

*This is an account of a summer cruise on the yacht Double Bill by friends Stephen and Carol Gill. From Caletta in **Sardinia** to **Malta**, with extensive reporting of conditions in **Sicily**, they have kindly allowed us to put it on the web site for its general interest to fellow cruising folk.*

“Received your email and thought I’d while away some time this rainy afternoon giving you a bit more info about our travels since we last met up in La Caletta.

We made good progress down the East coast of Sardinia, calling in at **Arbatax** and **Vilasimius** where we were held up for a few days because of the strong winds. Eventually we got a ‘slot’ (or so we thought!) for the crossing to Sicily and set off at first light on August 8th. Despite a forecast promising W3 becoming variable 4, we had the most atrocious conditions we have ever experienced in 25 years. Winds up to 40 Knots (thank God, from the port quarter) and surfing down the steep waves at up to 8 knots...quite an achievement in Double Bill with only a bit of headsail set. This went on from mid afternoon until the early hours of the morning. Thankfully nothing broke, the autopilot was spot on and Carol didn’t sue for divorce – though it was a close run thing!

We decided to seek refuge and get some sleep, since none had been possible on passage, by putting in to **Marettimo** the most westerly of the **Egadi islands**. This was a very dramatic spot where we anchored under steep cliffs to escape the wind and got our anchor chain wrapped around some rocks. Anchoring anywhere around the Egadis is very hit and miss as the bottom is either too deep or all rocks and boulders. This put us off rather and we decided to head for Trapani, on the mainland, to recover our composure.

From this point things looked up. **Trapani** is a pleasant, ordinary commercial town, not given to tourists, with much interesting history, excellent fish shops and free moorings in the harbour close to the yacht club. These were put down for a large catamaran regatta and they have been left in place for anyone to use. We also made use of a small family run ‘marina’ – well a pontoon really – where the facilities were good and the manageress spoke excellent English – a rarity in Sicily outside the obvious tourist hotspots like Palermo. Whilst in Trapani we took the cable car up to the ancient walled town of **Erice** – a delight not to be missed. Everyone we met told us this, but cynical old me didn’t really believe it until we got there.

Well rested up by now, on August 15th we decided to head on east to **San Vito lo Capo**. As usual, by the time we entered the harbour there was a screaming gale blowing, we were turned away from all the available mooring places - 'FULL' gestures being much in evidence – and with a powerful on-shore swell breaking onto the beach there was no possibility of anchoring. At this point we caught some thing round the prop!!!! Eventually it cleared itself – cutter earning its corn? - and we limped off down the coast to seek refuge in **Castellamare**. Can't tell you much about this place as here too there were no spaces so we didn't get off, but we were able to anchor in the harbour, where we rolled like a pig all night. First light saw us moving on again, this time to **Terrasini**, which is a small fishing harbour right next to the runway of Palermo airport. Here time stands still. There is just one pontoon with space for 6 boats run by three mafia style brothers and the place is a mecca for local holidaymakers, though no foreign tourists were in evidence. Hence it is cheap, cheerful, filthy (if the amount of rubbish strewn about is anything to go by) and the people very friendly. Feeling quite 'At Home', and with strong winds continuously blowing from the east, we decided to give up at this point and wait for the family to fly in on August 22nd. This proved just as well as when we did eventually get to the marina at **Villa Igia**, (the principal marina for **Palermo**) where we had originally planned to meet them, we were charged 100 euros per night excluding water (which was an extra 20!!) At this sort of money our stay in Palermo was kept brief. However, we had an excellent day visiting the sights and enjoyed a first class lunch whilst out on the town. Not surprisingly, there were few visiting yachts at Villa Igia, so I guess most must risk the reported rats and thieves in Palermo old town harbour.

Continuing eastwards, our next port of call was **S. Nicola L'Arena** which is a small village with a marina and where, by arriving by lunchtime, we got the only visitor space. One or two yachts did arrive later and were rafted up on the fuel berth. Our next port of call was **Cefalu**, which is a delightful old town and well worth a visit. The harbour offers good shelter from prevailing winds and the anchorage is secure.

