

A TRIP ACROSS CENTURIES



Exploring ancient history on Italy's small island, Sicily

AP Photo/Siobhan Starrs

Tourist Matthew Kirkland takes a photo of a bronze statue at the Valley of the Temples in Agrigento, Sicily, Italy, on April 14. The seven Greek temples date to ancient times and have been declared a UNESCO World Heritage site.

By **SIQBHAN STARRS**
Associated Press

PALERMO, Italy — Sicily sits at the toe of Italy's boot, just two miles from the mainland at its closest point, and a short ferry ride from the town of Messina. But our gateway to Sicily was on the other side of the island, flying into the capital Palermo.

We have holidayed in Italy before, but now with my partner and our 6-year-old daughter Kitty in tow, and two weeks at our disposal, we were ready for a road trip. Sicily's size, culture, food and weather make it an enticing destination.

Located in the Mediterranean, Sicily has been of strategic importance from ancient times. The Greeks, Carthaginians, Romans, Saracens and Normans are just a few of the civilizations that invaded, each leaving their mark.

A rainy day led us to Palermo's Royal Palace. Construction began in the ninth century during the Arab era, and it was later expanded by the Normans, invaders from northern France, who assimilated designs of the Islamic and Byzantine courts that preceded them. Sicily's Arab-Norman architecture is on UNESCO's World Heritage List.

The jewel of the Royal Palace is the Palatine Chapel built in Byzantine style with lavish golden mosaics of saints, Arabic patterns and a wooden muqarnas-style ceiling — a type of ornamented vaulting often associated with Islamic domes.

Sicily's Opera dei Pupi, which dates to the 19th century, features wooden puppets in tales of medi-



AP Photo/Salvatore Allegra, File

Snow-covered Mount Etna, Europe's most active volcano, spews lava during an eruption on April 11, seen from the Sicilian village of Pozzillo, Italy. Mount Etna is a very active volcano, where eruptions of smoke and sometimes lava are a sight for visitors to Sicily and locals alike.

eval chivalry and battles. Some of the opera's puppets, and others from around the world, are on display at the International Museum of Marionettes. An in-house show stars Orlando, a medieval knight who must rescue his beloved Angelica from a legion of Saracens. Parents, be warned: It is a rather violent plot (though our daughter loved it), with the hero slaying dozens of marionettes, which ended up in

heap on the tiny stage. Some lost their heads, one lost its face.

A few days later we were sitting on the terrace of our hotel in Taormina, on the island's northeast coast, enjoying the sunshine, when Mount Etna, Europe's tallest active volcano, emerged from behind clouds and appeared to float, emitting two white plumes from its snow-covered summit.

Taormina is Sicily's plushest

resort, more Capri than Naples, with an ambiance that recalls "La Dolce Vita." Audrey Hepburn, Ingrid Bergman, Richard Burton and Elizabeth Taylor are just a few of the famous names who have stayed here. The resort's main attractions are the ancient Greek theater and a cable car that takes you down to a rocky promontory called Isola Bella.

Our quest to circumnavigate the

island led us next to Syracuse on Sicily's south eastern corner. We stayed in Orytiga (Ortigia), a small island which was once the historic center of the city, connected to the mainland by two bridges.

Syracuse's main cathedral, il Duomo, is built on the site of a Greek temple. The original Greek columns, which can still be seen, were incorporated into a church in the seventh century. A massive earthquake in 1693 devastated much of the region and many towns were rebuilt in a late baroque style, which became known as Sicilian Baroque. Syracuse's Duomo is a good example and we also visited the nearby town of Noto, also famous for baroque buildings. Even if you're not a fan of the opulent style, it's fascinating how Sicily's history can be explored through its architecture.

In the middle of the island's southern coast, a road leads to the Valley of the Temples near Agrigento, an ancient Greek and UNESCO World Heritage site with seven temples dating to the sixth century B.C. We visited two, the Temple of Juno (also known as Temple of Hera) and the Temple of Concordia. Concordia, which was eventually turned into a church, is considered one of the world's finest surviving examples of a Greek temple.

Our road trip through Sicily had taken us across the island and through history. But a winged bronze figure lying languidly outside the temple dozed in the sun as it has for centuries, oblivious to the stream of picture-taking tourists and to the passage of time.

A summery pasta dish with cherry tomatoes, pesto

By **KATIE WORKMAN**
Associated Press

Summer, summer, summer. The word is fat and round and breezy and rolls around nicely on the tongue. And we want our food to be breezy, too.

If you have basil and tomatoes growing in your garden, make this. If you have a farmers' market near you, make this. And if you have leftover pesto hanging around, even store-bought, you can still make this.

You'll cook the pasta and make the pesto in the time it takes to roast the little tomatoes. The amount of oil in the dish is flexible; a bit is added to the roasting tomatoes, a bit to the cooked pasta, and the rest goes into the pesto. The pesto is intentionally a bit thick, as it will distribute itself nicely over the pasta and tomatoes when tossed, but you can always add a little more oil if you want a more fluid pesto.

By no means do you have to use cavatappi — it was the pasta I grabbed at the moment, and I do love its compact, chewy, twisted little shape.

Another thing to love is the fact that this can be served hot, warm or at room temperature. It's a great make-ahead dish, hanging out happily for a day in the fridge before being brought to room temperature and served. It's very portable.

And it's not too hard on the eyes either. Yellow tomatoes are a nice burst of sunny color, but you can use red too, or a mix of colors.

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Sarah Crowder via AP

Cavatappi with roasted cherry tomatoes and pesto.

CAVATAPPI WITH ROASTED CHERRY TOMATOES AND PESTO

Serves 6

Start to finish: 35 minutes

- 2 pints cherry or grape tomatoes, halved
- 5 sprigs fresh thyme
- ½ cup olive oil, divided
- Salt and freshly ground pepper to taste

- 1 clove garlic, minced
- 1 cup packed basil leaves
- 3 tablespoons finely grated Pecorino Romano cheese
- 1 pound cavatappi or other chunky pasta

Preheat the oven to 300 F. Line a rimmed baking sheet with aluminum foil and coat it with nonstick cooking spray. Place the tomatoes and thyme sprigs on the baking sheet and toss them with 1 tablespoon olive oil. Season with salt and pepper. Roast for about 30 minutes, until they are wrinkly and slightly collapsed.

While the tomatoes are roasting, bring a large pot of salted water to a boil. While

the water is coming to a boil, make the pesto. Place the garlic and basil in a food processor or blender and pulse until everything is roughly chopped. Add ½ cup of the olive oil, a bit of salt and pepper and process, scraping down the sides part way through until everything is well blended. If it is very thick, add a bit more olive oil. Add the cheese and pulse until blended in. Taste and adjust seasonings.

Cook the cavatappi according to package directions. Reserve ½ cup of the cooking water, and drain the pasta. Toss the pasta with the cooking water, the remaining 1 to 2 tablespoons of olive oil (more if it seems dry) and the roasted tomatoes (discard the thyme sprigs), and transfer to a serving bowl. Dollop the pesto on top, and toss. Serve hot, warm or cold.

Nutrition information per serving: 560 calories; 227 calories from fat; 26 g fat (6 g saturated; 0 g trans fats); 20 mg cholesterol; 406 mg sodium; 60 g carbohydrate; 4 g fiber; 5 g sugar; 18 g protein.