

July 2015

Dear Friends and Family,

Having allotted only 6 days for the Sicily visit we decided to focus on the east and based ourselves first in Siracusa (Syracuse) and then Taormina. Siracusa has many interesting sites, especially its archeological park. Although the Roman amphitheater was closed for restoration, the Greek theater dating from the 5<sup>th</sup>C BC is alive and well and is now once again used for performances. Greek theaters are traditionally semi-circular and often open out onto dramatic views, whereas Roman amphitheaters were oval and



enclosed. A terrace with caves into the bedrock and a fountain inspired by a cult of nymphs overlooks the theater. The Romans expanded the central open area to accommodate gladiator competitions but then in the 4<sup>th</sup>C AD this area was paved with marble and usage returned to theater performances. The surrounding areas supported a great deal of quarrying which resulted in a network of caves. In the 5<sup>th</sup>C BC Siracusa rivaled Athens in prosperity and power.

Probably the most popular part of Siracusa is the island of Ortigia. The narrow winding medieval streets are very picturesque, often with distinctive balconies



and peek-a-boo views to the surrounding harbors. The ruins of the Temple of Apollo from around 565



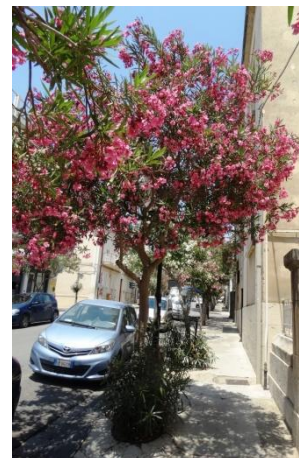
BC greet you as you cross onto the island. The focal point of Ortigia is the Duomo (the Italian name for Cathedral) which began life as a temple to the Goddess Athena during the 5<sup>th</sup> C BC. The current church, built around it, was converted to a mosque during the Arab rule from the 9<sup>th</sup> to 11<sup>th</sup> C. The Baroque façade dates from the 17<sup>th</sup> C when it was rebuilt following the destructive earthquake

of 1693. Its plaza is home to many cafes making for good people watching. Here the afternoon aperitif usually was accompanied by an assortment of small local snacks.



The best restaurants

are trattorias found in the small side streets. There were children playing the accordion for donations as well as one bringing a bird in a cage around to people sitting in cafes. (I didn't really understand what that was about.)



We stayed at Grand Albergo Alfea hotel which has a lovely open air atrium for taking breakfast and dinner and was offering a nice light dinner option of tapas. The hotel is only about two blocks from the bridge over to Ortigia, but is priced much better than comparable properties on the island. Street trees in Siracusa are Oleander which I hadn't seen before as trees, and there are fruit and vegetable sellers on many street corners.





Siracusa is very walkable, pleasantly flat after Valletta (but, watch out when we reach Taormina!). A dominant feature of the skyline is the Santuario della Madonna della Lacrime. This teardrop shaped sanctuary was built to accommodate all the pilgrims who come to see the icon of the Madonna which shed tears in 1953. The interior is very plain with



only one side chapel completed to date, the others plus stained glass windows probably awaiting future donations.

We did a day trip to Noto, known for its plethora of churches. Since only the first born son of a noble could inherit his title and the land, the

wealthy families built convents, monasteries and churches so their other children would have an occupation. Noto is very hilly and was also re-built following the 1693 earthquake in what came to be known as Sicilian Baroque design. The buildings are made from a soft tufa stone with a golden honey



tone.

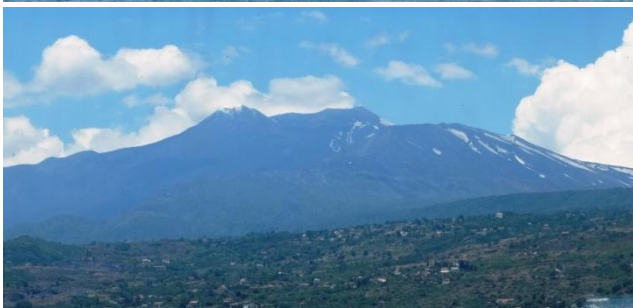
I visited only a couple of the 20+ churches in the central part of town. Particularly impressive were the gargoyles on the Palazzo Nicolaci di Villadorata, now the city library, across the street from Palazzo

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Modica Nicolaci di San Giovanni where we lunched. It was in Noto that I discovered that churches close for lunch plus siesta from noon until between 4 and 6 pm, so I missed seeing the interior of the Duomo.



We took the train from Siracusa to Taormina for our last three days. The route along the coast passes an enormous area of petrochemical refineries at Augusta. As you approach Catania from the south Mt Etna looms into view. Its silhouette changes from the south slope view to the east and then to the north



which is what presides over Taormina.

Arriving at the train station you are at sea level and Taormina looms 669' above you. Thankfully we had planned to take a taxi. Once up in Taormina, to go to the beaches you take an aerial tramway down.



