SICILY

This week we head south to the largest island in the Mediterranean Sea, Sicily. The island is compact and has many contrasts, with the mountains, stunning beaches and coast, volcanoes, countryside and fishing villages. Sicily has a rustic feel to it, which embraces you and brings to the fore the attributes we love about Italy – food, culture, history, wine, hospitality – without as much of the tourist feel that you might find in more popular areas of the country. Driving is easy, roads are in good condition and the experiences are endless.

WEDNESDAY – DAY 1

We land just before 9pm and have the taxi ride from hell to our hotel - at least we get there quickly. We check into the **Artemisia Hotel** and our reception is warm. The room is spacious and the bed has a bit of a hard, squared off look to it. The bathroom is spacious and has my favourite piece of equipment, a bidet.

We dump our things and take the recommendation from reception to eat at **Il Mirto Ela Rosa,** a mere minute or less from our hotel.

The restaurant has a great local feel and is well patronised at 10pm. We have Insalata Trecolore with arugula, tomatoes, mozzarella; I have spaghetti with broccoli and Dave has tagliatelle pesce, both good dishes.

THURSDAY – DAY 2

Our first day to ourselves. We sleep in and have Brekkie at 9am.

We do what all good tourists do and head to the hop on hop off bus. It's overcast with rain threatened this evening but very mild, 18 degrees. The rain that was forecast for the next three days has now disappeared from the radar and been replaced by brilliant sunshine. The tour is an excellent familiarisation of the city and we join the B route to see another part of the city.

We have lunch at La Duchessa, just around the corner from our hotel. We share a Sicilian pizza and a glass of Rose. The pizza is perfecto.

After lunch we walk to some local markets that we saw on the bus this morning and end up weaving our way through a very local area. We come across some rather splendid Catholic Churches along the way.

We spotted a popular restaurant last night on our way home so wander a few short metres from the hotel to **Kliko**. The restaurant is small and full. They seat us after 15mins, during which time we had a beer at an outdoor table. We both have the special, homemade short pasta with seafood and it is delish. We share a Sicilian cheesecake and it is also good. All washed down with a red wine that is reasonably average. It's a real enjoyable night.

FRIDAY – DAY 3

After brekkie we check out and walk up to the Hertz office to collect our rental, about 10m up the road.

The staff are quite good until we express our dissatisfaction at the car - a Fiat Qubo, which is a cross between a delivery van and a hearse. They tell us we could change the car at the airport if we'd like.

We tootle back to the hotel and Dave is ok with the car so we decide not to waste any more time. Dave double parks while I scoot in and grab our luggage. We initially looked for a car park before remembering we're in Italy and there are no rules.

It is slow going coming out of Palermo but we are rewarded in our decision to take the local road by some stunning views on the way to Cefalu. We take the coastal road via Palermo - Ficarazzi - Campagnone - Santa Flavia - Solanto.

The drive into **Cefalu** is stunning and tempts us with a snippet of what is to come. We must park in a parking lot and phone the owners of the hotel to pick us up, as the streets are narrow and parking very limited.

Our hotel is **La Plumeria**, right in the heart of the old town. Our room is large and comfortable but we have a problem. The air con is broken; we have big doors we can open onto a balcony and the receptionist assures us that any noise will abate by 7:30pm.

We go for a walk around town and it is indeed quaint and charming. The roads are cobbled. Most of the shops are closed ..... must be siesta time. We have a gelato - only €2 for two scoops.

We have dinner at a restaurant (whoops, forgot to write down the name) we booked when we walked past earlier and the owner was just locking up after lunch. We order Eggplant Caponata with Crispy Squid - Mussel Soup - Pasta with Fish, Artichoke, Tomato - Red Tuna with Sesame, Tomato, Lime. The entrees are sensational but not so the mains. Dave's pasta is much more than al dente and the artichoke stringy and inedible. My tuna is great but some parts are chewier than others, ie inconsistent. But enjoyable. The service is great and the white wine a great choice. The restaurant inspectors turn up during the night with no great upset as the owner is clearly on top of things and has all the relevant paperwork at his fingertips. There is a lot of form filling out, stamping, signing and counter signing going on.

