

Seafood &

snowshoes in Sicily

SNOWY LANDSCAPES, A BUSY CITY AND TASTY FISH GIVE **JONATHON REYNOLDS** AN IDEAL WINTER BREAK ON THE ITALIAN ISLAND OF SICILY

he snow squeaks under our snowshoes – the only sound I can hear other than a whisper of wind through the bare branches of the birch trees. To my right, the land falls into a tumbled series of ridges appearing far closer than they actually are.

Although they look close, the tiny houses perched on their sides give perspective showing us just how far away these ridges actually are. To my left, a slope of snow climbs in a clean arc to the top of Mount Etna. From her summit a wisp of smoke is curling up then dropping down the leeward side, hugging the side of the mountain away from the ever-present wind.

Behind us the trail dips through a copse of birch to a small parking pullout where the car is stationed. Ahead we see the trail, marked by ski tracks and snowshoe prints angling up the side of a small cone. One side is black tumbled lava and the other is stark white snow. Stefan, our guide, tells Lily and myself that the snow never stays on the one part of this cone because the rock is still heated too much from the underground warmth of the volcano. For Mount Etna is a volcano – the largest in Europe – rising from the Mediterranean Sea

on the eastern shores of Sicily. Looking east over the shoulder of the mountain we can see the tops of the hills on the Italian mainland jutting through the clouds.

Ten minutes of climbing and we are on top of a small cone on the shoulder of Mount Etna. We can go a bit higher but there is no real point. The view won't get any better and there is a chance of a shift in the wind sending Etna's sulphurous fumes towards us. No one is allowed to go up to the lip of the

major eruption on Etna in 2004. That one covered a hotel, closed half the ski hill and buried the road in metres of solid black rock.

Lily and Stefan head back down the slope, their snowshoes sliding on the hard crust of the snow. I wait a while, letting the silence wash over me as even the sound of their snowshoes is silenced as they round the corner of the hill. I know this will be as quiet as it gets for the next couple of days – Catania is never quiet.

“DRIVING BACK INTO CATANIA STEFAN EXPLAINS THE RULES OF DRIVING IN SICILY. ‘IT IS WAR!’ HE EXCLAIMS, TAKING BOTH HANDS OFF THE WHEEL”

main crater area – indeed Etna doesn't have one main crater like many volcanoes, rather there are dozens of smaller craters, domes and fissures scattered all over the sides of the mountain. The black sided dome we are on was part of an eruption from the late 19th century. Below us we can see a swath of barren black rock which is a legacy of an eruption in the mid-1970s. Looking a bit further to the north and west we can see the ridge that is a result of the last

Driving back into Catania Stefan explains the rules of driving in Sicily.

“It is war!” he exclaims, taking both hands off the wheel to gesture emphatically. Grabbing the wheel again he narrowly misses a truck slowly chugging up the hill. Without pausing his speech to acknowledge this near accident, he explains why almost every car we have seen has dents and scratches on all fenders.

“No one will stop to let you in, so you must force your way into the stream of traffic. If they don't let you



WRITER PROFILE

NAME JONATHON REYNOLDS

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INFO In over 50 countries around the world, Jonathon has searched for adventure. Not stopping at extreme sports, he also enjoys the adventure of food and wine and experiences which combine activities with exceptional destinations.



Stefan and Jonathan take in the views from snowy Etna



Lily enjoys being beside the sea on the coast of Sicily

oranges. The smell is pretty strong but the smiles, friendly people and colourful vibrancy of the experience makes it all worthwhile – as do the great deals on fresh food.

Francesco welcomes us into his B&B and then apologises for leaving saying, "It's Saturday night, I might not be back until very late... or tomorrow, so here is the address of a local café where you can get breakfast." With that he is gone and we have the whole place to ourselves. The outside of the building is at least 200 years old but the interior is very modern and chic with a slight oriental flair. It is so comfortable we end up sleeping until almost noon on Sunday. Not good for getting food! The Catanians are quite religious and almost every shop is closed until 7pm on Sunday night. We do manage to find a couple of cafés which are still open but there's no

real food till evening. Then it's fish, fish and more fish... along with some fantastic bread and of course lots of veggies. Being right on the sea Catania has great fresh fish.

Strangely though, it is difficult to get to the sea in Catania. A couple of days (and another hotel – the Hotel Grand Excelsior, one of the Turin Hotels International Collection; a luxury hotel) later we finally give up on trying to get tickets to one of Bellini's operas (he was born here and there are statues of him everywhere but it is virtually impossible to get tickets to the show unless you speak very good Italian, which we don't), so we decide to walk to the coast instead. It is no problem getting close but there are train tracks all along the coast in town and there's absolutely no way of reaching the seaside. Even getting to the walkway that leads along the tracks is dangerous as we have to cross four lanes of Sicilian traffic!

