
European Islands: Sicily and Crete

May 10-26 & September 13-29, 2022
Select sequential countries for a shorter tour



Scala dei Turchi, Sicily

Sicily

May 10/Sep 13 Day 1: Arrival Catania

Met on arrival at the Catania airport and transfer approx. 50 min to the hotel in Siracusa.

May 11/Sep 14 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 12/Sep 15 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 13/Sep 16 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 14/Sep 17 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 15/Sep 18 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 16/Sep 19 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 17/Sep 20 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 Palazao 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 18/Sep 21 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.

May 19/Sep 22 Day 16: Messina – Taormina – Catania (B,L)

Depart at 9 am driving 1 hr 20 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/Sep 23 Day 17: Catania: Excursion to Mount Etna (B,L)

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

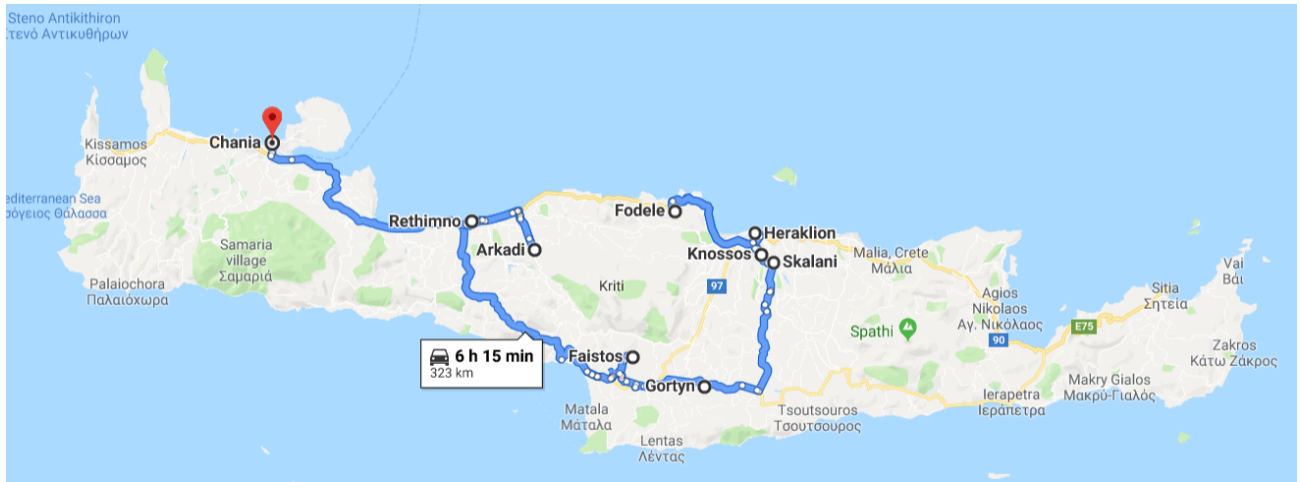
Transfer to a local farmhouse for visit of vineyards followed by lunch with wine tasting. Return to Catania for overnight.

Greece: Crete

May 21/Sep 24 Day 18: Arrival Athens (B)

Transfer to the airport for flight Aegean Airlines 673, dep Catania 2:35 pm, arrive Athens 5:15 pm. (schedule subject to change) Transfer to your hotel.

CRETE ROUTE



May 22/Sep 25 Day 19: Fly to Heraklion (B,L)

Depart hotel at 6 am (sorry) and transfer to the airport for Olympic Air flt dep 7:30 am, arrive 8:30 am. On arrival transfer to hotel for early check-in and breakfast at Olive Green Hotel.

Pick up at 10 am to start the tour including visits to: El Greco museum in Fodele village, the archaeological museum in Heraklion and Knossos.

Start with a drive 30 minutes north to the El Greco Museum Fodele village. The beautiful village of Fodele is the birthplace of the famous painter EL GRECO. The village is built in a very green environment and is known as a center of traditional textiles and handicrafts.

Afterwards, return to Heraklion to visit the archaeological museum. A stop for lunch. Then drive south 10 minutes to Knossos, the ancient capital of the great king Minos. Your guided tour will take you through the fantastic ruins of the ancient palace complex, which served as the administrative and religious centers for the whole region. The restoration undertaken by Sir Arthur Evans, though criticized by some for its modernity, helps the traveler to both visualize the palace as it was and understand its labyrinthine complexity.

Continue about an hour south to visit Skalani and Karteros traditional villages. Return to hotel will be approx. 7 pm. *Overnight in Heraklion*

May 23/Sep 26 Day 20: Gortys – Festos – Rethymno (B,L)

Depart at 8:30 am and start with a one hour drive to Gortys, an ancient Greek/Roman town where archaeologists found judicial laws pertaining marriage, inheritance, adoption, divorce, etc. dating to 500 B.C. written in the Cretan Doric language.

