

ITALIAN JOURNEYS

4400 Cold Springs Road, Winston-Salem, NC 27106

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Sicily -November 2 to 12, 2010

Sicilians refer to the warm weather they often enjoy in early November as the “Summer of San Martino.” The saint, a fourth century bishop from Tours, is said to have shared his cloak with a beggar shivering by the roadside. His act of kindness brought about the brief return of summer. And that is what we’ve experienced: lunches in piazzas, sunbathing amidst the ruins, even swimming. And virtually no other tourists. Needless to say, we’re convinced that November is the best time to visit the island.

Weather notwithstanding, Sicily continues to be one of our most popular destinations and for good reason. A small island at the crossroads of the Mediterranean, it has been settled and/or conquered by Greeks, Phoenicians, Romans, Saracens, Normans, Swabians, Angevins, Aragonese, Spanish, Bourbons and finally Republican troops from mainland Italy. All left their mark, which makes for a marvelous stew of different cultures and eras--Doric temples, a Roman amphitheater, medieval mosaics, Spanish Baroque churches—and all of it richly layered within an island the size of Vermont.

The itinerary that follows provides a rough idea of what we will see. Three-quarters of the island is rich in Greek, Phoenician, and Roman ruins—not to mention charming cities and beautiful seascapes. And then, just when we’ve had our fill of temples and Venuses, we reach Palermo, the jewel of the Middle Ages and a celebration of light, color, and energy.

Tuesday, November 2 - Arrive Taormina. (See travel options) Afternoon free. Welcome dinner. (Grand Hotel Timeo; Taormina; Dinner provided)

Wednesday, November 3 - Visit to the Roman theater at Taormina, with striking views of Etna and the sea. The afternoon is free for shopping and strolling through this most elegant of cities or for hiking to the ruined castle perched above the town. Taormina has several excellent pottery shops. (Taormina; D)

Thursday, November 4 - Drive to Syracuse, an appealing city surrounded by the sea. A morning visit to the Castle of Euryalus, a rare example of Greek defensive architecture. After lunch we’ll have our own puppet show. (Puppets are an entertaining and endearing part of Sicilian folk culture.) Early evening stroll through the old quarter, Ortygia, with its ancient Greek temple that now functions as the city’s cathedral. (Grand Hotel Ortygia, Syracuse; L)

Friday, November 5 - Early morning excursion for local pastries and a market tour. Then on to the archeological park of Syracuse, noted for its mostly intact Greek theater, and the newly renovated archeological museum with its wealth of interesting artifacts. After lunch, we drive to Noto, a sumptuous city synonymous with the Sicilian Baroque. (Syracuse; L)

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Saturday, November 6 - A quick visit to the church of Santa Cecilia, to admire Caravaggio's stunning painting of the young saint's entombment. Then inland to Piazza Armerina for a visit to the Villa Casale, a 3rd century hunting villa with astonishing floor mosaics, most of which, by this time, will have been newly restored. Elegant lunch before we move on to Agrigento, where we can glimpse the temple ridge at dusk. (Villa Athena, Agrigento, L, D)

Sunday, November 7 - Few ancient sites rival the magnificence of Agrigento. We will hike the temple ridge in the morning, examining each of its three temples, and then visit the museum where a number of choice artifacts are housed. After lunch, we hike through the Kolymbetra—a beautiful citrus grove where ancient agricultural techniques have been revived. Dinner at our hotel. (Agrigento; L and D)

Monday, November 8 - Further along the coast, sits Selinunte (Selinus) with remains of temples and the ancient city. In the afternoon we continue on to the ancient stone quarries at Cave di Cusa that stand much as they did when Selinus was sacked in 409 BC. Half chiseled column drums rise hauntingly from the rocks. We will spend the night in the beguiling hill town of Erice. (Hotel Moderno; Erice; L and D)

Tuesday, November 9 - Our morning is free to wander about Erice, a beautiful medieval town situated on a mountaintop and looking out to sea. Since prehistoric times the site has been associated with various goddesses. Today it is more noted for its delicious almond pastries made by local nuns. In the afternoon, we will visit the temple and theater of Segesta. (Centrale Palace Hotel; Palermo; L and D)

Wednesday, November 10 - A day of Norman Byzantine sites: The gem-like 12th c Palatine Chapel, the massive, gold encrusted cathedral of Monreale, along with its cloister, and, finally, after lunch, La Zisa, a carefully restored Norman pleasure palace. And, finally, we'll stop at the archeological museum, primarily to see the sculptural metopes from Selinus, rare examples of Doric sculpture. (Palermo, D)

Thursday, November 11 - Today we segue forward to the baroque with a tour to include Giacomo Serpotta's marvelous stucco-work in the Oratorio of San Lorenzo, the bustling market of Ballero, in passing, and the extravagantly baroque Casa Professa. After a very nice lunch, we will visit the regional art museum housed in the lovely Palazzo Abatellis, and, finally, the Palazzo Mirto, a fully furnished patrician palace recently turned over to the state, intact. It's a fascinating window on aristocratic life in Palermo. (Palermo; L)

Friday, November 12 - The tour ends with breakfast. We will arrange transportation to Palermo's airport. Flights should be booked into Catania by November 2 (or into Rome--see below) and out of Palermo on November 12.

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Bed - Here we can look forward to real luxury. Our hotel in Taormina is one of the prettiest in all of Italy while the Villa Athena next to the temple ridge in Agrigento has recently undergone a splendid renovation. Thus, with the exception of our little 3-star hotel in Erice (one night), we will enjoy a high level of comfort throughout the trip.

Board - One can expect to eat well in Sicily: abundant seafood, pungent vegetables, exotic Arabic/Italian dishes unheard of on the mainland, and good local wines. For most meals, we order interesting regional dishes such that by the end of the trip we will have sampled the best of the Sicilian cuisine. Indeed, we believe that understanding the food of Sicily is one step towards understanding the culture.

Cost and Reservations - Cost per person, double occupancy: \$5000

This includes 10 nights in hotels, all breakfasts, meals as outlined in the brochure, admission fees, guide fees, tips, and private bus transportation. Not included are air and airport transportation, hotel "extras," and discretionary purchases. Reservations require a deposit of \$500 per person. The group will include no more than 16 participants.

Supplement for single occupancy: \$600

Room upgrades available upon request.

Rome Add-on - For those who wish to start off in Rome, we are offering the following:

Sunday, October 31 - Afternoon walk through Rome's ghetto to the Capitoline Hill for a chandelier-lit tour of the Capitoline museum, followed by dinner at a favorite restaurant. A perfect Roman Halloween.

Monday, November 1 - A morning tour of Rome's historic center, including the Pantheon, Piazza Navona, and everything in between. It's an essential Italian Journey's tour as well as a primer in how an ancient city moves into the modern era. Lunch to follow.

Tuesday, November 2 - Morning tour of the beautiful Galleria Borghese, after which we go directly to the airport to catch our midday flight to Catania.

Costs for the Rome Add-ons available upon request.

For further details:
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