

Pt. 5 Rhodes in the Med June thru August 2019

This is the 5th part of a journal of a trip on a 22-foot (6.7m) Rhodes sailboat from Naples Italy to western Greece. 50 years ago, I took the same voyage in a 19-foot (5.8m) wooden Lightning class sailboat with a good friend, Doug Hayes. This time, 50 years later I am sailing with my best friend and wife of 46 years, Alice. In some places in the journal I have posted current pictures and those of 50 years ago with the original captions. Sometimes there is little change, other times the scene is unrecognizable. The opportunity to see things in a different perspective that life has provided me, along with the perspective of my wife, has made the trip so much more interesting and enriching this time around. Below are links to previous journals about sailing the Med in a Rhodes and the original trip 50 years ago. https://drive.google.com/file/d/1KiD-gM-60Q2vGCFm0-uxttvdvHoqkC_ww/view

July 4th Thur. Lipari to Messina, 48 nm Since this was going to be a long day we were up and out of the Marina by 7am headed to the northern tip of Sicily and then through the straits to Messina. The trip over flat seas with light SW winds was hazy and we spent most of the time retrieving Styrofoam fish boxes and drifting fishing gear out of the water and piling the trash in the dinghy. It wasn't until later in the afternoon as we approached the straits that things began to be interesting.

Here again we pick up the wake of Odysseus. In navigating the straits, Odysseus had to choose between dealing with two equally deadly dangers. There was Scylla, a 6 headed monster that would pluck men off the ship if they sailed too close to the mainland. This was probably a shoal area where ships would collide with the rocks and men would be thrown into the swift currents of the straits.

Charybdis on the other hand was a great monster that would suck down whole ships if they sailed too close to the Sicilian shore. This was certainly the whirlpools that are created by the strong currents flowing through the narrow straits and the unusual underwater topography of the sea bottom. In ancient times the whirlpools were big enough to sink ships and it wasn't until a large earthquake changed the bottom about 500 years ago that the whirlpools were no longer quite so deadly but could still be dangerous to small boats. Since that time there was born a third fearsome monster: The Straits



Leaving the smoking crater of Vulcano to starboard and on to Sicily

of Messina Traffic Separation Scheme. (actually, a navigation necessity). If any boat attempts to cross the straits within the boundaries of this controlled area, without prior authorization, they will face a two-handed monster that will pluck money from their wallet after being sucked down a black hole of Italian bureaucracy. For a boat as small as mine it could be a thousand of euros. It is all monitored by highly sophisticated radar stations with the coast guard ready to do an intercept as soon as a boat strays even 50 meters into the area. 50 years ago, we only had to deal with the 1st two monsters.

Even though there were anticipated currents I wanted to continue to sail, not motor, around the point and down the straits under sail. The wind, though light, was enough to move us along with the southbound current and keep us out of the SOMTSS area.



Approaching the Straits of Messina, Sicily to starboard, mainland Calabria in the background

Below is an excerpt from my journal of our crossing of the straits 50 years ago.

(July 1969) "We got to the village of Scylla in late morning and after explaining our concerns (since the whirlpools were still prominent hazards for such a small boat we felt) they advised us to wait an hour or two. It would turn out they thought that we *wanted* to sail through them when they were their most powerful. So, around noon we started off to cross the straits of Messina in our little boat. What a treat this would turn out to be.....

..... We noticed when we looked down that there were debris a meter or two under the water but moving at an oblique angle to our course. Then much deeper I could see more garbage moving at right angles to the first layer. Now the idea of dumping this much trash in the ocean pisses me off but being able to see these weird currents was kind of cool. A few hundred meters later the water started to act very weird. Imagine a metal bucket with water in it; now visualize tapping on the side with a hammer and picture how the water would jump up into hundreds of little standing aquatic stalagmites. Ok, now visualize acres of this surface, it was totally weird. We were so involved in watching this that we failed to notice the big hole in the water. Yep, a hole in the water; well perhaps it was a meter or two deep depression, 30 meters across and moving very fast in a circular motion. As the boat approached it felt like a giant hand grabbed the centerboard and jerked us sideways. In an instant were rushing around sideways and slowly sliding toward the center where a huge hole reached to the bottom 500 feet below and there was a horrible sucking noise. Ok, the part about the huge hole and seeing the bottom might be an exaggeration but the whole thing really sucked. After a few turns around on the nautical merry-go-round we found if we fought it we couldn't climb the walls but if we ran the motor full speed and had the sails in the broad reach/close haul quadrant

of the whirlpool, while going with the spin we could climb out. With this success we went back in a couple more times to experience this strange phenomenon”” “Along this coast is an unusual kind of fishing boat. They are motorized and are around 10m long but have very, very tall masts and ridiculously long bowsprits all held up with a spider web of wires. At first glance they are absurd craft; however, they have evolved so that they can most effectively catch the giant tuna & swordfish that come into the Med to spawn. The spotter is in the crow’s nest at the top of the tall mast and it is he who directs the boat where to go. When they arrive among a school of tuna the crewmen rush forward on the bowsprit and proceed to harpoon the poor fish. We could see several of these boats in the distance. Suddenly the water erupted



Note the strange rig on this boat (1969)



Note the strange rig on this boat, look closely to see the fore stays reaching out 50’ in front of the bow (2019)

and all around us were huge tuna. When I think of tuna I think of “chicken of the sea” in a can. I had envisioned a fish the length of my forearm; instead these fish are easily 2 meters long, some looked to be even longer with wide muscled bodies and large staring eyes. They were leaping everywhere, sometimes so close we were splashed, and all we could do was shout and cheer.....” (July 1969)

