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# Sicily: Mediterranean Crossroads—Crucible of Civilizations

March 16 through 28, 2010 (including travel days) Bay of Naples extension, March 28 through April 2

Island nations are special and unique places. In the company of Sicily we think of Ceylon, Formosa, Cyprus and Cuba, all places where the *genus loci* is unusually distinct and where the cultural and historical layers are unusually rich and vivid. Sicily, like many of these other examples, also had the good fortune to find itself at the center of the known world during much of its history. Trade routes



*Agrigento, Temple of Concord*

by sea and by land are great conduits for the transfer of civilizations across the globe. While the Silk Route connected east with west, the Mediterranean was civilization's maritime conduit from the time of the Phoenicians on to the modern era, and Sicily found itself at the center of it (see map below) in such a position that ships passing from Spain or the Atlantic towards Constantinople or from Europe to Africa could not avoid it and were drawn to its shores. It is not surprising that many of the places of Ulysses' adventures described in Homer's *Odyssey* take place on the "Island of the Sun".

Sicily witnessed and bears the stamp of all the major civilizations that the Mediterranean cradled: Phoenicians, Greeks, Romans, Byzantines, Arabs,

Normans, the Holy Roman Empire, and finally the Italians as they moved from a collection of independent kingdoms to one nation. Even then, preserving its island independence or insularity, Sicily maintains its distinct identity today both culturally and politically. These civilizations each left important visual stylistic traces, which we find in the major architectural, urban and artistic monuments. Classical temples, open-air theaters, villas adorned with mosaics and frescoes, magnificently adorned churches and chapels, Islamic cloisters, and Baroque cathedrals are all found in abundance.



Islands are a particular kind of bell jar when it comes to the shaping and melding of diverse civilizations, perhaps because the geography confines them close together to cross-pollinate, whereas on the mainland, different civilizations can just move on to a new patch of virgin ground, leaving the spot previously hallowed unchanged. So, in Sicily it is not unusual to find a classical temple that has been re-cycled as a cathedral like the one in Ortigia in Siracusa where Baroque icing surrounds robust Doric columns. Even the cuisine, always regionally unique in Italy, here reflects these many cultural influences, making it one of Italy's most exotic and varied.

Added to these layers of history and culture the topography and geography of

Sicily are just as varied and dramatic. The terrain is rarely flat (only in the west end of the Island around Trapani and Marsala) and rises precipitously from a dramatic coast line to a mountainous center. Mt. Etna, one of the world's largest active volcanoes offers a constantly changing pyrotechnic display, as we will see in Taormina on our last day.

Our eleven-night odyssey of the core trip has been crafted to reveal these aspects of Sicily, and will take us in a leisurely counterclockwise circle around the Island moving from west to east. We will arrive independently in Palermo and depart from Catania, Sicily's two international gateways. As always, our stays have been chosen for the ambience of the place as well as for the quality and comfort of the accommodations and the succulence of the table, and have been planned to avoid one-night stays save for two: one in the middle of the trip and the other in Taormina on the last night. At the end of the trip, there is the option to continue by boat to Naples and to extend the trip by five more nights.



*View from Erice of coast enshrouded in fog*

## Itinerary

[Day 1, Tuesday, March 16, 2010](#) In transit from home

Depart from home on own with Palermo as your destination. (Connections are available through various European capitals including London, Frankfurt, Rome on British Air, Air One, and Alitalia *if* it is still in business. Ryan Air operates a daily early morning flight from Luton, UK to Trapani, near Erice.)

[Day 2, Wednesday, March 17](#) Erice

Arrive at Palermo's Falcone Borsellino Airport, where you will be met and brought to Erice, a picturesque hilltown one hour to the west. We have chosen this spot dramatically situated in the clouds above the sea, as the perfect place to spend three days acclimatizing, recovering from jet-lag and making day trips. The family run Hotel Moderno in the heart of town is our hotel. Its restaurant is the best in town. Time is unplanned this afternoon so you can explore the town. We will gather for

drinks and a welcome dinner at the hotel.

