

Jim and Emmy's Travel Journal

The Island of Sicily

1980, and 1989

1980

We arrived in Germany on May 9, visited in Germany, France, Andorra, a tiny bit of Spain, Italy, then to the Island of Corsica, and by ferry to Sardinia. A couple of days later another ferry took us to Sicily.

I, Sardinia to Sicily, Jun 17, Tue - Ferry

Arrived at Trapani, Sicily at 7:00 AM. On the ship, Jim was reading a fiction book where one of the characters had been in Sicily during WW II, and talked about some Greek ruins at a town called Agrigento, Sicily.

When a native (in the book) said the buildings had been damaged during the war, the American was surprised to find he meant some war a couple of thousand years ago, not WW II. Jim said we will look on the map, and if Agrigento exists, we must go there and see what there is to see. (It was and we did!)

Drove through Trapani, and stopped at an early morning fruit market. Lovely ride on the Autostrada, no toll—compliments of Sicily. The farming looks beautiful and neat, with no weeds, and the mountains are pretty. Good first impression of Sicily.

Palermo is potentially a pretty city, with interesting buildings, monuments and parks, but it's very unkempt, with trash, trash, all over the place. It was trash pick-up day, we saw some trash trucks, but there was plenty of trash in Palermo that had not been picked up in a long, long time. There are small (2' X 3') advertisement signs placed every ten yards along some of the main streets. Palermo was really junky! We found no parking place, and weren't too sure we wanted one. (By hindsight, wasn't that stupid on our part!)

At one place they were selling outdoor furniture at several spots along the street, for a couple of blocks. They had the umbrellas set right at the curb, so they stuck out into the traffic lane. We missed most of them, but at one place we were forced to the side of the road, and in the rear view mirror could see people catching their umbrellas with one hand and shaking their fist with the other. Jim ignored Emmy's suggestion we stop and help the people. Jim knows the Mafia is headquartered in Palermo, even if she doesn't.

The countryside from Palermo to Agrigento is very pleasant, similar to Northern Europe, but not as green. Beautiful farms on rolling hills, more open than Sardinia.

Emmy loved the purple and red wild flowers in the countryside in Sardinia, but they don't seem to grow in Sicily. There are some clumps of yellow flowers. Stopped at another fruit stand, they had the first good apricots we have seen this season, none before were so sweet. Fruit costs three times as much here as it would cost in the US.

Continued on to Agrigento where there are fascinating Greek ruins dating from 500 to 700 BC! We found a parking place and walked around the town. Mostly older buildings, but right in downtown there is an interesting round building, and the Post Office was in a very substantial facility.

Here is one place we needed a tape recorder. Agrigento's fruit and vegetable vendor, with his donkey-drawn cart, was singing his own special song advertising what he had for sale. We heard they did this years ago, but did not expect it was still being done, and have never seen it elsewhere.

Agrigento is a middle sized town (50,000 population) on a hilltop a couple of miles from the Mediterranean Sea. When we left there and headed for the Greek temples, we first went down a steep hill, across a valley, then up another hill to the ruins. The sea is still a good distance away, and below this hill.

One of the temples was being renovated and had a fence around it to keep out the curious. Along the side of the hill toward the other temple, there was a series of "works" of some kind, also dating from the same ancient times. The second temple was quite complete, but still protected from tourists. It was the hottest day we have seen in any part of Europe. The heat really got to Emmy, but Jim really enjoyed it!

We went back through town, and could not find the right road to Enna. They were in the process of completing a new road, and did not have the new signs up yet, and we could not follow the old ones as they now pointed nowhere. We stopped at a garage for directions and one of the mechanics was going to lunch. Since it was on his way, he told us to follow him, and it worked. So nice of him to do that.

In the center of Sicily, Enna is intriguing, a city built high on a plateau, and supposed to be a very Sicilian city. Wonder what that means, sounds scary. The cemetery has little cement slab houses built over many of the graves. It was naptime, Enna was closed for lunch—like from 1:00 to 4:00, so after a drive-through, we continued on our way.

