
Sicilian Palimpsest: Cultural Memory of the Mediterranean

March 12 to 23, 2022 (dates in Sicily) *Rescheduled from 2020 and 2021*



Agrigento, Temple of Concord

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 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 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 (see map below). 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 has been crafted to reveal these aspects of Sicily, and will take us in a clockwise circle around the island moving from west to east. Noted Rome based scholar, Jeffrey



View from Erice of coast enshrouded in fog

Blanchard will accompany us as lecturer, to the delight of the many of us who have enjoyed his company and erudition on past trips! We will arrive in Trapani and depart from Catania. 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 (with two exceptions).

A Note for the time of Pandemic: This trip has been rescheduled from March, 2020, when the decision to postpone the trip was made within a week of planned departure. Sicily was relatively spared the impacts of Covid-19 then or since, however travel there would have been impossible due to lockdowns and flight cancellations. Planning for 2022 is predicated on a number of factors still unknown, however, at the time of the trip, those safety precautions being advised at the time will be adhered to, and the viability of the trip will be determined prior to departure based on what is known then.



Above: The temple at Segesta

Detailed Itinerary

Day of departure, Friday, March 11, 2022
In transit from home

Depart from home with Palermo (PMO) as your destination. (Book your international flight to Rome --FCO-- in order to connect with ITA AZ 1799 departing at 11:05 am for Palermo--PMO--arriving at 12:15 pm on March 12, 2022, and book this flight as part of your overall itinerary (so as to be able to check bags through at Rome).

Day 1, Saturday, March 12 Rome to Palermo and on to Trapani

Assemble at Rome's Leonardo da Vinci Airport for our flight and arrive at Palermo's relatively small Falcone Borsellino Airport at Punta Raisi, west of the city. We'll meet our local guide, Giorgio, and our driver, Antonio, and then will drive the short distance to Castellamare del Golfo, where we will have a buffet lunch at the Agora Bar. We'll continue to Marsala and find a boat for the island of San Pantaleo

or Mozia, one of the most important Phoenician sites in Sicily. Here the Giuseppe Whitaker Museum houses and displays the important finds, including the magnificent 5th c. bce Motya Charioteer, excavated in 1979. We will then check into our hotel beside the former fish market in the port of Trapani. We have chosen this spot pleasantly situated within the town's ancient ramparts by the sea, as the perfect place to spend three days acclimatizing, recovering from jet-lag and making day trips. We will gather for drinks and a welcome dinner at a nearby restaurant.