[Day 3, Thursday, March 18](#) Erice

Today we will take an excursion to Sellinunte and Marsala. Sellinus was founded by the Greeks in the mid 7<sup>th</sup> century BC and was destroyed twice by the Carthaginians (in 409 by Hannibal and again in 250 BC). The toppled columns of its three temples make a picturesque ruin by the seaside. Temple G is the second largest temple in Sicily after that of Olympian Zeus at Agrigento. In the afternoon we will return to Erice around the western coast via Marsala. There we will visit the museum of tapestries to see its eight 16<sup>th</sup> century Flemish tapestries and then we will stop at the Florio distillery for a tour and taste of their marsala. Back in Erice we will have dinner at our hotel.

[Day 4, Friday, March 19](#) Erice

Not far to the south lies Segesta, a dramatically isolated site with a great, unfinished Doric temple and a theater



*Above: The temple at Segesta*

whose backdrop is the panorama of the distant countryside. The Greeks established this site, and the temple was constructed first in 430 BC, and the theater followed in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century. It is not clear whether the temple's smooth (unfluted) columns and lack of a cella indicate that the construction was not completed, or that these features were intended.

In the afternoon we will visit Gibellina further to the south. This town was destroyed by an earthquake in 1968, and the remains were immortalized by the Tuscan artist Alberto Burri, whose work *il Cretto (the crack)* is a huge concrete mat placed where the town stood, marking the pattern of the streets and the blocks. A new town has been constructed in the vicinity and has become a showcase for works of art, architecture and urban design by contemporary Italian practitioners

including Pomodoro, Quaroni and others.

Day 5, Saturday, March 20 Palermo

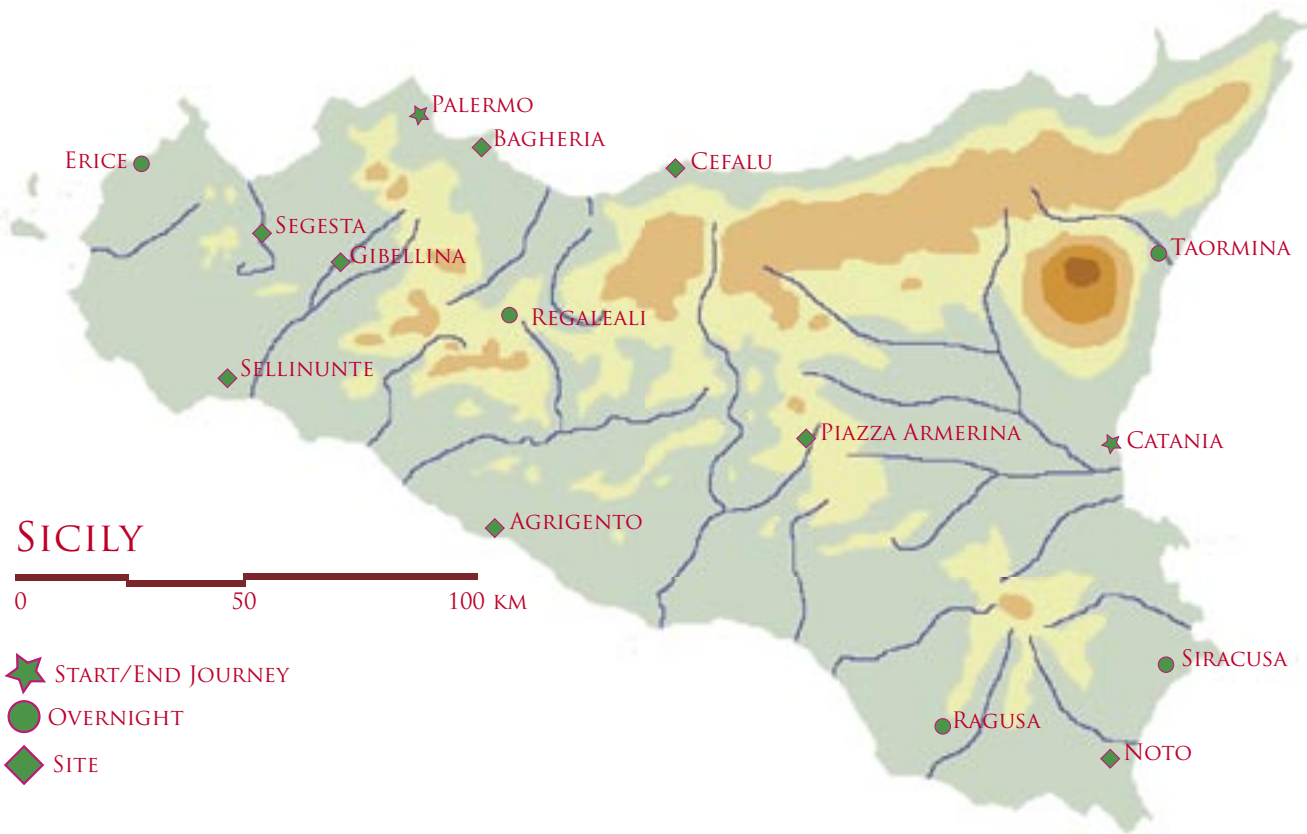
We will leave Erice and begin our circumambulation of the island, heading the short distance to Palermo. We will stop on the way at Monreale, at the top of a valley above Palermo where the Normans (William II) built a great cathedral, abbey and palace beginning in 1172. It is here where we will discover for the first time that melding of Norman and Arabic styles that is so unique to Sicily. The cathedral's essentially Norman form is then covered with Islamic patterns of blind arcades of pointed arches and geometric surface decoration. Inside there are splendid mosaics depicting scenes from the bible. We will have lunch nearby at the Trattoria del Pavone.