By August 29th we were ready to move on again and we made passage to **Portorosa**. Once again our arrival was accompanied by a strong wind - W6 - and entering the marina was quite a hairy experience as it is necessary to head towards the beach with its boiling surf, before turning sharply to starboard behind the outer mole. Once inside however, all was peace and tranquillity. Indeed Portorosa proved an ideal place for the family. It is a huge marina basin dug out of the lower reaches of an old riverbed, surrounded by trees, low rise apartments and villas. We were

allocated a secluded alongside berth adjacent to the swimming pool and, though it was a fair walk around the basin to the 'island' where the marina office, shops, bars and restaurants are located, it suited us admirably.

The family were now into their second week, and as we had promised Rachael (aged 6) that we would try to find a volcano, we set sail for the **Aeolian Islands**. Vulcano obliged by bubbling sulphur and Stromboli smoked away merrily. We berthed in the marina on **Lipari** and spent a delightful day exploring the island. With time pressing we needed to get back to the mainland so our visitors could catch the train back to Palermo. Our plan was to head to **Milazzo**, which is the ferry port for the islands and has a train station. Unfortunately, when we arrived we were turned away...the yacht club marina was full and there was nowhere to anchor... so we had to retrace our steps to Portorosa, where the family were able to get a taxi to a station further down the line.

Back on our own, we decided we would take a rest day before heading for the **Straits of Messina** and the perils of the whirlpools much recorded in Greek Myth and Legend. Whilst impressive, they were no worse than those experienced in Bardsey Sound off North Wales, thus demonstrating yet again that if you can sail in the Irish Sea you can sail anywhere! Mind you, we did have a big diesel engine to power us through rather than a square sail and oars, so perhaps it's an unfair comparison! Racing through the straits (SOG up to 11 knots) we managed to dodge the numerous ferries before picking up a strong northerly which sped us down the east coast. Our original intention to anchor off **Taormina** had to be abandoned as the sea state was far too high and we thus surfed on to **Riposto**, a town situated immediately below the slopes of Mount Etna. Here the 'Marina del Etna' proved to be a real gem. Cheap, wonderfully clean, excellent showers etc. and offering a spectacular view as night fell of Etna erupting. It seems quite surreal to see street lights marking habitation half way up the mountain side, while lava pours down from the summit and great gouts of volcanic material is showered high into the heavens. A really spectacular show.

The big problem with Sicily for those of us who prefer to anchor, is that there are very few suitable places which are really secure. During our time there, what with the endless strong winds and inevitable large swell, we had to use marinas almost all of the time. Our next port of call was the notable exception to this rule, **Siracusa** providing excellent all round shelter, good holding, and an anchorage a short dinghy ride from the town quay. There were more visiting yachts here than in the rest of Sicily

altogether, and it is easy to see why. Think Porto Colom on Mallorca, but with a large town steeped in history on the doorstep. We dug our anchor into the same mud where the Greek and Phoenician fleets battled it out in ancient times and felt a real sense of history.

Siracusa was a place to stay and explore in some detail, but time was pressing and the weather was starting to become more unsettled. With flights booked from Malta looming, we decided to save this delight for another day and the following morning we headed on south to **Porto Palo** from where we would make passage for Malta. Friday morning dawned serene and at 0615 we departed the anchorage and laid course for **Valetta**.

For once there was no wind and we motored all the way across, arriving off Grand Harbour at 1500, only to be told that the harbour was closed until 1900 because it was 'Victory Day' and there were flying demonstrations and a rowing regatta.!! After swanning around outside for a couple of hours, together with numerous other yachts, 2 freighters and a bulk carrier, we eventually sneaked in to Msida harbour where we took on fuel, before heading round into **Grand Harbour** and proceeding to our marina berth in **Dockyard Creek**. The town had certainly laid on a welcome for us! As night fell the Victory Celebrations began with fireworks, spectacular illuminations and all the bells of the scores of churches ringing out a deafening cacophony which continued until midnight.

We enjoyed a final week of holiday exploring Malta by bus (an experience in itself) and doing end of season jobs on the boat, before flying home on September 18th. Fortunately late September and early October have been unseasonably warm here in the UK, so the 'thermal shock' was not too bad!

Hope you find the above interesting and that it provides a flavour of the second part of our 2006 cruise.

Very best wishes

Stephen and Carol