

MALTA & SICILY: HISTORY, CULTURE & NATURE

Aboard THE SEA CLOUD

MALTA PRE-TRIP

APRIL 29–MAY 3, 2017

&

SICILY EXTENSION

MAY 11–18, 2017

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An optional pre-trip to our Sicily and Malta cruise aboard the Sea Cloud, May 2-11, 2017, explores in greater depth the natural, historical, and cultural highlights of the island-nation of Malta, one of Europe's most charming countries. An optional extension offers additional time in Sicily, with more birding opportunities and visits to several famous locations not included in the cruise program, namely Mt. Etna, Taormina, and Palermo.

MALTA PRE-TRIP

APRIL 29–MAY 3, 2017

Situated in the middle of the Mediterranean Sea, Malta is famous as a crossroads of history's greatest civilizations. Malta is one of Europe's smallest countries, but what it lacks in size is made up for in charm. Successful and prosperous, historic and culturally rich, Malta is a favored getaway for travelers from Europe and the United States.

For this pre-trip to our cruise, Sicily & Malta: History, Culture & Nature aboard the Sea Cloud, we'll experience the island-nation of Malta beyond what is offered in the cruise program. We will have three days to explore the island, visiting a variety of important historical, birding, and scenic locations.

Malta's illustrious history is on display everywhere, as evidenced by the fact that it hosts a greater density of UNESCO World Heritage Sites than any country in the world. Our itinerary visits a selection of prominent sites, each of which provides exposure to a slice of Maltese history. On the first morning we'll enjoy a boat ride on Grand Harbor, featuring spectacular views of the walled capital city, Valletta, followed by a walking tour of the Three Cities district. We'll journey inland to the remarkable St. Paul's Catacombs, an expansive underground burial chamber used during Phoenician, Punic, Roman, and early-Christian times.

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We'll travel to South Malta for a visit to the Neolithic site of Hagar Qim followed by lunch on the waterfront at Marsaxlokk, famous for its fleet of colorful fishing boats. For a special treat, on one evening we'll have dinner in the old city of Mdina, unique for its Arabic, Norman, and Gothic architectural styles.

Late April and early May are a prime time to be in Malta for birding, as this is when the island's resident species are joined by northbound passage migrants. Visits to the Buskett Gardens, Ghadira Nature Reserve, and Foresta 2000, the latter two BirdLife Malta sites, afford opportunities to seek a range of migrating shorebirds and landbirds. Little Egret, Little Ringed Plover, Black-winged Stilt, European Honey-buzzard, Cetti's and Sardinian warblers, Blue Rock-Thrush, Spotted Flycatcher, European Pied Flycatcher, and Italian Sparrow are representative of the possibilities.

Finally, our travels will showcase Malta's scenic beauty, such as the Dingli Cliffs and Blue Grotto, highlighted by flower-filled uplands, towering limestone cliffs, and dramatic seascapes.

April 29-30, Days 1-2: Departure to Valletta, Malta; arrival and evening welcome. Flights from the United States bound for Valletta depart on April 29 and arrive in Europe on the morning of April 30. Connecting flights to Malta arrive throughout the day depending on your European departure city. Upon arrival at the airport you will be met outside the baggage claim by a representative of our ground agent and transferred to the **Westin Dragonara Resort** where a room has been reserved in your name. After check-in you will have the remainder of the afternoon to yourself, where options include relaxing in the privacy of your room or exploring the expansive hotel grounds or nearby resort town of St. Julian's.

We will gather as a group at 6:00 p.m. on the terrace outside of Quadro Restaurant for a trip introduction and welcome, followed by dinner.

The Westin Dragonara Resort is one of Malta's finest hotels, offering accommodations, amenities, and services that provides a nice complement to our stay aboard the *Sea Cloud*. Situated about 15 minutes north of Valletta on a short narrow peninsula in the seaside resort town of St. Julian's, the Dragonara offers plenty of privacy amid beautiful surroundings. A spacious outdoor terrace affords fine sea views while a beautifully designed swimming pool will appeal to those who like the idea of a cool dip. The hotel operates three restaurants, all accessed from the south side of the hotel, each offering outdoor dining with sea views.

NIGHTS: Day 1, en route on aircraft
Day 2: Westin Dragonara Resort, St. Julian's

May 1, Day 3: Central Malta: Grand Harbor, Three Cities, and the Mdina area. Today will be the first of three days in which we'll explore a number of important areas across the island. A morning cruise on Grand Harbor will start things off followed by a walking tour of the Three Cities district. In the afternoon we'll travel inland to the town of Rabat for a visit to the remarkable St. Paul's Catacombs, and the day will end with a trip to the wonderful medieval village of Mdina for a walking tour of the fabled citadel. For a grand finale, we'll have dinner in Mdina atop a historic building.

While the entire island brims with historic sites and interesting natural features, the area around the capital, Valletta, is an essential first stop. A walled city dating from the mid-1600s, Valletta is the historical, cultural, and administrative heart of a region that hosts most of the island's population. As a tour of the famous city is included in the cruise program, we will spend our time this morning visiting a number of important locations in the immediate vicinity, namely Grand Harbor and the Three Cities district.

No one sight on Malta is more impressive than that of Grand Harbor, which serves as a maritime gateway to Valletta and the island's interior. Featuring multiple peninsulas of land, three fortresses, and unparalleled views

of the capital, Grand Harbor offers a dramatic first impression. It is also Malta's deepest port, which explains its considerable value to commercial, military, and tourist interests alike.

Depending on weather and sea conditions, we'll transfer from the hotel to Grand Harbor by boat, entering the city through a breakwater that passes directly in front of Fort Elmo. Traveling with local guides, we will enjoy a leisurely hour-long interpretive cruise, taking in all of the famous sights including Valletta, featuring towering walls, defense bastions, and the dome of St. John's Co-Cathedral: forts St. Elmo, Ricasoli, and St. Angelo; and the *gardjola*, a stone sentry box carved with an eye and an ear as reminder to the guardians of the harbor to stay vigilant.

We will disembark in the Three Cities district across the harbor from Valletta and spend the remainder of the morning on a walking and driving tour of two of the three communities that comprise the district—Birgu and Senglea (the latter also known as L-Isla)—both of which sit on narrow peninsulas that project into Grand Harbor. Birgu was the capital of the Knights of the Order of St. John until the end of the Great Siege in 1565. We will walk through the medieval village exploring its winding stone streets, narrow passages, and Baroque architecture. On the far side of the peninsula we'll enjoy fine views of Fort Ricasoli that guards the outer harbor. We'll then make the short trip to Senglea on the parallel peninsula. At the tip we'll visit the attractive Safe Haven Garden and take in the sweeping views of Grand Harbor below, Valletta across the way, and restored Fort St. Angelo across Dockyard Creek.