. For a video glimpse of what it was like to sail these waters in 2019, click on the links below:

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<https://drive.google.com/file/d/1cCG0Sz1YjkekYGTju5b-JoL4iZXYRgpw/view>

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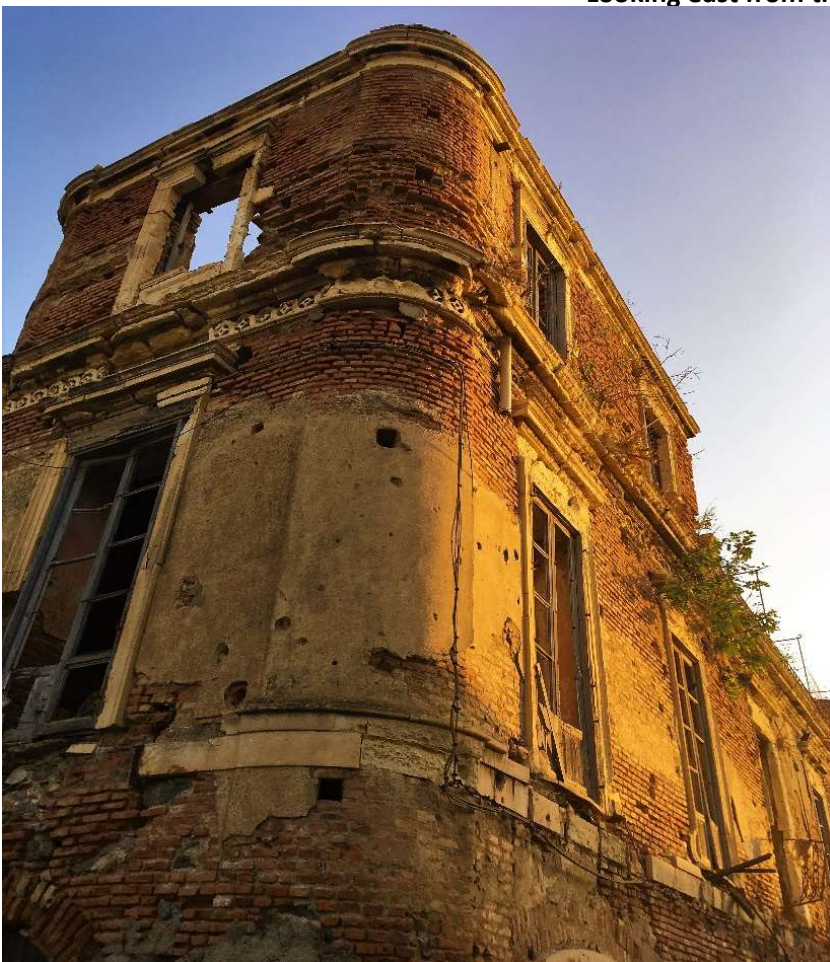
The currents were not as strong this time as 50 years ago but still very noticeable. The currents are results of the out of phase cycles of tides between the Terranean sea and the Ionian Sea. There is less than a foot difference, I shudder to think what the place would be like if they had tides like New England or the Pacific NW. Add to this the differences in water densities, temperature and the unusual configuration of the straits in 3 dimensions the results are these famous currents. When we entered the straits the water temp was 80 degrees F and 2 miles later, 66 degrees F.

With the wind picking up to NNW we continued south, wing and wing, with a steep building sea to 3-4 feet as the current began to go counter to the wind. With the jib poled out port and the main to starboard with a preventer, we hit 7.1 knots on several occasions. We sailed on the edge of the SMTSS limit for about 7 miles along the Sicilian coast then dropped sails and motored into the marina of Nettuno in the afternoon. We had some drinks at an expensive upscale restaurant in the marina because they gave us a of kilo of cube ice, but that was all that was available. There was none to be had nearby. I did find out that about a mile away was a fish ice depot and planned to get there by sunup to score some ice for the next trip segment.

July 5th 6th Fri. & Sat. I got up before sunrise and began walking along the rebuilt waterfront of Messina and headed into the area fronting the port. I say rebuilt not restored as this whole area was devastated by the war and there was not enough money to restore the



Looking east from the cockpit getting ready to head out for some ice



One of the remaining structures that still testify to the impact of a war 76 years ago.

town. I arrived at the Ice depot only to find that they were out of ice. I got a cab who said he could take me to another ice depot not far away and off we went. The new depot was in the older SE part of the city and there were a few buildings that were still in ruins with shrapnel and bullet holes in the walls and roofs gone. I think the area was called the “American Quarter”, I’m not sure why. But much of the buildings had been rebuilt. Despite that, I recognized the neighborhood from when Doug and I were there so long ago. This seems like one place that did not change so much.

I even found the wine store where I refused to buy any Sicilian red wine back in the day (you will have to read why in my old journal from 1969). I got 8 kilos of ice from a nice ice guy, and when he heard that I had been here as a young man, he insisted that the ice was a gift, free ice every 50 years, for life, he promised.

We spent the rest of the day shopping for fresh fruits and veggies, got some fresh meat and stocked up on beer and wine and of course fresh bread. I tried to go back to the same place where we had come ashore the first time, but the quay stone steps and a carefully tended symbol of Fascism were covered up with a steel barrier that rimed much of the port. Still later, we saw a few remnants of the old regime on, appropriately enough, sewer covers and then on an old deserted train bridge.



Did someone say party? Oh, that kind of party, forget about it!



