



Walking in Sicily

Crater & coast: in the footsteps of history

24–31 March 2025 (ML 646)

8 days • £ 3,890

Lecturer: Dr R. T. Cobiانchi

Six walks of between 3 and 8 km through immensely varied scenery, from the lava fields of Etna to salt lake flats along the coast.

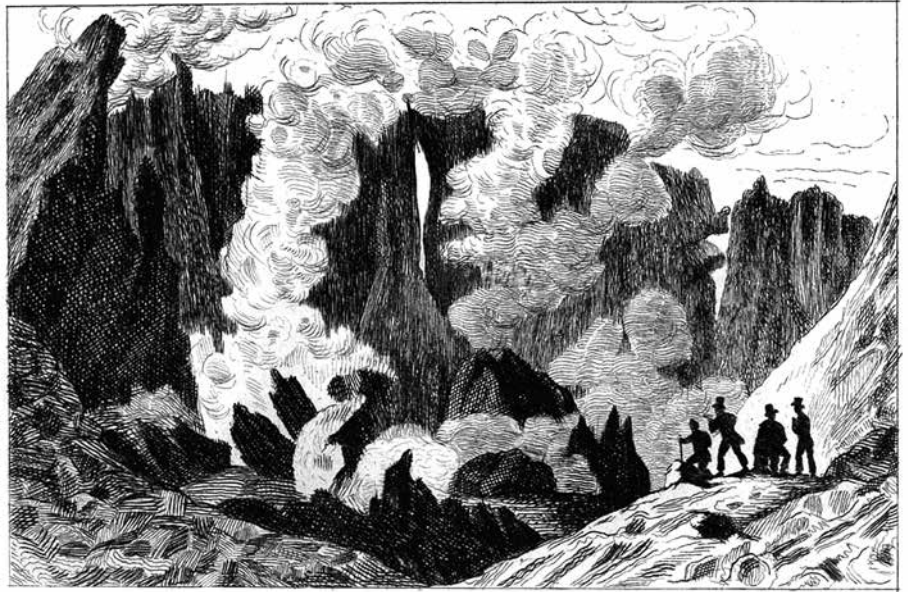
Much of archaeological interest, as well as visits to Syracuse, the greatest of western Greek cities, and to the Baroque city of Noto.

Led by art historian and Sicily expert Dr R. T. Cobiانchi.

Sicily, the Mediterranean's largest island, is well chronicled in history and literature as one of the most fascinating destinations in Europe. Her archaeological and historical sites delight visitors, but fortunately few of them explore the hugely varied landscapes on foot. Locals rarely indulge in country walking, and shepherds met on mountain paths are aghast that people choose to walk for a holiday. Yet walking can provide the key to understanding and appreciating this intoxicating island. We have included walks that are relatively unknown and countryside that is not easily accessible, but keeping in mind the principles of travelling less and seeing more, we hope to have designed an itinerary giving a fuller flavour of what Sicily can really offer.

Mount Etna, peaking as Europe's highest active volcano at nearly 11,000 feet, and sitting within a designated regional park covering 224 square miles, demands attention but also respect. Volcanologists venture perilously close to the crater's lip in the name of research, but for hikers there are remarkably varied and interesting paths to explore on the northern flank.

The distinctive climate and volcanic soils nurture a plethora of wild flowers, with orchids flourishing in both spring and late autumn. On the lower slopes, areas that were once covered with holm oak are now cultivated for citrus fruits and for wine, intensely flavoured reds and whites that are garnering approval throughout Italy and beyond. Above these, at 6,500 feet, Europe's southernmost beech trees are thriving, as are birch, considered an endemic species. Another thousand feet and the thorny shrub known locally as *spino santo* (*Astragalus siculus*) covers the ground, and mountain flowers such as senecio, violets and cerastium flourish.



Tourists inspecting Mount Etna, engraving c. 1830.

Twenty miles inland from Syracuse is the ten-square-mile Pantalica Nature Reserve, set on a plateau with gorges plunging through the limestone to the Anapo and Calcinara river valleys. It contains what is thought to be Europe's most extensive open-air necropolis, where the earliest rock tombs can be dated to the thirteenth century BC. Later civilizations have also left their mark; the faint frescoed walls in an almost-hidden cave church have lasted remarkably well in this somewhat harsh environment.

A coastal walk alongside the salt-water lagoons of the Vendicari Nature Reserve provides another category of experience. The *pantani* are a haven for birds, and with luck flamingos can be spotted in all seasons. Medieval watchtowers, an old *tonnaro* (tuna cannery) and a fishery punctuate this landscape, highlighting the importance of sea-faring trade in this part of Sicily. Fifteenth-century merchants in Noto shipped carob, grain and almonds from the port of Vendicari, and until the 1940s tuna was caught and tinned here.

These walks have been chosen to make the most of the protected parks in Sicily, thus helping efforts to restore, waymark and maintain the paths in this remarkably unspoiled land on the edge of Europe.

Itinerary

Day 1. Fly at c. 11.30am from London City to Catania, via Milan (ITA Airways) Drive to Syracuse in time for a late light supper. First of three nights on the island of Ortygia.

