

## Black pearl of the Med.



The volcanic soil of Ustica's hinterland supports lush vegetation. Photos: Arnold and Jeffrey Sciberras.

Ustica is the oldest of all Sicilian islands, having emerged above the waves around one million years ago.

The island is in fact the emergent part of a submarine chain of volcanoes which punctuate the Tyrrhenian Sea, especially in the stretch between Sicily and Naples.

Even the island's name reflects its inextricable relationship with fire and volcanism – in fact, 'Ustica' is uncannily similar to the Latin 'ustum', for 'burnt'.

The Greek name for the island, conversely, latches onto a more recent historical occurrence.

In fact, Ustica for the Greeks was 'Osteodes', which literally means 'bone repository', in remembrance of the 6,000 Carthaginian mercenaries left to die on the island of hunger and thirst during the Punic Wars.

There are many historical analogies between Ustica and Malta. For instance, Ustica witnessed the passage of numerous regional powers, including the Phoenicians, Carthaginians, Greeks and Romans, as testified by the numerous archaeological findings on the island, including a series of Roman-era dwellings.

It is purported that the first settlers came from the Aeolian Islands around 3,500 years ago, since Ustica is visible from Alicudi and Filicudi on unsullied days.

Ustica occupies a coveted maritime position for seafarers and therefore it has always been an apple of discord between warring powers. The stretch from the Roman period to that of the Bourbons in the 18th and 19th centuries is typified by dramatic swings in fortune for the local population, with successive deportations and re-colonisations, with incursions by corsairs and consequent enslavement being the main driving force behind such swings.

Unlike Malta, Ustica witnessed procrastination by the authorities in the construction of coastal fortifications, leaving the island at the mercy of marauding parties.

The construction of two towers (nowadays housing the archaeology museum and the Marine Protected Area visitors' centre) was delayed until the mid-18th century.

It was in this same period that the final re-colonisation of Ustica occurred, with the arrival of around 400 individuals on the island. They immediately embarked on the promulgation of

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*- Alan Deidun*

agriculture, through the construction of water cisterns for instance.

It was at this time that the island was granted autonomy, its governor was replaced by a mayor and the church dedicated to St Bartholomew was constructed.

When the population of Ustica reached close to the 5,000 mark (an unsustainable figure for such a small island of around eight square kilometres) a steady exodus resulted, first to Sardegna and then further afield to New Orleans in Louisiana, where it is estimated that up to 70,000 residents are descendants of the emigrants from Ustica, more than 70 times the actual population of Ustica today.

In view of its relative remoteness, Ustica served from the time of the Bourbon rule up to 1961 as an outpost for exiles, including Libyan tribal head honchos exiled during the Italian Fascist occupation of Libya.

One date etched indelibly in the recent history of Ustica is June 27, 1980, when Aerolinee Itavia Flight 870 crashed in the waters lapping Ustica's coasts.

The flight was approaching Palermo from Bologna and all 81 Italian passengers on board perished.

From the 1970s to the early 1990s, residents embarked on a campaign to paint scenes from everyday Ustica life on the outer walls of their houses. The so-called murales are synonymous nowadays with the colourful joie de vivre of the island's residents, a legacy which is jealously guarded by the heritage authorities.

Not mentioning Ustica's underwater assets would be a great disservice to the island, which is renamed as a diving mecca in the Mediterranean.

Ustica is renowned for the profusion of groupers and gorgonians in its waters, which prompted local authorities to declare one of Italy's first Marine Protected Areas here in 1986.

Besides its living underwater assets, Ustica also boasts underwater archaeological attractions. Artefacts salvaged from these waters, such as anchors and cisterns dating back to Phoenician and Roman times, have been purposely disseminated along a tailor-made underwater trail, endowed with interpretive information panels for divers. The trail, located at Punta Cavazzi in the south-west of the island, is accessible to rookie divers and even snorkellers, since the depths range from 10 to 25 metres.

Ustica is easily accessible on a short 90-minute hydrofoil jaunt from Palermo.