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Italy: Sicily

Travel Style - Guided Walking Tour

This small-group Guided Walking Adventure offers an authentic travel experience, one that takes you away from the crowds and deep into the fabric of local life. On it, you'll enjoy 24/7 expert guides, premium accommodations, delicious meals, effortless transportation, and local wine or beer with dinner. Rest assured that every trip detail has been anticipated so you're free to enjoy an adventure that exceeds your expectations.



A rugged island of sun-kissed coves, wildflower-dotted fields, family-run vineyards, and the ancient ruins of 12 civilizations, Sicily offers travelers the true soul of Italy. From the Grecian drama of Selinunte's seaside temples to the quiet of Oasi Naturale di Vendicari's secluded bird sanctuaries, it presents a cultural heritage and natural beauty as rich as Mt. Etna's volcanic soil. Explore historic cities such as ancient Syracuse and medieval Erice. Marvel at architectural masterpieces, including Aci Castello's towering 11th-century castle and Monreale's 12th-century cathedral, considered one of the most magnificent churches in the world. Delight in sumptuous meals scented with fresh jasmine, ripe tomatoes, rosemary, mint, and basil. Sip robust reds and complex whites in the private library of a renowned vineyard, each glass paired with delicious appetizers and fresh olives. Walk quiet trails along spectacular mountainsides and through neolithic burial grounds. Enjoy it all in the company of our expert guides—a 10-day feast of ancient ruins, olive groves, and much more.

Tour Only Itinerary - 2019

Day 1

Join your Country Walkers *Italy: Sicily* tour

Aci Castello and transfer to the slopes of Mt Etna; 3 miles, easy to moderate

Depart Catania for the charming nearby coastal town of Aci Castello. Here, you're greeted by the silhouette of an imposing, 11th-century castle, built on the foundations of a 7th-century Byzantine fortress. From its commanding position on a rocky cliff, this rugged castle once protected the Messina Strait. This is also a land of legend, as the rock formations in the seas beneath the castle are said to be rocks thrown by Cyclops at Ulysses in Homer's *Odyssey*. Once an isolated promontory, the castle was connected to the mainland by lava flow from Mt. Etna in 1169. As the lava flow made other villages uninhabitable, the town of Aci Castello grew up around the base of the cliff, overlooking the



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shores of a beautiful bay. This spectacular setting has continued to inspire writers and artists for centuries.

Enjoy lunch at a seaside restaurant before continuing on to nearby Acireale, an elegant Baroque city set on a series of lava terraces that lead to the sea. Long famous for its thermal waters, your walk begins in the town and continues to the sea, with a visit to a tiny church within a lava cave. Afterward, you drive toward Mt. Etna, whose majestic cone is the highest mountain in Sicily and one of the largest active volcanoes in Europe. Almost constant activity from the volcano has gifted its slopes with fertile soils for agriculture, orchards, and vineyards. You are the beneficiary of that gift this evening, as you arrive at your home for the night: a country boutique hotel set amid grapevines and fruit trees right on the slopes of Mt. Etna. Settle in, then gather for a welcome *aperitivo*, followed by a dinner of typical specialties crafted from the estate's organic farm.

Accommodation: Monaci delle Terre Nere, Zafferana Etnea

Relax in unique accommodations at this Sicilian country estate set on 39½ acres on the slopes of Mt. Etna, with views of a sparkling sea. The boutique hotel's 20 rooms are scattered throughout a historic, 19th-century building that is surrounded by an organic farm—whose produce is the star of the restaurant's traditional cuisine. In this tranquil setting, enjoy an infinity pool and optional activities ranging from yoga and pilates to massage. Bikes are also available for guests' use.

Day 2

Mt. Etna

2-4 miles, moderate to challenging, 800-ft. (maximum) elevation gain and loss

Following a delicious breakfast, begin your day with a short drive to the Rifugio Sapienza (at 6,348 feet) on Mt. Etna. Europe's largest active volcano—over 11,000 feet high and occupying an area larger than metropolitan New York—the mountain presents a fascinating alpine environment with its combination of nature and the uncontrollable essence of fire. A range of walking routes (with a maximum elevation gain/loss of 800 feet) are weather- and volcano-dependent and may include a *funivia* (gondola) ride to the alpine station (at 9,514 feet) from where you have panoramic views over the southern promontory of Etna and the basin of Catania, as well as a view to the main summit of the mother volcano of Etna and Monti Silvestri, Monti Calcarazzi, and Montagnola—three side craters that are testament to the volcano's activity. Alternatively, you may embark on an adventurous climb through pine forest, crossing a corridor of hardened lava flow. A simple lunch of Sicilian specialties is provided at the nearby *rifugio* (alpine refuge).

