

## SOUTH & NORTH ITALY

### Sicily, Southern Mainland, Rome & Tuscany

20 days

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#### Day 1 Arrive in Palermo

Welcome to Sicily, where ancient civilizations have layered their stories across sun-baked stones for nearly three millennia. As you transfer to our hotel in Palermo, you'll enter a city that has witnessed Phoenicians, Arabs, Normans, and countless others shape its character. The capital's streets tell tales through their architecture—a living museum where Byzantine domes nestle beside Norman towers, and Arab-influenced markets spill their colours beneath Spanish baroque facades. Tonight we gather with fellow travellers for our first evening meal, beginning a journey through Italy's most storied landscapes.

Overnight in Palermo.

Included Meal(s): Dinner, if required.

#### Day 2 Palermo: City Tour

We plunge into the sensory symphony of Il Capo market, where fishmongers display magnificent sword fish alongside glistening octopus, and Sicily's agricultural bounty creates a painter's palette of colours. Mount Etna's volcanic soil produces crisp apples, while Arab-introduced citrus trees offer their golden treasures. We sample fresh ricotta and pungent pecorino cheese, understanding how this island's fertility has sustained civilizations for centuries.

We then move to Piazza Praetoria, where the "fountain of shame" shocked 16th-century locals with its renaissance nudes—a testament to Sicily's complex relationship with outside influences. The baroque Quattro Canti divides the old city into four quarters, each corner representing a season and a Spanish monarch. At the Martorana Church, we witness the extraordinary fusion of Arab-Norman architecture, its interior ablaze with Byzantine mosaics that shimmer like captured starlight.

Our journey concludes at Monreale, the "Royal Mountain," where Norman King William II constructed a cathedral to demonstrate his kingdom's sophistication. We finish at the remarkable Church and Monastery of Santa Caterina d'Alessandria, where Dominican nuns once perfected the art of sweet-making in these very cloisters. The convent's rooftop terraces provide sweeping views across Palermo's piazzas, while the onsite bakery I Segreti del Chiostro continues centuries-old traditions.

As this is a large site, we end today's formal tour here so you can choose to linger and explore on your own before gathering for dinner this evening.

Overnight in Palermo.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

#### Day 3 Palermo - Segesta - Selinunte - Agrigento

We journey across Sicily's ancient Greek heartland, where colonies once rivalled Athens in wealth and ambition. Sicily was part of Magna Graecia—when mainland Greece grew overcrowded in the 8th century BC, bold settlers sailed west seeking new fortunes. To them, Sicily represented what the Americas would mean to 16th-century Europeans: vast possibilities, untold riches, and considerable dangers.

Our first stop is Segesta, where a perfectly preserved Doric temple stands as testimony to Greek architectural mastery. This powerful city-state waged bitter wars with its rival Selinunte, our next destination. After a break for lunch, we explore Selinunte's magnificent ruins, once home to over 100,000 inhabitants and boasting an unrivalled temple-building program. Lost to history until a Dominican monk rediscovered its location in the 16th century, these temples rank among the ancient world's most impressive monuments.

We continue to Agrigento, where tomorrow we'll witness Sicily's most spectacular Greek legacy.

Overnight in Agrigento

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Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

#### **Day 4 Agrigento: Site Tour - Piazza Armerina - Enna**

We begin among Agrigento's magnificent temples, where five elevated structures create a picture-perfect tribute to ancient paganism's enduring power. Time, earthquakes, Punic Wars, and Christianity's rise have all tested these World Heritage landmarks, yet they remain defiant against Sicily's azure sky.

Next, we travel inland to explore Villa Romana del Casale near Piazza Armerina, a vast 4th-century complex that may have belonged to co-emperor Maximianus. This archaeological treasure houses some of the world's most beautiful Roman mosaics, including detailed hunting scenes, mythological images, and the delightful "bikini girls" performing ancient aerobics—proof that athletic fashion has ancient roots.

We then proceed to Enna, perched high in Sicily's interior. You'll have free time to explore this mountain town, perhaps visiting the Castello di Lombardia or Torre di Federico II for stunning panoramic views; your Tour Leader will point you in the right direction.

