

# GOING PLACES

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# SICILY

## SIGHT FOR SORE EYES



You probably never heard. I doubt if you were told. And I know it didn't make the 6pm news. But I almost drowned one Wednesday last year. No, not at sea – it was on land. In Europe, in fact. On the island of Sicily. In the wettest, heaviest, thunder-and-lightningest storm I've ever experienced!

**S**icily (to give you some background) is the largest island in the Mediterranean, and one of the region's best-kept secrets. It's been hanging there off the toe of Italy's boot for as long as anyone can remember, and was invaded throughout history by all the usual culprits: the Phoenicians, Carthaginians, Greeks, Romans, Arabs, Byzantines, Spaniards – and, also, the Normans (King Roger and William the Bad, to name just two).

During this past century, the Sicilians were dealt a mixed hand. They gained semi-autonomy in 1948, only to have a Mafia stranglehold plunge the country into a silent 50-year civil war. But public outrage finally drove thuggery and violence off the streets – and we Kiwis never saw a single swaggering Godfather or machinegun-toting mafioso.

Today, tourists are queuing up to eyeball smouldering Mount Etna (the highest active volcano in Europe) ... soak up the history, art and atmosphere ... sample the unique spicy cuisine ... and explore the locations of ravishing beauty that can be found all over this island. In short, the word's got out: Sicily is a sight-for-sore-eyes.

Anyway, back to my near-drowning ...

**W**hile we sat down to breakfast that particular Wednesday morning, our cruise-ship dropped anchor under threatening skies off the port of Catania (a city largely constructed from the sooty black lava that engulfed the region in 1669, when an eruption claimed 12,000 lives.)

It was spotting with rain as we rock'n'rolled to shore aboard one of the

ship's bright orange tenders. We were pulling out our umbrellas as a coach took us up-up-up a zig-zaggy mountain road. And we had raincoats on as we squeezed into the elevator that took us even higher – to the medieval town gates of Taormina, perched on a cliff-edge overlooking the Bay of Naxos.

Taormina is impressive in the wet – and it's drop-dead gorgeous in sunshine.

*(Just look at these photos – shot mostly by others, in better light!)* Built originally in the 3rd century BC by the Greeks, it was later completely renovated by the Romans – and I tell you: these guys may not have had cameras, but they knew a great view when they saw one!

We strolled through the Piazza Badia (town square) with its 10th-century



Corvaja Palace, Clock Tower and Church of St Catherine of Alexandria – all sporting lava-and-pumice architecture. We strolled some more along the cobblestoned Corso Umberto (main street), past public parks, private gardens, former mansions, and balconies brimming with flowers. We lingered on the Piazza IX April Terrace for some panoramic views and photo-ops over the (misty-grey) Gulf of Taormina.



Taormina township.



Greek Theatre, Taormina

And then we strolled yet again, up narrow streets, behind our orange-haired guide, to the town's most renowned sight: the heavenly Teatro Greco.

To be honest, it didn't look *that* heavenly in the rain (which was still stopping/starting/making-up-its-mind). But this dramatically located Greek theatre was built a couple of hundred years before Rome's better-known Colosseum. Shaped like a horseshoe and suspended between sea and sky, it has retained its superb acoustics and is still used today for open-air concerts and arts festivals.

We braved the elements, poking around

the crumbling colonnades, archways and terraces – and trying in vain to spot Mt Etna through the clouds. And then, obeying the maxim “When in Sicily do what the Sicilians do”, we strolled back to the stylish boutiques and cafés along Taormina's Corso Umberto – where the women went shopping and the men went looking for food.

The coffee was, frankly, divine. There





were marzipan fruits, weird ceramic faces and funny doorknockers for sale in every window. And the welcoming locals didn't seem to care that we Kiwis looked so bemused and bedraggled under our brollies, hoods and plastic capes.

But then the rain *really* started ...

**E**n route back to our coach, we were suddenly and seriously blitzed by a weather-bomb. Thunder-crashes threatened to shake the teeth out of our heads ... torrential rain turned the cobblestone streets into freely-running streams ... our raincoats and umbrellas proved hopelessly inadequate ... and we got instantly soaked to the skin!

We were a sorry bunch of drowned rats that eventually made it back to the ship. But two hours later, when (showered and changed) we sat down to our four-course, silver-service dinner, we were all in full agreement: Taormina had been marvellous fun – another unforgettable experience to add to our Mediterranean memories ...



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