

Tears and Lava Flows.

Just what is it that makes Sicily so different, so appealing? I have just wandered out of the cavernous 18C palazzo where I am staying, and straight into a simple street cafe with a cabinet filled with warm pastries oozing fresh ricotta; I have ordered the first cappuccino of the day plus a spremuta made from freshly squeezed local blood oranges and sat down to write a few words about this beguiling island as the sunlight outside intensifies and highlights the pitted surface of the blue-black volcanic paving stones. It will be 36C today. It's May 15th and it is wonderful to be in a new place again.

I arrived in Catania last night, the long train journey from Florence made suddenly worthwhile by a brief glimpse of Etna erupting, sending a thin golden line of molten lava snaking down the slopes towards the houses on the outskirts where these things are considered routine and nobody on the train batted an eyelid. Coming from a country where the last volcanic eruption was 55 million years ago, to me at least, it was pretty remarkable.

Emerging from the central station at 10pm is like stumbling onto the set of a period drama or grand opera and this is surely part of the magic of Sicily. Figures animated or in repose populate a dramatically lit piazza surrounded by crumbling palaces, windows ink-black as caves, art nouveau kiosks serving refreshing 'selzer' drinks and snacks illuminated like fiery beacons to attract the weary traveller, their insistent light washing over nearby

palm trees and a tangle of wrought iron balconies. Then you plunge down a darkened street - nobody could explain why parts of the city were treated as an exercise in chiaroscuro- and arrive at a friendly trattoria still welcoming diners at 10 or 11 at night, a time when we are often brushing our teeth and closing things down. No 'have you booked?' nonsense here. Sit down, bread and caponata arrives promptly and a glass of mineral rich Etna Rosso and instantly you can relax. I am back in Sicily again and very comfortable it feels.

Catania traditionally hasn't had a great press and is often relegated to the 'best to be avoided' category for those hurrying between up-market Taormina and alluring Siracusa, but that is a pity because this city of about 300,000 souls is one of Italy's most fascinating and unusual destinations.

Etna, Europe's largest and most active volcano, looms over the city much of which is built on lava flows which also provides a building material giving the streets a dark smokey feel, very different to the the ochre and honey colours of nearby towns like Ragusa and Noto- known in our house as Montalbania after the dashing easily-tempted TV detective. If you visit the enormous Benedettini Monastery, now part of Catania University, you can see how a 17C lava flow actually swerved past the building and then solidified into a 14 metre high outcrop of rock. A lot of serious praying must have gone on.....and a bit of surreptitious bag packing perhaps. But strangely the greyness is not at all drab, rather it makes everything look like a black and white photo or a charcoal drawing. Splashes of

colour there are- cascades of bouganvillea spilling over balconies, market stalls piled high with glowing citrus fruit, the bright glazes on the local pottery from Caltanissetta, and the great yellow drapes over the main entrance of the Duomo. And white marble and limestone is used throughout the city to balance the grey-black of the lava- most fetchingly for the tusks and eyes of the statue of 'U Liotro', the winsome elephant in the main piazza that provides the city with it's unusual emblem.

And then there are the cakes. In all honesty if you have never been into a Sicilian pasticceria then your life is somewhat incomplete. A veritable paradise of pistacchio and almond paste, oceans of flaky pastry, pine-nuts and creamy ricotta- trays heaped up in windows and or arranged as a sugary perspective in long display cases. At Nonna Vincenza's you get all this and glittering candelabras too. Breakfast in Catania can be a warm brioche, the size of a small loaf, filled with bright green pistacchio granita. It's probably not on any healthy eating regimes but sitting on the terrace of the Caffè del Duomo it seems the perfect choice.

The food here is quite simply outstanding. I was taken for lunch to Zu Maru, a roadside fish restaurant on the outskirts towards Acireale.

Actually that should be roadsides as it on a busy junction with traffic near enough develop a Drive-Through business if you had some left-overs. But that would be unlikely as the fish here was the best that I have tasted outside of Japan. Enough said. Next day I was taken to Haiku, an organic vegan restaurant near the station. If that conjures up a

vision of something possibly a little humdrum and worthy, think again. Filled with gossiping families and featuring staff that could have been fashion models, the food was unbelievably delicious. The last time I was in a vegetarian place that was anywhere near as lively was in Manchester on a Friday night, but then you should not come to Sicily and expect a reverential hush, especially when dining. In fact even the taxi ride to the airport was noisy but in a rather wonderful way- the driver insisted on singing some of the hits of the great opera tenor and local- boy-made-good, Giuseppe di Stefano. And he only charged 8 euros! Must be the cheapest transfer in Italy!

But then Sicily is full of surprises, and Catania is one of them. Walk along the street from the Duomo and you pass standard shop windows full of clothing, communion invitations, motor scooter parts and then, suddenly, a classical theatre! Founded by the Greeks and developed by the Romans, the people here just built around the site and eventually right up to it, borrowing odd bits here and there, so some very normal apartments actually overlook the rows of seating like theatre boxes.

A startlingly original setting, not very busy so very relaxing to visit with helpful and chatty guides, and all 2 minutes from the Piazza Duomo and another much-needed granita. Like most monuments here it also features the statutory notices forbidding photographs...which may as well be written in Swahili for all the notice people (and staff) take of them.

As for surprises, I can trump most experiences as I found myself lying on the floor in a theatre studio outside of Catania playing the role of someone's dead grandfather/great uncle or whoever. This was all part of the family constellation workshop that my friend Adriana was conducting with 20+ local drama students. I am still not quite sure how it all works, but it seems to release a lot of pent-up emotions and to be a genuinely cathartic and healing experience for some people. At the end of the 3 days of soul-searching and tearful reconciliations, I had a couple of hours to lead the students astray in one of my creative art workshops which went down pretty well.

Most movingly for me, a young woman, 35-ish, said that her face was hurting because she had not laughed so much in many many years. The day before I had taken the role of her husband, who 15 years ago had been driving North with 4 friends to look for work when 1 of them fell asleep at the wheel and all 5 had been killed. She had brought up their child alone and had obviously passed through a vale of unimaginable sorrow, but was now slowly emerging from that. To have helped her a little made that long train journey from Florence to Catania very worthwhile.