

A WESTERN MEDITERRANEAN CRUISE

Phil and Norma Heaton

(Phil and Norma left Northern Ireland at the end of May 2009 aboard their Ovni 395 Minnie B, completing a circumnavigation in 2016 and returning to Europe from the Caribbean in 2018. Visit their blog at www.sailblogs.com/member/philandnorma.)

It seemed that, typically, we had got this the wrong way round. Many European cruisers start in the Mediterranean before heading off for longer passages and the tropics, but we had forgotten to 'do' the Med. However, with the usual cruiser issue of increasingly frail elder family members, prudence suggested basing ourselves closer to the UK.

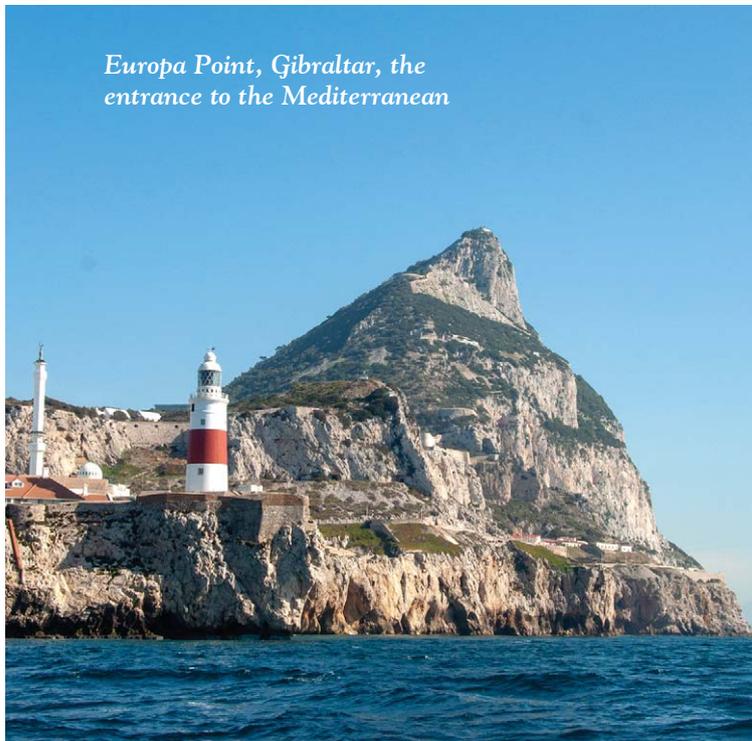
We over-wintered *Minnie B* in Albufeira, Portugal for 2018/19, and found this a good choice for safety, logistics, climate and price. Leaving on 1st May 2019, we made our way motoring and sailing via anchorages and a couple of marinas for our first point of exploration – Gibraltar. We stayed at Alcaidesa Marina, La Linea, as it is home to OCC POR Antonio Valbuena and an easy walk to the border with Gibraltar. We met up with fellow members Alan and Shirley Lillywhite of *Lazy Jack* and then did the Gibraltar tour, taking the cable car up the rock, visiting St Michael's cave, seeing the macaque monkeys, exploring the Great Siege Tunnels from 1779–83 and climbing the Moorish Castle. A truly first-rate day during which we walked about 15km.

