



Drive & Hike Tour (DHSIC)

The Real Spirit of Eastern Sicily

Exploring a mythical island: Mount Etna, ancient civilizations, Greek, Roman and Baroque treasures



TRIP NOTES 2024

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****GENIUS LOCI TRAVEL - The Real Spirit of Italy****



INTRODUCTION

Everybody knows Sicily. And most of us could even name a few famous places such as Taormina, Mt. Etna, and Syracuse. All 'highlights' which definitely deserve a visit!

But this tour will also show you life in Sicily as the real Sicilians live it. You'll fully explore the south-eastern part of Sicily, home to the eight baroque towns, listed by UNESCO as 'world heritage sites'. Noto and Ragusa are a must! Of course you will also visit Syracuse, once the most powerful Greek city in the world, where 3000 years of history are still alive. Visit its amazing Greek 'Neapolis' - and perhaps attend a show - and explore this intriguing city carefully.

You will be part of the different civilizations that have chosen Sicily as their base: you'll walk past prehistoric caves, Byzantine churches and baroque buildings. And, of course, you can wander through the smaller villages and perhaps chat with some locals. Of course you have to dedicate some time to the most famous wine in the area, the Nero d'Avola! This journey will not only show you some of the cultural highlights of the largest Mediterranean island, but also lets you experience some natural wonders and, of course, taste the flavours of the real southern Italian life!

And you will of course make a few nice walks, to explore the amazing landscape of the Iblei Mountains. Discover the inland villages, yet to be discovered by mass tourism. Sit in the shade of the orange trees and have a nice country lunch with local specialties. Have a delicious almond or strawberry 'granita' for breakfast, swim in the little pools of the wonderful Pantalica Gorge and handpick some fresh oranges.

You can start the tour from the charming small town of Sortino, one of the less known, but equally beautiful baroque towns in the area, but above all, gateway to the stunning Pantalica canyon.

Then you can travel further South into the real heart of the 'Baroque Corner' of Sicily, visiting stunning towns like Ragusa, Noto and Modica. And your tour in this corner of Sicily with a visit to Syracuse, also one of the stunning baroque towns, but above all a city with an immense greek heritage, and a beautiful oriental feel to it. A city which literally has it all!

And, if in Sicily, you cannot miss Mount Etna, Europe's highest and most active volcano. Here you will have the possibility to travel to the top, but also to walk some unbeaten tracks, away from the crowds. Discover its most recent lava flows, its forests, its barren landscape and many volcanic cones.

If you want you can spend some extra days in the wonderful resort of Taormina, halfway between the Mediterranean Sea and the impressive Mount Etna, one of Italy's most scenic locations, which boasts one of the most spectacular Greek theatres in the world and a very charming old town centre. Views of Mount Etna are unforgettable!



During this tour you can decide the difficulty level of the excursions yourself. All walks follow easy routes without any real technical difficulties and are feasible for those who have some walking experience and are in a good physical condition. Driving times are limited to the minimum – and follow the most beautiful routes. Walking times: approx. 2 to 5 hours a day.



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DAY-TO-DAY PROGRAMME

N.B. In case you arrive late in Catania, you could as well stay a first night here – and take your time to discover the city the next morning, before driving to Sortino. In case you also want to see the western part of Sicily, you can fly in to Palermo, pick up your car there and then drive from the western to the eastern side of the island. This will give you the opportunity to visit Palermo, the stunning church at Monreale, beautiful Cefalù and the Madonie and Nebrodi Mountains (see below).

Day 1 – Arrival at Catania & Transfer to Sortino

Arrival in Catania. At the airport or train station you pick up your car. Driving south, in the shadow of Mount Etna, you soon arrive at the charming baroque town of Sortino, dominating the valley of the River Anapo, one of the most intriguing places in Sicily. In the evening you find a nice restaurant for a hearty dinner.

Sortino

Day 2 – Roundwalk Sortino

Today you have two options: you can start your walk directly from your B&B, or you can opt to drive down to the entrance of the Anapo Valley, and make a shorter roundwalk there. The valley has been inhabited since prehistoric times, and all civilizations have left their traces here. You make a wonderful roundwalk through the canyon, first through the higher parts, along the various prehistoric burial sites, the so-called necropolis of Pantalica – the largest necropolis in the Mediterranean – and its most impressive monument, the ‘Palace of the Prince’. But we also encounter small chapels, Byzantine villages, and at the edge of the canyon we find beautiful baroque churches. You can enjoy your picnic lunch on a nice spot in the canyon. After lunch you continue your walk through the canyon, now following the path of an old railway, and, therefore, almost flat. Along the river there are several good spots for a rest and perhaps a swim in one of the wonderful little lakes. A short climb at the end of the walk brings you back to your starting point. Now take some time to stroll through the quaint village of Sortino too, and perhaps enjoy a ‘granita’ in one of the typical Sicilian bars.

