

Sicily 2023

Sicily had been on our list of places to visit for its multicultural history and architecture, and in particular because the mosaics in the Norman cathedral of Monreale, outside of Palermo, were reported to be the best in the world. Thus, we sought an all Sicily itinerary to see them, and not incidentally, to visit the best preserved Greek temples in the Mediterranean. We came for the history, art and architecture, but unexpectedly, we swooned over the food!

We chose a small group tour company, Odysseys Unlimited, with whom we had traveled before, on a Dartmouth Travel tour of Egypt and Jordan in 2019. We were not disappointed!



Travel Day 1, Sunday 19 March 2023. After a series of travel fiascos on previous trips, we worried about the overnight flight to Rome and connection to Palermo. Despite a somewhat tedious 5 hour layover in Rome, all went well. We didn't know it yet, but the 19 guests in our group were pleasant & friendly, the weather would be perfect and the guides spectacular.

Day 2, Monday 20 March. We were the first out of baggage claim because we used carry-ons & met our tour director Gaetano Salemi just outside the doors. After a long while, all the others came through & we boarded a bus for the transfer to Palermo. Right off the bat, we saw the mountains thrusting straight up, like the two arms embracing the coastal plain of Palermo. Gaetano, for whom this was the first tour of the season, was pumped & began the first of his many informative commentaries on the landscape & history. We checked into the *Hotel Eurostars Centrale Palace*, just steps from the original crossroads - *Quattro Canti*, the Four Corners - of the ancient city. We immediately hit the sack for a 2 hour nap. The group was scheduled to meet at 6 PM for an orientation talk, after which we went to the roof top restaurant of the hotel to have the first of many, many astoundingly good 3 or 4 course meals.

Day 3, Tuesday 21 March. Imagine our joy when we entered the breakfast area & saw the coffee making machine that we have come to love in recent years abroad! We quickly remembered the drill: push the cappuccino button, wait for the cycle to complete, & then push the espresso button for a shot into the same cup. Oh my god. The extensive, lavish breakfast buffet was also wonderful & made me remember ruefully how difficult it was back in the '70s to assemble a decent breakfast while traveling...at least, on our lowly budget back then. At 8:30 AM we met for our walking tour. We began at the nearby Four Corners.

With a running commentary on art, culture, architecture & history, Gaetano led us through the old city. He was full of energy & happy to be back expounding. Gaetano had the bus meet us just outside the pedestrian zone, to bring us around the route of the former city walls to the pyramidal gate at the top of a long incline, which had been the governmental & religious sector of the city since antiquity.

The gate was built by the Normans to celebrate their victory over Islamic forces, & had statues of four huge carved Arab prisoners in submissive poses, including one poor guy with both limbs severed across the forearms. Nice.



We entered the Norman palace which felt very much like many monastery type buildings we have visited, with a central cloister. We really did not know what lay ahead as we entered the Palatine Chapel. Mosaics!



Fabulous, radiant, luminescent even though it was cloudy outside, stunningly artful & beautiful beyond words! And we had not even know it was coming! We were speechless. Too soon we had to leave, which was painful! Then Gaetano led us for a coffee & pit stop. As good as he was with the commentary, he was also good with mundane details & necessities of life with elder travelers.

After that - to the open air market. There the vendors did their singing & calling out thing, with some stalls grilling food right there on hibachis on the tabletop.



One vendor passed vegetables to Gaetano to show us & say the Sicilian name - not necessarily the Italian name. Everybody seems to know Gaetano! It was crazy & chaotic, although I felt sad empathy for the octopuses laid out in lifelike poses.



The last stop was to the restaurant. Endless amounts of wine, antipasti, pasta, veal, sparkling water, crusty bread.... The group walked back to the hotel & we were on our own for the rest of the day. After a rest, David & I went out to walk to the Capuchin catacombs, depicted in

photos as walls lined with luscious mummies of long dead monks. For some reason, we had neglected to locate it on a map.

After a while, we gave up & walked back to the Opera House, notable to Americans as the location of the murder on the steps seen in *Godfather III*. We paid 10 Euros (\$11) each for a nice, but forgettable tour of the 19th century edifice. One large chamber had a domed ceiling with bizarre acoustics. Still not worth \$22.



