

# Orchids of Sicily

Mariposa Nature Tours trip report

10<sup>th</sup>-17<sup>th</sup> April 2025

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Tour leader Andrea Corso

Trip report by Andrea Corso

(Images, clockwise from top left: *Ophrys grandiflora* © Alison; *Ophrys lacaitae* x © Julia;

*Ophrys calliantha* © Alison; *Ophrys pallida* © Julia)

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## **Orchids of Sicily, 10<sup>th</sup>-17<sup>th</sup> April 2025**

This tour was our third Orchids of Sicily foray, and our second in the capable hands of local resident and all-round Italian naturalist legend, Andrea Corso. The following trip report is his account of the week.

### **DAY 1, April 10<sup>th</sup> – Arrival and Etna slopes**



© Alison

The group arrived at Catania Airport, where they met me at the arrivals hall. It was initially hard to find them, as there are two exits from the baggage reclaim area... Eventually I gathered all of them and soon realized that it was a nice varied group with nice people not only from England, but also further afield! The car rental, normally a hard annoying task, went very smoothly as the rental company is the same I've been working with the last years and it's very

trustworthy and efficient. Having picked up the comfortable 9-seater van the group had their first taste of the (crazy) Sicilian traffic.

With no hesitation and happily chatting we easily reached the hotel up on Etna Volcano (or rather, peacefully resting along the volcano's feet); already from the road we'd had a view of the biggest European volcano, a spectacular sight of a world of its own! She (for Sicilians the volcano is a nice female) was smoking and covered by a snow white mantle over the top.



© Julia



Ophrys grassoana © Julia

Having arrived at the hotel we had a late Sicilian style lunch with the first taste of our special "street-food" rosticceria: arancini\* (or arancine depending on which side of Sicily you are), sfoglie, schiacciate. \*Arancina/o is a ball of deep fried rice filled usually with "ragù" sauce, but we also had the variants with aubergines, ham and cheese, spinach etc.

Shortly after lunch, having taken our rooms and freshened up, we went for a first visit to the colorful and harsh-ragged slopes of the volcano, like "walking on a moon" (as The Police would say) : Etna in spring is glorious, like a palette of colors of a mad painter, stained with the yellow of the broom (including the tree-like gigantic endemic *Genista etnensis* and the ferula, the red of the poppies, the green of the cistus and the thyme. Flying around the "macchia" there were a few

earliest Eastern Orange-tip *Anthocharis damone* – a small yellow butterfly with bright orange-tips to the forewings in males; and Italian Festoon *Zerynthia cassandra*. Only two minutes from our hotel, a road-side stop yielded the first of the many endemic orchids of the tour – the highly localized (only on Etna) *Ophrys grassoana*.

Nearby there were many specimens of *Orchis italica*, Giant Orchid *Himantoglossum robertianum* and various *Serapias* tongue orchids; the latter a taxonomic nightmare for all orchid-hunters, especially in southern Italy and the Mediterranean islands. Eventually we figured out the presence of *S. bergonii*, and if the ID of the *Serapias* had proven hard, the “speculation” over the English name of *O.italica* as usual was hilarious with a close-up study on why it is called “Italian Naked Man”...



We reached one of my favourite spots on Etna, the locality called “Quota Mille” where, after a nice rough walk over the old lava, we managed to find the first “elusive” specimens of the sub-endemic *Orchis brancifortii* – a tiny little bright pink beauty dispersed among big black stones and bright green and yellow *Ferula communis*. Other species included *Orchis italica*, Green-winged Orchid *Anacamptis morio*, and *Anacamptis longicornu*.

## DAY 2, April 11<sup>th</sup> – Bosco della Ficuzza

An exciting day of driving along mountains then fast highways and then via narrow steep “scary” and curvy roads through small Mafia towns...

