TOUR CODE

TM2

ADVENTURESABROAD

TUNISIA, MALTA & ITALY

Tunisia, Malta, Sicily & Southern Italy

26 days

Updated 06/01/2013

Day 1 ***Arrive in Tunis***

Arrival in Tunis.

Tunis, the capital of the country, is a bustling metropolis and the home of one-sixth of the country's population. Situated in the Gulf of Tunis on the Mediterranean Sea, the modern city extends along the coastal plains and to the surrounding hills. It is a city of many contrasts, with its modern office buildings, shopping malls and European cafes, the colonial French style of the Ville Nouvelle, and the dynamic Arab souks of Tunis' old Medina.

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

Day 2 ***Tunis: Medina, Carthage & the Bardo Museum***

We begin the day with a walk through the old medina of Tunis, its narrow lanes crowded with markets, mosques, tombs and palaces. This was Tunis until the arrival of the French in the late 19th century, who subsequently built their quarters -- the Ville Nouvelle -- outside of the eastern gate, Bab el Bahr (the Sea Gate), which stands today in the middle of Place de la Victoire. On our walk, we pass through the various bustling souks of spices, carpets, clothing, gold, and the Souk des Chechias, the area of workshops where the traditional red hats of the Tunisians are still made by hand. En route we will see the Great Mosque of Tunis Jemaa Zitouna and the elegant Place du Gouvernement with its historic buildings, now all converted into government offices.

We emerge from the medina here to meet our bus and drive to the Bardo Museum. A former 17th century palace, the Bardo museum houses the largest and finest of ancient mosaics in the world. The mosaics were discovered in the wealthiest of Roman villas from various ancient sites across Tunisia. Rich Roman patrons commissioned such a vast array of subjects and themes, from scenes of gods & goddesses, to scenes of daily life (harvesting, fishing, hunting), zodiacs, seasons, to amphitheater games. From their exquisite details, we can understand how the North African school of mosaicists was the finest in the world, and whose masterpieces were exported all over the Roman Mediterranean. Besides these, there are also sculptural galleries, exhibits of Punic, Christian and Islamic artifacts, and a gallery dedicated to the 1st century BC shipwreck found off the coast of Mahdia in 1907, with its magnificent collection of bronzes.

We will begin with a visit to the ancient Carthaginian cemetery -- the Tophet, or sanctuary to Baal & Tanit. Roman propaganda, hostile to their enemy, stated that the Carthaginians ritually sacrificed their children here to the gods, though modern archaeological studies have found little evidence to support this. Our next stop is the Punic ports, once the foundation of Carthage's prosperity. Here we see the remains of what was once an sophisticated naval harbour, complete with ship sheds for dry-docking their warships, and a elaborate merchant harbor, for their fleets of cargo ships which engaged in trade throughout the Mediterranean.

From here we visit Byrsa hill -- the ancient acropolis and the first area to be settled by the Phoenicians. Crowning the hill is the 19th century Cathedral of St. Louis and the Carthage museum with finds excavated from the city. Our final stop is the Antonine Baths -- the monumental public baths of the city. In the 2nd century AD, these were the largest

baths in North Africa and the 3rd largest in the Roman world.

Overnight in Tunis. Meal plan: Breakfast and dinner.

Day 3 *Tunis - Dougga - Bulla Regia - Tabarka*

We leave Tunis early this morning and head south towards Dougga. Our first stop is the charming village of Testour, founded by refugees from Andalusia in the 17th century, who brought their sophisticated culture with them -- everything from agricultural techniques and products, to decorative tilework, fine architecture, music and poetry. The inhabitants of Testour even today remain proud of their Andalusian heritage, visible in their hospitality, dress, craftsmanship and music. We will see the Great Mosque with its tiled octagonal minaret -- the only one in Tunisia with a clock -- which recalls the church bell towers of Aragon & Castile.

We follow the Medjerda River valley to Dougga, the best preserved Roman city in Tunisia and a UNESCO World Heritage Site. The monumental Capitolium temple stands in the city's Forum, with a breathtaking view over the green rolling hills and plains below. The theaters, gymnasia, baths, shops, stone paved streets and lavish villas are all testimony to the golden age this North African city enjoyed during the Roman era.

After lunch we visit the Bulla Regia. This ancient site is famous for its unique subterranean villas, which belonged to the wealthiest of its inhabitants; we descend to see these luxurious villas and their splendid floor mosaics, still in situ.

Our drive to Tabarka takes us through the scenic Khroumirie Mountains, with the road climbing 900m (3,000 feet) through the cork and oak forests. We reach the charming alpine town of Ain Draham before descending to sea level to reach our destination, Tabarka.