Beginning the descent down into Palermo, we will discover Sicily's capital city and principal port flanked by mountains on both sides and in the center of a great crescent bay. Our first stop will be the Capella dei Normani whose crown jewel is the Palatine Chapel, built by Roger II, grandfather of the king who built Monreale. Nearby is San Giovanni degli Eremiti, also built in the mid 12<sup>th</sup> century under Roger II and one of the most famous Arabo-Norman monuments in Palermo. It has an elegant central plan with domes supported on Moorish squinches.

We will retire to our small central Hotel Principe di Villafranca and tonight you will be able to have dinner on your own to sample one of the interesting restaurants nearby.

Day 6, Sunday, March 21 Palermo

In the morning, we will continue with the sites of Palermo. We'll see first





some of its great urban places: Piazza Vigliena, (or *Quattro Canti* for its four canted corners) leads to the Piazza Pretoria with its spectacular baroque fountain carved by a Florentine. San Cataldo, the seat of the Knights of the Holy Sepulchre was also built during the Norman period and is a blend of Arabic and Norman styles. Facing the harbor is the Baroque Palazzo Butera, where we have arranged a private visit to its grand apartments. Further afield are the Oratorio del Rosario di Santa Cecilia, the Archaeological museum and some of the buildings in Style Liberty or Art Nouveau.

The rest of the afternoon is free for individual explorations, and dinner will be at the restaurant Bellotero not far from our hotel.

#### Day 7, Monday, March 21 Regaleali

Today we will leave Palermo and head along the northern coast to Bagheria and Cefalu. Bagheria was, beginning in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, the summer coastal resort for wealthy Palermitani to escape the summer heat, and many fanciful baroque

villas were constructed. We will stop to see the Villa Palagonna from 1715. It has an unusual butterfly plan, and its garden walls are populated by throngs of bizarre figures carved out of tufa. This earned it Goethe's condemnation as a monstrosity.

We will continue on to Cefalu to visit its Duomo, another project initiated by Roger II and built between 1131 and 1240. It sits majestically against the rock escarpment above the sea. We'll have lunch at a local seafood restaurant before turning inland to the mountainous center of the Island where our destination is Regaleali, the Masseria (farm) of Tasca d'Almerita, one of Sicily's oldest and most distinguished wine producers. Here we have arranged our own private wine tasting and dinner of locally produced fare. There is also a cooking school here, and they are renowned for having reestablished some of the best of traditional Sicilian cuisine. We will spend the night here in the newly restored bedrooms of the villa.

#### Day 8, Tuesday, March 23

Ragusa (day at Agrigento)

Leaving early to continue our drive

south through dramatic mountainous countryside, we will reach Agrigento, where we will spend the morning exploring the Valley of the Temples, although "valley" is somewhat of a misnomer as the four golden Doric Temples are in fact prominently sited on a ridge. The city was founded in 580 BC by settlers from Rhodes and Crete. The temples were built during the reign of Theron (488-472 BC) but were burnt by the Carthaginians and later restored by the Romans in the 1<sup>st</sup> century BC, and finally gradually declined due to seismic activity and quarrying. The better preservation of the Temple of Concord is due to its conversion to a church.

