

Volunteer Service Experience in Bronte, Sicily

Justus Genetzke – September 2024 to September 2025



Arrival

I arrived in Bronte about two weeks later than the other volunteers. After a long train journey – during which I was already able to experience the warmth of an elderly Sicilian couple on the night train from Bologna to Catania and communicate with them using my very limited Italian at the time – I finally reached Catania. There, I quickly discovered that bus connections were not listed on Google Maps. After missing one bus and walking around 40 minutes through Catania to the bus station, I was finally able to take the correct bus. The ride offered me an impressive view of Mount Etna under brilliant afternoon sunshine.

Upon arrival in Bronte, I was picked up by Johannes, a student, and brought to the volunteer house. Since the other residents were at the gym at that time, I unpacked my luggage first and prepared my first meal – pasta, of course. At the start, our group consisted of eight Germans – five volunteers and three students – as well as one volunteer from France. Later in March when the students had left, 4 Spanish students arrived.

First Weeks and Group Life

The first week was characterized by group game nights and evening walks. My first working day took place in the fields, as the almond harvest had just started. We spent several days gathering almonds in the fields of *Giacche Verdi* and enjoyed fresh panini from local bakeries and butchers during breaks. At the office, I began with my Italian study plan.



The time leading up to Christmas was particularly special. We went on many trips, cooked together, and had great group dynamics. After Christmas, two students left the project, and in the following two months the atmosphere in the house was at times tense, as many residents were struggling with homesickness or exhaustion. At the end of February, Nina, the French volunteer, and Johannes, the third student, also left. With the arrival of spring, the atmosphere improved noticeably. In mid-March, four Spanish volunteers joined the project, and life in the house became lively and cheerful again.



At the end of May, I suffered a scaphoid fracture in my wrist and spent the summer back in Germany receiving treatment. I returned to Bronte at the end of August, where I met Nicole, a new volunteer who had been alone in the house during the summer. A week later, the new group of volunteers also arrived.



Hobbies & Co.

At first, Michel and I regularly went jogging and combined it with home workouts. However, after tearing a lateral ligament in my ankle in November, I started going to the local gym with Anton and Korbe instead. We also spent a lot of time playing games as a group, and I learned numerous new Spanish and French card games.

Trips



Until Christmas, we did several weekend trips to Catania, Palermo, and a national park, which strengthened our group bond. One particularly impressive trip was to the Necropolis of Pantalica, where we hiked through a spectacular landscape of rivers, rock pools, and caves, followed by a visit to the sea and an overnight stay in Catania.

Another trip took us to Taormina, where I spent a few relaxing days at the beach in November, enjoying 25°C weather despite being sick, and indulging in culinary highlights like pizza and tiramisu. The trip to Palermo was our last one before Christmas and marked a beautiful end to our first group constellation.



At the end of January, we traveled to Syracuse for a few quiet days. In February, I joined three other volunteers in attending a volunteer meeting in Rome, where we participated in workshops and connected with volunteers from all over Italy, two of whom later visited us in Bronte at Easter. Leading up to Easter, we also went on several smaller hikes around Mount Etna.

With Michel, I undertook some particularly memorable tours, including a two-day hike in early May, where we ascended from Piano Provenzana to 3,200 meters, covering 29 kilometers and 1,800 meters of elevation gain, and stayed overnight in a rifugio. After the arrival of the Spanish volunteers in March, we also did several hikes on Etna and another trip to Catania together.



Pistachio Festival (*Festa di Pistacchio*)

A particular highlight was the Pistachio Festival held over two weekends in October. It featured culinary specialties, live music, and dancing until the early hours of the morning. Anton and I especially enjoyed this time and actively participated in the festivities.

The Organization

The president of *Giacche Verdi Bronte* is Gino Montagno, with whom we volunteers mainly coordinated organizational matters and our fieldwork. At the office, Andrea and Lidia were our main points of contact, working closely with us on school projects and the educational nature trail. In the fields, Alessio was always our guide, sharing his experience, interesting facts, and important techniques for our work.

Field Work

Fieldwork was not always easy, especially on very hot days, but it was fascinating to gain experience in a completely different area of work. We typically started around 7:30 a.m. to avoid the worst of the heat and finished between 3 and 4 p.m.

The *Giacche Verdi* fields are beautifully located and offer a stunning view of Mount Etna. In addition to pistachio plants, they are home to almond and olive trees. Unfortunately, the olive harvest in autumn 2024 failed almost completely due to severe drought and the effects of climate change.

