

European Islands: Malta and Sicily (19 Days)

May 3-21 & September 27- October 15, 2023



Taormina, Sicily

Malta

May 3/Sep 27 Day 1: Arrive Malta (B)

Arrive Valletta, capital of Malta (UNESCO Heritage Site). Transfer to hotel.

May 4/Sep 28 Day 2: Full Day Tour: Valletta (B,L)

Meet our guide in the hotel lobby at 9 am to begin our full day tour of the Capital city, a UNESCO World Heritage site and a candidate for the European Capital of Cultural 2018; built by the Knights in the late 1500's, to protect the harbor from attack by the enemy following the Siege in 1565.

We start with St. John's Cathedral (opens at 9:30 am), a historical gem which houses famous tapestries by the artist Caravaggio.

We then head to St. George's Square (aka Palace Square) and next to it is the smaller Republic Square (Queen Square). We shall see the 3D show at the Valletta Theatre about Malta History to modern times. We plan to get there at around 11.00. It runs every hour, duration is 30 minutes.

Next is a visit to the National Museum of Archaeology. Please Note: **The Grand Master's Palace & Armory are closed for renovations until 2023.** <https://heritagemalta.mt/explore/national-museum-of-archaeology/>

At around 12:45, a stop for lunch.

Continuing our leisurely walk around the historical center of Valletta, we admire the exteriors of the Baroque architecture and head towards the waterfront for a visit to the Upper Barracca Gardens, built by the Knights as a place of recreation and overlooking the Grand Harbor (one of the world's oldest natural harbors).

Afterwards descend to the Harbor via a scenic lift, and have some free time at Valletta's waterfront. There are no attractions on the waterfront, just restaurants and shops. The guide's duties end at 5 pm. You can return to the hotel with him or stay longer and walk back on your own. To return with him, at 4:30 pm you will go back up the lift and walk to hotel (about 15 minutes) with the guide. If you wish to stay longer you can take the lift back up and walk to the hotel, or take a taxi available in front of the lift as you come back up (pay direct).

May 5/Sep 29 Day 3: Mnajdra, Hagar Qim, Blue Grotto Caves, Marsaxlokk (B,L)

NOTE: lunch is a bit late today, 2 pm, so take some snacks, fruit, breads etc from breakfast buffet.

Depart at 8:30 am driving to the South of the island. It is approx 30 min drive to Mnajdra (UNESCO World Heritage Site), a megalithic temple complex found in an isolated location on the southern coast (site opens at 9 am). It consists of three buildings facing a common oval forecourt. The first and oldest structure dates to the Ġgantija phase (3600 – 3200 BC). The second structure to be built was the South Temple, constructed in the early Tarxien phase (3150 – 2500 BC). The South Temple is aligned so that it marks the sunrise on the first day of each season; the Spring and Autumn Equinoxes and the Summer and Winter Solstices. The Central Temple, inserted between the other two, was the last to be built. Remains to the north-east and south of these buildings indicate that these three structures are only the best preserved of a larger complex.

Then, nearby, we visit the Hagar Qim megalithic complex located on a hilltop overlooking the sea and islet of Fifla, approximately 500 metres from Mnajdra. First excavated in 1839, the remains suggest a date between 3600 – 3200 BC, a period known as the Ġgantija phase in Maltese prehistory. Hagar Qim was never completely buried as the tallest stones, remained exposed and featured in 18th and 19th century paintings. The site consists of a central building and the remains of at least two more structures. The large forecourt and the monumental facade of the central structure follow the pattern typical of Maltese Prehistoric Temples. Along the external wall one may find some of the largest megaliths used in the building of these structures, such as a 5.2m high stone and a huge megalith estimated to weigh close to 20 tons. The building itself is made up of a series of C-shaped rooms, known as apses. Walking through the main entrance, one finds a central paved space with an apse on each side. These apses are more firmly screened off than is usual at other temple sites using walls and slabs with square shaped portholes cut through as doorways.

During excavations, a slab bearing a pair of opposing spirals in relief and a free-standing pillar decorated on all four sides were found in the area. These have been replaced with replicas on site and the originals can be found at the National Museum of Archaeology. Hagar Qim holds an elliptical hole which is hewn out in alignment with the Summer Solstice sunrise. At sunrise, on the first day of summer, the sun's rays pass through this hole and illuminate a stone slab inside the chamber.

The Megalithic Temples of Malta are among the most ancient religious sites on Earth, described by the World Heritage Sites committee as "unique architectural masterpieces."

Afterwards, continue (5 min drive) to one of Malta's natural wonders: the Blue Grotto. Drive to Wied iz-Zurrieq where we take a boat, departing every 15 minutes to visit Blue Grotto, the largest cave (aka Grotta Azzurra) and the Arch. We cruise for about 25 minutes before reaching the caves; along the way enjoy superb views of little deserted islet of Filfla. The water can be rough but the boatmen know the area well,

so your safety is ensured. In case the water is too rough, there is a viewing platform on the road leading to the site where you can enjoy a view from a distance.

