

There is only one place on the planet where you can enjoy a spectacular dinner of swordfish rolls and stuffed calamari, sipping perfect chardonnay and having a midnight swim in crystal waters under the herculean fireworks of an active volcano. And this place is Stromboli, and Stromboli is the must: it's impossible to overestimate the subtle charm and violent beauty of this unique island. With its continuous volcanic fireworks, the fiery furnaces of hell are closer to the sky than the tolling of the church bells. Sometimes, with westerly winds, a violent thunder remind the bar-going visitors that indeed one is standing on an open scar on the Earth's crust. The pyrotechnic show can be either leisurely enjoyed sailing at night under the Sciara of the W side, or deservedly admired from the top after a 3-hour hike. This is the best of sailing the Aeolian Islands



I had been away from Stromboli for slightly over a month and this idea of writing something funny about it seemed the best way to handle such an extraordinary subject. This volcano is a desperate hand straight out of the guts of the planet, the cry of rage and fear of an imprisoned monster around which humans had built whitewashed houses, bursting churches and jam-packed bars. A critic might cavil whether Stromboli is the point of the Earth where Heaven and Hell are closest, but there is no doubt that it is the only place where the explosions from the Fiery Furnace are closer to the sky than the tolling of the church bells. The only place where the black sand and the white walls live in harmony, a kingdom of contrasts in perfect balance on a tight rope, enraged nature on one side and imbecile human dreams on the other. Anyway, when I let go last night just off the few lights and under the reddish glow in the clouds, anything funny or ironic faded away, and this tale will be a contrast of tragedy and comedy, only less perfect than this island.

Then after other two days, when the subtle worm of comedy nearly found its way back to the world of temptation and possibility, a thunderstorm came and the worm died forever. My vessel was at anchor several miles away when God decided it was time to end summer in glory, rage and wrath, and thunder and lighting came to split the world between darkness and light. After an hour the rage was over Stromboli, and there it was, a cascade of lighting and anger in a fluorescent atmosphere of

ghosts and strobo-madness, a techno-show of terrific power over the sea and the horizon. Only, there, flashing black and triangular, oblivious of storms and rain, unaware of pains and disaster, careless of destinies and choices, the volcano again was bouncing between heaven and hell, a cone of perfect darkness, lost in time.



It's a place where black and white do exist, like in the worst movies when a spotless good defeats a shameful bad. But still, the red of fire and negronis add a new weight to the balance, the burden of life and existence, of human beings sensing cocktails, kneeling in churches and hiking up the sandy slopes to the crater. Black, white and red.

Be sure to approach the 'Lighthouse of the Mediterranean' from the North West and in the last hours of the night. The thousand-metre high firework platform will show you the way and slowly a black perfect cone (Strombos means cone in Greek) will remain in the night while the rest lights up. Until 1934 the island was bursting activity, with thousands of farmers building terraces up the cone to transform the rich ashes into wine and capers. That year a stronger eruption killed a dozen souls, shrapnelled the others, but failed to destroy the recently imported vine parasites. Most inhabitants left, mainly to the States. Until a couple of decades ago, you could buy a house in Stromboli for the cost of its bricks. Microsoft stocks cannot compete with the values of the same houses in more recent days. But Italians are smart chaps and never advertised it too much around. Now, like I or not, you'll have to drink your Negroni with left-wing politicians, stylish gays, glamorous fashion stars, summer charter sailors and large Sicilian notables, none of whom will ever think about climbing the cone, a deplorable activity left to French and German backpackers, kindly deprived of 25 euros each for a trekking permit. But winter selects, and only locals and backpackers remain.

Autumn clouds hang like a bracelet around the cone and pour down rain. The alleys are a desert, the bars less so but certainly active is the church. After ten hours of sailing, three anchoring manoeuvres and a rolly night I was looking for reasons to understand why this place climbed my list of favourite islands to reach first and second place. Then I reached the square and I had on one side the church where Tuesday mass, a renowned favourite activity of all Catholics, was celebrated, and on the other a double rainbow falling right over Strombolicchio, a 50-metre high pillar with compulsory beacon and sunset reflections floating over a sea of a whole bunch of shades of steel. Ok, I'll stand the rolling another night... also because Andrea's bar is closed.

The Barbablu is the closest thing to an old English pub you can find on the territory of the Italian Republic. Only, it does not look to a pub at all, with its red and yellow pastel walls (only one around) and stylish modern interior with 4 (four) highly valued stools. But it's the atmosphere... it's a place where you arrive alone and after an hour or so you know everyone. Maybe the merit goes to Andrea's concoctions. One night a couple came in, and they ordered a Negroni and a tonic water. Andrea's reaction to the latter order was mild, mainly due to the fact that my girlfriend had just ordered a tea - what? A tea? Who the fuck are you, snow-white? - thus reaching the tolerance limit. I naturally complimented the bloke for its choice. Only I was grossly mistaken and the red velvet was bound for the lady's throat instead. When the two came out to join the majority of the company, who sat down as usual smoking on the sort wall outside, where a gigantic tray full of black sand swallowed the filters, the lady's eyes were sparkling. God I feel good. Stromboli had harvested another victim. Expect to meet any possible variation of human being at Andrea's: Australian gardeners, bad politicians (there are no good ones in Italy), lose sailors, Sicilian writers, serious engineers, pigtailed musicians, serious managers, dreamy tour-guides and Neapolitan lawyers.

Ginostra lies on the other corner of San Vincenzo , just half a mile South of the Sciara, the slide where the fiery rocks rolls down to the sea. Yes, because Stromboli main difference when compared to fireworks and other volcanoes is that what goes up do fall down again here, mostly down the Sciara, seldom somewhere else, occasionally on unfortunate heads. Japanese tourists cannot believe someone is even paying Ginza values to buy property here...

The tiny village proudly boasts the smallest harbour of the planet, a tiny haven hidden among rocks where the locals can easily haul out their gozzi. Old wisdom suggested not to build anything bigger, because Ginostra is only sheltered by dead calm weather. Needless to say authorities recently built a wharf for the use of evac-units and hydrofoils, but I am sure Nature will soon claim it back.

Ask the Author