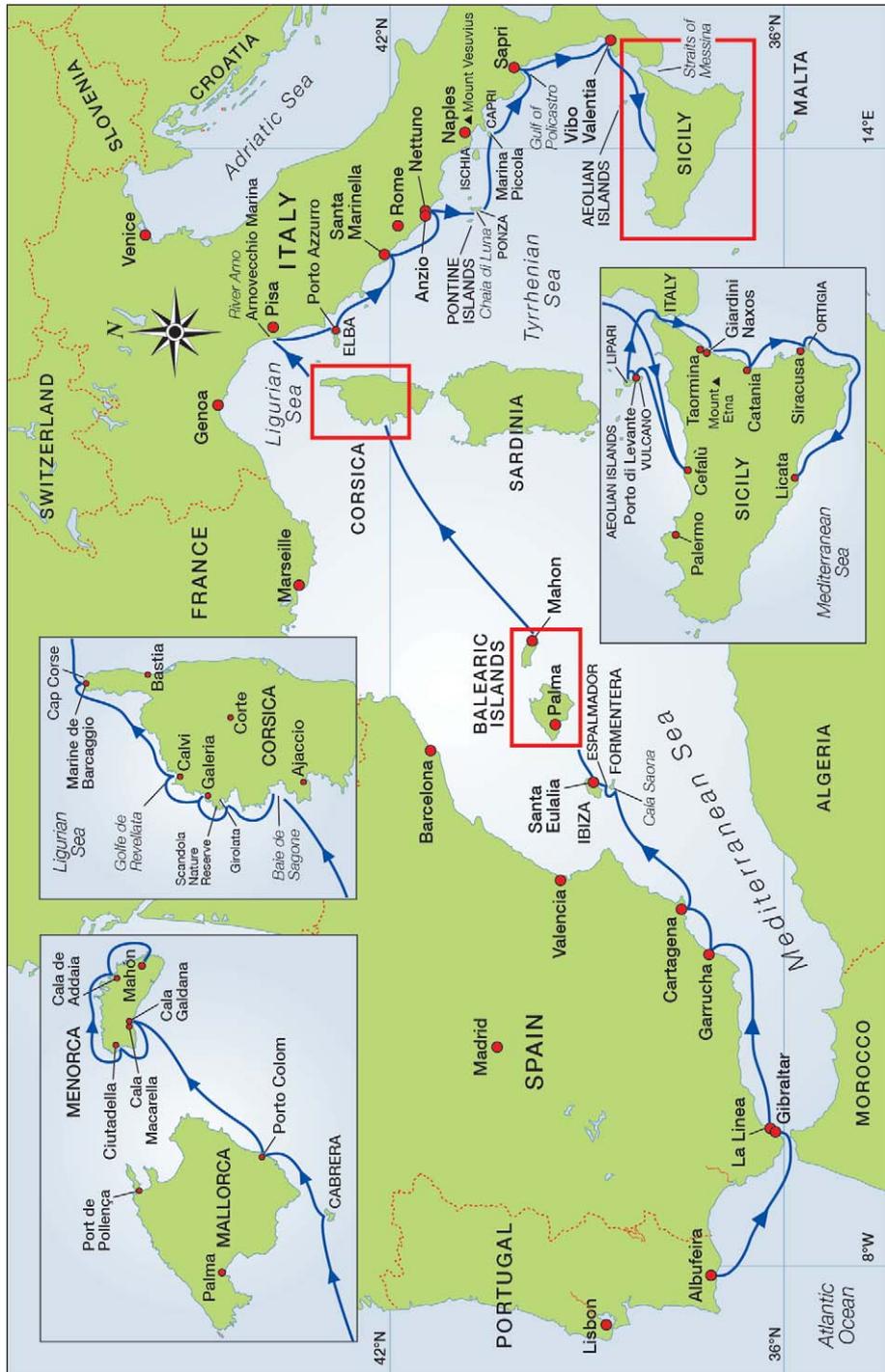
With the weather looking decent for the trip into the Med we prepared *Minnie B* and left for Cartagena on Tuesday 7th May. First, however, we visited the Gibraltar fuel station as diesel there is much cheaper than in Spain or Portugal. That was the

best bit, then Norma twisted and locked up some muscles in her back, causing lots of pain. Oh dear! But you cannot keep a good woman down, so we carried on with Norma self-medicating and resting.

Passing Europa Point we cruised joyfully with genoa poled out, the main braced with a preventer and the keel up – our favourite sailing configuration. The boat's movement was right for someone with a very painful

Europa Point, Gibraltar, the entrance to the Mediterranean







Norma at Espalmador, Formentera

back. By mid-afternoon the following day it was clear that we were not going to make Cartagena until after midnight so, never having visited previously and with Norma not being too agile, we pulled into Garrucha – okay for a night but a busy port loading gypsum so rather noisy and, if the wind is in the wrong direction, very dusty.

Arriving in Cartagena, the top priority was back treatment for Norma and a very considerate and careful osteopath and physiotherapist made major improvements. We visited the splendid Roman Theatre, the Naval Museum with the first submarine to fire an underwater torpedo, the Civil War shelters museum and Conception Castle overlooking the harbour. It is a very nice town to wander around, with some attractive late 19th century buildings, restored after the bombing in the Civil War – and some tremendous *tapas* bars. We also met up with Karen and Grahame Brookes, OCC, of *Blue Voyager*.

