

Best of Sicily
22 September – 1 October 2018

Sept. 22 Palermo

Today, upon arrival at the [Palermo](#) airport we will take a private shuttle to the 4 star hotel in the historic and bustling center of Palermo.

Time at leisure.

Sept. 23 Palermo (D)

Although relatively neglected by the casual visitor to Italy, Palermo is one of the great cities of Italy and is filled with many sightseeing treasures. This is one of the oldest cities of the Mediterranean. Colonized by the Phoenicians, Sicily boasts a rich 3,000-year history, flourishing under Arab and Norman rule. The many great empires that once ruled Sicily's capital left behind wonderfully diverse architecture, from Roman to Byzantine, to Arab-Norman which we will see in the city's palaces, churches and crypts.

In the morning we will meet our guide at the hotel and set off for a tour of some of Palermo's most iconic sites. We begin our journey with a visit to [Palazzo dei Normanni](#) (Palace of the Normans). This is Palermo's greatest attraction and Sicily's finest treasure trove and is designated a UNESCO World Heritage Site. Today it is the seat of Sicily's semiautonomous regional government. Our visit includes seeing the [Capella Palatina](#) (Palatine Chapel) built by the Norman King Roger II from 1130-1140 when it was adorned with extraordinary Byzantine mosaics. From here we will visit [San Giovanni degli Eremiti](#) (St. John of the Hermits), one of the most famous of all the Arab-Norman monuments still standing in Palermo. We will also visit the city's eclectic cathedral, originally Norman, then Catalan Gothic, and in the 18th century, transformed by Baroque and Neoclassical styles.

Afternoon at leisure.

In the late afternoon we will meet our native Sicilian guide and enjoy an aperitivo and introductory presentation on the history and culture of Sicily.

Following the presentation, join fellow travelers for a **Welcome Dinner** at a gourmet restaurant, within walking distance of the hotel.

Sept. 24 Cefalu, Monreale and Palazzo Gangi in Palermo (B)

We will meet our guide at the hotel Today we will have a full day guided excursion to Cefalù and Monreale.

[Cefalù](#) is a beautiful seaside resort town with its winding Medieval streets, small squares, and important historic sites. The town has a rich history and has been known to be inhabited since the 9th century B.C. The port of Cefalù was a backdrop in the filming of the Academy Award-winning film *Cinema Paradiso*.

Here, set in the Medieval district, we will visit one of Italy's most magnificent cathedrals. Begun in 1131 by King Roger II, this mighty Norman church dominates the rooftops of the *centro storico*. The building's interior is decorated with lovely mosaics created by 12th Century Byzantine artists that include a large Christ Pantocrator on a gold background dominating the apse. These gleaming mosaics are one of Sicily's greatest sights. The Duomo is designated a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

Then we will visit Monreale, located 9 miles outside Palermo. Monreale is home to one of the most impressive cathedrals in all of Italy and it offers a beautiful panoramic view of the bay, Conca D'Oro. The [Monreale Duomo](#), launched in 1174 by the Norman King William II, is the last and most stunning of the Norman churches of Sicily and is viewed as one of the architectural wonders of the Middle Ages. It has been designated a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

Transfer back to Palermo where we will have in the late afternoon a privately-arranged visit to the [Palazzo Valguarnera-Gangi](#), one of the oldest and most important noble houses of Sicily and where Luchino Visconti filmed the magnificent ballroom scene in the film, *Il Gattopardo*. We will be received personally by a member of the household and enjoy a drink following the visit.

This evening, a leisurely evening of dining, shopping or walking on your own awaits you.

Sept. 25 Selinunte and Agrigento (B,D)

Pick up from the hotel. Today we will explore the ruins of two great cities of Magna Graecia.

One of the superb colonies of ancient Greece, [Selinunte](#) traces its history to the 7th century B.C., when immigrants from Megara Hyblae (Syracuse) set out to build a new colony. Situated by the sea in the southwestern corner of Sicily, the isolated ruins here have stood abandoned for most of their history. The lack of development allows us to imagine the ancient town as it would have been two-and-a-half thousand years ago. We will meet our expert local guide in Selinunte and after exploring this fascinating site together, we will travel by minibus to the magnificent ruins of [Agrigento](#).

