

MALTA & ITALY**featuring Sicily, Southern & Northern Italy****29 days**

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Day 1 Arrive in Malta

Welcome to Malta!

Malta has a greater density of historic sights than any other country. Starting with its unique prehistoric temples, some of the oldest stone buildings in the world, it also has Roman catacombs, medieval towns, and the extraordinary architectural and artistic legacy of the Knights of St John (the Knights of Malta). The British left behind red letter boxes and phone booths, as well as the language, in spite of which Malta (independent since 1964) remains thoroughly Maltese. The country has thankfully shaken off the British culinary legacy and is home to some excellent restaurants specialising in Mediterranean food.

Overnight in Malta.

Included Meal(s): Dinner, if required.

Day 2 Valetta: City Tour & Dingli Cliffs

Today we explore Valletta—Europe's smallest capital at just 1000 by 600 metres—from a vessel showcasing why this location became the Mediterranean's greatest fortress. The city commands two natural harbours whose strategic value shaped 4,000 years of history. Our harbour cruise reveals the defensive genius that saved Christian Europe from Ottoman expansion. In 1565, Jean Parisot de la Valette led 600 Knights of St. John against 40,000 Ottoman invaders in the "Great Siege of Malta." Their miraculous victory prompted Felipe II of Spain to found a new capital worthy of these heroes—Valletta, built on Renaissance military engineering principles.

From Upper Barakka Gardens, we survey Grand Harbour's fortified peninsulas—Senglea and Vittoriosa—their bastions creating interlocking fields of fire that made Ottoman conquest impossible. The Grand Master's Palace, now housing Malta's presidency and parliament, preserves the Knights' aristocratic legacy. Walking through State Apartments where European diplomacy once unfolded, we examine 17th-century Gobelin tapestries depicting scenes from the Americas—reminders that Malta's Knights wielded continental influence. The Palace Armoury houses the world's finest medieval and Renaissance weaponry collection, with thousands of armor suits testifying to the military brotherhood that dominated Mediterranean warfare for three centuries.

"The Malta Experience," screened in the Knights' former hospital, provides us the perfect historical context through a 45-minute audiovisual presentation tracing Malta's story from prehistory to modern independence.

PLEASE NOTE: Malta's Hal Saflieni Hypogeum site and tour is a popular option should you choose to extend your stay outside of our tour. We do not include it in our program as the number of visitors per day is very limited and spaces tend to sell out before many/most of our travellers commit to our tour; as such, promising the visit in our itinerary is problematic. We suggest booking your own visit once our tour is 'guaranteed' to operate.

Most of our tours are accommodated in St Julian's, a smaller seaside district located just to the north of Valletta.

Overnight on Malta

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 3 Valletta & Prehistoric Malta

Our Valetta sightseeing continues to St. John's Co-Cathedral, transforming our understanding of Baroque religious art. Built in the 1570s by Maltese architect Gerolamo Cassar, this masterpiece served as the Knights' spiritual heart. The interior's symphony of gold leaf, marble, and masterful painting demonstrates how military monks expressed devotion through artistic magnificence. Over 300 Knights lie entombed beneath elaborate marble floor slabs, each a decorative masterwork depicting heraldry and achievements. The Cathedral Museum houses Caravaggio's largest painting—"The Beheading of St. John the Baptist"—the only work the master ever signed, created during his turbulent Malta period (1607-1608).

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The National Museum of Archaeology introduces Malta's prehistoric temple builders who created the world's oldest freestanding stone structures. These artifacts, dating to the 4th millennium BCE, represent civilizations flourishing 500-1,000 years before Egypt's first pyramids.

At Hagar Qim, spectacularly positioned on cliffs overlooking Fila islet, we encounter architecture challenging assumptions about prehistoric capabilities. Built between 3600-3200 BCE, these temples demonstrate sophisticated understanding of astronomy and monumental construction. Massive limestone blocks—some weighing over 20 tonnes—were quarried, transported, and positioned using technologies lost to history.

Nearby Mnajdra Temple complex reveals how prehistoric Maltese developed increasingly sophisticated architectural forms. Careful alignment with solstices and equinoxes suggests these weren't merely religious centres but astronomical observatories connecting earthly worship to celestial cycles.

In Marsaxlokk village, brightly painted luzzu boats preserve Mediterranean maritime traditions, their distinctive eye symbols connecting contemporary fishermen to Phoenician customs over 2,500 years old.

