

# Volcano!

## Tea Break Travels No 2

*This is one story from a collection of travel related stories called "Tea Break Travels". They are designed to be read in a short break from work or whatever, and cost around the same as biscuit! Some are true, some embellished, and some fictional. Some are from near 20 years of too much business travel, or our holidays, others are relayed from friends and acquaintances, yet others are just plain made up! This one is about a trip to the volcanoes of Sicily  
Enjoy.*

"Vulcano" I answered.

"OK, but which Volcano?" he asked.

"Well it's not which, it's called Vulcano. Named after the god, Vulcan. It's the island that gave its name to all volcanoes." I paused, "In the Aeolian Islands, north of Sicily."

"It isn't *VolKno*, it's *VulCARno*," intervened my wife.

"You say *VulCARno*, I say *VolKno*" but we did not call the whole thing off! We did, however, have the same conversation a number of times when we tried to explain where we were going for our next holiday.

We've always been fascinated by volcanoes. They are sort of "real-time" geology, some still active now, others having only just done their deeds – well, "just" in geological time scales at least! A visit to Santorini many years back had really started it, but more of that in another story. The trip to the Aeolian Islands was to be paired with a week on Sicily, in Taormina and a trip up Etna.

Getting to Vulcano was a little fraught. The flight into Catania was smooth, the transfer mini bus to the ferry port at Milazzo only had us as passengers so all seemed well, and the driver and his mate were happy to try a little English and a lot of sign language. The A18 is quite a road. Most of it is motorway standard with two-lane dual carriageway, but as it heads up the Eastern Sicilian coast it seems to have been stuck on the side of a cliff in many places, then dives through a tunnel, only to emerge on a soaring bridge to revert back to being stuck on the cliff face, and then do the whole sequence again, and again. Still we made good time, with the mini bus rarely not accelerating as hard as it could, or alternatively braking as hard as it could.

As we approached Messina, with a great view across the strait to Reggio di Calabria, we suddenly took an exit and headed into town. The driver's mate was really just getting a lift back from the airport! Not a problem, except as we headed into town, we passed miles of stationary traffic heading out of town. It was evening rush hour. So when we had dropped off our non paying passenger, we joined the solid traffic to head back to the motorway. This was a problem, because try as he might to overtake the un-overtakable,

the driver could only get us to Milazzo to see the ferry pulling up the gang plank and sailing away.

“No problem,” he said, “There is a later one,” and left to get our tickets. On his return he gave us the tickets and very rapidly departed. On looking at the tickets we saw why. We had a four hour wait, saddled with all our luggage, for the five past midnight ferry! Ah the joys of travel.

Well the dockside did not look too interesting, but some distant lights suggested a bar or restaurant, so we wheeled the bags across the cobbles and concrete in that direction. A pizzeria on the harbour front did us a bottle of wine, pizza and salad, and soon it was time to drag the bags back to the ferry, just a little doubtful that anything would work after midnight!

We need not have doubted. Throughout the stay in the islands we were amazed at the quality of the ferry services. Two or three different lines crisscross the islands with frequent and very punctual services. Our ferry to Vulcano left on time and dropped us at the small ferry port just after one a.m. Again to our surprise the hotel car was there to meet us and within minutes we were, at last, checking in.

A few smelly minutes that is. Aeolian means wind. Gentle summer breezes off the Tyrrhenian Sea you might think. But that is wrong English meaning of “wind”. Think more of sulphur, rotten eggs, or to put it basically, “letting off”! Just next to ferry dock are the sulphur baths and further up the road to the hotel are a set fumaroles – volcanic vents still hissing out sulphurous gas. A lovely greeting. But you either get used to it quickly, or it didn’t seem to affect the hotel.

After a little bit of rest and recreation we decided to start volcano bagging. We began in a small way, with the friendly, bite size cone of Vulcanello, just about a mile up the road, and almost literally in somebody’s back garden. Vulcanello is latest cone on what was a separate island to the north of Vulcano. Lava flows are still clearly visible and one of these led to the build up of a sand bar joining the two islands. So now you can walk up a gentle incline on a good tarmac road, past peoples’ homes and holiday villas, through olive groves and then just round a sharp bend in the road, a little, unmade footpath shoots through the hedge row, round a garden and then steeply up the side of the cone.

It’s a dusty and slippery climb, but thankfully very short. And the reward is looking at what could be a model of a volcano. The cone, which last erupted in 1550, is around 80 metres across, sadly now filling with rubbish (no shopping trolleys yet however!). It was odd to think that less than 500 years ago this very cone was pumping out lava. Now there are houses within 100 metres of the cone and presumably people don’t live there fearing that deep rumble in the night. If you needed evidence that another volcano can start were there is a dead one, you just need to walk all around cone and see into the previous cone that this eruption had partially filled. All in all great introduction to the structure of a volcano!

Of course there is no point in going to Vulcano and not going up the real volcano. It was June and rather hot, so we chose to start early and attack the 1,000 metre (3,000 feet) climb before the sun came round to the north side. It is a walk with a few scabbling sections, and good footwear is really recommended. Some sections of the hillside are deeply eroded, and frequently the pathway had been washed away. Most of the surface is loose and dusty gravel, but even so some plants are already staking a claim seem to be doing well in the hostile conditions.

