

# Bicycling with La Famiglia

## Sicily, The Island You Can't Refuse

Story by Stephanie Ager Kirz

Photos by Howard L. Kirz

The King of Sicily towered over me, sweating liquid aggravation in the hot, midday sun. His bare, bloody hand clutched a razor-sharp hacksaw blade. It was just like a scene from *The Godfather*. Well, sort of. He'd accidentally nicked himself while trimming the tube of my bicycle seat so my feet could reach the pedals.

"Is it short enough for you yet?" he growled in a thick Sicilian accent.

"Perfect," I replied, standing on my tiptoes at five-feet, two inches.

My husband and I had come here to ride the countryside with a small tour group. Our friends thought we were crazy.

If they weren't positive we'd be buried in ashes, thanks to a Mt. Etna eruption — Italy's only active volcano, last known to spit fire in 2002 — they were sure we'd be buried by the mob. They, too, were undoubtedly thinking of *The Godfather*.

"Hope you won't be sleeping with the fishes," they joked.

We had no such plans. For starters,

mob activity in Sicily is on the wane and has been for years.

Because we live on a small island in Washington state, we have often sought out other island adventures, such as cycling past the stone Hindu temples in Bali and beating the wind and weather on the Isle of Inishmore in Ireland. The very hilly island of Sicily, however, was not high on my list. It was, of course, my macho husband's first choice.

Our one-hour flight from Rome to Catania on Alitalia was a breeze. With 200,000 residents, Catania is Sicily's second largest city. When we arrived in Sicily's major airport, we were greeted by a big, official-looking bus to transport us to the terminal less than 20 feet away. Who had that contract, we wondered?

A van soon whisked us off to a rustic country house on the outskirts of Noto, a center for art and culture. We met our small cycling group for the first time and got an overview of the next six days of sightseeing on new bikes.

**The Ups and Downs**

"Welcome to our shake-down ride,"



said the affable Enrico, one of Ciclismo Classico's more senior guides. "We want to make sure that your new bikes fit properly before we start on our longer rides tomorrow. Is everyone's seat and handlebars at the right height? You may have already met my good friend and co-leader Paolo, who's working in the back of the shed. We call him the King of Sicily." His fuzzy grey-black hair looked like a Brillo pad. He nodded up and down, and his hand, wrapped in a bloodstained towel, waved to the group.

"Why do you call him that?" one of the several well-outfitted attorneys on the trip inquired.

"Ah, Paolo, he's related to practically everyone on the island that the locals call Sicilia," explained Enrico. "He speaks their language, a special dialect that I, coming from northern Italy, can't even fathom."

Separated heart and mind from the mainland by barely a two-mile stretch of the Straits of Messina, Sicilians see themselves almost as a country apart from Italy. *La Famiglia* has a broader meaning here besides just being a reference to the Mafia.



The family network is a web of unbreakable genetic links that date back generations. But there was something about Paolo. Although he was somewhat smaller in stature, he dressed all in black and reminded us of the character Luca Brazzi, the hulking enforcer in *The Godfather*. I know it sounds silly, but we couldn't help but wonder, "Exactly what kind of ties did Paolo have?"

That evening the van drove our merry band of cyclists, consisting of several lawyers, a sales manager, a translator, doctors, retirees, newlyweds, and my husband and me, to a small family-owned restaurant. I was dreaming of the local Sicilian specialty called *caponata*: local olive oil drizzled over grilled zucchini, eggplant, capers, garlic, and Parmesan cheese. Our first course was pasta with red sauce. Pasta with white sauce was the second course. By the third course, it was pasta again, and the dishes were all starting to look, smell, and taste the same. I imagine that Italians must have invented carbo-loading.

The next day things got better. We got a safe start in the morning on rural roads, bypassing the busy city routes and headed through a region called the *altopiano ibleo*

*As we rode into each tiny town, Paolo's friends would call out to him, halting traffic in both directions: "Paolo, Paolo, what's happening?"*

— a highlands dominated by olive groves, cacti, and the occasional roaming shepherd. The weather couldn't have been better: cobalt blue skies, not a hint of a breeze.



**Culinary treasures.** Grilled eggplant, fresh goat cheese, sun-dried tomatoes, olives, and wine.

#### Fields of Fennel

My legs were burning as we pedaled up and down steep hills, but my nose was in heaven. We sped past green fields of fennel, their black licorice scent following us down the road. Orchards of eucalyptus trees with silver leaves that dangled in the breeze injected a healthy dose of peppermint menthol in the air. Pink, scented

geraniums lined the roads. Barnyards smelled like a bacon-and-eggs breakfast.

This country is like its bread, I thought, a tough exterior with a soft heart. The old towns we toured seemed untouched by modern times, fossilized in a time warp. In the homely squares, men stood around in their black and blue frayed jackets, smoking, swearing, and talking. Women were mostly hidden on the balconies. Tattered sheets and clothes snapped in the breeze several floors above the streets.

Narrow roads wiggled up and down switchbacks, slow and steady. The birds chased us. Were they warbling in Italian

or maybe Sicilian? No matter, their melody was beautiful. Cycling like this made all the molecules in my body march in the same direction.