Even after all the walking, we were still full from lunch. We had no supper, but bought a bottle of wine & had some back in the hotel room, before falling into another fitful sleep. The room was lovely, comfortable & quiet, so we couldn't figure out why we were not sleeping well.

Day 4, Wednesday 22 March. We woke up hungry! Enjoyed a big breakfast before the 8:30 AM rendezvous. Again, we met the bus just outside the pedestrian zone & headed back in the direction of the airport on our way to Erice (ERR ee chay). We got another view of those mountains & enjoyed entering the countryside, which took on more & more of the look of Tuscany or Umbria. The landscape was of olive groves, vineyards, citrus groves, rolling hills, flowering almond trees, dry creek beds. The first flocks of sheep showed up, guarded by white shaggy dogs, like Pyrenees, rather than wolf-like dogs such as German Shepherds. This area had had a large Greek population back in ancient times, with a hill top temple nearby at Segesta, just inland, which we did not have time to see.

We started up sharp switchbacks into the clouds to the ancient town of Erice, sited on the flat top of a sharp, mesa-like mountain. The views were terrific as we headed to the top.



It was named after Aphrodite's second son, Eryx (not her first, Eros.) Because the town could not grow outside its natural limits, it is the same size it has always been, but well preserved & not built over. The town had three "corners" - the pagan temple site, the Jewish quarter (depopulated when Spain conquered Sicily in the 1490's & expelled all the Jews) & the Christian neighborhood. Gaetano taught us about the 3 "corners" of the island of Sicily, which Erice resembled, pointed out architectural features, & told the story of the pagans releasing white doves ceremoniously which event has been imitated by the Christian faithful ever since. We saw the orphan wheel in the nunnery wall: the unwanted newborn would be put in a compartment which turned like a lazy susan so that it passed through the wall & the nuns could receive the child. The year round population today is 500 people, the summer population is 10,000! Down below, as the clouds blew away, we could see "New Erice," where the 19th & 20th century city developed. On the other side of the mountain, we saw the salt flats of Trapani (TRAP an nee.)

Driving towards Trapani, we saw our first World War II remnants: a watch tower & a pill box, well preserved. The salt pans stretched out in huge squares to the sea, like white cranberry bogs, with many windmills for pumping the brine from flat to flat. We arrived at a windmill/old storage barn, now a restaurant, & enjoyed today's fabulous meal: antipasti of green olives, tomato cubes, crusty bread, asiago cheese, & bruschetta; then a course of curly ribbon-like pasta. The primo course was salt dried (large) sardines about which the gentlemen around me bitterly

complained but I thought delicious, if a little laborious, to fork up. Dessert was a sweet ricotta ravioli, accompanied by an espresso. Heaven. The bus ride back to Palermo was soporific - even Gaetano must have dozed.

Once back at Palermo, the group had free time so we walked through the Piazza Pretoria. There was an elaborate fountain of the 1580's that scandalized the populace because of the nudity of many of the sculptures. This was directly in front of the Cathedral of Santa Caterina d'Alessandro. We headed around to the Dominican "monastery" of Santa Caterina, actually a nunnery, whose living quarters were only recently opened to the public after 400 years of strict isolation. We saw the nuns' spartan bedrooms, each with an agonized Christ on the crucifix, a small balcony & a fountain. On some desk tops were knotted cords for self-flagellation. Sicilian tradition among the wealthy was that the second daughters were raised since toddlerhood for the religious life & were sent into life-long seclusion at puberty, after the family paid a large "dowry" to the order. This "bought" the family a smoother path to salvation. The religious artwork bordered on torture porn. We kept seeing statues of an ugly sheep, or was it a dog? with a lit candle in its mouth. What was *that* all about? We saw the meeting room with one wall of metalwork screens which gave the nuns the view down onto the altar & the congregation during Mass. There was another orphan wheel, the kitchen (now a cafe serving cannoli,) the laundry - we stayed until closing time fascinated & repelled. Gaetano later told us that the ugly creature was a dog with a flaming torch, a visual pun on *Dominicano*..... "domini - cane" the "dog of God."