We had a luxury early morning breakfast at the hotel with local products, and just after jumped on our adventurous van super-car to drive for almost 3h towards a TOP orchids and



landscapes destination – the wonderful BOSCO DELLA FICUZZA and ROCCA BUSAMBRA. We drove towards the volcanic rocks made medieval town of Randazzo, from where we took an incredible series of roads that needed numerous stop to take amazing photos of an incredible beautiful Etna!

Before reaching the destination we had to drive through a small town with scary narrow steep roads with much ‘enjoyment’ of some of the participants which helped the driver (me) with serial horror-movie style screams at every corner...

We safely reached the peaceful woodland of Bosco (that is in fact ‘wood’) della Ficuzza. Here, Dr. Michele Viganò, one of the top Italian naturalists and a new member of the wonderful family of Mariposa Nature Tours leaders, had done some scouting the previous day as he was touring Sicily thanks to the indication given by me and hence he was co-operating with us.



Thanks to him (and to the usual brilliant intuition ;- ) of myself), we found an amazing spot – just inside the small village, basically a town-garden for picnics – simply absolutely packed and crowded by thousands of orchids of all sorts: abundant were wonderful specimens of endemic *Ophrys pallida* (found only here and nowhere else in Europe), but also the pale primrose flowers of European rarity *Dactylorhiza markusii*, many *Neotinea lactea* were lingering around, together with hundreds of *Orchis italica*, some simply marvelous *Ophrys bertolonii*, *O. exaltata*, Bumblebee Orchid *Ophrys bombyliflora*, *Ophrys grandiflora*, and several examples of the *Ophrys fusca*-group, a taxonomic nightmare even more than that of *Serapias*, of which many *S. lingua* and *S. parviflora* were blooming around.



Ophrys pallida © Julia



Ophrys grandiflora © Alison

We spent long time photographing orchids here, and after a lazy al fresco lunch with gorgeous self-made “Panini” with local various type of ham (crudo and cotto) and cheese (provola dei Nebrodi, as well as caciocavallo and pecorino) with green local olives and grilled aubergines we slowly headed back home for a relaxing night at the hotel: the melancholic calls of Scops Owls were a nice background for a much deserved sleep. The nomadic Miki Viganò reached us during the evening to enjoy a much deserved wonderful dinner – one of the many incredible “luculliane” dinners we would have in Sicily (uuuppy, 5 kg of weight gained every tour!).

### DAY 3, April 12<sup>th</sup> – Etna!

The morning was pleasantly quiet, and Etna as a background was just breath-taking with its dark smokes over the top and the bright white mantle. It was a late start after the long driving of the previous day, and with all luggage with us (we would in fact change hotel and area), we went driving around Etna, taking several stops to photograph not only various orchids including a wonderful spot for many colorful Roman Orchid *Dactylorhiza romana* of both pinky-violet and white forms (including intermediates specimens).

We paid attention also to other endemic plants such like *Viola aetnensis* and *Betula etnensis*. The latter is a glacial relict, with a tiny isolated distribution, being one of the



Dactylorhiza romana © Alison



Betula etnensis © Julia

rarest trees in Europe (only found in 40 hectares in total in the whole world!). It is called for fun the 'watching-eyes birch', but has more vulgar names besides...

After lunch al fresco on the very top reachable area of the northeast side of Etna, where we were surrounded by the Etna Crossbills and Rock Buntings (and also Coal Tits, Ravens, Hoopoes etc), we drove down towards Bronte – the town of the famous Sicilian Pistacchio! In fact, we had a look at the Pistacchio trees along the road and tasted also some pistachio specialties. In the late evening, we reached Borgo del Carato, our amazing hotel for the rest of the tour. This hotel is a typical Sicilian "Masseria" (where there were

stored food, crops, wheat, rye etc during the XV-XVIII centuries), an impressive and spectacular setting, and with every night a different standing ovation dinner!)