Overnight on Malta

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 4 Day Trip to Gozo

The brief ferry crossing to Gozo transports us to an island that feels like Malta's rural cousin. Gozo maintains a distinct cultural identity and dialect, with landscapes and traditions that modern Malta has largely abandoned. The prehistoric temples of Ggantija rank among humanity's oldest religious monuments, dating back to 3600-3200 BCE. Local folklore attributes their construction to giants, and the megaliths' sheer size is awe-inspiring. Victoria, Gozo's capital, clusters around the fortified citadel of Il-Kastell, which has been continuously fortified for over 4,000 years.

Within the citadel, the Cathedral of the Assumption showcases trompe-l'oeil ceiling paintings that create illusory domes. The Archaeological Museum reveals how successive civilizations adapted the same strategic location to serve their defensive needs. The Folklore Museum provides intimate insights into traditional Gozo life, illustrating how island communities maintained self-sufficiency through ingenious adaptation to limited resources.

At Dwejra, we witness geological forces at their most dramatic. Two enormous limestone caverns collapsed to create today's Inland Sea, a lagoon connected to the Mediterranean through a 100-metre tunnel. Local fishermen guide us through this natural wonder, past the Blue Hole and Fungus Rock, where Knights of St. John once harvested rare medicinal plants. The cynomorium coccineus growing on Fungus Rock was highly valued for its medicinal properties, reminding us how biological diversity creates economic value across cultures. Overnight on Malta.

Overnight on Malta

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 5 Mosta, Mdina & Rabat

This morning, we visit the Rotunda Church of Mosta, a remarkable architectural achievement that dominates the island's central plateau. Based on Rome's Pantheon, its dome ranks as Europe's third-largest unsupported span. The church's most famous story emerged during World War II, when a German bomb penetrated the dome but failed to explode during evening mass. The unexploded bomb remains displayed as testament to faith surviving warfare's brutal realities.

We then proceed to Mdina, Malta's ancient capital, which preserves the medieval Arab city within massive fortifications. As we walk through the narrow streets, we experience urban planning designed for shade, privacy, and defensive strength. The Cathedral of St. Paul occupies the site where tradition claims the Roman governor Publius welcomed the shipwrecked apostle.

From Mdina's bastions, we take in panoramic views of Malta's landscape, understanding why successive conquerors established strongholds here. Next, we visit the nearby Rabat, where the Domus Romana reveals how wealthy Romans lived beyond official Mdina. The excavated

villa's mosaic floors and columned courtyards demonstrate provincial luxury. Finally, we explore the Catacombs of St. Paul and St. Agatha, which preserve early Christian burial practices and feature characteristic agape tables.

Overnight on Malta.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 6 Valetta, Malta - Palermo, Sicily, Italy

Today we fly to Palermo.*

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.

* Due to air scheduling considerations, we may elect to fly the group to nearby Catania instead of Palermo and transfer to Palermo from there (+/- 2 hours). For our purposes, Catania often has more convenient departure/arrival times.

Overnight in Palermo.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 7 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 8 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

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 9 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 10 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 11 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 12 Taormina: City Touring

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 13 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 14 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 15 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 16 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 17 Rome: City Tour

We begin our guided tour at the 2,000-year-old Colosseum, built to seat 55,000 spectators for Rome's most brutal gladiatorial combats. We walk through the Roman Forum where we see the Curia, Rostra, Temple of Vesta, Basilica of Constantine, and Arch of Titus. Continuing upward, we reach the Campidoglio (Capitoline Hill), seat of the Roman Senate since the 12th century and the city's original citadel. This beautiful square was redesigned by Michelangelo in the 16th century.

We arrive at Piazza Navona where we can break for lunch at restaurants and cafes surrounding the square. Here we admire the impressive Fountain of the Four Rivers, with detailed figures representing the Nile, Ganges, Danube, and Plate rivers.

We continue to the famous Trevi Fountain, designed by Nicholas Salvi in 1732, its water supplied by one of Rome's earliest aqueducts. Throwing a coin ensures your safe return to Rome. We also visit the temple-turned-church Pantheon and admire its perfect proportions on our way to the Spanish Steps, where we finish today'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 not accomplished today will be moved to tomorrow afternoon.

Overnight in Rome

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 18 Rome: the Vatican Museums & St. Peter's

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 world's most important Greek and Roman sculptures, Renaissance paintings, Flemish tapestries, and mosaics. Understandably, this collection attracts more than 3 million visitors annually. We also visit Michelangelo's Sistine Chapel to absorb its breathtaking frescoes.

