

## Tracing Odysseus

*On their way to or from 'The Promised Waters' of the Eastern Mediterranean, you have to transit the narrow Strait of Messina, which separates Sicily from Calabria on mainland Italy. This route leads you through a stunning area characterized by volcanoes, impressive landscapes, ancient history and today's refugee problems.*

### Southern Strait of Messina

Sailing north along the eastern coast of Sicily, there are many places worth while a visit and Syracuse is an absolute must. There is even a large and well-protected anchorage from where you can make landing right in the centre of the city, and where you can anchor safely while exploring. The origin of Syracuse dates back to 750 BCE, when it was established as a Greek colony. Within a few centuries Syracuse became one of the largest city-states in the Greek world comparable with Athens and Sparta. There are many traces of the ancient past. Among other things the city's great cathedral originally - in the 5th century - built as a temple of Athena (goddess of wisdom, handicraft and warfare). Even to day the original pillars of the temple are preserved and can be clearly recognized as an integrated part of the cathedral.

One of the most famous mathematicians of all time Archimedes is from Syracuse. He was born, lived, worked there and is allegedly buried in Syracuse (at least his burial ground is displayed). For a sailor Archimedes is worth while remembering as it was he who stated that 'when a body is immersed into water, it is influenced by a buoyancy equal to the weight of the displaced water'. Thus, one could say that he is the founder of all mathematics fundamental to boat construction.

Further north is Catania, Sicily's second largest city and first and foremost interesting because of its international airport with flights to many other European countries. It is better however, to sail on to Riposto some 20 nm further north. Here is a nice marina where you might negotiate a reasonable price if you want to stay there for a little longer (remember that in Italy everything can be negotiated). The marina is apparently and probably due to the port's relatively deep water, the base of several mega-yachts. Yachts having 10-12 man crews and a platform with helicopter. They are impressive, but to us it was difficult not to notice, that almost all of these wonders were flying flags of convenience, ie. registered in various tax havens. For instance we noticed flags from Guernsey, Jersey, Bermuda, Marshall Islands (in the Pacific) and the Cayman Islands (in the Caribbean).

If you want to rent a car for a trip to the countryside, Riposto is the place to stop, and visit Europe's largest active volcano Etna, or the popular tourist destination Taormina, are obvious destinations.



*Rosemarie enjoying the views at Etna. The summit in the background can only be reached by foot and with a professional guide*

Etna is best reached from the south side. We rented a car (but bus connections are available) and drove to Rifugio Sapienza at 1900 meters altitude. From here it is possible to get further up with a cable car to 2500 meters. Then continue the onward journey in small, 4WD vehicles. Etna's latest major eruption (in 2003) took place in a new secondary crater on the south-eastern slope of the volcano. The visit here at an altitude of almost 3,000 meters was a fantastic experience (visibility permitting which it did when we were there).

Taromina has been inhabited since time immemorial and is exciting because it has been a tourist destination as early as the late 19th century. Among it's attractions are the ruins of a Greek amphitheatre. Today however, it is probably first and foremost the coast and beaches (most famously 'Isola Bella'), which attracts tourists.



*Isola Bella near Taormina*

The trip further north along the coast is truly breathtaking, and by car it is possible to visit one of the traditional large Sicilian villages inland, in

our case Gallodoro. Hundred years ago the city had more than 1000 inhabitants, all of whom were sustained by agriculture (olives and wheat). In today's globalized world population has been reduced to less than 400 and tourism is a major contributor to the local economy.

### The shore of mainland Italy

Reggio Calabria, is capital and biggest city in Calabria. Not a typical tourist destination, but well located as a starting point for the passage through the narrowest part of the strait. While waiting, the local museum can be visited. Here are two impressive Greek warrior statues from about 450 BCE, exhibited in a specially climate-controlled room. The so-called 'Riace bronzes' are quite unique as most similar ancient bronzes in former times time were used as 'scrap metal' and re-cast (probably into guns). In 1972 however, these two statues were found in the seabed off the coast of Calabria. The grand warrior statues does make a visit to the museum a must.



SAR ship in Reggio run by MSF (Medicine Sans Frontiere). They arrived with more than 1000 refugees/migrants only the day before we came

When navigating the Med the ongoing refugee problem is one of the things one cannot avoid considering. The number of refugees and migrants crossing the Mediterranean to Europe has fallen dramatically (more than 1 million in 2015 compared to just under 180,000 in 2017). Still, navigating these waters one can't stop considering how to behave if one encounters a crowded, small sinking vessel at sea. Fortunately we did not; but in Reggio we experienced the problem at close range. Here, there is a reception centre where, shortly before our arrival, a SAR vessel run by MSF (Medicine Sans Frontieres) had arrived, with more than 1000 migrants. These were now going through registration and reception formalities. Although everything was carried out in an orderly manner, it was quite clear that this is a significant problem, which is largely left to the EU countries

that have coastlines to the Mediterranean.

