



Southern Italy - This is Clusterfucking Awesome!

Naples, Amalfi, Aolian Islands, Sicily, and Some Netherlands



Left to Right: (top) canal kayaking, Arnhem Open Air Museum, Vesuvius/Naples, Capri; (middle) Naples graffiti, Path of the Gods, great veggie lunches, Vesuvius/Pompeii; (bottom) Vulcano sunset & climb, Stromboli pizza sign and explosion, Mt. Etna rain-out

Introduction

First of all, the chosen title of this report is a play on the title of our family's 2014 DIY trip to Northern Italy's Dolomites. The Italy portion of this trip was supposed to happen last fall (instead of the easy Tuscany/Umbria option I did – see write-up) but my foot was deemed "not ready" for the hiking demands. Even though I would not exactly call Southern Italy hiking-heavy, my foot would not have been able to handle this trip last year – mostly because the majority of the walking was in cities, on hard pavement or stone paths. As with last year's Tuscany-Umbria trip, I began this trip by visiting Ellen in the Netherlands for a few excellent days of shockingly good weather. This year, Allison/Marshall (A/M) then joined me for the Southern Italy portion. And then we all visited Ellen for a couple typical-weather Dutch days – A/M's first time seeing Ellen in her natural environment.



Left to Right: class picture, more high-fives this year, Utrecht kayak rental place, kayaking central/old Utrecht

September 19-24: Netherlands

Although I spent plenty of time with Ellen this summer (including our Hokkaido Road Trip, see June/July 2017 report), I enjoyed last year's pre-Italy time in the Netherlands so much that I arrived FIVE days early this time around – key goals being to visit Ellen's class, to kayak the canals of Utrecht, and to visit the Open Air Museum near Arnhem. Other than some exciting security pat-downs, my flights to Amsterdam were uneventful. Given that it was Wednesday when I arrived (with everybody working), I took a pre-arranged taxi to the Hague; it was not cheap but it was easy and fast. Although I napped minimally and worked in a sunny walk Wednesday afternoon (resulting in a decent night of sleep), I napped too much Thursday (my planned all-rest day) in between 5 miles of walking in the Queen's Forest (as I call it) and consequently experienced a lot of jetlag the following night. On Friday, I was up early and groggy for

Ellen's class. This year, the class atmosphere felt markedly different for what were many reasons: more energetic boys, less assertive girls, less in-class activities (i.e. more activities outside the class – like music and inter-class team puzzling in another room), more administrative meetings that Ellen had to attend, more parents visiting (reading books and hosting a birthday celebration), and profuse rain (i.e. no sliding!!!). Oh well – I had Ellen's laptop and got a fair bit of my own work done.



Left to Right: (top) Utrecht outer ring canal with walkways, rich "lakefront" housing; (bottom) wilder canals with obstacles, back to the center, Bruno and his beloved baguette, Sarah (and Bruno) with her beloved ice cream, Sarah and her John and Tonic

The next day (Saturday), we headed to Utrecht, just over an hour away. Last fall, Ellen and I met Bruno here for dinner following a super-rainy day in Amsterdam. In contrast, today was sunny and hot – meaning I could finally experience canal kayaking, available in many Dutch cities (Ellen prefers Utrecht because boat traffic is not as crazy as in Amsterdam – and there are many side-waterways that are somewhat more natural). After parking in an expensive garage within Utrecht's outer ring, we walked a short distance to the kayak rental place – located along Utrecht's unusual lower walkway area, located right along the canal (most of the city located a floor above). Waiting about 30 minutes for Bruno to arrive from Eindhoven, we watched MANY parties launching enthusiastically. Having significantly overdressed, we also shed our long pants and long-sleeved thermal tops. Setting out around noon (Bruno solo, with Ellen and I in a double), we completed a 2.5 hour course. Unfortunately, a big chunk of the old town canal system was closed – meaning our time in the town center was limited... although this was probably good because there were, by this point, a fair number of large boats (private and big tour operators) jockeying for space (and Ellen and I were not the greatest team when it came to decisive maneuvers). Continuing to the outer ring, the paddling was easier and quieter – although the water was always nasty-dirty. After passing a big park, a big highway, a cemetery, a wide lake-like area with very rich houses, we made a sharp turn through an overhanging willow and entered a boat-free canal that was often less than 10 feet across... sometimes choked with blackberries, nettles, branches and – at one point – a downed tree. I cannot say it was ever wild-feeling – but it was a good day and, by the end, my arms were tired. Back at the kayak rental place, we enjoyed a picnic lunch of baguette and gruyere (Bruno's favorite!). Unfortunately, when we climbed the stairwell to the main upper promenade, it was a MADHOUSE (as in: Amsterdam-level crowds). Determined to find a well-rated ice cream stand, we shuffled our way through wall-to-wall people for about 10 minutes... and ultimately did enjoy some delicious ice cream (in my case: scoops of basil-lemon and blood orange). Given a dinner date with Mr. John (Ellen's assistant) back near the Hague, we headed back around 3:30... but arrived sufficiently early that Ellen and I both took naps – while Bruno worked on the deck. Later, we drove to John's nearby home for an amazing multi-course meal with wine, cider, and gin/tonic flight. Thank you John!



Left to Right: old barn, modern living room, the every popular RV trailer, 1800's "castle farm house" with canal reproduction

The next day (Sunday), Ellen and I got a somewhat later start for the Open Air Museum, 90 minutes away (with some traffic delays) near Arnhem. Ellen had visited the Open Air Museum several years ago and mostly remembered it for its hilly topography, all set in woods; indeed, this part of the Netherlands does not lie on reclaimed land. Being another astoundingly sunny and warm day, the Open Air Museum was packed with Dutch visitors... but being large and sprawling, it never felt crazy as we walked around the grounds. In retrospect, we spent too much time on the first 12 buildings (most old farmhouses) in the southwest corner – although we did enjoy a bowl of hearty vegetable soup with pork at one of the live demonstration facilities (in contrast, the live cook at the building all about

Dutch colonies in Asia was NOT generous with what looked like delicious noodles and stir fry). After eating our hand-packed lunch at an outdoor picnic area (alas – smoking permitted... and the Dutch really like to smoke!), we headed into the central area with all kinds of canals and windmills. I insisted we wait in line to tug ourselves across one of the main canals in a rope-raft; I think we were the only middle-aged women rope-team... perhaps not a surprise given that pulling the raft-rope was a little wet and muddy.



Left to Right: rope-raft canal to Marken reproduction, tugging the rope-raft, rope-raft view to windmills, Zaans reproduction, poffertjes

On the other side was a reproduction of Marken/fishing villages from northern Holland – which were familiar to me because I'd toured this area last year and really enjoyed it. And just beyond Marken was the Zaans Schans shopping/industry reproduction – another place I'd visited last year. Several stores sold reproductions of Dutch products – like old time candy, bread, and dime-store-style gifts. The main food-court was also here – with a front-and-center cook making poffertjes, mini-pancakes cooked in a huge griddle made of circular concave molds (similar to Japanese takoyaki, albeit savory) and then drizzled with melted butter and coated with powdered sugar. Thinking we would return for said treat later, we moved more quickly through the late 1800's buildings in the northeast corner – with notable stops including the big laundry (which described how people typically washed their clothes fully every 3 months, including harsh chemical bleach treatments), the first industrial dairy with steam-driven Pasteurization and a fully-equipped microbiology lab, the hands-on farm/petting area (the funniest feature of which were the 2D plywood dairy cows equipped with water-filled rubber udders that kids could “milk”), and the hedge maze where Ellen and I did succeed in getting lost for several minutes.



Left to Right: laundry complex, industrial dairy microbiology lab, kids farm simulation area, bad-faced housewife, Green Cross

We made a very quick run through the southeastern area, walking through the brewery (only the free beer tasting was interesting – everything else was just static displays), some oddly-placed 60's/70's houses featuring funny mannequins, and – finally – the Green Cross medical house... which also had funny mannequins, as well as collections of bedpans, syringes, and even neti pots. Making our way DOWN a long hill (a novel thing in the Netherlands) past the biggest windmill in the museum, we passed an urban urinal for men. For some reason, I thought these were only recently installed in big Dutch cities... but here was, apparently, one of the first: a brick structure from the 1920's, complete with hilarious mannequins and sound effects (alas, I did not take a picture... or a video). Arriving back at the poffertjes stand, we considered ordering but it was not like you could just walk up and get a plate; you had to sit at a table and wait for what was clearly SLOW service. Because A/M had arrived earlier in the day and we did not know what they were up for (it was now 3:30), we headed back – the traffic definitely heavier. In the end, Ellen and I finished leftovers at her place and then met A/M at a Japanese restaurant in Aalsmeer (near the airport hotel where they – and then I – were staying).



