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Stepping into the past in Sicily

In her twenties, she explored Sicily on the back of a motorbike. This time Ursula Kenny returns to discover the island at walking pace

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The coast is clear ... the relaxing pace of Scopello in spring. Photograph: Alamy

We have history, Sicily and I. In my twenties I spent several glorious summers there, the most memorable of which involved finding remote beaches on the back of motorbikes with very attractive boys. I particularly recall an idyllic week or so on a sleepy little whitewashed tuna-fishing island called Favignana (one of the three Egadi Islands off the north west coast of the mainland). Which is why, for years, I hadn't really contemplated going back. Why mess with the memories?

It is a sign of maturity, I like to feel, that in recent years I am much more likely to get my holiday kicks by ... well, walking. It was while I was tramping the Amalfi coast that someone started waxing lyrical about the walking in Sicily - the food, the beauty of the flowers in spring - and I started thinking about going back. A walking holiday in Sicily. It would have a lot to live up to.

It started well - our flight was overbooked so we were upgraded. And at Palermo airport we were greeted by Fabio, who turned out to be, well, fabulous; a man who dedicated himself to appearing when we really needed him to. If you book this holiday he, or someone very like him, will do the same for you.

On this trip we were doing something I'd never done before: 'independent walking'. This means that instead of walking in a group with a guide, Headwater, the tour company that organises this trip, books all the accommodation for you, lays on Fabio to get you from A to B, but then leaves you to do all the walking on your own, using the maps and written instructions they provide.

I have to admit I was nervous. I've got lost on walks before, but always in the knowledge that it was someone else's responsibility to get me back - someone sensible with a first aid kit, food, a mobile and fluency in the local language. My friend Sue and I couldn't really be described in those terms. As it turned out I needn't have worried: the instructions are easy to follow, the walks mostly reasonably short, and Fabio talks you through them all anyway, telling you where you can buy food and water and, crucially, where he will pick you up.

You can pretty much divide Sicily down the middle. The eastern side is Greek in flavour; on the west side, where we were, the feel is much more North African. We were staying in three different locations over our week, two on the north west coast not far from Trapani, the biggest town in this region, as well as several days on the island of Marettimo in the Egadis.

Our first night was spent at the Tenute Plaia agriturismo, right by the Zingaro Nature Reserve, the first to be established in Sicily. In 1980, plans to use the land to build a road from Scopello to nearby San Vito lo Capo caused uproar, and environmentalists, thankfully, won the day. It's stunning - 7km of unspoilt coastline with no vehicle access.

Walking there was relatively easy going - four to five hours in perfect, breezy but warm, weather. Then, on the way back, we dropped down to a small cove at Cala Baretta, took our boots off and went for a swim in the cold clear water. It was heaven.

Two days later Fabio picked us up at 8.30am, eventual destination Marettimo, the furthest of the Egadis from Trapani. On the way we stopped off for a flying visit to the stunning ancient city of Segesta. The remains are quite magnificent and include an unfinished Doric temple and a theatre high up on a hill, where, in odd-numbered years, summer concerts and plays are still put on.

Last time I went to the Egadis, I recall taking a rather sedate ferry. This time we took a hydrofoil that insisted on blasting Italian soaps at deafening volume from the many TV monitors dotted throughout the cabin. Marettimo, though, is one of those places that

makes you feel, upliftingly, that there are still parts of the world that haven't really made much progress in the past 100 years. It's basically a cluster of white houses on a promontory and two harbours - one for the fishermen and one for the ferries. Only a very small part of the island is actually inhabited and there are numerous opportunities for walking.

Our accommodation was wonderful: self-catering in a smart, comfortable, blue and white place called The Marettimo Residence, with a roomy balcony, a sea view and a pretty garden. We went on several wonderful and blissfully solitary walks - save for the odd deer - during our days here. The only sour note was struck when we plunged into the sea after a moderately gruelling six- or seven-hour trek and promptly got stung by jellyfish. There was an English couple on the beach and as we got out of the sea, cursing and throbbing, they mentioned ruefully that they had meant to warn us. Indeed.

Back on the mainland, the temperature was soaring. It was, Fabio told us, unusually warm for May: 30C and rising, with a hairdryer wind blowing up from Africa. A welcome drop-off, on the way to our next destination was an afternoon in the medieval hilltop town of Erice, whose winding streets were much cooler.

Now, yes, Erice is very lovely - a Norman castle here, 'ancient squares' there - but there is something about perfectly preserved tourist-attraction towns like this that make me feel as though I'm in an episode of *The Prisoner*. Luckily Fabio was on hand to whisk us away to Daniela's guest house overlooking the sea, about 10km from San Vito.

As accommodation goes, it was pretty near perfect. Rural and remote, Baglio la Luna has only three bedrooms and the decor is very tasteful boho. Meals are served on the terrace and loungers are dotted about the beautiful garden, where you can lie and read or watch the water. We were the only guests, which I suppose means we were spoilt, but it was gorgeous, and Daniela's home-made food was delicious.

We went on one last walk while we were here. It was, to tell the truth, tough going. Not because of the terrain (a mild ascent and then a coastal cliff path) but because by now it was far too hot. And because it was so windy, every time we put suncream on we ended up covered in sand. And it was impossible to keep my hat on, and there was almost no shade, and we didn't have enough water ... I know, I know: your heart bleeds. But honestly, where were those boys on bikes when we most needed them?

Essentials

Ursula Kenny travelled with walking specialist [Headwater](#) (01606 720199) on its seven-night Islands of Sicily trip. The next departure is 28 April and costs £893pp including flights, seven nights' accommodation, some meals, transfers and transport of luggage.

Trips depart regularly from the end of April to June, and from September to mid-October.

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