Back at the hotel we open our balcony doors and it is very noisy. I go down to reception and they have no other rooms available but maybe tomorrow we can move.

SATURDAY – DAY 4

We go for a run along the promenade. It's 16 degrees so shorts and singlet for the very first time.

Last night was a horror. Our room faces the street and the noise never stopped - either bikes and cars rattling over the cobblestones or nonstop chatter at 3am. The receptionist is clearly expecting us and knows about last nights' visit. She moves us to another room which opens to an internal courtyard. It is lovely and bigger than our previous room.

We walk about town and out to the lighthouse. The rain starts so we scamper back to the hotel to pick up our brollies.

We wander through town and pick up a lovely platter and bowls from a family ceramic shop down a side street.

We go to **Antares** for light lunch, along the promenade. We share a Capriciosa pizza, more a tourist pizza than an Italian pizza. Very average.

We go back to the hotel for some R&R before we go out for another walk around town. It has rained quite a bit and the outdoor cafes and bars are deserted. Slowly they come back to life as the evening wears on.

We have d inner at the hotel restaurant - Cortile Pepe - Tuna Tartare - Slow Roasted Lamb with Mash Potato & Absolute Eggplant - Chocolate Chilli Mousse. The food is lovely; the only complaint being that my eggplant main is one small piece of eggplant with eggplant purée - a long way short of being a main meal but brilliant executed.

SUNDAY – DAY 5

We have Brekkie and hit the road to **Taormina**. We take the autostrada as to do otherwise might take days. Lovely drive with some stunning scenery.

We arrive in Taormina early afternoon and park in a multi storey car park. We push our bags up a short rise and are greeted by a friendly, older gent who recognises us as tourists in search of our hotel. He can't understand our Australian twang but asks if our hotel is 'petite?' Si. We walk through the arch to the pedestrian walkway and he points to a small hotel - no. Onto the next one.... Here. Si, grazie. The hotel **Taodomus** is home for the next 2nts.

The receptionist is gorgeous and couldn't be more helpful. Our room is facing the street and we are hesitant given our experience in Cefalu. She explains we can choose as she has another room - both will be ready in about 15mins so we go out for a walk.

The sun is shining but it is cold and windy in the shade of the street. There is a gelato shop a few doors down and we decide that's lunch – I have liquorice and vanilla. Divine.

Not much further on the street opens to a square with magnificent views over the water. What a place!

When we get back to the hotel, we have a look at the rooms - the receptionist has already moved our bags into the front room which is beautiful and very roomy with a balcony over the street. We look at the other option - a side room with a window which will get exactly the same noise as the street room. We take the front room. The receptionist explains that the air con will work so we make ourselves comfortable and unpack before going out again. We enjoy a lovely walk around town before taking a bus to the beach.

It is all but shut down and is also very run down. So pleased we didn't book down here!

Back in town we exit the arch way in search of a quieter spot to settle in while the sun is dipping. We find the perfect place in the sun. We take a seat and order a beer. The staff aren't keen to sell us another one so we just sit and watch life go by.

Dave wants a pizza for dinner and the (new) girl at the hotel recommends a place that she likes. We look online at the pizza place and there are alarm bells already. One, they have thirty varieties of pizza and, two, they have pizzas with potato on them.

We shower and head out. Even on arrival this doesn't look 'local' and the spivs inside do nothing to allay this feeling. The nail in the coffin is when we look at the pizzas at the table next to us and they're disgusting. Tourist pizzas. We leave and they don't notice.

I had read about a local restaurant that sounded lovely, family run. I hadn't mapped it but had a fairly good idea where to go. Down to the gardens, turn right, up a few alley ways. And there it was.... **Osteria Da Rita.** Gorgeous, small, packed. We squeeze into a table and know we've picked the right place.

