

# Train-Ferry Ride to Sicily



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**F**OR a train buff like me, there was no better way to see Italy than by train. Italy has a dense railway network and its train fares are among the lowest in Europe.

Five years ago, my wife and I arrived in this boot-shaped peninsula after a thoroughly enjoyable time in the Swiss Alps. When we were in Salerno in southern Italy and wanted to visit Sicily, the rock at the toe of the boot, going by train was our natural choice. Our destination on Sicily Island was Siracusa, about 130km south of Messina, the town closest to mainland Italy.

Upon further investigation, however, we found that the island was not connected to the mainland by bridge or tunnel. So I thought we'd probably have to cross the strait by ferry and then hop into another train in Messina to continue our journey to Siracusa.

The train departed from Salerno Station at 14:30 hrs and we were expected to arrive at Siracusa 8 hours

later. The fare covered the whole journey. The train pulled into the station in Villa San Giovanni, a village at the toe of the boot, at 18:10 and stopped there for almost half an hour, during which time, it moved forth and back.

I did not realise that the train was being split into sections to prepare it for crossing the Strait Of Messina by ferry. I only realised it when our coach started to back into a very large and long ferry. The lower deck of the ferry had several tracks that allowed the whole train to be loaded, in sections. A middle deck held vehicles and the upper deck was for passengers.

The narrow strait was crossed in just 20 minutes. Once the railway track on the lower deck of the ferry was properly lined up with that on the dock, the reverse process began and the locomotive pulled sections of train out of the ferry and reconnected them at Messina Station.

Train passengers were allowed to remain in their coaches throughout the ferry crossing, but getting out and onto

the upper deck to enjoy the view was obviously a much better option. One had to remember, though, the way to get back to the right coach later.

The first train ferry was built in Scotland in 1833. Since then, the idea of transporting a train over a body of water by ferry had been adopted in many parts of the world. The decision to opt for a train ferry over other alternatives is usually based on economic considerations. The train ferry on Lake Van in Turkey which forms an essential link in the proposed Trans-Asian Railway from Istanbul to Singapore, for example, continues to operate because a railway line to circumvent the lake would be 250km long in mountain terrain compared with the 96km ferry route.

When the Trans-Siberian Railway was completed at the turn of the 20th century, rolling stocks crossed Lake Baikal in train ferries until the Circum-Baikal Railway was completed at the end of 1905. ■