### Between Scylla and Charybdis

Before departing from Reggio it is important to stay informed on the weather situation. Going through the narrow strait one might encounter difficult currents as well as winds funnelling against the current. Conditions in the Strait of Messina are described vividly in Homer's epic Greek poem the Odyssey (from about 800 BCE). Prior to his journey through the Strait Odysseus is warned by the sorcerer Circe, who tells him the original storey of being caught between 'the devil and the deep blue sea'. Odysseus is told that he has to pass on between two high cliffs on his journey northward. In a cave in the mountain on the east side Scylla resides. She(?) is a monster with six heads, each of them with terrible teeth. No one can pass the monster without each of the six heads grabbing one of the crew. On the other shore resides Charybdis, who sucks water into his mouth and spew it out again twice a day and with a force that no ship can withstand. Circe advises Odysseus to choose Scylla, even if he would have to pay with the life of six of his men.

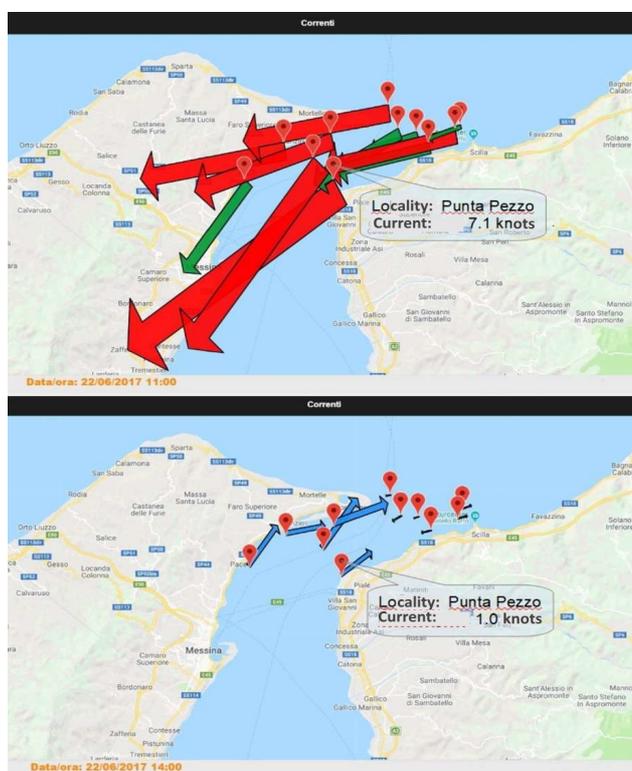


An artistic impression of Scylla and Charybdis (© Wikipedia)

The myth of the two sea monsters has survived for centuries, and modern oceanography explains the very special currents of the area. Even if you not normally think of tides in the Med, it is actually found, although typically there is only a difference of 20-25 cm. However, the tidal phase is different in the Thyrenean sea to the north and in the Ionian sea. This means that at the same time there can be high tide in the north and low tide in the south (or vice versa) all within a few miles. In combination with the rugged seabed, these conditions can create very violent currents and whirlpools.

At Troldand, we had heard many stories of the famous strait. Everything from that it was completely seamless, to dramatic descriptions of strong currents with currents that uncontrollably

pushed the boat sideways through the water. We had therefore in many ways tried to obtain more concrete information about the conditions. But internet searches for a tidal atlas had been in vain. And then the last night in Reggio, just before we had to go through the strait, we talked to some Italian sailors. When they heard we were planning to depart next morning at 9 am, they told us that it was a very bad idea and that we should rather wait until 1pm. Our new friends obviously knew something we didn't. Further inquiries revealed the existence of an internet site (and now also an app) with hourly forecasts of the tidal conditions in the strait. This revealed that with our originally scheduled departure we would have experienced counter-currents of up to 7 knots, whilst with the later departure we had a smooth passage.



Two screenshots from the Italian app 'Correnti Stretto di Messina' from the day we actually did the passage and showing our original planned departure and the 'updated' departure

### Along the northern coast of Calabria

Further on we continued along the north-eastern Calabrian coast, visiting some nice tiny (primarily) fishing harbours: Bagnara Calabria and Palmi. Not many pleasure boats come here, but we felt very welcome. These small places had a relaxed atmosphere, sustained partly by local tourists and partly by fishing swordfish a great local speciality. On our way towards Bagnara Calabria we met a few of these highly specialized fishing vessels.



One of the impressive sword-fish boats one might encounter in the Strait of Messina. Incredible?