Off to a great start when they bring bruschetta, FOC. Yum. I have pasta with seafood and it is sensational. Dave gets his pizza and is happy. The servings are huge. We enjoy a Rose di Casa, contained in a ceramic chook. The restaurant buzzes. We talk to our next door neighbours - Mike and Lisa from the UK. DInner finishes with complimentary Limoncello. This is great and we book for tomorrow night.

We're walking home and hear music up an alley with live music drifting down. We take a seat! The couple next to us keep requesting 'Heart of Gold' so I make conversation by asking if they're Canadian - yes. When the music is ending, I do what is expected and get people up dancing. There is another table - mum, dad, three boys -and they have been clearly enjoying the music. It takes little encouragement to get mum up and the rest follow.

When it's all over we stand around for quite a while, chatting with our new friends. The Canadians - he plays professional ice hockey in Austria and she is a speech pathologist. The family - mum is French (a journalist), dad is German (an economist), they live in London. Oldest son is 18 and is going to stay on and cycle Sicily with friends. The other two boys are still at school. They are delightful.

MONDAY – DAY 6

The day is blue skies and heading for 21 degrees. We have Brekkie on the terrace - superb with a couple of women on hand to cook either pancakes, eggs or vegies. Dave has eggs and tomato and I have grilled vegies. There is also a great range of meats, pastries, cheese, bread, etc. beautiful setting. We have a great view of Etna, smoking away in the distance.

We do some work then go to catch a bus up to the town high on a rocky outcrop behind us. We miss it by a couple of minutes so take a bus to Giardini Naxos, which we can see from town. We walk along the beach - it is beautiful with sun and blue skies and we really enjoy the walk.

We take the bus back to town and wander around a bit more. We are debating our next move and decide to do so over an appetizer of mixed vegies at Rita's. It is huge with artichoke, eggplant, tomatoes, zucchini, and more. We have a beer and chat with the lovely couple at the next table by they are from Manly (AUS) and over here for a few months. Like us, they think Taormina is quaint but there is nothing 'local' about it. We enjoy their company. We linger long time, before stocking up on water and returning to our hotel.

Tonight we are back down to Rita's where we have another smashing meal. We are welcomed like old friends. I have pasta Norma - with tomato sauce and eggplant - and Dave has Rita's special meatballs. And the mandatory starter if bruschetta. And a chook of Rose. Neither of us can finish our meals.

We are offered complimentary Limoncello again and then the waitress, Allessandra, gives us a glass of her mum's chocolate liqueur. Wicked. When we are leaving, I ask if this is her family's restaurant and she says yes. She points to a photo on the wall of her parents and says they come in of a morning and she and her brother - Roberto - are there at night. Roberto has a tattoo of red lips on the side of his neck and makes jokes about the Sicilian mafia.... yet he is lovely and welcoming and fun. But I wouldn't cross him.

We tell Allessandra how much we have enjoyed their restaurant and that we are leaving tomorrow. She responds, "then I must give you a present" and gives us one of their beautiful ceramic plates with the restaurant name on it. I give her a big hug and tell her I will treasure it. I think they may have heard us talking about how beautiful all their ceramic table wear (and chooks) were.

TUESDAY – DAY 7

We enjoy brekkie on the terasse before packing up for our next stop at Siracusa. They hotel has been gorgeous and the town very pretty but it's not a place you can 'settle into' in terms of living the local life.

We don't bother going to **Etna** as there is a real haze about and the views won't be that good today. We've had great views from a distance which may well be the best views.

We drive along the coast - Giardini-Naxos - Fiumefreddo (fairly ordinary)- Giarre (very pretty) - Catania - **Siracusa**, which is fairly underwhelming as is our hotel. 3* and nothing more. We had been told there is nothing to see in Siracusa itself and all the action is on the island of **Ortigia**, connected by a bridge.

