

Italy: Sicily

Tour-Only Itinerary

You have veered off the hiking trails into an artisan studio that keeps the craft of Sicily's brightly painted horse carts alive. These wagons with their delicately rendered pastoral scenes seduce you, much like the lava fields, vineyards, boutique hotel, and Michelin-starred restaurant on Mt. Etna's slopes. Like the Baroque magnificence of Ragusa's hillside Old Town. And like the ancient quarry pathway along the Cave of Mercy. There's more to follow – more mouthwatering meals and local wines at welcoming *agriturismi*. More glimpses into a rich past in Syracuse, once a cultural capital of Magna Graecia, and at the haunting necropolis of Pantalica. More breathtaking nature preserves and their profusion of birdlife. Indeed, this walking tour of Sicily is painting an altogether new and sublime canvas for you.



Highlights

- Venture across the slopes of Mt. Etna – Europe's largest active volcano–hiking trails through wildflowers, forests, and over a hardened lava flow.
- Dine on Michelin-starred Sicilian fare accompanied by local wines at your boutique hotel and spa on the slopes of Etna.
- Learn about the cherished tradition of the Carretti Siciliani, the island's vibrant horse carts, while exploring Ragusa Ibla.
- Follow scenic pathways through the Oasi Vendicari Nature Reserve, home to 40 types of birds and the perfect place for a refreshing dip in the sea.
- Stroll amid the ancient walls and columns of the Syracuse Archaeological Park with an expert

historian, visiting the park's famed Roman amphitheater along the way.

On all Guided Adventures you can count on ...



Expert local guides to introduce you to the best of your destination.



Gracious accommodations that are a clean, comfortable home away from home.



Off-the-beaten-path places you'd never find on your own.



Experts to handle all the details.



A maximum of 18 fun-loving fellow travelers to share the journey.



Flight + Tour Combos include plane tickets, airport car service, and pre- and post-tour accommodations.



Delicious, authentic multi-course meals—virtually all are included.

Activity Level

This tour is one of our Guided Walking Adventures, rated easy to moderate, with an average of 3 to 6 miles per day. Maximum elevation gains and losses during the walks range from approximately 500 to 1,000 feet. There are daily ascents and descents that can be steep in sections and challenging due to uneven footing. The terrain is varied—along cobbled streets, dirt roads, well-maintained trails, sandy or rocky coastal paths, and lava flows. The days on this tour are quite full to allow for the inclusion of diverse regions of cultural and historical importance.

DAY 1

Join your *Italy: Sicily* tour. Mt. Etna's northern slope

3-4 miles, easy to moderate, 500-ft. maximum elevation gain and loss

Your guides meet you in the lobby of Hotel Monte Tauro in Taormina at 8:30 a.m. They will be wearing Country Walkers shirts. Please be dressed for hiking (with appropriate footwear and backpack).

Departing Taormina, a short drive delivers you to your first trailhead in the foothills of Mt. Etna's quiet, picturesque, northern slopes. Etna's majestic cone is the highest mountain in Sicily and one of the largest active volcanoes in Europe. Over 11,000 feet high and occupying an area larger than metropolitan New York, the mountain presents a fascinating alpine environment that combines the beauty of nature and the uncontrollable essence of fire. Hiking options on or near the volcano's slopes today are weather- and volcano-dependent and may include an easy trail from Linguaglossa, crossing through hazelnut and olive groves and along part of a converted rail trail to the village of Castiglione di Sicilia. Referred to as "the quastallum" (or the castle) by a famous Arab geographer, Castiglione di Sicilia is located on a hill between the Alcantara Valley and the Etna Park, offering pretty views among fruit trees, vineyards, and lava flow. On arrival to Castiglione, wind your way through the historic center and continue across the valley to Motta Camastra, where you are treated to a Sicilian-style lunch of crusty bread, olives, fruit, cured meats, local pasta and cheeses enjoyed under the pergola. After lunch, explore the wonderful medieval atmosphere of this village, which was featured as the town of Corleone in Francis Ford Coppola's film, *The Godfather*.

This afternoon you travel to your nearby home-away-from-home for the next two nights: a family-owned country boutique hotel set amid grapevines and citrus groves. Settle in, then gather poolside for a welcome aperitivo, followed by a delicious dinner in the hotel's Michelin-starred restaurant showcasing elegant, refined Sicilian fare, paired with a glass (or two) of wine from the nearby fertile slopes.