Day 5, Thursday 23 March. This was the day we were to see the cathedral at Monreale, sitting high above the Palermo plain. The "Royal Mountain" was built by the Normans in the 1200's near their hunting grounds. After they had expelled the Arabs, they restored or built anew Christian churches & once again promoted images, icons & statues. As Gaetano meaningfully noted: the populace had not seen a representation of a human figure in the 400 years of Islamic rule. But now, suddenly & stunningly, every wall, column & ceiling of their new cathedral would pixilate with figurative, glittering mosaics. Up between the highest clerestory windows were panels telling the Old Testament story, from Adam & Eve to Issac. The second tier down had New Testament Life of Christ pictures. In the huge half dome behind the altar was the famous head & shoulders of Christ, eyes looking off to the side, with an odd, slightly detached expression.



The 6,000 *pounds* of gold hammered into leaf, or incorporated into the tesserae, shone as if lit from within, & the figures were as skillfully rendered as those in Hagia Sophia or Ravenna. Yet, the most unexpected feelings came up - this was it, our goal, as glorious as reported, & yet.....somehow the spectacular surprise of the Palatine Chapel mosaics seemed to ever-so slightly blunt our reaction to these. We looked a little side-eye, like that Christ. We took a few minutes to walk down one of the streets to the view point overlooking the “Golden Shell” valley of the Palermo plain. And soon, time was up & we were ready to leave.

Confident that good stuff lay ahead, the Sicily tour soon brought us up to a vineyard literally in the middle of nowhere, surrounded by hundreds of rolling, grape vine covered hills. “How do they *find* these places?” I heard someone ask. We were met by a man who looked like a young David Schwimmer, Federico. He had earnest but heavily accented English - I had to whisper the English words to myself as he said them to make sure I got it right. Federico gave us a quick tour of the storage barns where the wines are aged in new white oak barrels, & then led us around to a terrace for a unique event: with cubes of freshly cut bread & saucers of various olive oils, we enjoyed an olive oil tasting. My favorite was oil with basil which, oddly enough, tasted peppery. What fun.



This called for lots of wine from the vines which surrounded us. Feeling extremely fine, the group then motored to the private home of a chef nearby. There we had another wonderful four course meal, with local oil & wine, a tartlet appetizer, chick pea sauced pasta, a meat course which I forget, dessert: *squisito!*

By late afternoon, we had ridden southeast across the island to our next hotel, on the southern shore near Agrigento, *Baia di Ulisse*. After a rest, we explored the luxurious hotel, just opening up for the tourist season. The pool & the ocean looked inviting, but it was still way too chilly. We found our way in the dimming light down onto the beach, past our very own WWII pillbox, to gaze at the melon slice of moon & the planet Venus in the sky. It was darker making our way home through the brushy sand dunes, but we did, & got back to the hotel for another wonderful meal in their restaurant, with our amiable new friends.

Day 6, Friday 24 March. Breakfast at the hotel did not have a coffee machine, but the servers bustled about & took our orders for *cappuccini pui forte* with a smile. (I learned it can mean "VERY LOUD CAPPUCCINI" when we thought it meant "strong.") Another broad buffet with an unique emphasis on sweets: cakes, tortes, petit fours, pastries, cannoli. We would have pretty much the same thing every morning: moist scrambled eggs & soft bacon; fresh fruit; some rolls or baked goods. I went for the creme pudding filled croissants. And at least three loud coffees. Our destination this morning was the ancient Greek city of *Akragas (Agrigento)* famous for its best preserved temples in the Mediterranean. We headed inland & approached the long high ridge line along which were 13 temples built by the Greeks. Three still upright & intact with others in varying states of plundered ruin. The ancient city, unexcavated, lies beneath olive

groves in the sling of a valley on the north side of the ridge & behind that, the medieval city sprawls high across a mountain. The colony was established by the Greeks here in the 700's BC because of the dramatic escarpment at the confluence of two rivers, which at that time were both navigable from the sea with smallish boats. They are now just rocky brooks. We met our local guide Giovanna - hugs & double kisses for Gaetano. She was a firehose of information as we walked with her along the line of temples, starting with the Temple to Athena, formerly thought to be to Hera.

