

Art & Archaeology in Sicily

At the crossroads of Asia, Africa and Europe, the Mediterranean's largest island is one of the world's most cosmopolitan civilisations. Accumulated over thirty centuries, the collective legacy of Phoenicians, Greeks, Romans, Arabs, Normans, Germans, Spanish, Italians and even British is expressed everywhere in a marvellous melting pot of architecture, art, culture and cuisine.

Included: 3 nights dinner, bed and breakfast at the Hotel Sporting Baia, Giardini Naxos and 3 nights dinner, bed and breakfast at the Hotel Kore, Agrigento (or similar).

Return flights between London and Catania. (Regional flight connections and overnight accommodation before or after the tour available at a supplement).

Visits to the Valley of the Temples; the Norman Palace, Palermo and Monreale Cathedral and Cloister; Piazza Armerina villa and the Greek Theatre, Taormina.

Excursion to Mount Etna, with lunch.

Services of a Brightwater Holidays representative throughout and local guides as required.

Itinerary

Day 1

We depart on our flight from London Airport direct to Catania, on Sicily's eastern seaboard (regional flight connections and overnight accommodation before or after the tour are available on request). On arrival we are met by our local coach and guide and transfer to our four star hotel overlooking the lovely Bay of Giardini Naxos on the east coast of the island, the Sporting Baia Hotel. Dinner will be served after our arrival.

Day 2

After a leisurely breakfast we are going to take it easy this morning! Relax in the hotel's pool or on the adjacent beach before joining our excursion this afternoon to lovely Taormina, about 5 km north. The town is in a wonderful location, idyllically perched high above the sparkling Ionian Sea with towering, snow-capped Mount Etna at its back. We have an easy walking tour of the compact old town with its meandering, medieval streets and tiny passages concealing some great shops and restaurants; pretty, flower-filled squares and ornate buildings. The town's undoubted highlight is the Greco-Roman amphitheatre, one of Sicily's largest, which with Etna and the sea in the background forms an everlasting impression of Sicily. We return to the hotel for dinner this evening.

Day 3

Today following breakfast we will venture as far as we can take our coach up the winding roads on Mount Etna, Europe's highest volcano and greatest natural wonder. Depending on the weather we should reach 2000 metres (7000ft.) where we will see the 'Silvestri' craters dating from 1986, and some of the latest lava flows from 2002/2003, in an amazing lunar landscape of black rock and steam. The views across the island are truly breathtaking, but please remember that Etna is a highly active volcano so things may have changed by the time this holiday happens! Lunch will be included in today's excursion. There will be time to relax in the hotel this evening before dinner.

Day 4

After breakfast today relax in the hotel, take to the streets of Taormina again or alternatively join our optional excursion to Tindari to see the classic Greek/Roman ruins. The remains of the ancient city are superbly situated on the cliffs, with great views across to the Aeolian Islands. You will see the remains of the impressive entrance, the theatre, and much more. There is also a Basilica built in the 1950s to house a wooden statue of the virgin dating back to the 7th Century which has performed some remarkable miracles over the years. Lunch is included in the excursion. We return to the hotel where dinner is served in the evening.

Day 5

This morning after breakfast we leave Taormina for Agrigento on the southern coast of the island. To break the journey across the island we will visit the small town of Aidone in the Erei Mountains, and the Regional Archaeological Museum here, which contains relics from the surrounding area. Following our visit here, we transfer to the nearby village of Pergusa, where lunch has been arranged at a local restaurant (not included). We then continue to Agrigento

and our hotel, the 4-star Hotel Kore. All rooms have private facilities with hairdryer, air-conditioning/central heating, satellite TV and safebox. Dinner is served in the evening.

Day 6

Today after breakfast we visit one of the truly spectacular wonders of the ancient world when we travel to the nearby "Valley of the Temples", a UNESCO World Heritage Site and one of the greatest legacies of ancient Greece. There are nine temples altogether and they dominate the landscape for miles giving a view, it is said, fit only for the gods. The most famous temple, Concordia, is not unlike the great Parthenon in Athens with its Doric columns and it is practically intact, apart from its missing roof - not bad for a building that was constructed around 582 B.C. We will have a good look around the site and visit the excellent museum. Dinner will be served at the hotel in the evening.

Day 7

Following breakfast we head to the north of the island, travelling through empty lands dotted with little villages, until we arrive at the island's capital city of Palermo. Having spent much of its history being conquered and re-conquered by various peoples, the city is the eclectic crossroads of Mediterranean and northern European civilisation and at its height during the Norman period was one of the most powerful cities in Europe. As a result of these diverse influences the city has developed a distinct character, with many interesting architectural and historical features. We visit the Norman Palace, which epitomises Palermo's heritage of diversity - originally a Punic structure stood on the site, then the Arabs built a castle before the Normans constructed a Romanesque chapel in the 11th century and the stunning Palatine Chapel in the 12th. The impressive interior of mosaics and high vaulted ceilings recalls the spirit of knights, chivalry and past grandeur. We tour the city then have time to relax and shop - a wander through La Vucciria, Palermo's oldest and best street market, is an unforgettable experience - before we head up to the magnificent Cathedral and Benedictine Abbey in the village of Monreale. This is the crowning glory of the Norman epoch - nearly 70,000 square feet of mosaics in gold leaf and coloured glass blaze in the cathedral, and the adjacent abbey's delightful Norman-Arab cloister, with its outstanding Romanesque sculpture, is reminiscent of the Alhambra. We return to our hotel for dinner.

Day 8

Following breakfast we check out of the hotel. We continue to Catania Airport in time to check in for our flight to London.