In the late afternoon, you return to your retreat on the slopes of Etna to relax poolside with a book or to stroll the estate before another delicious dinner of traditional Sicilian specialties.

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Day 3

Oasi Nature Reserve at Vendicari

4-7 miles, easy to moderate; Syracuse Archaeological Park; 1-2 hours, easy

Your day begins with a (2.5 hour) drive to one of the most beautiful spots in southeastern Sicily: the Oasi Nature Reserve at Vendicari, a complex of coastal marshes and a serene sandy beach, which, depending on the season and time of day, provides a protected home for large populations of migratory birds such as ducks, white egrets, black storks, and even European flamingos. Footpaths lead 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 embraces the entire reserve, from the splendid isle of Vendicari to Capo Passero in the distance. Depending on the weather, you may be enticed to take a swim! Arriving on foot at a family-owned *agriturismo* (agricultural farm estate), you enjoy a meal of regional specialties, including grilled vegetables; local Sicilian provola, pecorino, and tuma cheeses; and freshly made pasta.

Following lunch, you continue on to Syracuse. At one time rivaling Athens as the most important and powerful city of the ancient world of Greater Greece, known as Magna Graecia, modern-day Syracuse is a UNESCO World Heritage site and the cultural and administrative capital of southeastern Sicily—an area known for its extravagant Baroque architecture, historic ruins, gastronomic delights, beautiful landscapes, and beaches. Your first stop is the Parco Archeologico della Neapolis, where you enjoy a guided tour with a local expert. Syracuse's Archaeological Park is a treasure trove of important Greek and Roman monuments, including the spectacular 5th-century BC Greek Theater, one of the finest and largest of its kind, still hosting Greek plays in the summer months. Nearby is the 2nd-century Anfiteatro Romano, the largest Roman amphitheater in Sicily and third-largest in Italy after the Colosseum in Rome and the amphitheater in Verona. Unlike the Greek Theater, the Roman Amphitheater bore witness to more gruesome events, such as gladiator fights and slave punishments.

Late afternoon, you reach Ortygia, the historic heart of Syracuse and your home for the night—connected to the mainland by the Ponte Umberto bridge. Upon settling in to your room—in a 14th-century aristocratic property overlooking a tiny waterfront piazza and the Ionian Sea, 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. At one time the acropolis of ancient Greek Syracuse, this elegant piazza is ringed by exquisite Baroque buildings, constructed after the 1693 earthquake. Its centerpiece is the Duomo (cathedral), the city's best example of the successions of evolving architectural styles that have shaped it over the centuries. The cathedral's Baroque façade disguises the 5th-century BC temple of Athena; however, 26 of the temple's Doric columns remain



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intact and are visible both inside and outside.

Accommodation: Hotel Domus Mariae Benessere, Syracuse

A former 14th-century aristocratic property, the historic Domus Mariae Benessere has been recently refurbished and is spectacularly situated on the island of Ortygia in the historic heart of Syracuse. The hotel features a therapeutic spa and lovely panoramic rooftop terrace overlooking the sea.

Day 4

Necropolis of Pantalica

4-7 miles, moderate, 1,000-ft. elevation loss

After a breakfast buffet of fruit, yogurt, juices, cold cuts, and homemade pastries, 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, it 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 BC. You walk through a dramatic river-carved landscape of limestone formations, luxuriant in colorful, fragrant Mediterranean vegetation.

Nearing midday, a short transfer delivers you to another traditional Sicilian lunch at a nearby family-owned restaurant and *agriturismo*. Dishes are derived from locally-sourced, seasonal ingredients and reflect the ancient traditions of the Anapo Valley. By mid-afternoon, you continue on a two-hour drive to the outskirts of Caltagirone, where you find your home away from home—a simple yet beautifully-renovated Sicilian stone farmhouse located in the open countryside amid towering palms, olive trees, and neighboring forest. Following time to settle in to your room or relax by the outdoor pool, a feast of traditional specialties, perfectly paired with local Nero d'Avola red wine, is served in the warm, wood-beamed dining room.

