocolate mousse; a ricotta and nut square; and saffron gelati.

Went to bed to the sound of the waves and thinking about what a super day it had been. It certainly lived up to the walking and gourmet tour title.

A rest day followed when we all variously made the most of our time in Siracusa. Bob and I started in the daily market, not far from our hotel. Just enjoyed it so much - so colourful, with the freshest fruit and vegetables and seafood I have ever seen in Europe. I just wanted to buy lots and go somewhere to cook and eat it.

We spotted a seafood retailer who, amongst the swordfish, tuna, squid, octopus, mussels and various other fish that I don't know the names of, was selling huge oysters. For a few euros, we had one each (delicious) and a glass of the very acceptable local dry white wine - at 9.30 in the morning! And why not?! We bought pistachios, dried melon, preserved lemon and orange rind; chilli flavoured salami and enjoyed the friendly atmosphere. The prices were, we thought, very reasonable. (Perhaps next time we are in Siracusa we'll rent an apartment and benefit from the market produce.)



We wandered into the centre of Ortigia, finding the remains of the 7th century BCE Greek Temple of Apollo, had a coffee in the Piazza Archimedes (yes, there is a good reason for the name - he was a local lad), and returned to that lovely Piazza Duomo to visit the cathedral. Inside, quite a surprise. Given the ornate Baroque facade, we might have been expecting that style to be continued inside (and it was in part). The initial impression is of a cool, cream coloured stone interior, with the original Greek temple pillars incorporated into the two side walls (so an explanation of the unusual shapes noticed earlier) and in the nave's simple columns. There is a simple Norman apse at the end of one aisle. It is on the other side that Baroque takes over, with a baptistery and a series of highly decorated chapels.





We rather preferred the plainer sections. More wandering, this time down little laneways, with quite a few local artisans working their trades, to the waterfront of the large harbour (said to be the largest natural harbour in Europe). Past the Fonte Aretusa, an oval basin filled by a natural spring, with papyrus and fish, and associated with one of the many Greek legends (this one about a nymph being persuaded by some god with designs on her....). Having walked as far as Castello Maniace, at the entrance to the

harbour, built in 1239, we backtracked to choose a restaurant for lunch. Yes, we know the rule about not eating in tourist-infested waterfront locations (and with a cruise ship in the harbour there were a fair few others looking for lunch), but...It was a pleasant day and Bob spotted oysters on the display menu. So he had his second helping of the day, along with stuffed squid. I settled for a simple salad and pasta with cockles.

Back then to visit Santa Lucia alla Badia at one end of the Piazza Duomo, mainly to see the large Caravaggio painting, The Burial of Santa Lucia, who is the local patron saint much loved for her miracles performed when the inhabitants have been in need. A strange work, possibly incomplete, as the artist was being pursued for unacceptable behaviour at the time (or so the story goes).

We still had more to see, mainly in mainland Siracusa. We heard about the impressive archaeological museum from Linda, and the Jewish baths from Gill and Virginia over more aperitivos (more Aperol spritz). On the list for next time, there is the Arsenale, a Byzantine bathhouse, the papyrus

museum, the catacombs, the Teatro Greco, the Roman arena used for circus games and deadly fights between prisoners and animals.

Despite sensing we had eaten enough for the day (forgot to mention the breakfasts - lots of choices, the inevitable cakes and biscuits, and a kind of chocolate flavoured set custard which seemed to be popular with the sweet tooth of which there were quite a few), we headed off for a light dinner. And you might have guessed it. Bob had oysters for the third time that day. He decided however the ones in market were the best.

Our last day on the tour was spent in an extraordinary location - Pantalica. Another sunny day, flower filled, and a pleasant walk in the Anapo Valley to the NW of Siracusa. The necropolis of Pantalica is THE most important prehistoric site in Sicily. There are probably more than 5000 tombs, dating from the 13-8th century BCE, carved into the limestone cliffs in the gorges created by two rivers. No wonder it's a UNESCO World Heritage Site. Starting from a plateau on the north side, we followed a gentle flower





lined track down to one of the rivers, almost immediately spotting the square holes in the cliff faces.

We crossed the river, climbed up on to the next plateau, coming quite close to tombs. They appeared to be large enough for more than one body - possibly they were used by a family, a practice still prevalent in Sicily today.

Skeletons were certainly found, along with pottery. Gabriella led us to a favourite picnic spot under a carob tree and surrounded by flowers.

