

ACTIVITY BREAKS

Arriving at Palermo airport clutching a novel by Mario Puzo about the Mafia and its wheeler-dealings, I was not in quite the right frame of mind to enjoy a holiday in Sicily. Of course, everyone had told me that it is a land of mystery and beauty, with rolling hills and glorious landscapes, but nevertheless at the back of my mind was Marlon Brando's impeccable performance as the Mafia boss in *The Godfather* (based on a fantastic storyline by Mario Puzo), which I had seen as an impressionable teenager. It was perfectly ridiculous, since these days the Mafia is not as active as it was, but the west coast around Trapani was where this novel was set and that was exactly where we were to cycle.

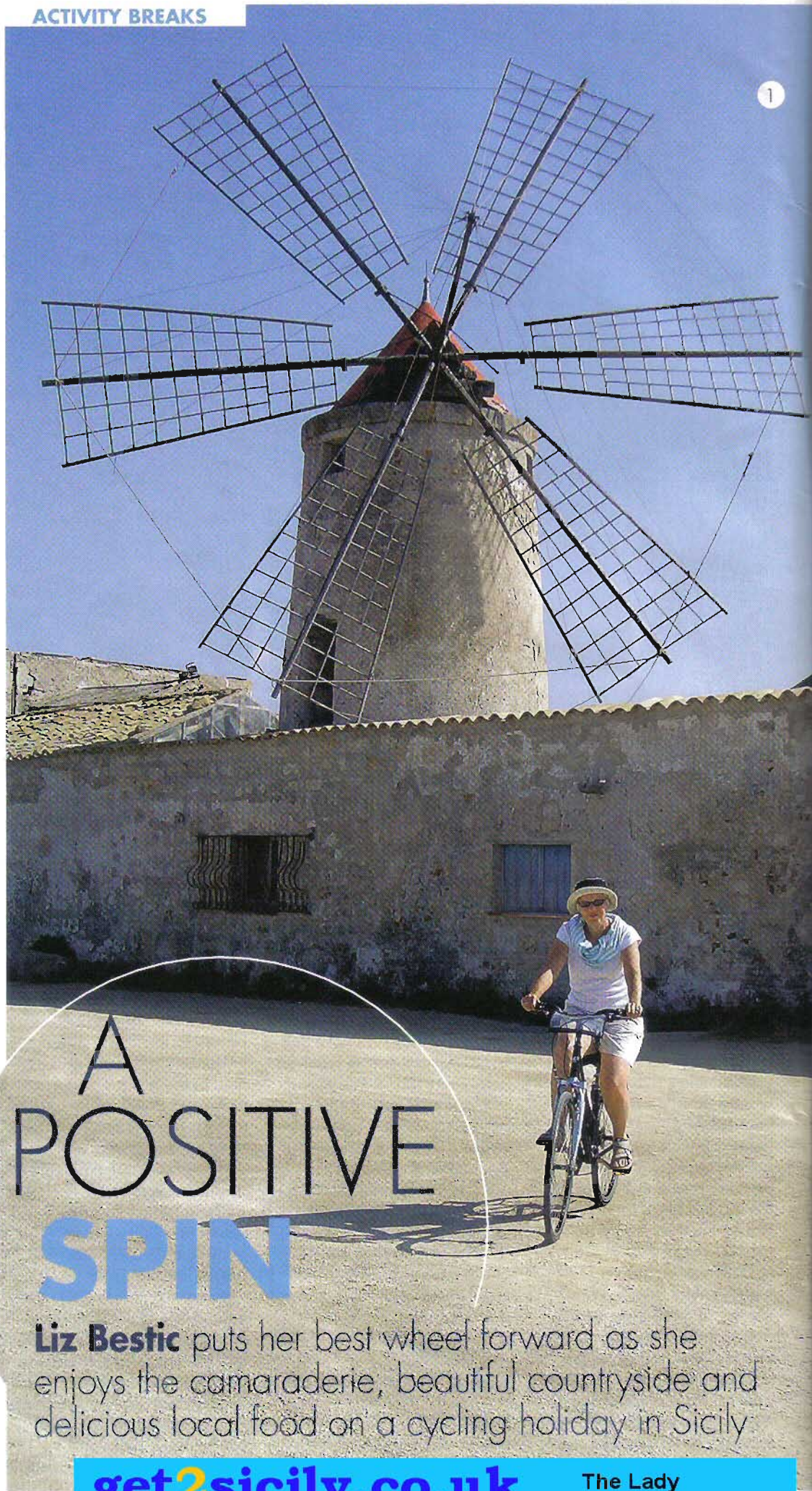
Once installed in our lovely room in the beautiful purpose-built Tenute Plaia Agriturismo at Castellammare del Golfo, I got a grip and realised that most of the people we met were perfectly ordinary Italian citizens. I was ready to relax into the holiday, which took us through some of Italy's most breathtaking countryside, with our luggage transported for us between hotels.