Overnight in Enna

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

#### **Day 5 Enna - Siracusa: Archaeological Park**

We travel toward Sicily's eastern coast, coming within sight of Mount Etna's imposing slopes. At 3313m (10,866 feet), Etna stands as one of Earth's most active volcanoes—both blessing and curse for local inhabitants. While volcanic soil creates extraordinary fertility, the constant threat of eruption looms; Catania was nearly buried by lava flows in 1669.

We arrive in Siracusa (Syracuse) and tour the Archaeological Park, including the Greek theatre where ancient dramas once echoed, the Monumental Altar of Hieron II, and the Latomia del Paradiso quarry with its famous "Ear of Dionysius." After a break for lunch, we explore Ortygia, old Siracusa's historic heart, wandering narrow streets where we discover the Temple of Apollo, Fountain of Aretusa, the main piazza, and the remarkable Duomo—a former Temple of Athena transformed into a Christian cathedral.

Overnight in Siracusa.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

#### **Day 6 Siracusa - Mount Etna - Taormina**

We depart Siracusa and drive up the east coast toward Taormina, with stunning views of Mount Etna dominating our horizon. We'll make a detour and drive up Etna's slopes—have a sweater handy as we'll be approaching 1,800m (6,000 ft)! (Depending on weather, we may explore Mount Etna tomorrow instead.) This is Europe's highest volcano and one of the world's most active; its spectacular eruptions and fiery lava flows have fascinated scientists and visitors for millennia.

We continue to Taormina, arguably Sicily's most beautiful town—an ancient hilltop settlement full of history and culture, perfectly positioned between mountains and sea. Taormina's reputation for welcoming travellers spans centuries, combining incredible heritage in archaeology and architecture with genuine Sicilian hospitality.

Overnight in Taormina.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

#### **Day 7 Taormina: City Touring**

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We begin with a leisurely walking tour starting at the almost perfectly-preserved Greco-Roman amphitheatre, Taormina's greatest treasure. This 3rd-century cliff-side arena once seated 5,000 spectators, with Mount Etna framed perfectly as a backdrop to the 1,800-year-old stage—a setting that continues to inspire artists and performers today.

We explore the Palazzo Corvaia with its fascinating blend of Arab, Norman, and Catalan elements, where Sicily's first parliament convened in 1410. The charming Corso Umberto I pedestrian street runs the town's length, lined with shops and boutiques leading to Piazza IX Aprile, where lovely views stretch across Naxos harbour to the Italian mainland. Above us rises the medieval fortress, while in Piazza del Duomo, Taormina's 15th-century basilica stands beside a fountain topped by the town's symbol: a female centaur statue.

The afternoon is yours for independent exploration of this enchanting town.

Overnight in Taormina

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

### Day 8 Taormina, Sicily - Paestum, Italian Mainland

We take a short ferry ride from Sicily to the Italian mainland and proceed by motor coach to Paestum, where three Doric Greek temples rank among the world's best preserved, rivalling those of Sicily and Athens. Originally built without mortar or cement—simply covered by terra-cotta tile roofs supported by wooden beams—these temples survived even the great earthquake of AD 69 that reduced Pompeii to rubble.

After periods of native Italian control in the 5th and 4th centuries BC, Paestum fell to Rome in 273 BC and was renamed. It remained a Roman town until deforestation of nearby hills turned the area into swampy marshland. Plagued by malaria and pirates, Paestum's ruins lay relatively untouched until rediscovered in the 18th century.

Overnight in Paestum

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

### Day 9 Paestum - National Archaeological Museum - Pompeii

We travel to Naples where we see the colourful harbour front and Castel dell'Ovo, a 12th-century fortress built on ancient villa ruins, before visiting the National Archaeological Museum. This impressive facility houses one of the world's most comprehensive collections of Greek and Roman antiquities. Built on Santa Teresa Hill as military barracks, later transformed into a university campus, it was remodelled in 1790 to receive the treasures of Pompeii and Herculaneum.

