TOUR CODE

IT6

ADVENTURESABROAD

SOUTHERN ITALY

Sicily & Southern Italy

12 days

Updated 29/04/2013

Day 1 ***Arrive in Palermo***

Today we arrive in Palermo. Transfer to our hotel.

Overnight in Palermo. Meal plan: Dinner, if required.

Day 2 ***Palermo: City Tour - Segesta - Erice***

We begin our day with a walk through the narrow streets of the Vucceria outdoor market. Here we feel the very pulse of the city's daily life, passing stalls where fishmongers display whole sword fish and tuna, and several varieties of squid and octopus. Sicily is agriculturally rich and here some of the island's excellent produce is displayed: apples from the slopes of Mount Etna; oranges and lemons, introduced to Sicily by the Arabs; cactus pears, fresh figs and grapes, fat olives, fresh capers, zucchini blossoms, fresh ricotta and pungent pecorino cheese.

A short walk brings us to the Piazza Praetoria with its voluptuous 16th century Florentine fountain, decked with renaissance nudes and animal heads. At its unveiling, centuries ago, locales named it "the fountain of shame". Nearby is the baroque Quattro Canti, the 17th century crossroads that divides the old city into four, and the Municipio, a 15th century palazzo that is Palermo's city hall.

On the Piazza Bellini, we step inside the Martorana Church; a 12th century building that is a jewel of Arab-Norman architecture, and its interior encrusted with byzantine mosaics. And no visit to Sicily would be complete without a stop at Monreale, the Royal Mountain. It was here, at the end of the 12th century, that the Norman king, William II had a great cathedral built to reflect the sophistication and wealth of his kingdom. Byzantine and Greek artisans were employed to cover almost every surface of its interior with costly golden mosaics depicting Christ the Pantocrator, the apostles, and cycles form the Old and New Testaments. Next door, we walk through the cloister of the Benedictine abbey. Here, no two of the exquisite capitals on over 200 twin column are the same.

En route to Erice we stop at Segesta to see the picturesque Doric temple. Sicily was part of ancient Magna Graecia. In the 8th century BC, with population rising dramatically in mainland Greece, land became expensive and resources scarce. This led to an exodus of Greeks in search of new lands. Sicily and southern Italy were to Ancient Greece what the Americas were to 16th century European explorers: the great unknown; a land of possibilities, riches and great dangers. Segesta was a successful colony, which fought with its rival Selinunte, to the south.

We continue the short distance to Erice, our final destination today.

Overnight in Erice. Meal plan: Breakfast and dinner.

Day 3 ***Erice: Walking Tour - Selinunte - Agrigento***

Erice sits dramatically on a promontory at over 600m (2,000 feet) above the sea. The ancients considered it a sacred

place; the Arabs called it Jebel Hamid, or Blessed Mountain. The city was widely respected as the centre of worship for the goddess Astarte, and later Aphrodite whom the Romans knew as Venus. It is claimed that Erice was built by descendents of the Trojans.

This morning we take a walking tour through this picturesque town, which reminds one of a northern Italian hill town with its cobbled, narrow streets. We enter the Carthginian Porta Trapani, passing the Chiesa Matrice, a beautiful Normanesque Gothic church built in the 15th century. Near the main square you might like to sample some Sicilian sweets at a local shop where they are made to order. The Arabs are credited with the introduction of the local fondness of desserts, including gelato for which Sicily is famous.

Farther along we come to the site where once the temple of Venus Erycina stood. From the Norman Castle, now standing in its place, the views out to sea are splendid. On a clear day, we might even see the coast of Tunisia, 145km distant. Erice is home today to an important scientific institute where international conferences and symposiums are held year round, giving Erice the sobriquet, "City of Science".

We depart Erice for Agrigento via the town of Marsala, a Arabic name meaning "Harbour of God". Here, in 1860, Garibaldi landed with his army of a thousand redshirts to take Sicily from the Spanish Bourbon rulers. In the previous century an Englishman named John Woodhouse saw the potential for a lucrative export, fortified wine, which became all the rage, especially after Admiral Nelson supplied it to his sailors instead of rum. You may like to sample some Marsala, this sweet dessert wine, at one of the local cantinas.

In the setting of a vaulted 19th century winery, there is a museum housing a remarkable find: a Carthaginian galley. This warship, manned by 68 stores, was rammed and sunk off shore near Marsala in a sea battle in the 3rd century BC during the second Punic War. With the Roman victory over the Carthaginians at the end of this war, Sicily became Rome's first overseas province in 210 BC.

Further along the southern coast we stop at Selinunte where a series of Greek temples stand. One of these was one of the largest of the ancient world. Today its colossal ruins remind one that civilization can so easily be toppled by conquest and earthquakes, humbled by the events of time and history.