Enna had a twin city across the valley, also on a hill, named Calascibetta—we didn't explore it though. (Ten years later Jim saw a magazine picture of a hill-top city, and recognized it as Calascibetta on the hill across the valley from Enna. He checked this Travel Journal to make sure of the name. Of course he was right!)

Enna had little cement slabs houses over the graves in the cemetery on top of the hill. Something else we have not seen elsewhere.

Emmy had worn herself out going to see the Greek ruins in Agrigento in the heat. Didn't seem too hot when we started our walk, but any exertion is too much when it's so hot—really wipes her out. It almost seem a shame that Jim just loves the heat, the hotter the better!

I, Catania, Jun 18, Wed - 27 - 343 - 3,963

The campsite was on the beach south of the city. We could see Mt. Etna from the beach near our camper. There are a lot of trees and a lot of more or less permanent "camp" sites.

They insisted on taking our passports and not letting us pay last night, so this morning we found the office wouldn't be open for an hour or so. We went into town and "drove" around, or at least tried to. The traffic was overwhelming, and the streets were very rough. It took forever to find a parking place, but we sightsee while we are looking.

While in town we bought gasoline—took \$67 to fill the tank! Not bad when we consider we paid five dollars for our campsite in Catania last night, and on Sunday we paid \$62 for one night in the hotel in Sardinia. We were more comfortable and slept better in the camper. If we did the hotel bit all the time, we would still have to buy gas, or pay for our transportation somehow. We were finally able to pay our bill and leave Catania's campsite by 9:30. Jim is well aware it's still early, considering we have already been sightseeing this morning, but we are on vacation and can always rest when we get home!

We drove back through Catania, then along the coast past the foot of Mt. Etna. The town of Taormina is on a hill, as usual for this part of the world, and the Italian road builders made a tunnel for the Autostrada right under the town and didn't bother it at all. We drove up this narrow switchback road a thousand feet to Taormina, and fell in love with the place. Emmy immediately wanted to stay for an extra day. Heard a group of Christian young people singing familiar hymns as they walked through the town.

Taormina is a really nice tourist town, very clean, picturesque, and with plenty of stores. Emmy bought a table cloth and 12 napkins. Later she found there were only six napkins in the package, so when she returned to the store on Taormina's main street and told the owner, he gave her another six without question. She also bought some napkins to go with the white tablecloth she bought in Guam.

Emmy almost bought an antique 17th(?) century copper picture frame with a round green velvet picture for only \$150, but she restrained herself. If we could really know for sure not that we disbelieved the seller, but what did we know, maybe the person who sold it to her was wrong. This lady is coming to US next year, and asked questions about driving across the US in a month.

When the town closed for lunch we went up the road to the campsite, rested awhile, then came back to Taormina and spent the rest of the day just looking around.

There is an old Greek Theater on a point of land right above the Mediterranean Sea, with the smoky tip of Mt. Etna, right past the top of the theater stage. As in many places, the theater is still in use. Just spent the day wandering around Taormina. Lovely city.

The road to Castlemola was not rough, but steep and narrow, and it seemed at the most narrow curvy places is where we would meet a redi-mix truck, or some other truck associated with the great amount of building being done here. We tried to park in the parking lot in Castlemola, but the man in charge made us

move on. He didn't like something the size of our camper taking space in his parking lot.

After driving a little way into the town, we found a truck blocking our way. The driver had gone to lunch, but someone found him and he moved the truck, so we could continue into Castlemola. We found we could not go much farther anyway. We were able to park, then walked on up the hill to look out over everything. Other hills, and of course Mt. Etna, were much higher than we were, but below us were Taormina, castles, and the Ionio Sea. What a sight. Truly amazing. (Maybe we see the Golfo of Catania, or the Straits of Messina. The Mediterranean Sea may be out there somewhere, but there are several other "Mares" (seas) around Italy, as well as dozens of Golfo-di-this and Golfo-di-that.)