Day 2: Vendicari Nature Reserve, Syracuse. Drive south to the salt lagoons and nature reserve at Vendicari for a level walk along the sandy paths, c. 5 km. Visit the Villa Romana del Tellaro, where a small but superb set of Roman mosaics depicting scenes of hunting has been beautifully restored at this former *masseria*. Return to Syracuse to see some of the highlights of sculpture and ceramics from Sicily's Greek colonies in the excellent Archaeological Museum.

Day 3: Syracuse, Noto. Visit the 5th-century BC Greek theatre, the stone quarries and the Roman amphitheatre in Syracuse's Archaeological Park. There is a short walk (c. 3 km) exploring the Greek ruins at Palazzolo Acreide. Visit Noto, one of the loveliest and most harmonious Baroque towns.

Day 4: Pantalica Nature Reserve. Today's walk of c. 8 km takes place in Pantalica, where a series of paths within this spectacular reserve follow the Anapo river bed and former railway lines, or meander high along the plateaux; water levels in the river and local conditions determine the exact length of the walk. There is

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continued

a challenging downhill section which requires sure-footedness. Drive north to Taormina, where the next four nights are spent.

Day 5: Taormina, Castello Saraceno. A moderate circular walk of 5 km starts from the hotel on a paved path, and continues uphill to near the Castello Saraceno on steps. Perched on the hilltop at 400m above sea level, and thought to be the site of the lower part of Tauromenion's Acropolis, the apex of the walk offers spectacular views of the town and the Ionic coast. Visit Taormina's famed Greek-Roman theatre and the small Roman Odeon.

Day 6: Mount Etna, Piano Provenzana. Less-visited and less-well known than the southern slopes, Etna's northern flank nonetheless provides plenty of interest and atmosphere. A moderate circular walk (c. 5 km) on the lava fields from the great eruptions of 2002 with a local volcanologist allows time to appreciate what was known as Mongibello, mountain of mountains. Lunch at a rustic restaurant, before returning to Taormina.

Day 7: Forza d'Agrò. An unspoilt village with panoramic views of the Peloritani mountains and Etna, Forza d'Agrò is the starting point for a 8 km countryside walk, reaching 547m above sea level. It follows shepherds' tracks through olive groves and terraces; some terrain is very uneven on this path and requires sure-footedness. Return to Taormina for a tasting of some Sicilian wines.

Day 8. Catania. Drive to Catania Airport in time for the flight to London Gatwick (British Airways), arriving at c. 2.30pm.

Lecturer

Dr R. T. Cobianchi. Art historian and researcher specialising in Italian art and architecture of the Renaissance and Baroque. His interests range from the iconography of the late Middle Ages to the sculpture of Neoclassicism.

Practicalities

Price, per person. Two sharing: £ 3,890 or £3,650 without flights. **Single occupancy:** £4,590 or £ 4,350 without flights.

Included: flights with ITA Airways (Airbus A220) and British Airways (Airbus A320), travel by private coach; hotel accommodation; breakfasts; 3 lunches (2 of which are picnics) and 4 dinners with wine, water, coffee; all admissions; all tips; all taxes; the services of the lecturer and tour manager.

Accommodation. Algila Ortigia Charme Hotel, Syracuse (algila.it): charming seafront 4-star hotel on the island of Ortygia.

Hotel Villa Belvedere, Taormina (villabelvedere.it): 4-star, charming, family-run hotel, in the old town, with its own garden (rooms vary in size and outlook). *Single rooms are doubles for sole use throughout.*

How strenuous? This is a walking tour, graded moderate. There are 6 walks, 2 are easy, 3 are moderate and 2 challenging. It is essential for participants to have appropriate walking footwear, be in good physical condition and to be used to country walking with uphill and downhill content. If you are used to them you may find walking poles useful. Some days involve a lot of driving. Average distance by coach per day: c. 34 miles.

Group size: between 10 and 22 participants.

Walking tours

This is a walking tour. Our walking tours require a different scale of fitness and agility to our other tours. You should be used to country walking and have a good level of fitness and balance. There are ascents and descents, climbs over stiles and terrain which can be uneven, loose, slippery or muddy. Appropriate footwear and clothing are essential. Only in weather conditions which are so extreme as to be dangerous would a walk be cancelled.

Please attend to the walk descriptions for details of the distances covered, lengths of walks and type of terrain.

We also grade both individual walks and tours as a whole using the following system:

Easy. A short and mostly flat walk lasting 1–2 hours, on well maintained footpaths or roads, perhaps with short periods of gentle ascent or descent. An 'easy' tour will consist of mostly easy walks, perhaps with a couple of moderate ones. There might not be a walk every day.

Moderate. A walk of 2–3 hours' duration, with significant elevation gain, or stretches of rocky, gravelly or slippery paths. A 'moderate' tour will consist mostly of moderate walks, perhaps with a couple of easy or challenging ones, too. There is likely to be a walk every day.

Challenging. A walk that is longer than 3 hours, has steeper, longer or more frequent episodes of ascent and descent, or is tricky under foot. Tours graded as 'challenging' will consist mostly or entirely of this level of walk, perhaps with some moderate or easier walks too.