TOUR CODE

ML3

ADVENTURESABROAD

MALTA & ITALY

featuring Sicily, Southern and Northern Italy

27 days

Updated 01/11/2013

Day 1 *Arrive in Malta*

Arrive in Malta. Transfer to our Sliema hotel.

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

Day 2 *Valletta: Harbour Cruise & Walking Tour*

Today we will witness Malta's gallant past and sail the routes of the Knights of St John and the great Ottoman fleets of Suleyman the Magnificent. We will depart from Sliema and take a guided cruise of the two natural harbours surrounding the city of Valletta. During the cruise, Malta's rich history will unfold, from the occupation of the Knights of St John to World War II. The "Three Cities" and the Marsamxett and Grand Harbour once witnessed the two Great Sieges of 1565 and 1942. The fortifications and bastions, Fort St Elmo, and monuments surrounding the creeks are only fully appreciated from the sea.

We will then walk through Valletta, the capital of Malta, and visit the Barracca Gardens. This colonnaded public garden on top of St Peter's and St. Paul's was once a covered play area for the boisterous Italian knights. The gardens offer a magnificent view of the harbour. From the gardens we will visit the St. John's Co-Cathedral, built by the Knights of Malta between 1573 and 1578. The severe exterior of the Cathedral, built immediately after the ending of the Great Siege of 1565, is reminiscent of a military fort.

Overnight in Sliema. Meal plan: Breakfast and dinner.

Day 3 *Valletta - Marsaxlokk - Ghar Dalam - Hagar Qim*

We will return to Valletta to view its most important historical monuments. The Grand Master's Palace is a magnificent building and houses Malta's House of Representatives, the office of the president, several state rooms, and the Gobelins Tapestry. We will also visit the National Museum of Archaeology, one of the finest and most comprehensive museums in Malta.

We then head to the southern part of the island to witness some of the prehistory of Malta. Our first stop is Marsaxlokk, perhaps the most picturesque fishing village in all of Malta. The decoration and form of the bright multi-coloured fishing boats which fill the harbour can be traced back to the age of the Phoenicians.

We also visit the underground cave of Ghar Dalam ("The Cave of Darkness") which served as the abode of the first neolithic settlers of these islands about 6,000 years ago. Excavations carried out between 1933 and 1937 yielded an enormous quantity of animal bone deposits from the lower strata of the cave's subsoil which confirmed that the Maltese Islands at one time formed part of the European mainland.

Our last stop is the Neolithic temples of Hagar Qim, from 300 BC, and some of the oldest human-made structures in the

world. Reminiscent of England's Stonehenge, the temples are built of limestone rock, some towering six metres (20 ft) high and weighing several tonnes. The complex is an impressive maze of corridors, chambers, niches and altars, all carved out of stone using flint.

Overnight in Sliema. Meal plan: Breakfast and dinner.

Day 4 *Gozo*

Today we travel by ferry to Gozo, the second largest island of the Maltese archipelago, separated from Malta by a 8km (5 mi) wide channel. Gozo is an island of green hills surrounded by blue sea, where tranquil villages are set onto the sides of the fertile and flat-topped hills.

We visit the citadel where we can enjoy a wonderful panorama of Gozo. This citadel dates back to the second century AD, when the Romans once occupied this area. We will visit the capital, Victoria, and its grand Cathedral. In 1897 the capital of Gozo had its name changed from Rabat to Victoria to celebrate Queen Victoria's Diamond Jubilee. While on Gozo we will visit Xaghra, meaning "a large open space", with the most enchanting village square on Gozo. We will also see the temple at Ggantija, the most impressive of all Maltese Copper Age monuments. According to legend, the huge monolithic stones of the temple were carried great distances on the head of a female giantess. We return via ferry to Malta.

Overnight in Sliema. Meal plan: Breakfast and dinner.