The location of this fascinating natural grotto combines with sunlight and the surrounding chain of caves to reflect the phosphorescent colors of the submerged flora and the deep dark shade of blue of the sea. There is a massive arch (over 30m) and a system of six caves that were created by centuries of persistent action of the waves and the elements. The sky reflects the white sandy seabed, giving off a bright cobalt color while the caves mirror the orange, purple and green off the minerals in the rocks. This particular spectacle of colors can be seen daily from sunrise until around one in the afternoon, and together with the white froth of the waves hitting the cliffs, the Blue Grotto presents exceptional photographic backgrounds.

Next is a 10 minutes drive to visit to the small village of Zurrieq. It is one of the oldest and most culturally rich villages in Malta. The town is known for its handful of original windmills of which Xarolla Windmill is the only windmill in Malta that is still able to function. In addition we will see Bubaqra, a fortified residential tower built in 1579 and Bakkari, ancient temple ruins.

From here it is about a 20 min drive to the fishing village of Marsaxlokk, picturesquely dotted with colorful fishing boats. We plan to arrive by 2 pm and enjoy a simple quick lunch here.

Afterwards about 8 min drive to Qhar Dalam Cave, a prehistoric cave where fossils, and human remains were found, and giving insight into the first settlers of the island. The cave is 145 m long and the lowest layers, more than 500,000 years old, yielded remains belonging to dwarf elephants, micro-mammals and birds.

Return to the hotel, approx. 20 min drive.

Suggest dinner at a restaurant that specializes in local cuisine -traditionally a mill house (pay direct), such as Gululu in St. Julians, Spinola Bay.

May 6/Sep 30 Day 4: Hypogeum – Tarxien - Senglea, Cospicua and Vittoriosa (BL)

Departing the hotel at 8:30 am, we begin the day with a visit the Hal Saflieni Hypogeum of Paola, literally meaning "underground" in Greek, a subterranean structure dating to the Saflieni phase (3000-2500 BC) in Maltese prehistory. The Hypogeum is a necropolis housing the remains of more than 7,000 individuals. It is the only known prehistoric underground temple in the world. The Hypogeum is a UNESCO World Heritage site and since its restoration in the mid 1990's **only 60 people per day are allowed to enter, only 10 per time slot; no refunds if you cancel. We are purchasing tickets as people book the tour, for the 9:00 am entrance. This means "early bird" gets the tour!** If you book one month or less from tour date there is a chance there will not be space for you. **Bring your passport. They check to be sure the ticket you present matches the passport number listed on the ticket.**

Afterwards, an approx. 15 min drive to the town of Tarxien, to visit the Tarxien Temples (UNESCO), a megalithic temple complex which is among the oldest free standing complexes on earth.

Then we embark on a tour of "The Three Cities" which offer an intriguing insight into Malta and its history. Left largely unvisited, these cities are a slice of authentic life as well as a glimpse into Malta's maritime fortunes.

The Three Cities can rightly claim to be the cradle of Maltese history, as Vittoriosa (Birgu), Senglea (Isla) and Cospicua (Bormla) have provided a home and fortress to almost every people who settled on the Islands. These are the first bases of the Knights of St. John.

Their harbor inlets have been in use since Phoenician times: the docks always providing a living for local people, but also leaving them vulnerable when Malta's rulers were at war. As the first home to the Knights of St. John, the Three Cities' palaces, churches, forts and bastions are far older than Valletta's.

The local communities here celebrate holy days and festas as nowhere else on the Islands. The most spectacular events are the Easter processions when statues of the "Risen Christ" are carried at a run through crowded streets.

Birgu, Isla, and Bormla were the original names of the cities before the Order of St. John came to Malta in the 1500s. The oldest of the Three Cities is Birgu, which has existed since prior to the Middle Ages. The other two cities, Senglea and Cospicua, were both founded by the Order of Saint John in the 16th and 17th centuries.

We drive approx. 20 min to Senglea and spend an hour here to visit the Gardjola Gardens which overlook the harbor and the historical viewing tower - Gardjola, hence the name of the gardens.

Then we walk with our guide along the waterfront to Cospicua, a beautiful quaint town and see St John's Cathedral. Continue to Vittoriosa, which witnessed the victory of the Great Siege, hence its name.

The walk is about 30 minutes without stops but we figure an hour to allow for photography, bathroom and refreshment breaks. Just as we are approaching Vittoriosa, we walk up a small hill to see the Notre Dame Gate (aka Bieb is-Sultan/King's Gate). We can only see the outside as it is closed to the public. Located within the Notre Dame Curtain between Notre Dame and St James Bastions at the highest point of the Cottonera area it is the main gate of the Cottonera Lines.

