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# Hot stuff in Sicily



If your idea of fun is super sailing and wonderful food against the backdrop of an active volcano, the Aeolian Islands might be the ideal place for a charter holiday. *Ross Farncombe* gets a little too close for comfort.

It was hardly an auspicious start to our holiday. I could see the looks of disappointment on the faces of the crew. I'd let them down badly. How on earth could we be the only group of people at Stansted Airport at 0400 without a group identity?

It was true. I'd failed in my duties as skipper to provide my crew, Dick, Kevin and Ian, with the means of being identified as one of us. Not the group of blokes in England shirts with (I assume) their own names on the back, going to Germany for some football tournament. Or the group of girls, rushing around the check-in area in matching pink, fluffy, cowboy hats, on their way to a jolly hen weekend in Barcelona.

We were the group of guys flying to Palermo for a week's sailing in the Aeolian Islands and, unlike everyone else, we were wearing nothing to tell

the rest of the world about it!

I must admit to never having flown with Ryanair before or having flown from Stansted, but economics dictated that it should be so. A 2½-hour direct flight from Stansted to Palermo cost the princely sum of £109 each return, all taxes included. To fly from Heathrow with Alitalia with a stopover and change in mainland Italy, taking a total of over four hours, would have cost a total of £459 return. So Stansted it was.

The flight was fine, really, and our early departure meant that we were in Palermo before 1000. We'd been offered a taxi or minibus to collect us, but at a cost of around £145 (€200), we decided it would make more sense to try the Sicilian rail network, which proved to be an excellent decision. The rail terminus is under the airport and a gentle ramp runs all the way to a ticket

office and the waiting trains.

