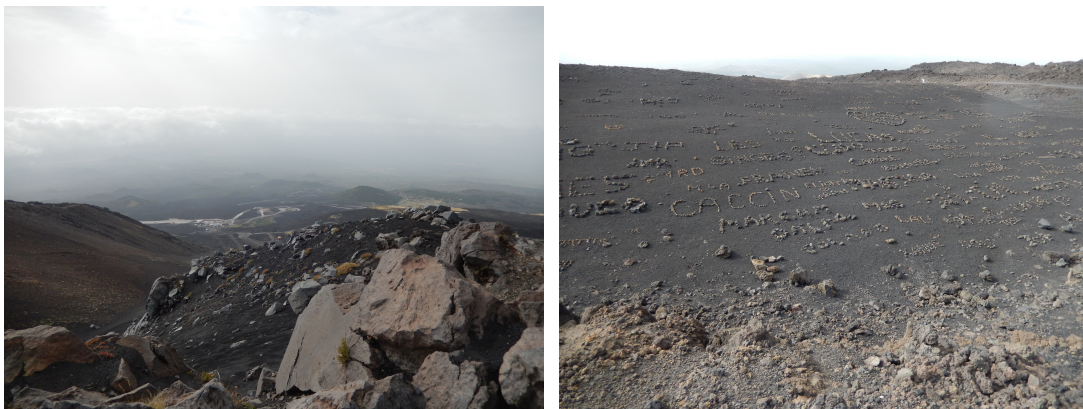


2: GIARDINI NAXOS, ETNA, TAORMINA, SYRACUSE AND NOTO

Saturday, 15 October

Up at 6.30 this morning; by 8.30 I had eaten breakfast and was ready to go with the others in the coach to Mount Etna, despite the fact that conditions were rather dull and cloudy. As the famous volcano was not too far away, we soon reached its base and began the climb upwards. Fortunately we left the mist behind. We eventually stopped at a cable car station that offered transport to the crater for the rip-off price of €63, or €30 to the end of the cable car line. As I had no inclination to see the crater or inhale the stinking sulphur in it, I opted for the latter and bought a ticket. As Janet did not want to join me, I left her to wander around lower down. As I approached the cable car, a minibus appeared from nowhere and the driver urged me to join some people inside when I showed him my ticket. The drive up was swift and we were dropped off near the top.



Mount Etna, Sicily

I now found myself in a black wilderness, with lumps of hard lava all around me. Looking down, I could barely see the land and sea through the thick mist that enveloped the volcano below where I stood. I wandered around the black hillocks, which reminded me of parts of Iceland, and stopped to look at an area where people had left their names by arranging small pieces of lava into letters. I decided to do the same, and found enough chunks of the right size to spell my first name.

When I had seen enough of this desolate landscape, I walked to the cable car stop and returned to the station below. As I had some time to spare, I looked in a shop nearby and bought a couple of small gifts for friends at home. I then met Janet and, when ready, we returned to the coach.

When everybody was aboard, we set off and drove to the seafront at Giardini Naxos, where we had a lunch of pizzas in a small, though pleasant, restaurant. The waiters and waitresses were good humoured and joked with us in English.

When we had finished eating, we were driven up a winding road to the little town of Taormina in the nearby mountains. This turned out to be quite a spectacular,

though very touristy place. We parked near the main square and set off on foot for the famous amphitheatre with its dramatic view of Etna and the coast beyond. Our guide explained that the amphitheatre had originally been built by the Greeks, then modified by the Romans; if the Roman wall with columns behind the stage had not partially collapsed, some of the view before us would have been obscured. As expected, the acoustics here were excellent, and we had no bother hearing what people were saying down on the stage, which was quite a distance from where we were seated.



The amphitheatre at Taormina, and a wedding in the town centre

When finished here, we ambled back towards the town centre, and stopped at an ice cream stall, where Janet and I chose some flavours that appealed to us. As expected, the scoops of ice cream tasted very good indeed. Back in the town square, I ambled around and came across a wedding ceremony that had just finished in the local church. The guests were all well dressed and the bride looked very becoming.

Eventually we returned to our coach and were driven back to our hotel. At dinner time, many of us helped ourselves to desserts before choosing our starters and main courses. Once again the food was excellent and the company around the table was agreeable. It had been another excellent day!

Sunday, 16 October

Off at 8.30 this morning to the city of Syracuse. As it was quite a distance south-east from where we were staying, the journey was quite long. Today's weather was much better than the previous day's, for it was very hot and sunny.