Left to Right: Naples and Vesuvius, tarmac exit, long-awaited dinner, Castel Nuovo by the harbor

September 25-27: Rome Airport Bonus Time, Naples, and Capri

Our original itinerary was to leave Amsterdam around 11, arriving in Rome just after 1, then flying to Naples at 2:30, arriving there comfortably at 3:45 (plenty of time for the REI group meeting at 6, followed by dinner). In reality, our Amsterdam flight did not depart until well after noon. Even though we physically made it to the Rome gate with 5 minutes to spare Alitalia rebooked us on the 5:30 flight

while we were in the air from Amsterdam (because, they said, they could not move our luggage between flights in time). Our FOUR extra hours at the Rome airport were tedious but could have been worse; I was, frankly, impressed at how modern and clean everything was – particularly the food court. Of course, come 5:30 our Naples-bound flight was delayed another 15 minutes because of some kind of software/computer problem, meaning we did not land until nearly 7. But the near-sunset views of Naples and Vesuvius were very beautiful from the air. Although the harbor area (where our hotel was) looked close to the airport from the plane, our exciting taxi-ride downtown took a solid 40 minutes – the traffic nuts and heavy; at one point during the sketchy ride, we all wondered if the driver was willfully driving down this questionable middle lane meant for oncoming traffic. In general, Naples reminded me of 1997-era Buenos Aires: run-down, somewhat dirty, somewhat gritty, with many areas run-down and/or under construction. Our hotel, which I didn't photograph (mostly because it felt like we were always late or on-the-go in Naples), was a block up this pedestrian-only zone – meaning the taxi dropped us off by this big square and we schlepped luggage from there. Indeed, for the first time in YEARS, I carried a duffle (not a rolling bag) – largely because REI's pre-trip literature strongly suggested we had to move our luggage a fair bit over cobblestones, uneven ground, or up stairs in elevator-free hotels. In retrospect, a rolling bag (which EVERYONE else had – except A/M & I) would have been fine. Arriving at the hotel around 7:45, we were greeted by the waiting assistant guide who gave us 5 minutes to schlep luggage into our rooms – before we headed out on foot to meet everyone else at dinner. It was a solid 10-minute walk to the fish-oriented taverna. Our large group of 14 (5 couples and 4 singles) plus lead guide was just finishing the first course (Caprese salad) when we arrived; thankfully, they handed us our salads as we sat down and we stuffed our face. Second course pasta dishes came out quickly, followed by fish or "potato veggie patties" (what I had), and a small pastry dessert. I recall being immediately favorably impressed with the REI group – both in terms of sociability and age diversity. Thankfully, too, dinner did not drag too late into the evening, AND our departure time in the morning was 9 a.m. That said, I wasn't back at the hotel until around 10 – AND my shower leaked all over (which one of the other clients warned me about – notably because she had been in my room the night before and complained about this problem... apparently to no avail). Indeed, the hotels on this trip were lower-end than those on my usual adventure travel venues (e.g. Mountain Travel Sobek, Wilderness Travel – both of which cost about 25% more than REI).



Left to Right: hotel mini-door, Piazza del Plebiscito, metro project by Castel Nuovo, hydrofoil, hilarious safety video

Following a pastry-oriented breakfast, we headed out at 9 on foot for the harbor. En route, we quickly passed the beautiful Piazza del Plebiscito (alas, we never returned here again) and the Castel Nuovo – this time walking through it to the harbor on this long construction walkway built over a gaping hole where a new metro is being built (it should be noted that I found a website from 2008 that said the metro should open in 2011... but that is clearly NOT happening, which seems to be typical in Italy). At the HUGE harbor (flanked by industrial ships, HUGE cruise ships, etc.) was the crowded hydrofoil area where we boarded the least crazy hydrofoil on this trip (by the end of 2 weeks, we racked up dozens of HOURS and hundreds of MILES on insanely crowded hydrofoils!). The hour-long ride to Capri (visible in the distance) was mostly quiet – interrupted only by this repeating music video about safety on board the ship (featuring a singing captain and his cute fleet of back-up singing/dancing girls). As we neared Capri's harbor, I think it began to dawn on me that Capri was going to be a major tourist CF; indeed, I can truly say – after YEARS of international travel, that I saw and heard more American/English in Southern Italy than ANYWHERE else in the world. My working theory: the whole place is in the throes of being RICK STEVES-ED (DAMN IT!). Oh Rick Steves – why are you CF-ing Europe... you know I love you but this is RIDICULOUS!



Left to Right: Capri main harbor, views from near La Piazzetta mayhem, finally sort of getting out of town, Belvedere Tragara view

From the INSANE harbor, our first task was to walk UP the hill (600 feet – all paved, lots of steps) to La Piazzetta – famous for some avenue of super-high-end shopping (which interested no one when we returned here for 30 minutes of free time later in the day). We then headed out from La Piazzetta on a well-defined promenade (the Via Camerelle, I believe) – first through lots of cute Mediterranean houses with tropical flowers and cacti (all imported) – and continuing on the Via Tragara (all level walking on paved paths), eventually arriving at this big scenic overlook (Belvedere Tragara). From this point (now on the opposite side of the island relative to the harbor), we took the Via del Pizzolungo, the route still paved but the crowds substantially thinner and more hiker-like. The Pizzolungo are 2 big rocks/seastacks; I believe the first is connected to Capri proper by a narrow strip of rock (although this likely gets covered by water at high tide). The boat traffic around both was substantial, as renting small boats and motoring around the island seems to be a popular activity. The Via del Pizzolungo contoured through lots of wild rocky land covered with natural scrub plants, which our guides presented

at a pretty overlook where we enjoyed our first view of the Amalfi Coast – this mountainous peninsula south of Naples (which we would visit shortly). At some point, we passed this very modern building (Villa Malaparte) that had been built on a remote, boat-only-accessible rock area down near the water. Having been dropping gradually for some time, we eventually had to start climbing back up to the island's central plateau. Following a moderately steep, sustained set of stairs, we rested up and snacked on healthy chocolate granola biscuit cookies in this impressive grotto, the guides explaining the long human history here (including some very old chapel ruins, I believe). It was then another steep, sustained set of stairs to signs of civilization. Passing a currently closed restaurant/patio, we enjoyed a short drop to this wild natural bridge that looked like some kind of Italian limestone Delicate Arch.



Left to Right: (top) Pizzolungo, distant Amalfi, more natural trail, stair #1; (bottom) grotto, stair #2, Natural Bridge from side-trail and Piazzetta delle Noci – with Noci views of Amalfi and Tiberius' famously wild Villa Jovis

We then began walking back towards the Piazzette via the Via Matermania – but took one final side-trail to the viewpoint at Piazzette delle Noci, which offered amazing vistas of the coastline, Amalfi, the Natural Arch, and one of Tiberius' Roman structures, Villa Jovis. Of course, to several of us Tiberius is only familiar as Captain Kirk's middle name. Oh well. From here, we took an unmarked side-trail into a pleasant stand of pine trees, where we enjoyed our only picnic of the trip: the guides laying out a delightful spread of fresh produce (pears, tomatoes, olives, fennel, and melon), pickled produce (olives, eggplant, artichoke hearts), meats (sausage, mortadella), local cheeses, bread, and cookies. Alas, though, this would be our only pseudo-natural picnic of the trip – something I hoped would happen more often. During several trips to water the trees, some of us noted rifle shells and asked what was up with that... the answer: hunting, most likely wild boar. After lunch, we returned to Via Matermania and were back at the Piazzette in no time. Following a short moment of history in a small square frequented by the likes of immunologist Emil von Behring (who discovered that survivor antibodies could be harvested to treat various diseases in naïve victims), we were given about 30 minutes of free time (this was 30 minutes less than had been presented this morning... in general, our group was pokey and often ran behind of schedule). Of course, the Piazzette was a mobbed CF, and I would have much preferred to be down by the harbor where it seemed like the shops were cheaper and there was a little more room to spread out. Other than fighting the crowds a few blocks in search of my beloved pine nut gelato (which NEVER made an appearance on this trip), I can't say I have many positive to say about Piazzette (although I do regret not buying ANYTHING with, like, a map or image of Capri on it!).



Left to Right: picnic in the pine forest stand, bougainvillea, a faster hydrofoil

Thankfully, we headed back down to the harbor and jumped right on board a MUCH busier hydrofoil (a different and faster ship than before). Given intense crowds, our group was totally dispersed – with me in the middle of this HUGE boisterous Canadian group (most energetic older women) that was on, like, day 18 of a 21-day Italian extravaganza. The friendly couple I chatted with was very effective as deflecting a more sales-aggressive ship crew intent on hawking drinks, snacks, and cheap Capri-festooned bags and clothing. After walking back to our hotel, we had about 45 minutes to get ready for our pre-dinner “underground Naples” tour, which began at 5:30. Warned that it would be colder down there, I put on my loud-print longjohns – which I am sure offended all Italian fashion sensibility (given that we walked a couple very crowded blocks to get to the start of the tour). Having done one underground tour in Oviato last year, I assumed we were going to see old wine cellars or storage areas from the middle ages. After descending via stairs probably 200

feet, I was hungry to the point of impatient at times... particularly during what was a sort of long initial presentation in the largest of the chambers we would visit; our underground tour guide was in his mid-70's and spoke no English, meaning our REI guide translated. Once I started to understand that much of the history here regarded WWII – specifically, hiding ~200,000 people during air raids – and once we started touring other rooms and passageways, I did my best to suppress my cranky hunger. Although the first underground areas were, indeed, carved centuries ago as palace cisterns (one of which the guide said to remember very carefully!) and storage areas, these were expanded significantly during the war. At times, we went between rooms using very narrow passages (most required turning sideways and were very dark) that didn't freak anyone out in our group but probably would bother someone with claustrophobia. We also visited the fascinating public bathroom area, which the guide said emptied “naturally” via a giant geological fissure that drained eventually into the sea. Some rooms had political graffiti, including the liberation message below – as well as drawings of planes, warcraft, or people. During the tour, our guide revealed that he was one of many babies born down here – which made the tour even more interesting. After about 90 minutes, we climbed a different set of stairs notably near the aforementioned palace cistern that we were supposed to remember. Almost like a magic trick, we effectively popped out in the lobby of our hotel – THE original palace. After enthusiastically thanking and shaking the underground tour guide, we had 10 minutes to get ready for dinner – a 5 minute walk away. For me, that meant taking off the crazy longjohns. Dinner was at a swank little restaurant with a lot of cool, colorful art. I enjoyed another beautiful Caprese salad starter, some lemony pork medallions with vegetables, and a lovely modern tiramisu in a jar.



Left to Right: underground Naples – stairwell history overview, bathrooms, narrow passages, liberation graffiti

September 28-29: A Little More Naples and Amalfi Coast

The next morning, the plan was to pack up, store our luggage in the hotel lobby while toured downtown Naples on foot, eat lunch, and then relocate via bus to our Amalfi basecamp town (Agerola) for the next 2 nights. Although Naples was not as scary or dirty as suggested by some sources (including, frankly, Rick Steves), it was not my favorite place and I cannot say I was greatly moved by anything during the tour. On the contrary, it made me ready to leave Naples behind. In writing this up and reviewing the maps, I was also disappointed to note that we were a mere THREE BLOCKS from the National Archaeological Museum (which houses a lot of famous Pompeii artifacts) – but REI doesn't include it... favoring, instead, free/less-interesting sites. From the hotel, we basically walked down to this affluent shopping area (Galleria Umberto) that is being remodeled (it featured the most posh McDonalds I have ever seen!). After a few random stops by stark 20th century government buildings, we headed into the heavily graffiti-covered university area (or the outskirts – we never saw anything that looked like a campus).