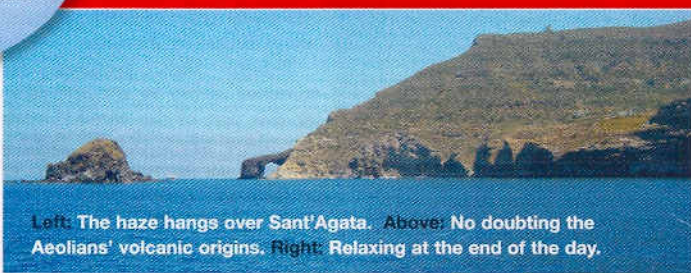
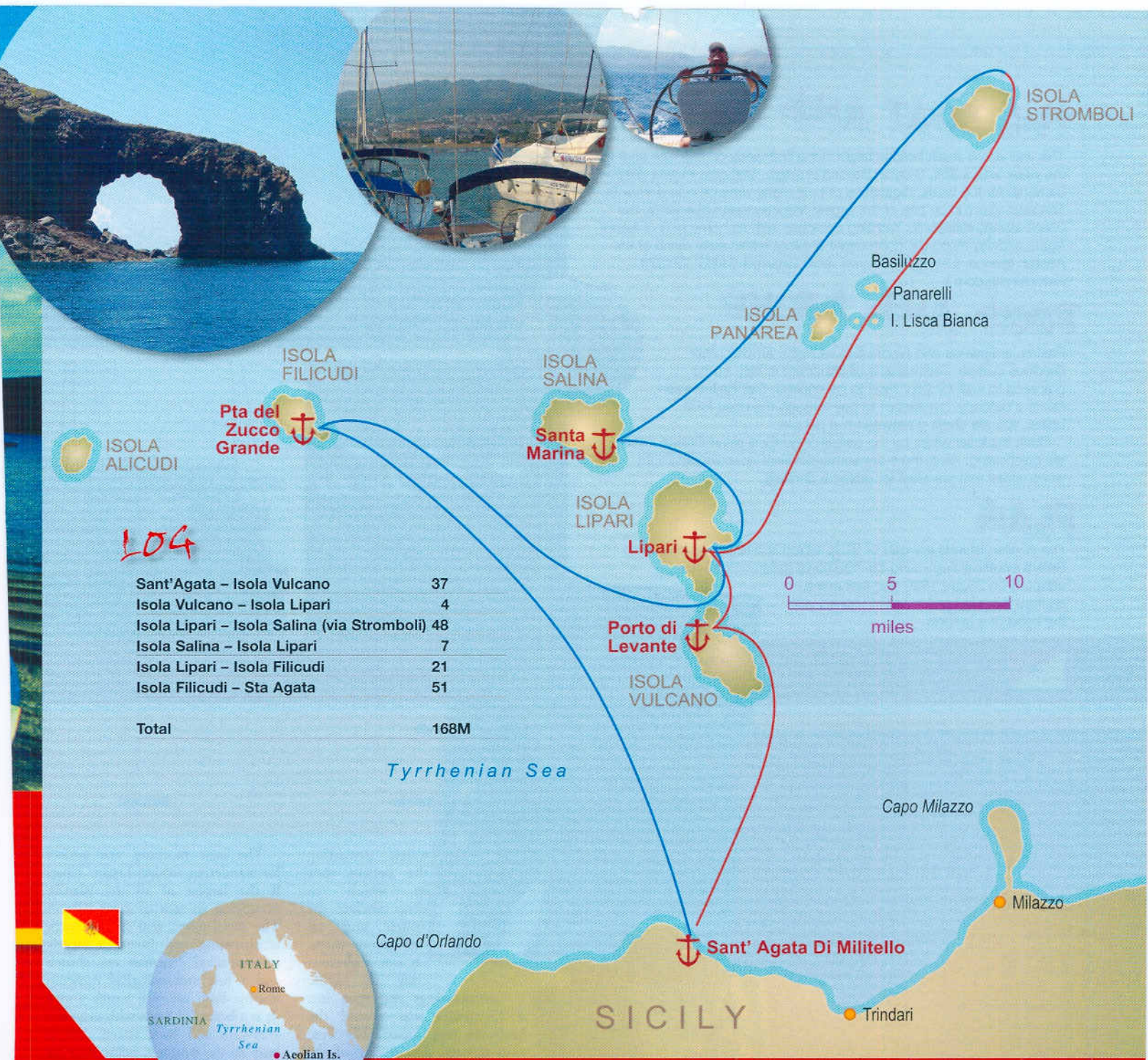
The ticket, for a journey of apparently, some 232km cost a mere £7.50 (€10.55). A word of warning, however, at this juncture. In Italy it is not just sufficient to buy a ticket for a journey. Once you've bought your ticket from the office you must then 'cancel' your ticket in a small orange box. These are generally located close to a platform and must be used just prior to departure. The ticket inspectors are on commission, apparently, so are all too willing to hand out €50 spot fines.

The train service is excellent. The carriages, though old, were clean and, surprisingly, first class is even air-conditioned. We changed trains in Palermo, a very easy, level stroll between platforms, and were soon heading away from the somewhat depressing urban sprawl of Palermo out along the beautiful northern coast

of the island towards our charter base at Sant'Agata di Militello.

Sant'Agata could have been used as the location for a spaghetti western. Tumbleweed rolled down the dusty streets and there wasn't a soul to be seen, but it didn't take us long to rustle up a Fiat 500 taxi and were soon at the new marina at the other end of town. These are early days in this part of Sicily. The Kiriacoulis charter operation has only just moved east from Palermo to make it an easier passage across to the Lipari or Aeolian Islands (as the domain of Aeolus, god of the winds). After a splendid lunch back in town the Kiriacoulis base staff performed a speedy handover of our boat for the week, a Bavaria 36.

Having comfortably stowed our gear away and having seen the fabulous swordfish being landed by one of the local fishing boats, a stroll



Left: The haze hangs over Sant'Agata. Above: No doubting the Aeolians' volcanic origins. Right: Relaxing at the end of the day.



