



Civilisations of Sicily

Mediterranean crossroads: three thousand years of creativity

20 October–1 Nov 2025 (ML 832)

13 days • £6,430

Lecturer: Dr Zoe Opacic

Covers all the island, showcasing the main sights and many lesser-known ones.

The whole gamut – Greek, Roman, Norman, Renaissance, Baroque and 19th century.

A full tour but carefully paced and with only three hotels.

Cross the Straits of Messina to Reggio di Calabria to see the Riace Bronzes.

Several special arrangements to visit places not normally open to the public.

Sicily is the pre-eminent island in the Mediterranean – the largest as well as the most eventful historically. It is also more or less in the middle, a stepping stone between Europe and Africa and a refuge between the Levant and the Atlantic. Throughout history Sicily was viewed as a fortuitous landfall by migrating peoples and a prized possession by ambitious adventurers and expansionist princes. And as the Mediterranean has been the catalyst and disseminator of a greater variety of civilisations than any other of the world's seas, the island has accumulated an exceptionally rich and incomparably varied inventory of art, architecture and archaeological remains.

Here are to be found some of the finest surviving ancient Greek temples and theatres; Roman floor mosaics which have no peer in Europe; and wall and vault mosaics by Byzantine craftsmen which are unequalled anywhere. Medieval churches and Baroque palaces abound, and there are many memorable paintings, sculptures and other works of art.

As much part of the experience as these masterpieces are the picturesque hill towns, coastal settlements lapped by a gentle sea, haphazard alleys and vibrant city boulevards ornamented with wrought-iron balconies. In every town there are buildings of unexpected magnificence and a plenitude of modest structures of ineffable charm. Some are well preserved, some are crumbling – witness to a deeper malaise.

For much of its history, Sicily was regularly one of the most prosperous of European territories, but political mismanagement and social dislocation led to a long, deep slump. Into the space vacated by absentee landlords and self-serving authorities, the 'Honoured



Segesta, watercolour by Alberto Pisa, publ. 1911

Society' inserted itself as protector – though it has been even more exploitative and malign than the worst of earlier tyrants. And the region remains low in the tables of prosperity.

Matters are improving, however.

Conservation and curatorship have made great strides in recent years, the Mafia has lost its dominance, poverty has lessened, and other indicators of wellbeing – the high quality of cuisine among them – are more evident as each year goes by. Sicily has been a part of a unified Italy since 1861 and ethnically and culturally it is unmistakably Italian. But it is also distinctly Sicilian, a world apart. Forming the backdrop to all this are some ineluctable landscapes, the formidable stark hills of the interior and the glittering greens of intensely farmed valleys. The smoking bulk of Mount Etna, Europe's largest active volcano, is visible from much of the eastern part of the island.

Itinerary

Day 1: Palermo. In March: fly at c. 2.45pm from London Heathrow to Palermo (British Airways). **In April:** fly at c. 9.00am from London Gatwick to Palermo, via Barcelona (Vueling). **In October:** fly at c. 7.15am from London Gatwick to Catania (British Airways).

Transfer by coach to Palermo. The largest and by far the most interesting city on the island, Palermo has been capital of Sicily since the period of Saracenic occupation in the ninth century. It reached a peak under the Normans and again during the Age of Baroque. First of six nights in Palermo.

Day 2: Palermo. A morning walk through the old centre includes visits to the Palazzo Abatellis and outstanding Norman buildings including La Martorana with fine mosaics. Lunch is at a private palace, by special arrangement. In the afternoon see the remarkable Greek sculpture in the Archaeological Museum. In the evening there is an out-of-hours visit to the Palatine Chapel in the palace of the Norman kings. Entirely encrusted with Byzantine mosaics, this is perhaps the finest assembly of Byzantine art to survive anywhere.

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Day 3: Monreale, Cefalù. The small town of Monreale dominates a verdant valley southwest of Palermo. Its cathedral is one of the finest Norman churches on the island and possesses the largest scheme of Byzantine mosaic decoration in existence. Cefalù, a charming coastal town, has another massive Norman cathedral, also with outstanding mosaics, and an art gallery with a painting by the 15th-century artist Antonello da Messina.

Day 4: Agrigento. The remains of the Greek colony of Akragas at modern-day Agrigento constitute one of the greatest sites bequeathed by the ancient world. A relatively late foundation (580 BC), it rose rapidly to riches and constructed eight peripteral temples, the most numerous group in the Greek world. That dedicated to Olympian Zeus was the largest of all Doric temples before being felled by Carthaginians and earthquakes, while the Temple 'of Concord' is the best preserved.

Day 5: Segesta, Selinunte. Set in an unspoilt hilly landscape, the almost complete but fascinatingly unfinished fifth-century temple at Segesta was built by indigenous, if thoroughly Hellenised, Sicilians. On an adjacent hill is a spectacularly sited theatre with views to the sea. Selinunte, founded by Greeks from the Attic city of Megara c. 650 BC, is a vast archaeological site, renowned for its many temples and acropolises.

Day 6: Palermo. Start with the cathedral, a building of many periods (though largely medieval), with grand royal and imperial tombs, then to San Giovanni degli Eremiti, a Norman church with tall cupolas and a charming garden. See also Il Gesù, grandest of Palermo's Baroque interiors. Optional visit to three tiny stuccoed oratories in the afternoon, or free time.

