

TUNISIA, MALTA & ITALY

Tunisia, Malta, Sicily, Southern & Northern Italy

38 days

Created on: 19 Aug, 2025

Day 1 Arrive in Tunis

Arrival in Tunis.

The capital of Tunisia houses one-sixth of the nation's population within the embrace of the Gulf of Tunis. Founded by Berber tribes but shaped successively by Phoenicians, Romans, Vandals, Byzantines, Arabs, Ottomans, and French, the city embodies North Africa's layered history. Modern office towers and European-style cafés share space with the dynamic souks of the ancient medina, creating urban rhythms that seamlessly blend tradition with contemporary life.

The French colonial legacy remains visible in the elegant Ville Nouvelle district, but it's the medina—one of the Arab world's most vibrant—that captures Tunisia's essential character. Here, craftsmen practice trades passed down through generations while merchants negotiate in Arabic, French, and Berber dialects, creating a linguistic tapestry as rich as the goods displayed in their shops.

Overnight in Tunis.

Included Meal(s): Dinner, if required.

Day 2 Tunis: The Medina, Bardo Museum & Carthage

The call to prayer echoes across Tunis as we enter the UNESCO-protected medina through the ancient Bab el Bahr (Sea Gate). This labyrinthine quarter preserves medieval Arab life among monuments spanning a thousand years. The Great Mosque, Jemaa Zitouna, anchors the medina's spiritual heart, while narrow lanes reveal Koranic schools, traditional hammams, and the elegant Ottoman palaces of Place du Gouvernement.

At the Bardo Museum, we see the world's finest collection of Roman mosaics—sophisticated narrative artworks depicting mythological scenes, daily life, and zodiacal symbols. The craftsmanship rivals anything produced in Rome itself, proving that North African workshops often exceeded metropolitan standards.

We proceed to Carthage. At the Tophet cemetery, thousands of urns testify to religious practices that horrified Rome yet sustained Carthage for centuries. The reconstructed Punic ports reveal engineering genius that made Carthage the Mediterranean's greatest naval power—circular military harbours with sophisticated dry-docks that challenged Roman supremacy for three centuries.

From Byrsa Hill, where Hannibal once planned campaigns that brought Rome to its knees, we see how the Cathedral of St. Louis crowns the ancient acropolis where Carthaginian temples stood. The massive Antonine Baths—among the Roman Empire's largest bathing complexes—represent Rome's attempt to outdo Carthaginian magnificence through architectural grandeur, a stone symphony celebrating the empire's triumph over its greatest rival.

Overnight in Tunis

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 3 From Tunis: Bulla Regia & Dougga

This morning we journey toward Bulla Regia, one of North Africa's most ingenious responses to climatic challenges. Here, wealthy Romans created an architectural innovation found nowhere else in the empire: luxurious underground villas designed to escape the brutal summer heat. Descending cool stone staircases into these subterranean palaces, we discover remarkably preserved mosaics and frescoes that have survived nearly two millennia.

These aren't crude cellars but sophisticated residences with multiple levels, central courtyards, and elaborate decoration. The engineering required to create waterproof underground chambers, ensure adequate ventilation, and manage drainage demonstrates Roman technical mastery adapted to African conditions. Walking through rooms where toga-clad families once escaped the noon sun, we understand how

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imperial wealth translated into climate-controlled luxury.

After lunch among olive groves that have produced oil for over two thousand years, we reach Dougga—UNESCO's crown jewel of Tunisian archaeology. Spread across rolling hills, this remarkably complete Roman city offers an unparalleled journey through daily life in provincial Africa.

The Capitolium temple, dedicated to Jupiter, Juno, and Minerva, crowns the forum with imposing grandeur. From its steps, panoramic views encompass green valleys where Roman agricultural estates once supplied grain to feed the empire. The theatre, carved into a natural hillside, seats 3,500 spectators who gathered to watch comedies and tragedies under the African sky.

We explore residential districts where Roman families lived in houses with geometric mosaic floors, private bathhouses, and shaded courtyards. The Cyclops Baths, House of Dionysos and Ulysses, and numerous other villas reveal how provincial wealth created architectural magnificence rivaling Rome itself.

Dougga's preservation stems from its abandonment—when trade routes shifted, residents gradually departed, leaving this urban masterpiece frozen in time for archaeologists to rediscover centuries later.

Overnight in Tunis

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 4 Tunis - Monastir - Kairouan: City Touring

Tunisia's fertile northern landscapes unfold around us as we journey southward through valleys that have earned the country its traditional epithet: "Tunisia the Green." Here, ancient agricultural patterns persist—olive groves, wheat fields, and vineyards that have fed civilizations for millennia. Storks perch atop telephone poles and minaret towers, their massive nests testament to the enduring rhythms connecting human settlement with natural cycles.