A more time worn and neglected symbol of a discredited philosophy.



We spent a quiet evening on the boat, ate a nice dinner from our grill and after a couple of hands of cards, retired early. Tomorrow we would head down the coast to the marina of Riposto also known as Marina d'Etna.

July 7 & 8 Sun. & Mon.
Netunno to Riposto 40nm. It was going to be a bit of a long day with the prospect of wind only in the am, so an early start was planned. The coast was very interesting with the usual recent coastal

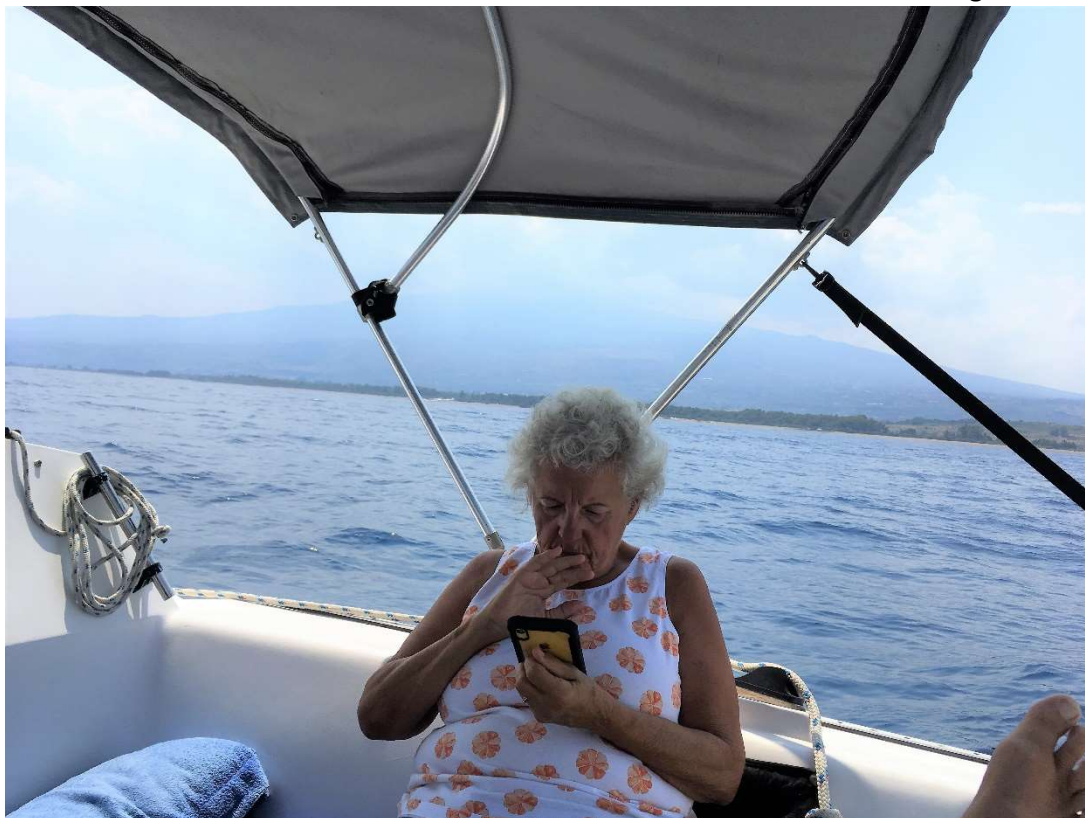
developments but behind this climbing up the hills and peaks were many small hill towns that did not seem to be changed much at all.

From here down to Syracuse and back would be all new sailing territory for me as we did not go this far south the first time. My dad used to take charters to Taormina and anchor there, way back when. He told me how delightful the spot was with the double coves and an ancient hill town above with wonderful restaurants. I was hoping that we might be able to anchor at Taormina but with the anchoring restrictions we could not.