The Balearic Islands

Now we were really in the Med and headed for Formentera in the Balearics. We had some trepidation having heard negative stories about either nowhere to anchor or overcrowded anchorages, extortionately-priced marinas and either too much or too little wind, but the 140 mile passage was 50 percent sailing and 50 percent motoring, so not too bad. We anchored at dawn in deserted Cala Saona ... so also okay ... until lunchtime when the anchorage filled up with day-visit boats, but most had left by early evening. Nearby Espalmador offered more shelter and easier beach access. The expected moorings laid to protect the Posidonia sea grass were not in place, but having carefully selected a sandy spot to anchor we were reassured when a Posidonia monitor arrived in a RIB, took a close look at our anchor and chain, and said we were okay. We stayed two nights and were able to stretch our legs ashore.



***The anchorage at
Cala San Miguel,
Ibiza***

As we had visited Mallorca previously in a charter yacht our Balearics cruise focused mainly on Ibiza and Menorca with our next stop Cala Tarida on Ibiza. Anchoring in the north of the bay, our chain instantly stuck in some rocks despite having carefully dropped the anchor in sand. After much to-ing and fro-ing we freed the chain without having to dive on it – good, as jellyfish were everywhere. We were advised that their stinging potential was high although, ‘the pain only lasts for 2–3 hours’. No thank you! After re-anchoring,

a beach landing took us to a bar for an evening chill. Cala San Miguel in the north provided a sound anchorage and, in a small cove on the west side, a beach bar from where we could walk to one of the many coastal lookout/defence towers. With some rain forecast and laundry needs, our next stop was Santa Eulalia marina on the east coast. We had drinks with Peter and Alison Allred, OCC, of *Upshot*, and planned a visit together to Cabrera – a national park where a swinging mooring has to be booked in advance.

After a cracking beam reach for 60 of the 68 miles, Cabrera was a delight with terrific hikes (one with the aid of a free Park guide who also opened the museum for us). A small *cantina* in the harbour provided the perfect stop after hiking. Menorca was our next destination, but we eased the trip by anchoring for the night at the entrance to Porto Colom, Mallorca. A fine four hours of close reaching on the seven hour passage to Cala Galdana brought us to a sandy spot for anchoring. This turned out to be a popular destination for families and Spanish holiday-makers so we made do with watching the world go by at a couple of bars and a walk to Cala Macarella.

Provisioning and laundry again called, so after a couple of nights we went on to Ciutadella. What a gem. The town was sacked by the Turks in 1558, and the rebuilding



Moorings are bookable at Cabrera, south of Mallorca

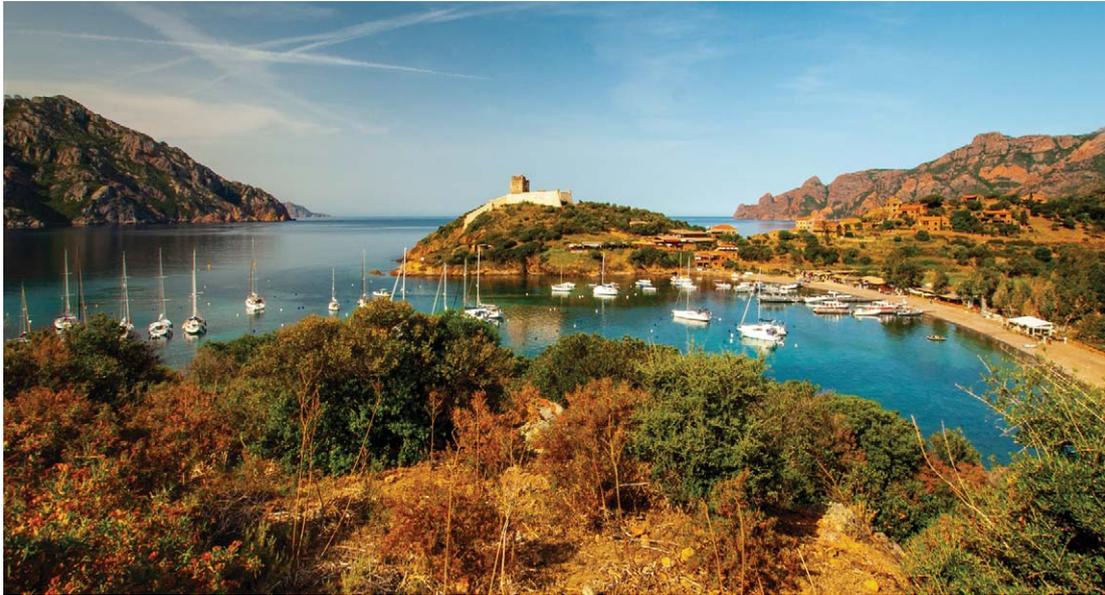
has left a legacy of beautiful palaces, churches and narrow winding streets and alleys, in many ways reminiscent of Moorish *medinas*, albeit the Moors were expelled in 1287.