Monastir introduces us to a unique Islamic institution: the ribat, a fortified monastery where soldier-monks combined religious devotion with frontier defense. Built in the 8th century when Muslim expansion faced Byzantine counterattacks, the Ribat of Monastir exemplifies how early Islamic civilization created institutions unknown in Christian Europe. From its towering walls, we survey coastlines where medieval fleets once launched expeditions across the Mediterranean.

Modern cinema has discovered Monastir's dramatic appeal—this ribat provided locations for Monty Python's "Life of Brian" and Zeffirelli's "Jesus of Nazareth," its ancient stones playing roles in stories spanning religious traditions.

Kairouan, our ultimate destination, holds unparalleled significance in Islamic history. Founded in 670 CE by the Arab general Uqba ibn Nafi, it became the first Islamic city established in North Africa and the fourth holiest city in Islam after Mecca, Medina, and Jerusalem. Seven pilgrimages to Kairouan equal one to Mecca—a medieval ruling that established this oasis as North Africa's spiritual heart.

The Aghlabid Basins reveal how 9th-century engineers solved desert hydrology through monumental public works. These enormous reservoirs, fed by aqueducts reaching 36 kilometres into the surrounding hills, supported a city whose influence extended from Spain to Egypt.

The Great Mosque of Kairouan astounds with its forest of columns—hundreds of marble shafts looted from Roman sites across North Africa and repurposed to support Islam's expanding architectural needs. Each capital differs from its neighbours, creating a museum of classical design within a revolutionary religious context. The mosque's 8th-century minaret, among Islam's oldest, established architectural forms still followed across the Islamic world.

At the Mausoleum of Sidi Sahab, legendary companion of the Prophet Muhammad, we witness how popular Islam transformed austere early mosques into centres of devotional art and architectural splendour.

Overnight in Kairouan

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 5 Kairouan - Sbeitla - Tozeur

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The Roman city of Sufeitula—modern Sbeitla—presents one of North Africa's most photogenic archaeological ensembles. Three perfectly preserved temples dedicated to Jupiter, Juno, and Minerva rise from the forum like a classical textbook illustration, their harmonious proportions exemplifying Roman architectural ideals adapted to African settings.

Sbeitla prospered during the 2nd and 3rd centuries CE through olive oil production—the "liquid gold" that made North Africa Rome's wealthiest province. Walking past ancient olive presses, we understand how provincial cities accumulated the wealth to construct monuments rivalling Rome itself. Stone-paved streets lead past public baths, theatres, and Christian basilicas with elaborate baptisteries, their colourful mosaics illustrating how early Christianity transformed Roman architectural forms.

Our route south carries us across landscapes that shift dramatically from Mediterranean fertility to Saharan vastness. This transition zone—the Sahel—has witnessed some of history's most significant cultural exchanges as trans-Saharan trade routes connected sub-Saharan Africa with Mediterranean civilizations.

Tozeur emerges from shimmering heat mirages as a palm-fringed jewel. This legendary oasis city controlled medieval caravan routes carrying gold, ivory, salt, and slaves between North and West Africa. Medieval accounts describe over 1,000 camels departing daily, laden with deglet nour dates—the "fingers of light" still considered among the world's finest.

The Eden Palm Museum introduces us to oasis agriculture's sophisticated techniques: the three-tier cultivation system where date palms provide shade for citrus trees, which shelter vegetable crops below. This ancient agricultural wisdom maximizes water use in environments where every drop is precious.

Wandering through the palmerie as afternoon light filters through date palm fronds, we experience the profound peace that has drawn desert travellers to oases for millennia. Here, the harsh beauty of the Sahara meets human ingenuity, creating landscapes of almost mystical serenity.

Overnight in Tozeur.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 6 Tozeur - Douz - Djerba

Our eastward journey crosses Chott el Jerid, Tunisia's largest salt lake—a crystalline expanse covering 5,000 square kilometres. This depression, lying 30 metres below sea level, preserves evidence of ancient seas that once covered North Africa. The salt floor's surface creates otherworldly reflections—pink and yellow hues that shift with the sun's angle while heat mirages transform the horizon into liquid fantasies.

Geologically, the chott represents millions of years of climate change. When the Mediterranean was lower and North Africa wetter, this basin held a vast inland sea. Today's mineral-rich flats support flamingo populations and create landscapes so alien that science fiction films regularly use them as extraterrestrial settings.