Day 2, Sunday, March 13 Selinunte and Marsala

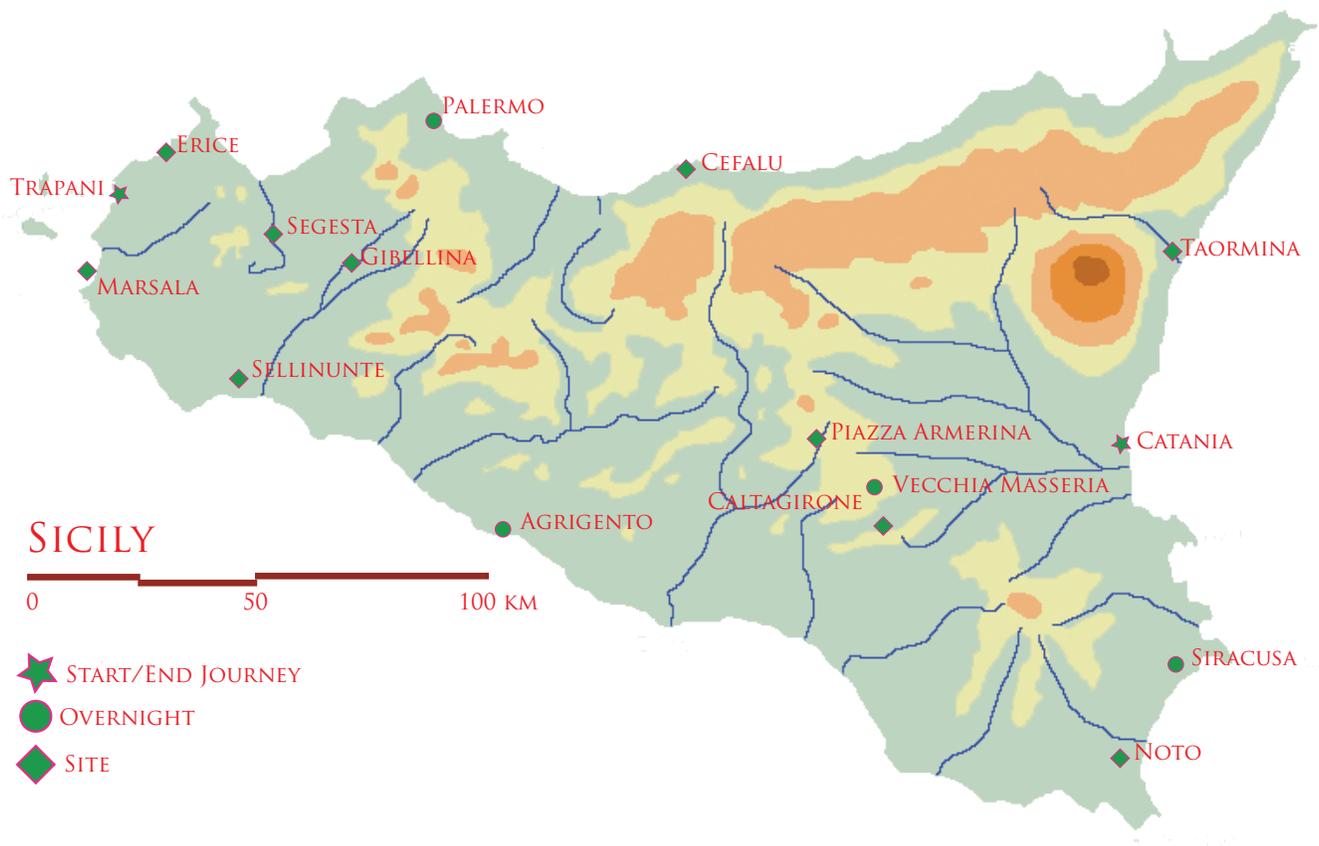
Today we will take an excursion to Selinunte and Marsala. Selinus was founded by the Greeks in the mid

7th 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 Trapani around the western coast via Marsala. Stops will be made (time permitting) in Castelveirano to see a magnificent church by the Serpota brothers and in Mazzarao del Valle to see the museum where a spectacular undersea find, the ancient Greek bronze *Dancing Satyr* is housed. Reaching Marsala, we will visit the museum of tapestries to see its eight 16th century Flemish tapestries. Back in Trapani, you will have time to join the evening passeggiata and have dinner on your own in a local restaurant.

Day 3, Monday, March 14 Segesta and Gibellina

Not far to the east lies Segesta, a dramatically isolated site with a great, unfinished Doric temple and a theater 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 3rd 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.

Following this, we will drive to Erice, a picturesque town often high in the clouds. We'll hope they part for us, revealing stunning views of the coastline in all directions. After exploring the town with its churches, bastions and piazzas, we will repair to the simple family run Hotel Moderno, whose restaurant is the best in town.

Day 4, Tuesday, March 15 Palermo

We will leave Trapani 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 or on our way into Palermo.