When we eventually reached the outskirts of Syracuse, we were met by our local guide Liliena, who showed us around the impressive archaeological site of Neapolis, which contained a fine Greek theatre, a quarry, a Roman altar, and a Roman amphitheatre. Visiting the quarry involved a walk through a deep gorge to a large dark cave, known as the Ear of Dionysus, from which slaves had removed stone. To test the acoustics of this great cavern, we sang a popular Irish song, *The Fields of Athenry* with lusty voices in honour of Anthony Foley, an Irish rugby union player and head coach of Munster, who had died on this day, aged just 42.

From here we drove through the streets of the city to Ortigia Island, which was connected to the mainland by a couple of short bridges. This was, in effect, the old

quarter of Syracuse, and it contained many fine old and elegant buildings. We parked in a square near the ruined Temple of Apollo, which Lilienna told us about, walked down some streets, then stopped to admire the large and elegant cathedral, the Duomo di Siracusa, which had originally been a Greek Doric temple dedicated to the goddess Athena. By looking down one side, we could see the shape of the ancient columns bulging out from the wall. This was in sharp contrast to the main façade, the style of which was High Sicilian Baroque, with Corinthian columns and statues. We were told that the present cathedral had been constructed in the seventh century, but it had been converted into a mosque in AD 878. It had then been converted back into a cathedral in 1085 when the Normans arrived and took control of the city. After a great earthquake in Sicily in 1693, the cathedral was rebuilt and the present façade was added in 1725–53. We were glad to escape from the boiling-hot sunshine and finally enter the cathedral, where we were able to admire the Greek columns at the sides, the fine Norman roof over the nave, and the mosaics (also Norman) in the apses.



The Duomo di Siracusa, Ortigia Island

Outside again, Lilienna drew our attention to two more interesting buildings nearby and the Chiesa di Santa Lucia alla Badia, where there was a painting of the burial of Saint Lucy by the famous artist Caravaggio. I left her talking to my companions and paid a quick visit to this little chapel, where I was able to admire the fine painting over the altar.

Afterwards, we all ambled down towards the harbour, where most of my companions boarded a boat for a short trip around the coast, with lunch supplied on board. As Janet and I were not interested in this, we wandered around and found a small restaurant in a narrow street nearby, where we sat in the shade and had a simple (and much cheaper) lunch of a sandwich and a small glass of beer, which was very refreshing.

Here we relaxed and chatted, then ambled back through some of the attractive narrow streets to the Temple of Apollo, where we waited for Francesco. When the others had arrived, we returned to our coach.

We then began the long journey back to our hotel. When we arrived, I made enquiries about travelling, on my own, to the elegant little town of Noto, which was even farther south from Giardini Naxos. As I had seen this wonderful place on one of Andrew Graham-Dixon and Giorgio Locatelli's BBC television programmes *Sicily Unpacked*, I was determined to see it on our last day, when nothing had been scheduled. Francesco had told me that the journey could be done by travelling on two different buses. After I had got all the information that I needed, I strolled along the beach and paddled in the sea for a while.

I then returned to my room, where I had a shower, then joined Janet and our companions for yet another wonderful dinner. In addition to the wine supplied by the hotel, I tried a little of Janet's *Zibibbo* wine, which was very pleasant. Afterwards I walked around the grounds and returned to the seafront to admire the moon shining over the Mediterranean. I then made my way back to my accommodation and settled down for the night.

Monday, 17 October

Off to Noto this morning. I got up early, had a quick breakfast, and caught the 9.10 bus for Catania at a bus stop out on the road. As I arrived in the city far too early, I had plenty of time to find the ticket office, purchase a ticket for the bus to Noto, take a walk through some narrow streets, and buy a sandwich for my lunch in a small restaurant. I then returned to the bus terminus, found the bus that I needed, and clambered aboard. As I was able to procure a seat near the front, I was able to enjoy the view when we left the city and drove through the countryside. As the driver had turned on his radio, I was able to listen to music and commentary on one of the Italian stations. It was a very pleasant sensation to travel in an ordinary bus with the local people. At one point we left the main road and drove to a small town, where a group of schoolchildren boarded the bus. When a young boy sat beside me and politely wished me '*buongiorno*', I returned the greeting. The children, who were very well behaved, got off the bus soon afterwards; no doubt they were going home for lunch.

