

## 'Our Sicilian Honeymoon'

Between the 11<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> of May, my wife and I were in eastern Sicily for our honeymoon. We decided to stick within Europe for our post-wedding break, and where better for sun, sea and classics than Sicily?

We were based at Hotel Ariston in Taormina, sat on the hill below the Greco-Roman Theatre. Taormina really is one of the most beautiful towns in Sicily, gorgeous views all around from every viewpoint! We had agreed a split between relaxing, activities and day trips. It was looking like gorgeous weather all week, and we had planned for – staying poolside on arrival day, Catania exploration on day 2, cooking class and boat trip on day 3, Reggio-Calabria trip on day 4, Isola Bella and an evening opera show on day 5, and then a wine tasting on Etna and Taormina's Greco-Roman Theatre on day 6, before a morning flight home on day 6 (the curse of living on the Isle of Wight, you need so much longer to get home).



Figure 1: Hotel Ariston Pool and Terrace

Hotel Ariston's pool was deeper than first expected (2.4-2.7m), but it was nice to relax next to on arrival day after our early flight and warm transfer up from Catania. Taking a stroll into Taormina that evening, we grabbed the first of a many gelati, and dinner in town, before returning to the hotel for bed.

Getting to Catania was pretty easy via public transport. A quick journey on the local bus down to Taormina-Giardini station, then about a hour on the train. As you would expect of the second city of Sicily, it was chaotic and busy, and with the train station being near the coast there was a slight walk, through some rather rough areas, to the centre around the Via Aetnea. Catania's ancient past survives in a few places - The Amphitheatre, several bath houses and the Greco-Roman Theatre



Figure 3: Gelato and the Duomo

and Odeon. I was under the impression that the amphitheatre was just viewable from above, but it turns out you can walk down into it and around the remains, so we did! First ancient site in Sicily ticked off! After that it was down the Via Aetnea. After a short sit by the elephant fountain to eat our gelato and drink some water, we headed into the Duomo. Charlotte likes churches and I like cold buildings when its 30 degrees! The main sites in Catania are grouped together across 3 tickets, so our Duomo entry fee also covered entry to the Terme Achilliane, which are a small, excavated section of Roman baths beneath the Duomo. The Terme were quite cool, in both senses of the word, with a central vaulted room and



Figure 2: The view from the amphitheatre of Catania



Figure 4: The remains of the Achilliane Baths Stucco



Figure 5: The orchestra of the Theatre

several channels running to it. On the vault were the remains of stucco decoration, you could just make out putti and vines. Our last stop in Catania was the Greco-Roman Theatre and Odeon. Tucked away behind a row of buildings, the size of the Theatre surprised me, especially knowing there's an Odeon tucked away behind it too! The strangest part of the Theatre is the orchestra now being underwater as a stream bubbles up in it. It was a rather late return back to Taormina so instead of going out to dinner, we enjoyed the hotel's buffet for dinner (though perhaps we should have noted what the cost was per person).

We were up and out at about 09:00 the next day to make our way to Porta Messina for the



Figure 6: The caponata being prepared

cooking class, where we were joined by around 6 other couples, predominantly American. After a quick visit to the fruit and veg market and the butchers, we headed to Chef Massimo's villa to cook up a large lunch. We prepped all the food in one big go, with a couple of water breaks, before sitting down to eat. The first course was a caponata along with a ricotta and tomato salad and ricotta-stuffed courgette flowers, we made our own maccheroni pasta and the sun-dried tomato pesto that accompanied it, then meatballs wrapped in lemon leaves and braised branzino for the main course. It was lovely! All so tasty and we stuffed ourselves on each course before remembering that there was more food to come. Once we'd had our fill, we had to rush off to return to our hotel, get changed and take a taxi down to Naxos port for our boat trip up and down the coast. This was Charlotte's honeymoon highlight, we spent two hours on

the boat, in the glorious sunshine, going up the coast from Naxos to Spisone beach via Capo Taormina, Isola Bella, Lover's Cave, Blue Grotto, Elephant Rock, and more. The sea and sky blending together in a glorious shade of blue. There was even time for a prosecco and swimming stop on Mazzarò bay (though Charlotte and I were the only two to go in the water). Once we had returned to Naxos we took the bus back to Taormina and headed out for dinner and an evening stroll.