Day 5 *Mosta - Mdina - Rabat - Dingli Cliffs - Blue Grotto*

Our journey today takes us to the 19th century parish church of St Mary's in Mosta. The church boasts the third largest unsupported dome, rivaled only by the Hagia Sophia in Istanbul and St Peter's in Rome. Among some of the marvelous interior decorations are the murals painted by Guiseppe Cali. During WWII, a bomb fell through the dome but did not explode; this bomb (defused, of course) is preserved and displayed as a sign of this miraculous occurrence. We will also see some of the finest examples of silver workmanship which testify to the fame of Maltese gold and silversmiths.

We will visit one of the smallest and most compact of historic cities, Mdina, (from the Arabic word for "walled city"). Mdina's zenith was during the darker medieval times of the Normans and Spanish. It is truly a Maltese city with the knights' influence restricted to a few fine buildings. Today Mdina has the smallest population in Malta with 420 people. We will visit the Cathedral and Roman Villa, in which a number of beautiful floor mosaics were discovered. Walking through the winding streets we come to the city of Rabat, just outside the walls and separated by a moat from Mdina. We will explore the early Christian Catacombs dating as far back as the 8th century. These Catacombs emerged because of a Roman law that prohibited the burial of the dead within the city limits; for Christians cremation was not acceptable.

We continue on to the Dingli Cliffs and Dingli village, the highest on the island on cliffs 260m (858 feet) above the sea.

Our journey continues to the Blue Grotto. Legend has it that the Blue Grotto was home to the sirens, the sea nymphs, who serenaded sailors to their destination with soft verse.

Later we return to our Sliema hotel.

Overnight in Sliema. Meal plan: Breakfast and dinner.

Day 6 *Valetta, Malta - Palermo, Sicily, Italy*

An early flight takes us to Palermo--capital of the island of Sicily. The balance of the day is free to explore the lanes of the traditional quarter of this attractive town.

Overnight in Palermo. Meal plan: Breakfast and dinner.

Day 7 *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 8 *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 9 *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 10 *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 11 *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 12 *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 13 *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 14 *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 15 *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 16 *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 17 *Rome - Assisi - Siena*

This morning we drive from Rome to Siena, a region famous for its wines.

Our first stop will be Assisi. Despite the millions of tourists and pilgrims it attracts every year, the hometown of St Francis remains a beautiful and tranquil refuge. St Francis was born here in 1182 and his spirit hovers over every aspect of the city's life. He renounced his father's wealth in his late teens to pursue a life of chastity and poverty, founding the order of mendicant friars known as the Order of Minors (the Franciscans after his death) which attracted a huge following in Europe.

St Francis' Basilica is the city's, and possibly Umbria's, primary attraction. Unfortunately, this peaceful town was hit by a strong earthquake on the morning of the September 26, 1997. During the initial shock, the Basilica of the upper church was damaged. An aftershock later that day brought the cupola down. The community of Assisi with assistance from individuals and organisations worldwide is now trying to save and restore as much of Assisi's priceless masterpieces as possible.

After a guided tour of the Assisi Basilica, we depart for Siena, arriving later in the afternoon.

Overnight in Siena. Meal plan: Breakfast and dinner.

Day 18 *Siena & San Gimignano*

Siena is best seen on foot. In fact, the city council was Europe's first to ban motor traffic from the city centre. Siena today seems frozen in time. The town has traditionally been Florence's rival as the centre of art and architecture in Tuscany. While Florence is known for its Renaissance art and buildings, Siena takes us straight back to the Middle Ages. Perhaps by preserving its original character more than any other city in Italy, Siena is a showcase of the Italian Gothic style. The walled city of Siena occupies three hill tops and contains a rich artistic heritage.

Included on our guided walking tour of Siena's charming medieval streets and squares is a visit to the Palazzo Pubblico (Town Hall), a famous example of Italian medieval architecture with Gothic influences. Also famous for its frescoes, the best-known are a secular series on government in the Hall of the Nine (also known as Sala della Pace), by Ambrogio Lorenzetti. These frescoes are collectively known as "Allegory and Effects of Good and Bad Government."