Entering the cavernous interior of St. Peter's Basilica, we appreciate its many treasures, including Michelangelo's Pietà. At the Vatican tour's conclusion, we visit the elegantly symmetrical Piazza St. Pietro.

After a break for lunch, we 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. Busier times often dictate an afternoon/evening visit to avoid morning crowds; indeed, we may include lunch instead of dinner today to expedite 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 19 Rome - Assisi - Siena

We drive from Rome to Siena, a region famous for its wines, stopping first at Assisi. Despite millions of tourists and pilgrims it attracts yearly, St. Francis's hometown remains a beautiful and tranquil refuge. Born here in 1182, Francis renounced his father's wealth in his late teens to pursue chastity and poverty, founding the Order of Minors (Franciscans after his death), which attracted huge European followings.

St. Francis's Basilica serves as the city's, and possibly Umbria's, primary attraction. After a guided tour of the basilica, we depart for Siena, arriving later in the afternoon.

Overnight in Siena

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 20 Siena & San Gimignano

Siena is best explored on foot—the city council was Europe's first to ban motor traffic from the city centre. Siena today seems frozen in time, traditionally Florence's rival as Tuscany's art and architecture centre. While Florence showcases Renaissance art and buildings, Siena transports us directly to the Middle Ages. Perhaps by preserving its original character more than any other Italian city, Siena perfectly showcases Italian Gothic style. This walled city occupies three hilltops and contains rich artistic heritage.

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

We visit the Duomo, this huge cathedral built in bands of black and white marble dating from the 12th century. Built in Romanesque and Italian Gothic styles, it features a dramatically painted façade—partly designed by Giovanni Pisano—and a soaring black and white bell tower. The inlaid marble floor depicts Biblical scenes, and the cathedral contains a glass-enclosed box with an arm tradition maintains belonged to John the Baptist and was used to baptise Christ.

This afternoon we drive to San Gimignano, called the "Manhattan of Tuscany." This medieval town preserves 13 noble brick towers, creating a skyscraper skyline. Today its fortress-like severity is softened by quiet, harmonious squares, with many palaces and churches enhanced by Renaissance frescoes.

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

Overnight in Siena

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Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 21 Siena - Volterra - Pisa - Lerici

We drive through beautiful and quintessential Tuscan rolling countryside to Volterra, situated like many Etruscan cities on a high plateau offering uninterrupted views over surrounding hills. In many places, the town's ancient Etruscan walls still stand. The exact origins of the Etruscans and their arrival in Italy remain unknown. Their civilisation centred between present-day Rome and Florence, experiencing its Golden Age from the eighth to sixth centuries BC. After this period, the rising power of Rome gradually superseded the Etruscan empire, though Romans incorporated many Etruscan cultural aspects into their own society and beliefs.

We visit the city walls and Etruscan Gate with its basalt heads of Etruscan gods dating to the sixth century BC. Before leaving Volterra, we view the Roman amphitheatre from the first century BC, one of Italy's best-preserved Roman theatres with enough original structure surviving to allow almost complete reconstruction. During free time, we suggest visiting Volterra's famous Museo Guarnacci, containing one of Italy's best Etruscan artifact collections, with pride of place going to 600 Etruscan funerary urns depicting many aspects of Etruscan customs and beliefs.

We then proceed to Pisa, concentrating on the town's principal monuments—the Duomo, Baptistery, and the most famous structure, the gravity-defying "Leaning Tower." We take ample time to view and photograph the tower from outside (climbing requires advance reservations and considerable queuing time; 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

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 22 Lerici - Cinque Terre - Florence

We leave Lerici and travel (weather depending) by boat along the Ligurian coast to Riomaggiore village in the Cinque Terre. Here we begin our easy-paced walk between coastal villages. This spectacular Italian Riviera section rivals the Amalfi Coast for stunning views and gorgeous sunsets. From Riomaggiore, we take an easy half-hour walk on 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 this delightful town with wonderful panoramic views. It's also possible to take a local train to nearby Vernazza to enjoy this village jewel. Those wishing to continue may start the 2-hour hike to Vernazza. The rugged coast's hills are covered in vineyards growing grapes for local Morasca, Chiaretto del Faro, and Sciacchetta wines.

We continue by train to Monterosso Al Mare, named for the area's red colour, where we find a large statue carved into cliffs and a lovely beach.

PLEASE NOTE: Due to past flooding in the region, our day may need adjustment depending on which trails are open or under repair.

