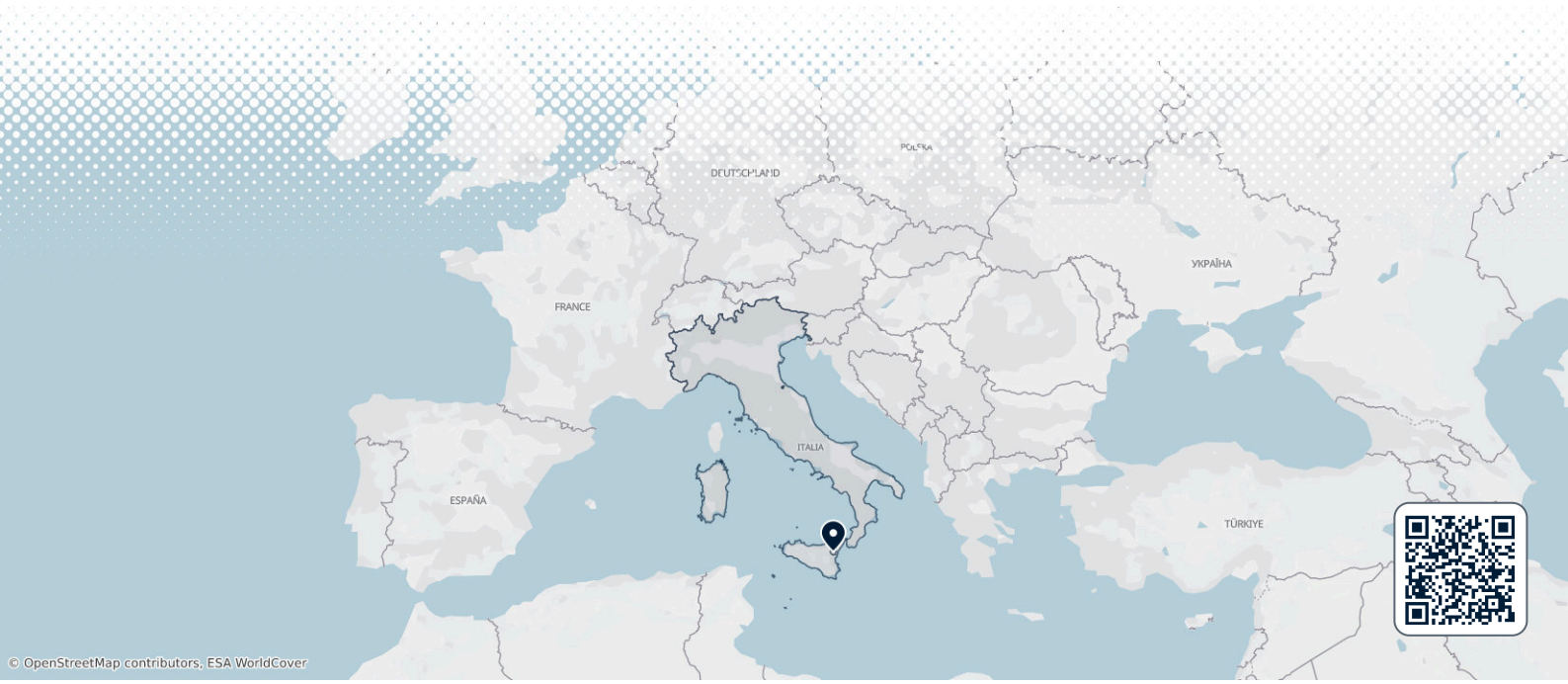


Mount Etna

Sicily · Italy

TRAVEL GUIDE

Tripomatic



Overview

Mount Etna is the highest active volcano in Europe and the biggest landmark in eastern Sicily. It rises above Catania to more than 3,300 m, and its exact height changes with each eruption. The volcano erupts often, usually with lava fountains and ash at the summit craters, and these eruptions rarely threaten the towns below. Since 2013 the mountain has been a UNESCO World Heritage Site, and most of it lies inside the Etna Park.

A visit here is about landscape. You walk on black lava fields and climb old side craters, and you look down into huge valleys of cooled rock. Lower on the slopes there are pine and birch forests, vineyards, pistachio orchards and quiet stone villages. Most people come for a day trip from Catania or Taormina, but a night or two on the slopes lets you explore both the south and north sides at an easy pace.

When to visit

Late spring to early autumn is the best time to visit. From June to September the upper slopes are mild and mostly dry, while the coast below is hot. Winter brings snow above about 1,500 m, strong winds and frequent closures of the high areas. Even in summer it is much colder near the summit than at Rifugio Sapienza or in Catania, so bring warm layers and good shoes.

