

## A family holiday with teenagers: Vacanze con figli adolescente (To Sicily with the mob)



Caroline Phillips in Catania, with her eldest daughter and friends

A family holiday to Sicily starts badly when the kids realise there's no 4G, and goes downhill from there. Well, what did Caroline Phillips expect?

8 September 2015 by Caroline Phillips

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The language barrier is always one of the first obstacles to overcome on holiday in a foreign country. Even more challenging when the tongue you're trying to understand is your teenager's: "Whaaa?"... "Huurgh?" Yet here I am: August, Sicily, at Casalnuovo – a beautiful villa with majestic 360-degree views and a massive pool – with six teens, two of them with my DNA.

Yes, just as your kids' teenage years are a prolonged enforced holiday from reason, sanity and the space-time continuum (for "In a minute" read "In an aeon"), an actual holiday with teenagers takes the teen-parent tinderbox (and I don't mean the app) to a whole new level of flammability.



### The teenager of the species

Let's try to look at this as a learning experience; put a zen spin on the situation. Think of it as scientific/anthropological fieldwork. After all, there are more teens in the world today than there have ever been. The UN reports that one in five of the world's population is between the ages of 10 and 19, a total of more than 1.2 billion people. An unimaginable quantity of pants and wet towels dumped on the bedroom floors of the world.

The teenager is a uniquely human phenomenon. There is no teen panda. Even apes, man's closest relative not on our Christmas card list, go straight from infancy to adulthood. (And that's without being given the use of the family car, 120-quid Nike Roshe Run fly-knit trainers or use of Dad's credit card.)

This may just be a fluffy 'What I did on my hols with teens' article to you, but for me, it's my own contribution to mankind's understanding. At least, that's how I justify the suffering and expense.

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**First hurdle: no 4G**

Let's rewind. We 'tip-up' – teen speak for arrive – at Casalnuovo. The villa is set in a magnificent 15-acre organic estate of fruit trees and olive groves, the glory of which pales into insignificance compared with whether it's a 4G zone. Which, needless to say, it's not.



As the teens register the absence of industrial-strength WiFi, their behaviour becomes noticeably twitchy.

Their eyes – generally in an upward sweep of the "OMG, what are you like?!" arc – begin to shift rapidly with horror from side to side.

"But look," I point out, "over there are the stunning Nebrodi Mountains, Alcantra Valley and Aeolian islands. And just a short drive away, Messina, Taormina, Cefalu and Mount Etna!"

"Hnurggh!" responds my youngest.



Taormina, a short drive from Casalnuovo villa

**OMG Mum, you're so disgusting**

My pathetic parental enthusiasm falls on deaf ears as the teens are already inside, engaged in the crucially important task of divvying-up the bedrooms: "Why *can't* I move my mattress into the same room as Antonia and Ambrosia?"

"Just 'cos Savannah's my sister doesn't mean I have to be in the same room as her!"

"Of course it's OK for me to share with Tarquin! I've practically grown up with him. Honestly Mum, what d'you *think's* going to happen? Oh my god, Mum, you're *so* disgusting!"



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### **Our first excursion**

The travelling teenager also has strong views linked to their keen and ever-present awareness of status. Our hire car is a Volvo. "Oh Daddy, a Volvo? How BORING. Spirulina's parents had a four-wheel drive Mercedes in Puerta Banus last year!" says Antonia.

"Has it got bluetooth for my Apple Music?!" asks Tarquin.

And so, in our tragic cars, we follow one another slowly down the Sicilian hill as the Italian drivers behind us play us a welcoming chorus of Don Corleone's Horn Concerto in G Sharp-turn-right-off-the-200-foot-cliff-you-bloody-tourists.

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Rocking up – the other way teenagers arrive somewhere – at the nearest roadside ristorante, we find that, this being a non-touristy region, nobody speaks any English. "How marvellous!" we crow smugly, "to be somewhere so out of the way they don't know English!" and gamely start to navigate the menu.

Max, 14, has done two years' Italian at school. It's his least favourite subject, but he confidently starts chucking aloras and per favors around in an accent that's pure Joe Dolce 'Shaddap You Face'. We make him "a-putta-da-sock-in-it" as quickly as possible.

Still the teens have questions. Lots of them. Tarquin wants to know, "What is the 'della chef' in Pasta della chef?"

### **The dynamics of a family holiday**

The thinking, such it was, behind this trip, was this: the teens would form a sort of self-entertaining gang, leaving the two adult couples to kick back and enjoy quality reading, conversation and daylight-snoozing.

And such, for a good part of the time, proved to be the case. The younger birds of a feather did indeed flock together, commiserating with one another over the lack of social media. The grey-feathered buzzards vegged out, read, and smiled knowingly at one another over the teens' Snapchat withdrawal symptoms.

And then, on the third day, as I was watching the giant risotto I was preparing acquire the consistency of papier-mache, it struck me. The annual family holiday has always reduced me to an anxious, hormonal state equivalent to teenagehood. Parted from my moorings, miles away from the habits and rituals I count on daily, I'm at sea (sometimes literally).

Like a teenager desperate to be popular, I want everyone to be ecstatically happy with our choice of holiday venue, activities and food. Is the accommodation up to the standard our kids' mates' families run to? Are we as much fun as Savannah's parents? Are we as buff in swimsuits as her parents?



### Learning to rub along together

Four days in, we all gradually let go of our various security blankets. We get used to airing our semi-naked High50 bods in front of one another; the sun starts to sink into our bones and we start comparing mozzy-bites, playing midnight Scrabble and sniggering at episodes of CSI Miami dubbed into Italian. We all sort of grow into our holiday selves.

The older teens finally accept that there are no "bangin' clubs" in the vicinity and start enjoying the company of the younger teens with whom they're stuck. The 18-year-olds turn into 14-year-olds when they're splashing about in the pool, and the 14-year-olds giggle with the 18-year-olds over the good-looking local farm boy (Tarquin: "He's not *that* bloody good-looking!").

It's at that point that they realize Casalnuovo has a basement games room, an American pool table, a "sick" Football table, an E-Piano, PlayStation 3 Console and horseback riding at the end of the grounds. They even get to do a hilarious on-site pizza-making course.

Their skin starts to turn to burnished gold. One day, 14-year-old Max arrives poolside only to see Savannah and Ambrosia sunbathing topless (he waits five minutes before coughing to announce his presence),. Tarquin's rampant acne fades as his tan increases.

The teen sulking of arrival day is forgotten, soon to be replaced by the teen groaning at the prospect of going home.

Visit [Solo Sicily](#) for Sicily travel information

Book a stay at Casalnuovo or phone 020 7097 1413. Prices from £ 1,542 a week for seven guests or £ 2,267 a week for 15 guests (full occupancy)

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