Afterwards, we walk back down and through Advanced Gate (aka The Gate of Aragon), the first of three gates on the side of Birgu. This gate dates to 1722 and is decorated with extraordinary engravings, although unfortunately they have been partially damaged during the uprising against the French in 1798.

On arrival in Vittoriosa we walk through the old town which houses the various residences of the Knights, the Auberges, and tour the Inquisitor's Palace (aka Sacred Palace), where the Inquisition played a very important role in the island's history as it did in Europe at that time.

Then we enjoy lunch in a typical Maltese restaurant in the city centre, near Republic Square.

After lunch, we tour the Maritime Museum. Then, enjoy some free time (about an hour) to wander and explore on your own. Our guide is available to ask questions and offer suggestions if you desire. He will designate a spot to meet at 4 pm.

We depart Birgu at 4:30 pm to Valletta by ferry, a pleasant 15 minute ride. On arrival at Valletta port we take the lift up from the port to the Upper Barrakka Gardens and our guide will walk with you back to the hotel, approx. 15 minutes. If you wish to stay longer in Vittoriosa, you can take a ferry back to Valletta on your own. They run every 30 minutes and cost is 2 euro. The guide's day finishes at 5 pm.

May 7/Oct 1 Day 5: Gozo Island (B,L)

Depart the hotel at 9 am for the 15 min transfer to Cirkewwa ferry terminal for the 9:45 am ferry departure. The thirty minute ferry takes us across the sea channel to this green, rural and traditional island of Malta. It has been rather untouched by the modern world. The island has been associated with Ogygia, home of the nymph Calypso in Homer's Odyssey.

Visit the temples of Ggantija (*Palace of the Giants*), which consist of two megalithic temples surrounded by a massive common boundary wall, that date to 3600-3200 BC.

Then proceed to Dwejra Bay, famous for the Azure window - a 28 meter natural arch surrounded by cliffs, panoramic views and hidden lagoons. It is naturally carved through the rock face. Unfortunately, rough heavy storms in March 2017, have collapsed the arch. You will have a boat ride through the cave and enjoy spectacular cliff views and see where the Azure window once stood.

Next visit Ta' Kola Windmill in Xaghra, Gozo, one of the few surviving windmills on the Maltese Islands dating back to the Knights' Period. Its origins go back to 1725 during the magistracy of Grand

Master Manoel de Vilhena (1722-36). As its construction seems to have incorporated bad quality stones and mortar, it had to be dismantled and reconstructed during the 1780s. The windmill's name Ta' Kola is connected with the last miller, Ġuzeppi Grech who was popularly known as Żeppu ta' Kola (Joseph the son of Nikola). Apart from operating the windmill, the miller would likely have performed several secondary jobs to keep himself employed when weather conditions made it impossible to operate the mill. When the wind was favorable for the mill to be operated, the miller would let the locals know by blowing through a triton-shell (Maltese bronja) and villagers would then bring their cereals to be ground into flour. It became a museum in 1992.

From here go to see Giordan Lighthouse, located on a hill above the village of Ghasri, on the northern coast of the island.

Then visit the capital of the island: Victoria and the citadel. A stop for lunch.

Afterwards, visit the fortified part of town where you will stop at the cathedral of St. Mary. The painting of its ceiling deceives visitors, as it gives the impression that it is domed, when in fact it is a flat ceiling. The citadel or Cittadella is perched high up on the hill of Victoria, 360 views of the island can be enjoyed from this view point.

Enjoy a refreshment drink (pay direct) at Xlendi Bay before taking the ferry back to Malta and return to your hotel. Evening at leisure.

May 8/Oct 2 Day 6: Central Malta: Mosta, Mgarr, Ta'Quali Crafts Village, Palazzo Parisio, Mdina, Rabat, Dingli Cliffs, Domvs Romana (B,L)

A full day tour of the central part of the island. Depart hotel 9 am.

We start with a 15 min drive to the town of Mosta, famous for its church with the 3rd largest unsupported dome in Europe.

Afterwards, a scenic 15 min drive to an agricultural town called Mgarr on the West side of the island, where you will learn about this quaint town, and the mystery behind Castello Zamitello.

Next, a 10 min drive to Ta'Quali Crafts Village, a hamlet constructed on the site of a WWII airbase. We will go inside a couple of studios to see crafts people at work.

Then, a 10 min drive to the 18th century Palazzo Parisio, formerly known as Scicluna Palace, Palazzo Scicluna, and officially Palazzo Parisio and Gardens located in the heart of the picturesque town of Naxxar. This palace is sometimes called the miniature Versailles of Malta, with its ornate interior and manicured gardens. Our tour here will be 1.5-2 hrs. <http://www.palazzoparisio.com/>

Then proceed, 14 min drive to Rabat for lunch, the best town for best quick meal restaurants.