Accommodation: Agriturismo Vecchia Masseria, Caltagirone

A beautifully renovated traditional farm estate set in the midst of fields and forest with swimming pool, Jacuzzi, and pub and restaurant. Please note guest rooms are very simple in style. In addition, there are no telephones in guest rooms.

Day 5

Mount Ganzaria and Villa Romana del Casale

4 or 7 mile options, easy; 1-3 miles, easy

After awakening in the peaceful countryside and eating breakfast, you have the option of enjoying your inn's facilities (including the Jacuzzi) or setting off on foot to neighboring Mount Ganzaria on one of two walks of varying distances. The mountain derives its name from the Arabic word for wild boar,



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yhanzaria, because of boars' abundance on the mountain in ancient times. This area has been settled from the prehistoric age until the present. Your route includes a Byzantine necropolis and takes you through vegetation of cork oaks, eucalyptus, walnut groves, dwarf fan palms, and orchids, inhabited by foxes, porcupines, and weasels. Broad views on one side look over the Catanian plain and, on the other, toward southern Sicily.

Returning on foot to the *masseria* for a light lunch, you then take leave of it and transfer a few miles to the magnificent Villa Romana del Casale, considered the most important Roman archaeological site in Sicily. This Roman villa or hunting lodge, now a UNESCO World Heritage site, was built around the 3rd and 4th centuries (AD) and is known for its extraordinary collection of mosaics, in various stages of restoration. Walkways take you through some of its 40 rooms that are carpeted with 4,200 square yards of magnificent mosaics depicting vivid scenes from mythology, hunting and fishing, and various aspects of everyday Roman life. Concluding your visit, you return to the estate for a relaxing evening and another delicious dinner.

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Day 6

Riserva Naturale Bosco della Ficuzza and transfer to Trapani

5 miles, easy to moderate

This morning transfer westward (2.5 hours) to the Bosco della Ficuzza, a vast nature reserve with Royal Palace, commissioned by King Ferdinand I of Naples during his exile. Enjoy a scenic walk and pick lunch as you traverse woodlands, home to hare, wild boar, and birds of prey. Continue on (2-hour drive) to the seaside town of Trapani. Named Drépanon, or "sickle," by the Elymians for the curve of its harbor, Trapani claims a strategic position on Sicily's west coast—which has made this major trading port a frequent site of conquest. Beyond the city, salt plains studded with windmills show lingering traces of its ancient salt trade, and Trapani also has a heritage of coral and tuna fishing. Today, Trapani province is a major source of wine, producing more even than the region of Tuscany. Settle into your hotel in the town's historic center, then step out for dinner, perhaps savoring *cuscus* (couscous) and fresh-caught fish (reflecting the city's North African influences) in a nearby favorite restaurant.

Accommodation: La Gancia Residence (or equivalent), Trapani

Historic architectural details meld with modern amenities in this elegant, beautifully restored hotel overlooking one of the most stunning city beaches in Sicily—just a one-minute walk away. The hotel's convenient location puts you right near the boardwalk and within easy walking distance of historic attractions, such as the Church of Sant'Agostino and Cattedrale di San Lorenzo. While at the hotel,



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experience gracious Sicilian hospitality, as well as a fitness center, bar/lounge, rooftop terrace, and free Wi-Fi.

Day 7

Riserva Naturale dello Zingaro

5 miles, moderate

Departing Trapani, a 55-minute transfer delivers you to today's walk in the Riserva Naturale dello Zingaro, Sicily's first nature reserve, established in 1981 after a successful protest halted a road construction project. The reserve features well-maintained paths, panoramic sea views, and a large variety of rare and endemic plants and rich fauna including eagles, peregrine falcons, and lizards. The area is also home to the spectacular Uzzo Grotto, one of the first prehistoric settlements in Sicily. The walk is along an out-and-back coastal trail involving minimal elevation gain and loss but with some rocky sections.

Finishing up the walk, a 15-minute drive brings you to a nearby farm estate managed by Daniela Adamo, a graduate of the University of Gastronomic Sciences by Slow Food in Piedmont, who returned home to dedicate herself to the family business of olive oil production. Begin this special experience with an aperitivo on the terrace, followed by a lunch featuring ingredients from the organic garden and local producers. After the meal, learn how to prepare an espresso (or macchiato) and typical almond pastries or cassata, another Sicilian specialty.

