

Final Report Loretta Miehle  
**ESC-volunteer in Bronte, Italy**  
**Environmental education and nature conservation on Etna**  
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Eight months ago, I started my adventure in Sicily.

I was fascinated by the prospect of immersing myself in the life of another country, learning Italian, getting involved and educated in nature conservation, becoming more independent, broadening my horizons, and possibly making friends for life.

### **Arriving in Bronte**

After landing at Catania airport, I took the *Alibus* to *Catania Centrale*. From there, I took the *Giovanni XXIII* metro to *Catania Borgo* station. I then took the bus to Bronte, which is opposite the metro station on *Via Etna* (the *Circumetnea* train leaves from the same station). In Bronte, I was very kindly greeted at the bus stop by my new flatmate, and I got to know all the other volunteers and our big house with garden and the best roof terrace you could wish for.

I very soon got used to living in a shared flat (up to 12 people) and sleeping in a room of four was always very harmonious.

I couldn't believe how quickly we grew together into a small family. During my time from spring to early winter, I got to know two different groups of volunteers, because in September there was a changeover.

## My work

As a volunteer, I was involved in almost all the work and activities.

Already on my second day, I was allowed to visit a school in Piedimonte, representing *Giacche Verdi Bronte*, with another volunteer and Andrea Aidala, the project manager for the organisation. There I met Antonio Fresta, a partner of *Giacche Verdi Bronte*, who is responsible for the northern area around Mount Etna.



With Antonio and Salvatore Vinciguerra, the partner responsible for the southern area, we volunteers were able to learn a lot about nature conservation, the special features of Etna and its flora.

Numerous exciting excursions brought our group together, helped us to get to know our new home better and provided a nice change from everyday life, as well as unforgettable memories. The *Grotta del Gelo* with its year-round ice on Etna, a visit to the *Biotica* earthworm farm, a trip to the nature reserve (*R.N.O. di Vendicari*) near Noto, various camps on horseback or enjoying the fascinating flow of lava during a small eruption at the beginning of June – our excursions covered it all!



## The schools

I particularly enjoyed the environmental education for children in primary and secondary schools, as part of our project *Humus per la Biosfera* (Humus for the Biosphere). When I arrived in spring, I first experienced the practical part of the lessons, which consisted in three different workshops: filling a compost and presenting earthworms and biodiversity. In November, the theoretical part began for me, with our presentation on humus serving as the basis for the practical part outside.

Despite barely having sufficient knowledge of Italian, I took over the biodiversity workshop with the help of an experienced volunteer after only two months, which was a great pleasure. Thanks to very good support, the language barrier was overcome. In mid-November, I was proud not only to introduce myself to the children in Italian, but also to spontaneously take over parts of the big humus presentation.

Other work in the schools included planting trees with the children, tidying up and creating flower beds, and collecting rubbish.

Through the work in the schools, I learned how to keep the children's attention and had the wonderful experience of seeing how the children soaked up everything like a sponge and never lost interest or fun. It was fulfilling to see the children's enthusiasm to fill the compost, the sometimes anxious excitement to take an earthworm into their hand or to see the pride in their faces when they understood biodiversity and its connections. I was fascinated by the children's curiosity to get to know me and the fact that they remembered me, hugged me or greeted me in town. What is more, I could see their joy at having someone from abroad come to their school.



Left: Outdoor lesson with the earthworms

Right: Presentation of our presentation to the school class

Below: Rubbish collection action in the middle school



### Preserving the 100-year-old oak trees on *Monte Egitto*

I assisted Himanshu, an Erasmus student, with the project *Conservazione delle querce centenarie di Monte Egitto*, a project to preserve the old oak trees on *Monte Egitto* on Mount Etna. Here, the pine trees deprive the oaks of sunlight, causing them to die. After an initial successful felling of some pine trees in 2015, the aim was to identify which oaks remained particularly threatened and which pine trees needed to be felled next. Together with Salvatore Vinciguerra, we have measured the oaks and started to mark the pines that threatened them. We also noted and recorded the biodiversity in the forest. The long hike there and the work in the forest were exhausting but it was great fun.



Top right: Old oak tree on *Monte Egitto*

Bottom right: Salvatore and Himanshu

Left: Hike to *Monte Egitto*



## In the field

Practical work has always appealed to me and so I was keen to work outside rather than in the office, as often as possible. Outside we built composts for the schools, fences or for example a box for our compost worms. I helped with cutting grass for fire protection, collecting rubbish, sowing seeds by hand, unloading straw and feeding the donkeys and horses of the *Giacche Verdi Bronte*. Once the donkeys broke free, it was a fun experience to lead them back home.

In mid-September we started the almond harvest, followed by the olive harvest until the end of November. We learned how to properly lay out nets under the trees, how best to tap the almonds down with a long stick, how to taste almonds for sweet or bitter to separate them clearly, how to "comb" olives out of the tree with specific machines and how to collect, sort and finally press them into oil. Tasting our own oil afterwards was incredible. The taste of it was a completely new, delicious experience for me.

I also assisted with a field survey using a GPS device, and I participated in the humus research project with the University of Catania and a study on *Terra Preta*.



## In the office

Learning Italian often kept me busy in the office. Later, I even gave Italian lessons to the new volunteers. I also made presentations, wrote reports and educated myself through films like *Kiss the Ground*, among others.

## ***The Traversata della Dorsale dei Nebrodi***



In the middle of July, the most beautiful kind of work began for me. As the person in charge of preparing the horses was unable to come this year, my boss Gino Montagno gave the volunteer Linda and me the task of getting the horses ready for the camp in the Nebrodi Mountains at the beginning of August. Almost daily rides followed, during which we rode different horses.

Soon the time had come and we packed our things for the five-day camp in the Nebrodi Mountains. Early in the morning, a small group of us rode all the horses from Maletto to the camp. The other volunteers arrived there later by car. Linda and I had the task of looking after the horses during the camp. We prepared them for the daily rides, we also fed and watered them and always kept an eye on them. For that reason, we slept in our tent right next to the horses. It was adventurous once to catch a horse again in the night.

Since all of our tasks, apart from fetching food, had to be done before and after the rides, we had time to go along to provide the riders with lunch during their excursion. We put out all of the food for them and enjoyed the beautiful nature on the way. On other days, both of us had the honour of riding along ourselves. For me this was a ride to a lake with a short rest there. On horseback, I really enjoyed reaching places and taking paths that you can't reach with a car. Overall, it was a great challenging week with unforgettable experiences.



Riders of the *Traversata della Dorsale dei Nebrodi*

Gino Montagno and I



## **My conclusion**

Looking back, I can say that I have learned an incredible amount, have become more independent, know how to take responsibility, take initiative and act accordingly, as well as to make decisions.

Flexibility, modesty, patience, respect, commitment and the joy of small things, such as having enough water, the ability to adapt as well as the love of good food are qualities that are once again made clear here.

The work was totally varied and diverse, challenging but also relaxing. Knowing that you don't have to worry about anything, that you don't have exams ahead of you and that you have an environment that is so relaxed and easy-going, which you will probably never have again at work, has enriched me personally a lot. I really had the time to completely relax inside.

Being away from home for eight months is tough, but it was an experience that broadened my horizons in every way. I met people of different ages and nationalities and gained insight into other cultures, gained experience in nature conservation and environmental education, grew as a person and learned a lot. It was an experience that I am very happy to have had.

My dream to live in another country and to get to know a completely new culture, to learn the Italian language and to find friends for life, has come true.

Thanks to all the staff of *Giacche Verdi Bronte* and the *Manfred Hermsen* Foundation!