Early that evening, back in Siracusa, another treat. A performance at the puppet theatre. We had learned from Marilù back at San Vito Lo Capo that puppetry, the scenery, performances and the stories being told have a very long tradition. This performance was in a dedicated little theatre, with very colourful scenery, the hero Orlando undertaking lots of daring exploits, engaging in noisy battles with a range of characters and at least one monster with red eyes, and performing the occasional chivalrous deed. We could not understand one word of the dialogue in Italian - or was it Sicilian? But we got the story and cheered and groaned and gasped accordingly.

And our last meal together was in a "street food" restaurant nearby. Very casual, great ambiance and

interesting food, produced in a kitchen about the size of a telephone booth. What do you think of my main course? I must admit to being a bit taken aback when it arrived. I wasn't expecting the whole octopus. (BTW it was delicious.) Bob chose the carnivore option - wild boar steak and sausages. Good desserts for those who could manage them. What a super day to finish our tour. All up according to Linda and Gabriella, being owners of gizmos that collect this kind of information, we had walked about 150 km over the two weeks, with walks of varying lengths and quite few climbs and descents.

We all headed off in the morning to Catania airport where Linda, Bob and I were to pick up our hire car, while the others returned to Palermo. Having waited in a queue for nearly two hours to collect our car, we had ample time to decide we never wanted to return to Catania airport ever again!! It's the main budget airline airport, chaotic, crowded and difficult to access... There had been a minor drama when I realised my jewelry case wasn't with our luggage, found that it had been left in our room safe and was quite OK. No one would mess with those nuns. Our route to that night's destination meant it was no trouble with our friendly GPS to find our way back to the hotel, collect the case, give one of the staff a big thank you and hug, and finally set off across country west of Siracusa. Just delightful scenery, rolling hills, perched villages (though we did worry that there were a few hills without a village - clearly an oversight!) - and the flowers.

Earthquakes of varying magnitude are reasonably common in Sicily and some have triggered Etna to erupt. The last major earthquake was in the south-eastern part of the island in 1693. That date is important for Sicily, not just for the devastation to the natural and built environment caused by the seismic activity and the subsequent tsunami, the towns and villages flattened, and the hundreds of thousands of people killed or injured. It also led to a major rebuilding program in the region with the last flowering of Sicilian Baroque architecture (think either flamboyant or just OTT). Our destination, Ragusa, was one such town reshaped after the devastation. It is effectively cut in two with Ragusa Ibla (the old town) on a spur above the valley, while Ragusa Superiore was rebuilt on, what must have for the time, streets with an innovative grid pattern. The locals in Ragusa Ibla rebuilt their part of the town using the same medieval street, laneway and steps layout as before. It's therefore quaint - and a nightmare if you are not on foot, a donkey, a Vespa or in a Fiat Bambino. We weren't.

As a result, for the next couple of days whenever we needed to use our car, it was a combination of guesswork, trying to find street signs (almost either non-existent or around the corner), avoiding





the area monitored by cameras (with fines attached), and not getting stuck in tight laneways. We are however up for a challenge and managed OK. When booking our B&B I had purposely chosen somewhere with adequate parking. It was however on the highest point in Ragusa Ibla

and therefore tricky to access. An old Castello no less (it's the squat building with the dark façade, middle top of the photo below) and with lovely views down over the Duomo.

We wandered down flights of steps till we found the Duomo, too late for a visit, so we continued down the sloping piazza in front of it till we found another smaller church, complete with half a dozen nuns singing the office of Vespers. Crumbs! Off for aperitivos (you guessed it - Aperol spritz) then Bob spotted a slow food deli that advertised tasting plates of local cheeses and salamis. Sounded good and having inspected the options inside, we grabbed a table outside and were served by a delightful young woman who told us that not only did she speak English (and of course Italian and Sicilian), she also spoke Spanish and Chinese. The latter came in handy soon after when a largish group of Chinese and South Koreans settled in at an adjacent table. Our platter came with a variety of cow, sheep and goat cheeses and four types of salami, all of which we washed down with an excellent bottle of local red. And grappa to finish, with some chocolate from Modica (more on that shortly). (You can see our gourmandising didn't finish with the walking tour.) And we were quite happy to have to climb all those steps back to the Castello.

