

Europe holidays

## Autumn walking in the Aeolian Islands

There is still time for a blast of sun and sea air before winter takes hold

Will Hide OCTOBER 3 2020

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The new normal looks much like the old one when viewed through the glint of ice cubes chilling a *negroni sbagliato* on a warm Sicilian evening. Masks are put aside and plump olives and bruschetta are being nibbled on a terrace overlooking the Tyrrhenian Sea. The volcano on Stromboli, some 40km away from where I'm perched on the Aeolian island of Salina, even puts on a show with random hiccups of fire illuminating the approaching night.

I am here on the inaugural trip of "Bellini Strolls", a collaboration between Italy specialist Bellini Travel and Maremma Safari Club, a company offering guided walking holidays in less well-known parts of the country. The first outing was supposed to take place in May. Then June. Then early September. And now, at last, our group of British walkers has gathered in Sicily with October knocking on the door.

Leading us is a Tuscan-based guide, Rudston Steward, and Emily FitzRoy, founder of Bellini Travel. We get to know each other on the first night, dining on the terrace of the 16th-century Villa Tasca, owned by winemaker Giuseppe Tasca, set in a 20-acre garden on the outskirts of Palermo.

It's a popular venue for weddings and this year Tasca has opened up the grounds for alfresco food fairs with artisan craft stalls. Tonight it hums quietly with local families chatting, devouring *arancini* and drinking Sicilian beer and wine.

The following day we transfer along the coast to the port of Milazzo and then on a hydrofoil to Lipari and onwards to Salina, our base for the next five days. Salina is the second-largest island in the Aeolian archipelago, approximately 5km by 7km, and there are well-maintained paths stretching around its two extinct volcanoes, 860-metre high Monte dei Porri and 962-metre Monte Fosse delle Felci.



The fishing village of Rinella in Salina © Getty Images

A few small towns cling to the coast, with whitewashed buildings and cafés serving breakfasts of watermelon and prickly pear *granita* topped with whipped cream alongside brioche and espresso. It's easy to see the charms that lured filmmakers here to shoot the movie *Il Postino* (1994).

We set off from the village of Leni and soon begin our ascent of Monte dei Porri. Each day's walk covers around 11km so it's not terribly hard going, but there's a lot of "up" and Steward has warned us in pre-departure emails to do some fitness preparation. The volcanic terrain is sometimes friable and requires concentration while many parts are exposed with little shade. The actual "stroll" part of the trip appears to be towards well-earned cocktails each evening.



The main piazza in the town of Santa Marina on Salina © Getty Images



A tray of granita, a Sicilian specialty © Getty Images

Steward, 46, is evidently a fan of the islands, having first arrived on neighbouring Filicudi for a week in 2005 and ending up staying four months. He describes the flora and fauna in detail when we stop for water and to take photos. “For Italy, the Aeolian Islands are quite exotic,” he tells me during one pause. “They’re a good reminder for Europeans that you don’t have to go half way around the world to access off-the-beaten-track places.”

Not all the islands of the archipelago have their own water supply, but Salina does and in places the steep hillsides have been terraced for farming. Along the path we pass artemisia, sea squill, olive trees and cacti with prickly pears. A pair of Eleanora’s falcons fly above us, swooping out over the cliffs before their long migration to Madagascar. At lunchtime, we wolf panini stuffed with Sicilian cheese and capers, and juicy peaches, before picking our way down zigzag paths accompanied by the gentle click-click of hiking poles.



The coastline of Salina © Getty Images/iStockphoto

The start of the walk each day is relatively early to give enough time to rest and relax in the afternoon. In the town of Pollara, after our hike, we wander down to the sea, stopping to pick up ice-cold beers from a bar. We dive off the rocks looking for octopus, with the small craggy island of Scoglio Faraglione a few hundred yards away. I'm too tired to tackle the crossing, even though the thought of spotting its Aeolian wall lizards (only found on this and three other islands) does sound tempting.



The reward for hiking under a hot Mediterranean sun comes when we all gather round the dinner table to swap stories under the stars, either at that night's hotel or a local restaurant. Menus are generally dispensed with and plates of pasta followed by swordfish or pork are just put in front of us and quickly mopped up, helped down by Sicilian wine, grappa and fennel liqueur.

My favourite evening meal is at the Principe di Salina hotel in Malfa where the owner's mother, Silvana, who until two years ago was a gastroenterological surgeon, emerges from the kitchen with a huge metal pot offering seconds of her wonderful pasta. No one says no.



The restaurant of the Principe di Salina hotel in Malfa...





... and the hotel pool

Another night, thanks to FitzRoy's fit-to-burst contacts book, we are invited to the home of Giuseppe Mascoli, who set up the London private members' club Blacks and pizza chain Franco Manca and now spends most of his time at his home on Salina. He's a bon viveur and gracious host, treating us to pasta, slices of roasted pumpkin and sausages made from black pigs that roam in the Nebrodi mountains. He's also evangelical about natural wines, making his own in amphora stored in the ground at his villa. He pours them for us liberally, the younger ones through a sieve.

Over the next days we continue to circumnavigate the island. We explore different sides of the volcanoes, chatting as we go, enjoying swims, picnics and post-hike massages, and relishing, above all, the chance to be out in the sun and fresh air ahead of what could be a long, dark winter.

## Details

Will Hide travelled as a guest of [Bellini Travel](#) and [Maremma Safari Club](#), which can organise similar trips on Salina from £1,695 per person. This includes five nights' accommodation, three days' guiding, luggage transportation, most meals, a massage and a donation to the Aeolian Islands Preservation Foundation

Entry to Italy is currently allowed from EU and some other countries but check the latest details at [esteri.it](#)