After lunch in the Three Cities we'll head to the center of the island for an afternoon and evening in the Mdina region.

Our first stop will be St. Paul's catacombs in Rabat, a must-see site featuring rock-hewn burial chambers spanning 1,600 years of history. The earliest of the catacombs were used in Phoenician burial ceremonies while the latest date from the Byzantine period, around 870 A.D. The site offers a modern visitor center and several underground access points where we'll have the opportunity to explore a labyrinthine network of corridors and burial chambers. Of special interest is the fact that the catacombs were first developed as ancient limestone quarries prior to serving as a burial ground. The Maltese government and European Union have invested significant effort and money into developing the catacombs as a first-rate historic site. A visit here provides a thoroughly unique experience.

In the late afternoon we'll head to nearby Mdina, the walled citadel that served for centuries as the island capital until the coming of the Knights of the Order of St. John. Mdina is an amazing place to be sure. Situated on a hilltop overlooking miles of fertile plains, it is small wonder that the site was so highly valued throughout its history for its strategic advantages. We will spend the last part of the day meandering through the medieval village exploring its narrow streets and plazas. From several overlooks atop the eastern bastion, we'll have unlimited views of the surrounding countryside and the distant sea. We'll also have an opportunity to poke our heads into several shops, and possibly even have time to explore the Palazzo Falson, a historic museum house where centuries-old rugs, furniture, art, and weapons are on display.

The birding around town will be light, although Italian Sparrows are ubiquitous.

For a final act we'll enjoy a sunset dinner atop a quaint hotel in town.

NIGHT: Westin Dragonara Resort, St. Julian's

May 2, Day 4: Birding in North and Central Malta. Whereas the previous day was dedicated largely to sightseeing and visits to historical sites, today will be allotted to exploring Malta's birding opportunities. We will spend the duration of the morning in North Malta, about an hour from the hotel, visiting several sites on this less developed parts of the island. After lunch we'll travel to the Buskett Gardens near the west coast for an hour or two of birding.

Owing to its small size and sparse vegetative cover, Malta does not support a high diversity of breeding birds. On the other hand, given that Malta is an outpost in the midst of the Mediterranean Sea, it happens to be an excellent

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place to see birds in the spring migration period when many species of waterbirds, birds of prey, and songbirds are surging north out of Africa, bound for European breeding grounds. At this season, a variety of birds representing a multitude of families is possible, including storks, herons, hawks, eagles, harriers, shorebirds, bee-eaters, shrikes, rollers, flycatchers, warblers, and more.

We will plan our day so as to visit several birding areas that give us the best chance of encountering a mix of resident and migrant birds alike. BirdLife Malta, an affiliate of the renowned conservation organization, BirdLife International, operates three reserves on Malta and we will visit two of these. We'll also explore a scrub-plateau that offers chances for a variety of species not found elsewhere and that affords magnificent views of the sea.

Our first stop will be Foresta 2000 north of the town of Mellieha where the island pinches in to its narrowest point. This, the first of two BirdLife Malta sites we'll visit this morning, is a small woodland of planted native trees attractive to migrant landbirds, particularly flycatchers and warblers. The project is interesting from the standpoint that it provides a look into the distant past to a time Malta might have appeared before its native forest was harvested for construction and fuel for fire. Foresta 2000 takes its name from the incipient year of the project. To demonstrate the problems associated with bird conservation in Malta, the forest was partially destroyed a number of years ago by vandalism inflicted by bird hunters upset with the growing movement to end the hunting of native birds in Malta. Still, the damage was limited and today the site is considered a success. If the pulse of migration is slow, we may see very little; on the other hand, a good wave of migrating birds could yield Spotted, Collared and European Pied flycatchers, and Wood, Garden, and Willow warblers. Eurasian Collared-Dove, Sardinian Warbler, and Italian Sparrow are resident.

Next, we'll proceed to the top of the plateau above, a region of rocky limestone uplands and loosely spaced low vegetation. Here, amid the shin-high scrub we have chances to encounter Sardinian and Spectacled warblers, Blue Rock-Thrush, and Greater Short-toed Lark. This location also provides a promontory from which to watch for migrating birds that use the surrounding clifftops as a natural flightpath during migration. Possibilities include White Stork, Gray and Purple herons, Eurasian Honey-buzzard, and Eurasian Sparrowhawk, all of which are moving north out of Africa. From the edge of the plateau, the panoramic views of the sea are magnificent. To the northwest, the sister island of Gozo looms large against the sea, its white cliffs visible even at a distance.

Descending the plateau, we'll next visit Ghadira Nature Reserve. Another BirdLife Malta site, Ghadira is a critical wetland habitat on an island with precious few. In historical times, the site probably began as a coastal lagoon, but later was used as a salt pan by area residents. Thwarted plans to develop the property, or in one case, run a road through it, ultimately led to the preservation of the site in perpetuity. Although small, the actively managed wetland is a draw for migrating shorebirds and wading birds. Exposed mud, shallow water, and salt marsh often teem with birds in the migration period. We never know what a visit will produce; regardless, we likely will not be disappointed. A representation of species we could possibly encounter includes Gray and Purple herons, Little Egret, Pied Avocet, Black-winged Stilt, Little Ringed Plover, Wood and Marsh sandpipers, Green Sandpiper, Little Stint, Dunlin, Common Greenshank and Common Redshank. Zitting Cisticolas and Sardinian Warblers inhabit the surrounding vegetation.

After lunch along the coast we'll head back to the island's interior before reaching the Buskett Gardens near the west coast of the island. Situated below Verdala Palace, the gardens were designed originally by the Knights of St. John as a private hunting ground for the grand master of the order. Populated by a fine diversity of trees and plants, this location is today one of the most verdant single locations in Malta. Consequently, it is also attractive to migrating birds. We'll spend a couple of hours walking the paths and roads that traverse the garden in hope of locating migrant birds. As with other sites we've visited today, what we see depends on the flow of migration. That being said, Buskett Garden supports a plant community in a relatively mature state, meaning that the trees are large enough and dense enough to host breeding species found nowhere else in Malta including a few pairs of Spotted Flycatcher, Blackcap, Cetti's Warbler, Common Chaffinch, and European Serin. Eurasian Blackbird and Eurasian Jay also are here.

NIGHT: Westin Dragonara Resort, St. Julian's

May 3, Day 5: South Malta: the coast, Hagar Qim, and Marsaxlokk. Having spent time in North and Central Malta, today we'll explore the southern end of the island, visiting scenic areas along the coast in addition to the Neolithic site of Hagar Qim.