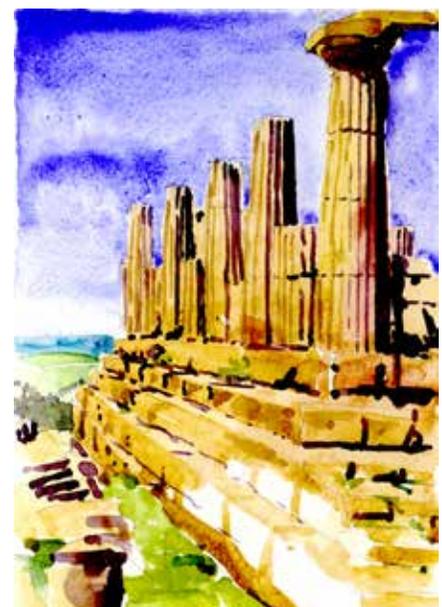
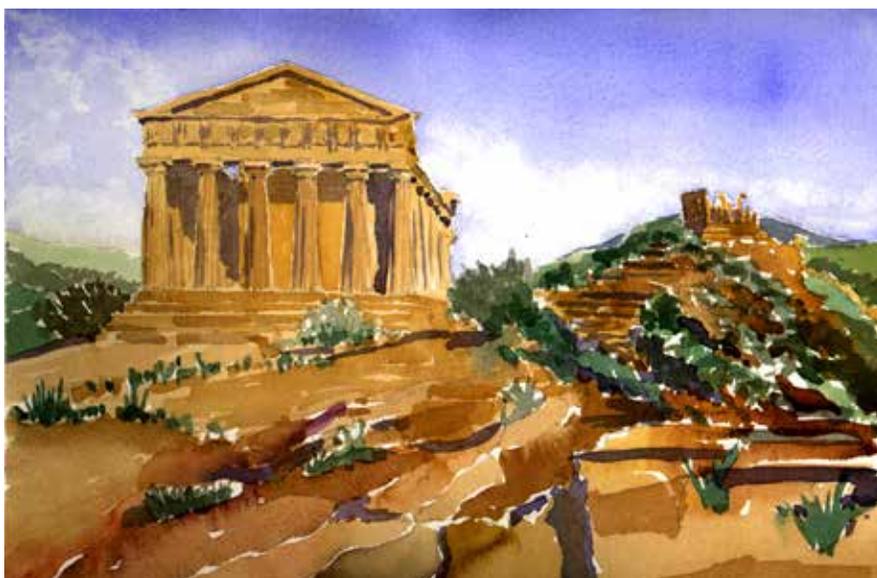
Beginning the descent down into Palermo, we will discover Sicily's capital city and principal port flanked by mountains on both sides and in the center of a great crescent bay. Our first stop will be the Capella dei Normani whose crown jewel is the Palatine Chapel, built by Roger II, grandfather of the king who built Monreale. Nearby is San Giovanni degli Eremiti, also built in the mid 12th 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 check in to the Hotel Piazza Borsa, a recently restored former bank. We will walk to the nearby Oratorio di San Lorenzo for a private viewing of the

magnificent plaster sculpture decoration by master Giacomo Serpota (1656-1732), followed by a dinner as the guests of the Principessa di Raffadali in her nearby palazzo.

Day 5, Wednesday, March 16 Palermo

This morning we will embark from the hotel on foot to see some of Palermo's 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, Santa Maria dell'Ammiraglio (la Martorana) 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. Next to it, San Cataldo presents a purer form of a three-domed Moorish/Norman chapel. Across the piazza, the Convent of Santa Catarina has recently been opened to visitors, offering a glimpse into what life was like for the nuns who lived in these cloistered environments. We will lunch on Palermitano "street food" at the nearby Focceria San Francesco, and then will continue our walk to take



Agrigento, Temple of Concord, above left, and Temple of Juno, above right

in some of Palermo's more rarified sites, including the Angiolo Mazzoni designed Mussolini era post office, more of the fantastically baroque stucco work chapels of Serpota, including San Domenico and

Oratorio del Rosario at San Donenico and the Oratorio di Santa Cita. These chapels are resplendent with the vivid and expressive figural plaster sculpture of the master.

Dinner will be on your own at a selection of nearby local restaurants we will suggest.

[Day 6, Thursday, March 17 Cefalu and Porto Empedocle](#)

Before leaving Palermo, we will visit the recently restored Archaeological Museum and the remarkable Palazzo Abetellis, a fine arts museum reconceived by the architect Carlo Scarpa in 1953. Scarpa is renowned for the way in which he respects the historic fabric, while celebrating and distinguishing the modern interventions. We will see there works by Antonello da Messina and others.

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. Leaving Cefalu, we will head south through the center of the island, past Agrigento to the nearby small coastal town of Porto Empedocle. Here we'll spend the night at a simple beach-side hotel, where we will also have dinner.