Back in Taormina Emmy tried to get something to eat, but they don't serve dinner until 8:00 PM. Jim insisted she at least buy some pizza that was available now.

After the few hot days, Jim was in bad need for some ice. Since the camper was in a parking lot rather than being driven, we could not make ice today. We stopped at a couple of restaurants, and asked to buy ice. Finally, in a bar in a small hotel, they said maybe they had some.

When the hotel opened a couple of years ago someone had put water in the ice cube trays, and no one has used them since. The freezer compartment was frosted into one solid mess, but they chipped away, and finally got the ice cubes. They were so happy and surprised and pleased someone wanted this ice, that they refused to even take a tip.

The facilities in the campsite were nice enough, but we were almost too tired to use the showers.

I, Lettojannie, Sicily, Jun 19, Thu - 28 - 67 - 4,030

Left at 8:15 to drive toward Messina to catch another ferryboat, drove through the town and to the dock.

We drove right on to the ferryboat for the 1/2 hour ride to the mainland at Villa San Giovanni. Trains were also being rolled right onto the ferryboat.

The water in the harbor was such a mess, with paper and trash floating all over. Jim saw a sign that said "do not throw cigarettes overboard," and figured the reason for the sign was they were afraid the trash and oil in the water might catch on fire.

While we waited for the boat to leave, Jim bought Emmy some breakfast—a round ball about 2 1/2 inches in diameter, deep fried, and coated with fine bread crumbs. Inside was rice with a spoonful of tomato-based stew. She said it was interesting, and if the sauce had a better flavor it could have been delicious.

There were several large trucks on the ferryboat, including a large gravel-filled dump truck, that had a flat tire. Several of the other truckers helped the driver, and before we arrived at the Italian mainland the tire was changed and everything was go.

Rode the ferry to the Italian mainland. We drove through Rome (and a hundred more towns) to Venice, visited Yugoslavia, several days in Austria, a night in

Hungary, and a night in Lichtenstein. Saw more of Switzerland then into the Alsace of France and back to Mettlach.

Crossed from France into Belgium, boarded a ferry for a visit to England, Wales, Ireland, Scotland, more of England, then by ferry to The Netherlands. Crossed Germany to Berlin, and back to Mettlach. After a couple of days in France, we returned to Germany, and on October 26, we returned to the US .

1989

We arrived in Frankfurt, Germany on March 10, drove across Luxembourg, on our way to Paris. After a couple more days in Germany we entered Switzerland, then a month in Italy including, but not limited to, Milano, Venice, (the country of) San Marino, Florence and Rome, then south along the western coast of Italy, to catch a ferry to Sicily.

Messina looked pleasant from the ferryboat, but didn't look exciting enough for a long visit. We didn't think so the last time we were here either. The earthquake in 1908 is perhaps the reason, the town was leveled, and a 20 foot wave killed 30,000 people. It was also heavily bombed in 1943, during WW II.

According to the Encyclopedia, Messina was founded in 730 BC and has been ruled by: Athenians, Cathaginians, Dionysius, Mamertines, Hiero II, Hannibal, Pomrey, Augustus (all in BC times), Saracens, Normans, Richard the Lion-Hearted, Spain, France, and finally in 1860, Italy. Messina was finally included in the kingdom of Italy by Garibaldi. Of course the Americans and the British were there for a short while after WW II. No wonder the place looks a little confused!

We got off the ferryboat in Messina, drove through the city and on toward Taormina. There are numerous peddlers selling vegetables, and it looks like the artichokes are the best sellers. Here again, they have long stems with plenty of leaves. It appears they are sometimes sold with the stems, but there are large piles of stems and leaves on the ground near the trucks. Wonder why they keep the stems like that? Perhaps the artichoke stays fresh longer with the stem still attached.