We had some photos from a friend who visited 25 years ago & we attempted to duplicate his shots, but the public is no longer allowed to walk up into the temples. What struck us was that, while these temples were indeed still on their feet, having never fallen, the local sandstone was deeply etched & eroded from millenia of weather exposure. The phrase "best preserved" just didn't seem to apply. In their day, of course, they would have been covered in painted plaster & would have gleamed. Now they looked like they were eaten by termites.

One temple was wonderfully intact because it had been converted into a church with a few architectural modifications: the altar came inside from its place out in front, arches were opened in the cella walls, & the religious orientation was to the west (life after death) rather than to the pagan east (renewal of life.)



The temple to Zeus was the largest Doric temple ever built, & oddly enough, just as with the massive temple to Artemis at Ephesus, almost totally erased from the face of the earth. In the

later Byzantine & medieval eras, these mega temples were convenient stone quarries & lucrative sites for lime production by burning marble statues. The configuration of these temples seemed odd, too. These structures were early: the Greeks had not yet settled on Golden Ratios & set styles - so the temple to Heracles was long & thin. Also, they had not yet figured out roofing spans, so that Heracles' columns were huge but close together, as at the Egyptian temples at Karnak. We learned about the cult of the Chthonic gods of the underworld: Demeter, Persephone & Dionysus. Theirs was the oldest sacred site, established in a warren of caves in the sandstone escarpment. These are open to the public but going underground required a special tour, so we missed all that. Ancient painted pottery from *Akragas* shows goats with odd, straight horns that spiraled like licorice sticks. Goats resembling those were found in the mountains of Afghanistan which not coincidentally was the eastern extent of the campaigns of Alexander the Great. Some were brought back here to re-establish a herd in their home territory. The weather was bright & hot, & the group had been among the temples for about 2 hours. We had the option to stay longer, but we were willing to leave. Another reminder of how differently we experience travel in our old age.

After a rest stop, we bussed to the archeological museum. There Giovanna concentrated in an effective way on only a few items that could tell the best stories. One was a red figure vase showing the distraught Achilles, with his helmet pushed way back on his head, helping a second warrior to lay out the dead Patroclus, with the hair of the dead man streaming unfettered down in what looked like braids or dreadlocks. The two warriors looked exactly like modern football players with their long dreads bursting out the back of their helmets. There was a late Roman marble sarcophagus showing a moving deathbed scene of a child. The expressions on the parents' faces reflected their agony of grief, the grandmother seemed sadly accepting, the little sibling was paying no notice whatsoever.

The group was bussed to a seaside resort, which was not quite awake yet from the winter, for lunch on our own. At a nearby restaurant we had delicious panini with 2 Messina beers. Back to the hotel for a rest & a hand laundry, drying the wet things out on our sunny balcony overlooking the Mediterranean. At 5 PM, we met up again for the bus ride to Chiara's 17th century manor house, which her family bought over 200 years ago when Napoleon forced the Church to sell property. There we enjoyed a nice walk through the olive groves as the sun got lower & lower. Some of the olive trees were up to 800 years old, with massive thick trunks, but with the "bush" on top no bigger than that of, say, 20 year old trees.



She pointed out wild plants that she forages to eat, & chatted amiably with us all. We returned to the house where there was a preparation of a Sicilian potato dish in which we guests were invited to help. While her kitchen workers prepared chicken Marsala (originating in Marsala, western Sicily, using the local wine) for the whole group, some of us took a tour of the manor house. It was like a time trip into the 1920s or 1930s with room after room of furniture of that era. Back down to sit at the big table for yet another fabulous gourmet experience. A special treat on the way home that night was that Gaetano had the bus driver go slightly out of the way to drive along just below the temple ridge of Agrigento, the ruins blazing in golden light, while he played music, *Nessus Dorma* from the opera *Turandot*. It was lovely.

