

## Sicily spring 2023

This was the fourth OCA sponsored botanical excursion to Europe. The other three were Southern France, Greece (Crete and Attica), and Switzerland (alpine areas).

On this trip we traveled to Sicily, the largest island in the Mediterranean, and a crossroads of both botanic and cultural interest. The European orchids are fascinating plants with a long association with people; are relatively easy to find, and most bloom within a limited time (4-5 weeks) in the spring, making it quite feasible to find a variety of orchids in a short time span such as our tour (9 days). The European orchids are all terrestrial plants that go dormant in the hot Mediterranean summers. Our guide on this trip was Jon Dunn, a very knowledgeable and experienced naturalist, and the OCA representative was Spiro Kasomenakis.

The group met up in Catania, a small city on the south part of the island near Mt. Etna. After leaving the airport hotel the next day, we were on our way to our first home base, an “agriturismo”. We made day trips out from this site over the next few days exploring sites on the slopes of Mt. Etna, and natural areas around Ferla, Monte Lauro, Dirillo and Priolo.

Unfortunately, Covid 19 raised its ugly head, and we had several people that had to end their trip early due to Covid infections. Despite public opinion, Covid remains a problem, with a complete lack of precautions on the plane or in the airports. It was our experience that almost no one wore mask, or took any precautions whatsoever. Fortunately all of our trippers fully recovered after mild to moderate infections. Because of these issues we have now written a firm Covid policy for our tours which we will be posting on the website under tours.

The ones remaining had a day exploring the ancient town of Siracusa, birthplace and hometown of its most famous citizen: Archimedes. We had an English-speaking guide to take us around the most important sites of the ancient city. We also had another guide a few days later in Agrigento (ancient Akragas), where we were able to enjoy the valley of temples, the museum, and the Baroque city of Noto.

We transferred to another hilltop agriturismo, in another part of the island, this one a 19<sup>th</sup> century hunting lodge, converted to a hotel and catering hall. From this second base, we explored the areas around the Madonie Massif, a very rich and diverse collection of habitats.

The flora, and specifically the orchids of the island were spectacular. Though Mediterranean orchids tend to be small in stature, they more than make up

for it in their unusual and sometimes bizarre appearance and pollination strategies. And because some are very rare and localized, there are a special treat and accomplishment when spotted. Jon had, through his contacts, lists of very specific sites where very special plants were seen.

One, like the site of a natural hybrid of *Orchis italica* and *O.anthropophora* was completely unexpected: growing on top of a retaining wall by a busy road.!

We saw a little less than 50 species (a very good number for Europe), and all but one or two of the special endemics of the island, and that is only because they must be blooming a little later!

There was an almost endless variety of bee orchids (*Ophrys* spp.), no two looking alike, even if they were the same species! Identifying them takes experience and great observational skills, and learning about their pollination strategies is almost awe inspiring!

The weather was mostly sunny, but cool: a perfect combination, and the locals friendly and curious. The food was good; we did have several opportunities to sample the local specialties and of course the local wines.

We departed from Palermo airport, some staying an extra day to see the town. As the unpleasant memory of Covid fades, and everyone is back to normal, what remains from this trip is the wonderful and sometimes unexpected natural beauty of this place, the very photogenic orchids and the time spent clambering over lava fields and hillside terraces!

Europe is famous for a lot of things, and orchids must definitely be added to the attractions this continent has to offer.