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A New Way to See Sicily

By KATRINA ONSTAD

ON a thick summer afternoon in the Sicilian town of Corleone, beneath palm trees in the small central piazza, the old men in their rimmed caps watched us. They rolled their eyes over our touristy selves (cameras and sunhats), and my husband and I scarfed our gelato a little faster.

After all, this was Corleone, the birthplace of mob bosses like Bernardo Provenzano; its bloody history, on screen and off, made the name synonymous with gangster violence.

But on a stoop right next to our cheerfully oblivious children sat our tour guide, Edoardo Zaffuto, chatting away loudly about how "the Mafia has robbed Sicily of its dignity." To underscore that point, across Mr. Zaffuto's chest was a T-shirt reading "Addiopizzo!" The catchphrase means "Goodbye, protection money" and is the name taken by an organization determined to use tourism as a means to return some of that stolen dignity to Sicily.

Don't you ever get nervous, I asked, nodding at the glarers. "Never," Mr. Zaffuto said. "There are too many of us."

"Us" are fellow Addiopizzo members, part of a social movement that, according to Mr. Zaffuto, now covers more than 700 businesses, including a travel agency whose mission is to guide tourists toward establishments that refuse to pay the Mafia's protection money.

Given the duration and reach of the Mafia's influence on Italy (and on Sicily, in particular, where it is said to have started), trying to quantify the group's economic impact is an inexact science. That said, a 2007 study by SOS Impresa, the anti-rackets office of the retailers' association, found that 70 percent of Sicilian retailers pay the Cosa Nostra protection money. The average payment is about 880 euros (about $1,275) a month, according to the anti-Mafia research foundation Fondazione Rocco Chinnici.

And if they didn't pay?

"Arson, vandalism, harassment," said Mr. Zaffuto. By whom? "The Mafia," he said with a laugh, finishing his ice cream.

In July 2004, a group of Mr. Zaffuto's friends wanted to open a bar without paying protection money (or pizzo, in Italian). Outraged that this seemed nearly impossible, they

plastered Palermo's walls and phone booths with black-and-white stickers and fliers reading, in Italian: "An entire people that pays the pizzo is an entire people without dignity." The group then formed Addiopizzo, enlisting businesses that refused to pay, and showing up en masse at Mafia trials to cheer police cleanup efforts.

In addition to Addiopizzo's presence in Palermo, Mr. Zaffuto said, the group also counts members in the eastern province of Catania, and in March, a branch of Addiopizzo opened in Sicily's third-largest city, Messina. Other provinces contain stand-alone shops whose allegiance to Addiopizzo is usually marked by a sticker on the door. The next phase is to move off the island, into Calabria and Naples.

Mr. Zaffuto said that only a few Addiopizzo businesses had experienced retaliation. The most notable incident was in 2007 when the Mafia set fire to a paint and hardware warehouse called Guajana Company. Addiopizzo's members and supporters demonstrated, putting pressure on the state to relocate the company immediately, and two men were convicted.

The impetus is as much economic as it is moral: Sicily remains Italy's impoverished southern offshoot, far from the romantic, prosperous north, and paying protection money doesn't help the bottom line. (If businesses had not paid it between 1981 and 2001, southern Italy's gross domestic product would have reached northern Italy's, according to a 2003 study by the polling company Indagine Censis.)

But if it remains true that 70 percent of Sicilian businesses are still paying the Mafia, we wondered if our Addiopizzo tour of Corleone and Palermo would leave us feeling as if we were experiencing only a sliver of what the region had to offer. Would this exercise in ethical travel be an exercise in denial?

As if in answer, Addiopizzo tours cleverly mix the ethical with the unmissable. The company offers a seven-day package through western Sicily and the Palermo province, combining Mediterranean fishing villages and duomos with educational stops at historical Mafia hot spots. A 7-day Addiopizzo tour costs about 900 euros, or $1,300, at $1.42 to the euro. A 10-day tour is about 1,250 euros, and a day trip is about 50 euros. Prices vary according to the itinerary.

We had only two days, so after several e-mails, Mr. Zaffuto designed a packed itinerary starting in Corleone, and ending 35 miles away in Palermo.

In the hilltop city of Corleone, the sacred meets the extremely profane. Known as the City of 100 Churches, there does seem to be a church on every block and a monastery on every other. Meanwhile, Piazza Falcone e Borsellino, the cobblestone square where our children ran around the fountain, is named in honor of two magistrates murdered by the Mafia in 1992.

After ice cream, Mr. Zaffuto, our personal guide for both days, took us to a corner store

where we met a pixie-haired young woman named Massimiliana Fontana. We had missed the opening hours of the Museo Anti-Mafia, but Ms. Fontana, who manages the museum, walked a block to unlock it for us.

The small museum contains a gallery of graphic photos, which we skipped for the sake of the children. The second floor is like a library, with a floor-to-ceiling archive of documents charting the pivotal mid-'80s Maxi trials in Palermo that saw hundreds of Mafiosi convicted. Mr. Zaffuto pulled down one phonebook-size volume and translated a passage in which an informant told the judge that the Cosa Nostra call themselves "men of honor" (uomini d'onore). Testified the informant: "The word Mafia is literature."

