



FAILING *in love* with Bandit Country



Sarah Stirling finds herself in a whirl on a hiking, cycling and climbing adventure deep in the Sicilian outback.

"Oh stop!" I yelled, clenching my face and toes against the impact.

We'd explored much of Sicily's wild Madonie National Park that day, mostly by accident. Our map was a work of fiction, Damien decided, cross, hot and lost; we weren't attuned to the enigmatic ways of Sicily's dark interior, yet. Then, halfway down yet another switchback lane, we were dealt a lesson in it.

The road led us straight through a farmyard, past one of those Mediterranean houses that make you hold your breath in case they fall down, with patched, peeling shutters perfectly matching the shapes of the wonky window frames.

On the other side of the road sat the old man, watching his goats in the pasture below; looking peacefully over the surrounding patchwork of soft olive, forest green and clay-coloured felt that was draped over the rolling hills, cliffs and mountains. Distracted by all this, we didn't see the ball of fluff curled up enjoying a hot dust bath inside a pothole until the last minute.

The car screeched to a stop and I leapt out into the dust cloud, hoping it wasn't dead, whatever it was. Finally I spotted two pairs of liquid brown eyes looking at me: the indignant ones of a dusty border collie puppy, and the surprised ones of its owner, craned round in surprise at the fuss.

As the car ticked down, along with my heartbeat, I proffered a question in that nonchalant tone Brits use when totally lost: "Mi scusi, dove è la sorgente naturale?"

The man pointed to his truck and smiled in that good-humoured way Sicilians do, implying he had all the time in the world for us, and would show us. Looking less friendly, the puppy's eyes plotted

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revenge from behind hairy ankles and espadrilles.

"That's Sicilian friendliness right there," said Damien, reversing. "I thought you said they were all lazy bandits who can't draw accurate maps?"

"HE'S probably not. You're just generalising."

Three bends up the road the farmer got out and pointed down a path with a humorous bow: "Prego."

A short walk later, I stared open-mouthed. We'd been looking for a natural spring to wild camp by. On our map it was a tiny yellow fountain symbol. This, however, was a hot thermal spring cascading into a rockpool. A natural hot tub with a mountain view in the middle of nowhere.

This turned out to be typical of Sicily. On the surface we found the Med's largest island disarmingly open and friendly; then it tangled us up in chaos when we were least expecting it. Once we were sweaty, frustrated, and perhaps bleeding, it charmed us back to square one.

When we'd first arrived on Sicily, the lowering ferry ramp had revealed bedlam under a red evening sky, as a heady cocktail of hot late night air, petrol and noise rose up. The capital city of Palermo gatecrashes all your senses, including your sixth sense for impending car accidents.

I'd stared at a motorbike speeding the wrong way down a dual carriageway; a child perched in front of the rider, chin casually in hands, elbows resting between handlebars. Dark hair flowed: no-one wore helmets. Cars surged ever-impatiently forward, turning junctions into haphazard Tetris games.

Later, in a city square, a smiling waiter offered to lead us to a garden table. Sitting down we realised it was a different restaurant entirely: he'd cannily poached his neighbour's clients.

Now, an hour inland from Palermo, we'd found a slower pace of life deep in the Madonie National Park. Much slower. The next morning, in the region's main town of Caltavuturo, men were busy putting the world to rights. Dressed in flat caps, shirts and chinos, they clustered everywhere, talking and drinking. Rows of brown eyes followed us curiously.

Where were the women? As I looked round, an old lady watching the world from her window ducked at the sight of us, revealing an inch of white parting above her chestnut bun. She tweaked a net curtain across and peeked, wide-eyed.

We jangled through a string curtain. Inside even this tiny cafe a barista played a huge, gleaming coffee machine like a grand piano. Men holding espressos gathered round. Sicilians are the friendliest people I've ever met. Perhaps too friendly, sometimes.

Eyes twinkling in a weathered face, one man pointed to me, then his ring finger. "No," we laughed, signing that we weren't married. Pointing to my face and legs, he gestured that Damien should reconsider my assets.

Before Damien was talked into swapping me for a goat and a bag of olives, I suggested a walk. At the top of town we found a tumbledown castle swallowed by woodland on a promontory; the setting sun projecting black tree shadows set in pink onto its one remaining complete limestone wall.

Below us the whole town was laid out: terracotta roofs cascading over impossibly steep and narrow cobbled streets. Like many Sicilian towns and villages, Caltavuturo is far from nestled in the clichéd spot; it's stacked precariously right on the cliff-edge of a hill-top.

It's not surprising if Sicilians are particularly defensive, underneath the friendly exterior. Palermo is dubbed The World's Most Conquered City. Sicily has been claimed by the Greeks, Romans, Byzantines, Arabs, Normans, French, Spanish and Bourbon over its history. Then the Mafia took the law into their own hands.

It's fun to stumble across bizarre remnants of all these periods on hikes - perhaps an ancient cave city or classical Greek ruins - and the hill-crowning villages and towns made exciting road-biking targets, complete with silky-rich €1 cappuccinos as rewards.