Day 7, Saturday 25 March. After our last wonderful breakfast at the *Baia di Ulisse*, we headed cross country toward Syracuse. Heading northeast, we followed the Salsa River, another once navigable waterway that is much diminished now. The town of Caltanissetta began as a fort built by Hannibal's father Hamilcar & was enlarged by the Saracens & then the Normans in turn. It was situated at the point on the river that boats could go no further & was the start of an important overland trade route to Catania. On that trail, near present day Piazza Armerina, the Romans built an enormous municipal & domestic complex, the *Villa Romana del Casale*, as the great estate of a high-level senatorial aristocrat. After the barbarians sacked the buildings in late antiquity, generations of squatters lived here until the site was abandoned in the 1200's. Then nature sealed it over with muddy landslides that preserved the walls & floors until it was rediscovered in 1950. This site is famous for its expansive mosaics, like wall to wall carpets, depicting dozens of motifs of daily life: hunting, chariot racing in the hippodrome, games, dogs & children playing, picnics - plus a panorama in an exceedingly long narrow room of wild African animals being loaded into boats for shipping north to provide the colosseums of the Roman

world with blood sport. Here is located the famous mosaic of women in bikinis looking like they are playing volleyball.



Even though we had seen the mother of all late Roman mosaic collections in Gaziantep, Turkey, we were profoundly impressed. Our local guide told us that her goal in life is to get to Gaziantep & see that museum for herself...sometime after the Turks recover from the recent earthquakes.

Mid day. Gaetano told us that as a Sicilian clears the table after one meal, she is planning her next. We, too, knew we were headed for another gastronomic extravaganza, this time in the *Trattoria Laruota* in a valley nearby. The antipasti: red peppers, eggplant slices, fennel, zucchini ribbons, stuffed whole tomatoes, fava beans, sauteed green beans. And that was just the first course! I forget the pasta, although I'm sure it was good! Main course: One of us had pork loin with *funghi*, the other fresh killed braised rabbit. Local wine. Who is the god or goddess of feasting on delicious food? We bow down.

We finally rolled onto the bus & headed toward *Siracusa*. In the citrus & olive groves near the sea south of Syracuse, where Montgomery's army of the British Empire was bogged down for 39 brutal days while Patton skipped across Sicily & beat him to Messina...there is now a luxury spa/hotel, the *Hotel Borgo Pantano*, where we were to stay for three nights. We explored the spacious grounds with huge swimming pools & later sat down to a fine dinner. There was trouble sleeping that night because an extended family celebrated someone's birthday in the restaurant, one level above us, far into the night.

Day 8, Sunday 26 March. Five star hotel it may have been but somebody didn't get up in time to fire up the water heater. Cold showers & grumbles all around at breakfast. However, we were mollified by an elaborate breakfast buffet so impressive that we took a video of it... probably the best buffet of the trip, if not of the world, if that is possible. It was David's 77th birthday &

Gaetano surprised us all. He arranged to have the whole kitchen & wait staff come out with 2 pancakes stuffed like a sandwich with sweet white stuff & a candle on top, complete with a silly hat for the birthday boy to wear.



They then serenaded him (in tune!) with the birthday song ! It was great! After we enjoyed a leisurely breakfast - it was Daylight Saving Time for Italy, so Gaetano wanted to ease us into the new time - we bussed into *Siracusa* & met our next local guide, at the Archeological Park of *Neapolis*.

After hugs & kisses for Gaetano, she brought the group directly down into the ironically named *Latomia del Paradiso* (Paradise Quarry), now a lush & serene horticultural garden... but for over 1500 years, a hell hole of slave labor. As Rick Steves said, it was a concentration camp of endless suffering.

The white limestone was reminiscent of Cappadocia in Turkey with tall white stone walls & columns. The quarry had been a huge underground mining operation, with the cavern roof held

up by these pillars, until the whole roof collapsed during the 1690 earthquake. The slaves followed one seam of particularly high quality limestone along a sinuous path, which created a very tall, winding cave called the “Ear of Dionysius I,” named after the tyrant of *Siracusa*. The shape amplified whispers in an astounding way.



Next stop was the huge theatre, built as always into the hill, facing the sea. About $\frac{1}{3}$ of the rows were overlaid with modern seating, as the theatre is still in use. Way at the top, along a limestone escarpment, where Christians carved niches for burials, a fountain poured forth out of an old Roman water channel tunneled into the limestone. All these niches, channels, grottos, &

fresh water springs brought Ancient Corinth to mind. Doh! This city was established by the Corinthians!

