

Gasbags in Sicily – A Cycling route to Catania

Leeds to Catania

Huge queue at Leeds Airport, flight, followed by an Italian queue at Catania, Sicily. Into the taxi went Mike, Ian, Anne, Fiona, Jeff and me (Pam). Alec and Tracey went for their hire car.

First stop - wrong hotel. ("Never again" says Anne for the first time) Heated discussion with Mafiosa boss, then on to correct hotel in Palazzolo (first in a series of places with lots of zz s an ll s). "9 am here for the bikes" says the bike organiser and we plod our weary way to our little apartment. Beer in the sunshine and a wobbly walk through the narrow streets marvelling at the carved stone balconies. It got cooler as we worked our way through the menu of the local bar/restaurant – delicious pasta with pistachio sauce and lashings more beer and wine. After free pastries and paying the bill, the patron came out waving the bill and telling us we had paid too much! Lovely people. Note to self: In the middle of the night don't forget there is a bidet as well as a toilet.

Palazzolo to Modica

9 am the van arrives – no bikes. We have to collect them from somewhere else. We have not added this extra mileage! Spend the next half hour or so getting kitted up on bikes – "saddle up please, no, saddle down please, pass the screw driver, no bottle rack!" Then suddenly we were flying along a quiet road with amazing views in the sunshine. Quiet except for the 20 Norwegians who were also on a bike tour. Stopped at the old men's café in Girantanno and were applauded as we cycled past the Norwegians' coffee stop just up the road. Cycled through winding, flower filled roads to Ragusa – hilltop city of Inspector Montalbano fame. Lunch amidst the baroque buildings then back through the windy streets stopping for the sensational views.

Modica 'Old town rooms' were basic but comfortable and, after storing the bikes the Proprietor recited our names from our passports. "Iron Thompson" she smiled at Ian. A walk around the town, up the 300 steps to the 'Duomo' (cos we needed the exercise) and, just as James' legs began to freeze in his shorts, we found the recommended restaurant. This time the bill error was Jeff's. After collecting Mike's share in cash he forgot to add it to our share when he paid on his card!

Modica to Pozzallo

Woken by alarm in the room above at 6.20, then Anne's alarm at 7. After breakfast of croissants and coffee we set off up the hill stopping for bananas on the way. Weather a bit cloudy and windy. Quiet, rural roads with a view to Scicli, another Baroque town featured in the Montalbano series. It had an interesting looking castle but was choked with traffic so after a coffee and ice cream stop we headed off. We lost Mike in the traffic but found him again at the roundabout. Another rural road then we hit the coast road and the wind in our faces. The sun came out for our lunch stop which was sandwiches from the 'Supermercado'

as it was too early in the season for sane people. Cycled up and down Pozzallo until we found we were outside the hotel and the name was hidden under a layer of scaffolding!

We stood sweatingly around while the Patron took details and breakfast orders. Bikes went in underground garage, then our panniers went up in the lift whilst we walked.

Pozzallo was open for business and we had beer and snacks in the centre overlooked by palm trees. Sea very rough but sun out. Disappointing fish meal but chocolate ice cream made up for it.

Pozzallo to Noto

Good breakfast including eggs. Patron took a photo outside amidst the scaffolding and we were off on the coast road. Whizzed along watching the green churning waves then spotted flamingos and egrets in a nature reserve. Stopped in a lovely traffic free little seaside resort for coffee. The waiter asked us to come and live in Sicily. He hadn't met Mike at this point.

Found a pizzeria in Noto Lido which overlooked the sea and the sun came out! Jeff, Anne and I had a paddle despite the owner of the Pizzeria shouting at us that it was too dangerous. We survived the two inches of water around our ankles and continued on a rough track until there was a yell from the back: Puncture alert. In comradely fashion we all helped Jeff to fix the puncture (Mike hadn't made it clear that he had an inner tube the right size) while Mike videoed. On to Noto and found 'Giardino Barroco' behind a huge wooden gate in a busy street. Excellent rooms in the gardens of a palace! Another stroll around the Baroque architecture and great food. Jeff surprised the Maitre De by asking for more potatoes. "They are on the children's menu" she said huffily.