Left to Right: (top) Galleria Umberto/McD's, university graffiti, Piazza del Gesu Nuovo statue and churches; (bottom) Naples character, aggressive meat-man, Via San Gregoria trinkets (figurines, tambourines) and food, “first” pizza (?), colorful Spanish district

After a few more blocks of walking, we arrived at the Piazza del Gesu Nuovo, where we took a 30 minute “free time” break so folks could visit the square, or one of the 2 big churches (one ornate, one very stark). After a quick walk through the churches (which looked like plenty of places we visited last year in Tuscany), I asked our guides about bathroom availability and was told to visit one of the coffeshops half a block away. They let me use their toilet as long as I purchased something (I chose potato chips). While I organized my bathroom stop during the 30 minutes of allotted time, it was clear that MANY other people in our group did not think ahead... and so

the next 30 minutes turned into this painful CF of stopping-and-starting so folks could do the same – one after the other. I do not know why our guides didn't just do a formal coffee-stop and say: it's time to PEE now... EVERYONE! By now and making matters worse, the streets were a MADHOUSE of tourists (including yesterday's HUGE Canadian party) and street-people – some hawking wares and at least a few of whom gave the impression they were trying to bamboozle tourists and steal things (our guides had warned us to watch our wallets – particularly if someone stopped/distracted us... while their partner sneaked around to execute the crime). During one amusing CF wait, this apron-ed man carrying a bloody side of beef THROUGH the streets (like – back and forth) nearly hit and then actually hit one of the guys in our party, effectively smearing the meat across the back of his head. In between the back-and-forth's, he seemed to be negotiating with one of the butcher shops. After a few more blocks, we came to the Via San Gregoria, this block originally made famous for artisans selling nativity scenes and figurines – which of course have now expanded into pop culture and politics. The one thing I regret not buying on this street was a tambourine painted with Vesuvius and the Naples harbor – they were everywhere here but, alas, I never saw them again. It wasn't clear how much time we had for shopping on this street – and so there was another confusing wait at the end of the block while half the group took a lot of extra time shopping/looking at things; those of us (including me) who finished early and sat waiting on some church stairs were panhandled by a roving accordionist who wanted to serenade you and then aggressively demand payment. From here, we mostly made our way back towards the hotel – passing, en route, some of the first (or claimed to be first) pizza parlors in the world, and then the colorful and lively Spanish district... where our restaurant was located (and about 3 blocks from our hotel). Lunch: salad, various platters of vegetables (eggplant, bitter greens, and squash), meatballs in red sauce, and a small tart slice. Back at the hotel, we schlepped our gear a couple blocks to the waiting bus.



Left to Right: bus views, "Sentiero Orrido di Pino" hiking pictures – cliffside trail, shepherds huts, stream lowpoint, cyclamen

Thankfully, REI was very generous with the bus – using a 30+ seater for our party of 14 clients plus 2 guides. Our hourish-long drive took us through the busy city (the slowest part of the drive because of insane traffic), around the harbor under Vesuvius (still moderately busy and very developed/urban), and then up a narrow road that switchbacked high into the mountains forming the peninsula of land that defines the Amalfi. Every few miles, we passed through a small quaint village – eventually entering through a long tunnel and emerging on the other side on what feels like a high rolling plateau of villages, farms, and vineyards. Our goal, like I said, was the area known as Agerola – our hotel/basecamp for the next 2 nights. Arriving at the hotel around 2:30, we had about 30 minutes to schlep and unpack gear – and get ready for a ~3-mile hike (which I learned only later was called the Sentiero Orrido di Pino). While I liked this hotel's location and views a lot, my room was located on the first floor, next to the stairs where everyone came/went, and it had this odd high window that overlooked the main hall (which was lit all night – meaning lots of light and noise!). But I digress... after 2 days of concrete-walking, I know I was ready for a real trail. But, alas, this short outing only half-delivered: the first half-mile was on town streets, then we did about 1 mile on a real trail under this high limestone cliffs – descending to this vertex low-point with an incredibly garbage-strewn stream (the guides seemed very apologetic about Italy's lack of respect for nature, a frequent topic of apology given the intense garbage almost everywhere!). From here, we climbed up (enjoying a profusion of pretty cyclamen) – and then hit pavement again, the views across the valley very nice, the sunset views of Capri/Pizzolungo a little hazy but impressive.



Left to Right: looking back on route, vineyards-o-plenty, Amalfi peninsula peaks, sunset – Capri/Pizzolungo in actual sunset

From here, it was stairs, stairs, stairs, and more stairs up to the other/far side of Agerola. In writing this up, I found several web-sources suggesting there is more a natural trail through the woods that one could have taken. Not sure why we returned to the pavement. Indeed, there was about 1.5 miles of stairs and roads (all paved, all through village neighborhoods) before we arrived at tonight's pre-dinner activity: visiting a limoncello factory and sampling said drink, as well as several other specialty infusions. As with the Naples underground tour, this was more interesting than I thought it would... even though, once again, I was getting hungry (i.e. so the liqueur probably calmed me down). While the limoncello was good, the infusions were really interesting: an arugula-caramel (my favorite), an anise-caramel, and a local herb-blend-caramel. Much as I wanted to buy some arugula-caramel liqueur, I couldn't do it because hauling around liquids in glass is too annoying and risky. At around 5:30, a smaller local bus picked us up – returning us to the hotel where we had 30 minutes before dinner. Prior to actually eating, we watched a pizza demonstration; based on reading the trip literature, I truly thought we were going to be in a private kitchen making our own pizzas – and so I was sort of disappointed we were all crammed in this little doorway watching the cook prepare about 6 different pizzas (which would become the main course of our meal).

Indeed, tonight was the beginning of many pizzas; basically, our table ate about 12 pizzas (as usual, the best was the simple Margharita) – alongside a few platters of salad (iceberg lettuce, tomatoes, and corn). Being very tired, I skipped dessert and headed to bed at 9:45 – knowing it was going to be a rough night of noise and light.



Left to Right: infusions and tastings, pizza demo (note picture of Pope on the wall), pizza oven, delicious Margharita!

The next day was the second longest and most real-feeling hikes on this trip: the Path of the Gods (Sentiero degli Dei). That said, it only clocked in at 6 miles (~600 feet up, ~2000 down) and we probably could have completed the hike in 3-4 hours (vs. the 6+ it took our group given a lot of stopping). Of course, the logistics would have been challenging (on-line searches suggests a lot of confusion about buses), and some of the route-finding between Nocelle and Positano would have been hard because a recent landslide took out the official trail, forcing us to use more streets and stairs. Following a very busy breakfast buffet (with MANY large European hiking groups vying for the coffee machine and bread-toasting), our morning began with a few blocks of town-walking to catch a public bus to Bomerano, a few blocks from the start of the hike. Once the pavement ended, the actual trail was a mix of wide, easy, flat surfaces interspersed with some surprising little ups/downs on scrambly rock. Sometimes, we passed in-use farms (including a welcoming committee of goats) or out-of-use stone buildings (not quite ruins) – but most of the first 4 miles was relatively natural.



Left to Right: (top) catching morning bus, path welcome signs and goats, typical walking – ruins, limestone, looking back at start of path (bottom) more typical trail – nice path, crazy path, soaring views of Amalfi peninsula (towards Capri – too hazy to see)

After about a mile, we began to enjoy HUGE views of the Amalfi peninsula – although it was a little too hazy to see Capri. Although it didn't feel too busy at the start, things picked up after the first mile, with several very large hiking parties coming through (vying with us for our snack spot at mile 2-3). Below, it was also obvious that the sea was laden with tour-boat after tour-boat after tour-boat – going back and forth between the villages (at the end of the day, we would take one between Positano and Amalfi). But thankfully, we were about 1500-2000 feet above the water most of the day – with only a couple spots where some of my vertigo kicked in. After a pretty good descent in a short section of woods, followed by a little traversing, we arrived in Nocelle – stopping in the main square for a good view of the now-high-looking limestone mountains above us (including some kind of natural hole in the wall) and, in many cases, some squeezed citrus drinks. Shortly thereafter, we arrived at our restaurant for lunch. Today's lunch typified many future lunches, and what I liked best about the food on this trip: mostly light vegetarian fare, with LOTS of little servings of different things (e.g. little salads with corn or beans or peas, marinated mushrooms or eggplant or tomato or artichoke, baked quiche-like egg or cauliflower or potato squares, bread and cheese... and wine, wine, wine). After lunch, we had to walk the road for a little over a mile because, as stated, a portion of the natural trail had been washed away in a landslide a few weeks before. Unfortunately, we never walked on any more earthen trails today – because the way down to Positano (quite visible below) was all stairs, stairs, stairs, and more stairs. As we neared the bottom, the guides decided to offer a couple options for the remainder of the day (mostly because, as usual, we were running behind... and there was an age-defined rift forming between group members who wanted to swim at Positano, and those who did not). Like Capri, though, Positano was a MAJOR CF and the crazy beach in no way looked interesting (those few who ultimately did swim enjoyed it – but went to some side area not on the main drag). Being in the non-swimming group, I had 30 minutes of free time before we all crowded onto the INSANELY busy Amalfi-bound boat (once again, we were all dispersed for the 20 minute ride). I

do have to chuckle because my only association with Positano is the film version of “Under the Tuscan Sun” (Positano is the fabricated place where the female lead “gets her groove back on” sort of); anyway – the real Positano was such a mess that it is almost funny to imagine how they orchestrated filming all those pretty scenes along the beach.



Left to Right: (top) short woody descent, lots of cacti/fruit, mountain views (orange = recent fires); (bottom) fat lemons before delicious lunch, looking down on Positano, looking up at Positano, Amalfi and “horsey-boat” (their version of dragonboat)

Of course, Amalfi was another gigantic CF – and I cannot say that our impromptu “walking tour” was worthwhile; the only things that were interesting were the claim that Amalfi is home to the first compass (probably incorrect), and they used to do some kind of dragonboat-like racing using funny gold horse-boats. With 45 minutes of downtime, I spent 15 minutes waiting in line for/using a public restroom (incidentally, you paid for all public restrooms), followed by 30 minutes enjoying an AMAZING super-dark chocolate gelato on the waterfront promenade. Once everyone had regrouped (the swimmers took a later boat and skipped touring Amalfi altogether), we boarded a smaller bus for a wild, curving, cliffy ride back to the hotel. Dinner, promptly served, began with more pizza appetizers, followed by grilled porkloin (most of mine was too under-done to feel safe eating) and vegetables. Being behind on packing (because we were moving again tomorrow), I skipped dessert and headed to bed at 10.