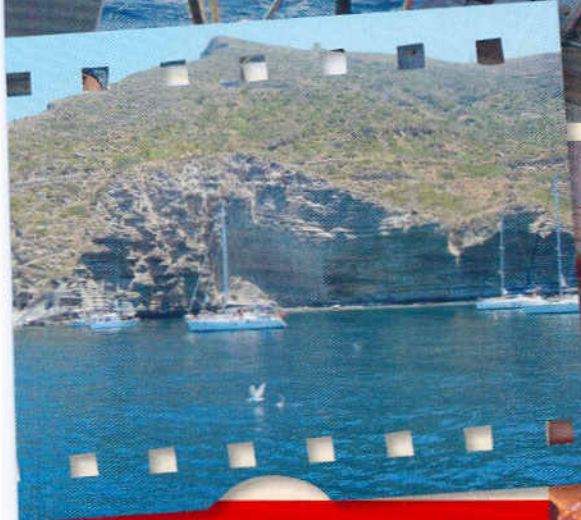
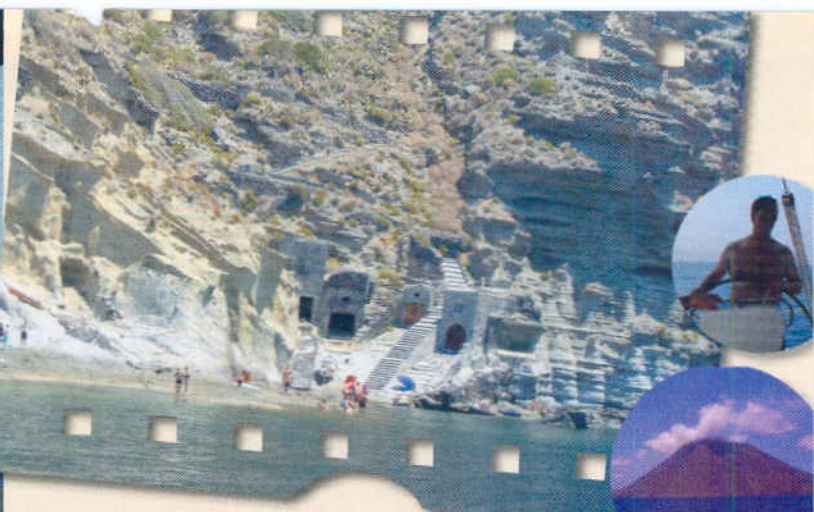
back into town for dinner at one of the many shore side restaurants was called for. We had an excellent meal, but be wary of the limoncello (lemon liqueur) – it's so wonderfully moreish! We were then delivered back to the marina personally by one of the waiters in his people carrier.

Having victualled the boat the day before, we made a reasonably early start and then headed north towards this small group of islands, a volcanic archipelago and our cruising ground

for the next week. Our first port of call was Vulcano. Our word volcano owes its origin to Vulcano. The Roman god of fire, responsible for making the weapons of the gods, was called Vulcan and he lived within the volcano we call Vulcano. The glow of eruptions was thought to be from Vulcan's forges as he worked beneath the earth. Fortunately, Vulcano, though still active, hasn't actually erupted since 1890, but you can still see occasional

puffs of smoke from the top. We moored against an aged pontoon within the main harbour late that afternoon and were soon ashore. The town was bustling and lively as these islands are very popular with day tourists and are easily accessible by ferry or hydrofoil from Milazzo and Messina. For those with stronger constitutions and more adventurous natures, a hot mud bath, I'm told, can be very therapeutic, but I must

admit the acrid, sulphurous fumes had us running for the nearest bar. The next day looked promising, with a stiff breeze inviting us to get up and go sailing. For the first couple of hours it was glorious putting the boat through her paces in hot sunshine on an azure blue sea, but it was not to last. The wind dropped away to nothing and we motored across the strait to find a gorgeous bay. The depths of the sea rise steeply up to about 5m in crystal clear »



### PILOT BOOKS

**Italian Waters Pilot** by Rod Heikell, published by Imray (7th Edition 2006) – Price £37.50

**Mediterranean Almanac with Mediterranean Cruising Handbook** by Rod Heikell and Lucinda Michell (2007-08), published by Imray – Price £29.95

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Above left to right: A typical beach bar; sunset on yet another windless day; one of the idyllic anchorages on Selina: just after early morning mass.