We'll begin the final morning of the pre-trip by heading directly across Malta for a morning trip to the Dingli Cliffs, a limestone escarpment that towers high above the sea on the west coast of the island. There are a number of reasons to visit the Dingli Cliffs: first, they are the highest point in Malta, rising 800 feet over the sea; second, the views from atop the cliffs are sensational; and third, migrating birds use updrafts of air that are especially pronounced here to aid them in their northward journey. The picture takers among us will enjoy the opportunities to photograph the seascape before us while the birders will watch for migrating hawks. Many people contend that this area is one of the least spoiled on Malta. Our visit should coincide with a profusion of wildflowers blooming on the surrounding uplands.

From the Dingli Cliffs we'll proceed south a short distance to the Neolithic site of Hagar Qim.

Malta has been inhabited for thousands of years, and its Neolithic past is on full display at the archeological site of Hagar Qim and its sister site of Mnajdra. Both sites consist of temple and dwelling complexes that showcase monumental archaeological style and achievement. The oldest parts of the complex have been dated to around 3,600 B.C.

Upon arrival, we'll spend time in the visitor center before making the short walk to the sites. Hagar Qim lies in closest proximity to the visitor center. Here, well-marked paths encircle and bisect the site, offering visitors the chance to view massive hand-hewn rocks mounted upright, square-cut entry ways, and partially collapsed chambers. Considering that the most ancient components of the complex are over five and a half thousand years old, it is remarkable to see them in their current state of preservation. Equally remarkable is that the site (and others on Malta) are believed to be the oldest Neolithic sites on the planet, predating Stonehenge by at least 500 years.

In the late morning we'll resume the journey south before stopping at a particularly attractive stretch of coastline to view the Blue Grotto.

Located on the southwest corner of the island, the Blue Grotto is one of Malta's best known landmarks. From the parking area we'll walk a short distance down a paved path to where we can look straight down onto the sea. Here, where the inexorable forces of tides and currents have resulted in a deeply sculptured coastline, the Blue Grotto appears as a wave-cut double-arched cave supported by a thick column of rock between the two arches. Depending on the angle of the sun, the incoming water is illuminated a dazzling azure.

For lunch we'll travel to the southernmost point of the island and the community of Marsaxlokk, situated on the bay of the eastern side of the bay that bears the same name. Marsaxlokk (pronounced Marsa-lock) is a fishing community best known for its fleet of brightly painted small fishing boats. We will have lunch at one of the waterfront restaurants where we'll enjoy fresh local seafood. Our time here will allow for many opportunities to photograph the famous boats.

We'll head back to the hotel in the mid-afternoon, arriving in time to break for a couple of hours before we join the other cruise passengers at 6:00 p.m. this evening.

NIGHT: Westin Dragonara Resort, St. Julian's

SICILY EXTENSION

MAY 11–18, 2017

Beautiful northern and eastern Sicily is the setting for this optional extension to our cruise, Sicily & Malta: History, Culture & Nature aboard the Sea Cloud. Owing to Sicily's size, there simply is not enough time in the cruise program to include all of the island's best known sites in a single trip. This land-based program provides the final piece to the full "Sicily experience," with additional birding opportunities and visits to marvelous historical sites.

Our trip begins with a flight from Malta to Catania (possibly via Rome), from which we'll transfer south to Ortygia, our base for the next three days. This part of the trip will be geared more toward birding and sightseeing, highlighted by trips to the Vendicari Nature Reserve, perhaps Sicily's finest and most important birding location where a range of shorebirds, waders, and landbirds may be found; Cava Grande and the rocky uplands for breeding songbirds; and a day-long trip to the slopes of spectacular Mt. Etna, Europe's highest and most active volcano. Golden Eagle, Great Spotted Woodpecker, Pallid Swift, Spectacled and Subalpine warblers, "Sicilian" Long-tailed Tit, Firecrest, Rock Bunting, Rock Petronia, and a variety of shorebirds and wading birds are all likely among many other species.

On the sightseeing and cultural front, we'll tour the historic city-center of Catania, Sicily's second largest city; visit the remarkable Necropolis of Pantalica, featuring rock-cut chamber tombs that date from antiquity; spend a night in lovely Taormina with its dramatic Greco-Roman theatre, public garden, and unparalleled views of the sea and Mt. Etna; and trace a route along the scenic Tyrrhenian coastline, stopping at the Cathedral of Cefalù, home to the mosaic Christ Pantokrator which the historian John Julius Norwich calls the most beautiful representation of Christ in Western art.

Our time in Sicily will conclude in the island capital of Palermo where a day-tour of the city and nearby Monreale will bring exposure to a panoply of marvelous historical and architectural wonders including the Cappella Palatina, Martorana, and Cathedral of Monreale—reflecting a blended array of architectural styles and exquisite works of art.

May 11, Day 1: Flight from Valletta to Catania; transfer to Syracuse. The *Sea Cloud* will arrive in Valletta by 8:00 a.m. with disembarkation to follow by 9:00. We will transfer to the airport with plenty of time to check in for the international flight to Italy which leaves at mid-day. Lunch will be on our own in the airport. Our destination is Catania, located on the east coast of Sicily. Please note that getting to Catania will require an initial flight from Valletta to Rome with a short layover followed by the flight to Catania.

We'll arrive in Catania around 6:00 p.m. Upon emerging from the baggage claim area we will be met by our ground agent who will provide transportation to Syracuse, a drive of about one hour. In Syracuse we will check in to the Grand Ortigia Hotel, located on the waterfront in Syracuse's old quarter, Ortygia. Following check-in at the hotel, we'll have a late dinner in the hotel restaurant.

NIGHT: Grand Hotel Ortigia, Syracuse

May 12-14, Days 2-4: Birding along the coast, Cava Grande & Mt. Etna. This morning marks the first of three days in which we'll dedicate most of our time to birding activities. We'll be joined at breakfast by a highly regarded local guide who will lead us on successive days to some of Sicily's best birding areas. As opposed to our

visit to this area during the cruise, we will have much more time to seek regional specialty birds and seasonal migrants, traveling to such delightful locations as Oasi di Vendicari Nature Reserve and the southeast coast, Cava Grande del Cassabile and Valle dell'Anapo, and Mt. Etna.

Oasi di Vendicari Nature Reserve and the southeast coast

Although we will have already been to Oasi di Vendicari during the cruise, the site is so productive as to warrant a second visit. As stated in the cruise itinerary, Oasi di Vendicari Nature Reserve is perhaps Sicily's greatest wildlife refuge. Boasting a vast collection of fields, marshes, lakes, mudflats, and brackish lagoons, the reserve offers tremendous birding possibilities all year long.

The second week of May is a particularly great time to be here as we'll likely encounter an exciting mix of resident wading birds, seasonal songbirds, and northbound migrants. At this season, the difference of even a couple of days can produce very different results in terms of what we see.