Sortino

Distance: 10 km. - Walking time: 3,5 h. + sightseeing time (4,5 h. with extra option) - Ascents & descents: +/- 380 m.

Day 3 – Ferla, Akrai & Ragusa

Today you’ll drive in a south-eastern direction, through the beautiful landscape of the Iblei Mountains, made up of ancient farmhouses, stone walls, olive groves and pistachios. You can make a first stop in the small town of Ferla, and perhaps go for a short stroll into the canyon of Pantalica, this time from the other side. Then you travel on to the beautiful town of Palazzolo Acreide, one of the eight baroque towns granted the title of ‘World Heritage Site’ by UNESCO. Of special interest is the archaeological site of the ancient Greek Akrai. Through a stunning landscape of dry stone walls, olive groves and vineyards you then continue to Ragusa, with its older ‘twin city’ Ibla, perhaps the most scenic of all Sicilian towns. Both parts of the city deserve a visit. Settle in at your hotel in the old city centre and start exploring! The ‘new’ baroque city of Ragusa was completely rebuilt after the devastating earthquake of 1693. In the late afternoon, you can also go for a short walk into the canyon of the Misericordia. Through an archway you descend into the valley of the Leonardo River, and then walk up a hill through olive groves and dry stone walls, with wonderful views of the city behind you. From here you will see how much the old city of Ragusa-Ibla is part of the surrounding landscape. Then you return to Ragusa-Ibla and walk back to your hotel through the old city centre of Ragusa-Ibla. End the day like the locals, with a stroll through the beautiful park, the Giardini Iblei.

Ragusa-Ibla – Hotel*** /****

Distance: 8 km. - Walking time: 2,5 h. + sightseeing time (shorter option: 1 h.) - Ascents & descents: +/- 360 m.



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Day 4 – Ragusa & Modica

Today you will explore Modica, one of the 'Gastronomical capitals' of Sicily. Or in case you did not do it yet, you can do the walk into the canyon of the Misericordia. In the afternoon you can then go for a visit to the beautiful city of Modica, famous for its delicious chocolate. Take your time to stroll through the old town. There are some steps to climb, but it's all worth it. And perhaps you could opt for a visit to the less known, but perhaps even more beautiful small city of Scicli. Also could you travel down to the beach, and visit some of the places which have become famous from the 'Montalbano' detective series. Then you return to Ragusa-Ibla for an evening stroll and a great dinner.

Ragusa-Ibla – Hotel*** /****

Distance & walking time may vary depending on selected route.

Day 5 – Sicily's deep south

Today you travel in eastern direction towards one of the most remarkable towns in Sicily, the quintessential baroque town of Noto, probably the most famous of all the baroque towns in southern Sicily. But on your way you will have ample time to make some nice discoveries: you can stop in Ispica, and make a short roundwalk in the intriguing canyon, full of traces from the past. Make the short walk to the 'Isola delle Correnti', Europe's southernmost point, where the Mediterranean & Ionian Sea meet. You then must visit the small fishing harbour of Marzamemi, a perfect place for a relaxed stroll and a great (fish) lunch. After lunch you can then make the short walk in the nature reserve of Vendicari. Here you'll find one of the last stretches of pristine coast in Sicily. You can make a roundwalk along the nature trails, through a landscape of sand dunes, lagoons and stretches of rocky shore. Birdlife is abundant, and of course, as in any place in Sicily, the cultural heritage is very interesting too: the Byzantine settlement of Maccari, where the necropolis and church can still be visited, a medieval watchtower and an old 'tonnara', where tuna has been processed for centuries. After the walk there's time for relax or a swim, before travelling on to Noto, and enjoy the town in the stunning afternoon light. Or you can already settle at your great 'masseria' (noble farmhouse) near Noto.

Noto – Hotel

Distance: 1,5 km. - Walking time: 1 h. (Isola Correnti).

Distance: 9,6 km. - Walking time: 2,5 h. + sightseeing time (Vendicari).

