

FINAL REPORT – ERASMUS TRAINEESHIP IN SICILY AT GIACCHE VERDI BRONTE



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11th of October 2021- 20th of December 2021

After finishing my bachelor's degree in Biology at the University Salamanca, my hometown in Spain, I was excited to gain some practical experience abroad before continuing with my studies or choosing a career path. My interests included biodiversity conservation, specifically related to climate change, and environmental education. I was lucky to find a call to do an Erasmus traineeship with Giacche Verdi (GV) Bronte, a small NGO that works, together with the German foundation Manfred-Hermesen-Stiftung (MHS), on environment and nature protection in Sicily. This is how I ended up in Bronte, a small village in the mountains at the western slope of the Etna volcano (which, by the way, is so astonishingly beautiful!). I could stay there just for two months and a half, which passed almost without noticing, but it was long enough to live all kinds of experiences and learn a lot. I am so glad I took this opportunity, which allowed me to live in another country while learning the language, as well as living and working with other 10 volunteers and trainees from different parts of the world.

During my stay, I joined the active project "Humus per la Biosfera": a new climate protection project 2021/22/23. This project included different aspects and activities, but the volunteers and trainees, including myself, mainly worked on the environmental education part, first: getting informed on our own about the topic of the project, which focused on soil fertility for a healthy planet, second: designing a didactic power point presentation and related practical experiments for elementary and middle school children and third: going to schools. In the beginning it was a bit of a challenge, since the work and the knowledge-gaining process was mostly independent and without much guidance, but the teamwork with my international mates was the best and, also thanks to the advice of GV and MHS people, I feel we did a really good job.

It was so rewarding when we finally went to schools and I saw the kids react to the presentation we made in such an honest and pure way: you could see they were interested, paying attention, making questions and interrupting with their comments. I was so delightfully surprised of how intelligent they were, how they listened and learnt so quickly and how they were so active and engaged with the topic. Just beautiful. I can say it was one of my favourite parts of the traineeship, the presentations at schools, including giving part of the lessons in Italian myself, it was a challenging and wonderful experience for me, I could feel the connection with some of the children and they were completely understanding about receiving a class in a far from perfect Italian.

More specifically, the presentation we made aims to sensitize kids about the importance of fertile soil for food production, biodiversity and climate change, in relation to the global problem of desertification. Through an animated presentation, we show them how the soil under our feet is alive and full of organisms that are crucial for its fertility. Also, with the help of a funny story of a farmer called Pietro, the children learn how intensive agricultural practices degrade the soil and kill all these organisms, and more importantly, how it is possible to return all the life and organic matter to the soil through composting organic waste, a practice that we explained and motivated them to try themselves.

Most of the days, from Monday to Friday, we worked in the GV office from 9 to 18:30, with a lunch break of 2,5h in the middle. There, we worked mainly on an autonomous way and we had the freedom to organize our time as we wanted, which was good but it could be a bit confusing at times. For the first weeks we worked on the "Humus per la Biosfera" presentation, we made a little personal presentation in Italian for the schools (so the kids got to know us and different cultures), and we learnt Italian. During the stay, we also received some Italian and photography lessons and sometimes we went out to do some outside activities with Gino Montagno, the president of GV Bronte, such as traditional hand sowing or feeding the horses (which was really fun!) and a week or so of traditional olive picking. For me, picking olives was such an enriching experience, I liked getting to know how it is done by doing it ourselves and it was also a great opportunity to enjoy both the good weather outside and the privileged views from the GV olive field (The Etna, the mountains and the river, so beautiful!). We also took the picked olives to the local olive press and tried our final olive oil (it was delicious!).

In the beginning of November, we started to go to schools for the project, but sadly the lessons couldn't last for many weeks, due to an increase in coronavirus infections. At the end of November, since the activity of GV could not continue normally because of the pandemic, some of us started our own miniproject (included in the big project "Humus per la Biosfera"): a small study on soil arthropod biodiversity in differently managed agroecosystems in Bronte. The project was welcomed by the GV and MHS people and they helped us to better shape it and gave us all the resources possible. By the way, this study is just the beginning, and it would be fantastic if future volunteers or trainees are interested on it and make a follow up!

Finally, I haven't talked much about the experience with the other volunteers/trainees and the free time. There is a lot of free time, and although Bronte is a calmed village with not too much to do and poor transport connections, you have the astonishing Etna surroundings and other beautiful landscapes very close and it is an opportunity to have time for yourself and get creative to visit new places and do the most of your experience. To end up, in relation to other volunteers/trainees, I can just say it was so good to have met them all. Living 10 people from different countries and with different routines and ideas in one house can be difficult for organization, but it is a crazy, messy experience I do recommend a lot. Or maybe I was just so lucky with the people I shared my experience with. I learnt so much from it and from them and really enjoyed it. Cooking together, playing guitar, dancing and singing, enjoying the sun in the rooftop with the very best views of all Bronte (ours), eternal talks, the coolest Etna hikes and many other things. I felt at home there with them. If any of you guys is reading this: thank youuu!!! Also thank you to Stephanie, Gino, Andrea, Lidia and Riccardo for making possible this experience, being so close, and always being willing to help and make us feel at home.

Some pictures:



Bronte, in the middle of the mountains.



Giving the school lessons!



Left: guided excursion to the Etna/ Right: Chilling after picking olives all day, with my lovely mates and Riccardo!



Beautiful Etna hikes all together on weekends!



Field visits for the arthropod study (with amazing views as you can see), with Monika and Gersey.