The views from the crater rim are fantastic. Look away from the crater and see the islands dotted across the blue sea; look down and see the main town and ferry port. While looking at the Port, just think that during the last eruption, 1888 – 1890, the crater behind you bombarded that area with boulders the size of a car, some of which you can still see around the town. There was only a penal colony there then, but it is amazing how quickly people forgive and forget and build a whole town in the shadow of a killer. One of the buildings in the town is the monitoring centre for this volcano. I call that faith in your abilities.

Look into the crater and you see a much more majestic sight than poor little Vulcanello. The crater seems to be about a third of the depth of the mountain, and looks like a moonscape. The walk around it takes about an hour. Although not spewing lava, it is the volcanic equivalent of the smoking gun. As you walk round the rim you pass through an area of fumaroles, some inside the rim, and some you have to walk over. These are continually releasing hot gases and steam, and the smell of sulphur is everywhere.

The bottom of the crater is a large flat area and despite the dangers from the gases, somebody had gone down and written their name in stones! We wondered what they had been doing in the Chemistry lessons that covered noxious gases.

If the walk up was a scabble on occasion, the walk down was more like skiing and before you know it you're back in the town and thinking about a beer and then lunch. Prawns in garlic and a dry, southern rose I seem to remember on that occasion. And having conquered the volcano, it all felt very justified!

The nearby island of Lipari also has some minor volcanic activity, but apart from a morning trip to the main town one showery day – on the reliable ferries of course – we saved our other volcano trip for the star of the Aeolians – Stromboli.

If Vulcano is a smoking gun, Stromboli is firing both barrels! It is said to be the most active volcano in the world, with minor eruptions every 15 minutes or so, more major events about twice a year and, every few years it completely loses it and throws all the toys out – as it did since we were there and caused an evacuation of the island.

You can get there by island hopping on the ferries, but we chose a boat tour. It started just after midday, called into another island, Panarea, for a break and refreshments, and then went on to Stromboli. You can stay over on Stromboli and, with a local guide,

climb for around 4 hours to see the active crater, which is especially spectacular at night. Unfortunately the trip didn't give us time for that (lol!).

We did have a look round the town and a glass of wine or two. It is a town of very narrow streets, giving normal cars a problem to reach many places. The Carabinieri have solved this problem by using golf carts – yes a golf cart with a blue flashing light on the top!

Again as we strolled around or sat watching the world go by with a glass of wine, we were struck by the normality of town that is just a few miles from an erupting crater. People seem to be able to live alongside volcanoes very easily.

We returned to the boat just before dusk and sailed “the long way round the island” to head back to Vulcano, passing what remains of the original island of Stromboli, now a vertical outcrop of granite, with one dwelling perched on it. As we sailed back then the reason for the long course became apparent. From this side of the island, and as darkness fell, you got a superb view of Stromboli's pyrotechnics. Every five or so minutes a shower of glowing lava is thrown into the air within the crater. Although it looks firework sized from off shore, the shower is around 200 metres (600 feet) high, hence the spectacular attraction of the trek up to the crater. All the way back to Panarea the flares continued to be visible. A real active volcano and a great way to see it.

The second week we spent in a hotel in Taormina. Taormina is a town of two halves. There is the old town, enclosed by walls perched up on the hill, and beach town, down by the shore where most of the newer hotels are. The two are connected by a cable car. We'd chosen a beach hotel, but used the cable car daily to enjoy the restaurants. The scenery is very like the Eastern part of the Cote d'azur, with rocky headlands, small bays and offshore islands. From many of the restaurants in the old town you can clearly see our last volcanic goal of trip, the massive Mount Etna.

Compared with the island volcanoes we had seen so far, Etna is a true giant. The peak is 3350 metres and looks like crouching monster. It dominates Eastern Sicily. The drive up the mountain starts in the highly fertile coastal plain, goes through broad leaf woodland on the lower slopes, into conifer forest. The villages and houses at this height all have an alpine look and feel, and the final village where the off road track starts is fully geared up for skiing in the winter months.

The drive to the summit is done in military style trucks converted to carry about 20 people. They are four wheel drive, high clearance vehicles that labour their way to the observation centre you can just see from the village. The ability to run the trip is at the mercy of two parts of nature. The weather is the first. It needs to be clear and we were lucky with that. Second is Etna's mood. Although not continually erupting like Stromboli, it is very active, frequently breaking out new complexes of cones and pouring forth lava. On our trip up we passed the remains of the ski lift, part buried and part flattened by a recent lava flow. Since our trip, we understand another flow had reached

the village we started from, but I'd guess that if you go there today, they'll have re routed the track so the tyres don't catch fire on the lava!

You get the full volcanic experience if you can go. There are groups of side cones identified by the years they first appeared in, lava tubes twice your height, and lava flows hundreds of metres across. I've always thought of the top of a volcano in a rather cinema or cartoon way. Step sided, inverted "V" with a crater. The top of Etna is really expansive. An older peak is home to the observation centre, continually monitoring its higher neighbour, the current main crater. Between the two is a flat, black plain able to hold several football pitches. You can not see into the main crater or get that close, but you can both hear and see the results of the activity. Ominous rumbles and puffs of dark smoke are frequent. One thing to remember, as with all mountains, is it can be cold up there, even when warm on the coast. For us the temperature was not so bad, but the wind coming up over the southern escarpment was like being a wind tunnel! We were thankful of the extra layers we'd packed.

So that completed our volcanic tour. We had bagged three and half volcanoes in 2 weeks which is not bad going given the total number in Europe. And left with deep thoughts about how people just get on with life around these proven killers.