As we left Messina, there are miles and miles of terraced mountain sides. They aren't in use now, and we wonder when and how they were constructed, and what grew there.

We easily found the campsite where we stayed last time, right under a very, very high Autostrada viaduct, connecting two hills. Just beyond, the Autostrada goes through a tunnel under the town of Taormina, so as not to disturb this 2500 year old town. We arrived early in the afternoon, and one party on this expedition decided to rest, and while on her vacation too!

Jim walked into Lettojannie, and bought some things we needed at a hardware store. The store owner is Italian, but had lived in Australia for several years, he likes this better. He said, as have others, the economy in Sicily and Southern Italian is not as good as it was a couple of years ago, but people live

very well here. Jim asked about all the houses we see half done, and he said the people ran out of money, and will complete them sometime in the future.

I, Lettojannie, Apr 20, Thu - 26 - 12,000L

We walked around in Lettojannie this morning, then decided to take the local bus the few miles to Taormina in the afternoon.

We waited with some other people, and as we started to get on what turned out to be the wrong bus, the right one came along, stopped for an instant, and in spite of the first driver trying to get the him to stop, the bus went, so we had another hour to wait. (That is one of the joys of trying to exist with public transportation. We much prefer to do it "our way," and our way is never much of a problem, but we had decided to do it "their way" this day.)

And that was just part of our wait. These are huge city buses, most appear quite new, and have very powerful motors. They climb these extra steep narrow streets, with power to spare. But they are too large for this traffic and these streets. But sometimes a donkey-cart would be too large!

As we were going through the town along the coast below Taormina, the gravel truck in front of us, just quit. Our bus driver, a skilled driver with a lousy attitude, drove our bus right up almost against the back of the truck, rather than staying back until the whole predicament was understood. We were on a sharp curve with the bus extending across both narrow lanes. With the bus in this position, the traffic that could have passed from the other direction could not move. For a minute we expected a fight to accompany all the bellowing.

Finally our bus was backed a little, they found some people to move their parked cars, and some very large men bounced a very small car out of its non-parking space. Now our bus could slither toward Taormina an inch at a time, with several people guiding the driver to within a half inch of the vehicles on each side of our bus. Again, it would have made more sense for our driver to have let some of the traffic from the other direction go first, but not him.

Finally we started up the steep switchback road to Taormina, 675 feet above the Mediterranean Sea. The road is so narrow and the switchback curves so sharp, both the front and back of the bus touches the trees or bushes as it turns, and some places the bus must stop and back and turn some more to make it (the camper would make it easily). All other traffic must stop and back up, or whatever, as a bus comes, especially with our bus driver. Taormina has been here for 2300 years so we would think they could have widened the road by now.

We walked through crowded Taormina for a few hours, including another visit to the old Greek Theater, with a view of Mt. Etna in the distance, and the Mediterranean Sea far below. A genuinely exhilarating destination! We arrived at the bus stop for the 6:30 bus back to the campsite, but it did not arrive. Finally they said a vehicle wreck, somewhere on the east side of the hill, has all Taormina traffic stopped in both directions until who knows when. There's another street on the north side, but it's either not big enough for busses, or busses are not allowed on that street, or who cares why.

We finally got on the 7:30 bus, but it didn't go anywhere for awhile. We finally got to the campsite by 8:15, and by 9:00 we were finished eating, the

dishes are were washed and put away, Jim had made the beds, and we were resting and reading. Surprising how easy and quick we can get settled.

Sure would hate to have to find a restaurant, wait for the slow service, then go to a hotel with a "strange" bed, without all the goodies in the refrigerator and the cupboards, and without these lights especially positioned so we can be comfortable while we read. Some people think travel in an RV is less than ideal, but no hotel can possibly match this style of living, and in no way are hotels located as well as campsites. Campsites have always been more quite than hotels we have stayed in.