The day after was 1 May, a Monday and a public holiday, so plenty of people out and about. Having extricated ourselves from Ragusa Ibla, we headed to Noto,

another town rebuilt post 1693. It is considered to have some of the best examples of Sicilian Baroque. It certainly has plenty to choose from, particularly churches. We started in one that was in the process of internal renovation - it was strange to be in a Baroque church stripped of colour and statuary. San Carlo was next only 100m further along the main street (but having passed three churches on the way - there are a lot of churches in Sicily!) where we climbed the tower for good views over the town. We were pleased not to be up there when the large bells were rung at midday. The imposing Duomo is certainly a statement. We very much liked the golden limestone and, as usual, its interior is highly decorated.

We walked up the adjacent side street which in late May is covered with flowers arranged in intricate designs - it must be quite a sight. Palazzos everywhere including the one below with very





ornate supports to the balcony. Lunch was a pleasant change - we found a restaurant serving interesting salads and fresh juices. We were all happy with the change in diet - even Bob who is only just tolerant of salads as a meal, unlike a Linda and me who could eat buckets of them!



Modica of chocolate fame was on our radar, so back across country. We were unsure of where the most famous shop was located (and the town is another warren of medieval laneways in Modica Basse and Modica Alte) so we took the first parking space we could find just up from a busy



looking piazza. Then luck stepped up. Linda asked a young woman passing by if she spoke English. She did. So would you tell us where to find the Antica Dolcera Bonajuto? Certainly! Come with me - I work there! Brilliant. We were less than 100m away.

The smallish shop which was lined with wooden display cases containing original manufacturing equipment and photos, was up a little alley, and was busy with customers on the same mission as ours. The chocolate is produced using the method apparently used by the Aztecs - the cocoa and sugar are heated and worked at a lower temperature than modern chocolate production methods, resulting in a grainy, crunchy texture. Lots of sampling was undertaken from a wide variety of flavours: pepper, cardamom, vanilla, cinnamon, chilli, almonds.... purchases were made, including some of the wicked looking and tasting chocolate liqueur.

Back to Ragusa, more struggles with those lanes and finally a visit to the Duomo. (Unbelievable. The swathes of silk curtains made it look more like a theatre, and very large statues of St George and his dragon made it more so). More wandering, noticing the many large intergenerational families who all seemed to be eating gelati. We had come across many scenes like these which had given us the opportunity to observe the importance of family life to Sicilians (and no doubt to Italians in general), and to reflect on the way Sicilian parents interacted with their children

in public. In contrast to the often strictly controlling behaviour we have noticed in France, Sicilian parents seemed to be much more warmly affectionate and relaxed. Instead of gelati, and as usual, we opted for aperitivos. These were soon disturbed by the sound of a large group of people with placards and loudspeakers making their way down the piazza. The significance of this became clear as they got closer - a demonstration against the G7 summit to be held in Taormina at the end of May. The depiction of world leaders on the placards left no doubt about whose participation they were objecting to.

Our route out the following day took us through more recent additions to Ragusa Superiore - boring, modern, ugly. However, we were very pleased soon after to find ourselves back amongst the flowers, green rolling hills and headed for Caltagirone, another Baroque town. It is best known to produce ceramics, which apparently dates back to Arabic times. There are little boutiques, galleries and workshops everywhere, particularly near La Scala, a 142-step staircase that was meant to





be a road linking the upper and lower town until someone figured the incline was too great. The tiles decorating the risers were added in 1950 - there is not one repeat.



We were just about over narrow streets, steps and Baroque, and looking forward to a complete change of historical context and architecture. Heading north and west, we found Piazza Armerina and our hotel, Villa Trigona, out in the countryside, in what turned out to be the (former) country estate of a local family. That was our guess - we noticed there was a Castello Trigona in town. Lots of family portraits and photos, and other memorabilia, and an old lady who seemed to be the main welcoming committee from her chair just inside the main door. A short drive later and we were at the main reason for coming to this part of Sicily - the Villa Romana del Casale and its stunning mosaic floors. Certainly worthwhile. This extensive villa, dating from the early 4th century BCE is thought to have been the hunting lodge of an important Roman official. Its rural location and the scenes portrayed in many of the mosaics give that clue. The design is typically of the period, with four groups of buildings around a large open courtyard, and connected by passages. There are public areas, family rooms, baths and guest quarters. The floors and parts of the walls are largely intact as a result of the whole area being covered by a mudslide in the 12th century. It was not until the 1950s that serious archaeological work was commenced, with of course the almost complete mosaics being revealed.