#### DAY 4, April 13<sup>th</sup> – Monte Lauro and the Iblei mountains

This day was devoted to the search of two of the rarest, most localized and nearly mythological endemic species of orchids in Italy: *Ophrys laurensis* and *Ophrys mirabilis*!

Once we arrived to the parking site at the very top of Mt. Lauro, the van soon appeared surrounded by all sorts of *Ophrys* of the *lutea*-complex, *funerea*-complex, *fusca*-complex, and *subfusca*-complex and all their hybrids like *Ophrys archimedeae*, *flammeola*, *lutea*, *sicula*, *caesiella*, *lupercalis*, *calocaerina*, *gackiae*, and *obaesa*. All intermediates in between were a real headache...



Ophrys laurensis © Julia



Ophrys incubacea © Alison

In the very same spot of our previous tour in 2024 we managed to find no less than 10 specimens of the much sought-after *O. laurensis*, some of them really typical and wonderful specimens! Along the path to them, we found many *Neotinea lactea*, as well as several specimens of the *Ophrys sphegodes*, *exaltata* and *incubacea* groups like *O. panormitana* and *O. incubacea*. Just nearby we found also our first pale yellow specimens of *Orchis provincialis*. After a good lunch we started a "treasure-hunting" with a real "pirate treasure map" sent the day before by Miki to find the single remote spot for a flowering *Ophrys mirabilis*!

Searching for a small hill to the side of Lake Rosalia, near Ragusa, we were supposed to find a big bivalve shell, a sort of River Clam left there to point

the spot for the legendary species. After some searching, and a steep climb which proved to be rather hard and adventurous, we spotted with much exaltation the Clam ...and there it was, a couple of specimens of the mirabilia *mirabilis*!! All along the hill however, all sorts of *fusca*-complex and subfusca species/forms/variety/subspecies were also spotted with a plethora of 'what the hell is that?!' crazy taxonomical conundrums to puzzle over. So we concluded we had *Ophrys flammeola*, *archimedeae*, *caesiella*, *gackiae*, *lupercalis*, *calocaerina* etc etc.

VERY satisfied we headed back for a bit of relaxing and another standing-ovation dinner!

However, the night wasn't so relaxing as a rather strong earthquake at 3.00am shook all of us (but for the heavy sleepers who noticed nothing except a gentle rocking).



Ophrys mirabilis © Julia

#### DAY 5, April 14<sup>th</sup> – Monti Iblei and Valle dell'Anapo



Orchis x bivonae © Julia

A day for one of the best sites in Europe for orchids and also for the best arancini in the world!

After breakfast, just one minute from our nice masseria hotel, a stop on the special site we visited last year paid off brilliantly with some yellow and white variation of *Serapias parviflora* and *S. lingua*, as well as *S. siciliensis* and some *S. hyblaea*!

Short after, taking the road to Ferla and Cassaro, we stopped at some famous road-side spot where we found a gorgeous hybrid *O. grandiflora* x *O. lunulata*! We also found, among hundreds of *O. speculum*, *lutea*, *sicula*, *calocaerina*, *incubacea*, *Neotinea commutata*, and *N. tridentata* an intriguing possible hybrid *Anacamptis papilionacea* x *N.*

*tridentata*. We also stopped to see another marvellous hybrid and its parents: *Orchis* x *bivonae*, the striking hybrid offspring of Man Orchid *Orchis anthropophora* and Naked Man Orchid *O. italica*.

For lunch we went at Palazzolo Acreide, one of the finest example of Sicilian Barocco Town – here we had the best arancini and roscicceria in the world at the national prize winning Caffè Corsino (a small Corso!), where we tasted all the different flavors! After the Lucullan lunch, we had a short walk to see the longest single world Baroque balcony in the world, with a line of monsters, ugly faces (the proto-selfie), mermaids, dolphins, tritons, devils etc, and also the nearby wonderful scenic square and churches.