The biggest annual event is the **Ottobrata** in Zafferana Etnea, held on Sundays in October. Village streets fill with stalls selling honey, chestnuts, mushrooms, wine and local sweets, which makes it a good time to combine the volcano with a food day.

Top sights



A Etna is the main reason to come. The summit area has several active craters and changes from year to year. The highest zones are often closed during eruptions, so plan with a local guide.

B Funivia dell'Etna lifts you from Rifugio Sapienza, at about 1,900 m on the south side, up to about 2,500 m. From the top station, 4x4 buses and guided walks continue to the area near 3,000 m.

The Silvestri craters sit right next to Rifugio Sapienza. These extinct side cones formed in the 1892 eruption, and an easy path runs around their rims. It is the simplest way to see a real crater without a long hike.

C Valle del Bove is a huge horseshoe-shaped valley on the eastern side of the volcano. Its walls are hundreds of metres high, and its floor is covered with lava flows from recent eruptions.

D Monte Zoccolaro is the best easy viewpoint over the Valle del Bove. A short trail from the road

above Zafferana Etnea leads to the top, with views across the valley to the summit and down to the sea.

E Piano Provenzana is the main visitor area on the north side, set in pine forest. It is the starting point for north-side 4x4 tours and hikes and has a small ski area in winter.

F Grotta del Gelo is a lava cave on the northwest side that holds ice all year round. It is reached on a long day hike, best done with a guide.

G Chestnut Tree of One Hundred Horses is a huge, ancient chestnut tree on the eastern slope, near the village of Sant'Alfio. It is often called the oldest and largest chestnut tree in the world.

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What to experience

- **Watch an eruption at night**: when the summit is active, guided evening tours go to safe viewpoints to see lava fountains glowing in the dark. Bring a helmet and warm mountain clothing.
- **Ride the cable car and 4x4 bus to nearly 3,000 m**: the trip from the south side takes you over fresh lava fields to the high crater area with a guide.
- **Explore a lava tube**: guided walks with helmets and torches lead into caves formed by flowing lava. For a bigger challenge, a long guided hike on the north side reaches Grotta del Gelo, a cave that holds ice all year.
- **Taste wine on the slopes**: Etna DOC wines grow on old lava soils, and many wineries on the north and east slopes offer tastings among the vineyards.
- **Ski on a volcano**: in a good snow winter, small ski areas open at Rifugio Sapienza and Piano Provenzana, with sea views from the slopes.
- **Ride the Circumetnea railway**: the slow train around the volcano passes through lava fields, orchards and old towns.

Day trips

These trips are listed from nearest to farthest.

- **Nicolosi** — the main village on the south side, about 25 min by car below Rifugio Sapienza, with places to eat and shops for hiking gear.
- **Zafferana Etnea** — a village on the eastern slope, about 20 min by car from the Valle del Bove viewpoints. It is known for honey and its October food fair.
- Alcantara Gorge — a narrow river canyon with basalt columns, about 30 min by car from Linguaglossa on the north side. You can walk along the river in summer.
- Ⓐ Catania — about 1 hour by car or 2 hours by bus from Rifugio Sapienza. The city is built largely of black lava stone and has a lively fish market.
- **Randazzo and Bronte** — small towns on the north and west sides, about 1 hour by car from Rifugio Sapienza or reached on the Circumetnea railway. Randazzo has a medieval centre built from dark lava stone; Bronte is famous for its pistachios.
- Ⓑ Taormina — about 1 hour by car from the north side, with a Greek theatre that looks straight at the volcano.



Where to explore

Etna sits in the middle of eastern Sicily, so most of the island's main destinations are within easy reach.

- **On the coast below the volcano**: Catania is the nearest city and gateway, and Taormina is the classic resort town to the north.
- **Baroque towns to the south**: Syracuse, Noto and Ragusa.
- **More volcanoes**: the Aeolian Islands, off the north coast, include the active Stromboli.
- **Western Sicily**: Palermo, Cefalù, Selinunte and the Trapani and Paceco Salt Pans.

Getting there

- **By air**: Catania Fontanarossa Airport is the gateway, about 1 hour by car from Rifugio Sapienza. Ash from large eruptions sometimes closes the airport. Closures can last a few hours or longer, so check with your airline or the airport during active periods.
- **By bus**: an AST bus leaves Catania central station once a day in the morning for Rifugio Sapienza and returns in the afternoon. The ride takes about 2 hours each way. Seats can fill up in summer, so board at the first stop and check the current timetable before you travel.
- **By train**: the narrow-gauge Ferrovia Circumetnea runs from Catania around the western and northern slopes to Riposto. It stops in towns such as Bronte and Randazzo, but not at the high visitor areas. Circumetnea timetables
- **On a tour**: many visitors join a guided day trip with hotel pickup from Catania or Taormina. This is the easiest option without a car.