After lunch, a 10 min drive to Mdina, the old capital city of the island. Visit to the Citadel of Mdina and its narrow winding streets shaded by palaces which belong to the nobility of Malta.

From here it's a 5 min drive to the Domvs Romana [Roman Villa] situated on the outskirts of Mdina. This was the first structure in the Maltese Islands to have been purposely built to protect and house an archaeological site and collection. It is a ruined Roman-era house located on the boundary between Mdina and Rabat. It was built in the 1st century BC as an aristocratic town house within the Roman city of Melite. In the 11th century, a Muslim cemetery was established on the remains of the domus. Most of the Roman artefacts and antiquities, including the few remaining marble pieces scattered in the streets of Mdina, were transferred to this museum, officially opened in 1882. The museum then continued to serve as a repository for all the Roman artefacts found around the Island. The tour here will be 45 min -1 hr.

Next, we head over to St. Paul's Catacombs in the suburb town of Rabat, 5 min drive. St. Paul's Catacombs are some of the most prominent features of Malta's early Christianity archeology. The archeological

clearing of the site has revealed an extensive system of underground galleries and tombs dating from the third to the eighth centuries CE.

The day culminates at the cliffs at Dingli, 8 min drive; the highest and most imposing of the island.

Return to the hotel, approx. 25 min drive; evening at leisure.

Sicily

May 9/Oct 3 Day 7: Ferry to Pozzallo-Drive Ragusa- Siracusa (B,L)

Transfer to the port for the 1 hr 45 min ferry departing at 7:30 am to Pozzallo on the southern tip of Sicily. On arrival, we are met by our driver and drive approx. 40 minutes Ragusa, a hilltop city.

Ragusa Ibla, the old town, is home to many baroque buildings, like the Duomo di San Giorgio, a grand church with paintings and stained-glass windows. There are sweeping views from the Giardino Ibleo, a public park with churches and fountains. In Ragusa Superiore, the city's more modern part, is ornate Ragusa Cathedral, with a museum of religious art and relics.

We will enjoy touring the city and stop for lunch in one of the casual outdoor restaurants.

Continue driving approx. 1 hour to Siracusa.

May 10/Oct 4 Day 8: Siracusa (Syracuse) (B,L)

We will enjoy a full day tour here including the archaeological area. The central Archaeological Park Neapolis comprises the Roman Amphitheater, the Teatro Greco and the Orecchio di Dionisio, a limestone cave shaped like a human ear. The Museo Archeologico Regionale Paolo Orsi exhibits terracotta artifacts, Roman portraits and Old Testament scenes carved into white marble.

Return to the hotel.

May 11/Oct 5 Day 9: Piazza Armerina-Agrigento (Porto Empedocle) (B,L)

Depart at 9am for the 10 min drive to Piazza Armerina.

Piazza Armerina, splendid art city woven into the heart of Sicily, boasts a slew of monuments that tell of its glorious past. Meanwhile, the apple of the citizens' eyes is the Villa Romana del Casale; originally the property of a powerful Roman family, it dates back to the 4th Century A.D.

This majestic Imperial villa, standing tall in the Province of Enna (perhaps the most "Roman" of places on the Island), is a magnificent rural abode, fascinating, above all, for its captivating mosaics, considered the most beautiful and best-preserved of their kind. The fruits of meticulous labor, these precise yet moving images make for a significant adornment to what remains of this extravagant residence – made a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1997.

The Villa Romana del Casale (trans. Roman Country Villa) in Piazza Armerina is considered to be one of the most important exemplars of an official governmental residence, attributed to the elaboration and exceptional beauty of its architectonic and decorative elements. Dated back to 320-350 A.D., the villa most likely belonged to a member of Rome's senatorial class, probably a governor of the Eternal City itself (*Praefectus Urbi*). However, some scholars would maintain that the villa was built and eventually expanded upon the official commission of an Imperial functionary of a rather high order; they have identified this person to be Maximian, a Tetrarch (one of four co-Emperors) of Diocletian.

Enjoy a simple lunch at a restaurant nearby.

Afterwards, we continue 2.5 hr drive to Agrigento via Catania. We will stop for a short tour of the city. Check into the hotel. Rest of afternoon/evening independent.

May 12/Oct 6 Day 10: Agrigento Full Day Tour (B,L)

Depart at 8:30 am for our full day tour of Agrigento.

Agrigento is a hilltop city on Sicily's southwest shore. Founded in 581 B.C. by Greek, Rhodium-Cretan colonists, it became Akragas the following century, and was one of the most resplendent centers in the Mediterranean. For that reason, in 1997, UNESCO registered it as a world heritage site.

We start with a visit to the ruins of the ancient city of Akragas in the Valley of the Temples, a vast archaeological site with well-preserved Greek temples. We will see Temple of Concordia, the largest and best preserved Doric temple in Sicily; Temple of Olympian Zeus, the largest Doric temple ever constructed although never completed; Temple of Hera Lacinia (Juno Lacinia) aka Temple D, Greek temple built during the Archaic Doric period approx. 450 BC and Temple of Heracles located on a rocky spur near Villa Aurea, also built in the Archaic Doric style.