We then visit ancient Pompeii, dug out from volcanic ash and pumice stone deposited by Mount Vesuvius's eruption in AD 79. This entire area provides a fantastic record of how ordinary Romans lived their daily lives. We explore the House of Vetti, the most elegant of Pompeii's villas, and examine the intriguing House of Mysteries. The nearby House of Faun occupies an entire city block with four different dining parlours and two spacious gardens.

Overnight in Pompeii

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

### Day 10 Pompeii: Herculaneum & the Amalfi Coast

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

We then 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.

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After a break for lunch and some free time in Amalfi, we take the ferry to the port of Salerno where our bus will be waiting. This is a great way to truly experience the spectacular coastline with this relaxing journey (calm weather-permitting!).

On arrival in Salerno we'll rejoin our bus and return to our Pompeii hotel.

Overnight in Pompeii.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

### Day 11 Pompeii - 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.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

### Day 12 Rome: City Tour

We begin at the Colosseum, where 55,000 spectators once roared as gladiators fought for survival above a labyrinthine underground of trapdoors and animal pens. Still dominating the cityscape nearly 2,000 years on, it unsettles as much as it impresses — because it was designed to. We then walk through the Roman Forum, heart of ancient civic life, where the Curia housed the Senate and the Arch of Titus commemorated the sacking of Jerusalem in AD 70. Among weathered columns and temple foundations, we stand at the physical centre of an empire that shaped Western civilisation.

Ascending to Capitoline Hill, we reach the Campidoglio — Rome's original citadel, redesigned by Michelangelo in the 16th century with the kind of harmonious geometry that would have pleased the ancients he admired. It is a fitting place to consider what separates Rome from other great cities: here, the ancient and the Renaissance don't merely coexist — each made the other possible.

We continue to Piazza Navona for lunch, surrounded by Baroque splendour. Bernini's Fountain of the Four Rivers — the Nile, Ganges, Danube, and Plate — asserted papal authority across continents as much as it delighted the eye. From here we walk to the Trevi Fountain, fed by an aqueduct built in 19 BC and still flowing, then proceed to the Pantheon. Its unreinforced concrete dome — wider than St. Peter's — was the largest in the world for thirteen centuries and remains a quiet provocation to everything built since.

NOTE: Due to traffic constraints and the proximity of today's sites, we travel primarily on foot and by Rome's efficient public transit system (tickets included). Any sightseeing not completed today continues tomorrow afternoon.

Overnight in Rome.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

### Day 13 Rome: the Vatican Museums & St. Peter's

We travel by metro across the Tiber River to Vatican City, the world's smallest sovereign state. Our guided tour begins in the vast Vatican Museums, where corridors seem to stretch infinitely, lined with humanity's greatest artistic achievements. Here we discover Greek and Roman sculptures that influenced Renaissance masters, Flemish tapestries depicting biblical narratives, and glittering mosaics assembled tile by precious tile. More than three million visitors journey here annually to witness this extraordinary collection.

The museums' crowning glory awaits in the Sistine Chapel, where Michelangelo's frescoes transform ceiling and walls into a theological masterpiece. Created between 1508 and 1512, these paintings revolutionised art history—their anatomical precision and emotional depth remain unsurpassed. We then enter St. Peter's Basilica, Christendom's largest church, its cavernous interior housing treasures including Michelangelo's tender Pietà, carved when he was just 24 years old. Outside, the elegantly symmetrical Piazza San Pietro embraces visitors in Bernini's colonnade arms.

After a break for lunch, we continue with any sightseeing carried over from yesterday.

NOTE: The timing and order of today's sightseeing may vary depending on seasonality. During lighter periods, we often begin in the morning; busier times may require an afternoon or evening visit to avoid crowds. We may include lunch instead of dinner today to optimise our schedule. Your Tour Leader will advise upon arrival.

Overnight in Rome.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

### Day 14 Rome - Assisi - Siena

We depart Rome for Tuscany, stopping first in Assisi — a hilltop town of pink limestone and cypress shadows that receives millions of pilgrims annually yet somehow retains the stillness its most famous son prescribed. Born here in 1182 to a prosperous cloth merchant, Francis renounced his inheritance as a young man and embraced radical poverty, founding the Order of Friars Minor in a gesture that reverberated through medieval Europe. What made his message so durable wasn't only its simplicity — it was that he lived it without compromise.