What a find! Today, raised walkways over most of the site enable an elevated view down into the rooms. Wooden walls and roofs have been added for protection using the style of the period. The basilica is just about the only area where visitors are able to walk at ground level, there not being many mosaics left in this grand chamber. It's hard to single out one room over another to give an idea of the quality, colour and intricacy of the mosaics. Here are a few, bearing in mind that the vibrancy of the colours has been subdued by a thin coating of dust.



The most extensive and extraordinary area is a 60m long corridor between the courtyard and private apartments, which portrays a continuous set of hunting scenes, with wild animals being either hunted or captured - tigers, elephants, ostriches, deer, rhinoceros.... there are slaves being injured, men with weapons, transport carts, and boats being loaded with animals (presumably for zoos



or contests back in Rome).

In the private apartments, the mosaics portray children playing; women engaged in physical exercise or, attended by slaves, preparing to bathe. Many of us think of the bikini as fairly modern women's attire, but the mosaics at Villa Romana del Casale prove otherwise. Of course, the gods are there engaging in various feats, as are chariot races, picnics - and almost always the main scene is surrounded by patterned borders and birds and flowers. Definitely a must-see place.

It was very pleasant to sit in the hotel's garden in the late afternoon sun, with a pot of tea and sounds of farm animals nearby and wild birds in the trees. We could have done without the cigar-smoking fellow guest nearby.... Our excellent dinner was very typically Sicilian (many courses) served with plenty of wine, and breakfast was the same (no wine!) - Lots of cakes and biscuits. Thank goodness for boiled eggs and toast!

The road took us south again, via back roads (avoiding the town of Gela's infamous nightmare traffic and pollution) through wide valleys and fields full of daisies and poppies, and up on to a ridge with the remains of a Norman castle. This guy was passing as we stopped for photos. Down to the azure blue sea and Agrigento, and the reason we had come here - the Valle dei Templii. The remarkable remains belonged to a sizeable Greek city called Akragas, which was founded in 581 BCE. Along a ridge, stretching for about a kilometre are



some of the city walls, streets, a necropolis, sacred sites and an irrigation system that fed a garden in a small valley just below - and these temples or parts thereof. The best-preserved temple, Tempio della Concordia is probably so because it was a Christian church from the 6th century CE until finally restored to its original Greek form in the 18th century.

But the remains of what must have been the most impressive Doric temple ever constructed caught our imagination. It was the size of a small football stadium, but never truly completed (those Carthaginians again!) and reduced to huge piles of stones by subsequent earthquakes. Nonetheless, the size of the altar base and the stones themselves





provide a clue to the size, as do the telamons - supporting columns in the shape of male figures. Even lying horizontally as they do now, they are impressive.

Our last full day in Sicily was mainly spent on the move north through the centre of the island to Palermo, and roadworks that painfully went for kilometres (the flowers made for a happier trip than it might otherwise have been). But before that, a visit to la Scala dei Turchi, a series of white marl cliffs to the west of Agrigento, so called as the shape of the unconsolidated limestone resembles a staircase and was apparently a landing place for Turkish marauders at some time in the past.

We stayed in a small town not far from Palermo airport in a quirky little hotel, the rooms of which were decorated with aspects of

Sicilian food and customs. We were in Crema di Ricotta while Linda had Arancia (oranges). After a walk and an aperitivo in the orange tree and hollyhock lined main street of this very non-touristy town, for our last meal in Sicily we headed for a recommended trattoria that was very popular with the locals. The large servings of seafood, accompanied by super fresh spinach and roasted radicchio were very acceptable. The next day, Linda left for Naples and the Amalfi Coast while we headed for France. As you will have gathered, we really enjoyed our time in Sicily, particularly in spring - so much richness and diversity to experience - and among the people we found warmth, good humour and friendliness. To round off our time in Sicily, here a few photos of the very many wild flowers we came across during our walks.

We are happily ensconced again in Besanceuil till mid-September - it is lovely to be back in a familiar place. The first week was miserably grey and wet, but Spring is now here. The countryside is green, the cattle are up to their



bellies in grass, and there is a chaffinch that sings of his joy in a tree beside the kitchen. We've started to reconnect with friends on this side of the globe and we have a few diversions elsewhere lined up between now and when we head back. Our first visitor has come and gone - it was lovely to share travel tales and our part of France with her. And it's been interesting to be here at such an important time for France, and Europe, with the French Presidential election in early May, and the legislative elections to come in a few weeks. Every French person we have spoken with is concerned about his or her country's direction and future. Understandably. So - our very best wishes and love to you all. Happy and safe travelling to those of you on the move or about to set off. Stay well.

Bob & Margaret