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There is another town, Castelmola, even further up the hill as well as the “Arab” fort overlooking Taormina.



Taormina also has a Greek theater, the second oldest in Sicily after Siracusa, which is actively in use for performances. It was carved out of the rock of the cliff wall originally in the 3rdC BC, but what remains is primarily of brick construction which would have dated from Roman times.

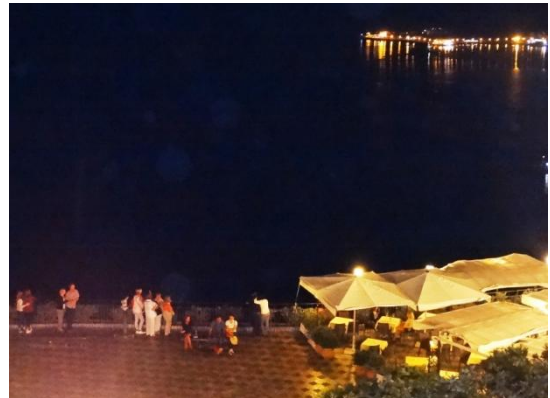


It has magnificent views over the harbor, and there are other miscellaneous ruins such as this small Odeon from the 3rdC BC.



You can tell from the shops in town that many well off people visit and/or live here and it is said that some international performers make Taormina their only performance stop in Italy. In fact, many famous movie stars, authors, painters and photographers have at various times made their home here.

Three times per week there is a performance of 2 hours of mostly Italian Opera arias and duets, some familiar and some not, plus a pianist of superior quality in the Theater San Giorgio. The ticket included a glass of Prosecco on a terrace overlooking the Plaza IX April and the Med during the intermission. It was



a thoroughly lovely evening.

Among the many items on offer are coral and lava stone jewelry and traditional pottery. The pinecones were on many balconies and walls and have various meanings from Sicilian hospitality, to the “third eye” to bringing good luck. The Maiocan pottery (vases in the shape of heads, often Moorish) supposedly





started during the period of Arab occupation.

Although one often associates Sicily with pizza and pasta there was in fact a wide variety of cuisine on offer and we focused particularly on the abundant seafood, although I did break down one night and had spaghetti con vongoles (clams) which came just with the natural juices from the clams. Grated cheese does not normally accompany pasta in this region.

The main street, Corso Umberto, is pleasantly pedestrian only. However, one day a rally of antique cars came through town, causing quite a stir.



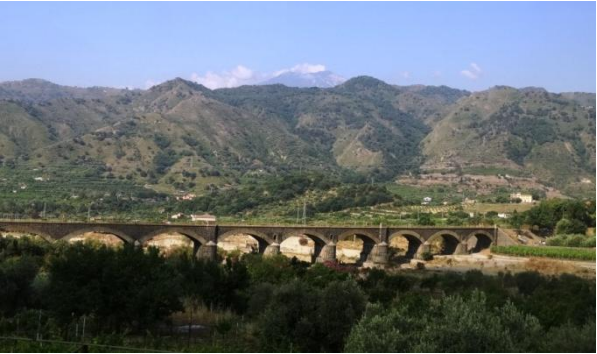
Mt Etna dominated the view from the terrace of our hotel where we breakfasted. It produces a constant plume of steam, creating a cloud cap by late morning every day. We also had brief thunderstorms a couple of afternoons. One of them, the day after we had taken a tour to the north slope of the mountain, produced snow cover that we could see the next morning.

On the trip to Etna we stopped at Randazzo which is unique because it hasn't been touched by any of Etna's many eruptions.

Plus, the main church was constructed of black lava rock. We were invited to a tasting of local wine (nero d'avolo), cheese (I bought a delicious parmiggiana) and salamis including one with imbedded



pistachios, another local product. We passed olive tree trunks supposedly 2000 years old plus beautiful



scenery.



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We picked the north slope to visit because there is more variety of habitat. From sea level to 600 meter elevation is agriculture – olives, citrus, vineyards, fruit and nut trees. Then up to 1200 meters wildflowers and broom (apparently the first plant to come back after a lava inundation) and up to 1800 meters beautiful pine forest. These were regularly tapped for resin until UNESCO made Etna a



protected area in 2014. In total Mt Etna has a height of 10,900' and is the highest active volcano in Europe. The base circumference is 93 miles which dominates the eastern third of Sicily. The earliest known eruptions began in 1500 BC, earliest written record in 425 BC. It actually has fairly frequent vertical eruptions from its 4 or 5 craters, and more occasional lateral eruptions. The last lateral eruption in 2002-3 buried the previous hotel, church and village at Piano Provenzia at 1800 meters

where our tour terminated (due to snow fields at higher elevations). This is what the hotel's former owner has now. As much damage happens also from frequent earthquakes. The south face of the mountain has little vegetation and is almost all lava rock fields (which I have experienced elsewhere).

