



## COMPLEX CROSSROADS SICILY ANCIENT & MODERN

WEDNESDAY 10 – FRIDAY 19 APRIL 2024 (10 DAYS)

LECTURER: TOM DUNCAN

£4330

- Comprehensive overview of Sicily's history & its major treasures
- Centrally-located four star hotels in Palermo, Agrigento & Syracuse
- The Greek temples of Agrigento & the famous Roman Villa at Piazza Armerina with its magnificent mosaics
- Major Norman churches & palaces with their sophisticated Byzantine mosaics
- Private visits to remarkable Baroque palaces in Palermo & Syracuse



Palatine Chapel, Norman Palace, Palermo

### OVERVIEW

Sitting in the centre of the Mediterranean, Sicily has always been a strategic resource fought over for millennia. The original settlers were overcome by the Phoenicians from Carthage, followed by the Greeks, both sets of invaders attracted by its natural resources. Then the Romans arrived and overran the island, hungry for expansion in their quest for new sources of food and wealth. Making typical use of what they found, they adapted the existing building styles and general cultural models, models based on the by-then firmly rooted language of Greek classicism.

During the so-called 'Dark Ages', Sicily continued to prosper, particularly during its period as part of the Byzantine Empire. Subsequently, from the ninth century onwards Arabic or 'Moorish' culture added to this heady mix. The local dialect, the crops grown, the culinary traditions (particularly its love of all things sweet!) and the particular adaptation of familial customs point to a deep dependence on Muslim sources, all too frequently denied by the locals down to today. In complete contrast, from the north-west of Europe came the Normans, of all unlikely invaders, who initiated a period of great wealth and sophistication. Led by the de Hauteville family, this was truly a golden age when the cultural ambitions of the new elite made use of any and every style available, all fused together to create one of the great cultures of the Middle Ages. This heritage is reflected above all in Sicily's medieval mosaic cycles.

Thereafter, a succession of French, Austrian and Spanish dynasties ruled the island with 'sublime indifference', the island's culture and economy remaining isolated from much of the rest of Italy and Europe. However, their resident aristocracies have given the island a rich heritage of Baroque, Rococo and Neo-classical monuments of great power and beauty. Our visit is the ideal opportunity to discover the visual arts of Greek and Roman Sicily and the Norman and Baroque and later periods in and around Palermo, Agrigento and Syracuse.

We shall spend four nights in Palermo at the **Grand Hotel Piazza Borsa**, two nights at the **Baglio della Luna** in Agrigento and three nights in old Syracuse on the 'island' of Ortygia at the **Grand Hotel Ortygia**. All are decent, locally rated 4\* hotels and that on Ortygia is of architectural interest with some rooms enjoying inner harbour views.

### ITINERARY OUTLINE

**Day 1:** Wednesday 10 April – We fly early morning from Gatwick directly to **Palermo**, arriving just before midday. We drive into its nearby hills to visit **Monreale Cathedral** to see the magnificent medieval mosaic cycles, after which we pause for lunch (not included). We continue to **Palermo** to check-in for four nights at the **4\* Hotel Piazza Borsa** where there will be ample time to rest. In the early evening there will be a group lunch in a local restaurant – wine, water and coffee are included with all group lunches and dinners.

**Day 2:** Thursday 11 April – The tiny island of **Motya** lies just off the south-west coast of Sicily and is one of the most exciting archaeological sites in the Mediterranean. Founded as a staging port by Phoenician merchants and then taken over by their Carthaginian successors, recent excavations have revealed much about this hidden phase of Sicily's history. We shall spend the morning on the island after which we lunch at a local restaurant in nearby **Marsala**. En route back to Palermo we stop at the isolated site of **Segesta**, where there is a monumental, still unfinished, Greek Doric **Temple** and a dramatically sited **Theatre** looking out to sea. The evening will be free.

**Day 3:** Friday 12 April – **Palermo's** earliest surviving monuments above ground are mostly from the Arab and Norman periods. The **Norman Palace** was rebuilt in the eleventh century under Roger II, to whom we owe great thanks for initiating a series of sophisticated mural decorations, in his case the great mosaic cycle in the **Cappella Palatina**. Other highlights include the **Cathedral** with its royal tombs, and the lovely church of the **Martorana**. After some free time for lunch, not included, we visit two of the city's most important **Oratories**, private devotional chapels renowned for the fine stucco decorations by the Serpotta family. The evening will be free.