We return to the modern city and enjoy a lunch break.

After lunch, we venture to the modern city's outskirts to visit the Museo Archeologico Regionale 'Pietro Griffo.' The museum illustrates the story of ancient Agrigento and its territory, from the prehistoric to the Hellenization periods. The rich collection of historical finds includes the Telamon over 7 metres high, the Ephebe of Agrigento.

Next to the museum, the medieval Church of S. Nicola containing the Sarcophagus of Phaedra (one of the maximum expressions of Roman sculpture in Sicily). Its lush garden awaits us for a cool break.

Then we visit:

The Cathedral of San Gerlando

Founded towards the end of the XI century by Bishop Gerlando, it is in a Norman-Gothic style and is entered by a wide, gently sloping staircase flanked by a magnificent, unfinished XV century bell tower. The building houses the precious Cathedral Treasure, particularly rich in works of art. Let's climb the bell tower to admire the roofs of Girgenti from above.

Santa Maria dei Greci and Abbazia di Santo Spirito

Along via di Santa Maria dei Greci we reach the church of the same name, in the Medieval town's oldest district. Built in the XII century, its foundations stand on the base of a V century B.C. Doric Temple which some believe to be that of Athena, on the Acropolis of Akragas. Preceded by a small, elegant courtyard, the Church facade has a XIII century Arab-Norman portal and lovely mullioned windows. Inside it has three naves with a wooden ceiling and is enriched by what remains of XIV century frescos, a XVI century wooden statue and a sarcophagus holding the remains of a nobleman from Palermo. From the left-hand nave you enter the northern base of the Doric temple, of which some column tambours are still visible.

Abbey of Santo Spirito. Built in 1260, the complex includes the church and the adjacent Cistercian monastery. Outside, the church has a magnificent Chiaramonte style portal surmounted by a rich rose window, in a more recent Baroque context. Inside, XVIII century, numerous Serpotta stuccoes decorating the church walls, a XVI century stoup, a Madonna by Gagini (or the Gagini school) and a 1758 wooden coffered ceiling containing the coat-of-arms of the Chiaramonte family. It was, in fact, the wife of Federico Chiaramonte, Marchisia Prefoglio, who made it possible for the complex to be built with a donation.

The adjacent monastery, or Great Abbey, dated 1290, has a magnificent cloister with Gothic portals: one an imposing pointed arch flanked by mullioned windows, entrance to the Chapter House. Inside the Monastery has some XVI and XIX frescos. The monastery nuns prepare delicious almond and pistachio cakes, from a centuries-old recipe... let's taste them!

May 13/Oct 7 Day 11: Selinunte-Mazara del Vallo (B,L)

We depart at 8 am. After 20 min drive we stop to see the curious Scala dei Turchi. This white cliff is located along the stretch of sea between Realmonte and Porto Empedocle (Agrigento) and its rock is made of a soft, limestone and a blinding white marl. Nature has worked this material over time, making it soft and sinuous, with the help of the sea and the salty breeze, creating terraces and smoothing every corner. You ascend the “staircase” admiring the intense blue sea.

Continue 1 hr 15 min to Selinunte. On arrival we embark on a tour of the Greek archaeological site.

Located on the southwest coast of Sicily, Selinunte is the largest archaeological site in Europe. On a par with pretty much anything found in Greece itself, Selinunte has lain abandoned for nearly 2,500 years, its numerous temples, its acropolis and its agora in dignified ruins. Once one of the most progressive and eminent cities in Magna Graecia, in 409 BC the Carthaginians launched a massive attack that turned the city into a pile of rubble. Located in a beautiful setting on a high plain overlooking the sea, it is flanked on both sides by golden beaches. We have a guided tour here by one of the on-site guides.

After our visit we will have lunch and continue approx. 40 min drive to Mazara del Vallo. On arrival check in to hotel and rest of the day/evening independent.

Mazara del Vallo sums up the character and history of the whole island! With the largest fishing fleet in Italy, a world famous Dancing Satyr netted from the sea, a labyrinthine North African Kasbah in the town centre and some delightful architecture, Mazara del Vallo offers a fascinating mix of culture, history, ethnicity and art.

Mazara del Vallo (spelt Mazzara until the Second World War) was founded in the 9th century BC by the Phoenicians, who used it as a strategic emporium for their trans-Mediterranean trading interests. Floating along on the familiar tide of Sicilian History Mazara soon became part of Magna Graecia, when it served as a port for nearby Selinunte and then to the Romans during whose dominance, in the 3rd century AD, the town's most famous son, San Vito, was born. After a life of miracles, including curing Diocletian's son of epilepsy, San Vito was martyred in Rome in 303 AD by the same, ungrateful Emperor.