Getting around

- **Car**: the most practical way to move between the south side (Rifugio Sapienza), the east side (Valle del Bove viewpoints) and the north side (Piano Provenzana). The mountain roads are narrow and winding.
- **Cable car and 4x4 buses**: on the south side, the cable car goes up to about 2,500 m, and 4x4 buses with guides continue higher. Tickets are sold online and at the base station at Rifugio Sapienza. Funivia dell'Etna
- **Guides**: authorised volcano guides lead hikes to the high craters and the lava caves. Access to the summit zones is controlled by local rules that change with volcanic activity, and the highest areas are open only with a guide.
- **On foot**: marked trails start from Rifugio Sapienza and Piano Provenzana. Distances between the different sides of the volcano are too long to walk. Etna Park

Getting around on foot & by bike

WALKABILITY

Moderate

Marked trails start from Rifugio Sapienza and Piano Provenzana, but the different sides of the volcano are too far apart to walk between.

CYCLING INFRASTRUCTURE

Low

The roads up Etna are long, steep and winding, so cycling suits only fit road cyclists.

Driving

- **Is a car worth it?**: yes, if you want to see more than one side of the volcano or visit wineries and villages. For a single trip to the summit area, a guided tour or the daily bus from Catania is enough.
- **Roads**: the SP92 climbs from Nicolosi to Rifugio Sapienza, and a separate road leads from Linguaglossa to Piano Provenzana. Expect hairpin bends, cyclists and fog or ice in winter.
- **Parking**: there are large paid car parks at Rifugio Sapienza and at Piano Provenzana. They fill up on summer weekends, so arrive early.
- **Restrictions**: roads near active lava flows can close at short notice, and winter snow sometimes closes the upper roads.

Food & drink

The slopes of Etna are a farming area, and the volcanic soil gives the food its character. Look for **Bronte pistachios** in pastries, pesto and gelato, chestnuts and mushrooms in autumn, honey from Zafferana Etnea, and wines made from the local Nerello Mascalese and Carricante grapes.

For a simple meal, the restaurants and snack bars around Rifugio Sapienza serve arancini, pasta and hot drinks. For better food, eat in the villages. Nicolosi and Zafferana Etnea have trattorias with mountain dishes, and the wine area around Linguaglossa and Randazzo has many winery restaurants.

What to eat & drink

LUNCH

Pizza Margherita
Thin-crust pizza topped with tomato, mozzarella, and basil, invented in Naples and still best there.

DINNER

Spaghetti alla Carbonara
Pasta with egg, cured pork cheek (guanciale), pecorino cheese, and black pepper, a Roman classic.

Risotto alla Milanese
Creamy saffron-infused rice dish from Milan, often served alongside braised veal shank.

Lasagna · Lasagne al Forno
Layered baked pasta with ragu, bechamel, and cheese, a staple of Emilia-Romagna cooking.

SNACKS & STREET FOOD

Prosciutto and Cheese · Prosciutto e Formaggio
Cured ham paired with regional cheeses, a common antipasto plate found nationwide.

SWEETS & DESSERTS

Gelato
Dense, slow-churned Italian ice cream, traditionally lower in fat and air than American-style ice cream.

Tiramisu · Tiramisù
Layered dessert of coffee-soaked ladyfingers and mascarpone cream, dusted with cocoa.

DRINKS

Espresso · Caffè
A short, strong shot of coffee drunk quickly, usually standing at a bar counter.

Wine · Vino
Italy is one of the world's largest wine producers, with regional styles from Piedmont's Barolo to Tuscany's Chianti.

Aperol Spritz
A bittersweet orange aperitif mixed with prosecco and soda water, a staple of the early-evening aperitivo.

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Safety & health

Etna can be visited safely if you follow the rules. Eruptions are usually limited to the summit area, and the authorities close high zones when activity increases. The alert levels and closed areas change often, so check the current rules before you go. Never go past closure signs, and do not walk to the summit craters without an authorised guide. Gases, falling rocks and sudden explosions are real dangers near the vents.

Some rules apply to everyone, with or without a guide. In the high summit zone, a **certified protective helmet and mountain clothing are compulsory**. Always stay at least 50 m from the edge or front of an active lava flow. Breaking these rules is an offence.

