

Condé Nast Traveller

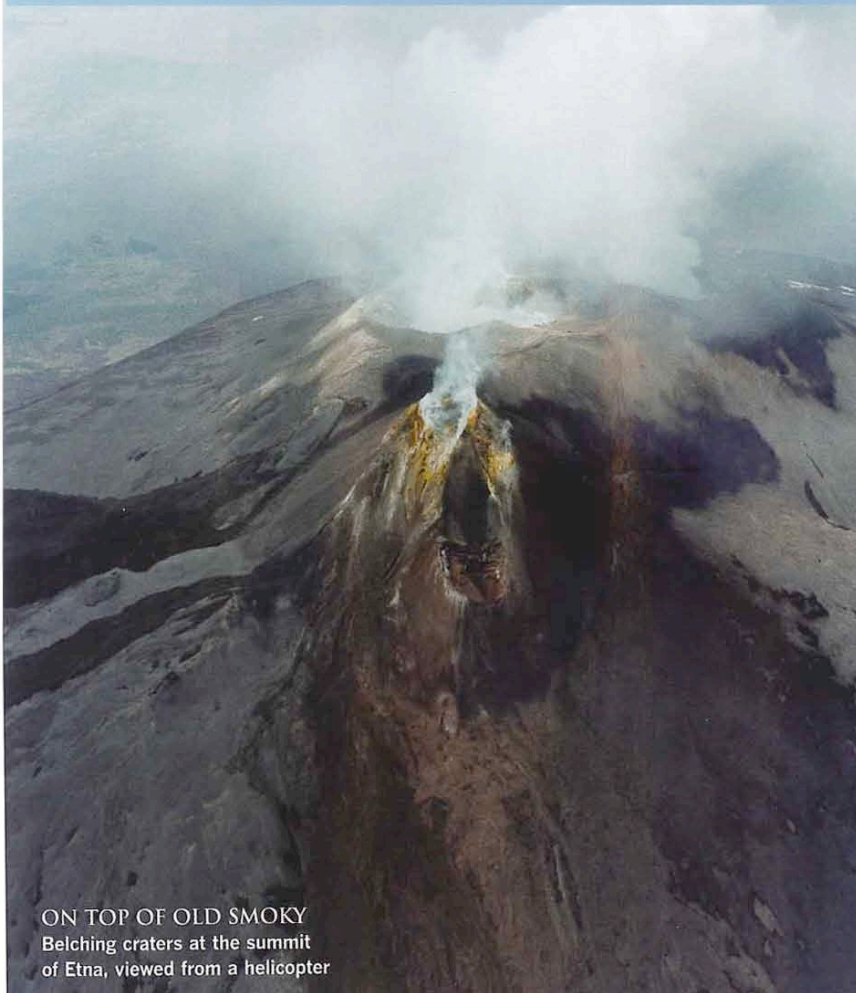
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THE BEST OF SICILY

An insider guide to eight places you must visit

COMPETITION
WIN A SHORT BREAK
IN SWITZERLAND



ON TOP OF OLD SMOKY
Belching craters at the summit
of Etna, viewed from a helicopter

THE BEST OF SICILY

A NEST OF BURNING SNAKES: THE BEST WALK UP ETNA

This is how the world was born and how the earth was made. Nine thousand feet up, it is still happening. We walk through thick curtains of sulphur fumes. 'Stay very close to me,' says Andrea, the guide. We tiptoe along the edge of the smoking mouth of the central crater as if trying not to wake her. Etna, *la mutagna*, the mountain, is always referred to as 'she'. We have scarves over our mouths and go very slowly, sometimes blindly, through reeking gas. 'No one knows what's down there,' Andrea says. He rolls a rock in and we hear it bounding down, down to a rattling roar, then a boom, then silence. The steamy smoke closes in again. We step around a burst bubble in the ground and pass huge cakes of sulphur, like loaves of golden sugar. It smells like the devil's bedroom. Etna whistles and hisses as if it is not the giant Enceladus trapped down there, as the Greeks believed, but a nest of burning snakes. Scalding gas jets from yellow holes around our feet.

There is a loud boom from the north-east crater. Andrea freezes and my heart pounds. We are tiny intruders here, weak as the insects carried up by Etna's eight winds to die in her snow fields and volcanic deserts. I look at Andrea. He has explained what to do if something happens. We will fight the urge to run: we will stop, look and use our heads. Then run. There are more explosions. 'Fireworks,' he says. We are not disappointed: there are black splats around our feet, the bursts of lava bombs, missiles the size of washing machines hurled hundreds of metres from another crater. Further down the mountain, Andrea saw a man struck by a smoking rock thrown lazily out of a side vent.

Andrea is the perfect guide, and not just because no one has ever been hurt on his watch. Arriving at the top, after a steep trudge through snow, is an overwhelming emotional experience. Etna makes people cry, sometimes: climbing her is a life-marking moment, one you want to undergo with someone who understands your sense of Etna's terrible sublime, who adores and studies her. Andrea's head is full of volcanology, stories and dates. When she did this, when she did that. She obeys only her own rhythms and Andrea is her devoted student. He gives an unforgettable lecture, illustrated with handfuls of black ash, on how she has grown and changed from one summit crater to four, on her quakes and collapses, on different eruptions, lavas and pyroclastic flows in her repertoire. He is proud of her, like a man who has befriended a dragon.

Etna seems to resent man's works. On the way up you pass the wrecks of three cable-car systems. Andrea points out the positions of refuges, roads and restaurants, all gone. You can see the very top of a two-storey hotel buried in still-steaming ash. Anything which comes too close is obliterated. You thank her for having you, as you descend, and for letting you go. Nothing, not even the sea in its full fury, is quite as extraordinary as Etna.

Andrea Ercolani takes tours up Etna and in the Madonies (00 39 095 968 882; www.siciltrek.it). He provides boots, jackets and water, drives you from your hotel to the cable car, then a Unimog takes you to within 90 minutes' walk of the top. Etna is monitored by seismological instruments which, in theory, warn of imminent activity