After this historic interval, we drove towards the Orchids Paradise of Valle dell'Anapo, where we found *Ophrys explanata*, *O. calocaerina*, *O. oxyrrhynchos*, *O. lupercalis*, *O. biancae*, *O. panormitana*, *Neotinea commutata*, *Serapias siciliensis*, *S. lingua*, and *S. vomeracea*, but also, thanks to international cooperation of some visiting orchids-hunters the beautiful (as its scientific name implies) *Ophrys calliantha*.

In my favourite spot, we managed to find a truly intriguing specimen of what seems to be a hybrid *Ophrys lacaitae* x *O. biancae* or *O. lacaitae* x *O. oxyrrhynchos*. In the same field, we managed to find the third of our most-wanted Sicilian highly localized endemism – the simply stunning *Ophrys lunulata*. Surrounded by many *Ophrys panormitana*, *O. speculum*, *O. sicula* and *O. lutea* we found about 50 plants of *lunulata*! The rest of the day was devoted to admire the beehive-like Bronze-age tombs carved (and masterfully excavated) out of the limestones cliffs of Pantalica.



*Ophrys calliantha* © Alison

## DAY 6, 15<sup>th</sup> April - Wetlands, flamingos and orchids

For a change in landscape after a very good and rich breakfast we headed towards the southern-most coast of Italy – Pachino, Capo Passero and surroundings wetlands. Here, there is one of the brightest example of Nature Protection in Italy! Some ten years ago, a German gentleman, Roland Tischbier, who has founded the “Stiftung Pro Artenvielfalt” (<https://www.stiftung-pro-artenvielfalt.org/en/index.php>) – Foundation Pro Biodiversity, bought two of the biggest and most important wetlands in the whole Southern Italy.



*Ophrys apifera* © Julia

These two place, called Ciba and Longarini Marshes, are a most important stop-over site for migrant water-birds as well as for breeding water-birds. Before the foundation acquired the area, hunters were illegally killing thousands of birds here, with uncivilized local people also using the marshes as a rubbish dump of all sorts of trash (including plastic, asbestos etc). Since acquiring the marshes the conservationists have dug out and removed over 5 tons of garbage, fenced the whole area, protected both wetlands, built some little sandy islets for breeding birds, and saved all the fields good for orchids and other wildflowers.

Here we met one of Sicily's nature conservation heroes, Nino Patti, who told us about this fight and adventure. Short after, we found and photographed a massive number of Bee Orchid *Ophrys apifera* (including white variants) but also some specimens of the endemic

and localized *Ophrys biancae*, several *Serapias lingua*, *parviflora*, and *vomeracea*, with also the first and only specimens of *Anacamptis fragrans*!

Plants here, but also birdwatching: thousands of Greater Flamingos were flying around with their bright be-coloured pink/red and black wings, with Avocets, Black-winged Stilts, Kentish Plovers, Little Terns, Collared Pratincoles and so on spotted along the banks.

After a stop in the historical tuna-fish farm little town (from XV-XVII cent.) to have a wonderful granita lazily resting in the little scenic square, we headed back to the hotel to relax our weary bones.

### DAY 7, April 16<sup>th</sup> – Monte della Ganzaria

For a change with the previous year's tour, I decided to visit an orchids paradise in the Catania province : Monte della Ganzaria. After 1h and 40 minutes driving, we reached the small town of San Michele di Ganzaria, where we stopped for a coffee and cornetti. Delicious! Soon after we started driving up the mountain in a Scottish-like day and landscape... all was hidden by a dense mist recalling a Stephen King B-movie!



Ophrys speculum © Julia

Fortunately, inside the thick dense mist we didn't find any monsters but a wonderful variety of orchids just along the road where we parked: some gigantic samples of *Ophrys grandiflora*, nearby several small tiny *O. bombyliflora*, wonderful sexy *Ophrys bertolonii* close by what should be *O. explanata*, and many colorful *Anacamptis longicornu* and Pink Butterfly Orchid *A. papilionacea*.