Included Meals: Lunch, Dinner

DAY 2

Mt. Etna's southern slope: Monte Concilio, Monte Grosso and Monte Gemmellaro

2-5 miles, moderate to challenging, 400-1,000 ft. maximum elevation gain and loss

Following a delicious breakfast, begin your day with a drive to Mt. Etna's picturesque southern slopes. Hiking options today are again weather- and volcano-dependent and may include trails above the town of Nicolosi, the gateway to many excursions on the volcano, and home to the Museum of Etna, which showcases the geologic and historic aspects of the volcano. Your featured trail options begins at an elevation of just over 4,000 feet and offers lots of flexibility in terms of mileage and elevation gain (and loss), allowing those who wish to hike up and around Monte Gemmellaro, formed during an eruption in 1886, the ability to see the summit craters and to complete the full 5-mile circuit, with elevation gain and loss of 1,000 feet. A shorter circuit is around Monte Grosso, and at approximately 2 miles, includes elevation gain and loss of 400 feet. (Should you wish to do less mileage and climbing, you may also walk up and back for about a mile along the same well-established trail and with some nice views provided it's a clear day.) Regardless of how far or high you choose to trek today, weather permitting, as you approach Monte Grosso, you'll enjoy expansive views to the Gulf of Catania as well as over the remains of various volcanic eruptions with particular volcanic structures such as hornitos, pyroclastic cones, lava flows and flow channels. The trail is dedicated to Carlo Gemmellaro, professor of natural history, geology and mineralogy at the University of Catania in the early 1800s, whose research contributed to the development of an internationally renowned geological school. The terrain is mixed, including wide and narrow paths of lava gravel and the vegetation features pine and broom.

Almost constant activity from this volcano has blessed its slopes with fertile soils for agriculture, orchards, and vineyards. Midday, you arrive at one of the many emerging wineries on Etna's slopes, where you're treated to a light lunch and tasting. Its location affords excellent views of the vineyards on one side and the

volcano on the other. You return to your country house hotel with time to relax and refresh prior to stepping out for another dinner that reflects the bounty of the region.

Included Meals: Breakfast, Lunch, Dinner

DAY 3

Val di Catania: Sentiero dei Cristallo di Gesso to Tenuta Serravalle. Travel to Ragusa

3-4 mile options, easy to moderate (with some challenging terrain), 350-ft. elevation gain and 1,000-ft. elevation loss

Awaken at your tranquil resort to a delicious breakfast of eggs, local cheeses and cured meats, fresh seasonal fruits, yogurt, pastries and bread, and of course a cappuccino (or espresso). Then travel about 60-75 minutes to your trailhead in Ramacca, just west of the Plain of Catania. This area is known for both its archaeological and agricultural importance. Your pathway is immersed in the hilly landscape of the Erei mountains, and gypsum rock presents in well-stratified formations of coarse crystals like selenite, or moonstone. Luxuriant stands of olivastri, oaks, prickly pears, carob, citrus orchards and oleanders mark your progress. Your trail culminates below the imposing Serravalle castle, a medieval jewel belonging to the Grimaldi family since the early 1500s.

You are greeted warmly at a splendid estate owned by your local hosts, Gerardo and Mariarosa, where you refuel over a tasty lunch of Sicilian specialties. After lunch, explore their impressive citrus estate, and learn about the techniques they use in a region faced with the many challenges brought upon by climate change. Afterward, travel (approximately 75 minutes) to the valley of Noto, much of the area has earned the status of UNESCO World Heritage site for its architectural splendor, rebuilt in stunning late Baroque style after a devastating earthquake in 1693. Arrive late afternoon to the town of Ragusa, perched on a limestone hill. Ragusa Ibla, the Old Town, shared in the remarkable Baroque building boom at the turn of the 18th century, and you'll have time to explore it up close tomorrow. Your accommodations in a former palace put you close to the spectacular Old Town. Providing an elegant mix of modernity and tradition, the hotel was skillfully refurbished to preserve its historic character while melding harmoniously with modern design. There is time to settle in and refresh before reuniting with your fellow travelers and guides for a feast of traditional specialties at a restaurant steeped in local character. A leisurely stroll back to your hotel provides the perfect closure to your day.

Included Meals: Breakfast, Lunch, Dinner

DAY 4

Cava della Misericordia and Ragusa Ibla

3-5 miles, easy to moderate (with challenging sections), 350-ft. maximum elevation gain and 1,100-1,250-ft elevation loss, and 1-2 miles, easy

After savoring a breakfast of traditional local products, head out for a hike along scenic pathways along the Cava della Misericordia, the Cave of Mercy. Your guides will provide details on the walk options locally. Your trail traverses pine, poplar, and oak forest leading along an ancient quarry where evidence of human settlement has been left behind. As you descend steadily, pass the Benedictine convent, and the ruins of old mills and houses. In spring, a riot of wildflowers, orchids, poppies and wild asparagus dot the route.

Continue to Ragusa Ibla, and explore this jewel with your guides. Stroll among its magnificent architecture—part of the final blossoming of European Baroque. Take time to enjoy lunch on your own at one of the many trattorias, and then reunite with your fellow travelers for a visit to an artisan studio to learn about the tradition of the Carretti Siciliani, the famed Sicilian horse carts adorned with elaborate paintings that depicted the local ideals of chivalry, faith, honor, and justice.

Continue exploring on your own, or maybe return to the hotel and treat yourself to time in the wellness center. Indulge in a massage, Turkish bath with aromatic oils, indoor saltwater pool, and more. You may also enjoy the garden and outdoor pool at the nearby sister property. Enjoy dinner on your own this evening with recommendations from your guides.