The Basilica of St. Francis is Umbria's supreme artistic monument, but it is also the beginning of a thread that will run through our entire journey. Giotto di Bondone decorated the Upper Basilica's nave with a celebrated cycle of frescoes depicting the life of Francis — and in doing so, changed Western painting. Where medieval artists rendered sacred figures as flat, symbolic, and remote, Giotto's figures have weight, gesture, and something recognisable as grief or joy. The revolution you will see completed in Padova's Scrovegni Chapel begins here, on these walls, in this quiet Umbrian hillside town.

The drive south to Siena passes the shores of Lake Trasimeno — serene today, but the site of one of Rome's most catastrophic defeats, where Hannibal's Carthaginian army ambushed and destroyed a Roman force of 30,000 in 217 BC. This medieval gem awaits our exploration tomorrow.

Overnight in Siena.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

### Day 15 Siena & San Gimignano

Siena reveals itself best on foot—indeed, its council pioneered Europe's first traffic ban in the city centre. Traditionally Florence's great rival, Siena chose a different path: whilst Florence embraced Renaissance innovation, Siena clung to medieval traditions. This preservation makes Siena the finest showcase of Italian Gothic architecture, its walled city sprawling across three hilltops, each connected by steep, winding streets that seem frozen in the 13th century.

Our guided walking tour explores Siena's atmospheric medieval quarters, beginning at the Palazzo Pubblico, Italy's finest example of Gothic civic architecture. Inside, Ambrogio Lorenzetti's remarkable frescoes in the Hall of the Nine depict good and bad government—medieval political philosophy rendered in vivid colour. We then visit the magnificent Duomo, its alternating black and white marble bands creating dramatic visual rhythm. Built from the 12th century in Romanesque and Gothic styles, this cathedral features a façade partially designed by Giovanni Pisano. Inside, the inlaid marble floor depicts biblical narratives, whilst a glass-enclosed reliquary contains an arm believed to have belonged to John the Baptist.

This afternoon we proceed to San Gimignano, nicknamed "Manhattan of Tuscany" for its remarkable skyline. Thirteen noble brick towers survive from the medieval era when 72 such structures proclaimed family wealth and power. Today the fortress-like severity softens in harmonious squares adorned with Renaissance frescoes. Our return journey winds through Chianti's vine-covered hills, where some of Italy's finest wines mature in ancient cellars.

Overnight in Siena.

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### Day 16 Siena - Volterra - Pisa - Lericci

We journey through quintessential Tuscan countryside—cypress-lined roads, rolling hills dotted with farmhouses—to Volterra, an Etruscan city perched on a high plateau commanding sweeping views. Ancient walls still encircle much of the town, testament to the mysterious Etruscans whose origins remain debated. Their civilisation flourished between modern Rome and Florence from the 8th to 6th centuries BC, reaching sophisticated heights before Rome's rising power gradually absorbed their culture, adopting Etruscan religious practices and engineering techniques.

We explore the city walls and Etruscan Gate, its basalt heads of Etruscan deities dating to the 6th century BC—faces that gazed upon a world Rome had yet to conquer. Nearby, Roman and Etruscan cisterns survive beneath a working bar — a characteristically Volterranean arrangement, ancient infrastructure repurposed without ceremony. Before departing, we view the remarkably preserved Roman amphitheatre from the 1st century BC, its original structure so intact that reconstruction proves relatively simple. During free time, you might visit the excellent Museo Guarnacci, housing 600 Etruscan funerary urns depicting their beliefs about death and the afterlife.

We then proceed to Pisa, concentrating on the town's architectural jewels in the Campo dei Miracoli—the Duomo, Baptistery, and the gravity-defying Leaning Tower. Begun in 1173, the tower started tilting during construction due to unstable subsoil; by completion, the lean exceeded 5 metres (17 feet). We allow ample time for photographs of this beloved landmark. Later we continue to Lericci, dramatically positioned on a beautiful bay where the Ligurian coast meets the Tyrrhenian Sea.

