

The Riserva dello Zingaro, Sicily

A stubborn resistance to air con isn't the best thing to pack when you're planning a trip to Sicily in the forty degree heat of mid-August, but in a land where some still take their wares to market by donkey it seems anachronistic and a bit self-indulgent. Driving down the A29 from Palermo to Trapani, Luke begged me to pull over and improvise a shower with a bottle of San Pellegrino. I obliged and refreshed, we set to perusing the map: how many kilometres remained between us and the *Riserva dello Zingaro*?

This fantastic nature reserve isn't open to cars: you park and descend on foot. One of the few areas in Sicily that has been spared development, work had already begun on a coastal road in the 1970s when environmentalists began to campaign for its conservation. A persuasive press campaign in 1981 awakened public sensibilities to the precious jewel that was about to be destroyed, and the *Riserva dello Zingaro* became a ward of the State Forestry Commission.

Scrutinizing the map, we deduced that we'd be there in time for lunch – maybe half an hour more – and were just about to drive off, when a large, white van pulled up, flanking our car and, effectively, preventing us from moving. Having lived in Sicily for several years, I'm not easily given to fantasies about concrete boots and horses' heads, but we were, undeniably, in the middle of nowhere: nobody knew where we'd gone or when we'd be back.

Three sets of eyes burned into us from behind dark glasses. There wasn't a soul around. A pregnant pause filled the air. Nobody said a word. I limited myself to raising a quizzical eyebrow and maintaining what I hoped was a slightly intimidating gaze. Finally, the driver of the van spoke, in a gruff voice.

"Volete assaggiare dei formaggi?" Do you want to try some cheese? Suppressing a smile, and feeling my adrenaline levels swoop back down to normal, I assured him that, no thank you, we'd just eaten. So despite their unquestionable deliciousness, we'd have to pass. But thank you very much anyway.

Stopping off at the little supermarket just a mile or two down the road, I checked over my shoulder before ordering two of what must be the world's tastiest sandwiches, packed with layer upon layer of mozzarella and Parma ham.

And then, suddenly, we arrived. Sixteen square kilometres of perfectly unspoiled coastline unfolded before us as we trekked down amidst wild grasses, caper plants and searing heat. Fortunately, the descent is brief, and you're rewarded with breathtaking views of the San Vito lo Capo peninsula: stark, volcanic rock and crystalline waters, rendered turquoise by the blazing sun. A small entry fee keeps the beach spotlessly clean, and local pride ensures that no daytrippers leave any litter behind.

Wading into the cool, clear sea, someone waved to me. I raised a sheepish hand to the cheese seller, and made a mental note to hide my sandwiches.