

Route 12

- **Tour:** Etna
- **Starting point:** Cefalù
- **Arrival:** Taormina
- **Points of interest:** Parco naturale delle Madonie - Vulcano Etna - Taormina
- **Km:** 303



From the splendid sea resort Cefalù drive to the top of the Etna volcano and then to descend to the beautiful Taormina.

■ **History and traditions:**

The Cathedral of Cefalù located in Piazza Duomo was built under the patronage of Roger II of Sicily, beginning in 1131. This style of Norman architecture would be more accurately called Sicilian Romanesque, the mosaics inside are among the most famous in the world.

Madonie

The naturalistic, historical, and artistic heritage of the area is of considerable importance. In a context characterized by harsh mountains facing the Sicilian sea, the human signs still represent the evidence of a millenary presence (Prehistory) which in some cases has been handed down in current activities. The territory is scattered with several religious buildings, monasteries, hermitages and churches, often isolated on the top of the mountains. Along the watercourses you will find abandoned mills which, together with the old farmsteads (the so-called "masserie") often built on the more ancient ruins of Roman farmhouses, witness the ability of a culture to live in symbiosis with nature. In the Madonie there are the most ancient rocks of Sicily, dating back to the Triassic period. The several fossils of lamellibranchs, algae, and sponges found in the calcareous areas of the mountain chain are an evidence of it.

Etna

Etna was known in Roman times as Aetna, that possibly comes from the Greek word aitho ("to burn").

The Arabs called the mountain Gibel Utlamat ("the mountain of fire"); this name was later changed into Mons Gibel and subsequently Etna's current local name Mongibello.

The mountain's regular and often dramatic eruptions made it a major subject of interest for Classical mythologists and their later successors, who sought to explain its behaviour in terms of the various gods and giants that populated Roman and Greek legends. Aeolus, the king of the winds, was said to have imprisoned the winds in caves below Etna. The giant Typhon was confined under Etna, according to the poet Aeschylus, and was the cause of the mountain's eruptions. Another giant, Enceladus, rebelled against the gods, was killed and was buried under Etna.

Hephaestus or Vulcan, the god of fire and forge, was said to have had his forge under Etna and drove the fire-demon Adranus out from the mountain. The Greek underworld, Tartarus, was supposed to be situated beneath Etna.

Taormina

The remains of the Greek theatre, are not actually Greek, as the theatre was rebuilt by the Romans in the 2nd century BC on the site of the original theatre. With a diameter of 109 metres (after an expansion in the 2nd century), this theatre is the second largest of its kind in Sicily; it is frequently used for performances and concerts. The Taormina Film Festival has been held for over fifty years, with international film stars viewing films on a screen set up for the occasion inside the Greek theatre.

■ Food and wine:

Madonie

The Madonie's gastronomic tradition is second to none, relying as it does on local produce for prime ingredients. Meat, sausages, salami, cheese, olives, mushrooms, and fresh seasonal vegetables are all excellent while some of Sicily's best wine is produced nearby. In these lands a millenary peasant tradition offers the taste of local cheese and the warmth of Sicilian hospitality. Basilisk mushrooms become precious ingredients for the preparation of first meal courses. Sausages and lamb chops cheer up endless grills. Local pastry chefs turn loose in creating more and more refined pastries, "sfoglio", "testa di turco", and "amaretti" (macaroons). Wine-making is an almost sacred activity.

Finally, you cannot certainly miss a good lemon, strawberry, and wild berries "granita".

■ Sightseeing and Landscape:

Cefalù

A gorgeous little town located on the north coast between Palermo and Messina, has about 50,000 inhabitants and is one of the major tourist attractions in the region. It has Roman baths, an ancient cathedral, marvellous beaches and is a tranquil city full of history.

Madonie

Situated south of Cefalù, was the second natural reserve to be established in Sicily. The area of the Madonie with its geomorphological and climatic features leads to the identification of three different areas: the coastal strip of the northern slope, protected by the African winds and covered by thick woods, centuries-old olive groves, cork tree woods, chestnut tree woods, ash trees, oak woods made of Downy oak and the holly nuclei of Piano Pomo. On the contrary, the large mountain chain preserves the woods of ilex and beech trees, and is characterized by several endemic species, among which the *Abies Nebrodensis*, a relict of ancient glaciation. The southern and sunny slope, bare or luxuriant and mild in the changing succession of the seasons is "The aspect of real Sicily; however, it is also a gentle series of mountain and hilly slopes cultivated with wheat and barley.

Etna

Mount Etna is an active volcano on the east coast of Sicily, close to Catania. It is the largest volcano in Europe, currently standing about 3,320 m (10,900 ft) high. It is the highest mountain in Italy south of the Alps. Etna covers an area of 460 square miles (1190 km²) with a basal circumference of 140 km.

It is one of the most active volcanoes in the world and is in an almost constant state of eruption. Although

it can occasionally be very destructive, it is not generally regarded as being particularly dangerous, and thousands of people live on its slopes and in the surrounding areas.

Etna is an isolated peak about 18 miles (29 km) from Catania which dominates the eastern side of Sicily. Its shape is that of a truncated cone with a ragged top, which is actually a complex of large volcanic cones hosting four summit craters. At the top of the mountain is a volcanic wasteland, dominated by old lava flows, scree and volcanic ash. Few plants grow there and it is covered by snow for much of the year.

Taormina

Taormina has been a very popular destination with tourists since the 19th century. It has beautiful beaches (accessible via a Funicular) by the Ionian sea, which is remarkably warm and has a high salt content. Isola Bella is a stunning nature reserve that is just south of Taormina. Tours of the Capo Sant' Andrea grottos are also available. Taormina is built on an extremely hilly coast, and is approximately a forty-five minute drive away from Europe's largest active volcano, Mount Etna.