Today, Tabarka is a charming Mediterranean resort, with an expansive beach and picturesque harbour. In antiquity, Tabarka was the port from which exotic African animals were shipped to various parts of the Roman Empire to supply the amphitheater games and triumphal processions. Also shipped from here was the precious Numidian Marble from the inland Chemtou quarries, coveted for its unusual golden and pink hues; this exotic marble can be seen in prestigious ancient monuments in Algeria, Italy, Greece, Turkey and the Levant. Since medieval times, red coral, African commodities and slaves were traded from here. We make a brief stop to see the Genoese fortress, and the strange sandstone formations on the port, locally known as "Les Aiguilles" (The Needles), with their spectacular hues of red, orange and yellow.

Overnight in Tabarka. Meal plan: Breakfast and dinner.

Day 4 *Tabarka - Kairouan*

This morning we head east towards Kairouan, travelling through the fertile valleys and rolling hills of the North. Since antiquity to the present, Tunisia is still referred to by other Maghreb countries by the epithet, "Tunisia the Green." This area is a favorite haven for storks, who build their nest on top of telephone towers, minarets and rooftops. We head toward into the Sahel, the transitional barren region between the fertile north and the Sahara desert to the south.

The Holy City of Kairouan is not only the spiritual center of Tunisia, it is the first Islamic city to be established in North Africa, and the 4th oldest Muslim city outside of Arabia. Founded as the capital of the region in 670 AD by the Arab general Oqba ibn Nafi, Kairouan soon acquired magnificent ramparts, mosques, palaces and hammams. Our first stop is the Aghlabid basins, enormous artificial reservoirs constructed in the 9th century to store water for Kairouan, as part of a monumental system in which water was brought by aqueducts to the city from 36km away.

Later this afternoon we will have a walking tour of old medina of Kairouan -- the entire medina is protected by UNESCO. Meandering through the lanes, we will stop to admire the beautiful traditional doors and architectural styles, the main monuments, markets, pastry shops and traditional workshops where weavers (men) still create textiles on hand looms.

Overnight in Kairouan. Meal plan: Breakfast and dinner.

Day 5 *Kairouan - Sbeitla - Tozeur*

We start the day with a visit to the Great Mosque of Kairouan, the oldest, largest and most important mosque in Tunisia. The lowest story of the towering minaret is thought to date to 730 AD, one century earlier than the structure of the present mosque. Inside we will see the colonnaded courtyard with its ancient wellheads and sundials, and the forest of columns of the prayer sanctuary. The hundreds of columns all differ from one another, in marble types, size, shape and capital designs, since most were taken from ancient Roman sites and reused in the mosque's construction.

Our final stop before leaving Kairouan is the Mausoleum of Sidi Sahab, also known as the Mosque of the Barber. The name Sahab means that he was one of the original Companions of the Prophet, and thus today, his tomb is one of the most important pilgrimage sites in all of the Maghreb. We stop to admire its beautifully decorated interior, with its ornate stucco, tile and woodwork.

We continue to the spectacular Roman city of Sufeitula -- modern Sbeitla. The Roman civic center is incredibly photogenic, due to the excellent state of preservation its 3 monumental temples dedicated to Juno, Jupiter and Minerva towering over the Forum. Sbeitla, like other North African cities, prospered in the 2nd and 3rd centuries AD under the Pax Romana. Upon entering the site, we will see olive press -- one of many in the city, since the inhabitants here became extremely wealthy from the trade of olives and olive oil. After visiting the forum and its temples, we will walk through Sbeitla's stone paved streets to see the public baths, the theater, and numerous Christian basilicas with their elaborate baptisteries covered in colourful mosaics.

After lunch, we head to the south of the country, via Gafsa, the capital of the region and where the earliest remains have been found of the sophisticated. Capsian culture, prehistoric ancestors of the modern day Berbers, dating to over 10,000 years ago when this area was a savannah. We arrive late afternoon to the fascinating oasis town of Tozeur. Since medieval times, it was the administrative and economic center of the region due to its oasis, strategic location between the Sahara and the north and west of the great lakes, and as an important trading center on the ancient caravan routes. Merchants from North and West Africa gathered in this thriving market center to trade goods such as wool, dates, gold, ivory and slaves. Some of the finest dates in the world are grown in the region, the deglat nour ("finger of light") and exported to the rest of the world. Medieval accounts note that over 1,000 camels left here per day, laden with dates alone!