We continue our journey through the highly productive agricultural lands of southern Sicily, passing olive groves and vineyards, arriving in Agrigento later this afternoon.

Overnight in Agrigento. Meal plan: Breakfast and dinner.

Day 4 *Agrigento - Magna Graecia - Syracuse*

Our journey through the lands of Magna Graecia takes us this morning to the magnificent series of temples at Agrigento. The five elevated temples are a picture-perfect tribute to the indomitability of paganism. Time, earthquakes, vicious Punic Wars, and the rise of Christianity have taken their toll, and the temples have been named official World Heritage landmarks.

Leaving behind the ancient Greek world, we drive inland across the island. Near the town of Piazza Armerina we explore the remarkable ruins of a Roman villa. Built at the end of the 4th century AD, this vast complex which includes extensive baths, reception rooms, and private apartments may have been an imperial villa of Diocletian's co-emperor, Maximianus. The villa contains some of the most beautiful and extensive Roman mosaics to be found anywhere, including detailed and colourful hunting scenes, images from mythology, and a charming sequence of bikini-clad ladies doing aerobics!

After lunch we drive onward towards the eastern side of the island, coming within sight of the slopes of Mount Etna. At 3313 m (10,866 feet), Etna is one of the earth's most active volcanoes--both a blessing and a curse for the local people.

The surrounding lands are extremely fertile, but there looms the constant possibility of an eruption. The nearby city of Catania was almost completely buried by lava flows in 1669.

We arrive at Syracuse later this afternoon.

Overnight in Syracuse. Meal plan: Breakfast and dinner.

Day 5 *Syracuse: City Tour - Taormina: Walking Tour - Giardini-Naxos*

This morning we tour Syracuse.

The city was founded in 735 BC by settlers from Corinth, Greece, who took over from the native Sikels. In time it grew to become the largest city on Sicily, so important that Athens grew jealous and sent an invasion force in 415 BC. Syracuse became Roman; Rome declined, the Vandals and the Osrogoths took over. Belisarius of Byzantium conquered the city and from 878 to 1038 it was the Saracens who ruled Sicily. Then came the turn of the Normans, and in 1105 Count Roger incorporated Arab Sicily in his county.

We continue to Taormina and on arrival have a leisurely walking tour of the town, starting with the almost perfectly preserved Greco-Roman amphitheatre, Taormina's greatest treasure. In ancient days, the 3rd-century cliffside arena seated 5,000 spectators, with Mount Etna framed perfectly as a backdrop to the 1800 year old stage.

We see also the Palazzo Corvaia with its blend of Arab, Norman, and Catalan elements where, in 1410, Sicily's first parliament was convened. The Corso Umberto I is a charming pedestrian street that runs the length of town. There are many shops and boutiques along the way and at the Piazza IX Aprile, there are lovely views of Naxos harbour and the Italian mainland across the straits. Perched on a peak above the town is the medieval fortress. In the Piazza del Duomo where Taormina's 15th century basilica/cathedral stands, there is a fountain topped by the symbol of the town: the statue of a female centaur.

We spend the night 10 minutes away in Giardini-Naxos. The name of this pretty seaside town derives from Sicilian "Giardini" meaning "citrus orchards". The addition "Naxos" derives from the name of the first Greek colony in Sicily.

Overnight in Giardini-Naxos. Meal plan: Breakfast and dinner.

Day 6 *Giardini-Naxos (Sicily) - Paestum (Italian mainland)*

This morning we take a short ferry ride from Sicily to the Italian mainland and then proceed by motor coach to Paestum.

The three Doric Greek temples of Paestum are among the best preserved in the world, even rivaling those of Sicily and Athens. Originally built without any mortar or cement (they were simply covered by roofs of terra-cotta tiles supported by wooden beams) the temples remained standing even after the great earthquake of AD 69 reduced Pompeii's streets to a pile of rubble. After a period of native Italian control in the 5th and 4th centuries BC, it fell to the Romans in 273 BC and was renamed Paestum, remaining a Roman town until the deforestation of nearby hills turned the town into a swampy mush. Plagued by malaria and syphilitic pirates, Paestum's ruins lay relatively untouched until they were rediscovered in the 18th century.

Overnight in Paestum. Meal plan: Breakfast and dinner.

Day 7 *Paestum - Pompeii & Herculaneum - Sorrento*

Today we travel from Paestum to Sorrento.

En route we make an excursion to Pompeii, dug out from the inundation of volcanic ash and pumice stone that covered it by the eruption of Mount Vesuvius in AD 79. The entire area is a fantastic record of how ordinary Romans lived their lives. We will see the House of Vetti, the most elegant of the Pompeii villas and we also look at the House of Mysteries. The nearby House of Faun takes up a city block and has four different dining parlours and two spacious gardens.