I gathered snapshot memories while pedaling. A wizened man wearing only dusty shorts moved in an olive grove: with a hand up to shield the sun he'd resembled the trees he tended. Ruined farm buildings cracked at the seams, opening towards the sun like flowers. Golden cows wore wide, cream leather collars fastened with thong-and-duffle buttons. There was a peaceful sense of human life and nature

VISIT THE MADONIE NATIONAL PARK

- Climbing guidebook: di Roccia di Sole: Climbing in Sicily
- Get a cycle touring map from: www.touringclub.com
- It's hard to find info on the web but there is a tourist information centre on the road behind and parallel to the main road in Caltavuturo. They will weigh you down with leaflets and free walking maps.
- National Park offices in Petralia Sottana and Cefalù stock the 1:50,000 Madonie/Carta dei Sentieri e del Paesaggio map (€3), which highlights the region's best walking trails.
- Also hard to find: there is wifi at a restaurant in Caltavuturo called Alter Ego. Pizza cost €6. www.alteregocult.it
- No-one seemed to mind us respectfully wild camping in the Madonie National Park.
- Bed and breakfast is available at the picturesque Le Case di Cardellino, just down the road from the thermal spring. B&B costs from €55; 50% discount for children from 3 to 8 years. www.lecasedicardellino.com
- Fly there: Easyjet fly from London Gatwick to Palermo, and Ryanair from Stansted.



entwined.

Then, lost in my poetry, I swerved to avoid a pothole, wobbled over tarmac that had blistered in the sun like a volcano, and crashed.

In Palermo a mechanic agreed to fix my bike immediately and chatted like an old friend while flamboyantly wielding tools. What service! But the next day we realised he'd fitted the wrong model of part; jammed it in so I'd need a new wheel.

So instead of cycling we tackled Pizzo Carbonara (1979m); not an Italian carb-fest but the second highest peak on Sicily after famous volcanic Etna. In fact, the Madonie National Park guards six of Sicily's highest peaks.

Hiking above Carbonara's tree-line we emerged on a bald mountain top scattered with limestone boulders. Strong-smelling goats

stared at us over them, while we stared out at the view. We hadn't seen any other people.

The higher land in the Madonie is cooler and forested; lush with streams tumbling down and wild flowers everywhere. The glorious reds, greens and yellows cloaking the mountains contrasts beautifully with the dry, rolling agricultural plains spread around their feet.

A circuit of Carbonara's plateau was marked on our map. The path was at first obvious, but once it gained our confidence it grew faint and, once it was too late to turn back, vanished. We scrambled on through huge boulder fields and dense prickly forest.

An experienced mountaineer, Damien had to get used to getting lost on Sicily. It grew so late we were forced to enjoy sunset from the mountain-side. The sky was vivid red; the sun

dipping into a low band of bright purple clouds so dense they looked like magical trees. Beautiful, enigmatic Sicily.

Climbing area Cabeci - the largest of several sport crags in the region - provided a similar challenge. The guidebook described an easy 15-minute walk in. An hour later we were torn, tattered and wishing for a machete on a path overgrown to head-high prickly bramble. Our reward? Fifty sports routes for all tastes on soaring cliffs, and no-one else in sight.

Later, after a moonlit hot tub session, I reflected that in some ways Sicily is a caricature of Italy. Removed from the mainstream mainland, the coastal cities are even more unruly and chaotic; the inland villages ruled by ancient Mediterranean traditions and surrounded by untamed wildernesses.

Then a rustling in the bush behind our tent made me stare, wide-eyed.

"You get scared outside in the dark, don't you," comforted Damien. "Just remember, it's all the

same things here as when it was light."

He thought for a moment, then added: "The main predators to be scared of in Europe are big cats. In the 70s it became illegal to keep them as pets, so some people just released them. They found each other and bred."

A cow mooed balefully in the dark. I jumped. "You wouldn't feel it though, if you were attacked by a leopard," he added helpfully. "You'd be pumped with adrenalin. More pasta?"

Lying awake that night, I finally heard paws padding past, then a hungry tongue slurping and rattling a metal camping bowl. I froze, terrified. Then I guessed who it was. The puppy from the farm below us, come to get revenge!

Gently, I lifted the fabric and peeked. Spines glowed in the moonlight. A tiny porcupine, the sound of its tiny lapping tongue magnified by the silent hillside. Beautiful, enigmatic and wild; unexpected, charming and well-armed with prickly defenses. It left me a quill as a fitting memento of the Madonie National Park.

5 TIPS TO STOP YOU GOING CRAZY IN SICILY

- Don't expect anything to happen between midday and 4pm or on Sundays.
- Do stay in an agriturismo for a few nights, but not too many, if you value your waistline. On an Italian farm stay you will likely be treated to real Sicilian food - five courses including a pasta and meat dish - mostly cooked from their own local produce.
- Rent a small car. Roads can be very narrow.
- Learn a bit of Italian before you go and bring a phrasebook - away from the beaten track people won't speak English.
- If you want a simple, straightforward climbing and beach trip, head for San Vito and stay there. If you want more of an adventure head for the interior!