After we have seen the site and had lunch we will continue east to Ragusa where we will spend the next two nights at the Palazzo degli Archi. A private dinner will be organized for us in the hotel's restaurant.

#### Day 9, Wednesday, March 24 Ragusa

Ragusa is actually two towns, the new town and Ragusa Ibla which are built along a ridge and separated one from another by a deep ravine. We are staying in Ragusa Ibla which is very picturesque with its hilly topography, narrow streets and a number of baroque churches and palazzi.

Today's excursion is to Piazza Armerina, to see the late Roman (3<sup>rd</sup>-4<sup>th</sup> century AD) Villa Imperiale del Casale, known for its grandeur and for the extent of its mosaics. We'll stop on our return at Caltagirone, famous for its brightly decorated pottery. Since there are a number of distinguished restaurants in Ragusa with one and two stars, you will be able to independently sample them and compare notes.



Agrigento, Temple of Concord

Day 10, Thursday, March 25 Siracusa

We will depart Ragusa today for Siracusa, stopping enroute at Noto, perhaps the most notable ensemble of baroque buildings in Sicily. The town was completely destroyed in 1693 by a severe earthquake and rebuilt 10 km away from its original location with an expansive and well-organized baroque plan.

On to Siracusa! Occupied by the Greeks from the 8<sup>th</sup> century BC, from 416 to 413 BC it vied for domination over Athens. The interest of its seaside setting is heightened by the Island of Ortigia which is its oldest part and the place the Greeks settled first. We will stay here at the Grand Hotel Ortigia. Dinner will be at the restaurant Don Camillo.

Day 11, Friday, March 26 Siracusa

Today is devoted to exploring Siracusa. We will begin on foot with Ortigia,

where the cathedral incorporates a 6<sup>th</sup> century BC Doric temple. Further afield on the mainland is the Neapolis with its many well-preserved classical monuments, including a Greek theater, Roman amphitheater, limestone caves, and a large 3<sup>rd</sup> century BC altar. Tonight, we are invited to drinks and a selection of local cheese and salumeria with Baron di Benevento at his palace facing the Duomo. He will show us the grand rooms and his many collections including maps and works on paper documenting the architecture of Siracusa. Dinner (if you still have room) is on your own.

Day 12, Saturday, March 27 Taormina

For our final leg we move to the slopes of Mt. Etna, where, at its foot by the sea, we will make a brief stop to see the monumental center of Catania, including the Piazza del Duomo, the fine palazzi surrounding it (including a private visite to Palazzo Biscari), and

the Teatro Bellini, which opened with a production of *Norma* in 1890.

Skirting Mt. Etna, we will continue north along the coast to Taormina, an enchanting town above the sea on the slopes of the mountain. We will stay at the Hotel Timeo just below the Greek Theater. From the terraces of our hotel we will have views of the sea below and the smoldering volcano which will seem close enough to touch! Here we will raise a glass to our good fortune for being together and will have one last dinner together.

Day 13, Sunday, March 28 Travel back home or continue on the extension to the Bay of Naples

Individual or group transfers will be arranged to the airport at Catania for flights home. Buon viaggio e ben'tornato!



*Mt. Etna from the terrace of the hotel Timeo*



## Optional Four Night Extension

It is said that one must see Naples and then die. While we don't propose that, the setting of Naples with the great bay at its feet, Vesuvius towering overhead and the islands of Capri and Ischia shimmering in the distance is a great sight, and certainly a fitting one with which to conclude our Sicilian odyssey if not our lives!



*Piazza del Plebiscito, Naples*

Our proposed five nights includes one at sea enroute from Catania to Naples, two nights in the heart of Naples and two nights down on the Amalfi coast—one by the sea in Amalfi and the other up in Ravello. We will experience the richness of the city along with the nearby sites of Pompei, and Paestum as well as the baroque palace of the Bourbon kings, Caserta. Ravello enjoys one of the most spectacular settings on earth, perched

as it is over 1000 feet above the craggy Amalfi Coast.

### Detailed Itinerary

Day 13, Sunday, March 28 Catania to Naples (overnight by boat)

Rather than taking the only daily flight from Catania to Naples, which is too early in the morning and leaves us reeling from the abrupt transition, we

have opted to do it the old way, by ship, so that we can enjoy the experience of waking up as we steam into the Bay of Naples!