Douz, our midday stop, proclaims itself the "Gateway of the Sahara"—a title earned through centuries of desert trade. Here, traditional oasis life continues alongside modern tourism, creating fascinating cultural juxtapositions. Sand dunes rolling to the horizon remind us that we're standing at the edge of the world's largest desert, where nomadic cultures have adapted to extremes of heat, cold, and isolation.

Our final destination, the island of Djerba, floats in the Mediterranean like a fragment of myth made real. Connected to the mainland by a Roman causeway still in use after 2,000 years, Djerba has maintained distinct cultural identity through successive conquests. This may be Homer's legendary land of the Lotus Eaters, where Odysseus's sailors found paradise so seductive they forgot their desire to return home.

The drive through Tunisia's olive-growing heartland reinforces the country's agricultural abundance—over 65 million olive trees, roughly six for each inhabitant, making Tunisia the world's fourth-largest olive oil exporter. These groves, many dating to Roman times, connect contemporary Tunisians to Mediterranean agricultural traditions spanning millennia.

Overnight in Djerba.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 7 The Isle of Djerba

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Djerba reveals itself as a living museum of Mediterranean civilization. Officially recognized as Tunisia's newest UNESCO World Heritage site, this 514-square-kilometre island preserves cultural traditions and architectural forms found nowhere else. The island's 125 kilometres of sandy beaches attracted ancient Phoenician traders, but it's the unique blend of cultures that makes Djerba extraordinary.

The Museum of Patrimoine introduces us to traditions that have evolved over millennia. Traditional costumes, wedding ceremonies, and household implements illustrate how island isolation preserved customs lost elsewhere. The intricate arts of weaving, calligraphy, and metalwork demonstrate how Djerba's artisans adapted Mediterranean, African, and Middle Eastern influences into distinctive local styles.

Guellala village reveals one of North Africa's oldest pottery traditions. Here, families have worked clay for over a thousand years, their techniques passed down through generations of master craftsmen. The kilns, some medieval in origin, still fire vessels whose forms echo ancient Phoenician and Roman prototypes.

El Ghriba Synagogue represents one of Judaism's most significant pilgrimage sites. Legend claims Djerba's Jewish community arrived after the destruction of Solomon's Temple in 586 BCE, making this one of the world's oldest continuous Jewish settlements. The synagogue's architecture reflects centuries of cultural fusion—Jewish religious requirements interpreted through Islamic decorative traditions and Mediterranean construction techniques.

The building houses ancient Torah scrolls and preserves traditions linking contemporary worship to biblical times. Each year, thousands of pilgrims gather here for the Lag B'Omer festival, creating one of the Jewish world's most significant gatherings in an Islamic country—testament to Djerba's remarkable tolerance.

In Houmt Souq, the island's main town, medieval Borj el Kebir fortress recalls the bloody conflicts of 1560 when Ottoman and Spanish forces fought for Mediterranean supremacy. Today's fish auctions and vegetable markets continue traditions established when this port connected North Africa to European trading networks.

Overnight in Djerba

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 8 Djerba - Matmata - Sfax

The Berber village of Matmata challenges every assumption about desert architecture. Here, ingenious adaptation to harsh climate produced one of humanity's most distinctive building traditions: homes carved directly into soft sandstone, creating subterranean courtyards surrounded by chambers that maintain comfortable temperatures year-round.

These "troglodyte" dwellings—some over 400 years old—demonstrate sophisticated understanding of thermal dynamics. The circular pit design captures cool air while radiating heat upward, maintaining pleasant indoor temperatures when surface conditions become unbearable. Rooms branch off from central courtyards like artificial caves, each serving specific family functions within underground complexes that can house extended families.

Visiting a local family's traditional home, we witness how architecture shapes social organization. The central courtyard serves as communal space where family life unfolds, while individual rooms provide privacy within collective security. These aren't primitive dwellings but sophisticated responses to environmental challenges—sustainable architecture perfected through centuries of refinement.

Our route toward Sfax traverses landscapes that reveal Tunisia's geological diversity. Olive groves give way to industrial agriculture, while phosphate mining operations remind us that modern Tunisia's economy balances traditional Mediterranean agriculture with mineral wealth accumulated over millions of years.

Sfax, Tunisia's second-largest city, pulses with commercial energy absent from tourist-focused destinations. This working city processes olives, almonds, and phosphates while maintaining one of North Africa's finest preserved medinas. The 9th-century ramparts still enclose neighborhoods where traditional crafts and commerce continue patterns established over a millennium ago.