You return to Trapani to enjoy an evening of independent exploration and dining, with restaurant suggestions from your guides.

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Day 8

Walking tour of Erice and Segesta

1 mile, easy and 1-3 miles, easy to moderate

This morning, you visit one of Italy's most spectacular hill towns: Erice, set atop the legendary Mt. Eryx at 2,460 feet. On a clear day, there are panoramic views across the plains of Trapani, down the west coast of Sicily, and even to Cape Bon in Tunisia. Originally settled by the ancient Elymians, the



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town boasts a fascinating history and is an important historical site associated with fertility goddesses—the Carthaginians' Astarte, Greeks' Aphrodite, and Romans' Venus. Arriving through a maze of medieval streets, tiny piazzas, churches, and Baroque flowering balconies to Erice's enchanting historic core, you set off on a walking tour of the medieval town and some of its important sites: the hilltop Norman Castello di Venere (Castle of Venus), which offers spectacular views, and the 14th-century main town church of Chiesa Madre and bell tower, constructed from stones from the ancient Temple of Venus on the same site. The majestic Norman castle was a massive fortification and the power seat of these 11th-century conquerors in western Sicily. Afterward, enjoy lunch at an agriturismo before reaching Segesta, which features a marvelous Doric temple. Dating to 430 BC and situated alone in a field, it is one of Italy's best-preserved ancient temples. Founded by the Elymians, a mysterious ancient people, the city of Segesta was fought over for centuries before eventually being conquered by the Romans.

Another hour's transfer brings you south to the countryside of Menfi and your home for the next two nights at a vineyard-side resort. The individually decorated guest rooms open onto private terraces with views over herb and flower gardens and vineyards. Following a welcome *aperitivo*, you proceed to a dinner of superlative cuisine served at a large communal table in the hotel's dining room—accompanied, of course, by the estate's renowned vintages.

Accommodation: Planeta Estate - La Foresteria, Menfi

Set amidst the vineyards of the renowned Planeta winery, a secluded four-star resort features spacious guest rooms with individual terraces, swimming pool and steam bath, walking paths, and exclusive fine dining.

Day 9

Selinunte Archaeological Site, Winery Visit

3-5 miles, easy

After breakfast in your tranquil resort, you drive about 30 minutes to Selinunte, an ancient city that is now one of Sicily's most dramatically sited Greek ruin complexes. This city, whose name is derived from the Greek word for celery, *selinus*, was one of ancient Greece's most prosperous colonies as early as the 7th century BC, and hence the object of centuries of battles.

Following lunch, a leisurely afternoon at the hotel offers time to pack, relax, and perhaps swim in the hotel's panoramic outdoor swimming pool. This evening, a short drive brings you to La Dispensa winery and vineyards, also owned by the Planeta Estate. Planted in nearly 300 acres of vines, the winery produces quality white and red wines, including the super cru Cometa and Segreta lines. Following a guided tour of the historic winery, you gather in the library, home to hundreds of books dedicated to the grapevine, for a tasting of Planeta wines paired with breadsticks, crostini, and olives. A farewell dinner follows on the outdoor terrace (weather permitting), a perfect venue for toasting your discoveries of enchanting Sicily. (Please note that, La Dispensa is closed on national holidays; therefore, some groups will dine at a fantastic seafood restaurant in Porto Palo di Menfi, just a few



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minutes from the hotel.)

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Day 10

Your *Italy: Sicily* tour concludes

After a final relaxed breakfast, you transfer (90 minutes) to Monreale, (from *monte reale*, or “royal mountain”) situated on the slopes of Monte Caputo, amid picturesque groves of almond, orange, and olive trees. The town’s crowning glory is its cathedral, considered one of the finest examples of Norman architecture in the world. Built between 1170 and 1189 by William II (in competition with a royal church then being built in Palermo), the cathedral today is one of nine Norman structures in Sicily inscribed together on the UNESCO World Heritage list and a National Monument in its own right. Craftsmen from Constantinople were enlisted to assist in crafting the more than 64,500 square feet of magnificent, solid-gold, Byzantine mosaics for which the cathedral is renowned. As you explore this architectural masterpiece, consider how the mosaics, carvings, inlays, and pointed arches demonstrate a harmonious blend of Norman-French, Byzantine, and Arab cultures. You continue on to nearby Palermo, where you can conveniently explore this historic city on your own or make flight or rail connections for onward travels.