Tonight we arrive in Florence.

Overnight in Florence

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 23 Florence: Walking Tour

Florence is a city steeped in history and art. Our walking tour begins with a guided tour of the Accademia, Europe's first Academy of drawing, today housing a superb art collection including Michelangelo's David, probably the world's most famous statue.

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We then proceed to the Cathedral of Santa Maria del Fiore (commonly known as the Duomo), complete with its magnificent red dome. Upon completion in 1436, the dome was hailed as the greatest architectural achievement of its day, equalling, perhaps even surpassing, antiquity's monuments. The cupola's diameter exceeds St. Peter's in Rome, and the nave ranks as Christendom's third largest. Because the building's most interesting part is the exterior, and because we'll see other church interiors that are more ornate and interesting elsewhere (ie Siena), we do not tour the inside. If you'd like to visit independently, we suggest perhaps visiting tomorrow afternoon during your free time when crowds and queues tend to settle down (consult your Tour Leader for current advice).

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

Balance of the day at leisure.

Overnight in Florence

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 24 Florence: Uffizi Gallery

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

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

Overnight in Florence

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 25 Florence - Ravenna: Town Tour

From Tuscany we drive into Emilia Romagna, an area of fertile plains surrounding the Po River. This region is known for balsamic vinegar, and today we'll visit an acetaia where balsamic vinegar is produced. We see the machinery, cellar, barrels—indeed the whole process and all resulting products.

We arrive in Ravenna, an incomparable treasure-store of Byzantine monuments. Ravenna became capital of the Western Roman Empire in AD 402 as Rome was threatened by unstoppable Barbarians. Later in the fifth century, Ravenna also succumbed but was recaptured in 540 by Byzantines under emperor Justinian. From the sixth to 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); indeed, Ravenna's humble-looking churches house the most spectacular Byzantine mosaics outside of Istanbul (if you are a keen aficionado of mosaics, your Tour Leader can point you in the right direction for your free time, ie the Church of San Vitale and/or the Basilica of Sant Apollinare in Classe).

We'll have a walking tour of Medieval Ravenna's charming streets, visiting 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 an enlightened ostrogothic ruler's mortal remains, has a dome cut from a single stone block weighing almost 336 tonnes (300 tons)!

Overnight in Ravenna

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 26 Ravenna - Verona - Padova (Padua)

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

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

During our time in Verona, we'll have a walking tour starting with Piazza Bra, the centre of Veronese life. We'll wander rosy-hued streets admiring 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

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 27 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 minaret-like towers and byzantine cupolas, this structure blends eastern and western elements and serves as a focal point for a constant flow of pilgrims. When we step inside its precincts, we leave Italy and enter Vatican State—this is the only Vatican property (apart from Vatican City) in Italy that is extra-territorial. 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 Piazza Bo, scene of one of Italy's liveliest daily markets.

We then travel the rest of the distance to Venice by road. After a brief orientation by your Tour Leader, you'll 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

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 28 Venice: City Tour

On our guided walking tour this morning, we concentrate on St. Mark's Square, surrounded by 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 featuring Europe's second-largest wooden room. Of interest as we walk through council rooms is Tintoretto's Paradise over the Grand Council Chamber—alleged to be the world's largest oil painting. The palace connects to the old prison by the 'Bridge of Sighs.' In the late 16th century, new airier prison cells were built to replace original dark dungeons. It was from this new prison that Casanova made his daring escape across rooftops in 1755.

The square's highlight is St. Mark's Basilica, a Byzantine masterpiece. This cathedral was begun in 830 to house St. Mark's tomb, whose relics were stolen from Alexandria in Egypt. Inside walls are encrusted with precious art, rare marbles, and magnificent mosaics. Behind the altar is the famous gold altarpiece, 'Palla d'Oro,' one of the finest examples of gold craftsmanship.

(We do not include a tour of the basilica's interior as lengthy queues usually make this impractical for our program. We encourage you to visit during your free time this afternoon. Your ticket is valid for the Doge's Palace and the combined itinerary of Museo Correr, Museo Archeologico Nazionale, and Monumental Rooms of the Biblioteca Nazionale Marciana.)

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 Venice's core and was thus considered a safe gathering point. The market here vibrates with locals buying fruit and vegetables brought from the mainland, and a vast array of fish caught fresh in the Adriatic.

Overnight in Venice

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Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 29 Departure

Departure from Venice.

BUON VIAGGIO! Arrivederci!

Included Meal(s): Breakfast