Initially, we may work the fields along the entrance road watching for open-country birds like European Bee-eater, European Roller, and Woodchat Shrike. We'll walk the network of paths that give access to different portions of the refuge, taking our time to identify any birds we see. The large reeds ringing the marshes may host a variety of warblers including Cetti's, Eurasian Reed, and Great Reed warblers. Areas of exposed mud could reveal Common Shelduck and an interesting assortment of northbound shorebirds, gulls, and terns. Species one may typically encounter in this setting include Kentish Plover, Common Ringed Plover, Little Ringed Plover, Little Stint, Dunlin, Curlew Sandpiper, Common Redshank, Common Greenshank, and Little Tern. All the while, we'll stay vigilant for the appearance of less common gull species such as Slender-billed and Audouin's gulls.

Larger bodies of water can be exceptionally good for wading birds. Eurasian Spoonbill, Gray Heron, and Great and Little egrets are all typical of the area.

We'll have lunch in the charming old fishing town of Marzamemi, followed by a couple of hours of afternoon birding.

Around the marshes and fields in the Longarini and Ciba areas we'll watch for migrating hawks, shrikes, pipits, buntings, and larks.

Riserva Naturale Cava Grande del Cassabile and Valle dell'Anapo

Riserva Naturale Cava Grande is an important site in southeast Sicily featuring quality birding and attractive landscapes. Situated in the hills above Syracuse, we'll reach the Cava Grande area via a series of mountain roads that lead into a mid-elevation ecosystem of rocky uplands and a spreading limestone gorge. This rugged country is a good place to search for habitat-appropriate species such as Peregrine Falcon, Pallid Swift, Spectacled and Subalpine warblers, Whinchat, European Stonechat, Blue Rock-Thrush, Spotted Flycatcher, Woodlark Rock Petronia, Cirl Bunting, and others.

In the afternoon we will visit Valle dell'Anapo Nature Reserve and the nearby archaeological site of Necropoli di Pantalica. At Valle Dell'Anapo we'll enter an ecosystem of brush covered hills and shaded paths in the vicinity of the drainage of the Anapo River. The whole area is quite scenic and should offer respite from the warmth of the mid-day. A variety of birds are possible here including Eurasian Kestrel, European Turtle-Dove, Common Raven, Common Nightingale, and many others. At Necropoli di Pantalica we'll witness an extraordinary communal burial site in which thousands of individual tombs were hewn by hand from the base of a limestone promontory. The site is located near the convergence of the Anapo and Calcinara rivers and dates from the 13th–7th centuries B.C. There are thought to be approximately 4,000 individual chamber tombs, and the area is today a UNESCO World Heritage Site. In the nearby town of Ferla we'll stop for a wonderful ice cream break before returning to Syracuse.

Mt. Etna

On another day we will travel to Mt. Etna, Europe's highest volcano and also its most active. Etna is classified as a stratovolcano, meaning that it is a composite cone formed by layers of lava that rise dramatically to a small summit area. At nearly 11,000 feet Mount Etna dominates the landscape of eastern Sicily for miles around. In the wintertime, when the summit is snow-capped, Etna may be visible for over a hundred miles.

Many people come to the mountain to view its active geology in which clouds of ash and smoke are belched periodically from the summit. Although the summit itself is of high interest to many, the entire area is a wonderland of volcanic features. The main highway to the mountain tops out at around 6,300 feet, and all around us are fine views of cinder cones and smaller calderas that formed from side vents off the main lava chamber.

This will be a long day as it will take about two hours to reach Mt. Etna from the hotel. Once we reach the lower slopes of the mighty mountain the highway ascends the southeast flank through long open stretches intermixed with gentle switchbacks. We may stop at vista points in various places along the highway that yield commanding views of the lowlands below. Evidence of past eruptions, such as those from the early 80s, 90, and 2000s, are readily visible in the form of rivers of lightly vegetated darkened basalt flows that sweep down from summit area vents.

As we climb the mountain we will travel through several vegetation zones. For our purposes, the most interesting of these is where the forest grows tallest, at around 6,000 feet, and where expanses of grass and low shrubs have grown up around past flows. We will target a variety of birds as we explore the mountain, seeking species such as Golden Eagle, Great Spotted Woodpecker, Blue Rock-Thrush, Black Redstart, Coal Tit, Firecrest, Eurasian Nuthatch, Short-toed Treecreeper, Rock Bunting, Eurasian Linnet, and Red Crossbill. While decidedly uncommon, we do have a shot at seeing the endemic form of Rock Partridge, and finding the unique "Sicilian" Long-tailed Tit is also a priority.

NIGHT: Grand Hotel Ortigia, Syracuse

May 15, Day 5: Transfer to Taormina via Catania; afternoon in Taormina. This morning we will be joined by a local guide as we transfer from Syracuse north to Taormina. Moving north along the coast, our agenda will include a morning walking tour of Catania before we arrive in Taormina in time for lunch. In the afternoon we'll partake of a short walking tour of Taormina followed by time on our own to explore the beautiful town.

Situated in the middle of Sicily's east coast, Catania lies exactly half way between Syracuse and Taormina. Catania is Sicily's second largest metropolitan area, after Palermo, and offers an array of historical and cultural attractions. About an hour after leaving Syracuse we'll break up the drive with a walking tour of the city center. Often overlooked compared to places like Syracuse and Palermo, Catania is rife with architectural wonders. We'll allot from 60-90 minutes for an interpretive "highlights" tour of the city. Among the outstanding sites are the cathedrals and government buildings of Piazza Duomo, University Square, and the fascinating fish market.

We'll arrive in Taormina in time for lunch at one of the town's many fine restaurants.

Breakhtaking, romantic, and enchanting, Taormina perhaps captures best the natural beauty of Sicily more than any other location on the island. Perched on a small plateau below Mount Tauro, for which the city is named, Taormina offers commanding views of the sea gently washing the coastline below, while from another angle one may enjoy inspiring views of snow-capped Mt. Etna.

Settled by the Greeks in the early 4th century B.C., Taormina has witnessed practically every wave of civilization that has swept over the island, including the Greeks, Romans, Arabs, and Normans. We'll spend time walking some of Taormina's winding streets and plazas, but the main attraction is the beautiful Greco-Roman amphitheater, one of the most revered ruins in Sicily. Constructed mostly of brick, the site is a testament to the architectural prowess of its Roman builders, although the original site was Greek. This theater is the second oldest in Sicily, after Syracuse, and, owing to its remarkable state of preservation, is still used today for theatrical

performances and concerts. On a clear day, the views from the theater of Mt. Etna to the southwest and Naxos Bay below are spectacular.

After the tour of the theater, we'll have personal time to explore Taormina on our own. Although often crowded with tourists, Taormina is undeniably a beautiful place. A chance to poke our heads into the various shops and cafes will be appreciated by some while the wide plaza at the south end of the town offers marvelous vistas of the surrounding hillsides and shining sea beyond.

