

SOUTHERN ITALY

Sicily & Southern Italy

14 days

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Day 1 Arrive in Palermo

Today we arrive in Palermo and transfer to our hotel.

Palermo is the capital of both the autonomous region of Sicily and the Metropolitan City of Palermo. The city is noted for its history, culture, architecture and gastronomy, playing an important role throughout much of its existence; it is over 2,700 years old. To gain an initial understanding of the city's unique culture, start by wandering the streets of the old city. The mix of architectural styles points to the wave upon wave of invaders who have claimed the city as their own, as does the look of the locals.

Overnight in Palermo.

Included Meal(s): Dinner, if required.

Day 2 Palermo: City Tour

We begin our day with a walk through the narrow streets of the Il Capo 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.

We finish our day at the superlative Church and Monastery of Santa Caterina d'Alessandria, built as a hospice in the early 14th century and transformed into a Dominican convent the following century. This monastic complex wows with its magnificent maiolica cloister, surrounded by unique balconied cells and punctuated by an 18th-century fountain by Sicilian sculptor Ignazio Marabitti. The convent's rooftop terraces offer spectacular views of the surrounding piazzas and city, while the church's baroque interior harbours works by prolific artists. While the last nuns moved out in 2014, their tradition of baking lives on at the convent's onsite bakery I Segreti del Chiostro, which specialises in the traditional sweets made for centuries in Sicilian convents. 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

Today our route to Agrigento takes us first to 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, our next stop.

After a break for lunch, we visit the the ruins of Selinunte, some of the most impressive of the ancient Greek world and one of the most captivating sites in Sicily. Selinos (as it was known to the Greeks) was once one of the richest and most powerful cities in the world, with over

100,000 inhabitants and an unrivalled temple-building program. The city was forgotten until the middle of the 16th century, when a Dominican monk identified its location. Excavations began in 1823, courtesy of two English archaeologists.

We continue to Agrigento for dinner and overnight.

Overnight in Agrigento.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 4 Agrigento: Site Tour - Piazza Armerina - Enna

This morning we tour the magnificent series of temples of 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.

Then, leaving behind the ancient Greek world behind, we drive inland across the island where, near the town of Piazza Armerina, we explore the remarkable ruins of Villa Romana del Casale. 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!

We continue to Enna where you will have some free time to explore the town. See the Castello di Lombardia or Torre di Federico II for stunning 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

Today we drive toward 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 Siracusa (Syracuse) and tour of the Archaeological Park, including the Greek theatre, Monumental Altar of Hieron II, and the Latomia del Paradiso (quarry with the Ear of Dionysius). After a break for lunch we have a walking tour of Ortygia (old Siracusa), wandering the narrow streets of the old city where we see the Temple of Apollo, Fountain of Aretusa, the main piazza, and the Duomo, a former Temple of Athena.

Overnight in Siracusa.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 6 Siracusa - Mount Etna - Taormina

We depart Siracusa and drive up the east coast to Taormina, with stunning views of Mount Etna. We'll make a "detour" and drive up the side of Etna -- have a sweater handy as we'll be approaching 1800m / 6,000 ft! (depending on weather, we may explore Mount Etna tomorrow instead). This is the highest volcano in Europe and one of most active of the world; its spectacular eruptions and its fiery lava flows have always aroused the interest of scientists, along with the curiosity of visitors from all over the world.

We continue to Taormina, arguably the most beautiful town in Sicily, an old hilltop town full of history and culture and by the sea. Taormina is also famous for incredible heritage in history, archaeology and architecture, as well as for its reputation in welcoming travellers.

Overnight in Taormina.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 7 Taormina: City Touring

Today we'll 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 cliff-side arena seated 5,000 spectators, with Mount Etna framed perfectly as a backdrop to the 1,800 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.

The afternoon is yours for independent exploration.

Overnight in Taormina.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 8 Taormina, 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 marsh. Plagued by malaria and syphilitic pirates, Paestum's ruins lay relatively untouched until they were rediscovered in the 18th century.

Overnight in Paestum.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 9 Paestum - National Archaeological Museum - Pompeii

Today we travel to Naples where we see 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.

Our next stop is the ancient site of 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.

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.

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 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 gladiatorial 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. Its water was supplied by one of Rome's earliest aqueducts. 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.

* 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). Any sightseeing / touring not accomplished today will be moved to tomorrow afternoon.

Overnight in Rome.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

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

Today we travel by metro to the west side of the Tiber River and 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 Vatican tour we visit the elegantly symmetrical Piazza St. Pietro.

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

* NOTE: The timing/order 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/evening visit in order to avoid morning crowds; indeed, we may include lunch instead of dinner today in order to expedite the flow of our activities. Your Tour Leader will advise of any adjustments upon your arrival in Rome.

Overnight in Rome.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 14 Departure

Departure from Rome.

VIAGGIO BUONO!

Included Meal(s): Breakfast