[Day 7, Friday, March 18 Agrigento to Caltagirone](#)

We will head back to Agrigento, where we will spend the morning exploring



Above: The Baroque façade of the Cathedral in Siracusa, whose core is the Greek temple of Apollo

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 1st 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. We will round out our morning on site with a visit to the Archaeological Museum nearby. It was designed by Franco Minissi and opened in 1960s, integrating an existing church and cloister with modern structures. After lunch nearby at a local pizzeria, we will drive northeast to Caltagirone, where we will stay at the Vecchia Masseria. The word "masseria" refers to a traditional Sicilian farmhouse typology, consisting of a group of structures arranged around

a courtyard. We will have dinner here, sampling wines and food products of their own production.

[Day 8, Saturday, March 19 Piazza Armerina, Caltagirone, Siracusa](#)

We will continue eastwards towards nearby Piazza Armerina, to see the late Roman (3rd-4th century AD) Villa Imperiale del Casale, known for its grandeur and for the extent of its mosaics. We will have lunch in nearby Caltagirone, famous for its brightly decorated pottery. Finally, we will drive to Siracusa, occupied by the Greeks from the 8th 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. The Grand Hotel Ortigia, overlooking the harbor, will be our home for the next two nights. Dinner will be on your own, either at the hotel's rooftop restaurant or at any number of nearby restaurants we may suggest.

[Day 9, Sunday, March 20 Siracusa and Noto](#)

This morning is devoted to exploring Ortigia. We will begin on foot encountering one of Europe's most beautiful squares, where the cathedral incorporates a 6th century BC Doric temple. After visiting the Fountain of Arethusa and the museum in the Palazzo Bellomo, whose main attraction is an *Annunciation* by Antonello da Messina. Finding our bus, we will head south to 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. We'll have lunch on arancini, the ubiquitous rice balls, and then indulge in one of the best ice creams on offer anywhere.

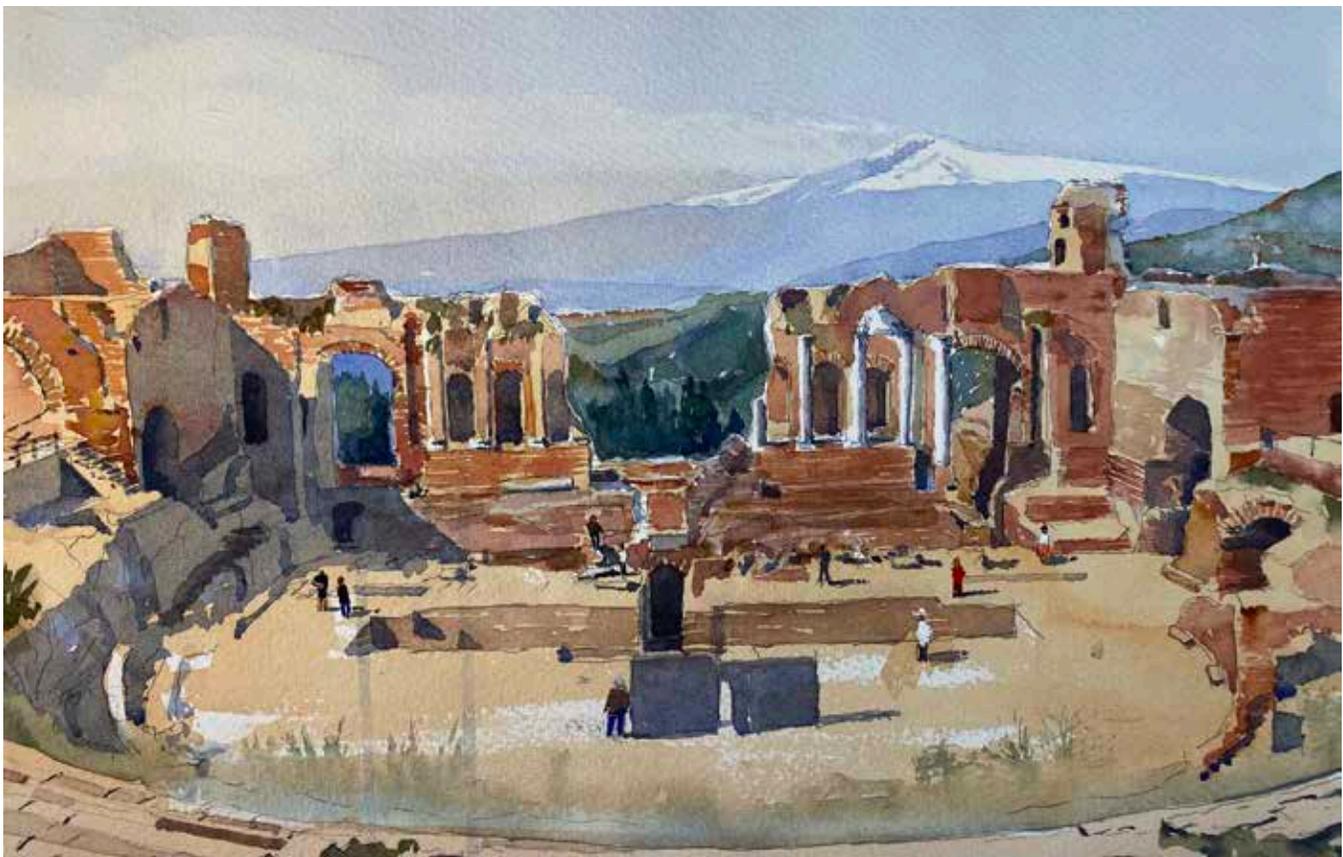
Tonight, we are invited to a "serata" proposed by Baron di Benevento del Bosco. He will meet us at the Church of Santa Lucia on the edge of town, where he will present his research on the life of Caravaggio and the creation of his masterwork, depicting the *Martyrdom of St. Lucy*, which has been recently restored in its original location. We will return to his palace facing the Duomo for drinks and dinner. He will show us the grand rooms and his many collections including maps and works on paper documenting the architecture of Siracusa.