Included Meals: Breakfast

DAY 5

Oasi Nature Reserve at Vendicari and travel to Syracuse

5 miles, easy to moderate

After enjoying a leisurely breakfast, you bid Ragusa farewell and set off for one of the most beautiful spots in southeastern Sicily—the Oasi Nature Reserve at Vendicari, a marvelous ecosystem of coastal marshes with a serene sandy beach. Depending on the season and time of day, the beach provides a protected

home for large populations of migratory birds such as ducks, white egrets, black storks, and even European flamingos. Your footpath leads through the salt fields of the Pantano Grande to an abandoned *tonnara* (tuna factory) and the ruins of a Norman tower known as the Torre di Vendicari. From here, the view takes in the entire reserve, from the splendid isle of Vendicari to Capo Passero in the distance. You may be enticed to take a swim! Your trail delivers you to a family-owned *agriturismo*, where you enjoy a meal of regional specialties, including grilled vegetables, local Sicilian provola, pecorino and tuma cheeses, and freshly made pasta.

Afterward, travel to Syracuse, a UNESCO World Heritage site. When the island was ruled by Magna Graecia (ancient Greece), it rivalled Athens as the most powerful city in the empire. Here, a local expert leads you on a guided tour of the Parco Archeologico della Neapolis. Syracuse's Archaeological Park is a treasure trove of important Greek and Roman monuments, including the spectacular 5th-century BCE Greek Theater. One of the finest of its kind, it still hosts Greek plays in the summer months. Nearby, the 2nd-century Anfiteatro Romano is the largest Roman amphitheater in Sicily and third-largest in Italy. Unlike the Greek Theater, the Roman Amphitheater bore witness to gruesome events such as gladiator fights and slave punishments.

Continue to modern-day Syracuse. The cultural and administrative capital of southeastern Sicily, the city is renowned for its extravagant Baroque architecture, historical ruins, gastronomic delights, beautiful landscapes, and stunning beaches. Your home for two nights is in Ortigia, the historical heart of Syracuse. Upon settling into your room, set out for an evening of independent strolling and dining. You may wish to wander through the Piazza del Duomo, acclaimed as one of Italy's most beautiful squares. Ringed by exquisite Baroque buildings constructed after the 1693 earthquake, the plaza's centerpiece is the Duomo (cathedral), a remarkable amalgam of evolving architectural styles that have shaped it over the centuries. The cathedral's Baroque façade disguises the 5th-century BCE temple of Athena; however, 26 of the temple's Doric columns remain intact and are visible both inside and outside. All roads from this piazza lead to dinner, and as always suggestions for venues to accommodate your preferences are provided by your guides.

Included Meals: Breakfast, Lunch

DAY 6

Necropolis of Pantalica and Independent exploration of Syracuse

1.5 miles, easy, 100-ft elevation gain and 300-ft elevation loss, or 2 miles, 450-ft elevation gain and 300-ft elevation loss, or 4 miles, moderate, 800-ft elevation gain and 700-ft. elevation loss

Start today on the hotel's panoramic rooftop terrace with an elaborate breakfast of fruit, yogurt, fresh-pressed juices, omelets, cured meats and cheeses, and Sicilian pastries with pistachio cream. Then, you depart for one of Sicily's most fascinating nature reserves and archaeological sites, the Necropolis of Pantalica. A plateau rising between the canyons of the Anapo and Calcinara rivers, Pantalica was inhabited from prehistoric times to the Middle Ages. The burial grounds carved in its steep rock walls comprise the largest complex of its kind in Sicily, with more than 5,000 tombs dating as far back as the second millennium BCE. Your walking options range from 1 to 3 hours in length and lead through a dramatic river-carved landscape of limestone formations luxuriant in colorful, fragrant Mediterranean vegetation.

Lunch today is on your own in the quaint hilltop village of Ferla. You may opt to savor local antipasti and pasta dishes, or a simple panino and gelato on the outside terrace of a local bar or restaurant across from the beautiful church.

After lunch, travel back to Ortigia. Take time to relax and refresh before gathering this evening for a memorable farewell meal of fresh local seafood and crisp white wine to toast the week's discoveries.

Included Meals: Breakfast, Dinner

DAY 7

Your *Italy: Sicily* tour concludes

After savoring breakfast at your hotel, bid farewell to your tour guides and travel companions, and make flight or rail connections for onward travels. The hotel can assist with any transportation required to Catania or beyond. (Check out time is 11:00 a.m.).

Included Meals: Breakfast

What's Included

Tour Only

Exceptional boutique accommodations	✓
14 on-tour meals: 6 breakfasts, 4 lunches, 4 dinners	✓
Local guides with you throughout tour	✓
Local wine and/or beer with dinner	✓
Entrance fees and special events as noted in the itinerary	✓
Telescopic walking sticks provided on tour	✓