

Clean and medieval

Sicily's Erice could have been
the same during the Middle Ages

By EDWARD IGINIO PLACIDI

"Cleanliness and silence are signs of civility," read the sign as we passed under Porta Trapani, one of three arched, stone gates into Erice.

My reaction was almost immediate, despite the dismal fog which in winter and early spring often blankets this village on western Sicily's highest point. If not for a few visible telephone lines and television aeri-als, Erice could have been transported intact through time from the Middle Ages.

It brought to mind such Italian towns as Todi, Gubbio and Assisi, known for their virtually unadulterated medieval settings, but Erice is the purest of them all.

My experience started when, with luggage in hand, I had entered a bar in a small town in western Sicily where I was awaiting a train when Pepe Butera ventured over to ask my nationality and where I was going. Within minutes he had me convinced that his village was my next destination and we were en route in his Fiat.

We ascended eight, steep, back-and-forth looping miles from the Valley of Erice to a walled village on a craggy summit. Almost monastic silence pervaded the foggy evening.

The rows of connected, stone houses displayed the architectural influences of many different centuries and peoples, many with black wrought-iron balconies and laboriously detailed lintels. The streets appeared to have been washed down by hand (not even a cigarette butt in sight) and the cobblestones were artistically and precisely laid like delicate mosaics.

city's countryside, villages and cities spread out before Erice like a gargantuan topographical map.

Apart from the greenery of the "Balio," Erice is an ancient village of stone, from the walls of Elimi, Phoenician and Cathagagainian origin, to Renaissance-era houses, to the 14th-Century cathedral and its 13th-Century isolated belltower, to the ruins of a Spanish fortress. The only ephemeral escape from the world of stone on Erice's streets is a glimpse through an open door of a courtyard of potted flowers and trees.

The village plan is to maintain the traditional atmosphere intact — no modern buildings or intrusions of any kind. There are no neon lights, billboards or gaudy signs. The street lights were made by local artisan in wrought iron in the style of old-time oil lamps. In summer, when hordes of Sicilian as well as foreign tourists invade the streets, cars are not allowed inside the walls.

Erice's population of 700 hosts thousands of tourists on a typical summer day. They ride up the aerial railway from Trapani or drive up from all corners of the island. They come to visit the dozens of churches of every epoch, walk on original Roman roads and squeeze down Europe's narrowest lane. They come to absorb the atmosphere of Italy's most intact village of the Middle Ages, marvel at the panoramas and enjoy Sicily's sweetest summer climate!



The 14th Century cathedral and 13th Century belltower on a mosaic-like cobblestone street in the village of Erice.

True to the tales of Sicilian hospitality — unequaled anywhere in Italy — Pepe gave me his spare, one-room apartment (which he makes a habit of offering to traveling foreigners) . . . and then he exposed me to an endemic disease in Erice: They love to show and talk about their village. And their pride is not hard to understand.

Erice's story begins in the 9th century B.C. with Eryx (from which Erice is derived), Venus' legendary son, who purportedly founded Erice and left it to the Elimi people — who then brought into being the cult of the goddess of fertility. Successive conquerors, up until the coming of the Normans in the 1200s, continued her worship on Erice's summit.

Looming above Trapani, the closest point to Africa on the slave, ivory and grain route to the continent via Sicily, Erice was a much fought over stronghold — the "gateway to Africa." Sailors had always gone to Erice to give thanks to the goddess for safe voyages to and from Africa and to make love to the "Priestesses" of the cult.

Today, the cult's crumbling legacy, the Temple of Venus, shares Erice's jagged western precipice with a Norman castle, medieval towers, the Pepoli castle (of Erice's ruling noble family in the 1800s) and the "Balio."

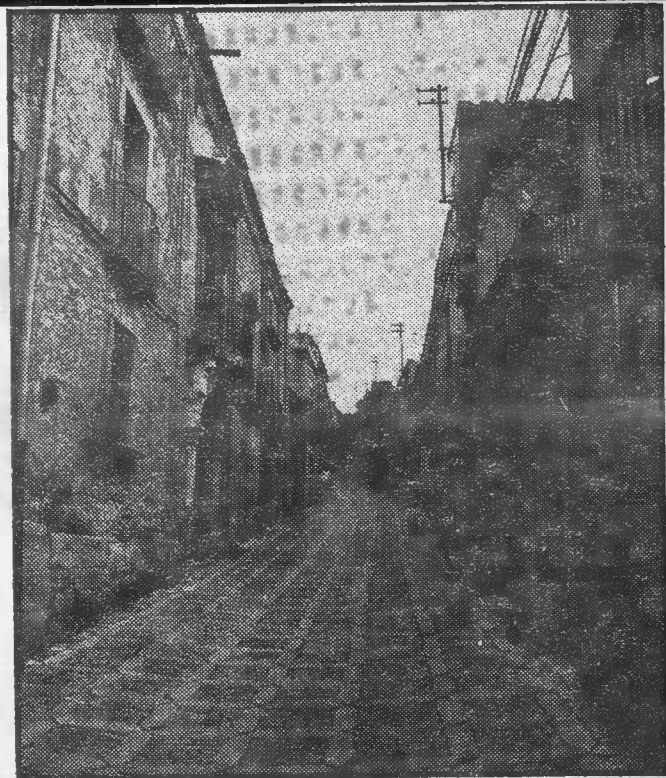
The "Balio" is Erice's verdant public garden that opens up Sicily's most fabulous panoramas. It is on Erice's highest point, above the concentric streets that wind around the summit. Miles of coastline, a vast expanse of sea, the Aegadian Islands and up to a third of western Si-

While most of the island broils in summer, cool breezes blow through Erice's "Balio," streets and Piazza Umberto I, the small main square which becomes one big, always-crowded outdoor cafe. The pine forests, encircling the mountains below the walls, purify and scent the air.

On this summit of serenity and antiquity, summer is also the season of traditional and special events. In July: The Monte Erice Race, up and down the winding roads of the mountain; the Flowered Courtyards competition with awards given for the most beautiful and typical Erice courtyard. In August: The Venere di Argento brings some of Europe's biggest names in entertainment to Erice for three days of sketches, singing and dancing with silver heads of Venus (Erice's equivalent to an Oscar) awarded to the best actresses and female singers of the year; a national art show features the works of Italy's best contemporary artists which are hung on the walls of the houses on the narrow Via Salerna; and a horse jumping festival, modern and classical theatrical presentations and an old-time car show — taking place outside the walls at the sports complex, which is open to public use.

Since Erice has only three hotels, most visitors are gone before nightfall. Only the Edelweiss Pension is within the walls (Double with bath and all meals, about \$34). The Ermione, the only first-class hotel (Double with bath and all meals, about \$70), is on the crest of a slope overlooking sickle-shaped Trapani. La Pineta is a tourist village in the pines (bungalow for two with bath and all meals, about \$48) with an open-air discotheque.

For information you can contact the Italian Government Travel Office.



Apart from some television aerals and telephone lines above, the town is a virtually intact medieval village.