

MEDITERRANEAN

SIGGY AND HEATHER | TRIP AROUND THE MEDITERRANEAN | WED-THURS 22-23 MAY 2013

Sicily

The freeway running down the southern coast of the boot of Italy is supposed to run through beautiful country. After driving on it for a few hundred kilometers, and through countless tunnels, we would certainly agree. Our bird's eye view was spectacular. Surprisingly there were no tolls. We simply "flew" over deep ravines and towns hundred of meters below us.

We had to take this freeway because we were keen to catch the ferry to Sicily. We left our farm caravan park in Matera and ambled through some magnificent rural country beforehand. It continues to amaze us that this part of Puglia and Basilicata is so intensively farmed. Its undulating hills were awash with many shades of green and pale yellow crops, olive trees and orange roadside poppies.

We were in no hurry and wanted the drive to go on and on but we realized that we needed to move on at a faster pace - into Mafia country - Calabria. Even here it continued to be green and lush. There is one heck of a lot of farm produce that comes from the boot of Italy. We had always assumed southern Italy was dry and poor but it certainly isn't.



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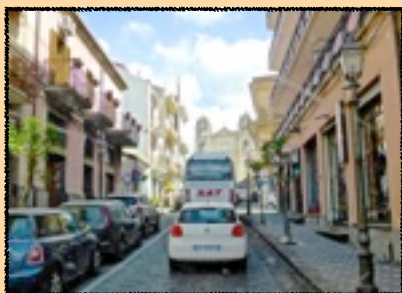
Random field with perched village

Security

We have a number of measures to improve security. Our bikes have a stout lock. Our van has a lockable safe - great to store documents and precious items. Because the front doors can easily be forced open with a flat headed screwdriver we tie the two front doors together with rope (as advised by the owner Martin). We take any valuables such as computers, GPS and mobile phone with us in handbags or a backpack and don't leave anything lying

around in view in the van. If we are leaving the van to see an attraction we try to park the van in an open space where it is easily visible or alongside tour buses or where there are tour bus drivers waiting for passengers. We always park the van so that I can drive it straight out.

We also both carry different cards so that if one is lost (as per today) then there is always another one to fall back on.



MAIN ROAD? What you cannot see in this photo is the line of traffic trying to come from the other direction. This type of circumstance has turned Heather to religion. She is constantly uttering "Jesus Christ"!

CAMP RULE

No admittance to persons who are not residents. People found inside the enclosure, without authorization from the management, will be denounced for house breaking as per Article 614 of the Italian Penal Code.

Denounced?

House breaking?



FERRY The entry by vehicles into the hold of the ferry was orchestrated with precision. The exit was in stark contrast - total, and I mean TOTAL, bedlam. Cars, buses, trucks and one motorhome jockeying to get out.

After much zigzagging around the narrow streets of Reggio di Calabria, at the end of the road, we purchased ferry tickets and drove our van on to the very large waiting ferry. We were the last vehicle to enter the hold. The ship was full.

The trip over the water to Sicily took only 30 minutes. The wind blew a gale and buffeted the ship. The rush of water between the mainland and Sicily was very noticeable. Another adventure was about to begin. And boy were we so unprepared.

According to the guide books Sicily is Italy's largest island. We knew this but what we did not realize is that Sicily is extremely mountainous. The problem is that with only a narrow coastal strip available for habitation, the urban area seemed to be one great big sprawl. Fly-over motorways inhabit the sky and very narrow local roads roam the lower levels. So traveling in Sicily is either really slow, through ridiculously narrow roads crammed with illegally parked cars, or very fast on freeways that have limited entry points.

After the chaos of exiting the ferry we pointed Emily towards the town of Milazzo so that we could book a trip to see Mt Stromboli at night. This was to be the highlight of our visit to this island - not to be missed.

Getting on to the freeway was confusing (take the wrong entry point

and it will be 50kms before you can get off) but we made it to Milazzo.

The port area was crammed full of traffic and had no place to park for a van our size. We decided to park further out. We searched in vain to find a parking ticket vending machine and gave up (turns out we did not need one). A quick spin on our bikes around the port was a great release of tension especially since we found the cruise ticket office and purchased the only tickets available - inconveniently for us - for the coming Friday. But we did find a secure parking place for the day and night of our cruise to Mt Stromboli (we are to get back in to port after 10pm). We were solving problems with ease and felt great.

But the end of the day proved how fickle luck can be. We spent a useless two hours trying to find a non-existent caravan park, so it was back on the freeway again in search of camp for the night. The one we found was in a rather decrepit area. Our hearts sank because the entrance was right next to a rubbish dump and sand quarry business. It turned out to be lovely and we camped right on the sea. The next day hopefully was going to be better. We were looking forward to driving up to near the top of Mt Etna, one of the most volatile volcanoes in the world.

And again we were unprepared for what was to happen.

In the process of trying to pay for a cable car ride up Mt Etna, we discovered that Heather had lost her debit card. I suppose after all the traveling we have done, it was bound to happen eventually. We scraped together enough cash to get us two thirds of the way up Mt Etna and continued on.

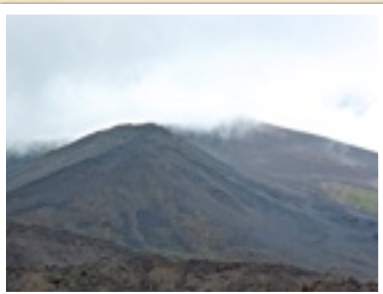
Mt Etna is huge. It has apparently been active for about 8000 years, is more than 3000 m high and erupts regularly.

We were able to drive up to the 2500 metre level. Once there, we had to don our winter gear - it was really cold. Snow covered the ground but the grey ash covered it so it was not visible.

We took a cable car to the 2950 m level and then investigated the area. Our planned trip higher up was a no-go because of the aforementioned lack of funds. It was probably enough anyway because the clouds were starting to roll in. We were keen to hurry away to check on our bank account.

Luckily for us, all appeared to be OK. No funds seem to have been siphoned from the account. We contacted the bank to cancel the card and fell back on another card that we have loaded with Euros. We had this safely put away for just such an emergency.

THE ETNA





PHOTOS



View from cable car down to the coast from Mt Etna



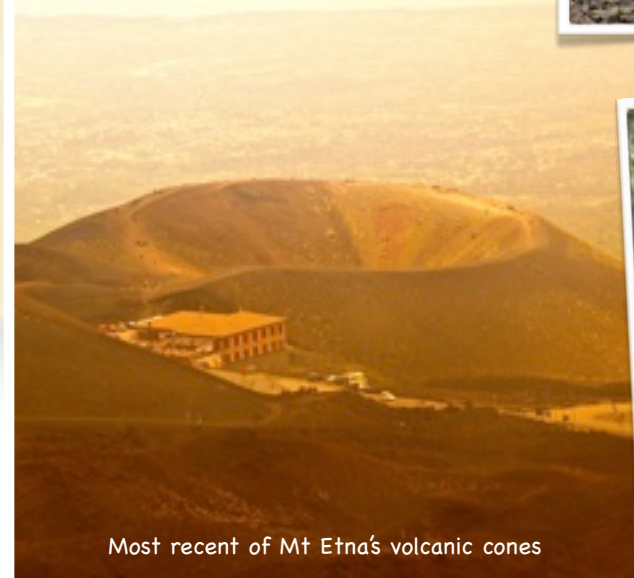
Rolling Calabrian hills?



View of Sicilian coast from freeway



Time for Heather to get a hair cut



Most recent of Mt Etna's volcanic cones



Not so wily Mt Etna fox caught on my camera