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adventure



Father of all monsters

Lava from Sicily's Mt. Etna continues to shape the landscape. Bring your hiking boots and a taste for wine.

BY EVA STELZER

FROM the well-worn, honey-lemon stones in Taormina's amphitheater, I gazed at Mount Etna on Sicily's east coast. The snow-covered peaks rose gracefully from a sapphire sea. There was no hint of danger. The ancient Greeks had built down into the caldera, a semi-circular basin that collapsed around the volcano, creating a stage that used nature's canvas as the backdrop.

During intermission, spectators would admire a view created by their pantheon of gods. Over the centuries the scene has never been compromised, although the structure itself has been modified, transformed by the Romans into a gladiator's arena and now by tourists into a historical icon.

In July of each year the Teatro Greco reverts to its original purpose, hosting the "Arte" festival with a cornucopia of ballet, music and opera.

The Mediterranean's most-conquered island has had its share of marauding nations that have influenced its art, architecture and governance. This area has learned to evolve. As Sicilian author Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa noted: "If you want things to stay the same, they will have to change." Here, people have adapted to the Greeks, Moors, Romans, and others, while retaining their family values, devotion to the land, food, slow-paced way of life and overall culture.

"There's the monster," said Mario, taking me out of my trance. My friends and I had hired a local agronomist as our guide. His passion for

plants and superstition outshone his social skills.

Etna's nickname dates back to the time of the Greek gods: Typhoeus, a fire-breathing Titan who never rests and whom Zeus banished to live in the underworld. When the Father of all Monsters shook, cracks opened in the earth before he spewed red lava and molten rock. Typhoeus has been roaring steadily in Europe's most active mountain for almost 50 years, and is still roaring. With each belch, the continent's highest volcano inches closer to Olympus.

Mario pointed to a ring of grey around the 3,329-metre peak, suggesting that our upcoming hike will be in fog and rain. Travelling during October, we knew that the weather could be temperamental. But for now, the blue skies and quiet pace contradicted the perpetual tremors that define the land.

When the time came to climb Etna's North Slope, the day was indeed dreary. We followed the road from Taormina, stopping in Linguaglossa, a sleepy ski-resort town that had been saved from disaster in the most recent eruption. "Last toilet," said Mario, ushering us into a bar. He was worried that we'll change nature's chemical balance.

The climb surprised me. I'd heard so much about the fertile soil and surrounding vineyards that I'd imagined walking near lush forests filled with colourful flora. I expected to hear birds chirping as they pecked on pomegranate seeds. We began with a gradual incline on a cleared trail flanked by dried grasses and young pine trees. The barren land



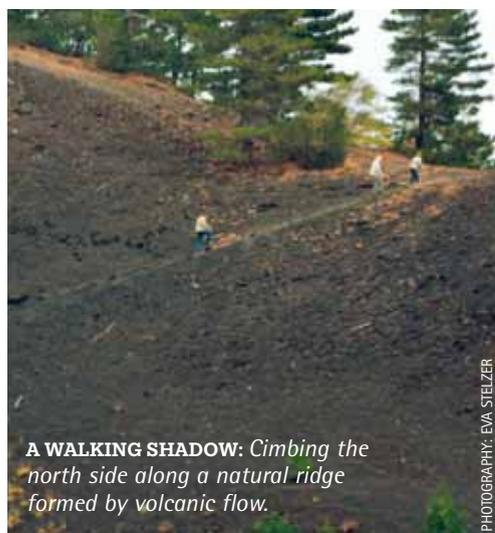
LEND ME YOUR EARS: The view from the Greek/Roman Amphitheatre in Taormina

PHOTOGRAPHY: EVA STELZER

provided little food for animals. Only insects and curious humans crawled around what seemed like a giant asphalt anthill. A grey blanket hung low over the charcoal earth.

Tricky footwork presented itself as we stepped over coils of lava, twisted like intertwined ropes. Nonetheless, the hike turned out to be less strenuous than we'd expected. Aside from a few tiny shocks of green pushing through the ground—a sign that life always renews itself—it felt as if we were walking through a black-and-white movie. Our agronomist explained that acres of pine forest had been consumed during the 2002 eruptions. Though it made perfect sense, I realized that I'd never fully considered the effects of the fiery lava flow.

My friend Andrew, training for a climb in the Teton Mountains, decided to sprint up the hill. Like Wile E. Coyote, winding up his legs and



A WALKING SHADOW: Climbing the north side along a natural ridge formed by volcanic flow.

PHOTOGRAPHY: EVA STELZER



going nowhere, he took long steps before landing on the shifting porous rock that advanced him no further ahead than the rest of us.

After our climb, Mario drove us past a new concession shop that seemed oddly out of place amid the desolation. The road had been constructed only a few months ago; for nearly a decade, the earth had been too hot to rebuild. Until that moment, it had never occurred to me that a volcanic eruption is more than the sum of the destruction in its path. An entire region can retain inferno-like temperatures for years.

Mario pointed to the moonscape across the road where the Betulle hotel used to be. "My friend was killed when a five-mile fissure opened and destroyed the hotel," he said. This former go-to destination collapsed during the 3,000 tremors before being engulfed by the lava flow. Our mouths dropped as we listened to Mario speak as if the event were nothing more extraordinary than having a glass of wine.

"Lava moves slowly and rarely poses a danger," he said. "It's the tremors that cause the most damage."

"Why would you build a new resort on the slopes if it will be destroyed one day?" I asked.

He looked at me blankly. My question seemed to make no sense to him. After all, we were in the best ski area south of the Alps! And the hotel stood in a slightly different spot, relocated to safer ground after insurance companies refused coverage.

On our return to Taormina, we stopped at one of the vineyard scattered around the foothills for a high-altitude wine tasting with local pecorino cheeses. Yum! Leaves were already brown and dried, the harvest completed and the vines ready for sleep.

Slightly inebriated, we were proud of ourselves for having completed the climb. The North Slope hadn't provided the challenge we had hoped for, but like everything else on this island, the Mount would wait for us to return to tackle the more arduous slopes another time. Maybe we'd even get a clear day with a panorama of the sea below. **Z**

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