

Trips



Vinehall School
2002-2003



CLASSICS TRIP 2003, SICILY

At Mount Etna. Report by Sam Gilbert

Friday 4th July

After setting off at 8.00 from Vinehall, we reached Heathrow after an uneventful journey in the minibus. At 11.40 we went through the departure gate, but the flight was delayed. We finally left at 12.30 and the flight was fairly smooth. After landing at Fiumicino/Leonardo Da Vinci in Rome, we had a rush to get to our transfer flight to Sicily. It was only 45 minutes, but after that we had a 45-minute coach ride to our hotel. After checking in we put our stuff in our rooms (I am sharing a room with Dilip) and went back downstairs for a delicious supper of penne, pork, potatoes and cake (though not all together!). After that it was back upstairs to unpack, and so to bed.

Saturday 5th July

After a wake-up call at 7.30 and then a bite to eat we set off in the coach to the Capella Palatina (Palatine Chapel). This was a Greek Orthodox chapel built by Roger II of Sicily in c.1140 and renewed in the Renaissance by Emperor Frederick II. It had a dome decorated in Byzantine style, with Christ Pantocrator at the top, then the Prophets, Saints and scenes from the annunciation. It also had geometric patterns reminiscent of Muslim mosques.

Our coach driver is called Paolo. He is very nice and the coach is, thankfully, air conditioned. Our tour guide is a nun called Olga Muni, and she has very interesting things to say but does talk a bit too much.

After that we visited the Botanic Gardens, in which were the remains of a church, built over a mosque, which housed the bodies of the King of Sicily's courtiers. In the gardens are plants typical of Sicily such as the Carob tree, and because all the seeds are exactly the same weight, they were used to weigh gold (carats).

We then visited the Cathedral in Palermo. This was decorated in Baroque style, as it was built in the 17/18 centuries, around the original mediæval basilica, which had become too small. It housed the remains of Roger II, his son Roger, Frederick II and Frederick's son William. It is also linked by a bridge to an old watchtower, on the roof of a tall building.

After that, we visited the catacombs of the Capuchin (Capucini) monks, in which were thousands of skeletons of the friars of the monastery from 1522-1822, and rich citizens of Palermo. They were all on display and some of the better-preserved ones, still with skin and eyes, looked as though they could suddenly talk to you. There was the embalmed body of a 3-year-old girl who died in 1920 and looked as though she had just fallen asleep. The bodies were a bit gross and ghostly and some people had to go back to the coach.

After a, let's say, interesting lunch we drove to a village called Monreale, a few miles away from Palermo and visited the wonderful cathedral. This had Old Testament and New Testament mosaics arranged so that when you come in the main door you go forward through the Bible and reach Christ Pantocrator (Christ portrayed with one hand holding a bible and the other in a sign of the benediction) at the end. It is said that Emperor Frederick II was told by the Virgin Mary in a dream to build the cathedral. After that we had a lovely ice cream (Chocolate Chip!) at a café and went back to our hotel. Supper was a tasty pasta starter, chicken for main course and some very refreshing honeydew melon for dessert.

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Sunday 6th July

After breakfast we dragged all our bags out to the coach ready to set off for Agrigento and our next hotel. After about an hour in the coach we reached Segesta, the site of an ancient city. We toured the ruins of the city and then of the Doric temple outside the city.

After that we had a buffet lunch at a nearby restaurant followed by watermelon. The lunch was well prepared but unfortunately it was food I didn't like.

After another hour's drive we reached Erice, a village near the western end of the island. We walked to the castle on top of a cliff, and then had really nice ice creams before our three-hour drive to Agrigento and the hotel.

When we arrived we dumped our stuff in our rooms and had a lovely meal outside followed by dancing to tunes played by a guy with a keyboard. After that we went upstairs and, after pretending to be bewildered Italians down the phone (Calum was particularly good at this!), went to bed at 11.00pm.

Monday 7th July

After getting up and having breakfast we visited the Valley of the Temples, where we saw one of the most perfectly preserved temples in the world. After that we went to the beach where the water was really cold, contrary to the weather! We then had a delicious lunch of home-made pizza.

