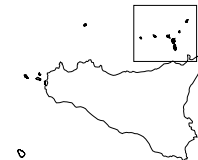


Aeolian Islands



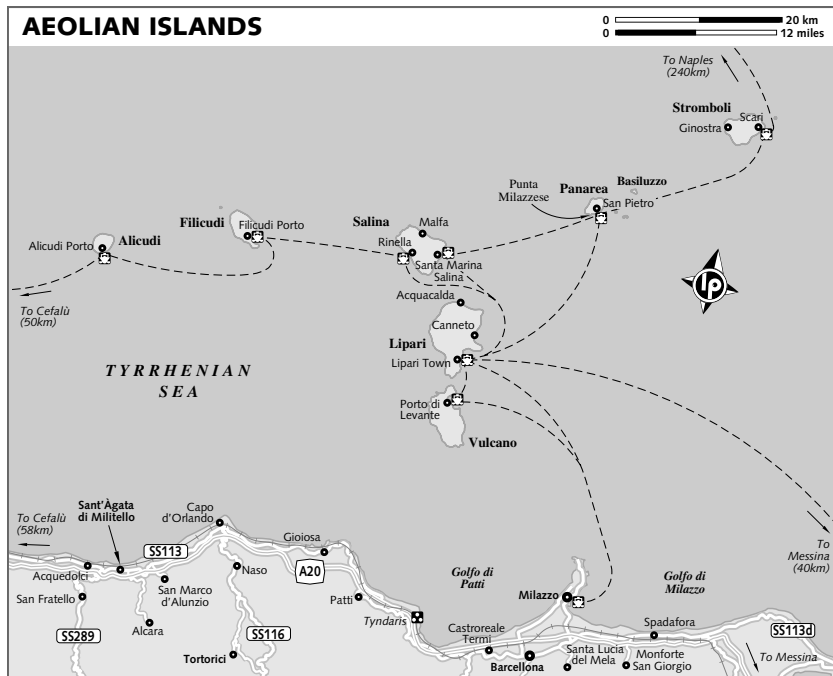
Cobalt-blue sea, wild, windswept mountains swathed in flowers and steaming volcanoes – these go some way to explaining why the Aeolians (Isole Eolie) are the European holy grail for island lovers. Part of a huge volcanic ridge, the seven Aeolian Islands represent the very pinnacle of a 3000m-high outcrop that was formed one million years ago. Created by successive explosions – first Panarea, Filicudi and Alicudi, then Lipari and Salina, and finally the still-boiling Vulcano and Stromboli – the islands exhibit an extraordinary variety of landscape. Hillsides of silver-grey pumice and lush green vineyards give way to jagged veins of black obsidian. A wilderness of flowers and plants enriched by the volcanic soil, as well as an abundance of sea life, make these islands a paradise for naturalists and scuba divers alike. Recognising their unique volcanic characteristics, Unesco declared the islands a World Heritage site in 2000.

The Aeolians' natural beauty and unpredictable nature have tempted and repelled people throughout the centuries. Myths name the island as the home of the god of the winds, Aeolus, and they were also thought to be home to the monster Polyphemus and the god of fire, Vulcan. Modern hedonists, including the international jet set and film stars, arrive in droves in the summer to swim, hike, dive and party in this playground. The best time to come is in May and early June or late September and October; prices soar in July and August, when the population doubles.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Go for a night-time climb on fiery **Stromboli** (p176) – an unforgettable experience for the eyes, legs and lungs
- Visit Lipari's dazzling **Museo Archeologico Eoliano** (p153), with its wealth of artefacts
- Climb to the top of Vulcano's mineral-encrusted **Fossa di Vulcano** (p168) and go for an atmospheric mud bath after dusk to heal those bones
- Take a trip around all of the fascinating villages on **Salina** (p170) and taste the sweet Malvasia wine
- Enjoy the wild natural beauty of Filicudi's huge **Grotta del Bue Marino** (p180)





HISTORY

There are two types of history when it comes to the Aeolian Islands: the mythical (which is very exciting) and the real (almost equally eventful). The mythical story is responsible for many of the islands' names. The Greek keeper of the winds, Aeolus, who famously gave Odysseus a bag of winds (not a wind bag, mind) to take along on his trip, gave the archipelago its name. Aeolus' father-in-law, the mythical King Liparus, gave his name to Lipari, the 'capital' island. Jupiter's son, Vulcan, the god of fire and metalworking, had his workshop on Vulcano island, giving it not only its name, but also its fiery character.

The more plausible version of the past testifies that the first settlers came to the islands to make tools out of obsidian, a hard volcanic glass that provided the mainstay of the islands' economy for more than 5000 years. Obsidian drew Sicily's first-known inhabitants to the Aeolians, the Stentilleni, who settled in the 4th millennium BC.

