



The dramatically situated theatre in Taormina, Sicily. JAMES ROSS

# CRUISING THROUGH AN ANCIENT WORLD

Ionian Sea journey blends myths, movies, and magical views, writes **James Ross**.

I am Al Pacino for a brief moment, posing as a young Michael Corleone, sitting out on the stone terrace of the Bar Vitelli in The Godfather. I sip on a limoncello and nibble on a cannoli. Behind me, the imposing Mount Etna belches steam into a blue sky, while before me is a sweeping view over the valley to the sparkling waters of the Strait of Messina.

How many civilizations have come across those waters to conquer this island of Sicily? There were Mediterranean pirates, Greeks, Romans, Moors, Venetians and Normans. Throughout this whole region, conquerors have come and gone, leaving behind a land flush with cultural diversity and historical richness.

### AN ODYSSEY BACK IN TIME

I am on an odyssey, a small ship Ionian Sea cruise, through an ancient world with so many layers of history. On a vessel so modern and intimate, you feel like you are cruising on your own private yacht. My ship, the Emerald Azzurra, is only 110 metres in length, with six passenger decks and 50 cabins. With a maximum of 100 passengers on-board, it is a vessel so friendly, cosy and practical that you can slip quietly and seamlessly into each port.

My wife and I jumped aboard in Athens, and our Ionian adventure will take us through some of the Greek islands to Sicily, the Amalfi Coast, Naples, Pompeii and Rome. It is a journey through the world of Homer's Odyssey, and the domain of Greek and Roman mythology.

Port stops include the small Greek coastal town of Gythio (Land of the Gods), with a visit to Sparta, where 300 Spartans defeated the Persian army in the Battle of Thermopylae in 480 BC.

The western Greek island of Cephalonia is magnificent, with

its convoluted coastline, captivating coves and beach-lined bays, and clear azure water. The Drogarati Cave and the Melissani lake cave are natural masterpieces. Despite the devastating earthquake of 1953 that razed much of the island's historic Venetian architecture, one still marvels at the charming harbourfront villages and the lush mountainous interior.

The Godfather theme music echoes in my head as I clamber up the cobblestone streets of Savoca to the Bar Vitelli. A statue of director Francis Ford Coppola adorns the main square, and a collection of photos taken during the filming here covers the walls of the bar and the entrance to the cathedral, where Michael Corleone and his Sicilian bride Apollonia were married.

In Taormina, Sicily, we soak up the cobblestone quaintness. Sitting high on a plateau above the Mediterranean, the resort town has a dramatic setting, staggering views and inviting piazzas. What must be the most dramatically situated theatre from the ancient world sits at the edge of town, with Mount Etna as a backdrop.

Meandering about the back streets of Naples, we visit the Royal Palace and Opera House. A trip to the Amalfi Coast and Ravello is both magnificent and daunting over narrow roads that hug the cliffsides.

### THE EMERALD AZZURRA

Back on the ship, new-found friends gather in the Amici Lounge for a pre-dinner cocktail, before heading to La Cucina, the ship's main restaurant. The Azzurra's intimate size and high-end amenities, its intriguing itineraries and the friendliness of the crew, make a memorable sailing.

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