Walking along the tarmac road, we spotted some truly gorgeous *O. bertolonii* x *O. grandiflora* hybrids, but also all sorts of colour variants of the Sicilian endemic *Ophrys oxyrrhynchos* (the bird-bill orchid), from the typical ones to the yellowish and pale forms! All around of course were the usual species with thousands of great *Ophrys speculum*, *bertolonii*, *sicula*, *lutea* etc.

### Conclusion & acknowledgements

Mariposa would like to take this opportunity to thank our intrepid group of orchid hunters who joined Andrea for an exploration of the orchid (and culinary!) riches of Sicily, his homeland. Your good humour and team spirit was superb, and your tally of 50 orchid species (and several additional hybrid combinations) testament to your sharp eyes. We look forward to you joining us again in the field in future.



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Orchids of Sicily 10 <sup>th</sup> -17 <sup>th</sup> April 2025								
Species name	Months	Day 1	Day 2	Day 3	Day 4	Day 5	Day 6	Day 7
<b>GENUS OPHRYS</b>								
<b>Ophrys iricolor group</b>								
Ophrys iricolor	III-IV							
<b>Ophrys fusca group</b>								
Ophrys caesiella	II-III				✓			
Ophrys lucifera	III-IV							
Ophrys lupercalis	II-III				✓	✓	✓	✓
<b>Ophrys funerea group</b>								
Ophrys calocaerina	IV-V				✓	✓	✓	✓
Ophrys gackiae	II-IV				✓			✓
<b>Ophrys attaviria group</b>								
Ophrys sabulosa	III-IV							
<b>Ophrys obaeasa group</b>								
Ophrys obaeasa	III-V				✓			
Ophrys pallida	III-IV		✓					
<b>Ophrys subfusca group</b>								
Ophrys archimedeia	IV-V		✓		✓			✓
Ophrys flammeola	IV-V				✓	✓		
Ophrys laurensis	IV-V				✓			
Ophrys numida	III-V							
<b>Ophrys lutea group</b>								
Ophrys lutea	III-V				✓	✓	✓	✓
Ophrys phryganae	III-V							
Ophrys sicula	I-V				✓	✓	✓	✓
<b>Ophrys speculum group</b>								
Ophrys speculum	III-V				✓	✓		✓
<b>Ophrys tenthredinifera group</b>								
Ophrys bombyliflora	II-V	✓			✓	✓		✓
Ophrys grandiflora	II-IV	✓			✓	✓	✓	✓
<b>Ophrys apifera group</b>								
Ophrys apifera	IV-VII					✓	✓	

Species name	Months	Day 1	Day 2	Day 3	Day 4	Day 5	Day 6	Day 7
<b>Ophrys bornmuelleri group</b>								
Ophrys biancae	III-IV					✓	✓	
<b>Ophrys fuciflora group</b>								
Ophrys apulica	IV-V							
Ophrys calliantha	IV-V					✓		
Ophrys lacaitae	III-VI					✓		
Ophrys oxorrhynchos	III-V					✓		✓
<b>Ophrys scolopax group</b>								
Ophrys scolopax	III-VI							
<b>Ophrys exaltata group</b>								
Ophrys exaltata	III-IV		✓			✓		✓
Ophrys panormitana	II-III				✓	✓		
<b>Ophrys sphegodes group</b>								
Ophrys grassoana	III-IV	✓						
<b>Ophrys incubacea group</b>								
Ophrys incubacea	III-V				✓	✓	✓	✓
Ophrys passionis var garganica	IV-VI	✓			✓	✓		✓
<b>Ophrys lunulata group</b>								
Ophrys lunulata	III-IV					✓		
<b>Ophrys bertolonii group</b>								
Ophrys bertolonii	IV-VI	✓	✓		✓	✓		✓
Ophrys explanata	III-IV		✓			✓		
<b>GENUS EPIPACTIS</b>								
Epipactis helleborine	VI-VIII							
Epipactis microphylla	V-VIII							
Epipactis palustris	VI-VIII							
Epipactis placentina	VI-VIII							
<b>GENUS CEPHALANTHERA</b>								
Cephalanthera damasonium	V-VII							
Cephalanthera longifolia	IV-VII							
Cephalanthera rubra	V-VII							
<b>GENUS LIMODORUM</b>								
Limodorum abortivum	IV-VII							✓
<b>GENUS SPIRANTHES</b>								
Spiranthes spiralis	VII-X							
<b>GENUS SERAPIAS</b>								
Serapias bergonii	III-V	✓						
Serapias cordigera	IV-VI							
Serapias lingua	III-VI		✓		✓	✓	✓	✓
Serapias hyblaea	III-VI				✓	✓		
Serapias neglecta	III-V							
Serapias nurrica	IV-V							
Serapias parviflora	IV-V		✓		✓	✓	✓	
Serapias vomeracea	IV-VI				✓	✓	✓	✓
Serapias siciliensis	IV-VI					✓	✓	
<b>GENUS ANACAMPTIS</b>								
Anacamptis collina	I-IV							
Anacamptis fragrans	IV-VII					✓		