We will take a brief walking tour through the old center to admire some of its 14th century architecture and their distinctive style of brickwork. The only place outside of Tozeur and Nefta where this ornamental use of bricks can be seen is in Iran, where it may have originated in the 8th century and was brought here by Arab invaders. You will have some free time to explore this fascinating town before we head to our hotel.

Overnight in Tozeur. Meal plan: Breakfast and dinner.

Day 6 *Tozeur - Degache - Douz - Matmata - Djerba*

We begin our day with a short drive to the nearby oasis of Degache. We will take a horse drawn carriage (caleche) into the oasis where we will learn about oasis farming and the date harvest. One of the oldest in the country, the Degache is

still a fully functioning oasis, where the 3 tiered system of agriculture can still be seen: Date Palms shelter a second tier of fruit trees, which in turn shelter vegetable and herb gardens, in order to make the most efficient use of these patches of fertile land in the middle of the desert. Here in the oasis we will see a staggering array of agricultural products: from date palms to citrus, apricot, banana and pomegranate trees, and beneath, vegetables, alfalfa, herbs and henna.

Our journey continues eastwards across Chott El Jerid, Tunisia's largest salt lake, extending over 5,000km2. The chott lies 30m below sea level, and is a remnant from over 1.5 million years ago when the area was flooded by the sea. Water on the surface of the salt floor reflects strange hues of pink and yellow, and the refraction of light on this depression often creates mirages.

Our next stop is Douz, the "Gateway of the Sahara", another ancient oasis town surround by vast expanses of sand dunes. Here you will have the opportunity to participate in optional adventure excursions (payable locally). You may choose to ride a camel or horse carriage or drive a dune buggy out to the sand dunes. Or, you may choose to take an "ultralight" airplane over the dunes and the palmeries of Douz. Your Tour Leader can provide you with detailed information regarding the various excursions, and assist with booking upon your arrival.

Leaving the Sahara behind, we embark on a scenic drive through the mountains to Matmata, where the inhabitants live in rock-hewn dwellings ("troglodytes" homes), some of which are over 400 years old. We will visit the pit dwelling of a local family who will happily show us around. We will also stop to see the cave home which appeared in the first Star Wars film (1977) and was later converted into Hotel Sidi Driss.

The final leg of our journey takes us to the legendary Island of Djerba, where we will spend the first of two nights.

Overnight in Djerba. Meal plan: Breakfast and dinner.

Day 7 *Djerba Touring*

We will spend the morning exploring the sites of this splendid island. Originally settled by the Phoenicians, the isle of Djerba is the mythical place where Odysseus encountered the Lotus Eaters during his journey back home from Troy. Phoenicians, Greeks, Romans, Vandals, Normans, Arabs, Spaniards, and Ottoman Turks -- all have come to Djerba and left their footprint. Historically Djerba has been known for its sponge fishing and agriculture -- here we can find olive trees which are over 1000 years old. The island today is one of Tunisia's most famous resorts, with its small villages, charming towns, and 125km of sandy beaches. Today's inhabitants have a society and culture distinct from Tunisians of the mainland. Here we find a mix of Arabs, Berbers, Andalusians and Jews, all who differ in their cultural traditions, names, dialect and style of dress.

Our first visit is the excellent ethnographic Museum of Patrimonie, which celebrates the island's peoples and traditions. Here we will see displays of marriage festivals and traditional wedding dresses from various parts of the country, traditional costumes of the island, circumcision ceremonies, household and agricultural implements, and displays of typical arts of weaving, calligraphy, jewelry and metalwork. We proceed to the center of Guellala, the pottery producing center of the island where we stop to see the kilns and workshops. Next is El Ghriba ("The Miracle") synagogue: one of the oldest synagogues and most important Jewish pilgrimage sites in the world. Djerba is home to one of the world's most ancient Jewish communities: tradition states that they arrived here after the First Destruction of the Temple by Nebuchadnezzar in 566 BC. This holy synagogue is fascinating for its historic and spiritual importance, as well as for its distinctive style of architecture (a marvelous blend of Jewish, Tunisian, Maghrebian and Sephardic elements). We proceed to the main town Houmt Souq, where first we shall stop to see the medieval fort, Borj el Kebir; this picturesque fort was the scene of a bloody conflict in 1560 between the forces of Dragut, the Barbary corsair, and Philip II of Spain. Dragut massacred the entire Spanish Armada and all of Philip's men who had retreated inside the fortress. The small white obelisk in front of the castle marks the place where the famous "Pyramid of Skulls" stood for over 300 years, erected by Dragut as a warning to potential invaders. In town, we will explore the fruit and vegetable markets, watch the action at the daily fish auctions, and wander the narrow lanes and souqs. You will have free time to explore more of this

charming town, perhaps do some shopping and have lunch at one of the many restaurants in the center.