When we got back to the hotel, we had a 45 minutes siesta during which we wrote our postcards.

After that we had a swim in the hotel pool, with everyone being put to shame by Christian's spectacular backward dives.

We then went shopping in a very expensive area of Agrigento where just about all you could afford to buy was ice cream and sweets. Once we got back we had a wonderful supper of paella, fish and salad and crême caramel.

Tuesday 8th July

Today we travelled from Agrigento to our hotel near Mount Etna.

On the way we stopped at the Roman villa in Piazza Armerina. This is one of the only three perfectly preserved villas in the world because it was buried under mud in the 12 century after being lived in by Normans. There were wonderful mosaics including the ten gymnasts in bikinis and the "corridor of the big hunt". The villa was owned by the Emperor Maximian. You can tell this because in the mosaics there are lots of ivy leaves, the symbol of Hercules, whom Maximian thought was protecting him.

After that we had lunch which a very nice lasagne and reached our hotel at 5.30. We had a swim in the pool of the hotel and then a very nice supper of pasta, steak and chocolate flan (sounds gross but was very nice), That night it was too hot to sleep so we just tried to get cooler for the whole night.

Wednesday 9th July

In the morning we drove to Syracuse. The drive took one and a half hours. We arrived at the Neapolis, the Greek "new city". We saw the only Greek theatre to have been carved out of the hillside, as opposed to built of stone blocks. We also saw the Roman amphitheatre and the guide said that the theater was the school of life whereas the amphitheatre, where gladiators fought, was the school of death.

After that we visited the old town of Syracuse, on the island of Ortygia. It had many beautiful buildings, including the Duomo that was built on top of the Greek Temple of Athena. It had a Baroque façade but a Byzantine interior with the original Doric columns.

After a lovely lunch of pasta at a restaurant just outside the archaeological park, we went to a place where we were shown how the different qualities of papyrus we made, using original Egyptian methods, Syracuse and the Nile are the only places where suitable papyrus grows.

After the journey back we had a swim and then supper.

Thursday 10th July

When we left the hotel we had a hot and boring coach ride up the slopes of Etna, but we had been told to bring bathing suits and so were looking forward to a swim that we had been told about.

When we arrived at the Alcantara Gorge, at the very foot of Etna, we swam in the fast and freezing water at the bottom of the gorge.

After a very nice barbecue at what must be one of the highest restaurants in Sicily, 1,900 metres up Etna, we were sent off on a trek up a lava field on the volcano. The lava was 40 metres deep and still liquid in places. We saw vents where if you held paper or wood over them they would burst into the flames as the gas was 800 centigrade.

After the trek we bought souvenirs and drove back to the hotel. After a swim we had pizza for supper and then packed.

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Friday 11th July

After leaving the hotel (we weren't sorry about that because the management had promised to fix our air conditioner but still hadn't) we drove to Taormina, where we saw the Greek theatre.

It had been changed from a theatre to an amphitheatre by the Romans and is now a cultural centre. Elton John had performed there on the night before our visit. We then visited the beautiful (and shady) botanic gardens with wonderful views over to Naxos, an old Greek town. Taormina was built by Greeks who, because they had helped the Athenians in a war against Syracuse, had been expelled from Naxos by the King of Syracuse, who destroyed the town. The Greeks then came back and built a new city, Taormina, overlooking the ruins of Naxos.

Afterward we went shopping and I bought a pair of Oakley sunglasses (probably fake as they were only 15 Euros, though in Dad's opinion that is quite enough for a pair of sunglasses!) and a delicious ice cream.

We then had lunch (picnic) on the beach in Giardini Naxos and drove to the airport. During the drive Olga (our guide) kept saying that the airport was 2 minutes away, and when we didn't arrive she said she was talking in Sicilian minutes. That was not quite enough to explain how 2 minutes turned into ½ hour, though!

The flight home was smooth, and, after going from Gatwick to Vinehall to home, I gratefully fell asleep.