

MALTA & ITALY

featuring Sicily, Southern & Northern Italy

29 days

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Day 1 Arrival 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 Valletta: 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.

Overnight on Malta

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 3 Valletta & Prehistoric Malta

Our Valletta 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).

The National Museum of Archaeology introduces Malta's prehistoric temple builders who created the world's oldest freestanding stone

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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 Fifla 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.

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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 at the Colosseum, where 55,000 spectators once roared as gladiators fought for survival in Rome's most brutal spectacles. Constructed nearly 2,000 years ago, this engineering marvel still dominates the cityscape. We then walk through the Roman Forum, heart of ancient civic life, where the Curia housed the Senate and the Arch of Titus commemorated military triumph. Among weathered columns and temple foundations, we witness the centre of an empire that shaped Western civilisation.

Ascending to Capitoline Hill, we reach the Campidoglio, Rome's original citadel and seat of government since the 12th century. Michelangelo redesigned this elegant square in the 16th century, creating harmonious symmetry from medieval chaos. We continue to Piazza Navona, where we break for lunch surrounded by baroque splendour. Here stands Bernini's magnificent Fountain of the Four Rivers, its figures representing the Nile, Ganges, Danube, and Plate—symbolising papal power across continents.

Next we visit the Trevi Fountain, its waters flowing from an aqueduct built in 19 BC. Legend promises that tossing a coin ensures your return to Rome. We then proceed to the Pantheon, Rome's best-preserved ancient building, where perfect proportions create an almost spiritual experience. Our day concludes at the Spanish Steps, where Romans and visitors alike gather as evening approaches.

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

Overnight in Rome

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 18 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 19 Rome - Assisi - Siena

We depart Rome for Tuscany, stopping first in Assisi, birthplace of one of Christianity's most beloved figures. Despite attracting millions of pilgrims annually, St. Francis's hometown retains remarkable tranquillity. Born to wealth in 1182, Francis renounced his inheritance as a young man, embracing poverty and founding the Order of Friars Minor—later called Franciscans—whose message of simplicity resonated across medieval Europe.

The Basilica of St. Francis serves as Assisi's spiritual heart and Umbria's premier artistic treasure. After our guided tour of this two-tiered masterpiece adorned with Giotto frescoes, we continue through rolling countryside to Siena, arriving late afternoon. This medieval gem awaits our exploration tomorrow.

Overnight in Siena.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 20 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.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 21 Siena - Volterra - Pisa - Lerici

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. 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 Lerici, dramatically positioned on a beautiful bay where the Ligurian coast meets the Tyrrhenian Sea.

Overnight in Lerici.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 22 Lerici - 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 Sclaccheta 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 23 Florence: Walking Tour

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 24 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 25 Florence - Ravenna: Town Tour

From Tuscany we drive into Emilia-Romagna, where fertile plains surrounding the Po River produce Italy's culinary treasures. This region claims balsamic vinegar among its gifts to gastronomy, and today we visit an acetaia—a traditional vinegar producer—where we discover the intricate ageing process. Walking through cellars lined with wooden barrels, we understand why authentic balsamic vinegar commands premium prices and requires decades to perfect.

We arrive in Ravenna, an incomparable treasury of Byzantine art. When unstoppable barbarians threatened Rome in AD 402, the Western Roman Empire shifted its capital here. Though Ravenna eventually fell in the 5th century, Byzantines recaptured it in 540 under Emperor Justinian. For three centuries Ravenna flourished as Byzantium's western outpost, its artistic and religious influence flowing not from Rome but from Constantinople—today's Istanbul. Inside humble-looking churches we discover the Western world's most spectacular Byzantine mosaics outside Istanbul itself.

Our walking tour explores medieval Ravenna's charming streets, visiting the breathtaking Mausoleum of Galla Placidia, a Roman princess who married a barbarian chieftain. Her tomb is entirely covered in dazzling mosaics that shimmer in dim light, creating an almost otherworldly atmosphere. We also see the Mausoleum of Theodoric, built in AD 520 for an enlightened Ostrogothic ruler. Its dome was carved from a single stone block weighing an astonishing 336 tonnes—a feat of engineering that still puzzles experts. During free time, mosaic enthusiasts might visit the Church of San Vitale or the Basilica of Sant'Apollinare in Classe for further Byzantine splendours.