The journey was long, though not tedious. We eventually arrived in Noto at one o'clock. I found a bench where I could sit in the shade of some trees, and made short work of the sandwich that I had bought, together with some water that I had brought with me.



The Porta Reale and a side street, Noto

I then entered the town through an impressive gateway, the Porto Reale, and ambled up the Corso Vittorio Emanuele, passing many fine Baroque buildings. This town had been completely rebuilt after a disastrous earthquake had completely destroyed it in 1693; it is believed that half the population had perished during the earthquake. The original medieval town of Noto had been elsewhere, and a decision had been made to rebuild the town in this particular spot. The result of rebuilding the entire town over a relatively short period of time resulted in a unique architectural homogeneity, in that almost all of the buildings had been constructed in the unique Sicilian Baroque style. I was absolutely delighted to be here at last and to see this fascinating and very beautiful old town for myself.



The Chiesa di San Francesco, Noto

I stopped first at the fine Chiesa di San Francesco, and walked inside to take a look at it. Relatively small and with most of the interior painted white, it was very elegant to behold.



The Cattedrale di San Nicolò, Noto

I found the Cattedrale di San Nicolò open and entered it just before the door was closed to visitors. When the BBC *Sicily Unpacked* programme had been made, the

cathedral was being restored after it had collapsed in 1996, but now all the scaffolding had been removed. Although the interior was painted white and was very plain, it was nonetheless very pleasing.



The Via Niccolaci, and inside the Palazzo di Villadorata, Noto

After I had seen this, I left and wandered around the many narrow and picturesque streets. I managed to find the famous Via Niccolaci, a street with houses that had ornamental balconies, and stopped to have a good look at them. I had seen these on television too. As the Palazzo di Villadorata in this street was open, I went into it, paid for a ticket and had a look around inside. Although it was small, it was quite elegant and interesting to see. In one of the rooms I met some people and chatted to them for a little while.

I then left and strolled around various streets, stopping to take photographs now and then. The streets heading northwards from the main road climbed uphill, which meant expending a little too much energy in the heat, but it was worth seeing everything. I found a couple more churches open and went to look inside them: the Chiesa Santa Chiara and the Chiesa San Domenico. Both of them were elegant and pleasing to behold. Back in the main street, I spied a man selling ice cream, and so stopped to buy one. It was very tasty and refreshing.



A view from the Palazzo di Villadorata, and the Chiesa Santa Chiara, Noto

Having seen as much as I could and feeling tired by now, I was happy to catch the bus back to Catania at 4.30 p.m. The journey went well, though we were held up in traffic and arrived in Catania a little late. Just as we were approaching the bus terminus, my 6 p.m. bus to Giardini Naxos was leaving. I told the driver that I needed to catch this bus and he kindly signalled the driver to stop and shouted something to him. He let me out, and I ran over to the bus. I showed the driver my return ticket and sat down, greatly relieved, for I would have had to wait an hour for the next bus.

Back at the hotel, I had a very welcome shower, then joined Janet and the others for dinner in the restaurant. This was our final evening meal together during the holiday.

Tuesday, 18 October

I was up this morning at 6.30, ready for our journey home. I had breakfast at seven, and by eight o'clock my suitcase was outside my door. When we were all together outside, I walked over to the coach driver and, speaking to him in Italian, thanked him for his hard work and gave him some money. When we boarded the coach, each one of us gave Francesco a tip.

We drove to the airport, where we checked in, went through the security area, and wandered around. As Janet was not able for the stairs and the long distances, a wheelchair was provided for her. I went to a confectionery shop, where I bought a bar of chocolate made in the town of Modica, near Noto. On one of the BBC *Sicily Unpacked* programmes, Andrew Graham-Dixon and Giorgio Locatelli had visited the small factory where this famous chocolate is made, and had drooled over the finished product. The young lady who served me turned out to be Russian and so we exchanged a few words in that language. Her English was faultless, and presumably her Italian was too.

When it was time to board the plane, Janet (in the wheelchair) and I were escorted to the aircraft before everyone else was allowed to enter, and we sat together.

The flight was pleasant and we arrived back in Dublin by 3.30 p.m. Once again, Janet asked for a wheelchair and I accompanied her while we were led through areas not used by the general public. Lifts brought us from one level to another. We finally

said goodbye in the arrivals hall of Terminal 2, and promised to keep in touch, which indeed we did. It had been a very enjoyable trip.

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