Noto to Syracuse

It rained heavily overnight and I woke worrying about the battery connection as the bikes were only under a bush. Delicious breakfast in the palace. We ate in a very grand room with antique furniture and original plasterwork. A tour of the other rooms followed and we glimpsed a bygone era. Bikes all in tact and we set off through acres of lemon fields, the sea a gorgeous bluey green. Stopped at another beachside boutique café with a naked lady for chocolate and lemon croissants. As we got on our bikes the sky got darker. A little way down the road and suddenly the road was a river and we were in the middle of a waterfall. When it subsided and we all crept out of our shelters all we could see was Jeff's florescent day-glo shorts. Lakes had appeared in the road but Italian drivers do not slow down. A wave of dirty water completely swamped Anne and Fiona. I was just in front and had escaped but there was an enraged scream from behind. Fiona cycled on in shocked silence. And on through the gathering traffic, puddles and pot holes till we reached the Diana Fountain (as though we needed more water). "Never again" said Anne. We found our different rooms and arranged to meet by the fountain. (4 of us) As we approached, we were accompanied by another cloudburst so had to shelter in a bar and drink beer. (The others went to the Ancient Greek amphitheatre). When it stopped we wobbled around admiring the Cathedrale (enormous stone columns rising above our dizzy heads) churches, piazzas, a castle and the sea

surrounding this little island of Ortegla. After meeting Alec and Tracey for a chat, we headed off to a restaurant James had identified as a good possibility. The place was busy with locals and the service was fast. Pastas later as we began calculating the bill, a free tiramisu appeared. Fiona thought she heard clapping as we finally worked out the bill and left.

Syracuse

Awoken by noises above at 6.00 – preparing us for our breakfast on the terrace. The table was set in the middle which was a bit windy so we moved it to the corner. Good view of rooftops of Ortegla. As we were staying a second night, only 4 cycled today, the other wimps went touring. Off through the traffic and pot holes until we finally got onto the route to the wonderful coastal walk Alec had told us about. We lifted our bikes over the road that had subsided, got lost in a luxury hotel complex, went through the (now common) deserted seaside resort and on to the end of the road. We were greeted by a security guard who told us in no uncertain terms we could not cycle that way. I thought of the others swanning around Ortegla and wondered if I had made the right decision. On the way back Jeff spotted a shop/café that was open and the decision got better as we ate our freshly made sandwiches. Back in Ortegla the sun came out and Jeff and I managed to swim off a tiny beach. Cold but satisfying. Spent the rest of the afternoon walking to the new Cathedrale in Syracuse that's shaped like an upside down ice cream cone. Very weird inside with modern stained glass but ugly concrete. Must be very cool when it's hot outside. It rained on the way back so we met the others inside a small bar where we took up most of the space. Found a spacious pizza restaurant and did the usual bill chaos. "Never again" said Anne. We all had a nightcap in the rainy bar. The staff had got used to us by then and just plied us with alcohol.

Syracuse to Catania

Met at fountain and set off through the busy traffic in Syracuse. After a few hairy moments checking that everyone was still alive, we headed towards Catania on a not quite so busy main road. At last we head off to the seaside resort James had earmarked for lunch. Up a steep hill and we are off the route. Mike takes a left and disappears. Anne shouts "You're going the wrong way". Jeff and Ian agree with Anne. "He'll come back" I say confidently. Ten minutes later still no Mike. Anne hails a very helpful Italian driver. "Follow me" he gestures. We all follow him to the MOTORWAY! "Never again" says Anne. Mike had gone this way and wasn't coming back. We push our bikes back the wrong way up the slip road and finally, after much discussion, find the route to Brucolli. The pizzeria was closed. Brucolli did have a lovely piazza overlooking the sea though and the bakers was open. Two or three pastries later we are heading back to the dreaded dual carriageway and past piles of mattresses. We passed the Italian version of Billingham chemical works, all the Catania beach resorts and headed into the fumes and traffic of Catania. As we snaked round a roundabout I saw a truck driver looking down on us. "Ah Giro D'Italia" he laughed. Eventually a large man appears ahead to save us from the traffic. "Never again" says Anne. Mike led us the last few metres to our digs.

Mike related how he had been stopped by the Motorway Police and escorted from a tunnel up 8 flights of steps to the other road. He didn't seem to think this was unusual.

Catania to Leeds

Ironically the Giro D'Italia is starting from Catania on the very day we have to get to the Airport so 5 of us get an early taxi. Anne and Fiona are staying an extra few days. We arrive early and find plane is delayed. Through security superfast and, just as we settle down Mike realizes he has left his bag at security. At Leeds we collect bags and are heading towards exit when Mike comes crashing through the doors to collect his forgotten bag. How is he still alive? we ask.

A fitting end to another Gasbags adventure. I wonder if Anne will come next time.

Pam