Extra Day Noto & Noto Antica

To make some more of your time in the surroundings of Noto, we recommend an extra night there. This way you can dedicate the whole day 5 to the southern part, and today to Noto & surroundings. A few km. north of Noto you can go for a beautiful walk to the fantastic ruins of the old Noto, once an impregnable fortress, completely destroyed by the earthquake in 1693. Here you'll find remains of Sicilian, Greek, Roman and Spanish ruins, in the unique setting of the Iblei Mountains. You have the option of a longer or a shorter walk. In the afternoon you can then make a hike in the 'grand canyon' of the River Cassibile, the largest canyon on the island, with some nice little lakes where you can perhaps have a swim. Otherwise you return to Noto and now take your time to visit the town centre. The 'new' Noto is one of the best examples of a rationally planned town, completely rebuilt in the baroque style, which was then fashionable. Some of its abundant decorations are unique! Visit its impressive cathedral and other monuments and perhaps have a drink or savour an almond 'granita' in one of the lively bars. Don't forget to do some wine tasting here as of one of the most famous wines on the island, the Nero d'Avola, is produced in this area.

Noto – Hotel

Distance: 5,3 km. – Walking time: 1,5 h./3 h. (Noto Antica) + 3,5 h. (Cassibile) + sightseeing time - Ascents & descents: +/- 80 m. (short option).



Day 6 – Syracuse

Today you make a short drive to Syracuse, an ancient town on the sea, which was of immense importance in ancient Greek times. You drive past the wonderful beach at Fontane Bianche and the Peninsula of the Maddalena, where you can make a nice walk towards Cape Murro di Porco. Also, at the nearby River Ciane, the only river in Europe where papyrus plants grow naturally, you can make a walk along the banks.

Syracuse has a superb archaeological zone, definitely worth a visit. Here you can admire one of the biggest Greek theatres, intriguing 'underground' architecture, and stroll through a very pleasant park. But also the old city, mainly located on the island of Ortigia is full of monuments, vast excavations, and countless churches. A stroll through the old city with its crumbling façades, baroque balconies, supported for centuries by a host of stone lions, tigers, bears, dragons, Moors, satyrs, devils, angels, kings, paupers, wenches and cherubs is an unforgettable experience. You will walk past many an open door, some of which will give you a glimpse of an ornate secret courtyard, others open right onto someone's dining room where potatoes are being peeled. Stroll the limestone-paved streets overhanging with laundry and ancient scaffolding, through narrow alleyways that lead you around a bend and suddenly, breathtakingly, into one of the most expansive 'piazze' Italy has to offer. Its 'Duomo' is a concentrate of almost 3000 years of history. This living history book is yours to explore. Another option is a boat trip to visit the marine reserve from the sea, with the chance to admire its sea grottos. After an extensive visit you return to your 'masseria' near Noto.

Noto – Hotel

Distance: 7 km. – Walking time: 2 h. – Ascents & descents: +/- 10 m. (River Ciane walk).

N.B. In case you want to see something more of Syracuse we recommend to stay overnight in this beautiful city. There are several great options to stay in stunning buildings in the heart of Ortigia.

N.B. In case you want to see only the Baroque south-eastern part of Sicily you can of course also skip Mt. Etna. After the day in Syracuse (with stay in Noto or Syracuse) you can then drive directly back to the airport, without going up Mt. Etna or into Catania.



Day 7 – The Alcantara Canyon and Mount Etna

Today you travel north for a full day visit to Mount Etna. First you drive to the charming little town of Linguaglossa, where you can have a coffee and enjoy one of the typical sweet cakes from this area. Then the route continues up along the 'MareNevè' road, the road of the sea and snow. Along the road you can admire the most recent lava flows, some of which date back only a few years, reminding you of the fact that the Etna is still an active volcano! You make a wonderful walk on one of the most recent lava flows, with a visit to some of the spots where the lava burst out. This walk really gives you the feeling of the immense forces still working below you. You can have lunch at a mountain hut with great views over the Strait of Messina, before starting a spectacular walk on to the Sartorius Mountains, partly through the birch forest, partly over older lava flows.



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Then you travel on to the southern side of Mount Etna. You have the possibility to make some more stops, either for a short walk onto recent lava flows, or to discover some of the villages. The southern side of Mount Etna, perhaps the best-known part, is again completely different. Here you settle in your next base, a charming hotel on the southern slopes, the highest hotel on Mount Etna. You have dinner here and can then enjoy a spectacular documentary about this still active volcano.

Mt. Etna – Hotel

Distance: 7,5 km. - Walking time: 4 h. - Ascents & descents: +/- 100 m.

Extra day on Mount Etna

Perhaps - in order to have more time on Mt. Etna, already worth it if alone or the photo opportunities! - one extra night can be booked on Mt. Etna. Back at your base, you can still go for a short, but again spectacular, round walk along the Monti Silvestri, through the barren landscape formed by the explosion of 1892. After a short stop for a drink you can from there then walk back to our base. With another night on the top of Mt. Etna, with perhaps a short night walk under the stars that seem so close from here, you end this wonderful experience. The next morning you then return to Catania, with the option to leave directly (in case of a late flight) or you can opt for a last night in Catania.