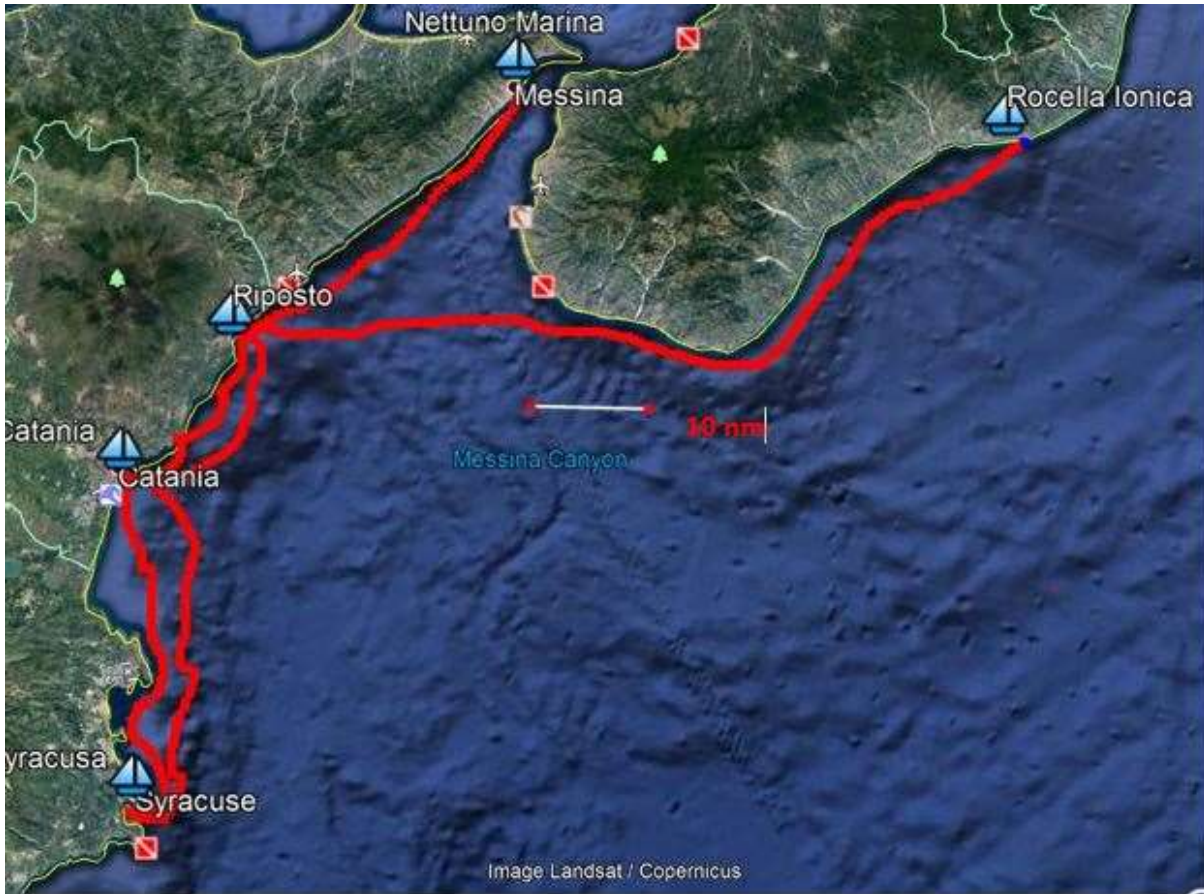
We were lucky to be able to see Etna which is usually obscured by haze. It doesn't seem to be as tall as it really is (11,000 ft). I think it is just so big that the mind doesn't perceive its real elevation.



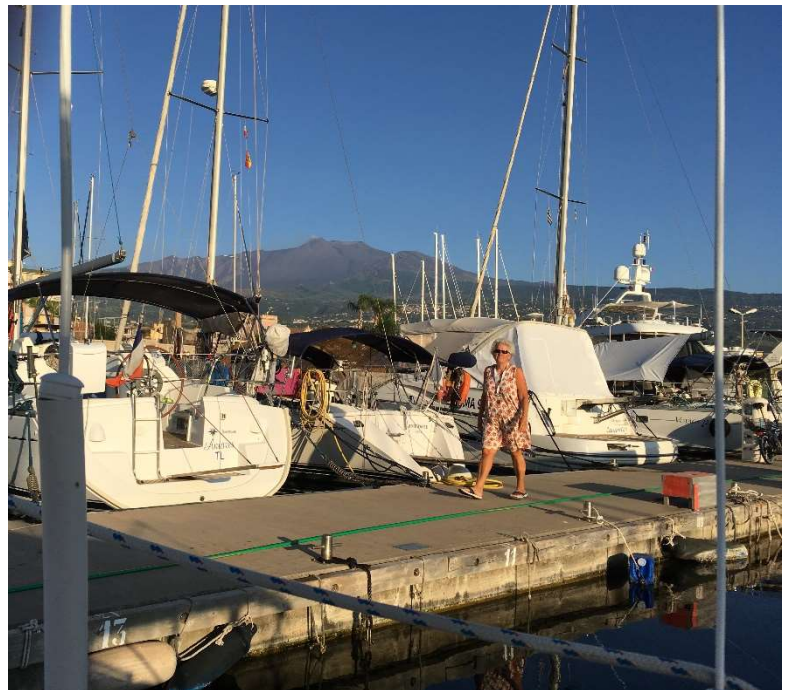
Taormina coves from Google Earth



Alice texting the Marina at Riposto to confirm our stay there for a couple of days, Etna in the background



July 5 thru July 13 routes, 250 nm. Nettuno to Syracuse outbound then return to Riposto and then to Rocella Ionica.

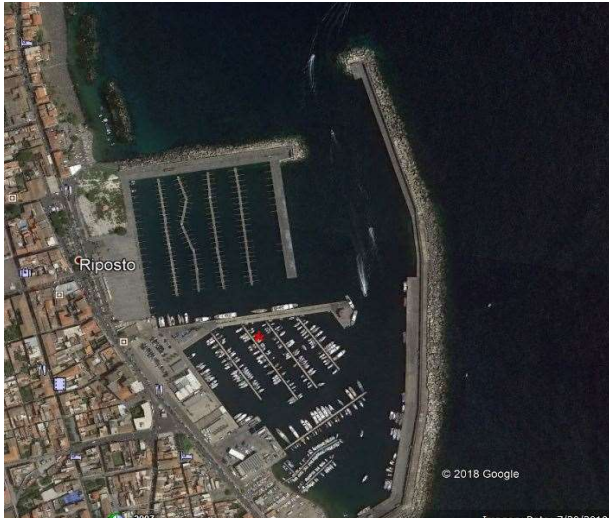


We arrived late in the afternoon and after checking in at the marina Alice prepared a lite meal and we watched the sun set behind the cloud shrouded Etna 10 miles to the east. The next morning the air was crystal clear and cool with Etna glowing in the early morning sun. Oddly, only half of the marina is in use. The other half of the marina is city owned but has been closed for renovations for a couple of years. Some of the locals think that the private half of the marina “made a gift” to some of the city council members. Hmmm could explain the rather expensive charge of €52 for the private (with no competition) side of the marina.