Day 10, Monday, March 21 Noto, Lentini, Catania

Leaving Ortigia on foot reaching our bus, nearby on the mainland is Neapolis with its many well-preserved classical monuments, including a Greek theater, Roman amphitheater, limestone caves, and a large 3rd century BC altar. Next, we will continue northwards to La Biviere, where we have been invited for lunch by the Borghese family at the villa and garden they have created there from desolate swamp land, incorporating



a collection of antique buildings transformed in a unique and personal way.



Top: Taormina as seen from the sea. Above: The Ancient Theater with view of Mt. Etna beyond.

For our final leg we move to the slopes of Mt. Etna. Our first stop will be in late afternoon we will visit the monumental center of Catania, including the Piazza del Duomo, the fine palazzi surrounding it (including a private visit to Palazzo Biscari), We will spend the next two nights here in the small and private Hotel Liberty hidden away on a quiet residential street. Catania is a hidden gem also for its cuisine, where after being inspired by the raw ingredients on offer in its central market, we will sample the local cuisine at Mé Cumpari Turiddu.

Day 11, Tuesday, March 22 Catania, Taormina and Mt. Etna

Today we will visit picturesque Taormina at the base of Mt. Etna. We will head out from Catania up the coast, we will soon reach Taormina, an enchanting town above the sea on the slopes of the mountain. Abandoning our vehicle we will walk through its pedestrian-only streets to reach the ancient theater from which we can enjoy the view, much as the ancients did, over the frons scenae and admire Mt. Etna, its puffs of smoke glowing fiery orange! Taormina has long been a great draw for British aesthetes, and we will visit and have lunch at the emblematic Casa Cuseni, a recently restored arts and crafts villa from 1905 built by Robert Ktison and decorated with murals and furniture designed by Frank Brangwyn. We will

return to Catania with time for a walk to work off our lunch, and arrange a rapid Covid test, which may be required for entry to the US. We also hope to secure tickets for the ballet, *Romeo e Giulietta* at the Teatro Bellini, which opened with a production of *Norma* in 1890. For those still hungry, we'll secure a light supper before or after.

Day 12, Wednesday, March 23 Depart

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



View of Mt. Etna and landscape from the ancient theater