NIGHT: Grand Hotel Timeo, Taormina

May 16, Day 6: Morning in Taormina; transfer to Palermo via Messina & Cefalù. We will spend the first part of the morning in Taormina before transferring to Palermo via the north coast of the island.

Beyond the Greco-Roman theater and the town itself, the Public Botanic Garden is another of Taormina's fine attractions. Set on a hillside just below the town, the garden features winding paths, a staircase, a multitude of flowering trees and bushes, and inspiring views of the sea. We'll spend an hour or so here after breakfast, exploring the garden both for its beauty and for its birding potential. Mature trees and shaded understories provide habitat for a variety of resident birds such as Common House-Martin, Blackcap, Eurasian Blackbird, European Greenfinch, European Serin, and Italian Sparrow while a variety of migrant species are possible.

From Taormina our route to Palermo will take us to the northeast corner of the island at Messina, near where Sicily comes closest to the Italian mainland. Situated on the aptly named Strait of Messina, we'll be looking across two miles of water to the Calabria region of the Italian mainland.

Despite the seeming tranquility of the passage, a natural whirlpool forms in the strait, giving rise to the legend of Scylla and Charybdis. According to Greek mythology, Scylla and Charybdis are two sea monsters that inhabit opposite sides of the strait and terrorize passing ships. Charybdis, in particular, was said to suck massive quantities of water into her gaping mouth, and when expelled, created the powerful whirlpool for which the strait is notorious.

In reality the whirlpool is a result of natural currents, and these same currents give the strait a unique ecosystem, complete with its own climate patterns. Air currents are stronger here where the strait funnels down to its narrowest point, which, by the way, is conducive to migrating birds.

From Messina we'll turn west, at which point the highway passes immediately along the coast of the Tyrrhenian Sea all the way to Palermo. At the town of Cefalù we'll stop for lunch and a visit to the famous namesake cathedral, built by the Norman king Roger II in the 12th century. We'll take some time to view the Cathedral of Cefalù both inside and out where the most outstanding features include the twin towers of the exterior façade, a triple set of apses, and the fabulous mosaic, Christ Pantokrator, depicted in Byzantine fashion, that adorns the semi-dome of the central apse. In his book *Sicily: An Island at the Crossroads of History* (2015), historian John Julius Norwich declares this work of art as the finest depiction of Christ in Western art.

From Cefalù the ride to Palermo will take about an hour. Our hotel is located in the center of the city, and we should be on site for check-in by about 4:00 p.m.

NIGHT: Grand Hotel Des Palmas, Palermo

May 17, Day 7: Full day in Palermo & Monreale. Our time in Sicily ends today with a flourish as we explore the most significant architectural and historical wonders of Palermo and the nearby town of Monreale.

Palermo

Our day begins immediately after breakfast with a walking and driving tour of Palermo that includes the city's top sites: Cappella Palatina in the Palace of the Normans, Palermo Cathedral, "Four Corners of the City," and La Martorana.

Built within the **Palace of the Normans, Capella Palatina** (Palatine Chapel) is considered the finest example of Arab-Norman art and architecture in Palermo. The palace was originally constructed by Arab chieftains in the 9th century on a site that formerly served as a Roman fortress. The palace was abandoned with the coming of the Normans but was eventually turned into a lavish residence under the Norman kings. In 1140, the Capella Palatina was completed by Roger II.

The art and architecture of the palace is spectacular. Glittering mosaics cover the walls while the ceiling is covered by a 10th century Arab honeycomb stalactite wooden ceiling. Biblical stories blend freely with scenes of Arab life and Norman court showmanship. Outstanding features of the chapel include large oval arches, a mosaic floor, and walls of marble wainscoting. The entrance to the nave is dominated by an enormous Royal Throne covered in mosaics. A carved 12th century candelabrum is also not to be missed. Over the nave, a wooden honeycomb stalactite is considered a masterpiece creation by Arab artisans brought to Sicily from North Africa. Throughout the palace and chapel, vivid colors and realistic styles give the site a sense of true splendor.

Palermo Cathedral is the cathedral church of the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Palermo. The church was erected in the 12th century on the site of an earlier Byzantine basilica. Like many houses of worship in Sicily, the cathedral has been greatly altered over the centuries to reflect the differences in style and taste of whoever held power. Most of the cathedral was constructed during the 14th and 15th centuries and reflects Gothic-style architecture while additions of Baroque and Neo-classical styles were added in following centuries. The Palermo Cathedral is grandiose in many ways and showcases a diversity of attractions including Gothic towers on the façade, arching turrets, a beautifully decorated Sacrament chapel, and a triple-arcaded portico that serves as the cathedral entrance. Inside the cathedral are the tombs of royal figures from the early second millennium including those of Frederick II and Roger II.

The "**Four Corners of the City,**" or **Quattro Canti**, is a beautiful Baroque square dating from the early 1600s that features the curved facades of four buildings that border the square and that are divided by four streets. The facades are instantly recognized by their curved facades and statuary while the square contains a spectacular fountain featuring elegantly carved statuary.

The church of Santa Maria dell' Ammiraglio, more popularly known as **La Martorana**, is one of the great artistic wonders of Europe. Founded by George of Antioch in the 12th century, and reflecting a blend of Arab, Byzantine, and Norman architectural styles, the church is best known not for its exterior but for its extraordinarily decorated interior, namely its exquisite Byzantine mosaics which cover the walls and ceilings throughout. La Martorana takes its name from Eloisa Martorana, who founded a convent of Benedictine nuns on an adjacent property. The church was eventually absorbed by the convent.

After lunch we'll then travel to Monreale.

Monreale

It is said that no visit to Palermo is complete without a trip to Monreale. This afternoon we will make a 4-mile trip south of Palermo's city center to this famous location. The most obvious reason to visit Monreale is to walk through the famous **Norman Cathedral**. Featuring an amazing blend of Romanesque architecture and Arab, Byzantine, and Norman artistic styles, the cathedral represents the best of 12th century art and architecture. The mosaics inside the cathedral are among the world's largest displays of this style of art, covering the structure's vast interior. The cloister of the Benedictine abbey, equally fabulous, features 228 columns, some of which are carved with mosaic inlay. The capital of each column features lavish scenes from Sicily's Norman history.

The cathedral was begun under the Norman king, William, in 1174 and mostly finished under his son, William II, by 1189 when he died at 36.

Tonight we'll have a final dinner together and bid fond farewells.

NIGHT: Grand Hotel Des Palmas, Palermo

May 18, Day 8: Departure for home. This morning marks the conclusion of our trip. All participants departing Palermo today will be transferred to the airport with plenty of time to check in for departing flights.

TOUR SIZE: The **Malta Pre-trip** will be limited to 25 participants; the **Sicily Extension** will be limited to 18.