Left to Right: Vesuvius – easy crater in the crater climb, our volcanology guide, the real summit, grapevines on the flanks

September 30-October 1: Pompeii/Vesuvius and Ferry to Sicily... With a Few Bumps

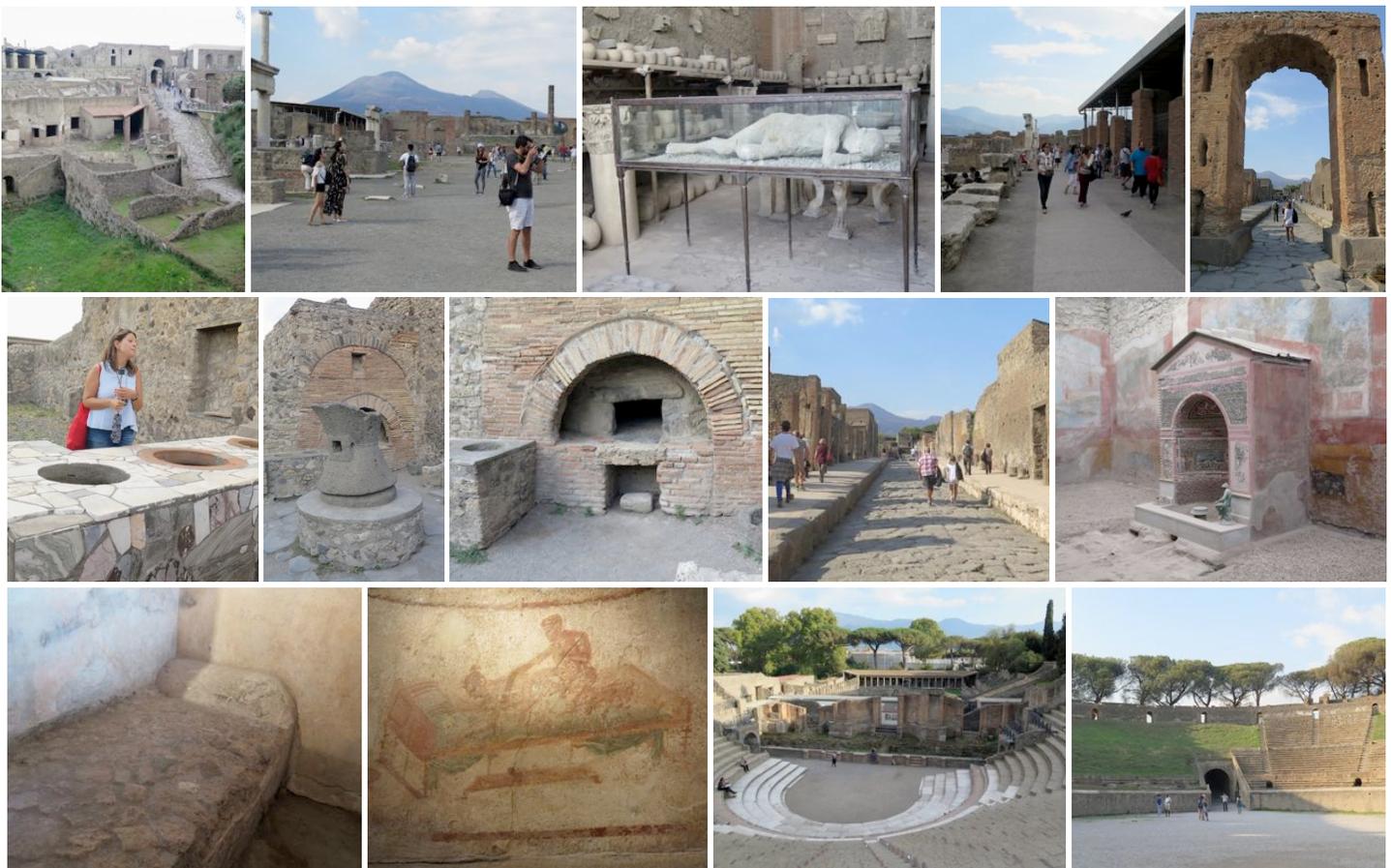
The next day was all about Vesuvius and Pompeii, followed by dinner in Naples and boarding our overnight ferry to Catania, Sicily. After another busy breakfast, we loaded packed bags onto the big bus for an hour-ish drive back to Vesuvius. About 20 minutes from the final summit trailhead, we made a bathroom and coffee/snack stop at a café that wasn't quite open – the views over the Naples harbor already good... though a little hazy. We then continued up the mountain, entering the outer caldera (the secondary summit of which is Monte Somma) and climbing into the inner valley (Atrio di Cavallo). At the surprisingly basic trailhead, things were getting busy – with giant tour-buses of people (few looked like they hiked much) dumping out. Clearly, this was not going to be a challenging climb. Presented to us as taking around 45 minutes up, it was barely over a mile, and not even 1000 feet up (we were not allowed onto the real summit, which was 4300 feet). At the first of two kiosks (which sold LOTS of tacky souvenirs – some of which oddly combined volcanoes and pot imagery - and more snacks), our local guide gave us a presentation for about 30 minutes – talking about ancient history, modern history (e.g. there used to be a funicular to this point), and some geology. Although our guides referred to the local guide as a volcanologist, my sense is that he was more like a volcano docent. From here, we climbed to the second/last kiosk. The main crater was rather dormant-looking, although its big sheer walls/cliffs were impressive. On the way down, we all took note of a big “real” hiking party going up the real summit on a route we had been told was not open (it seemed to depart from the first kiosk, ascending straight up the summit rim – and then going all the way around the cone). Clearly, some parties were being given more access than us. By now, it was coming up on lunch time and, thankfully, we enjoyed one of the most pleasant lunches on this whole trip: on a private farm at the base of the mountain. We were the only party there and it was quiet and relaxing, the food (DELICIOUS tomato bruschetta, amazing green salad, olives, cheese, penne with red sauce, and apples for dessert) simple but enjoyable. After lunch, we toured the wine-making areas and the impressive wine cellar, which was located basically in a lava tube – the ceilings and

walls all impressive natural lava. Apparently, grape-growing is a very successful endeavor in the volcanic soils – although the wine-making consortium collectively calls its wine “Lacrima Christi” (tears of Christ, presumably for all those killed by the volcano).



Left to Right: farm-fresh tomatoes drying, lunch, vineyards, lava wine cellar, Mr. Bean, hilariously ironic sign

After driving about 20 minutes, we arrived at Pompeii for our 3-4:30 guided tour (followed by another hour on our own) – entering at the Porta Marina (the original southwest sea gate – which was by the water... before the volcano erupted) and effectively walking through, exiting via the “entrance” near the amphitheater (anfiteatro). I have a lot of mixed feelings about the tour. On the negative side: (1) I felt confused much of the time because I couldn’t follow our location on the maps (I rarely have problems reading maps – but Pompeii seemed to use 3 different numbering systems on buildings, signs, and maps, leaving me feeling lost); (2) in studying maps and guidebooks after the trip, it is sad how little we saw – either by tour, or could physically cover on our own; and (3) as stated before, MANY artifacts are housed in Naples at the National Archaeological Museum (some folks in our group confirmed this, having intentionally come early to specifically visit this place). On the positive side: (1) even with beautiful weather, it wasn’t as nuts as I was expecting – perhaps in part because it is a HUGE area; (2) everything we did see was really interesting – to the point I WANTED more time, and to see the museum; (3) I did enjoy the guide and the things she presented – even though I still can’t find exactly what we visited. Some of the things I recorded in my journal include: (guided part) the sidewalks and gutter systems with the big stepping stones, the forum/basilica/temple area, the many “fast food stands” and bakeries, one of the wealthy family’s houses that had intact frescoes, the ornate public gym with various pools, the brothel with its fellatio graffiti and cock/balls direction carvings, and (on-my-own part) the smaller theatres, and the big amphitheatre (thought not as impressive as the smaller theatre).



Left to Right: Pompeii (top) Porta Marina, Forum with adjacent viewing museum (with a few human or dog plasters); (middle) fast food, bakery, Via di Mercurio side-street and wealthy house fountain; (bottom) brothel bed and erotic fresco, theatre, amphitheatre

Now – if you too are surprised to hear so much about brothels and sex, so were most of us. When we first arrived, we noticed a surprising number of erotic-oriented souvenirs being sold by street-vendors just outside the city walls... not understanding this was actually a thing. Although we only saw the brothel and its associated murals, erotic graffiti, carvings, and art/frescoes apparently

abounded throughout Pompeii – in private residences, in gymnasia – and most is highly graphic and would probably offend conservative-minded people (many original frescoes are in the Naples Museum, notably behind a cordoned-off area called “The Secret Cabinet” that has been on-and-off closed depending on the socio-political climate). As someone who gives legendary lectures about STD’s, I have to say that I was slightly surprised by how out-there Pompeii was... although it sometimes reminded me of Indian/Kama Sutra images. Sadly, the brothel area we focused on was facilitated by slaves (with most not Italian) – although there was talk of rudimentary condom use (made from pig intestines). Interestingly, I was having my bi-annual teeth-cleaning in November and learned that both my dentist and I had independently visited Southern Italy/Naples-Pompeii this summer. She and her family did not go with a guide and apparently missed pretty much all the things I mentioned (including the brothel/erotica)... so, after comparing notes with her, I have to say that I felt overall good about our tour, our guide, and the 2.5 hours we got to take in Pompeii.