Greek colonists from Gela (Caltanissetta) called this area Akragas when they established a beachhead in the 6th century B.C. In time, the settlement grew to become one of the most prosperous cities in Magna Graecia. Agrigento's remarkable series of Doric temples from the 5th century B.C. are unrivaled except in Greece itself. Agrigento has seen many conquerors over the centuries, from the Romans to Byzantines and Arabs. The year 1087 saw the arrival of the Normans. We will learn about the fascinating history of Greek life in Sicily and about the

invading cultures who followed. After our visit to the Valley of the Temples we check into our lovely 4-star hotel just a few kilometers from the center of Agrigento where we will enjoy a wonderful meal, al fresco, of Sicilian specialties in the hotel's renowned restaurant.

Sept. 26 Piazza Armerina, Modica, and Ragusa (B,D)

Pick up from the hotel. This morning we journey with our private guide to the ruins of one of Italy's most extraordinary Roman treasures—[Villa Casale in Piazza Armerina](#). Art lovers from all over Europe and America come here to see some of the most well-preserved Roman mosaics in the world. The site is designated a UNESCO World Heritage Site due to some of the most complex and large collection of Roman mosaics in the world; there are 3,535 square meters of them. Some consider it Sicily's most important man-made attraction. Built in the early 4th century A.D., the buildings were covered by a mudslide in the 12th century and though sporadic attempts were made over the centuries to uncover them, it wasn't really until the 1950's that a concerted excavation effort began, which even with the vast amount now on display, is still not completed.

Time at leisure for lunch in Piazza Armerina.

From Piazza Armerina we travel to the province of Ragusa where we will stop in the enchanting Baroque town of [Modica](#) which is known for its spectacular chocolate, still produced with the ancient Aztec method brought here, along with cocoa beans, by Spanish invaders of Southern Italy during the Middle Ages. Accompanied by our local guide we will visit the most ancient chocolate factory in Sicily, and of course, sample this unique chocolate which is made using a cold-worked method. Modica is the only place in the world where this type of chocolate is still made. In Modica, you can also discover some of the best gelato in Sicily with flavors that include jasmine, tangerine, and rose.

Then travel by private motorcoach with our guide to [Ragusa](#), often described as two towns in one: Ragusa Superiore, created after a devastating earthquake in 1693, and Ragusa Ibla, constructed on a small steep-sided hill with deep valleys on three sides separating it from the high plateau. Ibla, in glaring contrast to the modern city, is one of the best-preserved historic towns in Sicily and has been designated a UNESCO World Heritage Site. We check into our 4-star accommodation in the heart of the gardens of Ragusa Ibla. There we will have the opportunity to learn more about the life, culture, and history of Eastern Sicily at a special presentation by our local guide. Afterward, we will enjoy a wonderful dinner of regional dishes. At dinner interact with local residents and learn about life in Sicily today. Following dinner enjoy an evening passeggiata on your own.

Sept. 27 Donnafugata Castle, Noto, Siracusa (B, L)

Pick up from the hotel. This morning we journey with our private guide to DonnaFugata for a tour of [Donnafugata Castle](#), an imposing 14th century noble manor covering 2,300 sq. meters with a wide Neogothic façade, crowned by two towers at the sides, and divided into three floors with a total of 122 rooms, 20 of which are open to the public and containing original fittings and furniture from the time of the last "Leopards." Every room is furnished in a different style and was used for a different purpose—Music Room, Coats of Arms Room, Mirror Room. The visit will provide you a fascinating glimpse into the life of the Sicilian aristocracy.

This huge manor house was used as a setting for several well-known films and television productions including *The Leopard* by Luchino Visconti, *Kaos* by the Taviani brothers, *The Star Maker* by Giuseppe Tornatore and Roberto Faenza's *The Viceroys*. We will enjoy a guided tour of the castle and the botanical garden.

Then we will travel to [Noto](#), set amid olive groves and almond trees on a plateau overlooking the Asinaro Valley. On the way we will stop with our guide to visit the [Roman Villa Del Tellaro](#), dating from the 4th century A.D. and still displaying some of its magnificent polychrome mosaics. The villa, not entirely excavated, can be compared to the celebrated Villa Romana del Casale near Piazza Armerina. We will admire the exquisite mosaic floors adorned with geometric designs, hunting scenes, and a story taken from Homer's Iliad.

Lunch will be in Noto at a gourmet restaurant.