With the high cost of the Ciutadella marina we went in search of anchorages. One of the better things about Menorca is its size – just 34 miles long and 11 miles wide – so in theory as the wind shifts round the compass you can always move on and find a sheltered bay. Hm, theory eh? So what happens when the forecast wind shift from north to south occurs at 0200? ... and takes place every couple of days? Not conducive to relaxed and easy-going cruising. It was essential to find an anchorage with all-round shelter, and Cala de Addaia ticked all the boxes. Addaia is very peaceful, the marina has



a friendly *cantina*, and the village has a supermarket and a couple of bars/restaurants. We took the bus to Fornells and walked to the headland and defensive tower, followed by a seafood *paella* sitting by the bay. An old path, the Camí de Cavalls, runs all the way around Menorca so the island is very good for hiking.

Minnie B at anchor in Cala Addaia, Menorca



The anchorage and moorings at Girolata, Corsica

Finally to Mahón and a berth at the Club Marítimo close to the old town. The arrival of large ferries and small cruise ships at dawn is a bit alarming, however, given the noise and then the slap of the wake hitting our stern (we were bows-to the quay). The harbour is one of the most extensive in the world – safe all-round shelter once past the entrance and the guarding island. Major fortifications abound from British possession in the 18th century.

Squeezing through the Dog Leg Channel



Corsica – wow!

Next was the 255 mile passage to anchor at Baie de Sagone, Corsica – 80 percent motoring unfortunately. Our visit took in the west coast, anchoring at Anse de Castagna for Marina de Porto, then Girolata, where we hiked the Sentier de Girolata, and one night at Galeria. The very settled weather offered an opportunity to get close up in the Scandola Nature Reserve, particularly enjoying the narrow Dog Leg Passage – the headlands and rock formations are impressive and we enjoyed the dawdle. We anchored at Golfe de Revellata and then moved on to Calvi where we took a mooring while we hired a car.

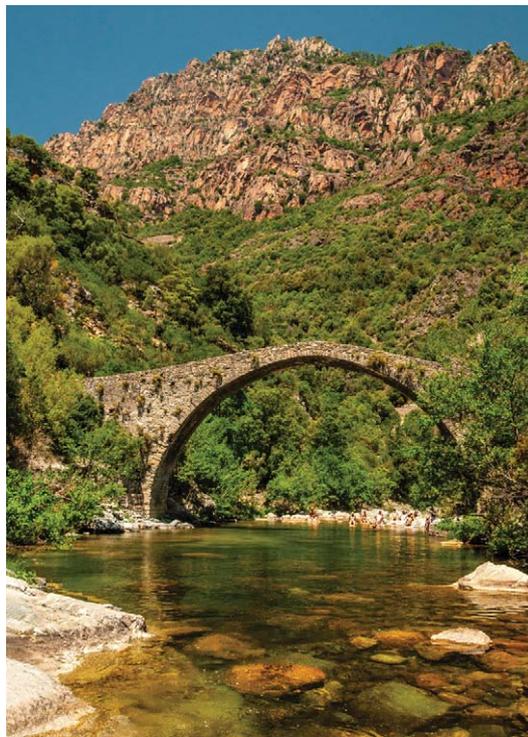
We visited busy Bastia, drove the coast north around Cap Corse, and through the Desert des Agriates. A trip to Scandola with its narrow, twisting roads was not for the fainthearted, but the views really are breath-taking, if you will excuse the clichés. We walked the Spelunca Gorges where many people were cooling off in the river from the near 30°C heat.

