

sicily

Sensational Sicily



From gelato to exploding volcanos, the Italian island of Sicily offers plenty of treats for kids.

Go to bed or witness a volcano erupting? Needless to say, my 10-year-old son didn't hesitate when given the choice. We'd just flown into Sicily's Catania airport and it was close to midnight, but nothing – repeat nothing – was going to prevent Max from checking out the spectacular lava flow issuing from Mt Etna. After weeks of traipsing through museums, churches and galleries throughout northern Italy there was finally something really cool to see, and there was no way his mother's tedious adherence to bedtime curfews was going to keep him away.

Fortunately, Gaetano Failla and Maria Sancio-lo-Bell of Echoes Events, an Australian-based travel company specialising in tours to Sicily, know

exactly what young travellers like. Meeting us at the airport, they had suggested a quick trip to observe Etna erupting before dropping us at our B&B in Catania. Having never visited Sicily before, I had chosen to book a customised tour of the island. I'd been influenced by the fact that the company offers a program of 'Peter Pan' packages – itineraries specifically designed for families travelling with young children. The fascination on Max's face as we drove towards the brightly glowing lava cascading down the side of the volcano immediately reassured me that I had made the right decision.

Give and take

I've travelled with Max since he was a toddler, and have learned that successful holidays are those that



Main: The drama of Mt Etna, one of the world's most active volcanos. From bottom left: A Greek temple in Sicily. Virginia and Max at Taormina, Sicily. Max on a quad excursion at Alacantia Gorge. Max at the agriturismo farm stay in Butera. One of the joys of Italy - gelato!



From top: History and great views go hand in hand at Taormina. The valley below Mt Etna. A traditional Sicilian car in Erice

balance adult-oriented activities with kid-focused ones. On this trip I'd followed a two-hour visit to the Uffizi Gallery (my choice) with a gelato stop (his), bartered a three-hour pilgrimage through churches in the medieval town centre of Lucca for an hour's bike ride around the city walls, and traded two hours exploring the Palatine archaeological site in Rome with a session at the city's interactive cinema.

We had agreed that the holiday's Sicilian finale would involve lots of kid-friendly (aka 'cool') stuff. Max had researched travel guidebooks and the internet, and had put together a list of things he would like to see and do when in Sicily. I passed this onto Maria and Gaetano, who then came up with an itinerary that was immediately appealing to him while also managing to avoid theme parks (meaning that I was happy, too).

The day after arriving we spent a wonderful morning at the Alcantara Gorge, a spectacular river gorge created by millennia-old lava flows. Gentle white water, alluring rock pools and loads of rocks to clamour over makes it an enormous hit with kids. After a swim, we hopped on quad bikes and drove to a different stretch of the gorge for a trek. Max's assessment? "That was totally awesome, Mum!"

Cheap and cheerful

One of the best things about visiting Sicily was its affordability. The first part of our trip had been spent in Venice, Milan and Florence, none of which can be described as economical destinations (the term 'ruinously expensive' immediately comes to mind). The perfect solution in Sicily was to stay in agriturismo (farm stays) – Max loved exploring the farms, and I adored staying in the stylishly converted historic farm buildings, most of which were surrounded by picturesque vineyards, olive groves and fruit-tree plantations.

What else did we enjoy? Taking a

moonlight walk through the Greek temples of Agrigento was a highlight for us both, hopping aboard a cable-car in Trapani to visit the spectacular hill-top town of Erice was unforgettable, and attending Palermo's famous L'Opera dei Pupi (puppet theatre) was a hoot.

Tasty treats

And the food was simply sensational. Max was in seventh heaven when he discovered the island's naughty secret – breakfasts of brioches filled with granita Siciliana (fruit sorbet) – and he and I both developed an infatuation with the local cakes, pastries and biscuits, many of which are made with sweetened ricotta.

Seasonal specialities abound – seared swordfish steaks with a side salad of sun ripened tomatoes and fragrant basil, plump prawns in spicy

cous-cous, and farm-style pork and fennel sausages accompanied by a tangy orange and onion salad are just a few of those we sampled. Max ate everything with alacrity – there were no requests for junk food fixes, just plea upon plea for second helpings.

On the plane from Palermo back to Rome, I asked Max if he'd enjoyed his time in Sicily. His answer said it all: "When can we go again?"

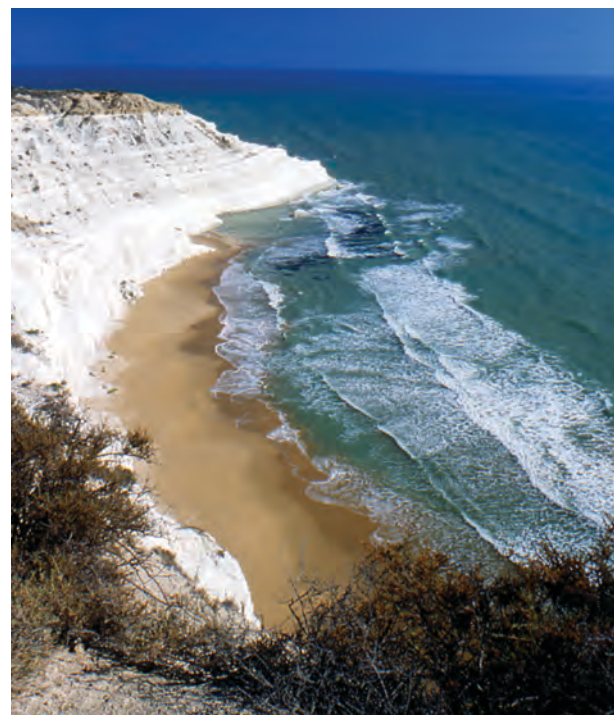
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footnotes

Echoes Events is an Australian-based company specialising in travel to Sicily.

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Beautiful Scala Turchi Beach, near Agrigento.

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