



49

MOUNT ETNA

“The gateway to that blazing universe [Hell] was fatally identified with Mount Etna, a volcano resting on the shoulders of a subterranean giant according to the poet Callimachus. It brightened the Ionian nights with rivers of fire and clouds of flame.”

Una voce dal Profondo, Paolo Rumiz

The myth surrounding the most powerful expressions of nature makes no exception with Mt Etna, portrayed as a fiery giant dominating the landscape and culture of Eastern Sicily. It towers above the Ionian Sea, with the sea stacks in Aci Trezza protruding from its waters as an everlasting mark of the earliest volcanic activity. It is found in the heart of the villages on its slopes that feature churches, roads, and castles built of lava stone. As an active volcano, it is a witness to the most ancient geological eras just as it is an ever-changing protagonist of contemporary life. This is why almost 20 hectares of the most strictly protected area at higher altitude that form part of Etna Regional Nature Park have been listed among UNESCO world heritage sites. Flower diversity on Mt Etna is also impressive for its wide range of ecosystems, from Mediterranean maquis at low altitude due to the sea's strong influence to almost naked ground around the cones. An iconic plant here is the Etna broom, unique in its kind for its capacity to adapt to extreme conditions and to the destructive force of the volcano, a sort of symbol of the determination of all Sicilians who chose to live and breathe symbiotically with “the Mountain”.



NATURAL HERITAGE
UNESCO DOSSIER: 1427
CITY OF INSCRIPTION: PHNOM PENH, CAMBODIA
DATE OF INSCRIPTION: 2013

CRITERIA FOR SELECTION: Mount Etna, an iconic presence in the Mediterranean landscape, has had a continuous volcanic activity over the centuries, documented in literature and scientific research since the 8th century B.C. It stands as a cornerstone of volcanological, geophysical, and scientific studies in general, as well as a cultural reference point of great significance in Europe and worldwide.





“They had told me much of the curious colours of dawn on the Ionian Sea, when beheld from the heights of Aetna. I decided to make the ascent of the mountain [...] At the summit a shelter had been built for us to await the dawn. It came: an immense rainbow arched from horizon to horizon; on the icy crest strange fires blazed; earth and sea spread out to view as far as Africa, within sight, and Greece, which we merely guessed at. That was truly an Olympian height in my life.”

If the words of the Roman Emperor in *Memoirs of Hadrian* by Marguerite Yourcenar arouse your curiosity and you are craving for sublime experiences, making it to the top of Mt Etna and wondering at the view of summit craters will be a truly unforgettable height in your life.

There are several ways to approach the ascent and reach the most active craters – the North-East Crater, *Voragine*, *Bocca Nuova*, and the South-East Crater, in addition to the latest South-East Crater formed in 2011. As the most directly accessible, the southern flank is also the most popular among hikers, who can favour one of the numerous trails wending their way from **1 Rifugio Sapienza** (1923 m) to the summit. To take it as easily as possible, catch the Etna cable car up to 2500 m and then a minibus to *Torre del Filosofo* area (2920 m); alternatively, you can skip the minibus ride and hike from

the highest cable car station up a steep 2-km ascent, but make sure to be back on time for the last cable car ride, as the round trip takes about 4 hours! Another option is to hike all the way up from Rifugio Sapienza – a rather strenuous four-hour climb just for the outbound trip – but definitely worth the effort. Once you reach the craters, you will be rewarded with a breathtaking view over the Strait of Messina, extending as far as Calabria, with the outlines of the Aspromonte and Sila visible in the distance. If you gaze east of the craters, you will spot the **2 Valle del Bove**, a vast

expanse of black lapilli formed by the collapse of a volcanic cone several thousand years ago. Moving to the northern flank, the access point is **3 Piano Provenzana** (1800 m), a small winter sports resort where you can ski with a backdrop of the sea from December to March, when the weather conditions allow it. From here, several paths lead up to the 3326 m peak. The climb is demanding, but the view from the top is unrivaled, stretching from the northern coast of Sicily as far as the Aeolian Islands on one side and as far as Calabria on the other.



IDDU OR IDDA?

“Mt Etna is mighty; he looks like a wise giant. At times, he can be dreadful, and even then it's as if he's rattling his chains within the inescapable mystery of a dark fate; [...] Etna is quintessentially male, he's the patriarch of crowds, villages, flocks of tuna fish in the deep waters at his feet.”

Meeting with Japan, Fosco Maraini

Fosco Maraini, orientalist, describes Mt Etna as a “patriarch”, thereby overlooking an essential trait of the local folklore culture according to which Etna is perceived and sensed as a

feminine entity regardless of the correct grammatical gender in the Italian language. In Catania, and to be honest across the whole of Sicily, people say “she, the mountain” or *Idda* (she, her in Sicilian dialect), while the masculine pronoun *Iddu* (he, him) is used for Mt Stromboli. Indeed, Etna should be referred to as a matriarch, bringing life back into the soil after cataclysmic eruptions through volcanic dusts. There are also legends involving primordial gods in support of Etna's supposed femininity. Uranus, the personification of the sky, and Gaia, Mother Earth, generated a nymph named Etna, who had a rebel creature inside her – a trapped giant for some, a monstrous son for others. Aside from the many versions, the myth explained volcanic eruptions as the efforts of this trapped creature to break free into the world.