The weather is the most common problem. At 3,000 m it can be near freezing even in summer, with strong wind and fast-changing fog. Bring warm clothes, a windproof jacket, sturdy shoes, sun protection and water, because the black lava gets hot and the sun is strong. People with heart or breathing problems should take care at high altitude.

Petty crime is rare on the mountain, but do not leave valuables visible in cars at trailheads.

History

People have lived on the fertile slopes of Etna for thousands of years. Ancient Greeks believed the forge of the god *Hephaestus* lay under the mountain. Arab rulers in the Middle Ages called it simply "the mountain", which survives in the local name Mongibello.

The volcano has shaped the towns around it. In 1669 a huge eruption sent lava as far as the walls of Catania and into the sea. Lava flows in 1983, 2001 and 2002 destroyed cable cars, ski lifts, roads and buildings on the upper slopes. Rifugio Sapienza and Piano Provenzana were both rebuilt after lava damage. When you walk around the Silvestri craters or look into Valle del Bove, you see the layers of these eruptions side by side.

Today Etna is one of the most closely watched volcanoes in the world. Its regular eruptions are studied by scientists and visited by travellers from everywhere.

Country facts

Quick practical facts for Italy at a glance:

CURRENCY

EUR €

EMERGENCY

112

ELECTRICITY



Type C / Type F / Type L
230 V · 50 Hz

LANGUAGES

Italian

TAP WATER

Safe to drink

Mount Etna's Absolute Essentials

Mount Etna, Europe's highest active volcano, features a diverse landscape of solidified lava flows, active craters, and ancient caves. This selection covers key access points like the Etna Cableway and Piano Provenzana, alongside geological landmarks such as the Valle del Bove caldera and the ice-filled Grotta del Gelo. Visitors can explore the Crateri Barbagallo, formed during the 2002 eruption, or view the historic Chestnut Tree of One Hundred Horses on the volcano's eastern slopes.





A Etna

Europe's highest active volcano, a UNESCO World Heritage Site whose summit craters erupt several times a year.

95033, Italy (37.75103, 14.99403)



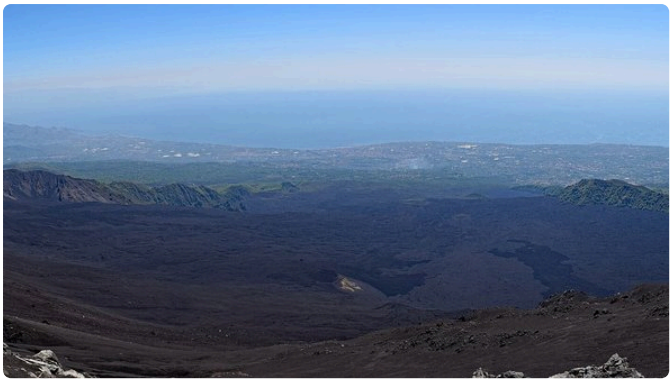
B Funivia dell'Etna

This cableway transports visitors from Rifugio Sapienza at 1,923 meters to an elevation of 2,500 meters on the southern slope of the volcano.

Rifugio Sapienza, 95030, Italy (37.70073, 15.00002)

Mo–Su 08:30–16:00

funiviaetna.com



C Valle del Bove

A massive horseshoe-shaped caldera covering roughly 37 square kilometers, characterized by steep walls and floors layered with recent lava flows.

Cresta Serra del Salifizio, 95019 Zafferana Etnea CT, Italy (37.70989, 15.04302)



D Crateri Barbagallo

Two pyroclastic cones created during the 2002–2003 eruption, situated at an altitude of about 2,900 meters near the former Torre del Filosofo.

(Unnamed Road), 95030, Italy (37.73499, 15.00038)



E Grotta del Gelo

Grotta del Gelo is a volcanic cave of Mount Etna which is known for the presence of a large amount of ice.

95036, Italy (37.80441, 14.98409)



F Monte Zoccolaro

A volcanic ridge on the eastern flank offering a panoramic overlook of the Valle del Bove and the Ionian coast.

95019, Italy (37.71446, 15.05639)



G Piano Provenzana

The main hub on Etna's northern slope, serving as a base for guided excursions and hiking following its reconstruction after the 2002 eruption.

95012, Italy (37.80451, 15.03407)



H Chestnut Tree of One Hundred Horses

The Hundred-Horse Chestnut is the largest and oldest known chestnut tree in the world.

32 Via Castagno Cento Cavalli, 95010, Italy (37.75017, 15.13036)

DATA SOURCES

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