Our next stop is the Duomo. This huge cathedral, built in bands of black and white marble, dates from the 12th century. Built in the Romanesque and Italian Gothic styles, it has a dramatically painted façade -- partly designed by Giovanni Pisano -- and a soaring black and white bell tower. The inlaid marble floor depicts different Biblical scenes and the cathedral contains a glass-enclosed box with an arm. Tradition maintains that the arm is that of John the Baptist and was used to baptise Christ.

This afternoon we drive to San Gimignano, called the Manhattan of Tuscany. The medieval town preserves 13 of its noble brick towers, which give it a skyscraper skyline. Today its fortress-like severity is softened by the subtlety of its quiet, harmonious squares, and many of its places and churches are enhanced by Renaissance frescoes.

Our drive this afternoon back to Siena takes us through the wine growing region of Chianti.

Overnight in Siena. Meal plan: Breakfast and dinner.

Day 19 *Siena - Volterra - Pisa - Lerici*

This morning we drive through beautiful and quintessential Tuscan rolling countryside to Volterra.

Situated like many Etruscan cities on a high plateau, Volterra offers uninterrupted views over the surrounding hills. In many places the town's ancient Etruscan walls still stand. The exact origins of the Etruscans and when they arrived in Italy, are unknown. Their civilisation was centred in the area between present-day Rome and Florence, and had its Golden Age from the eighth until the sixth century BC. After this period the Etruscan empire was gradually superseded by the rising power of Rome, although in the process, the Romans incorporated many aspects of Etruscan culture into their own society and beliefs. Although the Etruscans had their own language and alphabet, nothing of their literature has survived. What we know of their civilisation comes mainly from their highly decorated tombs which were stocked with everything the deceased would need in the afterlife -- food, drink, clothes, weapons and furniture.

We visit Volterra's famous Museo Guarnacci, which contains one of Italy's best collections of Etruscan artifacts. Pride of place in the museum goes to the collection of 600 Etruscan funerary urns, depicting many aspects of Etruscan customs and beliefs.

We also visit the city walls and the Etruscan Gate with its basalt heads of Etruscan gods dating back to the sixth century BC. Before leaving Volterra we view the Roman amphitheatre, dating to the first century BC. This is one of the best preserved Roman theatres in Italy and enough of the original structure has survived to allow an almost complete reconstruction.

Our next stop is Pisa, where we will spend most of our time concentrating on the town's principal monuments -- the Duomo, the Baptistery, and the most famous structure in Pisa, the gravity-defying "Leaning Tower." We will take ample time to view and photograph the tower from the outside (to climb the tower requires advance reservations and a considerable amount of time to queue for entry; time constraints make this impractical for our tour).

We continue to Lerici, set dramatically on a beautiful bay on the Ligurian coast.

Overnight in Lerici. Meal plan: Breakfast and dinner.

Day 20 *Lerici - Cinque Terre - Florence*

Today we leave behind Lerici and travel (weather depending) by boat along the Ligurian coast to village of Riomaggiore in the Cinque Terre. Here we begin our easy-paced walk between the coastal villages. This spectacular section of the Italian Riviera is considered to rival the Amalfi Coast near Naples for its stunning views and gorgeous sunsets. From Riomaggiore we take an easy half hour walk on the Via D'Amore (lover's Walk) to Manarola. The next section (about 1 hour) takes us to Corniglia.

Those not wishing to continue with the next two more difficult sections may walk up to Corniglia centre to sample the delightful town with its wonderful panoramic views. It is also possible to take a local train to the nearby town of Vernazza to enjoy this jewel of a village. Those wishing to continue may start on the 2-hour hike to Vernazza. The hills of the rugged coast are covered in vineyards which grow the grapes for the local Morasca, Chiaretto del Faro and Sciacchetra wines.