'A COLOSSAL FAMILY CAT SNOOZING BLISSFULLY. AT TIMES, IT WAKES UP, YAWNS, LAZILY STRETCHES OUT, THEN SWIPES A PAW, CASUALLY BLOWING ONE VALLEY OR ANOTHER.'

Sciascia's portray of Mt Etna in his preface to *De Aetna* by Pietro Bembo reveals the entertaining side of the volcano, especially for the young adventure-lovers – clouds of smoke, acrid sulphury fumes, and the rocks shaking under the feet can make an unforgettable experience. As a volcano,

Mt Etna is unexpectedly welcoming to visitors, who can explore it through a plethora of tracks, some of which are gentle and suitable even for small children. Start your hike from the Southern flank towards *Belvedere Etno*, a viewpoint at about 2600 m looking on to the impressive *Valle del Bove* covered with black lapilli. Regardless of your trekking expertise, you can take the **1 cable car** from *Rifugio Sapienza* and then easily cover the remaining 600 m to the viewpoint, from which you will feast your eyes on one of the best views of the summit craters from a medium distance, namely the pit crater known as "*Cisternazza*", a large

circular hole formed by a collapse due to magma movements. The north-eastern flank is just as exciting, though. You can choose between "*Sartorius' craters*", about a one hour walk from **2 Rifugio Citelli** on a comfortable loop trail, a number of relaxed paths branching off from **3 Piano Provenzana**, a winter ski destination with ski lifts – if you are planning a ski trip, please check their opening period and the weather forecast in advance –, and even some 4x4 shuttle service taking you to **4 Pizzi Deneri Observatory** (2900 m), for a stroll along a crater edge with an expert volcanologist. The shuttle service is available at an extra cost and by reservation only, even at sunset for the hopeless romantic! Horse rides for all are also organised setting off from **5 Linguaglossa** across ancient mountain tracks running along the village and around Valle dell'Alcantara. To spend an adventurous day with your kids, do not miss the chance to admire the grand columns of ballast rock in the **6 Alcantara Gorges**, splendid formations of large lava flows that have taken incredible shapes. Children will be free to explore and bathe in the shallow river waters and play under small cascades guarded by the imposing ballast rock walls enclosing the gorge.



KIDS



MOUNT ETNA in books

Reading suggestions to discover "the" Mountain of Sicilian people.

- **De Aetna**, Pietro Bembo (1496). This early work written by Pietro Bembo in Latin is a dialogue with his father, as the author recounts his ascent of the volcano and his firsthand experience of an unexpected eruption. Bembo's essay serves as a fascinating account of volcanic phenomena, notable for being one of the first descriptions based on direct observation, on-site information, and literary tradition, free from mythological connotations. Among various publications, the 1981 Sellerio edition includes notes by Leonardo Sciascia.
- **Due viaggiatrici "indifese" in Sicilia e sull'Etna. Diario di due lady vittoriane**, edited by Stefania Arcara (2001). Autobiographical novel based on 1859 work by Emily Lowe *Unprotected Females in Sicily, Calabria, and on the Top of Mount Aetna*. It narrates the Sicilian wanderings of the writer, an independent and unconventional traveller, accompanied by her mother. The ascent of Mount Etna in the snow is a key moment of their journey.

- **The Story of a blackcap** (1871) and **Nedda** (1874), Giovanni Verga. The first is a novel set between Mt Illice, on the southeastern flank of Etna, and Catania, the volcano slopes being often a destination for walks. Nedda is a novella whose protagonist is an olive-gatherer searching for a job among the various farms on the slopes of the volcano.

- **Sabbia nera**, Cristina Cassar Scalia (2019). The discovery of a mummified corpse in a villa on the slopes of Etna kicks off the investigation by deputy police commissioner Giovanna Guarrasi, known as Vanina, the protagonist of a detective series by Cassar Scalia. The plot unfolds in Catania and its surroundings, shrouded in the volcano's ashes – *sabbia nera*, the "black sand" evoked in the title.

- **Il vento dell'Etna**, Anna Chisari (2022). Set in Belpasso, a village on the slopes of Mount Etna, this family saga recounts the vicissitudes of the Baruneddu dynasty all the way back to the 19th c. when Puddu, the forefather, was awarded the title of baronet.

- **Una voce dal Profondo**, Paolo Rumiz (2023). The pages of this book

take us on a journey directly into the depths of Italy to analyse the roots of national identity of a restless land that trembles and erupts through geology, volcanology, myth and history.

- **Abbecedario siciliano**, Roberto Alajmo (2023). A witty, amusing glossary presenting a selection of Sicilian dialect entries and expressions to illustrate the character of this region. Prominent among the entries is "Idda", literally "she/her", referring to Mt Etna. "The" mountain is considered as a mother by the Sicilians, perhaps due to the fertility of the soil on its slopes.

Children's books:

- **L'Etna raccontata ai ragazzi**, Giuseppe Riggio (2016). It is a book conceived to pass on the story of an ancient world to new generations.
- **La bambina di nome Etna**, Marinella Fiume (2023). A short story that introduces young people to the universe of Etna through the narrative device of the protagonist sharing the same name as the volcano.