

- Comprehensive overview of Sicily's history & its major treasures
- Wonderful Greek Temples at 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 & Catania



Piazza Armerina, A detail of the mosaic decoration from the Roman Villa

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. 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 arrival of the Normans initiated a further period of great wealth and sophistication, a golden age when the cultures of east and west fused most felicitously. This heritage is reflected in the fine mosaic cycles made for the Normans under Byzantine influence. Thereafter, a succession of French, Austrian and Spanish dynasties ruled the island with sublime indifference. However, their resident aristocracies have given the island a rich heritage of baroque, rococo and neo-classical monuments of great power and beauty – all waiting to be discovered.

We shall spend four nights in Palermo at the **Grand Hotel Piazza Borsa**, two nights in Agrigento at the **Hotel Foresteria Baglio della Luna** and three nights in old Syracuse on the 'island' of Ortygia at the comfortable **Grand Hotel Ortygia**. All three Sicilian hotels 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: Tuesday 12 October – We fly early morning from Heathrow directly to Catania, arriving at midday. There will be a light group lunch soon after arrival after which we drive westwards approximately three hours (with a comfort stop) to **Palermo** and our hotel, the 4* **Grand Hotel Piazza Borsa**, for a four-night stay. After some time to rest there will be an early group dinner in a restaurant in the historic **Piazza dei Vespri**. Wine, water and coffee are included with all group lunches and dinners.

Day 2: Wednesday 13 October – 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. 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: Thursday 14 October – **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 Palermo's most important **Oratories**, private devotional chapels renowned for the fine stucco decorations by the Serpotta family. The remainder of the afternoon and evening will be free.

Day 4: Friday 15 October – We make a leisurely start and travel the short distance to the Kalsa district of the city to visit the **Regional Picture Gallery** at **Palazzo Albertis**. It contains a number of interesting objects and

paintings including works by Antonello da Messina. After a coffee break we visit the **Oratory of San Lorenzo** to view a remarkable and recently installed copy of an altar painting by Caravaggio, famously looted in 1969, probably by the Mafia, as yet unrecovered. Lunch is not included today and the afternoon will be free for private explorations. 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 a local restaurant.

Day 5: Saturday 16 October – We depart Palermo and take to its nearby hills to visit **Monreale Cathedral** to see the magnificent medieval mosaic cycles, after which we spend a gentle day driving through central Sicily en route to Agrigento. We shall 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 Pantocrato (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: Sunday 17 October – 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: Monday 18 October – In the centre of Sicily, the great Imperial Roman villa at **Piazza Armerina** is justly renowned as home to mosaic floor decorations which are the equal of any found in and around Rome and Pompeii. The visit is a morning one and will be followed by lunch in one of the island's best restaurants. We continue on to Syracuse for a three-night stay at the 4* **Grand Hotel Ortygia**. The evening will be free.

Day 8: Tuesday 19 October – **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. Following a coffee break we visit Syracuse's **Archaeological Museum**, rich in Greek and Roman finds from the city and the wider area. Our group lunch will be in a famous fish restaurant in **Ortygia**, the town's 'island', 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 afternoon. The evening will be free.

Day 9: Wednesday 20 October – This morning we drive to **Noto**, deservedly the most famous of all baroque cities on the island for our morning visit. We shall encounter 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 and our final group dinner in **Palazzo Beneventano**, the finest baroque palace in Syracuse.

Day 10: Thursday 21 October – The morning will be free for final private explorations. At midday we depart to **Catania**. Sicily's biggest city was devastated either by earthquakes and/or the eruption of Mount Etna and almost the entire city was subsequently rebuilt. After lunch (not included), we shall enjoy a private visit to **Palazzo Biscari**, one of the city's most important palaces followed with a visit to visit Catania's **Cathedral**. In the late afternoon we travel the very short distance to Catania Airport for our evening flight to London Heathrow.

PRACTICALITIES

Price £3695 **Without Flights** £3495 **Deposit** £500 **Single Supplement** £320 (Single – Please note only 7 available, with singles in Grand Hotel Ortygia, Syracuse only) £395 (Double for Sole Use)

Room upgrade £150 per room Sea view in Grand Hotel Ortygia, Syracuse (Subject to availability)

Hotels 4 nights with breakfast at the 4* Grand Hotel Piazza Borsa, Palermo; 2 nights with breakfast at the Hotel Foresteria Baglio della Luna, Agrigento; 3 nights with breakfast at the 4* Grand Hotel Ortygia, Syracuse

Flights British Airways

Outward: **BA2594** Depart London Heathrow (Terminal 5) **0810** arrive Sicily Catania **1220**

Return: **BA2595** Depart Sicily Catania **2025** arrive London Heathrow (Terminal 5) **2240**

Price includes 5 dinners & 4 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 Heathrow, 4 dinners & 6 lunches



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