Overnight in Ravenna.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 26 Ravenna - Verona - Padova (Padua)

We depart Ravenna, driving through the Euganean Hills—Colli Euganei in Italian—a region celebrated for thermal springs and exceptional wines. Our destination is Verona, setting for Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliet and one of Italy's most appealing cities. Pink marble Roman ruins and rose-tinted buildings create romantic ambience that inspired the Bard's tragic love story. The town preserves many Roman monuments, including the first-century Arena, now Verona's opera house and the third-largest such structure surviving from antiquity. The Teatro Romano continues hosting performances, particularly Shakespeare plays.

Our walking tour begins at Piazza Bra, the vibrant centre of Veronese life. We wander rosy streets admiring Renaissance palaces and medieval townhouses, discovering why Verona captivates visitors beyond its literary associations. We visit the Gothic mausoleum of the Scaligeri family, who ruled Verona during the 13th and 14th centuries—their elaborate tomb monuments exemplify Gothic funerary architecture. We also explore the family's fortified riverside residence and the bridge bearing their name, both testament to their power and artistic patronage. This afternoon we continue to Padova, our base for exploring the Veneto region.

Overnight in Padova.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 27 Padova: Town Tour - Venice

We begin our walking tour at the towering Basilica of Saint Anthony, patron saint of lost things and one of Christianity's most venerated figures. With minaret-like towers and Byzantine cupolas, this architectural hybrid blends Eastern and Western influences, creating constant pilgrimage flow. When we step inside its precincts, we technically enter Vatican State—this is Italy's only extra-territorial Vatican property outside Rome itself, granted special status due to the basilica's importance.

We then visit the extraordinary Scrovegni Chapel, commissioned by wealthy banker Enrico Scrovegni to atone for his father's sin of usury. Giotto decorated this modest chapel between 1303 and 1305 with frescoes depicting biblical narratives in revolutionary naturalistic style. Before Giotto, medieval painting was flat and symbolic; his figures possess weight, emotion, and humanity that transformed Western art. The chapel's blue-vaulted ceiling, studded with golden stars, creates an intimate sacred space that many consider Giotto's masterpiece.

After a short walk, we reach Piazza Bo, scene of Italy's liveliest daily markets where locals shop for fresh produce much as they have for centuries. We then travel to Venice, where after a brief orientation, you'll have free time for independent exploration. This evening you might choose a gondola ride through lamp-lit canals, visit the casino, or perhaps attend the theatre.

Overnight in Venice.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 28 Venice: City Tour

Our guided walking tour concentrates on St. Mark's Square, which Napoleon called "the drawing room of Europe." We begin at the Doge's Palace, former seat of Venetian power featuring Europe's second-largest wooden room. Walking through council chambers, we admire Tintoretto's Paradise above the Grand Council Chamber—alleged to be the world's largest oil painting. The palace connects to the prison via the Bridge of Sighs, so named because prisoners crossing it would glimpse their last view of freedom. From these cells, built in the late 16th century to replace darker dungeons, Casanova made his famous rooftop escape in 1755.

The square's highlight is St. Mark's Basilica, a Byzantine masterpiece begun in 830 to house relics of St. Mark the Evangelist, stolen from Alexandria by Venetian merchants. Inside, walls gleam with precious art, rare marbles, and magnificent mosaics covering nearly every surface. Behind the altar stands the famous Palla d'Oro, a gold altarpiece representing medieval craftsmanship's pinnacle. Due to lengthy queues, we don't include interior tours; however, we encourage independent visits this afternoon. Your ticket includes both the Doge's Palace and the combined museums of Piazza San Marco.

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Later we board the vaporetto—Venice's public water bus—travelling the Grand Canal before exploring the maze of canals, bridges, and narrow walkways that define Venice's unique character. At Rialto Bridge, we visit the bustling market where locals buy mainland produce and fresh Adriatic seafood. The name Rialto derives from "high bank"—this area occupied one of the islands' highest points, making it a safe gathering place when Venice was first settled. The market's energy and colour provide authentic glimpses of Venetian daily life beyond tourist spectacle.

Overnight in Venice.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 29 Departure

Departure from Venice.

BUON VIAGGIO! Arrivederci!

Included Meal(s): Breakfast