The rest of the afternoon is at leisure. You may wish to stay in Houmt Souq, go to the beach, or relax by the hotel swimming pool (weather and season permitting, of course).

Overnight in Djerba. Meal plan: Breakfast and dinner.

Day 8 *Gabes - El Djem - Monastir - Sousse*

Early morning departure to catch the ferry to the mainland. Our drive takes us through one of the main olive growing regions of the country. Tunisia has over 65 million olive trees (6 for each inhabitant!) and is currently the 4th largest exporter of olive oil in the world. We follow the coast past the cities of Gabes and Sfax, before heading inland to El Djem (ancient Thysdrus). Our first visit is the excellent Archaeological Museum, with its splendid collection of floor mosaics from the villas of the wealthiest inhabitants of El Djem. Just behind the museum is the House of Africa, an opulent villa covering over 3000 sq m which was found in the center of town, dismantled and moved here in its entirety. The villa is named after one of its excellent fine floor mosaics depicting the Goddess of Africa (the only mosaic of its kind in the world).

The sudden appearance of the massive Roman Amphitheatre is an extraordinary sight. With a capacity of 30,000 spectators, it rises 3 stories above the surrounding plains -- though smaller than the Colosseum in Rome, it is in many ways more impressive due to its excellent state of preservation. It was built during the reigns of the (usurper) Emperors Gordion I and his son, Gordian II, both of whom reigned for only a few weeks before being defeated by the legions sent from Rome. Wild beast fights, gladiatorial combats, circuses and games were held here. We climb up to the upper tiers for excellent views of the arena and surrounding countryside, before descending to the basement to see the chambers where scenery, gladiators, prisoners and wild animals were kept. Wild animals were hoisted by a sophisticated (if not theatrical) system of elevators and pulleys into the arena to the delight of the spectators.

After lunch, our journey takes us to the beautiful coastal city of Monastir, the birth place of Tunisia's first president, Habib Bourguiba. Here we will see the Mausoleum where he and his family members are buried. We will also see the Ribat (fortress) of Monastir, which served as a watchtower, defensive fort, and sanctuary of prayer and study for Aghlabid holy warriors in the 9th century. It was just one of a chain of ribats/watchtowers built along the North African coast to defend against marauding Christians (others surviving examples are found in Sousse and Djerba). The ribat of Monastir has also been used as a set of many films, including Monty Python's Life of Brian. You may wish to climb the spiral staircase in the tower for excellent views over Monastir and the Mediterranean Sea.

A short drive leads us to our destination, the beautiful resort city of Sousse. After checking into our hotel, we will go for dinner to a local restaurant in the marina of Sousse, Port El Kantaoui.

Overnight in Sousse. Meal plan: Breakfast and dinner.

Day 9 *Sousse - Hammamet - Sidi Bou Said - Tunis*

This morning we visit old Sousse, where you will have some free time to explore the medina, perhaps enter the ribat here, or do some last minute shopping. We take the highway up the coast towards Hammamet -- Hammamet was a sleepy fishing town until the 1920's, when millionaire shipping magnate, George Sebastien, first built a luxurious villa here; it was subsequently visited by artists, writers and celebrities. Today it is a bustling seaside resort. We walk through the tiny walled medina to see its charming whitewashed houses, the 15th century mosque, and the medieval fortress overlooking the sea.

After lunch we head inland towards Tunis, stopping en route to see the surviving stretches of the Roman aqueduct which once supplied water to ancient Carthage over a distance of 132 km!

The final leg of our journey takes us Sidi Bou Said, the charming hilltop village, famous for its beautifully decorated blue and white architecture. Visited by the likes of Cervantes, Simone de Beaauvouir and Jean Foucault, Sidi Bou Said made an indelible impression on the works of Paul Klee, August Macke and Louis Moilliet who stayed here together in 1914. You will have some free time to explore this beautiful village overlooking the Mediterranean Sea, before we meet for sunset and our final farewell dinner.

Overnight in Tunis. Meal plan: Breakfast and dinner.

Day 10 *Tunis, Tunisia - Valetta, Malta*

Today we fly from Tunis to Malta.

Overnight in Sliema. Meal plan: Breakfast and dinner.

Day 11 *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 12 *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 13 *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 14 *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 15 *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 16 *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 17 *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 18 *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 19 *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 20 *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 21 *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 22 *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 23 *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 24 *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 25 *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 26 *Departure*

Departure from Rome.

VIAGGIO BUONO! Meal plan: Breakfast.