#### The King of Sicily

Paolo, the King of Sicily, drove our support vehicle, sometimes more like an advance van when he parked at intersections to signal right and left turns for us so we wouldn't get lost. As we rode into each tiny town, Paolo's friends would call out to him, halting traffic in both directions: "Paolo, Paolo, what's happening?" He filled them in on the local gossip, did a little business, and they did the same. By the time we pedaled into the small town of Ragusa, with its narrow roads and killer hills, we'd covered more than 40 miles, and we were hungry.

Muscles aching but freshly showered, we strolled into the elegant *Ristorante da Serafino* for dinner. Settling into the cream-colored cellar surrounded by 700 bottles of wine, we selected a Sicilian sparkling wine and then tasted the very soul of Sicily — the soft, red Nero D'Avola, produced by Donnafugata's "A Thousand and One Nights Vintage." Mellow tan-



**Helpful support staff.** Paolo mounts the bicycles for a boat cruise around Salina and Panarea.

nins merged with the fruit-forward flavor. A separate tasting menu of nine different olive oils tempted us to experience the range — from mild to medium to intense, *frutto medio* to *frutto intenso*. Olive-oil tasting at Williams Sonoma back home was never this good.

Every appetizer and entrée appeared like a painting on a white palette; sauces

became edible brush strokes applied with an artistic eye.

Carob ravioli overflowed like lava with a stuffing of pungent Ragusano cheese. Tuna roe and cherry tomatoes danced on the sidelines, supporting the grilled swordfish smothered in almonds and olive oil. Thyme-infused honey hugged the melted cheese in puff pastry.



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Our memories of the dreadful all-pasta dinner the night before faded. If there is a food and wine heaven, this was it.

No one stirred on Sunday except us

cyclists as we wove in and out of one sleepy town after another. Church bells called from steeples, ringing our approach as we glided into the town squares in our

day-glow jerseys, dodging chubby ladies wrapped in black.

For the next several days, we seemed to have the island almost all to ourselves. Cycling in Sicily made me feel oddly weightless. My soul soared across this landscape that has been touched by so many inhabitants over 25 centuries: Greeks, Arabs, Romans, Normans, and now even the Mafia.

Our route took us through Caltagirone, then on to Morgantina, an excavated Greek city dating back to 600 BC. Paolo, who gave us a tour of the national site, confessed looking down at the ground, "I know these ruins well because I lived here once in another lifetime." Maybe he was king then too?

#### Aeolian Island Life

Cycling on Sicily was one grand land adventure, but our trip wasn't quite over. We caught a hydroplane out of Palermo and headed for Lipari, the nearby island that was our home for the next three nights. Then a private charter boat dropped



Teaching time. Enrico briefs the group at the Villa Donnafugata Castle outside Ragusa.



Island hopping. Lipari was home for three nights as the group rode and cruised the Aeolian Islands.

us and our bikes off on the nearby island of Panarea. Cars are not allowed. As we panted up and over the top of the inactive volcano, our boat chugged its way around the island to meet us on the other side.

Fortunately, Panarea is the smallest of the seven Aeolian Islands, known for their beautiful black obsidian. We climbed past cliffs of whitewashed houses and piles of silver pumice. From the top, we coasted

down to the marina below, gripping the brakes until our hands ached. Our guides and boat crew greeted us with lunch and a relaxing tour in our own private water taxi back to Lipari. It was a great day indeed.

#### Goodbye, Godfather

On our day of departure, we arrived back at Catania airport where it had all started. As we walked through the gate and glanced back, there was Paolo with a big grin on his face, wishing us a safe flight. Was he part of the real *Famiglia*? Who knows? The important thing was he'd made us feel part of his family and very much at home. **AC**

Stephanie Ager Kijz is the author of *The Complete Handlebar Guide to Bicycling the TransAm*, now in its second edition. She and her husband Howard L. Kijz have traveled the world on their bicycles and their stories, along with Howard's photos, have appeared in the *Boston Globe*, *San Diego Union Tribune*, *Dallas Morning News*, and many others. For information about *Ciclismo Classico*, visit [www.ciclismoclassico.com](http://www.ciclismoclassico.com) or call (800) 866-7314.

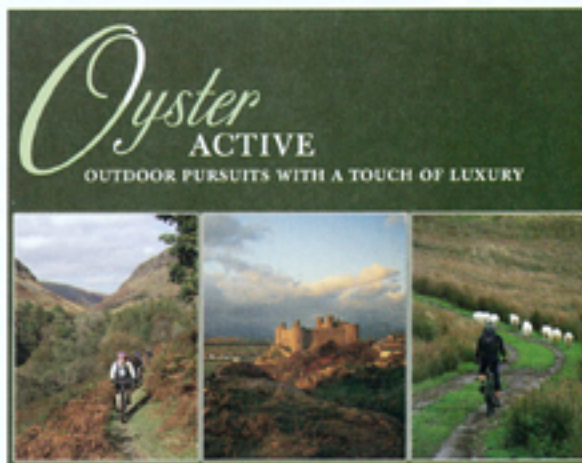


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