Figure 7: Sea and sky from our boat



Figure 8: The Duomo of Messina

Day 3 was a fairly early start as we took the bus back to the train station and pootled up the coast to Messina, where we had some brief time to check out the outside of the Cathedral there, with its' large astrological clock before we took the ferry across the Strait of Messina to Reggio-Calabria. We strolled the length of the town stopping in a few places for lunch, before returning to the northern part to visit the Archaeological Museum. And why did I divert our honeymoon from Sicily to the mainland you may ask? Why did I drag my patient wife away from the pool and beaches to visit a museum? Why, the Riace

Bronzes of course! The absolute highlight of the museum (which was altogether very good and split across 3 floors) are the bronzes. These 5<sup>th</sup> Century BC statues were found in the sea in 1972, and whilst we still don't know much of the details surrounding them, they both stand around 6 ft 6 inches standing in the *contrapposto* style, with the eyes of statue A made of calcite, teeth of silver, and lips and nipples of copper. It is assumed that they carried spears and shields and wore helmets or wreaths that have all since been lost.



Figure 9: The Riace Bronzes

After taking over 1000 photos in the museum, and killing my phone battery, we made a quick stop at a tech shop to buy a cable for my power bank before heading to the coastline to see the statue of Athena Promachos before strolling up the sea front and back to the port for our return ferry.



Figure 10: Isola Bella comes over all grey.

Friday came around and it was going to be our beach day at Isola Bella followed by our pool day back at the hotel, one long relax of the honeymoon. Whilst we managed to sit at Isola Bella for a few hours, suddenly (and rather rudely) the clouds came over and it got all grey. We tried to tough it out for as long as we could, though there was no change, so we headed back to the hotel pool for an hour, still waiting on the good weather to return, before giving up , grabbing spritzes

from the hotel and reading our books on the terrace whilst we waited for the evening to come around, at which point we got dressed up all fancy-like and headed out to the Tetro Nazarena for an operas and arias show, which was a great performance by the flautist, pianist and tenor.



Figure 11: The Nazarena Theatre stage

Saturday was supposed to be our day at the Etna vineyard, but there was a train strike, and we were planning on using the trains to get closer to the vineyard before getting a taxi. In the end it wasn't the trains that let us down, but the buses. I guess as buses were being used to cover the trains, no buses that could have got us closer to Etna were running, we were waiting at the bus station for about 45 minutes and nothing departed apart from those going direct to Catania airport.

So, we cancelled our wine tasting and headed into Taormina, we started with a visit to Bam Bar for their granita and brioche bun (made famous on the TV show *White Lotus*) – a wonderfully tasty and cooling treat to start our day in town.



Figure 13: A statue of a young priestess of Isis from the exhibition

We certainly wolfed them down! The weather was much more on-brand on the Friday, so we popped into a few shops to stay cool and buy souvenirs, before Charlotte headed back to the hotel to get ready to go to the pool, and I had a quick whip round the 'Da Tauromenion a Tauromenium' exhibition at Palazzo Ciampoli, an exhibition that was due to finish in November 2024, but was still going as a rolling exhibition. After returning to Charlotte and the hotel pool we stayed there for a bit, soaking up the sunshine and floating in the water, before climbing up to the Greco-Roman Theatre – if you ever do this trip, never go up and over the hill via the stairs from the coach park, always go around to Porta

Messina and then climb the slope, much easier on the legs!

The wind really picked up as we reached the theatre, and you could see dust devils everywhere, but the view over to Etna was unmatched. Sitting in the sun on the *cavea* of the theatre really made us appreciate the time we'd spent in Sicily and the majesty of the place. There was something almost liminal about it. We swung by our favourite eatery from the week – Cisterna del Moro – for dinner and then grabbed some gelato on the way back to the hotel to pack ahead of our 7:30 pick up on Sunday morning.



Figure 12: Granita & brioche at Bam Bar



Figure 14: The view over the Greco-Roman Theatre to Etna



Figure 15: Our happy selves sat in Taormina Theatre