TOUR LEADERS:

Malta pre-trip: Victor Emanuel, Barry Lyon, Peter Zika, and local leaders.

Sicily Extension: Victor Emanuel, Barry Lyon, and local leaders.

Victor Emanuel started birding in Texas 68 years ago at the age of eight. His travels have taken him to all the continents, with his areas of concentration being Texas, Arizona, Mexico, Panama, and Peru. He is the founder and compiler for 50 years of the record-breaking Freeport Christmas Bird Count, and served a term as president of the Texas Ornithological Society. Birds and natural history have been a major focus throughout his life. He derives great pleasure from seeing and hearing birds, and sharing with others these avian sights and sounds, both the common ones and the more unusual ones. He initiated the first birding camps for young people, and considers that one of his greatest achievements. Victor holds a B.A. in zoology and botany from the University of Texas and an M.A. in government from Harvard. In 1993, he was the recipient of the Roger Tory Peterson Excellence in Birding Award, given by the Houston Audubon Society in recognition of a lifetime of dedication to careful observation, education, and addition to the body of avian knowledge. In 2004, he received the Roger Tory Peterson Award from the American Birding Association, and the Arthur A. Allen Award from the Cornell Laboratory of Ornithology. He is a past board member of the Nature Conservancy of Texas, the National Audubon Society, and the American Bird Conservancy.

Barry Lyon's passion for the outdoors and birding has its roots in his childhood where he grew up in southern California. He attended several VENT/ABA youth birding camps in his teenage years, which ultimately led to his future involvement with Victor Emanuel Nature Tours. He holds a B.A. from the University of Arizona at Tucson where he studied history and political science, with an emphasis on environment and development politics. Barry joined the VENT team as a tour leader in 1995, and embarked on a travel-based career that has taken him to an array of worldwide destinations. He has lived in Austin, Texas since 2004 when he joined our office staff as an assistant to company president Victor Emanuel. In 2014 he was named Chief Operating Officer (C.O.O.), reflecting his increased experience and responsibilities. These days, his work is geared more toward the company's business side and management, although he will continue to lead a few tours annually. Barry's background and his knowledge of natural history have provided him with a strong interest in conservation. He currently sits on the board of directors of Travis Audubon Society, which emphasizes conservation through birding and youth outdoor education for urban children.

Peter Zika is a field biologist from Seattle, investigating and describing new species of plants from western North America. Working at the herbarium of the University of Washington, he is writing several chapters for new books on the plants of California, the Pacific Northwest, and the flora of North America, as well as conducting biological inventories of National Parks and Nature Conservancy preserves, studying interactions between noxious weeds and native wildlife, and researching the diet of fruit-eating birds. His interests in ecology have led him across the Tropics and into Polar Regions for the last 25 years. In addition to teaching wetland plant identification, he serves as a ship's naturalist on all oceans and continents. Peter has published more than 100 scientific notes, articles, and books, as well as occasional photographs, cards, and reviews in the popular press.

FINANCIAL ARRANGEMENTS: The fee for the **Malta Pre-trip** is **\$2295** per person in double occupancy from Valletta. This includes all meals from Dinner on Day 2 to Lunch on Day 5, accommodations as stated in the itinerary, land transportation including transfer from the airport to the hotel on Day 2, entrance fees to archaeological sites and museums, gratuities, and guide services provided by the tour leaders.

Not included in the **Malta Pre-trip** fee are hotel accommodations other than those stated in the itinerary; meals prior to dinner on Day 2 and after lunch on Day 5; alcoholic beverages; land transfers in Valletta from the airport to the hotel before Day 2; laundry, postage, telephone calls, internet usage, or other items of a personal nature; travel insurance; passport fees; fuel or exchange rate surcharges; excess baggage charges; airport departure taxes (if applicable); and gratuities to VENT leaders (optional). Rates are based upon group tariffs; if the tour does not have sufficient registration, a small-party supplement may have to be charged.

The fee for the **Sicily Post-trip** is **\$4995** per person in double occupancy from Valletta. This includes all meals from Dinner on Day 1 to Breakfast on Day 8, accommodations as stated in the itinerary, ground transportation during the tour, economy class airfare from Valletta to Catania on Day 1, gratuities, and guide services provided by the tour leaders.

Not included in the **Sicily Post-trip** fee is air travel other than the flight to Catania from Valletta on Day 1; passport fees; hotel accommodations other than as stated in the itinerary; lunch on day 1 and all meals after breakfast on Day 8; alcoholic beverages; all land transfers; laundry, postage, telephone calls, internet usage, or other items of a personal nature; travel insurance; passport fees; excess baggage charges; airport departure taxes (if applicable); and gratuities to VENT leaders (optional). Rates are based upon group tariffs; if the tour does not have sufficient registration, a small-party supplement may have to be charged.

The single supplement for the **Malta Pre-trip** is **\$255**; the single supplement for the **Sicily Post-trip** is **\$810**. You will be charged a single supplement if you desire single accommodations, or if you prefer to share but have no roommate and we cannot provide one for you.

REGISTRATION & DEPOSIT: To register for the tours, please contact the VENT office. The initial deposit is **\$500** per person per tour. If you would like to pay your initial deposit by check, money order, or bank transfer, your tour space will be held for 10 days to allow time for the VENT office to receive your deposit and completed registration form. If you prefer to pay the initial deposit using a credit card, your deposit must be made with MasterCard, Visa, or American Express at the time of registration. The VENT registration form (available from the VENT office or by download at www.ventbird.com) should then be completed, signed, and returned to the VENT office.

PAYMENTS: Initial tour deposits may be made by MasterCard, Visa, American Express, check, money order, or bank transfer. All other tour payments, including second deposits, interim payments, final balances, special arrangements, etc., must be made by check, money order, or bank transfer (contact the VENT office for bank transfer information). Full payment of the tour fee is due 120 days prior to the tour departure date.

EXCHANGE RATE SURCHARGES: In the erratic global financial markets of today, it is difficult to predict foreign currency exchange rates over the long term or at the time of operation of a tour or cruise departure. Tour prices are based upon the rate of exchange at the time of itinerary publication. If exchange rates change drastically, it may be necessary to implement a surcharge. If a surcharge is necessary, every effort will be made to minimize the amount. In many cases, these additional foreign exchange rate surcharges are passed to VENT by its vendors and suppliers.

FUEL AND FUEL SURCHARGES: In the uncertain, often volatile oil market of late, it is difficult – if not impossible – to predict fuel costs over the long term, and more specifically, at the time of operation of this departure. Our prices are based upon the prevailing fuel rates at the time of itinerary publication. While we will do everything possible to maintain our prices, if the fuel rates increase significantly, it may be necessary to institute a fuel surcharge.