After a leisurely breakfast and morning at the hotel, we will check out and depart for a circumnavigation of Mt. Etna with a stop mid-way for lunch at the town of Bronte, which is renowned for its pistachios.



*Naples with its bay and Mt. Vesuvius as viewed from the Certosa di San Martino in Vomero*



*Temple of Hera at Paestum*

Our ship (*m/n Trincaria or m/n Partenope*) departs Catania in the evening for the eleven hour voyage to Naples; this will give us some more time in the late afternoon to enjoy the ambience of Catania’s Piazza del Duomo from the vantage point of a cafe.

On board we will have dinner before retiring to our staterooms.

Day 14, Monday, March 29 Naples

Upon disembarking, we will start at the beginning of the region’s recorded history with an excursion along the coast to Pompeii, Herculaneum and the Villa of Oplontis.

After lunch we will return to Naples to check into our hotel, Constantinopoli 104. It is a little villa tucked away in a garden within a courtyard of a large palazzo just steps from the Archaeological Museum. Once settled, we will set out for a walking tour of Spacca Napoli and its churches, including Santa Chiara, San Domenico Maggiore and the Duomo. We will end up at the new Museum of Contemporary Art (MADRE) created by the Portuguese architect Alvaro Siza in the renovated Palazzo Donna Regina. Dinner tonight will be at *Ciro a Santa Brigida*.

Day 15, Tuesday, March 30 Naples

Today we will ascend one of the funicular lifts to the elegant 19th century Vomero neighborhood and the Certosa di San Martino, a former monastery set in a commanding position over the city. From there we will achieve a sense of



*Wall painting from Pompeii*

orientation to the dramatic setting of Naples and we will also learn much about the history of the city from this museum’s extensive holdings, including its extraordinary collection of presepi (creches).

Descending the hill again, we will delve into Renaissance, Baroque and neo-classical Naples, studying the grouping of Castel Nuovo, Palazzo Reale, Piazza del Plebiscito (where a replica of the Pantheon is framed by a version of Bernini’s St. Peter’s Colonnade), Teatro



*The Regia at Caserta*



San Carlo and its adjacent Galleria Umberto I. We will have lunch in the famed Gran Caffé Gambrinus.

The afternoon is devoted to the great museums representing the two significant epochs of Naples: The Museo Nazionale Archaeologico and the Capodimonte Museum. Dinner tonight will be at the Bersagliere, a venerable institution overlooking the port and Castel del Ovo.

Day 16, Wednesday, March 31  
Naples to Amalfi

We will leave Naples this morning, stopping first at the Regia di Caserta, the largest palace in the world. It was designed by Luigi Vanvitelli and built between 1752 and 1780 for the Bourbon monarchy. We will continue around Vesuvius and on down the coast to Paestum, a spectacular site where three



*Ravello and the dramatic view down the Amalfi coast*

Greek Doric Temples stand majestically on a coastal plane framed by the sea and a backdrop of sacred mountains.

After a breathtaking drive along the Amalfi coast from Salerno to Amalfi,

we will stop at the incomparable Santa Caterina Hotel, which descends from the coastal road down the cliff to the sea. Dinner will be at the hotel.



*This is the first view of Ravello we will have as we drive up the coast from Salerno. (It is the flat plateau shrouded in mist)*





*Ravello's town square with views down the coast framed by stone pines (left), Villa Cimbrone at Ravello. The axial path with its wisteria clad arbor leads to the...*



to exploring on foot this enchanted aerie, taking in its two magnificent gardens, Villa Ruffolo and Villa Cimbrone as well as a private tour of Gore Vidal's former villa. It clings to the side of a cliff with panoramic dramatic views of the coast below. Dinner will be at a nearby restaurant, Don Salvatore.

Day 18, Friday, April 2 Homeward Travel

Individual or group transfers will be arranged to the Naples Capodichino airport from which connections will be possible to the major international gateways.

Day 17, Thursday, April 1 Ravello

Today we will ascend to Ravello, which surveys the coast from its perch of over 1000 feet in elevation. Our home here is the incomparable Hotel Caruso Belvedere, which has always

occupied one of the best sites in town and has recently been given a makeover by the Venice Simplon Orient Express Company, which has preserved its charm yet endowed it with even more creature comforts. This final day will be devoted



*...scenic belvedere with its dramatic view of the coast 1,000 feet below.*