We continue by train to Monterosso Al Mare, thus named for the red color of the area. Here we find a large statue carved into the cliffs and a lovely beach.

PLEASE NOTE: Due to the flooding that occurred in the region in late 2011, our day may need to be adjusted depending on what trails are open or under repair, and any repairs or re-construction occuring in the impacted villages.

Tonight we arrive in Florence.

Overnight in Florence. Meal plan: Breakfast and dinner.

Day 21 *Florence: Walking Tour*

Florence is a city steeped in history and art. Our walking tour today begins with a guided tour of the Accademia, which was Europe's first Academy of drawing and today houses a superb art collection, including Michelangelo's David, probably the most famous statue in the world. We then proceed to the Cathedral of Santa Maria del Fiore (Duomo), complete with its magnificent red dome. Upon its completion in 1436, the dome was hailed as the greatest architectural achievement of its day, equaling, perhaps even surpassing, the monuments of antiquity. The cupola's diameter is greater than that of St Peter's in Rome and the nave is the third largest in Christendom. Even today its brilliant engineering is not fully understood.

We continue along the pedestrian mall to the Ponte Vecchio, the oldest bridge in Florence and the only one in the city to survive World War II. The Ponte Vecchio was built in 1345 and used to be lined with butchers' shops which have now been replaced by rows of gold and silver shops on both sides. At the Piazza Santa Croce, we stop to admire the facade of the Franciscan church of the same name. Inside we see the tombs of Michelangelo and Galileo Galilei and chapels covered in frescoes by Giotto.

Balance of the day at leisure.

Overnight in Florence. Meal plan: Breakfast and dinner.

Day 22 *Florence: Uffizi Gallery*

This morning we visit the Uffizi Gallery, Giorgio Vasari's extraordinary administrative buildings which he designed for Cosimo I Medici in the mid-sixteenth century. The galleries here contain the greatest collection of Italian artworks, including hundreds of paintings by such great artists as Botticelli, Leonardo da Vinci, Raphael, Michelangelo, Titian and Caravaggio. The galleries also contain one of the most famous paintings in the world -- Botticelli's 'Birth of Venus.'

The afternoon is free to take in the atmosphere of this sophisticated city.

Overnight in Florence. Meal plan: Breakfast and dinner.

Day 23 *Florence - Ravenna: Town Tour*

From Tuscany we drive into the region of Emilia Romagna, an area of fertile plains surrounding the Po River.

We arrive in Ravenna, an incomparable treasure-store of Byzantine monuments. Ravenna was made capital of the Western Roman Empire in AD 402 as Rome was threatened by the unstoppable Barbarians. Later in the fifth century Ravenna also succumbed, but was recaptured in 540 by the Byzantines under the emperor Justinian. From the sixth to the eighth centuries Ravenna flourished as a great centre of Byzantine (Eastern Orthodox) culture and religion. Its influence came not from the rest of Italy but from Constantinople (today's Istanbul). Today the humble-looking churches of Ravenna house the most spectacular Byzantine mosaics outside Istanbul.

We also visit the spectacular mausoleum of Galla Placidia, a Roman princess who married a Barbarian chief. The walls, floor and ceiling of her tomb are completely covered in dazzling decoration. The Mausoleum of Theodoric, built in AD 520 to house the mortal remains of an enlightened ostrogothic ruler, has a dome cut from a single block of stone weighing almost 336 tonnes (300 tons)! Later we visit the Basilica of Sant Appollinare in Classe with its stunning mosaics. Today we will also have a walking tour of the charming streets of Medieval Ravenna.

Overnight in Ravenna. Meal plan: Breakfast and dinner.

Day 24 *Ravenna - Verona - Padova (Padua)*

Today we drive from Ravenna to Verona via the Colli Eugani region, known in English as the Eugenian Hills. This glorious area is well-known for its thermal springs and terrific wines.

The area is also known for balsamic vinegar, and today we'll visit an acetaia where balsamic vinegar is produced. We will see the machinery, cellar, the barrels, indeed the whole process and all the products that result.