We regrouped at 5:30 outside the amphitheatre entrance. I arrived 10 minutes early so I could buy a couple souvenirs from the street-vendors (although I resisted the urge to buy a cock/balls bottle opener – or any number of other erotica/porn-oriented paraphernalia). We then headed back into CRAZY downtown Naples, where we schlepped our luggage a block to the lounge/waiting area in the ferry office. Our assistant guide then guarded said pile while the rest of us walked 3 blocks to a surprisingly excellent restaurant (I say surprisingly excellent because it looked super-modern fast food-like). Alas, though, tonight was the night I felt as though the tide turned and I started gaining weight... because, alas, I cannot resist veal Milanese (which, of course, came with French Fries). Thankfully, it was melons, melons, melons for dessert! After returning to the ferry office, we schlepped our luggage a longer distance onto the ferry. Of all the things we did in Southern Italy, the overnight/11-hour ferry was the most peaceful and least crowded (possibly, in retrospect, because most people take the Naples to Stromboli option, not the Naples to Catania one?). It was also one of the most comfortable accommodations – with no noise, bathroom, or lighting quirks. After a good shower, I took a few pictures as we finally pulled away – around 9:30 – but mostly I just enjoyed the peace and quiet.



Left to Right: gear at ferry office, ferry cabin/bathroom, industrial Catania, a good time to discuss reworking the itinerary...

The next morning, we were told that we had to be out of our cabins by 7:30 a.m. – with gear piled in the lounge outside the controlled breakfast area (indeed, I quickly discovered while reaching for a croissant that it was NOT a friendly, serve-yourself buffet). While REI supplied some fresh fruit, they definitely paid a la carte prices for other ferry-sold items (e.g. beverages, pastries, and very tasty eggs). Arriving in Catania at 8:30, we were greeted with mostly blue skies and a then-clear view of nearby Etna (fresh snow visible on her summit); alas, we would never see her again on this trip (intense foreshadowing of our final days). After schlepping gear to the waiting bus, we then climbed aboard for what would be an awkward day of several issues. Indeed, today was one of the wonkiest days of REI’s itinerary (which was even more annoying because much of today had to be repeated near the end of the trip). The overall goal of today was to make our way to the Aolian Island of Vulcano – which required driving about 3 hours to the town of Milazzo – where most of the hydrofoils departed for said islands. If you study a map of Sicily, you will note that Catania is on the southeastern side of the island – vs. Milazzo/Vulcano on the north. By taking the ferry to Catania, you have to effectively backtrack across Sicily to visit the islands (and then repeat the drive back). Making matters more frustrating, if you do a little research (e.g. internet, Lonely Planet), you will realize that there is an overnight ferry between Naples and Stromboli, one of the northernmost Aolian Islands. Why REI doesn’t go to Stromboli first, and then proceed in a linear path south to Catania, is mystifying (I can only assume it is more expensive and/or harder to book because that is the more popular/logical way to execute this trip without driving to/from Catania to Milazzo).



Left to Right: Taormina – church, horse fountain, cannoli, more church, promenade views of Sicilian coast... Etna no longer visible!

For whatever reason, we also did not proceed to Milazzo/Vulcano directly (which also would have been better given plenty of sunny beaches on Vulcano - and everything walking distance); instead, we aimed to drive to this town called Castelmola, which was perched high on a rocky outcropping above Taormina; we were supposed to tour Castelmola and then hike down to Taormina. The problem: our bus couldn’t make it to Castelmola and we basically hung around Taormina for WAY too long – NEARLY missing our target hydrofoil. But I digress. Taormina began pleasant enough; after another confusing coffee-bathroom stop, we walked to a big overlook where Etna was now VERY hidden in clouds. We walked through a nice park with interesting statues and an early war submarine piloted by men in scuba gear. We walked up to the Greek Theatre entrance and were given free tickets inside (I don’t think this is

normally included... BUT since our bus broke down, I think they felt obliged), and then we were turned loose for an hour. The views from the Greek Theatre were very good – both over Taormina and the water, but also up at the taunting town of Castelmola. Alas, several web-searches after our trip suggest Castelmola was definitely the more interesting of the towns, and the trail down to Taormina would have been a nice diversion from what quickly grew into CROWDS, CROWDS, CROWDS consuming Taormina. After meandering about the Greek Theatre, I visited a tempting Sicilian bakery for a mini-canoli, and a pistachio mandorli (a cookie made with a lot of meringue mixed into the batter); both were AMAZING. After retracing my steps through the park, I returned to the first square – which was near the restaurant where we ate another GREAT plate of vegetarian goodies... followed by – surprise, surprise – more cannoli.



Left to Right: scuba submarine with diagram inset, Greek Theatre, Taormina from theatre, taunting Castelmola

After lunch, we boarded the bus for what became a very FAST drive north around the peninsula to Milazzo. FAST because it was pretty clear we were NOT going to make our 3 p.m. hydrofoil to Vulcano. En route, we saw the famous Straits of Messina, the narrowest point of water to the mainland... Italy's coastline rising quickly beyond. The Sicilian landscape during much of the drive was steep and rugged – the terrain south of Milazzo green and mountainous. A few minutes after 3, our leader announced that he had been in touch with the hydrofoil company and they were holding the ship for us. But even then, we were not schlepping gear onto the boat until a little after 3:10 – the ship full, luggage piles everywhere... although not too many scowls, thankfully. After dispersing to find seats, we quickly departed – the captain announcing we would be landing at Lipari first, and then Vulcano because of the delay. Lipari and Vulcano lie 15 minutes apart, and about 45 minutes from Sicily – so that was no big deal. Lipari is the most developed of the Aolian Islands, and it seems to lack an obvious cone-shaped volcano (like Vulcano and Stromboli both clearly have).



Left to Right: Straits of Messina, hydrofoil, Vulcano, lots of these, Vulcano and Lipari map showing hotel and harbor

October 2-4: Vulcano and Stromboli

After a fast drop-off, we backtracked to Vulcano – arriving there at 4:30. After a hotel car arrived and took our luggage, we walked – a 7 minute stroll through island-y neighborhoods that reminded me of Easter Island. That said, our first view as we left the harbor was of the famous yellow sulfur baths; these smelled like Yellowstone and were filled with lots of people (more about that later since, yes, A/M and I did venture back to visit those). The harbor and our hotel were on 2 different black sand beaches that straddled a narrow isthmus separating the main part of Vulcano from the smaller lobe near Lipari. I apparently won the hotel key lottery (our leader swore he always handed keys out randomly) by drawing the only beachfront room... which I TOTALLY appreciated (but, again, wished we would have come here first thing so I could enjoy it longer!). Of course, few people knew I got this room because I tried not to broadcast where I was since it was very special.



Left to Right: famous sulfur baths with soakers, thermal area in the harbor (note bubbles), my hotel room/patio view... ahhhh!

Although I LOVED my patio and view, the hotel room itself was very dorny and basic – the bed hard, the sheets/pillows thin, and the furniture sort of ramshackle. After unpacking, I threw on my bathing suit and headed down to the water – where several in our party,

including A/M, were already swimming. Once you got through the weird-feeling plantdebris along waterline, the water and black sand bottom were great. Marshall, however, did suffer some kind of jellyfish sting that left a thumb-sized welt on his back. This promptly made us a little nervous (and reminded me of snorkeling in the Galapagos, where Allison and I earned MANY little jellyfish stings). And so the decision was made to go to the sulfur baths – the idea being that maybe they would sooth Marshall’s jellyfish sting. After paying \$4 each for the entrance and shower fee, we slowly walked into the shallow pit (the bottom of which had many boiling hot spots that sometimes bubbled up, burning your feet). Although the major smell surrounding the pit was sulfur, there was some kind of a nitrogenous undertone lingering near the bathing area – which, to me, meant human waste was accumulating (there was no obvious incurrent or excurrent flow – so the only thing that MIGHT wash junk away was a really high tide or storm from the adjacent sea). Indeed, my swimming suit honestly smells like it was soaked in pee even now after multiple washes. As a result of this impression, I cannot say I was into the sulfur baths or stayed long... and I certainly did not put my face in there or make an effort to scoop up the yellow mud and slather it all over a la pictures above. It should also be noted that I experienced a few bouts of urethral burning or itchiness over the next few days – yet another sign that it’s probably best to avoid the sulfur baths of Vulcano. I will say that the sulfur bathing pit is adjacent to a little bay that has several thermal areas bubbling up from the sea-bottom – and this was interesting to swim in... and definitely felt more hygienic. After returning to the hotel for lots of intense showering, we embarked on a weird eating adventure, the only explanation for which was that the guides – for sociopolitical reasons – had to patronize 2 locations/families during our stay to keep everyone happy (hmmm – why does this sound like the mafia?). The first place we went was supposed to just be for wine and appetizers... but everyone filled up so much on the ginormous buffet table of appetizers (which were DELICIOUS – especially these savory fried chickpea fritters that are a holdover of Middle Eastern influence in Sicily) that we were sort of shocked to hear we were going back to the hotel for our real dinner (literally – a 5-course affair). Thankfully, I had the sense to get a light bowl of pasta for the first course, a salad bar for the second course (mostly Romaine and tomatoes), and entirely skip the final courses in favor of going to bed. Several people wished they’d done the same as me in terms of VAST amounts of food remaining when I said goodnight.



Left to Right: Vulcano trailhead with warnings, mostly easy trail to rim, views of Vulcano, Lipari, and more distant Aolian Islands

The next morning, we had to pack up and move luggage to the lobby while we did our morning activities (i.e. climbing Vulcano) because we were moving again this afternoon: taking the 3-hour hydrofoil to Stromboli (with lots of stops en route). Even though Vulcano was pretty easy, it was my favorite hike of this trip – mostly because it was scenic, not very crowded, and had some semblance of being a little wild. From the hotel, we walked back to the harbor and then continued up this obvious street towards the volcano. After about 10 minutes, we came to the trailhead and the guides talked about safety and “the gas” at length. For a couple days, they had been more vocal about making sure clients with respiratory problems or asthma talk with the guides and consider backing off both Vulcano and eventually Stromboli. Indeed, there are lots of sort of scary warnings if you dig around Italian guide services at Etna and Stromboli. Most fully ban anyone with such conditions because these volcanoes can generate a lot of VOG, invisible volcanic fog made of sulfur-based gases that can be problematic for people with such physical challenges. Although Vulcano can be visited without a formal guide service, part of its crater rim features a very active line of yellow fumaroles spewing VOG – and today, apparently, was going to be a “high output” day. As someone who has experienced some mild asthma-like post-pneumonia inflammation for about 12 years now, I was not too concerned – particularly because I had a lot of experience at elevation and I worked in Yellowstone (which generates lots of sulfur-based gases) for years. Nonetheless, I was a little concerned because earlier this summer, I had experienced some breathing and bronchitis problems after spending a week in unhealthy levels of forest fire smoke (we were in the North Cascades at the time). In the end, I had no issues with the fumarole section of the walk.