Western Sicily is a quiet part of the island; most traffic tends to stay on a network of busier roads, which our route avoided throughout most of the trip. Scopello, close to the hotel, is a medieval village where three tiny streets converge on the main square. Here we found a fruit-seller and a friendly chap selling pistachio nuts for the equivalent of £1 for an enormous bag.

We stopped for a glass of prosecco in a friendly bar then, with the temperature threatening to soar to over 40°C, we decided to head for the beach. This took us through the Zingaro Nature Reserve, which is home to a huge range of plants and at least 40 species of bird, including the rare Bonelli's eagle.

The path meanders down to the beach, where we could see local tourists fighting for space. We decided instead to eat our lunch in the shadow of an old museum.

Taking it easy on the first day was a good idea, for the



A POSITIVE SPIN

Liz Bestic puts her best wheel forward as she enjoys the camaraderie, beautiful countryside and delicious local food on a cycling holiday in Sicily.

next day we were to get our briefing from Headwater's bike expert, Mauro, a dapper young chap in his early twenties who spoke perfect English. Many in our group were well-seasoned cyclists. Some came from Scotland,

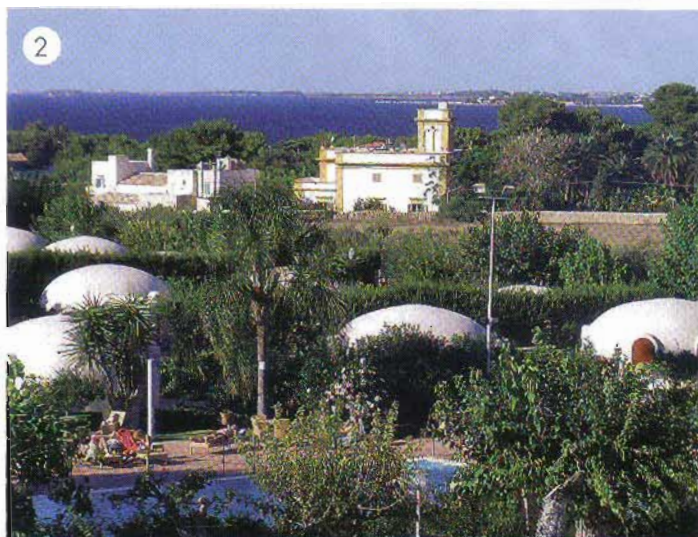
so were not averse to cycling up the sort of gradients you expect in the Highlands and knew a thing or two about gears. But the lecture on how to fix a puncture was to come in handy later in the trip and, more importantly, we were given a mobile number on which we could summon him at a moment's notice which, if we were to cover the 28 miles (45km) a day that was recommended, could be a lifesaver.

There was a buzz of excitement as our group of seven set off on our adventure. None of us could have predicted how hard the cycling would be on that first day, however. The heat was almost unbearable and the hills were steep and heavy-going. My gears kept slipping just when I needed them most and so by the time we got to our destination I was nearly in tears. Many of our compatriots also arrived tired and dishevelled.

Even though the journey was harrowing, we had travelled through some glorious landscapes of fields planted with melons, vines and olive groves.

