

Aeolian Islands trip report – May 2014

Mum and I enjoyed our garden tour to Tuscany last year and so we decided to do something similar again this year. We found a tour to the parts of Sicily that Mum has never visited, which included a day trip to the Aeolian Islands which lie a few miles off the North coast of Sicily. Unfortunately the tour dates did not fit in with my teaching commitments. Then we found a holiday comprising an entire week on one of the Aeolian Islands, with optional day trips to other islands. So we booked that.

The Aeolian Islands

The Aeolian Islands (named after Aeolus, the Greek god of the wind) lie about 25 miles to the north of Sicily. There are seven large islands and numerous smaller islands, islets and stacks. The archipelago is volcanic in origin, and two of the volcanoes are still active. They lie on the same fault line as Etna (on the Sicilian mainland) and Vesuvius (which looms over Naples).

The islands share Sicily's complicated history. Our omniscient guide, Tullio, recounted a *lot* of history for us during bus rides and boat trips. Most of it was a bit dry, but I will just mention here a couple of points. First, Sicily did not become part of Italy until 1861, when Italy unified under King Victor Emmanuel II (following a military campaign by Garibaldi). Secondly, the three-legged symbols of Sicily and the Isle of Man seem to be related in some way. Sicily's symbol dates back to the time when Sicily was part of Greece; it is called "trinacria" or three-limbs and possibly symbolises the three corners of the island of Sicily. It differs from the Isle of Man's "triskele" by having a face where the three legs join up. .

Our holiday

Our holiday started at Gatwick, with an afternoon flight to Catania on the east coast of Sicily, which lies beneath the massive slopes of Etna. The tour company uses Air One which is Alitalia's low-cost airline. Even Mum found the seat rows too close together, which gives an idea of how cramped we were. We met our fellow holidaymakers: Alan and Sue, Alan and Deborah and David and Lesley – all very pleasant and well-travelled couples. Then we had a two hour ride in a very comfortable minibus around the coast of Sicily to Milazzo, the port that serves the Aeolian Islands (passing by towns like Taormina and Messina, which I have to visit one day). At Milazzo, at about 9.00 pm, we boarded a chartered excursion boat for the 90 minute crossing to Lipari, the island on which we were staying. Once on the island, our luggage was collected by the hotel's very small minibus and we walked to the hotel, where a very late dinner was waiting for us.

Lipari is the most populous of the seven large islands with a population of about 12,000 all year, but many times that during the holiday periods. We were visiting at the beginning of the season when everything was fairly quiet. It must be mayhem in the summer months, as there is a limited amount of space to put people. The islands form a World Heritage site and so development is extremely restricted. The only industry on the island apart from tourism – the last remaining pumice quarry – has recently been forced to close due to its impact on the environment.

During our week on the island, we visited four of the other islands. The geology of the islands is similar. All are volcanic in origin and, give or take a volcano or two, they look much the same, with black sand and black paving forming the roads. Most of the buildings are whitewashed, giving it a bright cheerful feel. On two of the islands the volcanoes are still active. On one day we visited Vulcano, just to the south of Lipari, which has one of the active volcanoes. The boat trip would take about 20 minutes directly, but we were given a bit of a tour of the volcanic seascape and it took about an hour. We climbed up to the lower rim of the crater to see the sulphurous fumes. It took about an hour to get up there. On another day we visited

Salina, the island just to the north of Lipari. We circumnavigated the island and landed for lunch at a little village that seemed to consist mainly of beachfront restaurants, one of which we patronised.

Our third excursion (but first in time, on the day after our arrival) was to the islands to the north-east: Panarea and Stromboli. Stromboli is effectively a live volcano with three small villages on its flanks at sea level. It erupts daily. We circumnavigated it at dusk in the hope of seeing an eruption at sunset but the crater was in cloud until shortly after we had to leave for the 90 minute trip back to Lipari. We eventually saw an eruption but only from a distance of several miles. It is possible to climb Stromboli in the evening as part of a guided group, with safety equipment, and watch the eruptions from the rim, but there was no opportunity to do that on this occasion. I think I shall return one day to do that. Apparently it is quite safe as the craters are all on one side of the mountain and the lava falls harmlessly into the sea. Apparently.

The other days we spent on Lipari itself. One day we took advantage of the efficient local buses, which serve two villages in the north of the island about three miles apart. The buses reach the villages from opposite directions, one climbing the hills along the west coast and the other using the flatter road along the east coast. We made an enjoyable day out by taking the bus to the higher village and then walking along the coast road which drops several hundred feet to the second village, at sea level (local knowledge counts here – thank you Lonely Planet guidebook. Other people mistakenly did the walk in the other direction and found themselves walking consistently uphill to meet the bus for the trip back to Lipari Town). The wildflowers on the roadside were beautiful and the views over Salina to the north (to the restaurant where we had eaten the previous day), and towards Stromboli to the north-east, were magnificent.

We spent a day and a half in Lipari Town, shopping and looking at the museum, which has more pottery shards than most museums. It also has a fine collection of salvaged amphorae which are displayed most decoratively.

The weather during our stay was sunny but not particularly warm, as it was so early in the season (second week of May). We had taken our masks and snorkels but didn't go into the sea. On the penultimate day there was an impressive gale that stopped all the ferries and hydrofoils. Fortunately it was blowing from the north. The town lies on the east coast so we were shielded from the worst of it.

Our hotel, Rocce Azzurre, was slightly out of the town centre, up a hill and then down again, and only accessible in normal circumstances on foot. The rooms were comfortable and everyone there was very pleasant. The Nescafe coffee machine at breakfast was a bit of a disappointment though.

In conclusion

The trip home was made more exciting by the gale on our penultimate day, as no ferries and hydrofoils were operating. So there was no hydrofoil stabled overnight to take us back to the Sicilian mainland at 7.00 am – essential for our 11.30 flight back from Catania to London. So it was fortunate that we were able to charter the same excursion boat that we had used on our arrival day – just nine of us on a boat that can take 95, with fantastic dawn light and little swell as most of the trip was protected by the islands themselves.

We thought it was a very enjoyable holiday, although seven days was long enough. Apart from climbing Stromboli, we had done everything we wanted to do.

We booked the holiday through Travel Editions (www.traveleditions.co.uk). We would definitely travel with them again.