Our guide led us past an incredibly long altar, in front of a now absent temple, where she said that 100 bulls could be sacrificed, one or two at a time, in one day. We had heard the same thing about the Temple of Zeus in Agrigento. That's a messy business, so I asked her how 100 bulls, hearing death cries & smelling blood, would stand still for this ceremony. She said they drugged them (grain of salt required? Or not.) As we walked by the Roman amphitheater, about the size of the ones in Nimes & Arles but much more ruined. Designed not for plays but for Roman gladiatorial bouts & other forms of bloody combat, she reminded us that this was not the Greeks' idea of fun. A slanted cart road had been cut across the seats of one side to make it easier to quarry the stones to incorporate into later buildings.

Next on the agenda was a walking tour of the oldest part of Syracuse, on what was a peninsula: *Ortigia*. At some point to improve its defenses, the city cut a canal across the neck & it is now an island. Here Gaetano was the guide & we followed him through the twisty, narrow city streets. The entire island is a pedestrian zone (supposedly) but we dodged tiny cars & motorbikes. In Ortigia, as in every other town in Sicily, shops displaying colorful refrigerator magnets showing "Moor's Heads", from a local Sicilian story about forbidden romance.



As we strode up a shadowed alley, he said “You are about to enter one of Italy’s finest piazzas.” Sure enough, we burst into the brilliant sunlight of the spacious Piazza Duomo (Piazza Athena)



filled with life, energy, cafes, & music. Here, a cathedral was built into & around the Greek temple, ostensibly to supplant the pagan masterpiece but actually preserving it & the sanctity of this site forever. This was a fabulous experience of a white limestone Doric temple, with one wall of 13 free standing columns in superb condition, a nave with no transept, intact cella walls with arches carved into them to create side aisles.



On the other side, the baroque froth seemed to engulf the Doric forms like a giant amoeba. It was wonderful. And, we learned that the patroness of *Siracusa* since early Christian times is Santa Lucia, the virgin martyr whose eyes were plucked out, which in depictions she carries on a small tray. Lucy & the unfortunate St. Agatha, who lost her breasts to Roman torture, are the Sicilian-born saintly rock stars.

Next destination was the copious spring of Arethusa, likely one of the main reasons the Greeks settled here. The spring is an enormous walled off well, down into which you can see the water flowing in & out the other side, populated by carp, ducks & geese, & lush with papyrus plants which originally came from Egypt. At this point, the group broke up for lunch on our own. We

studied the spring some more, then walked along the seaside path to the point of the peninsula, where there was a fortress that had been much rebuilt & reconstructed over the centuries. Then we followed the Via Roma to the Piazza Archimede, in the center of which was a beautifully sculpted fountain of Artemis. Archimedes, a native born Sicilian, was the mathematical genius of the Greek world, famous for his practical inventions like the Archimedes Screw for lifting water, but also famous for his pure theory, like how to compute the volume of a cone....which he had to figure without the use of arabic numerals. So valued & famous was his genius, like a da Vinci or an Einstein, that the invading Roman troops were ordered to spare his life. But some low order soldier didn't recognize the old guy & slew him after Archimedes asked the soldier to get off the geometric figures he was drawing in the sand. Another version is that Archimedes complained that the soldier was blocking his light.

At the end of this street we found the much ruined Temple of Apollo, next to which was a little bog, so clearly this was yet another spring in the old times. It was lunchtime but we weren't hungry, so we sat & had a half liter each of Peroni. This is a beer we would never drink at home, yet sitting in the piazza in sight of the temple, the context lent a delicious flavor to our "lunch." A little buzzed, we rendez-voused with our group, found the bus, & went back to the hotel for a nap. Dinner this night was at the Hotel *Borgo Pantano's* excellent restaurant. The owner circulated among the tables making conversation. We did not mention the cold shower.

Day 9, Monday 27 March. Despite promises, the showers were lukewarm at best, cold toward the end. Unhappy campers. A fabulous breakfast improved the mood after which we bussed back into *Siracusa*. First, we walked to the canal that bisected the peninsula, where we loaded into two 20 foot long boats. We set off, first having to pass under the bridge where everyone had to bend way down to keep their heads. We cruised up along the coast, past the Arethusa spring outlet - it was said that once when the city was besieged, an enemy soldier swam up this outlet. We passed the much reconstructed fort, rounded the tip & headed back down the other side. The land rose up, creating limestone cliffs gutted with shallow grottos, where chimney swifts & pigeons dwell.