Riposto Marina turned out to be a delightful experience. The town is not a tourist town and most boats are local. The shops and stores cater to a large area surrounding Mt. Etna and the coast. So there were many, many fish shops and a central fish market along with many small local fruit and vegetable shops with delicious and delightful selections of local fruit and wine at local prices. We bought some fresh-that-morning tuna steaks for \$6.00 a pound. That night we grilled the tuna, peppers and zucchini and eggplant. Fresh baked bread, salad, and local wine and fruit made a perfect meal. Click on the links to see a small fish market, sorry or the strange orientation don't know what happened.

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Riposto



A perfect meal for a perfect evening

We spent the 6th just wandering around town and looking for a laundry. We relaxed, bought fresh food and got ice, took a nap or two and renewed ourselves. We liked the town so much we chose to stay another 2 days and rent a car to see some of the island.

I rented a diesel Ford Focus and decided to drive part way up Etna and then hike some more toward the summit. The drive was



interesting with much greenery and the "scotch broom", perhaps "Sicilian Broom" is more apt, was in bloom with great swaths yellow interrupting the bright green of the trees, all overlooked by the summit of Mt. Etna. I drove up to about 4000 ft elevation and hiked the final 2,000 ft to my

destination, still 5,000 ft short of the summit. For safety much of the summit is off limits because of the frequent outburst and small eruptions.



As I climbed along a ridge like an Iguana's back I could see back along the ridge and a dark black lava flow contrasting against the green of the forest. In the far distance at a slight dip in the coast I could make out Riposto and somewhere there, our boat. This flow is the youngest large flow, created by the 1991 eruption. It stopped short of flowing over the ridge and descending into several villages.

Part of the way up was a monument off the trail, and it proved to be the perfect spot for a lite lunch. Click below to see 2 videos of the dramatic views on the way, and at the top of the hike. The hike down was way easier than up and after a half hour of driving I was back at the boat by 1 pm ready for another adventure, this time with Alice. We almost ended up having to buy the salvage rights to the rental car on this one.



A spherical lunch, well not counting the crème caramel

lower lava flows

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Etna Summit

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Our goal was to drive north along the coast road and turn off after 10 kilometers and follow a road that parallels the only year-round river in Sicily. This river is fed from the snow melt from Etna and has cut its way through the columnar basalt at the base of Etna. It is supposed to be very dramatic, and no matter how hot the day the canyon is cool and the water about 40° F. It sounded like a perfect way to spend a hot July afternoon in Sicily. We just had to follow the GPS directions.



Driving along the creek bottom looking for a real road

The actual paved road that lead to the park facilities and the stairs down to the little river was on the north side of the river. However, the input data for the GPS directions was done by a programmer who happened to be a goat and had an affiliation with the south side. After 4 miles of ever worsening goat trail including driving along the river bottom and crossing a ford several times, we came to a dead end. After bottoming out numerous times, we somehow got the car turned around and headed back down to the coast and ignoring the directions we crossed over to the north

side. All we had to do was follow the nicely marked and paved road to the facilities on the north side of the canyon.

Once there it was a nice ride down (they had an elevator) and we arrived at the “beach” on the river. Very neat geology, freezing water, and Siciliani, lots of Siciliani. Everyone was having a great time, families with their picnics and kids running everywhere. It was not a place of solitude, but one of very exuberant humanity. I discovered if I was willing to brave the freezing water and wade upstream away from the beach the atmosphere was quite different.



“The goat road less taken” on the south side of the river



Alone, upstream with the wonderfully polished basalt columns.

Right: The “beach” with all the families enjoying the natural air conditioning along the river.



We spent a couple of hours walking, people watching and eating a picnic lunch. We headed home to the boat, cleaned up and went out to dinner at a local restaurant, the food was delicious and the wine rich and full bodied. Sort of like how were we were feeling from the day and our meal.

July 8 Mon. Riposto to Catania, 26 nm. Getting up early wasn't really what we wanted to do but it was time to head south. We got up just in time to pick up some fuel for the boat and top off the tank and return the rental car and pick up some fish ice. We motored out in hopes of a land breeze but no luck, so it was mostly motoring at first. Occasionally we would sail for an hour or two but then it was back to motoring. There was also a swell on the quarter to make things interesting as we sailed along the coast with the ever-present Etna in the background. Click the link for a short video of motoring along the coast. <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1oxcGA25Nw-vM2fWZMuNLeU6qbmbLbbXq/view>

Along the coast there were several odd islets and promontories with old ruins on them or even a few small castles. Around 3 we rounded the breakwater of Catania and motored up the large port past some WWII pillboxes on the breakwater, to a small dock at the N. end of the port, where we tied up. This dock was surrounded many heavy port industries and was far from what we experienced at Riposto. The price was right (€15), and the family run "marina" concession was friendly and welcoming. About a 1/2 mile away was an ice vendor that sold block ice, so I was excited about replenishing our ice as the small amount I was able to get in Riposto was dwindling. There were no real restaurants nearby and not much to see or do in the area. Dinner aboard and an early bedtime.



Mysterious Castle on a rocky promontory



Old WWII pill box on the original breakwater end



Catania & its harbor

July 9 Tues. Catania to Syracuse, 42 nm. (12:01 am) Oh, there was something we overlooked, an outdoor disco about 100 meters away. They were kind enough to not start blasting techno music until we had gone to sleep. Woke up around midnight and found the ear plugs and then went back to sleep. Woke up about 3 am to the aroma of untreated sewage flowing beneath the hull, all to the tune of "Dance Monkey". It seems the "sewage treatment" plant couldn't process the effluent fast enough so they would hold it in tanks and then when there were no EU inspectors likely to be sniffing around, they released their "surplus" of untreated sewage. Hmmm, get what you pay for. Still, despite all these minor irritations, the friendliness of the staff and the people I met a few hours later when I went into town to get ice more than compensated for the sensory assaults we experienced earlier.