I, Lettojannie, Apr 21, Fri - 27 - 12,000L - - 148 - 3,125

This morning we drove south, down the Autostrada, past snow-capped and smoking Mt. Etna, through Catania, and on to Siracusa.

As we passed Mt. Etna, we could see the plume of smoke coming from high on the side of the mountain. They have planted oleander in the median strip of the Autostrada in Sicily, but no one has thought of making sure the weeds are not higher than the flowers. At several places, a concrete retaining wall along the Autostrada is constructed with planter boxes high on the side of the highway, but if they remembered to plant anything, it has long ago died. As one man said, "Italy is not well organized." They do a great job of designing and building, but they have yet to hear about maintenance!

As we drove through Catania we saw one place with a three story high lava flow from Mt. Etna in some year in the past. It reminded us of what we have seen at several places in Hawaii. At stop lights in Catania, people in the traffic lanes are selling various products, and/or asking for money. One man has a face mask because of the very smelly traffic fumes. The last time we were here, we spent one night in a campsite on the coast just south of Catania, and spent some time in the center of town. We remember it was very smoggy, crowded and not overly exciting.

While Siracusa is picturesque and has ruins of note, we didn't view it as being as exciting as many people said it would be. There are olive groves and vineyards as we drive to this town, but we can't understand why the lady from Sweden said the Siracusa area looks like Switzerland. What a wild imagination she had.

Siracusa was colonized by the Greeks in 734 BC, and that's a long time ago. At one time there were 300,000 inhabitants, but now there are only 116,000. In Siracusa, in 287 BC, Archimedes shouted, "Eureka!" when he discovered during his bath, that "... any body immersed in water loses weight equivalent to that of the water it displaces." Surprise, they didn't keep the bath water as a tourist attraction!

The Greek theater in Siracusa is one of the largest remaining, and the seats were carved from the rocky hillside. Further up the hill, the Roman Amphitheater was hewn out of rock in the 100's AD, rather new compared to some of the other things around here. At one place the entrance (100 feet high, 75 feet wide) to a cave shaped like an earlobe is famous for its echo, and is called the Ear of Denys (Orecchio di Dionisio).

Jim looked at the map and gave a little thought about going to the Island of Malta, a few hours boat ride in the Mediterranean Sea, but decided not to. Wouldn't you know, a few months later President Bush decided to hold a "Summit Meeting" in Malta, and we sure wished we had spent the time and effort to visit. Jim would have a superb excuse to "name catch, and to name drop," as if he needs a reason, if we had visited Malta! It looked spectacular in the TV news broadcasts. Well, next time!

I, Lettojannie, Apr 22, Sat - 28 - 10,000L - 151 - 3,276

This morning we drove up, up, up through Taormina, and on up, and up the three miles more to Castlemola.

Soon after we arrived they were preparing for a celebration of some kind, and fired off a bunch of very loud firecracker type rockets.

Walked around Castlemola for awhile, then decided we weren't going to stay for whatever celebration there was going to be. We enjoyed the view over Taormina, the Castello (Castle), other villages below, and Mt. Etna to the south, and the rolling hills for as far as the eye can see.

Then we drove down the hill to the Autostrada, then back to Messina and crossed to the mainland by ferryboat. On the ferryboat Jim bought Emmy the two and a half inch ball of breakfast, with the rice and tomato stew on the inside, just like he did in 1980. But this one was no good, she said. (At the World's Fair in Vancouver, British Columbia in 1986, the Italian exhibit included a model of a bridge "soon" to be built from the mainland to Sicily, but still no sign of a bridge.)

A few days later we returned to the Italian mainland, toured southern Italy, rode a ferry to Greece, a cruise ship to Greek Islands, another to Turkey and the Soviet Union. Spent ten days in Yugoslavia, then drove through Austria. We re-entered Germany, spent more time in France, then to Toni's in Mettlach. We returned to the US on July 2.