Left to Right: Vulcano crater (considered inactive) solfatera rim... entering the VOG

But I digress. After the VOG speech, the initial trail headed up a little steeply but quickly became a very gentle series of a couple LONG switchbacks across the harbor-facing front of the volcano. These were 90% civil (wide, flat, soft sandy ground), interrupted every so often by a little mudflow that ate the trail and had to be negotiated more carefully. After about 25 minutes, we amassed at the lower side of the crater rim, from which there was a GLORIOUS view over Vulcano, Lipari, and several other neat cones on other Aolian Islands... not to mention a good view into the crater and up to the real summit. To the left, the dry solfatera field section smoked profusely, covered in significant yellow sulfur crystals. Donning various forms of face/mouth protection (which probably didn’t do

anything), we proceeded straight through the yellow field and I remember consciously thinking: we would NEVER be allowed to do anything like this in Yellowstone. But thankfully, no one broke through any of the crumbly-looking surfaces, and no one's lung's tightened up. At the other end of the field, we were greeted with a steep climb to the main summit – albeit made reasonably civil by the presence of many tight switchbacks. I don't think it took me more than 7 minutes to summit. We took a snack break on the main summit and the guides talked about Vulcano and the other islands. I cannot say the overall view was much greater than on the lower rim – but we could see much more of the south part of the island, which seemed to be comprised of lots of low, green rolling hills.



Left to Right: big summit climb, looking down on switchbacks, big views of solfatara rim, islands, & crater, heading down high crater

Dropping down the high side of the crater on a wide, glorious rim, we were given the choice of returning on the same trail we climbed... OR sand-skiing down this lesser-known straight-down sand gully. EVERYONE chose the sand-ski, which was actually really fun and very fast! Of course, most of the guys went super-fast, leaving the female members of the party taking our sweet time about 5 minutes back. We rejoined the original trail on the first switchback and easily descended to the road – total time about 2 hours, with lots of meandering, snacking, and chatting.



Left to Right: looking back on summit, sand-ski – various shots during descent, cactus flower

We pretty much went straight to lunch – a really great venue on one of the main streets... and another fantastic platter of vegetarian sides followed by an amazing mulberry granita for dessert. Afterwards, we had about 45 minutes of free time, which I used for finally shopping (I finally decided to buy some of the pretty kitchen towel maps – one of all of Italy, and one of just the Aolian Islands). Unfortunately, I FAILED to find an open PO – which was disappointing because I wanted to send our campus volcanologist (Jeff) a post-card from Vulcano. At around 2, we amassed by the harbor – where the hotel had dropped off our luggage (the assistant guide babysitting it in a shady spot). At 2:30, the extremely crowded hydrofoil arrived and we schlepped our gear on board – placing it in this MASSIVE pile of luggage in the front/center of the ship – and then dispersed to find seating. Unfortunately, we would have to repeat this whole process in about 20 minutes because the point of this ship was only to take us to Lipari... where we then had to disembark and wait for the next hydrofoil, which would eventually sail to Stromboli, after at least 3 other stops en route (and, remember, ALL of this would have to be repeated on the way back). Thankfully, time seemed to go somewhat quickly and the scenery was interesting most of the way; the only truly annoying problem was this woman with a very large camera totally hogging the one open window where you could take unobstructed photos. She seemed to respond to NO social cues when others (including me) OBVIOUSLY approached her, holding their cameras and hoping to move in for a quick shot. Following the Lipari ship-change, stops included Panarea, Ginostra (a tiny village on the far side of Stromboli – home, apparently, to many Dutch



Left to Right: another fabulous vegetarian lunch, Basiluzzo (rocky islands) and Stromboli (most distant), tiny village at Ginostra

After 3 hours, we arrived at busy Scari, San Vincenzo – carrying out luggage directly to the hotel, which was 1 block away. Generally speaking, it was a good hotel... and quieter than it looked, given its location right at the harbor. We had the option of a short town tour, which about 5 of us took. This basically involved walking up the hill to what seemed like a town square with a big church, and then –

after passing several volcano-climbing guide services (including the one we would use tomorrow) – walking down through what seemed like residential neighborhoods. En route, we passed some famous villa love-shack where Ingrid Bergman and Roberto Rossellini began a major affair while filming the movie, “Stromboli.” We returned via a path along the beach – although lot of Stromboli’s beaches were rocky. After returning to the hotel, I made another failed attempt at mailing Jeff’s postcard (this involved RE-climbing the big hill)... before finally showering and getting ready for dinner. Of course, we had to climb the big hill AGAIN – dining near the top at a restaurant where your options were pretty much fish or pizza. Because there is limited street lighting, we were all told to bring out headlamps for the walk back. We were the only ones in the dining area – with all the local diners (not many) and pretty much all of the staff glued to the bar TV because of some important soccer match. After days of watching other folks order special drinks or daily cappuccino’s (which REI covered – within reason), I finally asked our leader for a my treat tonight: an Aperol Spritz, which I’d first enjoyed in Tuscany, where it is sort of famous. Given that I hadn’t asked for much on this trip, he either thought he owed me or decided to exhibit his sense of humor by ordering me, like (I swear), a foot (+) tall version. Ha ha. Given the GINORMOUS pizza (which was only so-so) and plenty of time, I finished it – impressing a few folks who probably doubted my abilities to handle girly-drinks. And then it was back to the hotel by headlamp for some “Nudi et Crudi” (Italian-dubbed “Naked and Afraid”) before bed.



Left to Right: walking to... our hotel (taken next day), town tour with overview of climbing options, the love shack, Aperol Spritz

The next day was weirdly unstructured and felt a little frustrating for many reasons – not the least of which was that this dynamic cloud was swirling around Stromboli’s summit most of the day. Basically, we were on our own all morning and for an hour after lunch – with EVERYTHING focused on the afternoon/evening climb of Stromboli (scheduled from 3:30 to 9:30+). But we all enjoyed sleeping in... and the sunny and pleasant breakfast buffet warranted a couple plate-fuls. My first task following breakfast was to FINALLY mail my postcard to Jeff... which I did after patiently waiting in line 20 minutes and coughing up nearly \$3 for a stamp (JUST as it was my turn, an elderly woman who looked like she had polio showed up – but INSISTED I go ahead). FOR THE RECORD: it is now 5 weeks later and NO postcard! Hmmm. Given that I was DAYS behind on my journals, I relocated – books and water in hand - to this rocky beach near the hotel. Finding a shady spot, and wrote for a solid 2 hours. Unfortunately, there had been some growing angst that was about to get bigger: Namely, it came out yesterday that the Stromboli guide service won’t let you climb if you weren’t wearing full-leather, high-ankle boots (or that was the presented party line). Your only recourse: to rent such shoes. At least 5 members of our party wore low-ankle boots, with another 5 wearing high-ankle but canvas boots. I personally had faced shoe troubles on at least one other guided trip and – not surprisingly – it was in Italy (namely: Wilderness Travel guides refused to let me Chaco-hike the Dolomites on my first trip there in 2007). While I was not fully surprised with this news, others in our party were not happy. But I was also not fully committed to doing the summit trip and, if anything, hearing about this stupid rule only made me less interested in going up. Very little that I had read on-line about the guide services up Stromboli was encouraging, frankly; they all took huge parties (25-30 per guide) and there were multiple parties at a time all forming a cattle-line (upwards of 6X25 people went up today... that number can go as high as 200). With 100+++ people on the mountain at any time, guide services had to limit time on the final viewing platform (assuming there was a view). Although it didn’t seem like there were any other options, I have since found blogs by smaller independent groups of families/friends who were able to hire private guides for just themselves (not that it’s as cheap).



Left to Right: iffy Stromboli most of day, children of the corn section, lower section, sunset over the sea, explosion!

But, alas, that is not exactly what happened to us. After lunch (salad and pasta in a unique aged ricotta sauce – near the upper plaza), several of us visited the guide service for more information about our shoes. In the end, 3 people rented boots using 2 different places in town (1 was super-annoying – both ran about \$10/day to rent), 2 people had made the decision NOT to go up and just hike to the lower viewpoint, and then there was indecisive me. The guide service rep we met after lunch did NOT want me climbing in my low-ankle Keens – but then it felt like the REI guides basically said it was fine. At 3, we amassed in the upper plaza with our actual guide, this wild-haired Italian who clearly did NOT give a shit about boots as he examined NO ONE’s. This great disparity raised some ire – particularly because one of the independent parties who added to our group literally sported super lightweight Nike cross-trainers (total fabric, low ankle). After starting up with the GIANT THRONG (i.e. all 6 parties, plus the lower party group – we all began initially the same), I made the decision to join the lower viewpoint hikers and our REI leader... a truly peaceful and satisfying hike. A/M went up with the GIANT THRONG. I will tell my story first and then I will quote Allison about her evening. After climbing about 500(+) feet with

the GIANT THRONG (did I say that enough?), the lower party headed right – contouring through lovely terrain on a nice trail for a few miles. We then came to the lowest of several viewpoints along the side of this big dangerous rockslide area called the Sciara del Fuoco; this is where the majority of flowing lava has come down from the summit craters. We then climbed up a sometimes very steep path another 500(+) feet to the final/highest viewpoint you can visit without a guide. As we climbed, it wasn't dark but you could hear these big explosions every 15 minutes or so. At the top, it finally was possible to see the red explosions – which I managed to photograph a few of. We waited at the top viewpoint about 30 minutes before deciding to descend to the lower one – mostly because we didn't want to stumble down the steep section in the dark (even with our headlamps). We hung around the lower viewpoint and ate our sandwich dinners – taking in a few more explosions. But then the wind picked up and it became sort of cold. Having thoroughly enjoyed our time with Stromboli's explosions, we donned headlamps for real and followed a gentle, almost road-like route down. About 300 feet above the coast (but still 3 miles from our hotel/San Vincenzo), we arrived at this out-there but clearly popular restaurant called the Observatory with a FULL-ON view of all the explosions (we enjoyed probably the most spectacular from there – along with dozens of people sitting on the deck by candlelight eating what looked like delicious dinners. Why REI didn't offer up this third option mystified us – mostly because the restaurant will actually pick you up in town. After using their restroom, we QUICKLY walked dirt roads and then village thoroughfares back to our hotel... arriving there by 8:45. We were all super-excited to meet everyone else (whom we could clearly see descending – the mountainside sparkling with 125+ headlamps in long trail-chains) and hear how AMAZING their views were from the summit. BUT...