The first Greek settlers arrived from Segesta and Selinunte in 580 BC, creating an effectively run system of farming, commerce

and ship-looting, which brought much wealth to the islands. The Greeks also used the islands as ports on the east-west trade route between the Aegean and Tyrrhenian seas, and built their acropolis on the promontory where you can still visit the Neolithic and classical ruins.

The Aeolian Islands were a base for the Carthaginians and Greeks in the First Punic War, until they finally fell to Rome between 252 and 251 BC. The Romans impoverished the islands by charging high taxes on exporting obsidian. Population decline continued as the inhabitants fled the increasingly active volcanoes, especially on Lipari. Between Roman rule and the Arab lootings in AD 863, the islands frequently changed hands. The Arab attacks destroyed the islands' homes, enslaved the population and famously scattered the remains of St Bartholomew, the guardian of the Aeolians.

The islands lay depopulated for over a hundred years, until a group of monks was sent to settle there in 1083. They announced that St Bartholomew's remains had miraculously reappeared, and that this was a sign that the

islands should be repopulated under his protection. But it proved difficult to lure people back to the volatile islands, and rightly so – North African pirates attacked the islands frequently. The notorious pirate Barbarossa (tyrant of all of the Mediterranean) burnt Lipari Town to the ground and took off with its entire population in 1544 (some say he imprisoned as many as 10,000 people). The future of the Aeolians was not looking bright. However, the Viceroy Pedro of Toledo quickly rebuilt the island, setting up plentiful civilian privileges, which helped lure settlers from mainland Italy.

The 19th century saw a further population decline, with many islanders fleeing the poor living conditions and emigrating to Australia. During the same period Lipari's citadel became a prison and continued in this role until Fascist times, when Mussolini's political opponents were incarcerated here. With hardly any population and sparse agriculture, the Aeolians were a sad sight until the 1950s, when their wild beauty grabbed the attention of the tourist industry, propelling them to their present-day guise as one of the most attractive parts of Italy.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Ferries and hydrofoils leave for the islands on a regular basis in summer from Milazzo and Messina. In Milazzo all the ticket offices are along Via dei Mille, at the port, and in Messina the office is halfway up Via Vittorio Emanuele II. You have to purchase your tickets at the port ticket offices before boarding; telephone bookings are not accepted unless they are done weeks in advance. Hydrofoils are twice as frequent and faster than ferries, although more expensive. Peak season is from June to September and, although ferries and hydrofoils operate year-round, the winter services are much reduced and sometimes cancelled – to the outer islands at any rate – due to heavy seas. All the following prices were one-way high-season fares at the time of writing.

Air

For some brilliant Aeolian-style luxury, book yourself (and four friends) a helicopter transfer with **Air Panarea** (☎ 090 983 44 28; www.airpanarea.com; Via Iditella, Panarea). From Palermo to Lipari it works out about €560 per person.

Air Panarea also operates a scheduled transfer to the Reggio Calabria airport (€176, Monday and Friday) departing from Panarea at 9am and returning at 2pm.

An excursion around the islands, with a tour over Stromboli costing €480 per person (for a group of five), is just about one of the most exciting things you can do.

Boat

Both Ustica Lines and Siremar (for contact details for Lipari see p166, Vulcano p170, Salina p174, Panarea p175, Stromboli p180, Filicudi p181 and Alicudi p182) run hydrofoils to Lipari from Milazzo (€11.30), and then on to the other islands. From 1 June to 30 September hydrofoils depart almost hourly (from around 7am to 8pm) to Lipari, and also stop at Vulcano (€10.50, 45 minutes) and either Santa Marina or Rinella (€12.80, 1½ to two hours) on Salina. Services to the other islands are less frequent unless you change in Lipari: combined there are nine departures daily for Panarea (€13.30, two hours) and Stromboli (€16.20, 2½ hours). There are four daily departures for Alicudi (€21.30, three hours) and Filicudi (€17.50, two hours 20 minutes).

Ustica Lines hydrofoils also connect the islands with Messina (€16.50, 1½ hours from Lipari, five daily) and Reggio di Calabria (€17.50, two hours from Lipari, five daily), as well as Naples (€75, 5½ hours, one daily, summer only) and Palermo (€32, four hours, one daily, summer only).

Siremar runs car ferries from Milazzo to the islands (€7.30, small cars €24.40, two hours, five daily), but they are slower and less regular. **NGI Traghetto** (Map p147; ☎ 090 928 40 91; Via dei Mille 26, Milazzo) also runs a thrice-daily car-ferry service for the same rates.

GETTING AROUND

Boat

Regular hydrofoil and ferry services operate between the islands but they can be disrupted by heavy seas. In Lipari Town nearly all hydrofoil and ferry services arrive at and depart from Marina Lunga (also known as Porto Sottomonastero). Siremar and Ustica Lines have ticket offices in the same cabin opposite the port. Full timetable information is available at all offices. On the other islands, ticket offices are at or close to the docks.