Before departing Pisa we visit the Camposanto — the monumental cemetery adjoining the Campo dei Miracoli, its cloistered walls lined with medieval frescoes and soil reputedly brought from Golgotha by Crusaders. It is one of the most atmospheric and least-visited spaces in a city that rarely lacks for visitors.

Overnight in Lericci.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

### Day 17 Lericci - Cinque Terre - Florence

This morning we travel by boat (weather permitting) along the stunning Ligurian coast to Riomaggiore, first of the Cinque Terre villages. This spectacular Italian Riviera section rivals the Amalfi Coast for dramatic beauty, where colourful houses cling to impossibly steep cliffs above azure waters. From Riomaggiore, we follow the easy half-hour Via dell'Amore—Lover's Walk—to Manarola, then continue approximately one hour to Corniglia.

Those preferring gentler exploration may ascend to Corniglia's centre for panoramic views and local atmosphere, or take the train to picturesque Vernazza. More ambitious walkers can tackle the challenging two-hour hike to Vernazza through terraced vineyards producing local Morasca, Chiaretto del Faro, and Sciaccheta wines. The rugged hillsides, cultivated for centuries, cascade toward the sea in remarkable agricultural engineering feats. We conclude by train at Monterosso Al Mare, named for the area's distinctive red colour, where a giant statue carved into cliffs overlooks an inviting beach.

PLEASE NOTE: Due to past flooding, trail availability may require adjustments to today's itinerary. Your Tour Leader will confirm which paths are open.

This evening we arrive in Florence, cradle of the Renaissance.

Overnight in Florence.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

### Day 18 Florence: Walking Tour

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Florence transformed the world during the Renaissance, and today we begin discovering why. Our guided tour starts at the Accademia, Europe's first drawing academy, now housing an extraordinary art collection. Here stands Michelangelo's David, arguably the world's most famous sculpture—17 feet of anatomical perfection carved from a single marble block. Completed in 1504 when Michelangelo was just 29, David represents the Renaissance ideal of human potential.

We then proceed to the Cathedral of Santa Maria del Fiore—the Duomo—crowned by Brunelleschi's magnificent red dome. Upon completion in 1436, this engineering marvel astonished Europe: its diameter exceeds St. Peter's in Rome, and the nave ranks as Christendom's third-largest. The cupola revolutionised architecture, proving that ancient Roman techniques could be rediscovered and surpassed. Because the exterior showcases the building's finest features, and because we'll tour more ornate church interiors elsewhere, we don't include the interior today. However, you're welcome to visit independently tomorrow afternoon when crowds typically diminish.

We continue along pedestrian streets to Ponte Vecchio, Florence's oldest bridge and the city's only one surviving World War II. Built in 1345, it once housed butchers' shops; today goldsmiths and jewellers occupy both sides, their workshops overhanging the Arno River. At Piazza Santa Croce, we admire the Franciscan church façade before entering to see tombs of Michelangelo and Galileo Galilei, alongside chapels adorned with Giotto frescoes that pioneered naturalistic painting. The remainder of the day is yours to absorb this sophisticated city's atmosphere.

Overnight in Florence.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

### Day 19 Florence: Uffizi Gallery

We visit the Uffizi Gallery, Giorgio Vasari's extraordinary Renaissance administrative buildings designed for Cosimo I de' Medici in the mid-16th century. Today these galleries house Italy's greatest art collection, representing humanity's creative pinnacle. We walk corridors lined with masterpieces by Botticelli, Leonardo da Vinci, Raphael, Michelangelo, Titian, and Caravaggio—each painting a landmark in artistic evolution.

The collection's jewel is Botticelli's Birth of Venus, painted around 1485. This mythological scene—the goddess emerging from the sea on a shell—revolutionised art by depicting the nude female form as beauty itself rather than shame. The painting epitomises Renaissance humanism, celebrating classical antiquity whilst creating something entirely new. After our guided tour, the afternoon is free to explore Florence independently, perhaps visiting artisan workshops, enjoying cafe culture in elegant piazzas, or simply wandering streets where the Renaissance was born.

Overnight in Florence.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

### Day 20 Departure

Departure from Florence.

BUON VIAGGIO!

Included Meal(s): Breakfast