The boatmen nosed each craft in turn into a few of the grottos, where the walls, with the brilliant reflected sunshine & the teal blue water, fluttered with light.



Up on top of the cliffs was a large World War I memorial reminiscent of the prow of a ship, inscribed with the names of the dead soldiers who had fought together for the first time as united Italians, instead of for the separate principalities before unification in 1871. The names of the World War II fallen were fitted onto the existing monument. War is not their thing. Having been invaded 21(?) times over the millenia, the Sicilians learned to bend like willows. Forty five minutes later we had made a complete circle & disembarked where we had boarded.

We were off for a long walk through narrow roads & shaded alleys, overhung with shallow balconies from which draped vines & flowers, to the former Jewish quarter. Someone renovating a medieval house had found a staircase filled with debris, which when excavated, revealed a *mikvah*. This ritual bathing cavern, mainly used by Jewish women for purification after menstruation, had been filled in after the expulsion of the Jews when Spain conquered Sicily.



We gingerly descended a deep, cool stone staircase, surfaces a little slimy, with the sounds of running water, to a low ceilinged set of rooms. There, in the floor, were square tubs with little steps carved into the bedrock filled with clear lukewarm (18C, 62F) running water. The chambers would have filled with water had there not been a sump pump running constantly.

Back up on top, another jaunt down yet more alleys, until we erupted into the Piazza Duomo (Minerva/Athena), then entered a chocolate shop. Apparently Sicilian chocolate is a thing, but it is a thing in a lot of places! We bought some expensive 80% cacao chocolate bars, some jalapeno flavored, some with ginger. The cacao was from Ecuador!

The group disbanded for lunch on our own, and we invited several of our group to join us at a cafe advertising “Sicilian Street Food.” There we had *arancia* (orange) which was a baseball sized orange ball of rice & ground meat, deep fried. It may have been authentic, but it sat like a sullen mass in the belly. It was the worst meal of the trip! At least our half liters of Messina beer were good. After that, we wandered around town a bit before catching the bus back to the hotel. This evening the hotel put on a “cocktail hour” on the piazza, in the low sun. The serving tables offered lovely tiny cucumber sandwiches with ample glasses of wine. Then on into dinner for yet another superb meal.

Day 10, Tuesday 28 March. After our last breakfast at the fabulous buffet, the group rode the bus up to Mount Etna, which sits like a colossal cone on the coastal plain & is 11,000 feet high. After we picked up our volcano guide, we stopped at a small city on the way up for a quick break. There we admired the large church with the unique local pattern of alternating white limestone & black basalt. The altar cloths inside had particularly beautiful cross stitch needlework. Back on the bus, soon the road became a long series of switchbacks as the bus climbed to 6,000 feet, during which time we heard an intensive lecture on vulcanology. Our guide had the most charming accent, talking about “the solid crusta on the surfassa of the lava flows, eh?” The most notable fact was that Etna was an “effusive” volcano, constantly letting off a little steam, smoke & pressure - not an explosive volcano, like Vesuvius or Krakatoa. No worries! The name Etna was derived from an ancient word meaning “burner” & the city of Catania originally meant “at the foot of the burner.”



Our destination was only halfway up the mountain, at a tour bus area near the ski-way gondola. where the smoking top of Etna was hidden behind this shoulder of the mountain. Dirty patches of unmelted snow lay about. We were uncomfortable with the temp of 30F & stiff winds. We only had 45 minutes here, so we climbed a small cone, rimming its crater, but became rapidly fatigued due to altitude, the fierce wind & the cold.

Once again we were content to leave, & headed on our way down to the Catanian plain for lunch. We stopped at a 19th century agritourism farm in the middle of citrus groves, where lunch was served in a renovated barn. After yet another delicious meal, we had espressos on a little piazza formed by the roof of a cistern, with the well in the center. The view overlooking the lemon trees & on to the ocean was sublime. Time to go.