En route to the north face we were also able to visit Alcantara River Gorges Botanical and Geological Park with spectacular rock faces from several different geological eras. During spring snow melt the river actually fills the gorge and the areas





we walked are inaccessible.

Taormina has a cathedral and it appeared to be the time of year that the Roman Catholic Bishop conducts confirmations. We saw special shrines set up on the main street, boys and girls dressed in white with their families, and what appeared to be a separate confirmation mass for each of the local parishes. Just the central part of Taormina has at least 12 churches that I could see, for an estimated



population of 11,000.

There are also many parks in Taormina including the public gardens created by Florence Trevelyan, an English noblewoman and keen ornithologist, with fanciful towers from which to study the birds that make their homes in the garden. She left England after she was banished from the country for her relationship with Edward, son of Queen Victoria, the future King Edward VII. The park is a lovely 3

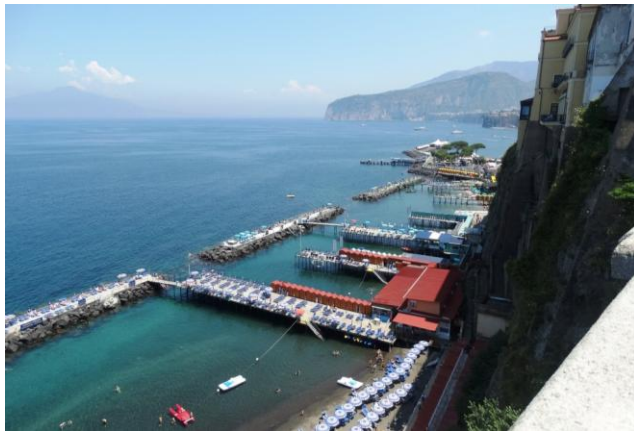




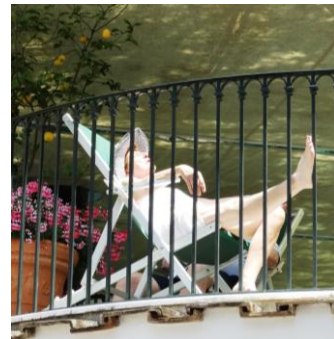
hectare peaceful enclave.

Since we were in the “neighborhood” we decided to hop over to Naples for a trip to Pompeii which I had never visited. It was definitely worth the trip. We stayed in Sorrento which was lovely all by itself with the town set on top of cliffs below which are “beaches” made of boardwalks and rock jetties. That reminded me a bit of Dubrovnik except Sorrento is no longer a walled town (a small bit of old walls remains). But it did have very good shopping, especially for inexpensive made in Italy clothes and local pottery. I especially loved the sculptures and benches made of pottery.





We twice lunched on the lovely terrace of the Bellevue Syrene hotel, an 18<sup>th</sup> C villa overlooking the Med, Vesuvius, and one day the cruise ship Seabourne Sojourn. Life can be very relaxing here.



Pompeii is an easy train ride and you can join a two hour guided tour right at the train station. The highlights tour (which is all it can be in 2 hours of a 170 acre fully developed ancient city) was actually excellent. At the time of the eruption (79 AD) Pompeii was a port city with active trade and seamen/merchants from all over the Mediterranean if not other parts of the world. Now it is about 2 km from the coast. The town gives a snapshot of Roman life in the 1<sup>st</sup> C AD with shops, bakeries, graffiti, aqueduct, public water supplies (including lead pipes!), public baths, brothels, temples, a theater and

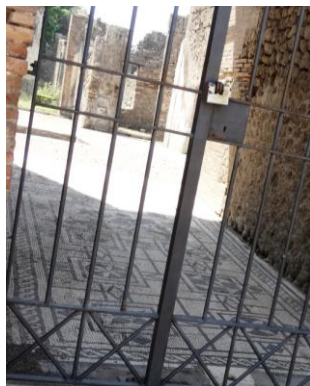




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forums for public assembly. Apparently the mid day meal was “fast food”. Shops usually had the living quarters behind around an open courtyard often with a fountain. The forum (overlooked by Vesuvius) was paved in travertine, had some fine ornamentation, and there are remnants of mosaic floors and graffiti on walls.



Mt. Vesuvius is about 10 km away and the city was buried in ash and rock, not lava. The population was probably about 12-15,000 at the time of the eruption (plus perhaps 25,000 slaves). But, because the eruption lasted 3 days most people escaped and perhaps only 1000 died. During the excavation an

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archeologist realized that voids were where bodies had been and he developed a system to create plaster castings. On view are a child, a dog and this slave who was chained to the outside of a building. Pompeii was initially discovered in 1599 and then more broadly in 1748 and tourists have been visiting ever since then. Approximately half the total site is excavated. After 150 years of exposure to the modern environment more focus is on preserving what has been exposed than continuing excavation.

The next Mediterranean Meanderings will be in Greece, but it will be a while before you hear about them.