



THE INDEPENDENT

June 10, 2006

A walk on the wild side of Sicily

Undaunted either by Mafia jokes or Europe's largest active volcano, Mary Novakovich sets off on a walking holiday in Sicily that leaves her captivated, if a little breathless

Mario Puzo has a lot to answer for. I'd had enough of people saying, "So, did you get an offer you couldn't refuse?", at the mention of a visit to Sicily. Out came the jokes about horses' heads and sleeping fishes. But I did get an offer I couldn't refuse: an unusual way of seeing what the Mediterranean's largest island had to offer.

The plan was to combine independent walking in the remote north-west of the island with a guided tour of the region around Sicily's largest landmark, Mount Etna. Our first stop, Scopello, was just over the next headland from Palermo airport, on the Golfo di Castellammare. It's more a hamlet than a village, with a handful of cafés and restaurants with terraces looking out over the Tyrrhenian Sea. As it was a public holiday, people were thronging Scopello's medieval baglio - a fortified courtyard now filled with shops and restaurants - making it look like a particularly lively film set.

The baglio principle was applied to our own hotel, the Tenute Plaia Agriturismo, which sits a couple of hundred metres outside Scopello, facing the sea. It's only two years old, but it already has a claim to fame: Brad Pitt stayed here while filming *Ocean's Twelve*. More impressive, however, was the warm welcome offered by the owner, Cinzia, and her restaurant manager, who guided us through our first Sicilian dinner.

The antipasti showed what magic can be created by a caring chef: octopus, caponata (fried aubergines and artichokes), frittata of broad beans and more artichokes. The choice of pasta (tagliatelle with cuttlefish ink, or ravioli with pistachio sauce) looked too tasty to narrow down, so we had a bit of both. And then came the mixed grill. It was a top-class introduction to Sicilian cuisine.

The first chance to walk off the big meal came the next morning, with a 12km trek through the neighbouring Riserva dello Zingaro. This nature reserve was the first in Italy, and came about only when a motorway was planned for this stretch of coastline. The locals reacted in typical Italian fashion: they went on strike until the plans were dropped. It was the right decision, as the 1,600-hectare reserve is a haven for birds such as Bonelli's eagles and peregrine falcons. After a 30-minute climb of several hundred metres along a stony, meandering path, you reach one of the many peaks that reward you with captivating views of the sea and the many coves far below. One of the coves made an attractive spot for our lunch of panini.

It seemed as if we had barely arrived in Sicily before we were leaving "the mainland" for a couple of days in Marettimo, the westernmost island of the Egadi archipelago, an hour's hydrofoil journey from the coastal town of Trapani. Fulvio was waiting for us with a golf cart. "I'll take the bags and you walk to the residence," he said. "You can't miss it." His little joke, we gathered. Marettimo has one village, one road

and only a few dozen families. The island's only hotel (well, self-catering residence, really) was clearly visible from the other side of the tiny harbour.

It was as if we had arrived in a Tunisian toytown. Marettimo is closer to Africa than it is to mainland Europe, so it was appropriate to see two-storey white houses with blue shutters lining the quayside. The Marettimo Residence recreates the local style - clusters of white houses with private terraces draped with bougainvillea. We surveyed the well-equipped kitchen and immediately went shopping. You don't turn down the chance of self-catering in Italy, not with the quality of tomatoes, cheese and olives on offer in the local shops.

The village of Marettimo sits on the sunny eastern side of the island, the only inhabited part. The rest consists of peaks, forests and footpaths of varying difficulty. As we discovered later, we made the first-time visitor's classic mistake of assuming that a coastal walk to an abandoned castle at Punta Troia wouldn't take more than an hour. Wrong. Although it was worth the effort in the end, we hadn't counted on a three-hour walk on a precipitous, cliff-hugging path.

We were better prepared for the next day's walk. A stone path climbed steeply just behind the village to the Roman ruins that make up Case Romane, and a Byzantine chapel, whose domed interior was covered in graffiti in defiance of the sign imploring visitors not to write on the walls. Another path then led through an enchanting forest of Aleppo pines and across hillsides smothered with prickly pear and bright blankets of valerian and calendula. After an hour or so, we reached a ranger's stone hut at Carcaredda. From there it was an extremely rocky, crumbling road down to Plaia Nacchi, an inviting cove that required a walk along a narrow path, with a sheer drop to the sea. We had seen hardly a soul, except for an old gent who bid us, "Buona giornata!".

That evening, Fausto, the owner of our residence, invited all of his guests to join him for dinner in the communal dining room. Spit-roasted suckling pig, he announced proudly. It turned into a convivial evening, the flowing wine enhancing our wonderfully relaxed mood. Not that relaxing is hard to do in Marettimo. The pace of the island dictates that everything slows down, from the time it takes to knock back your espresso to the time spent chatting to shop owners about the food you're buying.