**Day 4:** Saturday 13 April – We drive the short distance to visit the **Regional Picture Gallery** at **Palazzo Abatellis**. It contains a number of interesting objects and paintings including works by Antonello da Messina. After coffee, we visit a nearby oratory containing a remarkable copy of Caravaggio's 'lost' altar painting. Lunch (not included) and the remainder of the afternoon will be free. Our final evening in Palermo is spent in spectacular fashion when we visit privately **Palazzo Gangi**, containing the finest suite of eighteenth-century interiors in the city, used for the film of Lampedusa's novel *The Leopard*, followed by dinner in an excellent restaurant next to the palace.

**Day 5:** Sunday 14 April – We make a leisurely mid-morning departure and follow the coast to **Cefalú** to visit this small fishing port, dominated by its great **Norman Cathedral**. This has possibly the finest of all the Sicilian mosaic depictions of Christ Pantocrator (the all-powerful). After some free time for lunch, not included, we continue to **Agrigento** and check into our hotel, the 4\* **Hotel Foresteria Baglio della Luna** - housed in a converted thirteenth century watchtower - for a two-night stay. We have a group dinner in our hotel.

**Day 6:** Monday 15 April – Sicily, together with the coastline of southern Italy, was called *Magna Graeca* or Greater Greece. Founded as trading outposts by the major Greek cities, these 'daughter' settlements soon came to rival (and in some cases surpass) the fame and wealth of their founding cities back home. **Agrigento** is such an example and it preserves a remarkable number of temples and other buildings and we spend the day exploring the site and its archaeological museum. There will be time for a simple, snack lunch (not included) and our dinner will be in a good local restaurant overlooking the Valley of the Temples.

**Day 7:** Tuesday 16 April – We leave Agrigento and travel to the centre of Sicily to visit the great Imperial Roman villa at **Piazza Armerina**. It is justly renowned as home to fabulous mosaic decorations which are the equal of any found in and around Rome and Pompeii. After our visit, we have a group lunch nearby in one of the island's best restaurants. We continue to Syracuse for a three-night stay at the 4\* **Grand Hotel Ortygia** and a free evening.

**Day 8:** Wednesday 17 April – **Syracuse** was one of the greatest cities of *Magna Graeca* and this morning we explore its ancient heritage. The **Archaeological Park** is home to some of the city's major monuments, particularly a splendid Theatre. After a coffee break, we return to **Ortygia** walking through the historic centre. Our group lunch will be in an excellent fish restaurant. The town's 'island' is filled with splendid palaces and churches including the **Cathedral** fashioned from a Doric temple, and **Santa Lucia** with its damaged Caravaggio - both of which we shall visit in the mid to late afternoon. The evening will be free.

**Day 9:** Thursday 18 April – This morning we drive to **Noto**, deservedly the most famous of all baroque cities on the island. There are handsome Baroque buildings at every turn including its great **Cathedral**, reopened after a very long restoration. After an early lunch (not included) we return to Siracusa where the remainder of the afternoon will be free. In the early evening we shall enjoy a private visit to, and our final group dinner in **Palazzo Beneventano**, the finest baroque palace in Syracuse.

**Day 10:** Friday 19 April – After a little free time this morning, we leave for Catania Airport and our flight to London Gatwick.

## PRACTICALITIES

**Price** £4330 **Without Flights** £4085 **Deposit** £595 **Single Supplement** £485 (Double for Sole Use)

**Hotels** 1 night at the Premier Inn London Gatwick North Terminal pre departure on 9 April (*Room Only*)  
4 nights at the 4\* Grand Hotel Piazza Borsa in Palermo; 2 nights at the 4\* Baglio della Luna, Agrigento; 3 nights at the 4\* Grand Hotel Ortygia in Syracuse (*All Italian hotels on a Bed & Breakfast Basis*)

**Flights** Easyjet Flights to include: Allocated seats & 20kg of hold baggage

**Outbound** **EZY6491** Departure London Gatwick (North Terminal) **0850** arrive Palermo **1250**

**Inbound** **EZY8288** Departure Catania **1500** arrive London Gatwick (North Terminal) **1720**

**Price includes** 5 dinners & 3 lunches with wine, water & coffee, all local transfers, entry fees & gratuities, City tax, the services of Tom Duncan & local tour manager James Hill

**Not included** Travel to/from Gatwick, 4 dinners & 6 lunches



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