Corte was next, in the heart of northern Corsica and the centre of 18th century resistance to Genoese and then French rule. Today's movement for Corsican independence limits itself to shooting road signs or painting out the French place names, leaving only the Corsican language versions. Near Corte, the Gorges de la Restonica took us to 1400m above sea level, but the temperature remained above 30°C so the hiking was very limited and we were glad of the air conditioning in the car.

We were hoping for wind to take us to Italy for our five-week lay-up in the River Arno near Pisa. No such luck, so we decided to shorten the legs by anchoring at Anse de Periaola, and then Marine de Barcaggio. On 1st July we motored the 57 miles to the River Arno for our berth at Arnovecchio marina where *Minnie B* stayed for five weeks while we returned to the UK. We had enjoyed Corsica very much, and we were happy that with care and research we had been able to find suitable anchorages and largely avoid the cost of moorings and marinas.

A week in Tuscany

With Pisa just down the road we did 'the tour'. The baptistry and the cathedral are beautifully crafted and maintained, and a stroll to the Piazza dei Cavalieri and an ice cream made for an enjoyable afternoon. An altogether more interesting and much less visited city is nearby Lucca. Again, the cathedral is a must, along with the Torre Guinigi which is surmounted by trees. Piazza dell'Anfiteatro offers choice for a lunch stop, and a stroll around the walls and a beer in Piazza Napoleon before taking the train and bus back to the boat rounded off a charming day.



The Spelunca Gorges, Corsica



Fishing nets at the entrance to the River Arno, Tuscany

A hire car was necessary for some serious provisioning and more *tourismo*. We managed the

provisioning and did get to San Gimignano – which is probably at its best from a distance, where you can see the hilltop, vineyards, poplar trees and famous towers – but our Siena trip was thwarted when our now full-to-the-brim fridge/freezer stopped cooling and we had to wait for a refrigeration engineer, who installed a replacement controller.

Able was I etc ...

We had been warned to expect serious growth on the hull after over a month in the river, but *Minnie B* was remarkably clean apart from at the waterline and we eased quickly out of the river for Elba, passing the gigantic fishing nets lowered into the river from enormous jibs. The wind was kind and we sailed 40 miles of the 66 mile passage to anchor in Golfo della Lacona – busy, but there was plenty of anchoring room and a place to land the dinghy. The hills behind the bay provided a nice hike and gave us views over to Golfo della Stella and Porto Azzurro. The beach was very popular with Italian holidaymakers, who don't seem to have heard about the risks of skin exposure to strong UV light...

Elba was a delight, including anchoring at Porto Azzurro where the daily pattern turned out to be that the anchorage empties by 1030 as people go elsewhere for the day (mostly sunbathing) and return from 1700 onwards. Buses took us to the clifftop village of Capoliveri, and to Portoferraio which boasts Napoleon's home in exile and an excellent exhibition.

Norma and Phil at Capoliveri, Elba





Elba – Golfo della Lacona, Golfo della Stella and Porto Azzurro

Mainland and island anchorages

We opted for more islands and mainland Italy for our route to Sicily.

Santa Marinella was an anchorage for calm weather and a pleasant town, while Anzio/ Nettuno was okay anchoring off the packed beach (it was Sunday). Dinghying into the marina, we visited the US World War Two cemetery which contains the graves of nearly 8000 American troops. It is a superbly designed and maintained memorial to their sacrifice – very moving.

The Pontine islands came highly recommended, so we headed for Ponza – a short 42 mile hop, though again no wind. Our early afternoon arrival meant we could find a decent space just north of the town, but as the afternoon progressed the traffic increased exponentially until the sea in the bay resembled a washing machine as jet-skis zoomed about and day-tripper boats ferried their sun-worshippers back to the town from beaches further up the coast. Eventually things calmed down, but we decided to move next morning to a potentially quieter bay on the west side of the island – Chaia di Luna. A fine spot ... until 0400 when lightning storms brought 15–20 knots of westerly wind into the bay. No sleep after that, so at daylight we upped and left for Capri.

Our cruising guide said no anchoring at Ischia in July and August so we passed by. We anchored at Marina Piccola, but it was packed and had nowhere to tie up the dinghy. (There were lots of superyachts, whose crew would ferry owners and guests ashore and then return later to collect them after sumptuous lunches, but for some reason Norma did not see herself performing such crew-like duties – difficult to understand, really).