We unpack and hoof it down the 1.2km to the island. It is quite charming and we visit all the sites - the Fontana Diana, the Duomo, Cathedral St Lucia, the Fonte Aretusa (a freshwater fountain adjacent the sea) and the Jewish Quarter. It is fairly quiet and off the beaten track.

We sit and have a beer to fill in time before heading to a seafood restaurant that Dave has picked out. Unfortunately, they are booked out but the owner refers us to another restaurant a short walk away.

We take an outside table which has plenty of passing traffic. I order the pasta Sarde - pasta with sardines that I've been keen to try -and Dave has pasta with seafood. Mine has sardines, fennel, raisins, pinenuts and breadcrumbs. It's fantastic.

Dessert is written on a serviette and they scratch things off as they sell out! Dave orders Tiramisu.... no more of that, scribble it out. He goes for Chocolate & Pistachio Torte and I have Sorbet Limone. The torte is rich and the sorbet really tangy and yum.

WEDNESDAY 13 APRIL

We have brekkie - the bread is good, coffee disgusting. On the road again, gonna be 28 today. We leave town via the ruins - we can't leave the car so pretty much give it a miss. Off to **Agrigento**.

An hour into the trip and we climb inland. The road is slow, the land harsh and the temp 30. There is a haze, as there was yesterday and the clear blue sky is dusty rather than clear.

We arrive in **San Leone** early afternoon. I forgot to google map the hotel so we sit at a local restaurant **Taverna Portobello** for a bit and use their internet to find our way. Was share a grilled ocky and salad and enjoy the sun. Our hotel is only a few mins up the road and we decide we'll have an easy arvo.

The hotel **Costazurra** is still having a few off season renos but our room is spacious and we settle down for a rest. The **Valley of Temples** is the highlight of the region and we decide we'll do this later.

We head pit around 6pm in search of the temples. Finding our way around Agrigento is difficult and we don't really know where we're going, apart from a mark on the map from hotel guy for a viewing point. We finally find it and it's all quite lovely looking down on the ruins of the temples. The sunset is magic!

We have a problem when we get back in the car and it won't start. Dave tries a few things and nothing. After about 10mins he manages to manoeuvre the steering wheel to the point where the ignition starts. Phew. It was all to do with the steering lock. Off we go.

We miss out turn on the way home and end up God knows where. But there's a servo and Dave wants to top up before our drive to the airport tomorrow. Can't get the petrol cap off! Luckily, a chap pulls up who has a Fiat and he shows us the trick of getting the cap off. Then the bowser won't work. And we have no clue where we are. I decide it's time to google map out way home. We find a servo just up the road, get petrol and we're on our way. We're seriously off course but still not far from home.

We drop the car and walk a block to **Doctor Fish**, a local restaurant we're hoping will be good for our final meal in Sicily.

We have some fried anchovies and they're great. The fried little squid is on but too much batter. Dave has the grill plate - prawns, squid and swordfish. I have spaghetti with prawns and pistachio pesto, something I've been wanting to try. The Sicilians love their pistachios. It's really good but the prawns are tiny frozen things.

It's an enjoyable night though.

THURSDAY 14 APRIL

We set the alarm for 6:15am - first alarm this trip! We are off by 7am on our way to Palermo where we have a flight to London via Rome.

Sicily has been a treat. Favourite spot - Taormina. It is touristy but the combination of the town, the hotel, Rita's, the friendly people, the walk along the beach, the view…. all added up to a brilliant stay.

The drive to Palermo is interesting and the landscape changes vastly on the south west side is the island. Much greener, more things growing, not near as dusty.

We make good time and are 5mins from the airport at 9am. We pull off the road, into **Terrasini**, and have Brekkie at **Margaret Cafe**. We share a panini, I have a cappuccino and Dave has a cup of the thickest hot chocolate I've ever seen; he can barely spoon it out. Not tempting in the least.