Up for the third time at 5:30 am, I hiked over to the block ice guy. 8kg of block ice for €4. So, the least expensive "marina" and the least expensive ice. True, it was the most smelly and loudest. Nice start to the day. Since it was going to be a long, hot day, we left as soon as the I got back at 7:00 am. Initially it was the motor again, but later there was a nice ESE breeze and we were able to sail along quite nicely for most of the trip. There were several historic points of interest along the coast but nothing to actually see. We did pass a massive tanker port and petrochemical plant and a few large tankers anchored waiting to off load. To see a bit of a nice sailing instead of motoring, click on the link:

https://drive.google.com/file/d/112L5e_iyEEAUlyeOsEeahBBFdBf0bScfE/view

I was excited to visit Syracuse and Ortigia because of their historic importance. Archimedes was born here, and Plato spent time here. The island and harbor are guarded by several forts and originally the entire island had a wall around it, essentially a very big castle with a really, really large moat.

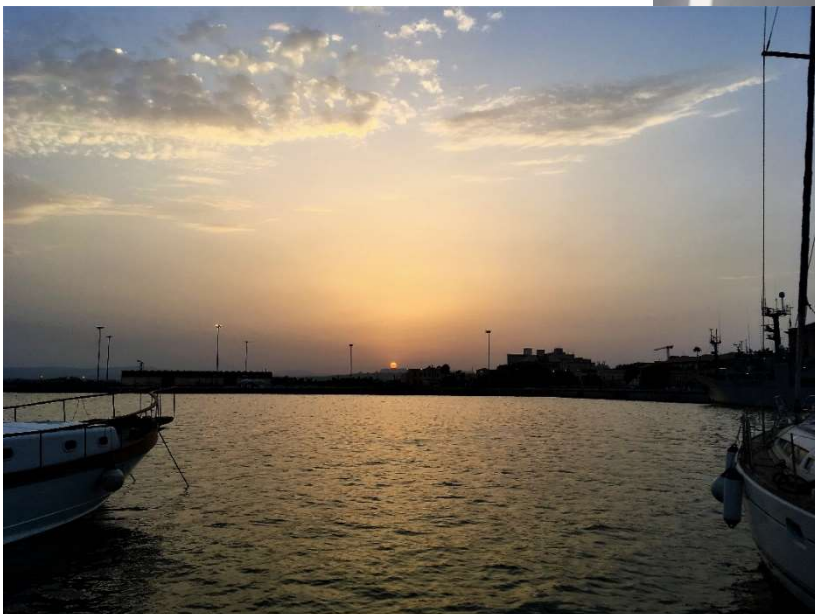
We arrived at the marina on the south west side of the island city of Ortigia across a bridge from Syracuse around 3:30. With the fortunate wind we made good time in the 8 hours of sailing. The marina had good facilities, at €30 a night, a real value.



13th century Maniace Castle on the SE tip of Ortigia Island

They also had ice cubes you could put in a drink for €4 for 2 kg. We hibernated in the shade until it cooled off and watched the sun set, then went into the old city of Ortigia and had a lovely dinner in the old town square.

July 10th Wed. I had to spend the 1st half of the day trying to renew my required 3rd party liability insurance. In the morning there were fierce winds from the SW (sirocco) that threw spray over the floating breakwaters, a good day to be at dock.



Windy day at Ortigia dock:

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In the late afternoon things improved and we wandered around the city and marveled at the architecture. Much was destroyed during to big earthquake in the 16th century. Much of the ancient Greek, Roman and early Byzantine architecture along with the Arab architecture was damaged or destroyed, but enough remained to make for a fascinating experience. Darkness fell and we found ourselves in the Piazza Duomo. The church was built in the 7th century over a Greek temple that was 1,200 years old in the 7th century! You can still see how the church was built on the temple's foundation and incorporated its pillars in its construction.



There was music everywhere, lots of buskers and a very popular street performer and his sidekick, a marionette. He was so skilled at imbuing his puppet with a hilarious personality. Everyone, and especially the kids, enjoyed the performance. Click to see a bit of this entertainment and the view from our table on the 2nd link. Note the Greek temple columns along the side of the cathedral.