They are typically 8-9 meters long, a mast of some 20 meters and an even longer bowsprit (and no, this is neither a printing error nor an exaggeration). From the top of the mast, the boat is controlled with a joy-stick. When the lookout from his position high above sea-level encounters a swordfish (allegedly sleeping on the surface), the boat sneaks close to the coveted prey, which is then harpooned by a man at the tip of the bowsprit. We almost didn't believe what we saw out there at sea. But it was real, and when the impressive boats entered the small harbour, we sensed that we had to hold our heads down to avoid the bowsprit, which almost swept over our heads while the small boats manoeuvred to the quay.

Further east along the coast we visited Tropea. An unusually beautiful old town, situated on a prominent cliff some 50 meters above sea level with a beautiful view of the Tyrrhenian sea and one of Italy's allegedly best beaches. In addition, visibility permitting we could even see Stromboli on the horizon.



Italian firefighter plane emptying its load of water a few miles from our mooring in Tropea. The picture is actually taken from Trolands cockpit and 'smoke is in the air'

In Tropea, we experienced a forest fire at close range. Indeed so close to the marina, that visibility was significantly reduced due to smoke and ash in

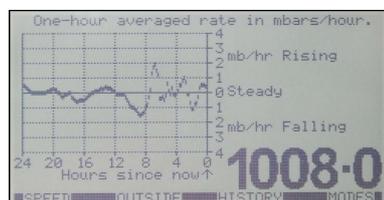
the air. In the very hot summer time, such fires in the dry maquis shrubland are common. Fortunately contingency plans were in place. From the time we first observed the fire, until the Italian fire-fighting air crafts were 'in place', only a few hours passed. We could then follow the operation, where the planes in full speed 'sucked' water from the sea surface, took off and shortly after released their load of water on to the fire. All with an impressive efficiency.

## Aeolian Islands

From Tropea it is a mere 30 nm to the northernmost of the Aeolian islands: Stromboli. The islands are a popular charter-destination, as they offer great diversity and usually have very stable weather conditions with light winds. On the negative side however, there are few (if any) secure anchorages, which means that if the wind changes, you have to move. In addition, the depth in most places increases so rapidly that safe anchoring is made difficult. Weather in the season though is mostly for motoring, but as an Italian charter skipper told us, it was really a problem, as most people coming to the islands don't come for the sake of sailing, but rather for swimming and enjoying sun at the fore deck.

Also Odysseus visited the islands on his epic voyage. Here he met Aiolos son of Poseidon, and responsible guard winds. Aiolos gives Odysseus a leather pouch as a gift. In the bag, Aiolos has confined the dangerous winds, thereby ensuring Odysseus safe return to home. Unfortunately, his men are curious, they open the bag, the winds escapes and Odysseus return home is once again delayed.

This story fits well with our experiences. When we were on the islands we experienced one of the situations when a local Mediterranean low pressure



moved over the southern Thyrrenian sea, giving us winds in excess of 30-35 knots.

However, modern high-resolution GRIB files had warned in time and Troldand were safely moored in the only safe port in the area at Lipari. Marina Pignataro is a fine combination of fishing port and marina with all-round protection. We were weather bound here for four days. But with access to the island's fine town and museum it was no problem.

Luckily we had plenty of time and visited further three islands. In stable weather, they are amazing, though perhaps to a great extent, characterized by

an intense tourism. In this context, it is interesting to see how the different smaller islands have specialised, and almost appear as a number of different 'theme parks': Stromboli is the island for trekking. Tourists come here first and foremost to climb the active volcano, often referred to as the Mediterranean lighthouse. Shops of the island reflect this, as there is a rich selection of shops where to buy hiking boots, walking sticks and other types of leisure equipment.

Panarea, on the other hand, has apparently become the island of (would be) celebrities seeking 'original' relaxing fairytale life in their idyllic, modernized fishing houses with access to small protected beaches. A clientele reflected in the plentiful selection of good restaurants.

Finally, a visit to the Vulcano (mother of all volcanoes) and named after the Roman god of fire. Here, the tourists also come to relax, and Vulcano seems to have become the 'theme park' for people seeking the healthy life style, including yoga, special food, easy walking and (sulfur stinking) mud baths.



*Sulphur stinking mud bath that people seem to enjoy*

From the Aeolian Islands to Sicily's capital Palermo, which were to be Troldand's wintering harbor, there are only 70 nm. En route from Vulcano in open sea, we had a close encounter with a sister-ship: Southerly 110 (Geof & Linda Grey in 'Summertime') sailing eastwards. Unfortunately we never met ashore but we did exchange e-mails (thanks to the SOA member directory) and we have thoroughly enjoyed their blog.

There are several interesting places to visit along northern Sicily. Apart from Palermo most of all, Cefalu, known for its huge Norman cathedral from the 12th century. Build by Roger II (a cousin to William the Conquer), and a great grandson of Rollo, the Viking who originally established himself Normandy. But that is a completely different story.