Unlike museum-piece medinas designed for visitors, Sfax's old city thrums with authentic daily life. Artisan workshops, traditional markets, and residential quarters create urban rhythms connecting contemporary Tunisians to their ancestors' commercial traditions.

Overnight in Sfax

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 9 Sfax - El Djem - Sidi Bou Said - Tunis

The massive Roman Amphitheatre of El Djem rises from flat agricultural plains like a sandstone mountain—a monument to imperial ambition and provincial wealth. With capacity for 30,000 spectators, this colosseum rivals Rome's own, yet its superior preservation makes it perhaps more impressive than its famous model.

Built during the brief reign of emperors Gordian I and II (who ruled mere weeks before Roman legions crushed their African rebellion), the amphitheatre demonstrates how quickly provincial wealth translated into monumental architecture. Here, gladiatorial combats and wild beast hunts entertained crowds drawn from across Roman Africa.

The Archaeological Museum's extraordinary mosaics, relocated from wealthy Roman villas, include the unique House of Africa mosaic—the only known representation of the personified African continent. Climbing to the amphitheatre's upper tiers, we survey landscapes where Roman agricultural estates once supplied grain to feed the empire, while basement chambers preserve sophisticated mechanical systems that created theatrical spectacles for bloodthirsty crowds.

Our final destination, Sidi Bou Said, perches on clifftops 20 kilometres north of Tunis like a blue and white jewel. This artists' village, famous since the 18th century as a creative haven, preserves distinctive Tunisian architectural traditions through building codes requiring traditional colour schemes.

Wandering cobbled streets past jasmine-scented courtyards and traditional cafés, we understand why painters, musicians, and writers have found inspiration here for centuries. The panoramic views across the Gulf of Tunis create scenes of almost perfect harmony between human creativity and natural beauty.

Overnight in Tunis.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 10 Tunis, Tunisia - Valetta, Malta

Our flight carries us from North Africa's ancient shores toward Malta, the Mediterranean's smallest nation. This aerial journey, whether direct or via Rome, traces routes followed by Phoenician traders, Roman governors, medieval crusaders, and modern travelers—testament to these waters' role as civilization's highway.

Malta emerges from azure seas as a golden limestone jewel, its strategic position between Sicily and North Africa having attracted conquerors for over 4,000 years. Here, the Knights of St. John created Europe's most formidable fortress state, while earlier civilizations built temples older than Stonehenge.

PLEASE NOTE that, though we are often able to get a direct flight, such flights do not necessarily operate every day and, if the airlines change their schedule, today's journey may end up being more convoluted, ie with a connection in Rome or elsewhere.

Overnight in Malta.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 11 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 12 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 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 13 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 14 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 15 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 16 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 17 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 18 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 Casalea. 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 19 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 20 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 21 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 22 Taormina, Sicily - Paestum, Italian Mainland

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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 23 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 24 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 25 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 26 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 27 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 28 Rome - Assisi - Siena

This morning we drive from Rome to Siena, a region famous for its wines.

Our first stop will be Assisi. Despite the millions of tourists and pilgrims it attracts every year, the hometown of St Francis remains a beautiful

and tranquil refuge. St Francis was born here in 1182 and his spirit hovers over every aspect of the city's life. He renounced his father's wealth in his late teens to pursue a life of chastity and poverty, founding the order of mendicant friars known as the Order of Minors (the Franciscans after his death) which attracted a huge following in Europe.

St Francis' Basilica is 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 29 Siena & San Gimignano

Siena is best seen on foot. In fact, the city council was Europe's first to ban motor traffic from the city centre. Siena today seems frozen in time -- the town has traditionally been Florence's rival as the centre of art and architecture in Tuscany. While Florence is known for its Renaissance art and buildings, Siena takes us straight back to the Middle Ages. Perhaps by preserving its original character more than any other city in Italy, Siena is a showcase of the Italian Gothic style. The walled city of Siena occupies three hill tops and contains a rich artistic heritage.

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

Our next stop is the Duomo. This huge cathedral, built in bands of black and white marble, dates from the 12th century. Built in the Romanesque and Italian Gothic styles, it has a dramatically painted façade -- partly designed by Giovanni Pisano -- and a soaring black and white bell tower. The inlaid marble floor depicts different Biblical scenes and the cathedral contains a glass-enclosed box with an arm. Tradition maintains that the arm is that of John the Baptist and was used to baptise Christ.

This afternoon we drive to San Gimignano, called the Manhattan of Tuscany. The medieval town preserves 13 of its noble brick towers, which give it a skyscraper skyline. Today its fortress-like severity is softened by the subtlety of its quiet, harmonious squares, and many of its places and churches are enhanced by Renaissance frescoes.