We arrived at the huge *baglio*, or fortified building, at Buseto Palizzolo exhausted and ready to jump into the huge pool to cool off. Then, sitting around wrapped in towels, we opened a bottle of Sicily's finest wine before retiring to the cool bedroom for a nap.

The hotel had flagstone floors and a wide, Gothic staircase that led to the bedrooms; ours overlooked the pool and the ornamental gardens. Before dinner we decided to explore the old quarry town, arriving back at the hotel to find that the staff had arranged tables around the pool, each with a snow-white



1. Windmills were once used to drain water from salt-marshes
2. The peaceful, luxurious Hotel Villa Favorita on the west coast
3. Pedalling through the salt-exporting port of Trapani

tablecloth and a candle on it.

Sicily is a complex place; its charm is that you can still stumble across stunning sights without any real signposts. Despite the influence of the Mafia, it retains an appealing innocence. Everywhere we went we were invariably met with friendly curiosity and great kindness.

In one town the local baker pressed freshly-baked biscuits into our hands and in the local bars we were offered free orange juice or coffee. In the smaller villages we had some of the most delicious food I have ever tasted in Italy. Most was simple traditional Sicilian fare such as bruschetta with anchovy and tomato or prosciutto with melon. The main course was usually a big, hearty bowl of pasta with aubergine and sausage, although couscous was quite common here, thanks to the old Arab influences. Luckily, on a cycling holiday calories are not an issue since you burn them off twice over on a day in the saddle.

The following day we freewheeled through stunning countryside with fields turning from deep brown Umbrian earth tones to burnt sienna. It is easy to see how the Italian great masters named the pigments for their paints.

Whizzing downhill, we passed a lake fringed with alder trees where goats grazed, oblivious to the whoosh of our tyres. We slowed to a gentler speed through the seaside town of Paceco, renowned for

its salt flats, ending up at the beautiful Antiche Saline hotel.

The piles of salt near the hotel have a fascinating history. In 1572 the port of Trapani became the most important in Europe for the export of salt. Special boats known as *schifuzzi* used to travel along the canals from the salt pans to the port, carrying 200,000 tons of salt a year.

Nowadays sea salt is enjoying a renaissance for its health-giving properties and the whole area is once again prosperous.

We decided to cycle into the city for a day's shopping. Trapani is a huge medieval town surrounded by the sea on all sides. Every corner is full of monuments, churches and buildings that tell the story of the city's occupants over the centuries, from the Carthaginians to the Arabs, who began their occupation of the island in AD827.

Our last cycle ride was 29 miles (46km) and took us through some of the most beautiful countryside of our trip. Once out of the urban sprawl the cycling was easy. We spent a couple of hours in Mozia, on the island of San Pantaleo, where you can visit Phoenician ruins. The sun was beating down, so we decided to have lunch in the shade overlooking the water before heading along the coast road. Here we passed some truly decadent Sicilian

seaside holiday homes. We paused to watch some kite-surfers on the shallow waters before finally arriving at our destination, the luxurious Hotel Villa Favorita.

One of the great things about the Headwater ethos is the camaraderie that builds up within the group. Many a long-term friendship has been forged on a Headwater trip, although it can be both a blessing and a curse. Nothing makes your heart sink more than cycling into a town only to find seven Headwater-branded bikes parked at the only pizzeria in the place!

Among the blessings is that on the last night there is usually much frivolity and laughter. Our Scottish group had organised an impromptu party on their terrace and had cycled to the local supermarket for wine and nibbles.

We were sad to hand our bikes back the next morning and, *Mafja* or not, travelling on the minibus back to the airport, I felt a pang of regret to be leaving. ☺



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● Headwater's eight-night *Secrets of Sicily* cycling tour departs on Saturdays from 5 April to 14 June, and again on 6 September to 18 October, and costs from £1,079 per person. The price includes: return flights with Alitalia from Heathrow to Palermo, eight nights' half-board hotel accommodation (typically three- and four-star hotels), bicycle hire, all maps and route notes, local transfers and transport of bags between hotels. For full details, call 01606-720199 (or visit: www.headwater.com).