CANCELLATION POLICY: Cancellation penalties and refunds are based on the following schedule: if cancellation is made 120 days or more before the tour departure date, a cancellation fee of **\$250** per person will be charged unless the deposit is transferred to a new registration for another VENT tour that will operate within the next 12 months, in which case the cancellation fee will be **\$100** per person. If cancellation is made fewer than 120 days before departure date, no refund is available. This policy and fee schedule also applies to pre-trip and post-trip extensions. ***We strongly recommend the purchase of trip cancellation insurance for your protection.***

<u>If you cancel:</u>	<u>Your refund will be:</u>
120 days or more before departure date	Your deposit minus \$250*
Fewer than 120 days before departure date	No refund available

*Unless the deposit is transferred to a new registration for another VENT tour that will operate within the next 12 months, in which case the cancellation fee will be \$100 per person.

Upon cancellation of the transportation or travel services, where you, the customer, are not at fault and have not cancelled in violation of the terms and conditions of any of the contract for transportation or travel services, all sums paid to VENT for services not received by you will be promptly refunded by VENT to you unless you otherwise advise VENT in writing.

Victor Emanuel Nature Tours is not a participant in the California Travel Consumer Restitution Fund. California law requires certain sellers of travel to have a trust account or bond. This business has a bond issued by Travelers in the amount of \$50,000. CST #2014998-50.

TRIP CANCELLATION & MEDICAL EVACUATION INSURANCE: A brochure and application form for optional coverage for baggage, illness, and trip cancellation can be obtained through the VENT office. **We strongly recommend that you purchase trip cancellation insurance as soon as possible to protect yourself against losses due to accidents or illness. VENT recommends Travel Insured International as our preferred insurance provider.** Check with your insurance agent regarding coverage you may presently have via other insurance policies that may cover illness during your trip.

Waiver for pre-existing conditions is available; however, stipulations apply, usually requiring the purchase of the insurance soon after registering. Optional expanded insurance coverage is available and includes items such as work-related cancellation, medical upgrade, and a “Cancel for Any Reason” clause among others. **Contact Travel Insured International prior to registration for details.** Not all insurance providers provide the same levels of coverage. If you purchase insurance through a company other than Travel Insured International, please be advised that rules and stipulations may be different.

AIR INFORMATION: Victor Emanuel Travel is a full-service travel agency and wholly owned subsidiary of Victor Emanuel Nature Tours (VENT). Victor Emanuel Travel will be happy to make any domestic or international air travel arrangements from your home and return. ***Please be sure to check with the VENT office prior to purchasing your air ticket to confirm that the tour is sufficiently subscribed to operate. VENT cannot be responsible for any air ticket penalties.***

CONDITIONS:

The programs – The Malta Pre-trip and Sicily Extension are similarly styled programs that provide a blend of activities including sightseeing, birding, and visits to historical sites. We emphasize that both the pre-trip and the extension are not birding trips exclusively, and participants should strongly consider this point before registering. For both trips, physical demands will be easy to moderate, but please bear in mind that our excursions will involve a moderate amount of walking and standing. No one will be subjected to physical demands that exceed their capabilities. All walking will be done at a slow pace. On both islands we will travel in buses of varying size.

Our excursions on Malta are divided fairly evenly between birding and sightseeing. Grand Harbor is a protected body of water, and our morning boat ride will be an easy affair. The plan is to be picked up from the Westin and transferred to the harbor. This portion of the activity will involve a 10-15 minute transit just offshore on the open sea; therefore, this part of the activity will depend entirely on sea and weather conditions. In unfavorable conditions, we will transfer to Grand Harbor by bus.

On Sicily, our excursions also are divided evenly between birding and sightseeing; however, almost all of the birding will occur during the first half of the trip and the sightseeing in the second half. On the day we visit Mt. Etna we'll reach an elevational high point of 6,000 feet.

INTERNET/WI-FI: Wi-Fi is available at all hotels.

CLIMATE & WEATHER: May is usually a delightful time to travel in Malta and Sicily. The long hot days that characterize the summer months have not yet arrived and the likelihood of a late cold front diminishes by the day. Daytime temperatures average in the upper 70s/low 80s (°F) along the coast. Seabreezes have a cooling effect and keep the coast about 5-10 degrees cooler than in the interior of the islands. Night and morning temperatures may fall to the mid-60s. That said, we should also be prepared for the possibility of an early heat wave, in which case temperatures can soar into the 90s, even along the coast. Significant rainfall is not expected, but late cold fronts occasionally affect the region all the way through the end of May. On Sicily, Mt. Etna is such a dominant land feature that it is often credited with creating its own weather. Our day trip to the mountain could bring exposure to a variety of conditions including clear and sunny, heavy overcast and rain, cold, and windy. A cold day could see temperatures fall to upper 40s. We may not know what conditions to expect until we actually arrive at the mountain.

BAGGAGE: The airlines now strictly enforce baggage regulations. Excess baggage charges, which can be substantial, are the personal responsibility of each participant. **Please consult your pre-departure materials and airline to find out specific weight restrictions.**

As a precaution against lost luggage, we suggest that you pack a change of clothes, essential toiletries, medications, a change of clothing, important travel documents, optics, and any other essential items in your carry-on bag. Due to ever-changing circumstances in the government's attempts to improve airport security, we strongly recommend that you check the website of the Transportation Security Administration (TSA) for information pertaining to permissible carry-on items:

<http://www.tsa.gov/travelers/airtravel/prohibited/permitted-prohibited-items.shtm>.

CLOTHING: As this trip combines birding with interpretive walking tours and leisure cruising, you will want to pack a mix of clothing that prepares you for all activities. The following items are recommended:

- **Pants and Shorts:** A couple pairs of pants and shorts each are recommended. Many people prefer lightweight pants made of cotton or other material, but denim, though not as comfortable, is certainly acceptable. Shorts will be desirable for warmer times of day and when cruising.
- **Field Clothing:** Outdoor stores such as Cabela's and REI carry field clothing that many birders find appealing. Pants and shirts made of lightweight, yet durable materials with multiple pockets and ventilated seams are popular and more reasonably priced than in the past.

- **Shirts:** Several t-shirts, (long and short-sleeved), in addition to other comfortable styles suitable for warm weather.
- **Bathing Suit**
- **Hat:** A hat for protection from the sun is essential.
- **Sweaters and Coats:** Warm weather will be the rule on this trip, but a sweater or light coat or jacket will come in handy some mornings and evenings. A warm jacket or outerwear is essential for the day trip to Mt. Etna in the event we encounter inclement conditions.

FOOTWEAR: A lightweight hiking boot or trail shoe is recommended for birding outings and when walking in archaeological sites. Comfortable athletic shoes are appropriate for other occasions.

LAUNDRY SERVICE: Laundry service is available at the hotels in St. Julian's (Malta) and Ortygia and Palermo (Sicily) for an extra charge.