Onto Verona, the setting for Shakespeare's 'Romeo and Juliet'. With its pink marble Roman structures and rose-painted buildings, Verona is one of Italy's most appealing towns. The town contains many Roman ruins including the first century Arena which is now used as Verona's opera house, the third largest such structure in existence. The Teatro Romano is often used for the performance of plays, particularly those of William Shakespeare.

During our time in Verona we'll have a walking tour starting with the Piazza Bra, the centre of Veronese life. We'll wander the rosy-hued streets admiring the palaces, townhouses and churches. We see the Gothic mausoleum of the Scaligeri rulers of the 13th and 14th centuries. We also visit the family's fortified residence on the River Adige and a bridge named after them.

We continue to Padova.

Overnight in Padova. Meal plan: Breakfast and dinner.

Day 25 *Padova: Town Tour - Venice*

We begin our walking tour of Padova with a visit to the towering Basilica of Saint Anthony, patron saint of lost things. With its minaret-like towers and byzantine cupolas, the structure is a blend of eastern and western elements and a focal point for a constant flow of pilgrims. When we step inside its precincts, we leave Italy and enter the Vatican State. This is the only Vatican property (apart from Vatican City) in Italy that is extra-territorial. We continue on to the small Scrovegni Chapel, situated near the town centre. Here we view exquisite frescoes by Giotto, who led the way to the Renaissance by piercing the wall of two dimension and introducing perspective and humanism into painting in the fourteenth century. We also visit a unique structure -- Europe's oldest permanent anatomy theatre, built in 1594, with viewing balconies so narrow that when students fainted they would be prevented from falling. After a short walk from the university we come to the Piazza Bo, the scene of one of the liveliest daily markets in Italy.

We then travel the rest of the distance to Venice by road. After a brief orientation by your Tour Leader, you will have free time this afternoon for independent exploration. This evening you may choose to visit the casino, take a gondola ride, or perhaps spend an evening at the theatre.

Overnight in Venice. Meal plan: Breakfast and dinner.

Day 26 *Venice: City Tour*

On our guided walking tour this morning we concentrate on St Mark's Square, surrounded with elegant, historic buildings. Napoleon called Piazza San Marco, "the drawing room of Europe". We start with a tour of the Doge's Palace. This former seat of Venetian power has the second largest wooden room in Europe. Of interest as we walk through the council rooms, is Tintoretto's Paradise over the Grand Council Chamber -- alleged to be the largest oil painting in the world. The palace is connected to the old prison by the 'Bridge of Sighs.' In the late 16th century the decision was made to build new airier prison cells to replace the original dark dungeons. It was from this new prison that Casanova made his daring escape across the rooftops in 1755.

The highlight of the square is St Mark's Basilica, a Byzantine masterpiece. This cathedral was begun in 830 to house the tomb of St Mark whose relics were stolen from Alexandria in Egypt. The inside walls are encrusted with precious art, rare marbles and magnificent mosaics. Behind the altar is the famous gold altarpiece, 'Palla d'Oro,' which is one of the finest examples of gold craftsmanship. (We do not include a tour of the interior of the basilica as lengthy queues usually make this impractical for our programme. We encourage you to visit the site during your free time this afternoon.)

Later we take the vaporetto, or public water bus, on the Grand Canal and then walk along the maze of canals, sidewalks and bridges that are uniquely Venice. At the Rialto Bridge we visit the market area. The name Rialto derives from 'high bank' because this area was one of the highest points on the islands that make up the core of Venice and was thus considered a safe gathering point. The market here is vibrant with locals buying fruit and vegetables brought in from the mainland, and a vast array of fish caught fresh in the Adriatic.

Balance of the day at leisure.

Overnight in Venice. Meal plan: Breakfast and dinner.

Day 27 *Departure*

Departure from Venice.

BUON VIAGGIO! Meal plan: Breakfast.