Afterwards, travel about 45 minutes through the scenic rolling hills and the countryside across the island of Crete to the ancient Palace of Festos. This city was second in importance after Knossos, ruling over the southern region of the island. The Palace is strategically situated high above the Valley of Messara on the top of a hill. It was occupied by King Radamanthys, the brother of King Minos. There, the famous Festos Disc was found, a disc with hieroglyphic signs of an unknown language stamped with seals on both sides. The central courtyard, the complex of living quarters, the theatre will help you to learn more About the Minoan Kingdom.

Next, we drive westward to the beautiful town of Rethymno, one of the most historical and picturesque towns on Crete. Although the town is developed, it still preserves the traditional local color and especially the old Venetian town with the little narrow streets and the endless shops, as well as the Venetian fortress, bring back memories of older times.

Arrival will be about 3:30 pm; at 4:30 pm option for a private cooking lesson with the hotel restaurant chef. And enjoy eating your creations afterwards! Extra cost, you must let us know in advance.

Overnight in Rethymnon

May 24/Sep 27 Day 21: Rethymno – Arkadi – Chania (B,L)

Depart at 9 am this morning for a city tour of Rethymno and visit Rethymno fortress.

Afterwards, drive 30 minutes to the very historical Monastery of Arkadi. The Monastery is set in a spectacular scenic at the edge of a gorge and represents a symbol of freedom for the Cretans, as a big battle between the Turks and the Greeks took place there in 1866 which practically led to the liberation of Crete. A stop for lunch along the way.

Continue to drive westward 1 hr 30 min to the picturesque town of Chania, with its Venetian harbor, narrow lanes and old buildings from the Venetian and Turkish periods. Arrival will be approx. 3 pm.

The town has many beautiful Neo-classical buildings and a unique covered market in the shape of a cross. Enjoy a city tour and visit the Archaeological Museum of Chania.

Overnight in Chania

May 25/Sep 28 Day 22: Chania – Seven villages excursion (B,L)

Depart at 9 am this morning and drive up to the mountain to visit the 7 Villages of Apokoronas in the East part of Chania Region. You will visit traditional villages, taste original Cretan delicacies, view the beautiful nature of Crete and be introduced to the traditions of the island.

We enjoy a visit to the folklore museum, a live demonstration of knitting technique of “Kopaneli,” a raki distillery (the cherished local spirit), a cheese factory – with some cheese tastings off course and a tasting of the world famous local olive oil. The experience will conclude with a delicious “meze” (nibbles) lunch.

Overnight in Chania

May 26/Sep 29 Day 23: Depart

Transfer to airport for flight to Athens Sky Express departing 9:25 am, arrival 10:15 am. Those ending the tour remain at the airport.

PRICE: Sicily & Crete: \$8570 based on min 4 people. Single Room Supplement: \$1220
Plus flight Catania-Athens: \$TBD. Optional Cooking class in Rethymno Crete TBD

Includes:

Sicily

Accommodations based on availability, with breakfast.

Siracusa: Hotel La Posta 3* <https://www.hotelpostasiracusa.it/>

Agrigento: Hotel Foresteria Baglio Della Luna, 4* boutique over-looking the Valley of the Temples
<http://www.bagliodellaluna.com/it/>

Mazara del Vallo: Melia Resort Dimore Storiche 3* historic hotel <http://www.meliaresort.it/>

OR Mahara Hotel 4* seafont, 5 min walk to historic center <https://www.maharahotel.it/>

Palermo: Eurostar Centrale Palace 4* in heart of the city, located in Old Palazzo Tarallo; building with vintage frescoes and furniture <https://www.eurostarshotels.co.uk/eurostars-centrale-palace.html>

OR Palazzo Sitano 4*, in historic center <https://www.hotelpalazzositano.it/it/>

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

Catania: Hotel Mercure Catania Excelsior 4* superior room, balcony, views of Mount Edna <https://excelsiorcatania.com/en/>

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

Transport by private minibus

English speaking driver plus licensed guide

11 lunches

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

Entrance Fees

Greece: Crete

Accommodations based on availability, with breakfast.

Athens: Herodion Hotel 4* standard room <http://www.herodion.gr/en>

Heraklion: Olive Green Hotel, in the heart of old town, Popular <https://www.olivegreenhotel.com/>

Rethymno: Avli, Boutique Hotel, superior room <http://www.avli.gr/>

Belmondo Hotel, standard room <https://www.belmondohotel.com/>

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

Transport by private Mercedes Vitos minivan 7 seats (up to 5 people); Mercedes Sprinter minibus 12-19 seats (6-12 people)

English speaking driver/ city guide (1-5 people); with separate licensed guide (6-12 people)

Four lunches

Bottled water, soft drinks and snacks in vehicle during drives and touring. Wifi on the vehicle!

Disposable ponchos, umbrellas and walking sticks are available if needed

Entrance Fees

Flight tickets: Athens-Heraklion & Chania-Athens

Does Not Include: international flight, the tourist tax approx. 2-4 euro per day payable directly to hotels; no tax in Cagliari. Flight Sardinia-Malta & Catania-Athens (priced separately), Tips to drivers, guides, hotel porters, meals other than listed