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Sicily – off Italy’s southern tip – is the largest island in the Mediterranean. The delights of the city of **Catania**, which sits in the shadow of Europe’s largest active volcano, **Mount Etna**, beckoned **QH** (literally!) to new heights...

I recently spent three nights in Sicily’s ‘second city’ Catania late last year. I’d visited Italy several times before, but never Sicily, and didn’t know what to expect. What a pleasant surprise it turned out to be! Arriving late on my first night, I hopped on the ‘airbus’ from the airport to the city (QR20). My stop was a five-minute walk to the hotel – Il Principe – in the heart of the city.

Up to my sizeable room, I watched some TV, and surfed the internet (WiFi was fast and free) before bedtime.

Walking shoes on...

The following morning, armed with a map from reception and internet notes, it was time to explore. Catania is organised in an easily-navigable ‘block’ layout, so it’s impossible to get lost. Don’t bother with public transport, there’s no need.

I spent all day walking around the city, marvelling at the incredible architecture. It seemed that around every corner there was something worth looking at. A Roman amphitheatre here, a castle there, an opera house, and long, sweeping streets where designer shops sat adjacent to countless takeaways selling all manner of cuisines.

The city’s main square, the Piazza Duomo, was stunning. In one corner of the Piazza stood a fountain which provided a refreshing, cooling spray. In high summer, temperatures in Catania are not much lower than Doha, so an autumn or spring visit is your best bet weather-wise!

Catania is quite rough at the edges, even a little run-down in places, but this undeniably adds to its charm.

By mid-afternoon, and five hours of sightseeing, I’d worked up an appetite. I found a supermarket and bought a simple selection of breads, meats, cheese, and bottled water. Finding a bench in the shade, I made myself a turkey and mustard roll and munched away. After a couple more hours of wandering about I headed back to the hotel and put my feet up.

Il Principe was a great base from which to launch my various excursions. The Sicilia Convention Bureau, had booked me into this four-star establishment and it really hit the spot. I was in an immaculately-decorated and spacious corner room with two balconies. The marbled bathroom was spotless and had a great ‘power shower’.

Breakfast was a continental buffet affair, but hot dishes were available at no extra cost so each morning I enjoyed a delicious cheese omelette, washed down with the local ‘blood orange’ juice.

...meet the Mountain

Catania sits in the shadow of the 11,000ft-high Mount Etna, Europe’s largest and most active volcano. Its frequent eruptions are accompanied by large lava flow, but the lava comes out at a snail’s pace, so don’t panic.

The Bureau hooked me up with Etna Finder (www.etnafinder.com). I felt quite the VIP when it turned out that they had organised a trip solely for me. My guide, Paolo, picked me up from the hotel and off we sped in his Land Rover.

It’s a 40km trip north to the mountain, and when you arrive at its base you appreciate its magnitude – it’s nine times the size of Doha. Paolo and I spent the day driving and walking up, down and around this natural wonder. You need boots for this one. Paolo’s knowledge of Etna was exhaustive, and he was also extremely funny.

We stopped at a restaurant half-way up Etna where a superb, rustic, two-course lunch was the perfect way to refuel before continuing our exploration. As you may imagine, the views from Etna are stunning and this is an absolute must-see. The seven-hour excursion costs QR400 per person and includes lunch. Well worth it.

Pizza time!

Paolo dropped me back at the hotel and a couple of hours later it was time for dinner with the two wonderful ladies, Daniela and Veronica, from the

Bureau. They had booked an outdoor table at the Locanda Cerami pizzeria.

You don’t go to Italy without having an authentic Neapolitan-style pizza and Locanda Cerami did not disappoint, with three delicious, dustbin-lid sized pizzas (just QR40 each) arriving at our table from the wood-fired oven.

The following day, after more sightseeing within the city, it was (regrettably) time for me to say farewell.

It had been a great ‘mini-break’ in a historic little city and of course, the great trip to Etna. Combine the two and you have a tourist destination which, despite being slightly off the beaten track, deserves a little more limelight to accompany the year-round sunlight it already enjoys.

Getting there, staying there

Fly Turkish Airlines via Istanbul from QR3,250 return. The Il Principe Hotel offered a great room, fresh breakfast and superior levels of staff service; a double B&B costs from QR525/night. See ilprincipehotel.com for more. The Sicilia Convention Bureau website (www.siciliaconvention.com) is a mine of information. ■