Colonizing Greeks landed on the east coast of Sicily just south of the Taormina mountain in 734 BC. There some streams flowed into the scalloped bay where ships from the Greek island of Naxos could beach themselves. The colony of Naxos thrived here until the Syracusan tyrant Dionysius I (the ear guy) destroyed the city in 403 BC & drove the townspeople to seek more security up on Mount Taurus, where the city lies to this day. Greeks, Romans, Muslims & Normans occupied the citadel, perched even higher over the town. Our 5 star hotel, peculiarly named *The NH Collection*, was on the highest street in town, backed against a cliff. Most of the group were given rooms on the sea side of the hotel, with the most spectacular vista of any place in which we have ever stayed in our lives! To the right, we saw the long arc of the Catania seashore and Mount Etna,



To the left the rugged coast & the straits of Messina...where Odysseus encountered Scylla & Charybdis. Just bad luck for those few guests whose windows looked out at the cliff face.

After some settling in time, Gaetano led us on a quick orientation tour of Taormina. Notable for being a mecca for wealthy homosexual men since the late 1800's, it is still the Provincetown of Italy. Our walkabout was over, but the group seemed loath to split up. Still, the rest of the day & supper was on our own. David & I found a little place called *Rosso Arco* where we had delicious panini & a half liter of wine. Just enough after the big lunch.

Day 11, Wednesday 29 March. We awoke to our last touring day in Sicily. After an excellent breakfast, we started with a small Greco-Roman theatre oddly built on an angle over the marble base of a temple to Apollo. We strolled around as our local guide pointed out architectural features & houses where famous people had stayed, like Oscar Wilde, Goethe, & D.H. Lawrence. Even Kaiser Wilhelm vacationed here. We visited the big Roman theatre built into a crag with an iconic view of Mt. Etna through an arch.



From there we could see a Dominican monastery (now a five star hotel) where, during World War II, the Germans had set up their Sicilian headquarters. The patron saint of Taormina was

St. Pancras, and on his saint's day in 1943 the British bombed the monastery, unintentionally killing 100 civilians. Upset that Pancras had not protected the city, the people demoted him & promoted our favorite Saints Lucy of the eyes & Agatha of the breasts to greater prominence.

The symbol of the city is a female centaur, about which our tour leader, for once, had no story! And, ironically, although the city & the mountain *Monte Tauro* were named for bulls, there were no bull icons to be seen. Odd. The group now had a free afternoon, so somewhat reluctantly, we dispersed, with the plan to reconvene for a farewell dinner at a restaurant in the evening.

Back at the hotel, several of us endured an ordeal trying to get boarding passes printed...five stars, crappy internet. After that, we hiked up a footpath of many switchbacks to the castle... which was closed for stabilization. We checked out a small 17th century chapel nearby, built into a natural cave. Once back down, we made our way to the public garden, donated by a British heiress in the 19th century & enjoyed the huge cypress trees & umbrella pines, flower beds, & "follies," those odd fanciful structures that amused the Victorian wealthy. There was a lifelike full sized statue of George Patton shaking the hand of an Italian soldier. Did that ever actually happen? There were many large bird cages, all empty - perhaps it was too early in the season. We walked on, looking for a place to sit a while & have a beer. We found it opposite the little Greco-Roman theatre where we had started this morning. We each had a *birra grande* in the warm sun & cool air, while watching a lively street scene. Heaven. Back up to the hotel for departure packing & to prep for tonight's dinner.

Our happy group gathered & followed Gaetano down to the restaurant for a long, wine fueled, convivial dinner of eggplant caponata, pasta Bolognese, glistening swordfish steaks with orange sauce, & for dessert, cannolis & almond brandy. Back at the hotel, we set the alarm for 3:10 AM.

Travel Day 12, Thursday 30 March 2023. The group rode in the van in total darkness & silence to the Catania airport. Nobody is chatty at that hour. From there, every leg of the way back to our house in Plymouth - the flight to Rome, flight to Boston, car ride back from Logan - went without a hitch, our good luck holding. At this stage in our lives, when we leave a country we have been visiting, we are unlikely to return to it. As the plane lifted off on this last day, we felt a little sad about leaving the island, but we thought, "We'll return to Sicily.... in our dreams."