

Wining and Dining ONE PORT AT A TIME

A cruise of the Adriatic with stops at Sicily's hotspots proves an ideal way of exploring Italy anew.

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THIS IMAGE Historic buildings line the water everywhere you look in Valletta, Malta. **OPPOSITE PAGE** Ponant Explorations' vessels are the embodiment of French luxury.

IMAGE CREDITS - THIS PAGE: STUDIO PONANT-CHARLOTTECALLAUD, RIGHT: STUDIO PONANT-CLEMENT LOUINEAU.JPG



Smiling faces in crisp uniforms welcome me onboard my maiden cruise. Ponant Explorations' Explorer ship *Le Bougainville* is docked at the port of Valletta in Malta, and she's positively dwarfed by a neighbouring, 4,000-passenger vessel.

Stepping in, white leather, marble counters and glistening surfaces floor to ceiling all sing first-class: if anyone knows how to do refined elegance, it's the French. Our petite ship promises eight days of gastronomic delights on board and on shore, sailing to Sicily, Puglia, then up the Adriatic Coast and into Venice.

As a travel writer, it's the opportunity to visit new-to-me regions – something of a push on the part of Italy's tourism bodies too. Independent site Visit Italy ran a campaign during the summer called '99% of Italy isn't full' to encourage tourists to discover other parts of the peninsula rather than just the famously crowded hot spots.

As such, we're Sicily bound. Syracuse was the first of two stops in Sicily, where we visited Planeta's Buonivini estate, a family-owned winery devoted to native varietals.

Located close to the Baroque town of Noto in Sicily's south, Buonivini is one of five vineyards in Planeta's portfolio, all certified organic. Here, the wine focus is on Sicily's most famous varietal, Nero d'Avola.

Buonivini's Santa Cecilia, 100 per cent Nero d'Avola, is regarded as the benchmark for the red varietal, structured and expressive of the limestone terroir. Aged in wooden barrels for 14 months and in bottle for another year, the 2021

vintage gives notes of carob, liquorice, chocolate and ripe blackberry. On the palate, the ripe fruit with wood tannins combine to create complexity and structure, making it a delight to drink.

Our host, Viviana Petino, treats our small group and pops the cork of a 2016 bottle to compare. The aged Santa Cecilia, named after the winery's owners and the patron saint of music, is remarkably different, robust and thicker with an earthy-mushroom nose. An olive oil tasting outdoors follows under the shade of ancient olive and carob trees, alongside a grazing table of focaccia, zucchini frittata, olives, polpetta, vegetable crudites and three kinds of cheese including fresh mozzarella for a light lunch – simple but satisfying, this is la dolce vita.

A MATTER OF TASTE

Back aboard our ship, I join Laetitia Ouspointour, an oenologist and sommelier from Bordeaux where she trains 4,000 people a year. She also teaches at the Paul Bocuse Institute in Lyon. Ouspointour leads a wine tasting method she created, for which she won a prestigious wine award at the Lépine competition. Following instructions, I tilt, examine, sniff, swirl, sniff again.

"Holding your wine glass up to a white background is the most accurate way to see the colour, if it's more transparent, it's lighter, if it's opaque, then it's darker on the colour spectrum," says Ouspointour, owner of LO Wine. "There are 'aroma families' in wine, think of that when are you smelling – is it fruit, and then smell again, and see if you

**LEFT TO RIGHT**

The beguiling Grand Canal of Venice; the lush Prosecco Hills of Valdobbiadene; Mount Etna stirs in the background of the ancient Teatro Greco in Taormina, Sicily.

IMAGE CREDITS - LEFT TO RIGHT SBORISOV @ GETTY IMAGES, DIANNE BORTOLLETTI, STEFAN ALFONSO @ GETTY IMAGES

can identify what kind of fruit, is it berries, cherries, plums or something else?"

A process for tasting follows, sipping a 2022 Nero d'Avola and a 2020 Chianti, to identify sweetness and bitterness depending on where the wine hits and then lingers in the mouth. After categorising the colours, the family of aromatics and flavours, it's time to make it my own. I take a pipette and blend the two wines, an enjoyable experimentation to find the perfect balance for my palate.