Day 7: Palermo, Piazza Armerina. Visit Castello della Zisa, an Arab-Norman Palace. Then leave Palermo and drive through the hilly interior of Sicily. At Piazza Armerina are the remains of one of the finest villas of the late-Roman Empire, whose floor mosaics comprise the most vital and colourful manifestation of Roman figurative art in Europe. Continue to the east coast for the first of three nights in Taormina.

Day 8: Taormina. Free day in this extremely pretty town. The Teatro Greco (actually largely Roman) is incomparably sited with far-reaching views encompassing smouldering Mount Etna, the Ionian sea and the Calabrian coast of mainland Italy. The town itself, clinging to a hillside with beaches far below, has buildings from five centuries as well as further Roman structures. A smart resort since the 19th century, our hotel has shaded gardens which spill down a series of terraces. (Also a swimming pool which is usually open between March and October).

Day 9: Messina, Reggio di Calabria. Drive along the coast to Messina. The city was one of Caravaggio's Sicilian refuges, and in the art gallery there are two paintings by him and the best-surviving work by the 15th-century painter Antonello da Messina. Cross the Straits of Messina by hydrofoil to Reggio di Calabria on mainland Italy to see the Riace Bronzes, over-life-size male nudes associated with Phidias and Polyclitus, among the finest Greek sculpture to survive.

Day 10: Catania, Siracusa. Sicily's second city, Catania was largely rebuilt after the earthquake of 1693 with long straight streets lined with Baroque palaces. Special arrangements to see a magnificent private *palazzo* and a Byzantine chapel, and visits to the Roman theatre and Normano-Baroque Cathedral. Continue to Syracuse for the first of three nights.

Day 11: Siracusa. Morning visit to the mainland to Santa Lucia al Sepolcro, the church for which Caravaggio painted the *Burial of Saint Lucy*. Continue to the Archaeological Museum, organised thematically to bring together material from much of *Magna Graecia*. The afternoon is free.

Day 12: Noto, Siracusa. Rebuilt after the 1693 earthquake, the hill town of Noto is one of the loveliest and most homogenous Baroque towns in Italy. All of honey-coloured stone, vistas are enlivened with carved stone balconies with elaborate ironwork. Visit the convent of Santa Chiara, the cathedral and San Carlo. Return to Syracuse in the afternoon via the Archaeological Park and its famous Greek theatre, the largest of its type to survive.

Day 13: Siracusa. Situated at the southernmost tip of the island of Ortygia, guarding the entrance to the 'Great Harbour', the Castello Maniace is one of the great architectural statements of 13th-century Europe. See the Antonello da Messina's bewitching *Annunciation* in the nearby Palazzo Bellomo. *In March & April:* Fly from Catania, via Barcelona, arriving London Gatwick at c. 7.30pm (Vueling). *In October:* fly from Catania, arriving London Gatwick c. 8.15pm (British Airways).

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Lecturers

Dr Luca Leoncini. Art historian specialising in 15th-century Italian painting. His first degree and PhD were from Rome University, followed by research at the Warburg Institute in London. He has published articles on the classical tradition in Italian art of the 15th century and contributed to the Macmillan Dictionary of Art. He has also written on Mantegna and Renaissance drawings.

Dr Philippa Joseph. Independent lecturer and researcher with a background in academic publishing. Former reviews editor of *History Today*, she is a tutor in architectural and art history at the Oxford University Department for Continuing Education. Her teaching and research focuses on the artistic and cultural legacies of Andalucía and Sicily.

Dr Zoë Opačić. Reader in the History and Theory of Architecture at Birkbeck College, specialising in medieval art, architecture and urbanism. She received her BA, MA and PhD at the Courtauld Institute of Art. A Fellow of the Society of Antiquaries, she edited the *Journal of British Archaeological Association* (2015–18) and has authored and edited a number of publications in English, German, Czech and Italian including recent contributions to the *Oxford Handbook of Medieval Central Europe* and the *Brill Companion to Medieval Vienna*. Zoe has longstanding family connections in Dalmatia and is a regular lecturer on MRT tours to Dalmatia, Italy and the Czech Republic.

Practicalities

Included: travel by private coach throughout; hotel accommodation as described below; breakfasts; 5 lunches (including 1 picnic) and 7 dinners with wine, water, coffee; all admissions; all tips; all taxes; the services of the lecturer and tour manager.

Accommodation. **Grand Hotel Et Des Palmes, Palermo (March)** (grandhotel-et-des-palmes.com): elegant 5-star hotel within walking distance of the city centre. **Grand Hotel Piazza Borsa, Palermo (April, October)** (piazzaborsa.it): centrally located 4-star hotel housed in an assortment of historical buildings. **Hotel Villa Belvedere, Taormina** (villabelvedere.it): charming 4-star family-run hotel in the old town, with its own garden (rooms vary in size and outlook). **Algila Ortigia Charme Hotel, Syracuse** (algila.it): seafront 4-star hotel on the island of Ortygia. *Single rooms are doubles for sole use throughout.*

Flights: as flights are not yet available to book for all of 2025, we have listed the most likely flights based on equivalent dates this year, but changes are possible. Direct flights are not regular, and indirect routes are subject to frequent changes. If you intend to book your own flights to coincide with our arrival and departure, we recommend you book flexible fares.

How strenuous? This tour involves a lot of walking, some of it over rough ground at archaeological sites and cobbled or uneven paving in town centres. Fitness and sure-footedness are essential. There are also some long coach journeys. Average distance by coach per day: 73 miles.

Group size: between 10 and 22 participants.