It was under the Arabs, who invaded in 827, however, that Mazara's potential was fully realized. Under their rule the town assumed an importance on the island second only to Palermo. Still today Meghrebian influences course through the town's streets, not least in the historic Kasbah quarter, where around 3,000 (mainly) Tunisians live, work and study. The Arabs developed the traditional maritime and commercial activities of Mazara, but also made it an important administrative, cultural and juridical centre.

May 14/Oct 8 Day 12: Mazara del Vallo (B,L)

Depart at 9 am for our tour. We start with a walking tour of Piazza della Repubblica the city's central piazza. It is an attractive space edged by elegant buildings, including the Cattedrale del San Salvatore, the two-story Seminario dei Chierici (dating from 1710) and, on the opposite side of the square, the 18th-century Seminario Vescovile, with its impressive 11-arched portico.

We shall tour Cattedrale del Santissimo Salvatore (aka Basil Cathedral), an imposing sight with its glistening cluster of emerald-green, ceramic-tiled domes. Originally dating to the 11th century, it was completely rebuilt in baroque style in the 17th century. Over the portal is a 16th-century relief of Count Roger trampling a Saracen. Inside, you'll find a heavily ornamented altar featuring the Transfiguration, surrounded by a bevy of statues by Domenico and Antonello Gagini, and stucco work by Antonio Ferraro. In the chapel to the right of the altar is a rare 13th-century painted cross.

Next, a short walk to Chiesa di Sant'Ignazio, an early 18th-century church that collapsed in the 1930s, but its roofless remains make a photogenic detour, with their circular colonnade of twin columns backed by a vine-draped stone wall.

Lunch at a casual restaurant.

After lunch, we visit Mueso de Satiro Danzante, the jewel in Mazara's crown. The central exhibit is a bronze statue known as the Satiro danzante (Dancing Satyr), pulled up from the deep sea by local fishermen in the late 1990s.

Then a walk through the Casbah, the old Arab quarter, where you will see typical Arab style homes with decorative facades including colorful tiles. This area is largely inhabited by the Tunisian community. Inside the Casbah there are many restaurants that serve traditional dishes.

May 15/Oct 9 Day 13: Mazara del Vallo – Segesta-Palermo (B,L)

Depart at 8:30 am for the one hour drive to Segesta and visit Parco Archaeological. We have a guided tour here by one of the on-site guides.

The Tempio di Segesta (Temple of Segesta) is perhaps the best-preserved Doric temple in the world, and the only freestanding limestone temple in Sicily (all the others are made of sandstone). It stands on a 304m (997-ft.) hill, on the edge of a deep ravine carved by the Pispisa River. Built in the 5th century B.C., the temple is shrouded in mystery. It has all the specifications of a typical Doric temple, but the columns were surprisingly never fluted. The inner architectural components are also missing -- a roof was never added, the tabs used to transport the stones were never removed which has led historians to suggest that the temple was hastily built to impress the Athenian ambassadors, to whom Segesta had turned in search of an ally against Selinunte.

We will drive up to the Teatro (Theater), at the top of Mount Barbaro (431m/1,414 ft.) and see the excavations currently underway. The theater, which dates from the 3rd century B.C. or maybe earlier, has been perfectly restored. A semicircle with a diameter of 63m (207 ft.), it was hewn right out of the side of the mountain and allows for some spectacular views, stretching out to Castellamare del Golfo and all over the surrounding farmland. In ancient days, the theater could hold nearly 4,000 spectators along its cavea of 20 semicircular rows -- there are still etchings on some of them to distinguish the "rich-folk" sections from the cheap seats. The site is still used for the staging of operas, concerts and plays every summer, so if you have the time you can watch a work by one of the ancient Greek playwrights performed in Italian against a spectacular backdrop on a balmy summer evening, just as audiences would have done thousands of years ago. Beneath the theater lies a grotto dating back to the Bronze Age.

After our tour, we drive 1 hr to Palermo, stopping for lunch en-route. On arrival check in to hotel.

This afternoon, a walking tour starting from the heart of Palermo, the Politeama Square with its magnificent theater built in 1874. We'll walk down via Ruggiero Settimo, an elegant street with shops that runs through the city to the Central Station.

Onward we have a guided tour of the Massimo Theater (opened in 1897).

Opposite the theater are 2 pedestrian streets via Bara and Via dell'Orologio which bring us to the Olivella, historic district. The area is lively in evenings with many restaurants and artist shops. You can remain for dinner on your own, or return to the hotel.

May 16/Oct 10 Day 14: Palermo (B,L)

Depart at 9 am for a full day tour of Palermo, capital of Sicily. We start with a visit to the Regional Archaeological Museum Antonio Salinas (opens at 9 am).

Afterwards, we walk down via Maqueda, built in the 17th century, taking us to the intersection with old Cassaro (now Corso Vittorio Emanuele) which opens to the wonderful Quattro Canti Square.