Our tasks were very varied: harvesting almonds, pruning pistachio and almond trees, renovating houses in Placa Bajana, felling and planting trees, sowing lentils and beans, digging irrigation channels, and distributing Terra Preta. We also helped care for sheep on Alessio's parents' farm and even tried our hand at milking.

Not every day was filled with work from start to finish, but moments like napping under olive trees or walking along the river were equally enjoyable.

Special Work Experiences

Some of the most memorable work experiences included a Terra Preta production demonstration for local farmers, which ended with a communal barbecue, as well as hosting a group of students from Bremen and giving them a tour of the fields. Working closely with Alessio was especially enriching, as he introduced us to culinary specialties such as homemade pancetta and Parmigiano and provided us with the best oranges I have ever tasted.

Office Work

My work in the office began with an Italian study plan to acquire basic language skills. Later, I supported an environmental education project about butterflies. My responsibilities included preparing presentations, giving talks in schools, and helping design a butterfly nature trail, which we completed in spring and officially opened at the end of May.

The early days in the office were somewhat monotonous, as the school project did not start until November. During this time, we developed the



concept for the nature trail in Placa Bajana and researched environmental topics to connect with our main butterfly theme for presentations. A particular challenge was transmitting scientific research to children, but with the input of Andrea, Lidia and 2 Spanish students for environmental education we created fun and informative presentations. At the end of February, we began visiting schools, and in May, the trail was completed and later used to guide a visiting class through the fields.

Between March and May, we visited primary schools to teach about the life cycle of butterflies and to connect this with global and local environmental issues, such as desertification and the local waste problem. Later, as my Italian skills improved, we organized small workshops where we also introduced the children to topics such as biodiversity, and I specifically focused on regional wild animals.

Daily coffee breaks at *Il Tartufo*, the local pasticceria, were always a highlight. Overall, I came to appreciate the slower pace of life in Sicily – a refreshing change compared to my life in Berlin.



Repairing beehouses
with Alessio

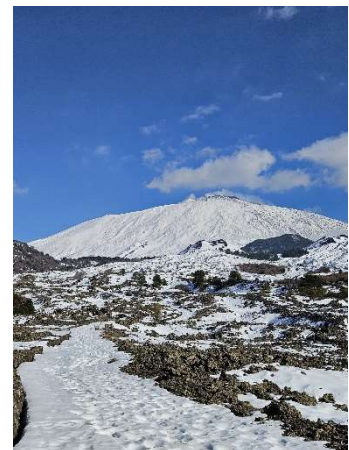


View on Etna

Impressions of Bronte

Bronte is a quiet town with about 20,000 inhabitants. Especially in winter, there are few leisure activities, so we often visited the local gym, which had a welcoming and family-like atmosphere. Culinary offerings in Bronte are excellent: The pizzeria *Bona Boné* and *Il Tartufo*, with its outstanding cornetti, arancini, and other specialties, were among our favorites.

The town lies at an elevation of 700 meters on the northwestern slope of Mount Etna and offers spectacular sunsets. The climate is mild in spring and autumn, cooler in winter, and snow is common at higher altitudes like Piano dei Grilli. The friendliness of the locals is particularly noteworthy, even if the regional dialect is sometimes difficult to understand.



Throughout the year there are several small or bigger events in Bronte. A wonderful example was for instance easter.



Accommodation and Living Situation

The volunteer house is centrally located, meaning all important places in Bronte were within a 30-minute walk. At first, I shared a room with 2 other guys, which worked well, later I moved and shared another guy. However, differences in hygiene habits among housemates and a very small kitchen, which was often crowded with nine residents, posed challenges.

The age of the house was evident, especially during heavy rainfall, when water would seep in through windows and doors. In winter, the poorly insulated building with no central heating became very cold, and we often spent nights in rooms with down to 10 degrees Celsius, relying on many blankets and electric heaters. Nevertheless, the house had many advantages, such as a large lemon tree in the garden, whose fruit I used to make homemade limoncello using the recipe of Andrea's mother, and a rooftop terrace offering a breathtaking view over Bronte and the surrounding landscape. Another highlight was the pizza oven in the basement, which we used to make our own pizza and enjoy lively evenings together.

Conclusion

This year in Bronte was already my second year abroad and once again showed me how enriching international exchange programs can be and how much joy there is in learning and speaking a new language. I formed meaningful friendships and look forward to seeing my fellow volunteers again.

For future volunteers:

Those who show initiative – not only at work but also when planning trips or activities at the house – and approach this opportunity with motivation and openness will have a truly unforgettable and rewarding experience here.