Noto dates from the 9th century and knew Greek, Roman, Byzantine, Arab, Norman, Aragonese and even Spanish culture before 1692, when an earthquake destroyed it. The town was reconstructed somewhat like a stage set, with curvilinear accents and wrought-iron balconies. Many Sicilian artists and artisans have worked hard to rebuild Noto into a Baroque gem, with uniform buildings of soft limestone. It is designated a UNESCO World Heritage Site. We will visit Noto's splendid [San Nicolò Cathedral](#) and see buildings that offer great examples of Sicily's unique style of Baroque architecture, including Palazzo Villa Dorata with its many playfully buttressed balconies that feature horses, griffons, nymphs and cherubs. Once at the top of Via Nicolaci, we will visit the beautiful Monte Vergine Church with its elliptical façade. From Noto we travel to [Siracusa](#) where we check into our 4-star accommodation on the island of Ortigia, the ancient part of Siracusa and a UNESCO World Heritage Site, overlooking the Mediterranean. This evening enjoy dinner on your own in one of Siracusa's or Ortigia's wonderful restaurants.

Sept. 28 Siracusa (B)

One of the centers of ancient Western civilization, southeastern Sicily is a sightseeing mecca filled with glorious, evocative ruins. Of all the Greek cities of antiquity that flourished on the coast of Sicily, Siracusa (Syracuse) was the most important, a formidable competitor of Athens. In its heyday, it dared take on Carthage and even Rome. Colonists from Corinth founded Siracusa on the Ionian Sea in about 735 B.C.

In Siracusa, enjoy a leisurely day on your own or join others for an optional self-guided exploration of the [Parco Archeologico della Neapoli](#) which contains the town's most important attractions. (A modest entrance fee will be required). Explore on your own the Teatro Greco (Greek Theatre), a UNESCO World Heritage Site and one of the great theatres of the classical period, the Altar of Hieron II, the Ear of Dionysius grotto, and the Roman Amphitheater. This evening enjoy dinner on your own in one of Siracusa's or Ortigia's wonderful restaurants.

Sept. 29 Extra virgin oil, local cheese and Taormina (B, L)

This morning we travel by minibus to [Taormina](#), one of Sicily's most picturesque towns and its greatest resort. On the way to Taormina we will stop in Giardini Naxos and visit a farm producing extra virgin olive oil and organic cheese where we will enjoy a guided walking tour and a tasting of local products for lunch.

Such writers as Johann Wolfgang von Goethe and D. H. Lawrence, captivated by the glories of Taormina's panoramic views of the bays beyond and Mount Etna looming in the background, spread word of the area's charms. Dating from the 4th century B.C., it hugs the edge of a cliff overlooking the Ionian Sea. Once in Taormina, we will check into our lovely 4-star hotel, within a few minutes of the town center. Enjoy the rest of the day on your own exploring Taormina's Greek amphitheater and its historic center. Linger in one of Taormina's many fine restaurants, or explore its beautiful shops. You can also take advantage of an optional excursion to Mt. Etna.

Sept. 30 Taormina (B,D)

Enjoy a leisurely day on your own to shop, savor a delicious lunch at one of Taormina's great restaurants, or just to people-watch while sitting at an outdoor café.

We will gather for our **Farewell Dinner** at one of the best restaurants in town, within walking distance from the hotel

Oct 1st (B)

Departure, pick up from the hotel and private transfer to **Catania** airport.

Prices

- \$4,175 per person (double occupancy)
- +\$1,000 single supplement

Included

- 3 night accommodation at the 4-star Hotel in Palermo, breakfast included
- 1 night accommodation at the 4-star hotel in Agrigento, breakfast included
- 1 night accommodation at the 4-star Hotel in Ragusa Ibla, breakfast included
- 2 night accommodation at the 4-star Hotel in Ortigia (Siracusa), breakfast included
- 2 night accommodation at the 4-star Hotel in Taormina, breakfast included
- Welcome *aperitivo* at the hotel in Palermo with a special presentation on Sicilian history, life and culture with our native Sicilian guide.
- Private visit of Palazzo Valguarnera-Gangi with *aperitivo*.
- All group excursions as featured
- Private transfers and excursions by minibus as per program, including airport transfers
- English-speaking private guide as per program : half-day guided visit in Palermo, full-day guide to Monreale and Cefalù , full day guided visit of Selinunte and the Valley of the Temples , full day guide for the excursion on day 5 , full day guide for the excursion

on day 6 , meetings with the guides at the hotels on day 2 and day 5 for the presentations on Sicilian life and culture

- 4 dinners and 2 lunches (one of the lunches is a tasting of products at the cheese and olive oil farm), drinks not included .

Not included

- International flights
- Gratuity for guides
- Travel insurance
- Meals and drinks other than those specified