Piazza Vigliena, known as Quattro Canti, is an octagonal square with four richly decorated and quite appealing façades. The four corners divide the old city into four neighborhoods or districts (La Loggia, Il Capo, La Kalsa and l'Albergheria). Heading to the right, we go towards the Cathedral and the Royal Palace.

We will then walk down, the oldest street in Palermo, dating to the Phoenicians, passing thru the historic Vucciria market (La Vucciria). The Vucciria opens to the square San Domenico and its large church.

Other highlights of the day include:

9th century Palazzo dei Normanni and the extraordinary Cappella Palatina (chapel) located on the mid level of Palazaa dei Normanni, Cattedrale di Palermo, 14th century Chiesa e Monastero di Santa Caterina d'Alessandria, 11th century Cattedrale di Monreale, Galleria Regionale della Sicilia showcasing Sicilian artists dating from the Middle Ages to the 18th century and the 18th century Pinacoteca Villa Zito art gallery exhibiting Sicilian-themed art spanning the 17th to 20th centuries.

We stop for lunch at a mid-point.

This evening, from Quattro Canti we go to the Piazza della Vergogna, the Martorana and San Cataldo and the streets of the old artisans (Calderai, Candelai) and the Ballarò market.

May 17/Oct 11 Day 15: Palermo – Cefalù – Messina (B,L)

Depart at 8:30 am and drive one hour to Cefalù, a coastal city in northern Sicily. We visit its' Norman cathedral, a 12th-century fortress-like structure with elaborate Byzantine mosaics and soaring twin towers.

Nearby, visit the Mandralisca Museum, home to archaeological exhibits and a picture gallery with a portrait by Antonello da Messina.

Continue, driving approx. 1 hr 45 min to Messina.

Messina is a harbor city in northeast Sicily, separated from mainland Italy by the Strait of Messina. It's known for the Norman Messina Cathedral, with its Gothic portal, 15th-century windows and an astronomical clock on the bell tower. Nearby are marble fountains decorated with mythological figures, like the Fontana di Orione, with its carved inscriptions, and the Neptune Fountain, topped by a statue of the sea god.

Check-in to the hotel and lunch at a local restaurant followed by an afternoon walking tour.

Preparing for the excursion to Stromboli: please pack a small bag (your carry-on) with clothing and essentials for the overnight in Stromboli. Your large suitcases will be locked in the mini-van in the guarded parking lot of the ferry terminal.

May 18/Oct 12 Day 16: Messina – Stromboli Volcano (B)

Stromboli, which in Sicilian dialect is called "Iddu" (He), is an active volcano that was born 160,000 years ago, just over 900 meters above sea level. Its name derives from the Greek word Στρογγύλη, which means "round" due to its almost circular shape. The Stromboli volcano rises 924 meters above sea level, but actually has an altitude of 2,000 meters above the ocean floor. There are three active craters on the summit. A significant geological feature of the volcano is the Sciara del Fuoco ("Road of Fire"), a large horseshoe-shaped depression generated over the past 13,000 years by several collapses on the northwestern face of the cone. Blocks of lava and fire descend through it to the sea after each of the frequent explosions.

Pick up at 8:15 am. Transfer from Messina to Milazzo Port, 40 min. Board the ferry with your guide; boat departs 9:30 am for a one hour ride through the Tyrrhenian Sea to Lipari Island. Our guide will give a brief walking tour and explanation of the island, then enjoy some leisure time and lunch on your own, pay direct.

At approx. 1:30 pm return to the boat and cruise to Panarea Island, the smallest of the seven inhabited Aeolian Islands (UNESCO listed). Skirting Monte Rosa and Canneto Bay, we admire the bay of Cala Junco, renowned for its crystal clear waters above which lies the promontory of Capo Milazzese where the remains of a prehistoric village from the Bronze Age are still found today. Once at the port, you will go down into Panarea to visit the narrow streets of the island.

Return to the boat (time will be communicated on board), to continue to the island of Stromboli navigating along a micro-archipelago within the Aeolian archipelago, formed by the collapse of an ancient volcano into the sea. Along the way, the boat is skirting the islets of Panarea: Dattilo, Lisca Bianca, Bottaro (where the phenomenon of boiling water occurs), Basiluzzo and Spinazzola.

Around 4.30 pm we will reach the port of Stromboli. Disembark and walk approx. 150 m (2 min walk on smooth sidewalk) with our guide to the hotel for check in. Afterwards a walking tour of the island. Leisure time to visit Piazza San Vincenzo and dinner on your own (pay direct).