It isn't an option to come to Sicily and not spend some time beside the sea, so we have a new mission: to find a stretch of beautiful coast to walk along. It's not exactly sunbathing weather (about 12°C) but the wind has whipped the water up into incredible waves, perfect weather for coast walking. We figure out which bus to take out of town – number 534 or 535 – and are soon bouncing north along the coast to Acì Trezza, a tiny seaside village with a couple of islands sitting offshore.

Supposedly these islands were the result of a struggle between Ulysses and the Cyclops, Polyphenmus. It makes a good story and definitely it is a cute and quaint seaside area. We walk south along the coast passing people drinking coffee, having animated conversations (or arguments) along the seawall and soaking up the sun beside the fishing boats. When we reach the small town of Acì Castello – so named because of the castle which rises straight from the waves high above the town – the wind picks up even more and waves crashing on the cliffs shoot spray high into the air which sparkles in the late afternoon sunlight.

Too tired to walk much further past Acì Castello, we have a big surprise when we arrive back at the bus stop: there are no benches and the buses only run twice an hour – or at least they're supposed to. We wait for 40 minutes before the bus shows up, and another 40 minutes later we arrive in Catania at the Hotel Grand Excelsior. Starving from such a long day we decide to

infobox.

Jonathon flew to Sicily with Air Malta, with one-way fares from London starting at €91 www.airmalta.com

ACCOMMODATION

Residence la Vetreria
Via Grimaldi, 8-95100 Catania, Italy
0039 095 281 537
www.residencelavetreria.com

B&B Rapa Nui

Via Gagliani, 13 Catania
0039 328 8283077
www.rapanuirooms.com

Excelsior Grand Hotel

Piazza Giovanni Verga, 39-95129 Catania
0039 095 74 76 111
www.excelsiorcatania.th.it

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Intrepid Travel
0203 147 777
www.intrepidtravel.com

Added to Travel

www.addictedtotravel.com

KE Adventure

01767 73966
www.keadventure.com

FURTHER INFO

www.italiantourism.com/sicilia.html

splurge on the restaurant attached to the hotel and try a medley of local dishes – almost all of which are fish. After a particularly good piece of swordfish we are served a tangy lemon mouse which completely clears the palate; a perfect end to the meal... except the waiters continue to bring more food! So it's another half an hour of yet more different varieties of fish: fried, sautéed, grilled, even raw, and eventually we stagger away from the table – too much of a good thing for sure.

The next day we decide we have seen enough of Catania – I think we've wandered down almost every street in the city a few times, visited most of the churches, and the street vendors are starting to recognise us. Catania may well be a huge tourist trap in the summer but now in winter we have so far only seen travellers – no tourists at all. We decide to head up the coast and spend our last night and day in Italy watching waves crash against the cliffs. Baia Verde is a hotel sprawled along the coastal cliffs south of Acì Castello. The waves don't disappoint and we spend a great afternoon and evening watching the waves, and occasionally getting wet. My lasting memories of Catania and Mount Etna will be of sparkling water and sparkling snow. ■

» in then... bang, another dent!" This is accompanied by a two-handed Gallic shrug which sends our car wandering over the road again. As the road twists and turns down the mountain we pass lemon groves which fill the air with a sharp

castle in Sicily – as if it has been transported from Britain or Normandy. It's a perfect example of the layers of history and different cultures here – Norman on top of Roman on top of Greek. Every couple of hundred years Etna has

A PLACE TO SLEEP

Our hotel, Residence la Vetreria, is just a few hundred metres from the Castello. A converted 19th century mirror factory, the hotel feels like a private home or residence with a kitchen on each floor, lounging rooms and very friendly staff. From our balcony we have great views of Mount Etna. Unfortunately we are only staying for two nights and so must move on to a B&B even closer to the centre of the old town.

Walking through the town to B&B Rapa Nui we pass the food market. Each day from early morning – far earlier than I was prepared to get up – until early afternoon several narrow streets turn into a street market. It seems most of the locals in Catania do their shopping here and we too buy food for lunches and dinner. Tables filled with dozens of different types of olives are side by side with cheeses and mounds of blood

covered Catania in ash and lava and the city has been rebuilt each time leaving the old remains beneath. Three blocks from the Castello lie the ruins of a Greek and Roman amphitheatre. One is hard to see – it is surrounded by old homes and tenement apartments. The other is just off Etna Street and although small is home to dozens of cats (and the smell of their urine).

Centuries of style and architecture adorn the city of Catania



It may smell strong, but the fish market is worth a look



Castello Ursino's Norman style feels a bit out of place here



Snowshoes are a must to get out of the city in winter