Left to Right: A/M pictures – typical trail, multiple groups spaced on switchbacks, “exposed” ridgeline near summit, only visible lava

Allison's Summary: “Monday night, Marshall and I climbed Stromboli volcano in time for the sunset. The idea is to see the lava fountains at night. Unfortunately, we had too much gas and smoke to see anything. Sarah took an easier hike to a lower observation point and had great views of the lava. The hike up Stromboli itself was cool, although you have to go with an alpine guide so you are in a herd of up to 200 people. Hopefully we burned off some of those pastries we've been eating! (Sarah: amen to that!)” It is interesting to note that we did each hike about the same mileage; the summit group just did about 2700 feet/lost gained, where I did about 1200 feet gained/lost. Their climb was pretty much straight up after I left for the lower route – although there were LOTS of tight little switchbacks to the final ridge. They spent about 30 minutes at the first viewpoint where they hit the final ridgeline to the summit. Allison said that was the ONLY time she saw anything glowing (see image above with a few embers). During that 30 minutes, other parties took their turns going up/along the final ridge to the summit. Allison reported nothing particularly scary about this supposedly exposed ridge. After 20 minutes on the actual summit – nothing but swirling clouds and very cold – they headed down, taking a different route back – pretty much all fast sand-skiing a la Vulcano. That part I would have enjoyed... except for the GIANT THRONG! In general, Allison rated the climb up St. Helens is significantly harder than Stromboli. Indeed, the family did that this August – with A/M and Ellen/Bruno making it... but me petering out after climbing 3000 feet (mostly because of lingering smoke in the air that affected my breathing).

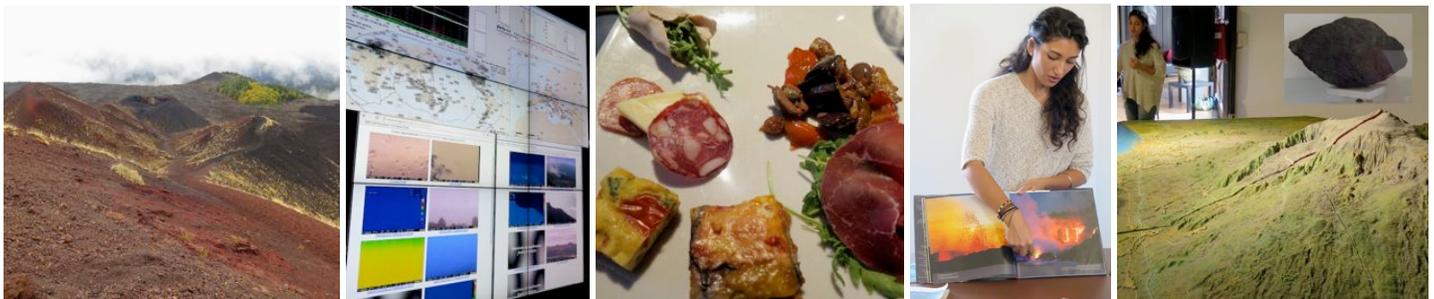


Left to Right: Rifugio Sapienza – the only pleasantries about our time at Etna, promising morning views, Silvestri craters

October 5-7: Back to Sicily, Etna Sadness, Catania, Yeah - It's Time To Go...

The next day basically represented the reverse itinerary (only longer and more frustrating and tiring) of what we did October 1: making our way back across nearly all the islands via hydrofoil, returning to Milazzo, driving towards Catania – but then heading UP to 6000 feet on Mt. Etna... all in a DELUGE rain-storm. In talking with many in our party that day and evening, it didn't seem like any of us really understood we were going to be traveling ALL day... sitting, sitting, sitting, schlepping, schlepping, schlepping... NO time to walk or hike. Of course, this was in contrast with the guides' presentation – which did include an hour of short walking at the Silvestri Craters around 4, after we arrived at the base of Etna. Alas, this was not the only frustrating communication problems along the way. For starters, we were all clearly told we had until 10:30 to vacate our rooms. After another delicious and leisurely breakfast, many of us received unhappy front desk phonecalls at 10 demanding we get out now! And so we had an extra 30 minutes to twiddle our thumbs in the lobby, the hydrofoil boarding process supposedly starting at 11:15. After schlepping to the harbor, the line did not budge until almost noon. As per usual, the crowds were HORRIBLE all the way on the hydrofoils – the sea extremely choppy to the point we

rocked and rolled for probably 90 minutes of the 3-hour ride. Even though we didn't have to change ships at any time, we arrived nearly 30 minutes late to Milazzo. Our lunch for the day consisted of a pre-made simple rice salad with eggs, corn, and tomatoes – which I wolfed right before boarding the very small bus (after being told I was not be allowed to eat on the bus). Although the weather had been sunny in the islands and on the north side of Sicily, the rain began in earnest around Taormina – and then turned into an outright deluge as we began climbing... the old narrow roads flooding with a river of rain. Sensing hunger and grumbling, we pulled over for gelato and pastries in some village above Catania (alas, I finally discovered a gelato flavor – milk - that was unimpressive). Above this village, the scenery socked in with heavy fog almost immediately, slowing us down to a crawl. But you could definitely begin seeing the HUGE fields of very impressive lava that represent Etna's recent flows. In the end, we did not arrive at our lodge (Rifugio Sapienza – RIGHT at the gondola station that heads up the mountain) until after-dark 6 p.m. With rain pouring at the lodge – and snow falling higher – it was very cold. But thankfully, the lodge reminded me of places in the Alps and so it had this familiar, mountain feel I always enjoy. After hauling luggage upstairs and cleaning up, we regrouped in the bar annex at 7:30 video about Etna. I was surprisingly enthralled by this – mostly because I found it hilarious that the Italians had more or less succeeded in using heavy equipment, dynamite, and other engineering feats to actually divert several recent eruption flows away from developed areas (including our lodge). Who knew? Dinner was also really great: an opening course that featured a pasta duo with meaty ragu and pistachio cream, more pork medallions – this time with AMAZING pan-fried potatoes (!!!), little cannoli's for dessert... along with limoncello. In reviewing the table as I left, I would say our group set the wine consumption record that night (I swear there were a dozen empty bottles of red wine out... and, as usual, I left before all of our hardest drinkers were finished).



Left to Right: parting shots of Etna, Volcano House – monitoring board, lunch, volcanology guide, map – note “bomb” insert upper right

Although our guides mentioned the slim possibility that we may go part-way up Etna the next day, they pulled the plug on that idea right out of the gate... even though the gondolas were running up the mountain and the cloudy weather seemed less intense than yesterday. Many in our party were not happy about this decision and would have preferred to at least ride the gondola up to see what conditions were really like up there (but, as cynically pointed out by a few folks: that would have cost a bunch of money!). Instead, we headed out after breakfast to walk around and up a few of the adjacent Silvestri Craters for about 90 minutes... amongst multiple CF's. Indeed, where things had been very peaceful yesterday, at least half a dozen tour-buses had ALREADY arrived, dumping their contents all over the parking area just outside our lodge. After returning to the lodge (now in a more steady rain), we had initially been promised 20 minutes to shower/change... but, of course, that was whittled down to less than 10 minutes (meaning most people skipped the offer). Tired of all the changes, I did everything I needed to... only to discover – of course – that our pick-up bus was ONE HOUR BEHIND SCHEDULE. Seriously? Apparently, they are not used to fog and rain in Sicily. Plan B for the day was to visit one of a few Etna museums (this was called the Volcano House) in the village of Nicolosi. While the museum lunch and modern building was nice, I cannot say we learned anything new. But our volcanology guide was serious and pretty enough that we, as a group, did not want to hurt her feelings as she showed us several live webcams/monitoring systems of places we'd been (e.g. Stromboli, Vulcano, Etna), went over the big Etna map talking about everything from last night's video, etc. The did have some nice “volcanic bomb” specimens (see insert in last photo above); basically, when a blob of liquid lava explodes into the air, it is aerodynamically formed into a football shape as it flies to the ground. The sizes of these things can range from palm-sized to a few feet.



Left to Right: Benedictine Monastery/univeristy, old earthquake sensors, red room with modern floor, spring-fed underground creek

From Nicolosi, we reboarded the bus and headed down to Catania, arriving a little over an hour later in another epic rainstorm. Our hotel reminded me of the place we stayed in Naples, although it was on a busy, nondescript, car-accessible street. Unfortunately, I never warmed up to Catania – which is sad because it was our leader's hometown and, while he was very enthusiastic about everything, most of us were tired. After a fruitless search for an ATM, I cleaned up for what turned into another long pre-dinner tour immediately followed by dinner (all on foot). This time, we walked about 20 blocks to visit what used to be a Benedictine monastery but is now all part of the university. Although not as interesting as the underground Naples tour, it was sort of neat to see all these walls of lava that came down from Etna in the 1500's (some were stopped by a surrounding outer wall/sand barrier – but then a big earthquake/fire happened). Amusingly (given that our group was represented by 4 scientists), there was a European genetics-meets-pharmaceuticals conference going on – with technical posters lining many walkways. Although we could not get into a number of the

rooms where talks were going on, we toured several underground areas... the old monastery kitchen and storage areas, which now contained displays of old earthquake sensors. One large former storage room (the "red room") had been renovated with a modern ceiling/floor that was cantilever-engineered to lack supporting pillars. We also viewed one of only about half a dozen places in Catania where some formerly above-ground pristine-looking spring-fed creek can be seen. Of course, the funniest (or saddest) thing about the Benedictine monastery cum university tour was that before heading out on foot for more city-touring, several of us needed to use a bathroom. We were directed to this side-building that, remarkably, seemed to open downwards to many lecture rooms. And of course, RIGHT when we arrived, there seemed to be some kind of a lecture break – and all these college students swarmed up the stairwells, flooding the entryway and out into the open plaza SMOKING SMOKING SMOKING.