At 630 or 7 pm (exact time to be confirmed) board the boat (without your guide) passing from the islet of Strombolicchio, a volcanic neck testifying to the presence of an ancient caldera. The boat continues to Sciarra del Fuoco, a deep black lava scar down the side of the volcano. Unforgettable sceneries will be seen during navigation to the Sciarra del Fuoco. Admire the spectacle of nocturnal eruptions that illuminate the nights and the hearts of visitors. (excursion lasts 1.5 hrs).

May 19/Oct 13 Day 17: Stromboli – Taormina – Catania (BL)

We take ferry boat departing at 7:15am and arriving in Milazzo Port at 9:35am. On arrival, drive 1 hr 45 min to Catania. En-route, after about 50 min, we stop in Taormina, a hilltop town on the east coast of Sicily. It sits near Mount Etna, an active volcano with trails leading to the summit.

We visit Teatro Antico do Taormina, Porta Messina (landmark stone doorway to the city), Porta Catania (arched entrance to the old city), Duomo di Taormina (medieval Catholic church), Palazzo Corvaia (10th century medieval palace), Chiesa Madonna della Rocca (historic chapel built into a rock with striking panoramas), Taormina Castle (historic landmark atop a mountain with sweeping views of the city and coastline).

We shall then venture into Piazza Duomo for lunch.

Continue 30 minutes to Catania.

Catania is located on the east coast of Sicily on the Ionian Sea and is the second largest city in Sicily. It sits under the imposing shadow of Mount Etna, or A Muntagna, as the locals call it. The volcano has had a significant influence on the city's history and its actual existence, having destroyed the city on several occasions. The most destructive being an eruption in the 17th century. Catania was covered in lava in 1669 and then 24 years later, in 1693, an earthquake shook the town to its foundations.

Transfer to hotel for check-in. Rest of the day is independent.

May 20/Oct 14 Day 18: Catania: Excursion to Mount Etna (B,L)

Depart at 8:30 am for a 50 min drive to Mount Etna. We enjoy a half day visit of Mt. Etna, including round-trip funicular.

Transfer to a local farmhouse for visit of vineyards followed by lunch with wine tasting. Return to Catania for overnight.

May 21/Oct 15 Day 19: Depart (B)

Transfer to the airport.

PRICE: Malta and Sicily: \$7485 based on min 4 people. Single Room Supplement: \$1185
Upgrade options (based on availability): Hotel Bagilo Della Luna, Agrigento from superior to deluxe: \$196 per room for the 2 nights-- deluxe rooms views of the sea or temples, are located in the tower and no elevator; Hotel Eurostars Centrale Palace Palermo from standard to superior \$80 per room for the 2 nights

Plus Ferry ticket to Pozzallo, Sicily: \$90

Includes:

Malta

Accommodations based on availability, with breakfast.

Valletta: Hotel Osborne 3* housed in a 16th century palace built by the knights of the Order of St. John, in the heart of Valletta, walk to museums, cafes, restaurants, shops <http://www.osbornehotel.com/>

Airport transfers on the tour arrival and departure days (extra cost if arriving or departing other days)
Transport: Renault or Mercedes minibus: 8 seats/6 people, 10 seats/8 people, 14-18 seats/ 10-12 people
English speaking driver plus accompanying licensed guide

Entrance Fees

Five simple lunches (so we don't waste time with a long/slow meal service); pay direct for beverages

Bottled water, 1 litre per person per day during drives and touring

Sicily

Accommodations based on availability, with breakfast.

Siracusa: Hotel Gargallo, B&B, superior room; steps from historical sites <https://hotelgargallo.it/>

Agrigento: Hotel Bagilo Della Luna, superior rooms overlooking the Valley of the Temples
<https://www.bagliodellaluna.com/>

Mazara del Vallo: Mahara Hotel, classic room with balcony <https://www.maharahotel.it/>

Palermo: Hotel Eurostars Centrale Palace 4* deluxe room; located in the heart of the city.
<https://www.eurostarshotels.it/eurostars-centrale-palace.html>

Messina: Hotel Re Vittorio 4* in historic center, deluxe room <http://www.revittoriodeluxe.it/>

Stromboli: Hotel Ossidian 4* room with volcano view <https://www.hotelossidiana.it/en>

Catania: Hotel Etna 454, located in an ancient Palace <http://www.etnea454.it/en/>

Airport transfers on the tour arrival and departure days (extra cost if arriving or departing other days)

Transport by private mini van such as Mercedes Vito or Peugeot 508; or mini-bus depending on group size

Accompanying driver/licensed guide for group size 4-6 people; less than 4 people will be English speaking driver + local guides at each site join-in tour

Ten simple lunches (so we don't waste time in midday with a long/slow meal service); includes mineral water, wine or cappuccino based on 4 people and above; not included for less than 4 people

Bottled water, 1 litre per person per day during drives and touring

Entrance Fees

Does Not Include: international flight, the tourist tax approx. 2-4 euro per day payable directly to hotels; Ferry from Malta to Pozzallo (priced separately), Tips to drivers, guides, hotel porters, meals other than listed