Nearby Herculaneum was a small town that was buried under Vesuvius' lava. Our tour here will include the baths, which were built during the reign of Agustus. An outstanding example of how the aristocracy lived is provided at the Casa dei Cervi.

We continue to Sorrento, the place where the Greeks placed the legendary abode of the Sirens, those wicked mermaids who lured seamen to their deaths with their sweet songs. The Sorrento Peninsula, a finger of land curling around the Bay of Naples, is beautiful with its soaring mountains and colourful flora.

Overnight in Sorrento. Meal plan: Breakfast and dinner.

Day 8 *Sorrento - the Amalfi Coast & National Archaeological Museum - Sorrento*

Today we drive along the famous Amalfi Coast on a winding road carved out of the rock in the mid-19th century. This scenic and unforgettable drive takes us to Amalfi, a resort town on the peninsula of the same name where we take a walking tour of the city. We will see the beautiful Duomo cathedral with its 13th century bell tower, the main square of the town, and the Cloister of Paradise.

Continuing to Naples, we pass by the 14th-century Duomo, the colourful harbour front, and the Castel dell'Ovo, a 12th-century fortress built on the ruins of an ancient villa, before our visit to the National Archaeological Museum. This impressive facility houses one of the world's most comprehensive collections of Greek and Roman antiquities. The museum stands on top of Santa Teresa Hill and was originally built as a military barrack later transformed into a university campus. It was remodeled in 1790 to receive the treasures of Pompeii and Herculaneum.

Return to Sorrento.

Overnight in Sorrento. Meal plan: Breakfast and dinner.

Day 9 *Sorrento - Monte Cassino - Rome*

Today's journey takes us to north to Rome via Monte Cassino. During the Roman Empire, the abbey located here was one of the great European centres of Christendom and one of the largest repositories of ancient learning. In 1944, Monte Cassino was destroyed by the Allied forces who suspected that it was occupied by German troops. The military cemetery on the nearby hill contains the graves of 1,100 Polish soldiers who lost their lives in the final assault.

Later we continue to Rome.

Overnight in Rome. Meal plan: Breakfast and dinner.

Day 10 *Rome: City Tour*

We begin our guided tour* of Rome at the 2,000 year old colosseum. Built to seat 55,000 spectators, this arena staged Rome's most brutal gladitorial combats. Next we walk through the Roman Forum where we will see the Curia, the Rostra, the Temple of Vesta, the Basilica of Constantine, and the Arch of Titus. Continuing onwards and upwards we reach the Campidoglio (Capitoline Hill), seat of the Roman Senate since the 12th century and the original citadel of the city. This beautiful square was redesigned by Michelangelo in the 16th century.

We arrive at Piazza Navona where we can break for lunch at one of the many restaurants and cafes on or near the square. In the square itself we can admire the impressive Fountain of the Four Rivers, with detailed figures representing the Nile, Ganges, Danube and Palata rivers.

We continue to the famous Trevi Fountain, designed by Nicholas Salvi in 1732. It's water was supplied by one of Rome's earliest aquaducts. Throwing a coin into the fountain is said to ensure your safe return to Rome. We also visit the temple-turned church called the Pantheon, and have the opportunity to admire its perfect proportions on our way to the Spanish steps, where we finish our day's tour. Balance of the day at leisure.

* NOTE: Due to traffic problems and the fact that today's sites are reasonably close to each other, much of today's tour will occur on foot and with Rome's efficient public transit system (cost of tickets included).

Overnight in Rome. Meal plan: Breakfast and dinner.

Day 11 *Rome: the Vatican Museums & St. Peter's*

Today we begin our visit to Vatican City with a guided tour through the immense Vatican Museums.* This amazing collection houses some of the most important Greek and Roman sculptures, Renaissance paintings, Flemish tapestries and mosaics in the world. Understandably this collection is visited by more than 3 million people a year. We also visit Michelangelo's Sistine Chapel to take in its breathtaking frescoes. Heading into the cavernous interior of St. Peter's Basilica, we can appreciate it's many treasures, including Michelangelo's Pieta. At the end of the tour we visit the elegantly symmetrical Piazza St. Pietro.

* NOTE: The timing of today's sightseeing can vary depending on seasonality. Early spring and late fall tours can often begin in the morning due to lighter crowds at these times of year. Busier times often dictate an afternoon visit in order to avoid morning crowds. Weather may also be a consideration. Your Tour Leader will advise further upon your arrival in Rome.

Overnight in Rome. Meal plan: Breakfast and dinner.

Day 12 *Departure*

Departure from Rome.

VIAGGIO BUONO! Meal plan: Breakfast.