Indeed, everywhere in Sicily, it seems, businesses are happy to exploit this macabre history. Towns are filled with "Mafia — Made in Italy" T-shirts and Il Padrino ("The Godfather") bobble-heads.

As we returned to our bed-and-breakfast, which was about 10 minutes north of Corleone, we passed the Corleone sign, a favorite of tourists until they discover that the famous "Godfather" films were actually shot on the eastern edge of the island in Savoca.

The B & B, Terre di Corleone, is in a very old building that has been gutted and renovated, and is part of a recent effort to transform old farmhouses into agriturismi, or eco-themed inns.

Over the last decade, the Sicilian government has been transferring land confiscated from imprisoned Mafiosi to groups of young people who work the tough, rocky earth to produce food and wine and convert the former haunts of Mafiosi into places to stay.

Our space in the converted stables of the convicted mob boss Salvatore Riina was immaculate and huge, with two adjoined rooms, wood beams and a shiny new bathroom. The shutters opened to a breathtaking dustbowl vista that seemed more like Wyoming than cinematic Sicily.

Though we could have eaten dinner there, we drove 10 minutes north toward the forested village of Ficuzza. The converted train station called Antica Stazione di Ficuzza was not officially Addiopizzo, but Mr. Zaffuto (who had returned to Palermo) was hoping to sign them up.

In the open-air dining room we reveled in phenomenal caponata and a walnut and sundried tomato tagliatelle. The restaurant abides by the slow-food principle — locally sourced fresh food that gets there when it gets there. On the large lawn outside, a party took turns at karaoke in the moonlight.

On day two, after a delicious breakfast in Terre di Corleone's dining hall (plum cake and eggs scrambled in olive oil), we drove to Palermo, on the coast.

The Addiopizzo-sanctioned Atlante, a bed and breakfast, is in an early 20th-century apartment on a traffic-choked street. The room was clean and modest, with four beds and a milkmaid fresco on the ceiling. Emilio Ajovalasit and Preziosa Salatino, the hippie-ish proprietors, said they had never been pressed by the mob, but in broken English, Ms. Salatino added that she was certain that a knock on the door would have come if they hadn't joined Addiopizzo.

Mr. Zaffuto waited with a foot-and-battery operated fiberglass rickshaw (made by Ecolapa, an Addiopizzo company). Our family of four piled in and moved surprisingly quickly through the streets; friendly hecklers shouted the same joke: "Do you sell gelato?"

We pulled up in front of La Martorana, a 10th-century church with a Baroque facade, filled with colorful neck-wrenching mosaics. Then we rickshawed over to the steps of the enormous Teatro Massimo opera house, where Sofia Coppola's character died in "The Godfather: Part III."

But this made us feel like people who take tacky Mafia tours (instead of anti-Mafia tours), so Mr. Zaffuto took us to a lush park called Villa Garibaldi. There stood a statue of Joe Petrosino, a New York City police officer murdered in Palermo while investigating the Mafia in 1909. It was an ordinary statue reminding us of the extraordinary reach of a century of violence.

After exploring the waterfront, where locals napped on stone benches, we stopped for lunch at Antica Focacceria di San Francesco. In 2005, a man showed up at the Palermian institution and demanded that the fifth-generation owner, Vincenzo Conticello, pay protection money. Mr. Conticello refused, leading to a highly publicized court case. In 2008, three extortionists received prison sentences of 10 to 16 years, and the Conticellos became local heroes.

Mr. Zaffuto ordered the famous focaccia maritata: beef spleen and ricotta wrapped in an unusually yellow focaccia bun. We ate heaping plates of couscous and looked around for undercover police.

In the early evening, our official tour over, Mr. Zaffuto cycled away, leaving us with a map of Addiopizzo businesses. We tracked down La Coppola Storta, a pocket-size space whose shelves overflowed with coppolas, snap-rimmed caps like those worn by the surly Corleonese men. In an e-mail, the designer Tindara Agnello wrote that her goal is "to take the coppola from the Mafia and change it into a symbol of redemption." After pawing through the beautifully embroidered hats (the kids liked a tiny gray one with a bird), we bought a dark green corduroy coppola for 50 euros.

As we walked with whining children and aching feet to find dinner, there were murmurs of ditching ethics for the nearest cafe, but we persevered until the map took us to a restaurant

called Il Mirto e La Rosa. Exhausted, we relaxed under the covered patio and tore through pizza margherita and wine.

When we paid, my husband asked the owner, Aldo Penna, why he had joined Addiopizzo. "My wife and I were tired of the fear," he said simply.

We felt then that we hadn't missed anything. Instead, Addiopizzo was a tourist's backstage pass, a bittersweet taste of a Sicily lived in by Sicilians.

This article has been revised to reflect the following correction:

Correction: May 22, 2011

An article on May 8 about a social movement in Sicily that steers tourists to businesses that do not pay protection money to the Mafia rendered incorrectly the Italian term used by members of Cosa Nostra to refer to themselves. It is uomini d'onore, not umoni d'onera. (The English translation is men of honor.)