Left to Right: spring-fed creek fountain near Piazza del Duomo with famous elephant (carved from lava), church... and Theatre Bellini

Heading out again, we spent probably another hour doing a sort of Naples-esque walking tour – albeit less crowded but often going through more weird little alleyways covered with graffiti (places, some of us noted, we would never choose to walk on our own). At some point, we visited this lava-walled basement grotto of a very smoky bar where you could also see the aforementioned spring-fed creek (our leader was super-into surprising us with this visit, splitting the group in half and then taking each down separately because of limited space). Near the end of our walk, we came to a big fancy fountain powered by the spring-fed creek near the Piazza del Duomo. By around 7:30 (30 minutes past my hunger threshold), we finally arrived at a small trattoria-style restaurant for dinner. Thankfully, the meal was served family-style, meaning you picked what you wanted (and how much) from platters. Following a generous selection of great appetizer options, the pumpkin risotto was delicious (and I normally do not like pumpkin risotto)... and the meat-tray main course was, well, interesting. By this point, I was sort of full – but I (and over half the group) could not turn down trying ground horsemeat patties. Although I only had about a tablespoon, I will not lie: it was delicious. We then enjoyed the salad course, lemon gelato, and a birthday cake (or the closest thing our leader could find) for one of our group members. Had we been closer to our hotel, I am sure the drinking would have been longer and heavier... but as it stood, we had to successfully walk a good 10 blocks back – with most of us ready for bed because we were leaving tomorrow. Although there was good effort to toast/tip the guides, our party seemed to disperse with virtually no fanfare at the level of saying goodbye or exchanging emails. This seemed a little surprising to me because, in general, we were a lively and sociable group.



Left to Right: A/M morning visit to VGM, Zaans Schans – selfie, sisters in the shoe, better weather than we thought...

October 8-11: Back to Holland... and HOME

The next morning at around 9:30 – in another HUGE downpour, A/M, another woman, and I shared a taxi-van to Catania's borderline CF airport. Although our guides suggested scheduling an hour for said drive, it took us only 15 minutes – meaning extra thumb-twiddling at the gate. Thankfully as in Rome, there were good – and cheap - lunch/food options; we each ate one of the famous arancini (giant rice balls/oblongs mixed with red/meat-sauce or spinach-cheese, and then lightly breaded and fried). During our slightly extended layover in Rome (i.e. our flight was 45 minutes late taking off), we enjoyed a final gelato (alas, their version of the Ellen-hyped chestnut flavor was too sweet). We enjoyed some great views of the Alps en route, but then the clouds socked in across northern Europe – and very high winds made for an applause-worthy landing in Amsterdam. But that is where the momentary fun ended. On-line searches suggested that a cab-ride to our central Amsterdam hotel would run about \$45; in fact, the fee was over \$70 – eating nearly all our combined cash – AND we still had to walk/schlep bags a few blocks (because we were on one of the pedestrian-only side-streets near the Red Light District). As noted, the pot smoke was so thick in our neighborhood that you could probably achieve a contact high just by breathing outside certain coffee-houses. This was actually surprising to me because I have, in fact, visited Amsterdam a few times and never smelled much in the way of marijuana while, like, walking the streets. Following quick showers, we headed out in search of an ATM and Thai food – this time accidentally touring the in-your-face sex shop areas. Indeed, the numbers of dildos, gas mask-themed S/M paraphernalia, and torso-based sex aids (often featuring cat-tail boas) was, honestly, slightly hilarious to me – particularly after all the Pompeii porn-erotica. Alas, our target Thai place had a 60-minute wait – leaving us to backtrack to this less crazy Tibet-themed restaurant... which, in the Netherlands, means: mostly bland Chinese stir-fry (although they did claim to serve Yak-butter tea). After a short trip to one of many Albert Heijn mini-markets (which Allison accidentally but amusingly renamed "Albert Hygeine") to pick up snacks for tomorrow, it was – or should have been – sleeping time. Unfortunately, I tossed and turned most of the

night – waking over and over again with horrible nasal congestion and a bad sore throat. In the end, I skipped the morning activities with Ellen (i.e. walking about 20 blocks to the Van Gogh Museum, which I'd seen before, and then doing a more meandering walking tour of the canals back) to hydrate and recover. At around 1:30, we regrouped back at the hotel and paid a less hideous cab-fare back to Ellen's car, which was parked in outer Amsterdam. Shockingly, everyone and everything fit in Ellen's tiny car.



Left to Right: Middle Eastern women very excited to pose with cute man-bun wooden shoemaker, the pigment/paint windmill

The afternoon was focused on visiting sort-of-nearby (45 minutes) Zaans Schans, a windmill-focused attraction I'd done on a day-tour last fall – and which I'd really enjoyed. Although the forecast was questionable, the winds were great enough that the clouds (and rain) were often blown away quickly, leaving sunny blue skies. Given the weather and somewhat off-season, there were FAR less crowds here than I was expecting – and so we finally escaped what felt like a perpetual CF across Italy (praise jebus!). Although it was free to enter Zaans Schans, you had to pay to park, to use the toilets, and to enter the open windmills. Thankfully, the wooden shoe-making facility (which was closed last fall when I was here before) was free AND they started an exciting demonstration (almost identical to the one I'd enjoyed last fall in Marken) when a few large groups arrived (one Middle Eastern, the other Chinese – they had just completed a river cruise from Switzerland). I thought the above man-bun picture and enthusiasm was adorable – even if the lighting was terrible. We then headed out on the walking paths to the many windmills lined up along the scenic river – making a short detour through the cheese-making area (closed last fall), which was sort of like the cheese place I visited in Volendam – mostly focused on free samples and buying things. Moving on to the windmills, I had hoped all would be open this time (last fall, only the oil-pressing one was open) – but only the oil-pressing and pigment/paint-making one was open (the sawmill one, which fascinates me the most, was closed again!). And, of course, there was a \$4 fee to enter (which surprised me because it had been included in our tour fee last year – so I didn't realize they charged). We also bought some hot chocolate, since they were tempting you with that as you entered. Since they charged the entry fee, I was hoping someone would do a presentation (which they did last fall at the oil-pressing mill for our group of 30)... but, no, everything was "read on your own." Basically – the mill pressed out some kind of calcium-containing stone and then that was mixed with various minerals or botanicals to achieve the colors. You could buy jars of solid pigments and there were instructions for mixing with water or oil to make paint at home. Given that A/M and Ellen were taking their time at places I'd seen before, I made a B-line for the old-timey bakery so I could enjoy a proper Dutch waffle and another hot drink – this time actually sitting down and taking my time to eat (last fall, they were about to close and I had to eat the waffle on the run). This time, there was quite a line and I shared a table with folks from both the aforementioned big tour groups.



Left to Right: cyclists and the weather we'd like to remember from Holland, bad weather the last day – North Sea, Leiden, Hague

We headed to the Hague around 5, hitting some traffic en route. Allison and Marshall were staying near the government buildings in a really nice (and decently priced) Holiday Inn – so we dropped their luggage off and then moved back to Ellen's apartment for a home-cooked dinner via her nearby Albert Hygiene. The next day, with a horrible forecast (that all came true), Ellen, Bruno, A/M braved the weather for a hike to the North Sea, followed by some walking, canal-touring, and Dutch pancake-eating in Leiden. Given that I have done all those things (including with my mother when we all visited Ellen in 2013), I decided to use today to get caught up on pending work – relaxing at Ellen's, taking a couple short Queen's Forest walks between the windy squalls. We met later that night at an excellent Indonesian restaurant (De Poentjak) near A/M's hotel for a Dutch-influenced meal called Rijstafal (sort of like dim sung meets tapas – MANY small bowl/plate dishes of meats, vegetables, and fruit). The next morning, Ellen kindly shepherded each of us separately to the airport (A/M at the crack of dawn, me around 11) for our flights home.

Closing Thoughts

As far as our REI tour goes, it is super-hard for me to judge them on this particular trip because the level of difficulty was less than what we usually take on with other companies... and Southern Italy was SO CROWDED compared with the wilderness-y places we usually try to go. Cost-wise, REI runs this trip about \$1000 less than comparable Sicily-Aolian Island tours run in the area by, say, Wilderness Travel (which I had considered – but their trips were all full). Having patronized with Wilderness Travel a few times before (including in northern Italy), I would say that many aspects of REI's relative cost-savings were palpable (i.e. the hotels were not as high-end, the service was lower in the sense that there was more gear-schlepping, and the "walking tours" were simplistic and sometimes cheap-

feeling). On the other hand, I felt REI (and our leaders in particular) were very generous and mindful about food and wine on this trip. In general, our large group was more diverse in terms of age, background, and expectations than I've experienced with other companies and, in general, that was a mostly positive thing. I would describe half our party as being very fit regular hikers (who likely felt this trip was too easy/slow), and the other half as less regular hikers for whom the activity level was about right (with Stromboli being challenging). Nearly everyone was extremely interested in summiting Stromboli, which increased tensions given the gear questions that arose that day; I also sensed that one of our members (one of the oldest in the party – but also one of the most experienced and fit) felt pressured by the guides not to attempt Stromboli because of her age; if that is true, this saddens me a lot because it adds another dimension to the “Stromboli problems” encountered on this trip. One of the questions REI asks clients at the end of the trip to evaluate is whether they would recommend this trip to a friend... and I struggled a lot with this one because, honestly, most of my friends would not enjoy this trip simply because of the lack of wilderness, in conjunction with the throngs of tourists. My revised answer to this question: if after reading this account, the destination sounds interesting (which it was for me), then by all means go... Southern Italy is what it is and it's probably not going to change, volcanoes notwithstanding.