Species name	Months	Day 1	Day 2	Day 3	Day 4	Day 5	Day 6	Day 7
Anacamptis laxiflora	IV-VII				✓			
Anacamptis longicornu	II-V	✓	✓		✓	✓		✓
Anacamptis morio	III-VI	✓			✓			
Anacamptis papilionacea	II-V				✓	✓	✓	✓
Anacamptis picta	III-V							
Anacamptis pyramidalis	IV-VII							
<b>GENUS NEOTINEA</b>								
Neotinea conica	II-VI							
Neotinea commutata	III-V					✓		
Neotinea lactea	II-IV		✓		✓			
Neotinea maculata	III-V							
Neotinea tridentata	III-VI		✓					
<b>GENUS ORCHIS</b>								
Orchis anthropophora	IV-VI					✓		
Orchis brancifortii	IV-VI	✓		✓				
Orchis italica	II-V	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓
Orchis mascula	IV-VI							
Orchis pauciflora	III-IV							
Orchis provincialis	IV-V		✓		✓			
Orchis purpurea	IV-VI							
Orchis simia	III-VI							
<b>GENUS DACTYLORHIZA</b>								
Dactylorhiza elata	IV-VII							
Dactylorhiza markusii	III-VI		✓					
Dactylorhiza romana	III-VI	✓		✓				
Dactylorhiza sambucina	IV-VII							
Dactylorhiza viridis	V-VIII							
<b>GENUS HIMANTOGLOSSUM</b>								
Himantoglossum hircinum	V-VII							
Himantoglossum robertianum	I-IV	✓						✓
<b>GENUS GYMNADENIA</b>								
Gymnadenia conopsea	V-VIII							
<b>GENUS NEOTTIA</b>								
Neottia nivus-avis	V-VII							
Neottia ovata	V-VII							
<b>GENUS PLATANThERA</b>								
Platanthera bifolia	V-VIII							
Platanthera chlorantha	V-VIII							
Ophrys mirabilis					✓			
Daily total		12	13	2	29	30	13	21
Running total		12	22	22	40	49	50	50
<b>HYBRIDS...</b>								
Ophrys grandiflora x lunulata						✓		



Species name	Months	Day 1	Day 2	Day 3	Day 4	Day 5	Day 6	Day 7
Orchis x bivonae (anthropophora x italica)						✓		
Ophrys bertolonii x grandiflora								✓
Anacamptis longicornu x papilionacea							✓	
Ophrys bivonae(?) x lacaitae						✓		