We decided to carry on travelling north the following day; we wanted to get up to Stromboli. How these islands got their name from the 'god of winds' is beyond me. Again, not a puff of breeze to fill the sails. We motored up past Panarea, one of the smaller islands and the sight of Stromboli, with its single volcano shrouded in cloud, soon dominated our view. Creeping up the eastern side of the island we didn't immediately spot any obvious harbour or jetty, so carried on around the top of the island and came down the west coast to see the awesome scree slope that falls down, nearly vertically it seems, from the crater some 1,000m above us down to the sea. The amateur scientists among us then had an inspired thought, wondering if it was made of hot volcanic ash, as it seemed to be puffing smoke at odd intervals. Would it make the water warmer nearer to the bottom of the scree? There was only one way to find out, so we slowly inched towards the base.

There aren't that many active volcanoes in Surrey, from where my merry crew and I hail, so it may come as a surprise to you to know that as we stood, looking up at the top of this slumbering beast, we

didn't really associate the odd puff of smoke and the following rumble with danger. We noticed the odd little pebble being dislodged from the top of the crater that would then bounce and cavort its way down 3,000ft of puffing scree to the sea below, but little else. However, I am sure that most of you who have seen the classic war movie, *The Dambusters*, will remember one of the earlier scenes where Barnes Wallis is out on the estuary watching the incoming bombers trying to launch a bouncing bomb. They only ever seemed to bounce once, before breaking up or just sinking. However, that first bounce carried their bomb a very long way. Now it was that self same effect that was happening to our 'pebbles'. Only after they had got closer to us by some 1,000m did we suddenly realise that these were now rocks of the proportions of the average household fridge that were bouncing a good 150m into the sea. In fact a little further than the distance we were from the shoreline. For the first time that week the crew were in unison as they hollered, "Ross – get the hell out of here!"

Stromboli was a most enthralling sight, but also a very hazardous foray that could have easily ruined

an otherwise very enjoyable week. If we'd read any warnings in the guidebooks we would certainly have stayed clear, but strangely enough, there weren't any.

If you find this scene hard to imagine, visit the Stromboli Online website at [www.swisseduc.ch/stromboli/volcano/simulation/index-en.html](http://www.swisseduc.ch/stromboli/volcano/simulation/index-en.html) where you can spend many a happy evening seeing how far these bombs can travel.

As our pulses returned to normal we beat, metaphorically I'm afraid, a leisurely retreat back down to Salina. It was impossible to tie up against the harbour wall – the inn was full. Salina has a reputation for being one of the places to be amongst the Aeolian Islands, but a good hold for the anchor was to be found within 200m of the end of the harbour wall, so it was an easy dinghy ride ashore for again more splendid food in a lovely little village.

Next day we decided to circumnavigate Salina. Not a monumental passage, but a gentle motor, revealing more idyllic bays and more stunning, but dormant, volcanic scenery. Even a lunchtime return to the harbour couldn't gain us entry, so we lunched and swam in a quiet bay and returned to Lipari for

the night.

It was soon apparent that the week was flying by and though the great god of wind Aeolus seemed to have neglected us, we were never short of something to do. The diving in this part of the world is stunning with the water being so clear – something to which Dick and Kevin will readily attest. However, once more than a few hundred metres offshore, in most places, the depth drops to nearly 1,500m. The quality of the diving manifested itself supremely on our last night away in Filicudi. We had chosen to eat at the only restaurant on the quay, as opposed to the only hotel on the quay. Our meals were all superb, the fish could not get any fresher, or so we thought, until the table of Italian divers next to us invited us to share their spread. They had speared some smallish grouper that afternoon and the restaurant had prepared them specially. It was some of the most delicious fish any of us had ever tasted.

The evening meandered on, with us returning their generosity with bottles of wine and it was a great memento of this so far unspoiled group of islands.