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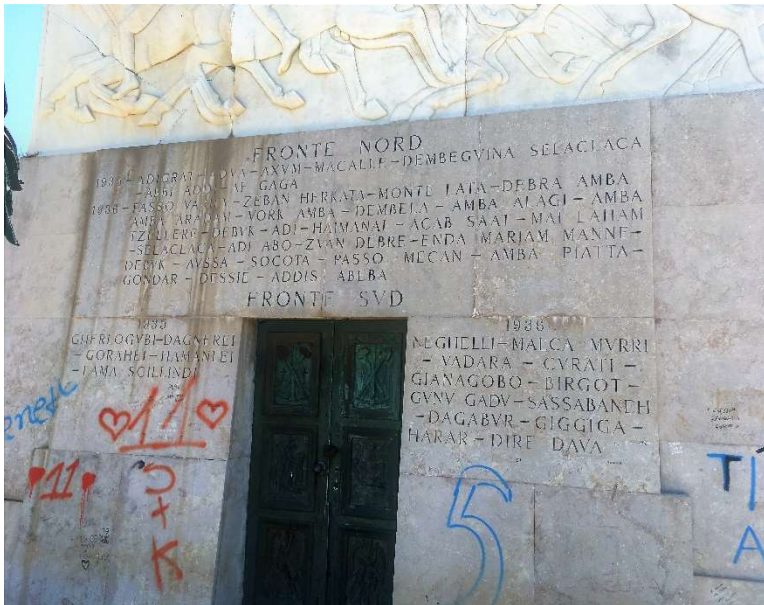
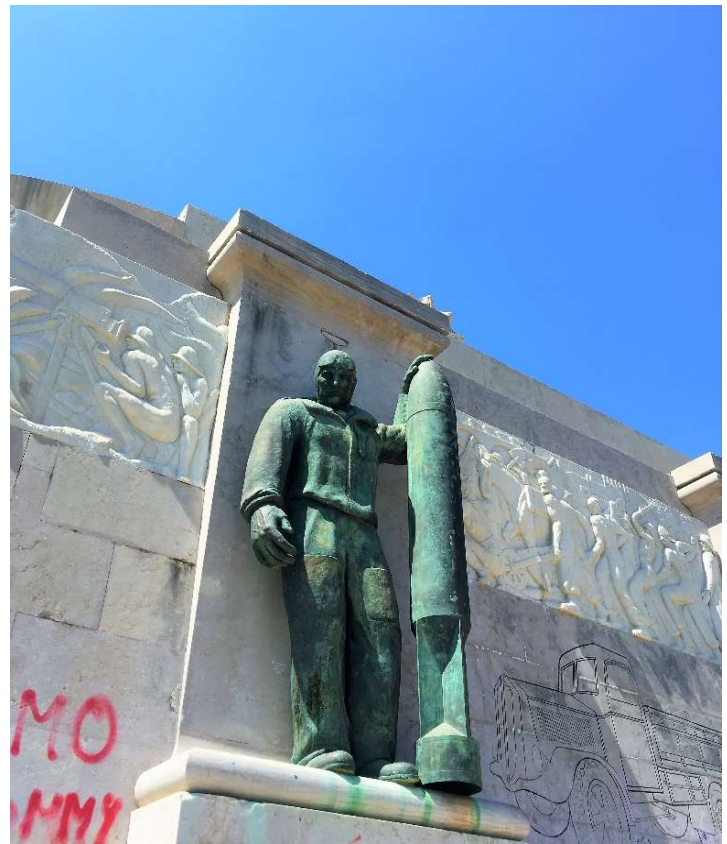
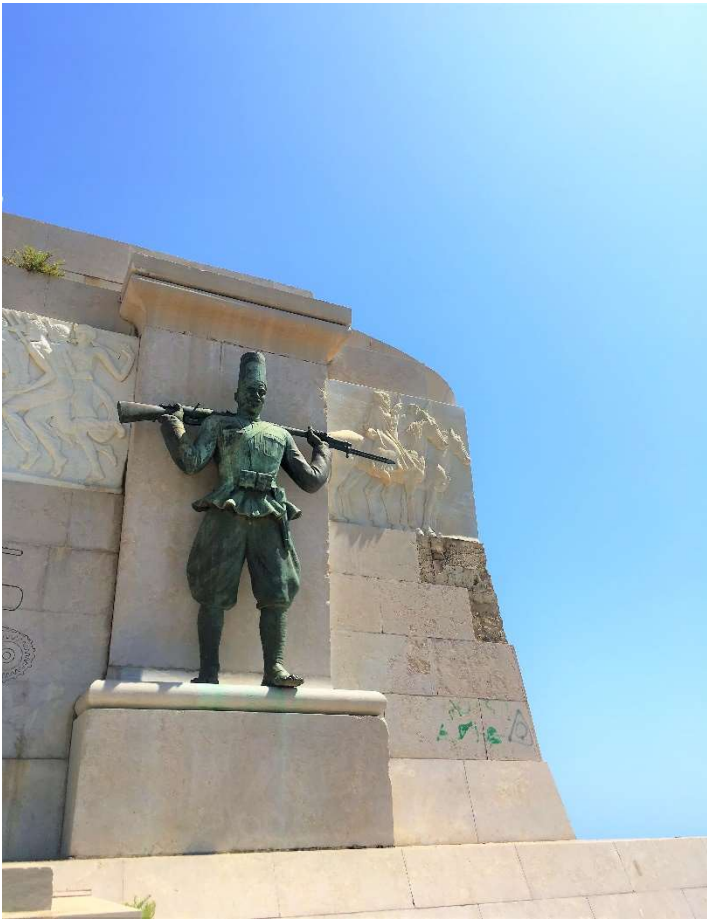


We sat and had a very leisurely dinner and people watched till late in the evening. I kept thinking that if we weren't on the boat we might want to live here.

July 11th Thur. Today was tour day. We bought 1-day tickets for the hop-on-hop-off bus and spent the day seeing the sights. The bus started out by the bridge connecting Ortigia to the mainland and Syracuse. It went north along the coast and stopped at a war

monument for 10 min. The monument was erected as a memorial to the soldiers who fell invading Ethiopia in 1936-7 and to the various branches of the military serving in the 1940's.

In Germany almost all vestiges of Nazi art and architecture have been removed. Here in Italy there are tens of thousands of fascist symbols, art and architecture. For most Italians it seems they say it is just history. The style seems to be a mishmash of Classical/Renaissance/Futurism. Sculpture on steroids. Still it is sad to see the graffiti and litter scattered around these pieces of history.