## Galleries

All images that follow were kindly shared by tour participants



Images © Alison





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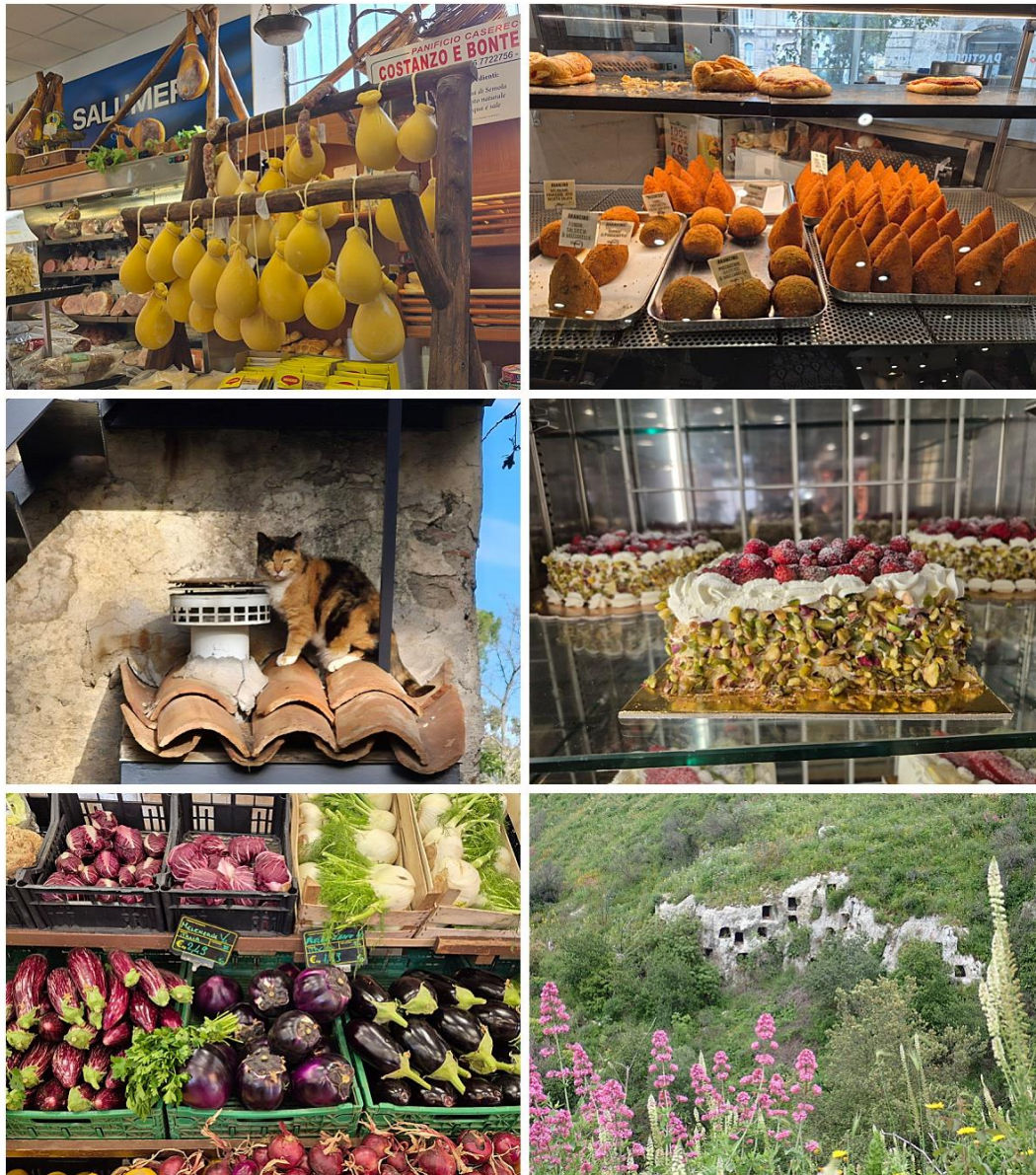
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