Next came a 75 mile passage to Sapri in the Gulf of Policastro. We anchored tucked in behind the marina and close to a fuel jetty, so very good shelter. We bought petrol and diesel at the jetty, and coffee and beer at their café each time we went ashore, so we could



*The Temple of Athena, built around 500 BCE,
at Paestum, Salerno*

coast, a lovely harbour-side village that we had visited in 1975 to stay with friends whose parents owned a villa there. Massive expansion and development have occurred, but it retains its charm and we had a fabulous lunch.

We hired a car to visit Paestum, a 2500-year-old Greek and Roman town with amazingly well-preserved temples and remains, and the Pollino National Park in the southern Apennines, which has picturesque hilltop villages and where we had a pleasant walk through the beech forest to a fantastic lookout at the Belvedere Malvento.

Lipari and the Aeolian Islands seen over a Vulcano crater



tie up the dinghy freely. Sapri can be described as authentic – ie. only Italians seem to visit. A couple of other boats came to anchor but no-one stayed more than two days – we stayed a week. We took the train to Maratea just down the

To Palermo, and a Sicilian cruise

Our prudent relocation to the Med paid off when we received news that Norma's 94-year-old stepfather had been taken into hospital. With guests arriving in Palermo the following week we pressed on, with an overnight passage from the marina at Vibo Valentia. Norma flew to Northern Ireland for the funeral and returned the following week, while in the meantime David and Jacquie arrived and Phil played Palermo tour guide – there is a lot to see.

We had a cracking sail to Cefalù, where there is safe anchorage and a fascinating town. Then to Vulcano in the Aeolian Islands, where we negotiated a reasonable rate for a mooring at Porto di Levante. The highlight is the climb to the volcanic crater with sulphurous fumes pouring from fissures in the rocks. The views across to Lipari were stunning. There was the option of a mud bath but, wimps that we are, we passed on this opportunity for a serious skin treatment. The next day we headed for Lipari and found a spot to anchor but patience was needed to cut through the thick weed. The picturesque town has narrow streets and the Castello, a massive Spanish bastion enclosing the cathedral and 17th century Bishop's Palace.

Then through the Straits of Messina, passing by Scylla and Charybdis* without

encountering them – just some turbulence reminiscent of Strangford Lough – and on to Taormina, anchoring at Giardini Naxos. The town is a busy tourist destination and the Teatro Greco's dramatic setting high on the cliffs with a backdrop of the hills, Mount Etna and the sea shows why it has



The Greco-Roman Theatre at Taormina, Sicily

remained so for over 3000 years.

* In Greek mythology, Scylla is a female monster with twelve feet and six heads on long snaky necks, each with a triple row of shark-like teeth, who lives on the Sicilian side of the Straits of Messina and attacks passing ships. Opposite her lives Charybdis, who drinks down and belches forth the water three times a day, creating a whirlpool fatal to shipping. The two sides of the Strait are within an arrow's range of each other – so close that sailors attempting to avoid Charybdis were forced dangerously close to Scylla, or vice versa. However Odysseus narrowly escaped their clutches, as did *Minnie B.*

Mount Etna is an active stratovolcano 3350m high which covers an area of 460 square miles, so it had to be visited. A marina at Catania provided the best location for car hire to reach the cable car and special four-wheel drive bus to go to 2990m. From there we walked around a crater and watched smoke, ash and steam spewing from the top of this mighty volcano.

Our next stop was Siracusa. It is possible to anchor, but we chose to stay at Marina Yacht Club Lakkios very close to the attractive island of Ortigia, where we wandered its ancient Greco-Roman streets. Our over-wintering marina at Licata was 90 miles to the west, and though with a forecast of westerly 12–15 knots we knew we would have a beat, we got 25–30 knots and were beaten up a bit. Our guests survived, however, and left us in high spirits after a couple of days. Licata is very congenial with an active community of cruisers (including David and Juliet Fosh, OCC, aboard *Reflections of Hayling*), many restaurants and bars, old palazzos and churches, and some of the friendliest people we have met.

Overall, our fears of overcrowding and no anchoring space were not realised, provided obviously busy places are avoided. We used the mobile app Navily to identify anchoring options as an alternative to the cruising guides and we would strongly recommend it. The cruise substantially exceeded our expectations and we look forward to further Mediterranean exploration.

The harbour and marina (far left) at Licata, Sicily



*Norma hoping
Mount Etna
does not
erupt*