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

Overnight in Siena.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 30 Siena - Volterra - Pisa - Lerici

This morning we drive through beautiful and quintessential Tuscan rolling countryside to Volterra.

Situated like many Etruscan cities on a high plateau, Volterra offers uninterrupted views over the surrounding hills. In many places the town's ancient Etruscan walls still stand. The exact origins of the Etruscans and when they arrived in Italy, are unknown. Their civilisation was centred in the area between present-day Rome and Florence, and had its Golden Age from the eighth until the sixth century BC. After this period the Etruscan empire was gradually superseded by the rising power of Rome, although in the process, the Romans incorporated many aspects of Etruscan culture into their own society and beliefs. Although the Etruscans had their own language and alphabet, nothing of their literature has survived. What we know of their civilisation comes mainly from their highly decorated tombs which were stocked with everything the deceased would need in the afterlife -- food, drink, clothes, weapons and furniture.

We also visit the city walls and the Etruscan Gate with its basalt heads of Etruscan gods dating back to the sixth century BC. Before leaving Volterra we view the Roman amphitheatre, dating to the first century BC. This is one of the best-preserved Roman theatres in Italy and enough of the original structure has survived to allow an almost complete reconstruction. In your free time here, we suggest Volterra's famous Museo Guarnacci, which contains one of Italy's best collections of Etruscan artifacts. Pride of place in the museum goes to the collection of 600 Etruscan funerary urns, depicting many aspects of Etruscan customs and beliefs.

Our next stop is Pisa, where we will spend most of our time concentrating on the town's principal monuments -- the Duomo, the Baptistery, and the most famous structure in Pisa, the gravity-defying "Leaning Tower." We will take ample time to view and photograph the tower from the outside (to climb the tower requires advance reservations and a considerable amount of time to queue for entry; 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 31 Lerici - Cinque Terre - Florence

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

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

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

Tonight we arrive in Florence.

Overnight in Florence.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 32 Florence: Walking Tour

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

We then proceed to the Cathedral of Santa Maria del Fiore (commonly known as the Duomo), complete with its magnificent red dome. Upon its completion in 1436, the dome was hailed as the greatest architectural achievement of its day, equaling, perhaps even surpassing, the monuments of antiquity. The cupola's diameter is greater than that of St Peter's in Rome and the nave is the third largest in Christendom. Because the most interesting part of the building is the exterior, and because we will 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 on your own, we suggest perhaps visiting tomorrow afternoon in your free time when crowds and line-ups tend to settle down (consult with your Tour Leader for the best current advice).

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

Balance of the day at leisure.

Overnight in Florence.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 33 Florence: Uffizi Gallery

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

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

Overnight in Florence.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 34 Florence - Ravenna: Town Tour

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

We arrive in Ravenna, an incomparable treasure-store of Byzantine monuments. Ravenna was made capital of the Western Roman Empire in AD 402 as Rome was threatened by the unstoppable Barbarians. Later in the fifth century Ravenna also succumbed, but was recaptured in 540 by the Byzantines under the emperor Justinian. From the sixth to the 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 the humble-looking churches of Ravenna 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 the charming streets of Medieval Ravenna, during which we visit 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 the mortal remains of an enlightened ostrogothic ruler, has a dome cut from a single block of stone weighing almost 336 tonnes (300 tons)!

Overnight in Ravenna.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 35 Ravenna - Verona - Padova (Padua)

Today 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 its thermal springs and terrific wines.

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

During our time in Verona we'll have a walking tour starting with the Piazza Bra, the centre of Veronese life. We'll wander the rosy-hued streets admiring the 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 36 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 its minaret-like towers and byzantine cupolas, the structure is a blend of eastern and western elements and a focal point for a constant flow of pilgrims. When we step inside its precincts, we leave Italy and enter the 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 the Piazza Bo, the scene of one of the liveliest daily markets in Italy.

We then travel the rest of the distance to Venice by road. After a brief orientation by your Tour Leader, you will 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 37 Venice: City Tour

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

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

(We do not include a tour of the interior of the basilica as lengthy queues usually make this impractical for our program. We encourage you to visit the site 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 the core of Venice and was thus considered a safe gathering point. The market here is vibrant with locals buying fruit and vegetables brought in from the mainland, and a vast array of fish caught fresh in the Adriatic.

Overnight in Venice.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 38 Departure

Departure from Venice.

BUON VIAGGIO!

Included Meal(s): Breakfast