Time to return to the modern world. Dragged like the lotus-eating members of Ulysses' crew, we got back on the hydrofoil and were then driven to Palermo to catch the coach to Catania, on the other side of Sicily. If you want a jolting return to reality, spend an hour in a Palermo traffic jam (missing your coach in the process). But a two-and-a-half-hour ride through the hinterland of Sicily soon restored our equilibrium. Sicily is one huge, mesmerising volcanic outcrop.

With Etna as our destination, things were going to get even more spectacular. Europe's largest active volcano, was clearly visible from the window of our room at Case Perrotta, an agriturismo in the foothills at Sant'Alfio. We had joined a party of 12 British walkers led by a delightful guide Elena, a bubbly 30-year-old from Taormina. They were beginning a gentler itinerary than the one we'd just left. That meant visiting Etna by minibus, cable car, then another, tougher minibus to reach the summit almost 3,000m above sea level.

Yes, it was easier, but walking up Etna without some winter gear (which we hadn't brought) would have been foolhardy. The air was bitterly cold and snow was still on the ground - a surreal sight on the black lava that was still warm, even hot, in places. Sulphur mingled with the clouds that swirled around us as we walked around the crater. Initially, I thought that the clouds obscuring the view would make the trip less enthralling, but I hadn't reckoned on the haunting and mesmerising atmosphere created by Etna.

After almost a week spent on coastal paths and mountains, it was a shock to end the trip in the chic resort of Taormina. First we had a walk up to the hilltop village of Castelmola, had a quick swig of the local almond wine in a bar and admired the winding medieval streets. We walked back down towards Taormina via the Saracen castle that gives you a superb view of the town's Graeco-Roman theatre - an odd sight as the Romans thoughtlessly filled in the spaces between the old Greek columns. Luckily for us, the brick walls are crumbling, exposing the original view of the sea.

We spent a few hours strolling through the main thoroughfare, Corso Umberto, which was swarming with holidaying Italians (on yet another public holiday). Then we squeezed through its choked streets back to the tranquillity of Case Perrotta. Crowds or no crowds, Sicily offered me an experience I'm glad I didn't refuse.

TRAVELLER'S GUIDE

GETTING THERE

The writer travelled with Headwater (01606 720199; www.headwater.com [<http://http://www.headwater.com>]). Its "Islands of Sicily Walk" is an eight-day independent intermediate walking holiday taking in Scopello, Marettimo, Erice and San Vito lo Capo. Prices start at £819 per person, including return Alitalia flights from Heathrow to Palermo via Rome, transfers, breakfasts and most dinners.

The eight-day "Best of Sicily Walk", a gentler guided tour, begins at Mount Etna and continues to Siracusa, Ispica and Noto Antico. Prices start at £949, including BA flights Gatwick-Catania, transfers, breakfasts and evening meals. Taking the two tours back-to-back costs from £1,599 per person.

Ryanair (0871 246 0000; www.ryanair.com) flies to Palermo from Stansted. BA (0870 850 9850; www.ba.com) and Air Malta (0845 607 3710; www.airmalta.com) fly to Catania from Gatwick. Alitalia (0870 544 8259; www.alitalia.co.uk) flies to Palermo via Rome and to Catania via Milan.

To reduce the impact on the environment, you can buy an "offset" from Climate Care (01865 207 000; www.climatecare.org). The environmental cost of a return flight from London to Catania, in economy class, is £3.30. The money is used to fund sustainable energy and reforestation projects.

STAYING THERE

Tenute Plaia, Scopello (00 39 09 24 541 476; www.plaiavini.com). Doubles from €110 (£79), including breakfast.

The Marettimo Residence, Marettimo (00 39 09 23 923 202; www.marettimoresidence.it). One-bedroom studios from €360 (£257) per week, self-catering.

Case Perrotta, Sant'Alfio (00 39 09 59 68 928; www.caseperrotta.com). Doubles from €75 (£54) per night, including breakfast.

FURTHER INFORMATION

Contact the Italian State Tourist Board (020-7408 1254; www.italiantouristboard.co.uk)

Independent News and Media Limited



© 2006 Independent News and Media. Permission granted for up to 5 copies. All rights reserved.

You may forward this article or get additional permissions by typing http://license.icopyright.net/3.7463?icx_id=travel/europe/a-walk-on-the-wild-side-of-sicily-481708.html?service=PrintICopyright into any web browser. Independent News and Media Limited and The Independent logos are registered trademarks of Independent News and Media Limited. The iCopyright logo is a registered trademark of iCopyright, Inc.