



South to Sicily where the lemon trees always bloom...

320 km west of Salerno, after a 30 hr. overnight sail, we reached Palermo, Sicily where Jan's cousin, Jørgen and ship's doctor, Peter, joined us for 2 weeks. Still baking hot (30C+), we found the cities and villages full of life, explored faded, crumbling backstreet tenements side-by-side with big city chic. In hired cars we ascended amazing hairpin roads to medieval cities perched improbably on narrow clifftops, each with their fortress and Duomo (Cathedral) with stunning views over the countryside and mountains. Some of the mountain landscape is harsh and rugged, other slopes are filled with lemon, almond and peach orchards or olive groves. It is an extremely fertile island which produces an abundance of fruit and vegetables from the lava soil. No less abundant is the sea. We couldn't believe the variety of fish on display in the loud and noisy markets. And cheeses, salamis, olives, and the wonderfully refreshing "granite" - a kind of "ice cream" made with water and the honeys.....



Palermo was chaos, noise, traffic, smells, dirty backstreets, a wonderful market, dirt poor in parts but fascinating. We were warned to be careful but we experienced nothing but gracious good manners and helpfulness. Just a thank you in Italian and they love you. Such warm people. We didn't expect to like it but we loved it.

Since 1944, Sicily has been self-governing. It has not enjoyed the investment and modernisation of N. Italy and remains relatively poor with an unemployment rate of 21% in a population of 5.1 million. (Tourism is one area of growth though many of the resorts and marinas are apparently controlled by the Mafia). Yet everywhere we were met with smiles and people who went out of their way to direct us or help us. Sicily was a tremendous experience.



At 751 m., Erice (“The City of God”) (top left) is a clifftop walled city from the Middle Ages with a beautiful Norman Castle (now a luxury resort!): From here you can see to Tunisia. In the quiet narrow streets, paved with lava slabs, it’s like stepping back in time. From here we drove to Marsala right), with it’s elegant main square...home of the sweet dessert wine, a bottle of which Peter generously donated to the ship’s stores! Another highlight was Cefalu (middle) on the north coast, where we stayed in a small rocky harbour situated at the foot of the cliffs. Here, Roger 2. built a huge cathedral as thanks for having survived a storm at sea. It’s touristy but very beautiful. Each narrow street is lined with pastel-coloured houses with different balconies. We watched a bride and groom posing dramatically for wedding photos perched up on the (windy!) sea wall with a flaming sunset behind.



Above everything rises Mt. Etna in the background- Europe’s largest active volcano. 3320 m. high, 40 km. in diameter, covering a total area of 200 km. There was just a touch of snow at the top (in winter you can ski it). As recently as 2002, a 5-10 m. high and 75-100 m. wide stream of flowing lava buried the cafes, parking place and ski lift where we stood.(now rebuilt). None of us had expected it to be so big. First we drove many kilometres up through the lava fields, much of it stark yet strangely beautiful, next we took a cable car and finally a 4WD vehicle up to within 100 m. of the craters (there are 5).

Then we trudged with a guide through black sand to the edge of the crater where it was blowing hard and freezing cold! You can see the gasses escaping and feel the steam coming out from the ground! But we were lucky for, as we were leaving, Etna awoke with a belch of black smoke from one side- quite dramatic (almost too close for comfort!) and a sign that lava will flow again soon. On the way back we drove through the extremely fertile (lava soil) wine district and past fields of lemon and olive trees. We stopped for a stroll in a village that was preparing for it's annual wine festival, setting up – everyone was involved setting up booths along all the streets for the evening festivities and tastings. That would have been something to see.



Many towns have been destroyed several times over by earthquakes and volcanic eruptions and rebuilt. Some were destroyed by bombing during WWII. During 3000 years Sicily was conquered again and again by Greeks, Romans, Byzantine, Arabs, the Normans, French and Spanish. Thus, everywhere, in between even the poorest sections, are archeological and architectural treasures, wonderful Roman ruins, Baroque palazzos and piazzas, huge Cathedrals, fountains, shrines, lovely hidden courtyards. It's simply quite fascinating at every turn.

We took a jetfoil to Lipari, the largest of the Aeoli Islands and had one of the best fish meals ´we´ve ever had in a deserted fishing village and afterwards explored the very pretty main town with it's fort, tiny harbour and pastel-coloured houses.





The island's main export is pumice stone (pimpsten). Taormina was another stunning mountain town- Sicily's "jetset resort", built high on a clifftop in a very beautiful location with stunning views over the ocean, classy shops and restaurants. It also has one of the most beautiful Greek/Roman amphitheatres in the world with 5400 seats where they perform theatre, ballet, concerts and opera. Would love to have seen a performance. Just when you think you can't possibly go any higher up, there appears a signpost to yet another even higher village (Castelmoro) balanced on an impossible ledge...so, of course, we had to go...And the beautiful Siracusa with its Baroque architecture and quiet streets. We loved every minute...made even better by being able to share it. **Thanks so much for coming, Jørgen and Peter!**