For the first time in a long time, I'm excited to eat from a buffet. In the stylish restaurant, the daily changing menu is complemented by a regular fixed menu, while on the more casual pool deck, the same dining options are available.

Two gala dinners on board are hosted by Calabrian-born celebrity chef Denny Imbroisi, a well-known (to the French) Paris-based restaurateur with restaurants IDA, Epoca and Marlo. "The first dinner is our introduction to Italy if you like, with dishes that have a familiarity to them, but are a bit more rustic," says Imbroisi. "Our second dinner is more sophisticated, still with Italian flavours but with my twist."

His first menu features some Italian classics: crisp Roman artichoke, prawn carpaccio sourced in Sicily that morning, rigatoni with pork and beef ragù, and limoncello-

soaked baba. The second dinner showcases hero premium ingredients such as burrata and Oscietre caviar, and ricotta gnocchi with lobster cappuccino, all served with the refinery expected on a luxury liner.

SICILIAN SUNRISES

Entering the bay of Giardini Naxos, our next Sicilian stop in the island's north, my camera is in overdrive. Just after sunrise, the pastel sky glistens on the silky sea softly lighting a panorama of coastal cliffs and jagged mountains, including Mount Etna wafting a trail of smoke after erupting just days earlier.

Arriving ahead of the crowds and the heat of the day, six of us follow our local guide on a walking tour of hilltop town Taormina, made Insta-famous by season two of *The White Lotus*. Some free time follows, and I window-shop the designer stores and artisan wares while savouring the best granita I've ever had, tri-layered icy lemon, blood orange and citron from a mobile juice truck.

Lunch is at Gambino Vini, on the slopes of Mount Etna, Sicily's highest elevated winery at 1,000 metres. We're sat at long tables, each of our four glasses topped with wines to match our lunch. First is the 2023 Tifeo Bianco, a light-straw coloured white wine blend of Cataratto and

Carricante, and the next is 2023 Tifeo Etna Rosato, a Rosé made with 100 per cent Nerello Mascalese, a light blush colour due to just six hours of skin contact. Onto the reds, the 2020 Tifeo Etna Rosso is transparent, 90 per cent Nerello Mascalese and 10 per cent Nerello Cappuccio with spicy notes of cloves, cherry, and carob which pair well with fatty foods such as our main course of 'happy pig sausages'. They say the pigs are happy because they roam around freely, are well fed and can also wild graze, a happy life on Mount Etna. Rounding off lunch are mini ricotta cannoli. The pigs aren't the only ones happy here.

INTIMATE ITALY

Ponant Explorations' *Le Bougainville* has a maximum capacity for 184 passengers, welcoming 130 on board for this voyage; with a mix of French and Americans with some English, Canadians, Dutch and eight Australians. As an added bonus, the 130-metre yacht is permitted to sail into Venice, along the Grand Canal, unlike large cruise liners – it's a real point of difference in the world of cruise.

There is a chorus of sighs, Venice's sheer unparalleled beauty presenting an astonishing vision from Deck 6.

Our final excursion is to Veneto's UNESCO Conegliano-Valdobbiadene hills, the Prosecco Hills. About 90 minutes from Venice in the province of Treviso, this is some of the most scenic, verdant, undulating scenery imaginable. A rural setting for lunch is at the Salis Ristorante Enoteca, where my eyes drink in beautiful surrounds. The restaurant comfortably accommodates our group of 12 as we juggle cameras, cheese and Prosecco, before a three-course feast. It's a fitting, fine swansong to close out our itinerary.

After my first cruise, any preconceived cruising perceptions of oversized people with elbows-out at crowded buffets, guzzling their 'money's worth' at the bar, have been blown out of the water. Cruising on board *Le Bougainville* is more akin to staying in a sophisticated five-star boutique hotel, where I wake every day to views of a new destination and the anticipation of new, curated experiences.

With every sip of the region's finest, from the south to the north of Italy, I'm left in awe of the passionate, dedicated family-owned producers I've been introduced to, in places devoid of masses of tourists. These are the roads less travelled, and are all the more marvellous for it: Visit Italy would approve. **S**