Mt. Etna – Hotel

Day 8 – The Summit of Mount Etna & Return to Catania

After breakfast can leave your base on foot for a last exploration of the southern slopes of Mt. Etna. If the weather permits you can travel up to the very top of Mount Etna, the highest active volcano in Europe. You first travel up by cable car and 4x4 vehicles, until you reach almost 3000 metres in altitude. Then, together with a volcano guide you can make a short –relatively easy- walk towards one of the crater peaks, a unique experience! Then you start your downhill walk, passing along a marvellous viewpoint above the Valle del Bove, the Etna's largest valley, in which many lava flows can be seen, one atop of the other. If there is volcanic activity going on a specialist guide can bring you there, to allow you to observe these impressive forces of nature from a safe point. Then you walk back to the cable car. Those who want a longer walk – all downhill! - can walk all the way back to your base. In case of adverse weather conditions it is not possible to do the hike all the way to the top, but you can make a wonderful roundwalk over one of the most impressive cones, the Montagnola, and along the edge of the Bove Valley. Then you walk back to your base and pick up the car to travel down the mountain. In about 1 hour you are back in Catania.

Catania – Hotel

Distance: 15 km. - Walking time: 5 h. - Ascents & descents: +/- 1000 m. (long option).

N.B. In case you have a late flight, or just do not want to drive into the city you have the possibility to drive directly back to the airport, without going into Catania.

Day 9 – Departure from Catania

After breakfast your tour ends. Perhaps you'll have some time still to go for a walk on the slopes of Mount Etna, or to drive down to coast for a dive into the Mediterranean, before travelling back home (or on to your next destination....). The drive back down to Catania (airport) takes about 1-1,5 hours.

N.B. Especially recommended is the 2-day extension to nearby Taormina.



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TOUR DETAILS

ACCOMMODATION & MEALS

All nights are spent in beautiful 'boutique' hotels and *agriturismo's* (generally 3/4-star – 5-star on request). All rooms have en-suite facilities.

Not all dinners are included in the tour price. In the evenings you'll have an ample choice of good typical restaurants in the towns where you'll be staying.

No picnic lunches are included in the tour price, but these can be prepared for you by the accommodation holders, or materials for picnics can be purchased in the villages which you will be passing through.

LEVEL OF DIFFICULTY

Easy/moderate (2/3): Easy to moderate walks without any real technical difficulties. Remember you decide yourself the level of difficulty of your excursions. Also in early spring and late autumn temperatures can be quite high during the central hours of the day.

Fitness: All walks are feasible for all with some walking experience and in a good physical condition. You should be able to walk for some hours a day also in hot dry weather conditions.

ARRIVAL & DEPARTURE

Arrival & Departure: The tour starts and ends in CATANIA. The town is served by an international airport with daily flights from Milan, Roma and Naples.



INCLUDED

- Accommodation nights in good 3/4-star hotels or equivalent B&B accommodations:
2 nights Sortino, 2 nights Ragusa-Ibla, 2 (3) nights Noto, 1 (2) night(s) Etna, 1 night Catania
- Extensive route notes, with description of the route & tourist information
- Maps at 1 : 25.000 scale (or better)
- 24/24 h local assistance



NOT INCLUDED

- Departure taxes, local tourist taxes
- Visas & Travel Insurance
- Drinks and meals not mentioned in the itinerary
- Optional additional tours or activities
- Tips & Items of personal nature



TOUR VARIATIONS

One of the main characteristics of a Genius Loci Travel 'Drive & Hike, Walk & Discover' Tour is the freedom you have in putting together not only your own daily programme, but also the length of the tour and the places to visit.

The above programme is only an example of what is possible. It is a well-balanced programme, which shows you the great variety of this part of Sicily, both the authentic inland areas, as well as the stupendous coastline.

However, according to your interests we can easily adapt the programme to your demands. It is possible to extend your tour with a few days in Syracuse, Catania or any other place in Sicily. More mountains, more sea, more culture, more relax.... You decide!

POSSIBLE EXTENSION ETNA

In case you want to see more of Mount Etna (there are many different walks possible) we strongly to book an extra night here (see above).

POSSIBLE EXTENSION TAORMINA

It is possible to extend your stay in Sicily with two more days in the charming resort town of Taormina.

From here you can explore both Taormina itself, as well as the hillside village of Castelmola and the beautiful alleys which lead down to the sea.

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