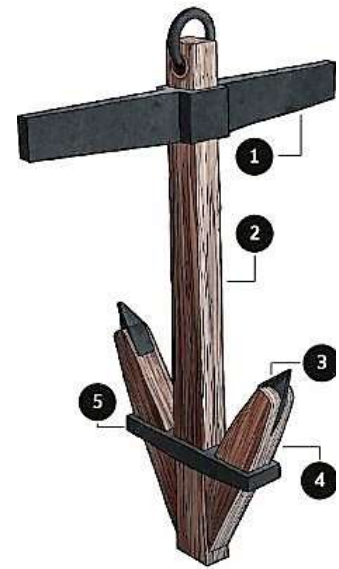


The next stop was at the Paolo Orsi museum of antiquity. It is in a new location on the mainland Syracuse in a well designed building and houses an amazing collection of finds and probably the best collection of coins from Magna Gracia. My dad had gone to the old museum and said it was fantastic. I collected ancient coins so I was very interested in their collection. Here is a link if you are interested in the collection at the museum.

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The building is surrounded by a small fenced park and sculpture/artifact garden. Scattered among the pathways are sarcophagus



and Roman statues. I found something of a nautical bent with the display of Roman and Greek lead anchors. The two on the bottom are almost the same as some that the diving club, when I was a member as a kid, recovered from "I Galli" (the islands of the Sirens). They are about 4-6 feet long and made of lead, really heavy. There was a wooden shank and flukes that completed the anchor.

One other place that was on my bucket list was the ancient underground quarries of Syracuse. As a small kid my Greek-American dad would tell me about the ancient Greeks and this was one tale I never forgot. For hundreds of years the stone to build the most beautiful and important city in Magna Grecia and for



Above ground quarries with entrances to the subterranean quarries



Entrance to the underground quarries

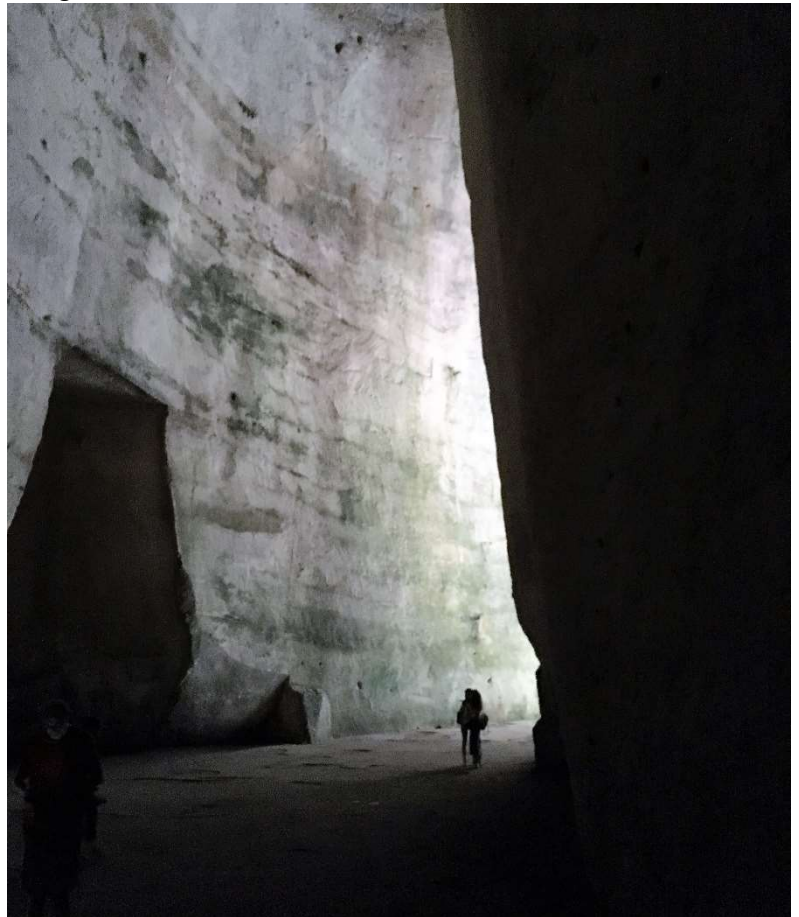
There were several other ancient buildings nearby to see. The amphitheater was one of those but as it turned out, I had mixed feelings about this Greek amphitheater when we went there. It had been decked over to provide seating for a classical music performance. It probably looked closer to the original theater than the current ruins, but also it felt very anachronistic.

Still, worth the visit. If I could have attended the performance, I probably would not have missed the original seating so much.

By the late afternoon we were beat, and ready to head back to the boat for a nap and another nice dinner out. Tomorrow would be a long day, so we went to bed early and slept soundly. From now on we will be in the Ionian Sea and headed to, and through, western Greece over the next 6 weeks.



a while, all of ancient Greece, was provided by the quarries of Syracuse. Athens was at war off and on with Sparta and sought more resources by besieging Syracuse with the expectation of it falling to Athens. With the help of a Spartan general and Archimedes, the tables were turned on Athens and their ships were destroyed, and their troops captured and enslaved by Syracuse. The Athenians were sent to the quarries for the rest of their lives. Housed in the caves, they would plot rebellion and plan escape, but every time they did, their plans were discovered, and the leaders punished. It seems the unique shape of the caverns were like a human ear and at the very top was a small hole. Here sat a guard who could hear even the faintest of whispers from the slaves because of the acoustics. This was known as the ear of Dionysius. So, I just had to go see this.



Going deeper into the caverns, strange acoustics