EQUIPMENT: One of the most important aspects of having an enjoyable travel experience is being prepared with proper equipment. The following items will come in handy during your trip:

- **Backpack** – Good for carrying extra clothing, field guides, supplies, and optical equipment during all land excursions
- **Notebooks and pens**
- **Travel alarm clock**
- **Polarized sunglasses with good UV protection**
- **Sunscreen, lip balm, skin lotions**
- **Personal toiletries**
- **Cameras, lenses, film, memory cards, and extra batteries**
- **Collapsible walking stick** – A highly recommended item for those who have trouble walking
- **Tissue packs**

BINOCULARS & SPOTTING SCOPES:

Binoculars – We strongly recommend good binoculars of at least 7x35, 8x42, 10x40, or 10x42 magnification. We recommend that you do NOT bring mini-binoculars of any kind. Some people like them because they are small and lightweight; but they have an extremely small field of view and very poor light gathering power. Trying to find a bird in your binoculars using minis is like trying to read a book through a keyhole. You will be very frustrated, and even if you do manage to get the bird in your binoculars before it flies, you will have a poor view. You will find that 7x35 or 8x42 binoculars are compact and light enough.

Spotting Scopes – Given the ship-based nature of the program and that most of our land-birding will take place around the archaeological sites, it is not necessary for you to bring a spotting scope. Your tour leaders will have scopes available for group use throughout the trip.

TRAVEL DOCUMENTS:

PASSPORTS - A valid passport is required. Please check the expiration date on your passport. **If it is not valid for at least six months after your trip return date, you will need to get it renewed.** You will also want to make sure that you have at least two blank pages in your passport for stamps.

If you need a passport, you should get it well in advance of your trip departure date. For additional fees, a passport can be issued on an expedited basis. In the United States this can be done at the nearest passport office, most post offices, or the county clerk's office. You may also visit www.state.gov/travel/ for information on how to get or renew a passport.

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As a safety measure, photocopy the first two pages of your passport. Keep the photocopies in a safe place, so if your passport is lost you will have proof of identification. Your passport should be signed and easily available at all times. You will need it for check-in at the airport on your first day of departure, so **do not pack it in your checked luggage**.

On board ship, it is customary for the purser to hold all passports for clearance with port authorities. Your passport will be collected upon embarkation, and returned upon disembarkation.

VISAS - Citizens of the United States and Canada do not need to obtain a tourist visa to enter Malta or Italy. Rules and regulations pertaining to non-U.S. and Canadian citizens may vary; please check with the Maltese and Italian consulates or embassies.

CURRENCY & MONEY MATTERS: Your pre- and post-trip extensions to Malta and Sicily respectively includes most necessary expenses. While U.S. dollars might be accepted in large cities and shops, it is always convenient to have a supply of local currency (Euros) for such items as meals and beverages on your own, gifts, additional gratuities (laundry tips, local guides, etc.), and any personal items.

Although it is possible to exchange U.S. Dollars for Euros at a bank or exchange facility in Malta, it is easiest to acquire Euros either before leaving the U.S. or at the airport in Malta. Small denominations of cash are always best as it is easier for individuals and businesses to provide change. Should you extend your vacation in Malta or Sicily beyond what is offered in either program, you should strongly consider obtaining Euros. ATM machines can be found in large cities and in some towns; you shouldn't have any problems using major cards in hotels, restaurants, and shops. Please check with your bank and credit card issuer for more information regarding banking and the use of ATM and credit cards overseas.

The official currency of Malta and Italy is the Euro (EUR). You can check the latest currency conversion rate by visiting "XE-The World's Favorite Currency Site" at: <http://www.xe.com/>.

ELECTRICITY: Power in Malta is 240V. Electrical outlets conform to the Type G ("British") electrical plug with a three-pin rectangular blade formation. The electricity in Sicily varies considerably; the cycle is 220V in most places with electrical outlets conformed to the Type C and Type F plugs. The Type C plug, also known as the Europlug, features a round plug with two round pins. The 19 mm separation of the pins and the pins' 4 mm length allow for its safe insertion in most Type C and Type F outlets. The Type F electrical plug, also known as the "Schuko" plug, displays two round pins and rectangular side grounding contacts. Use of American standard 110V equipment, with the flat-bladed plugs, will require the use of adapter plugs. Although many electronic devices and appliances are now manufactured to accommodate the higher European voltages, you should bring an all-purpose transformer to convert the current for 110V use if there is any doubt.

LANGUAGE: Maltese and English are the official languages of Malta; English is the primary language spoken on board *Sea Cloud* and throughout our tour; Italian is the primary language of Sicily.

TIME: Malta and Sicily are on Central European Summer Time (CEST) and are 6 hours ahead of Eastern Daylight Time (EDT).

HEALTH: As of this writing (July 2016), no major shots or inoculations are required for entry into Malta or Sicily; however, The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recommends vaccination against a variety of preventable diseases, including the so-called **Routine Vaccinations** (if you are not up-to-date), which are measles/mumps/rubella (MMR) vaccine; diphtheria/pertussis/tetanus (DPT) vaccine; and poliovirus vaccine (boosters for adult travelers who have received a primary series with either inactivated poliovirus vaccine (IPV) or oral polio vaccine (OPV); they should receive another dose of IPV before departure). You should also be up-to-date with your **Hepatitis A** or Immune Globulin (IG) and **Hepatitis B** vaccinations.

If you are taking personal medication, prescription or over-the-counter, be sure to bring an ample supply that will allow you to get through the expedition safely. Please consult your physician as necessary. Remember to pack all

medication in your carry-on baggage, preferably in original containers or packaging. As airline baggage restrictions can change without warning, please check with your airline for procedures for packing medication.

Sun Exposure – The sun’s ultraviolet rays are dangerous under prolonged exposure (sometimes only a matter of minutes). Anytime you are outdoors you will want to protect your skin, including your lips, eyes, nose, and ears. A severe sunburn is potentially very painful and will affect your level of enjoyment. Always protect yourself when outdoors and be sure to bring an ample supply of high SPF sunscreen and lip balm. We strongly recommend the use of ultra-violet blocking, polarized sunglasses.

In addition to your physician, a good source of general health information for travelers is the United States Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) in Atlanta Georgia. The CDC operates a 24-hour recorded Travelers’ Information Line: 800-CDC-INFO (800-232-4636), or you can check their website at: www.cdc.gov/travel. Canadian citizens should check the website of the Public Health Agency of Canada: www.phac-aspc.gc.ca/new_e.html (click on travel health).

SUGGESTED READING: Our website, www.ventbird.com offers an affiliated online store that carries a wide variety of items for birding and nature lovers, including over 6,000 books. A portion of the sales from this store benefits the Cornell Lab of Ornithology. You may also visit such other online stores such as www.amazon.com, and for those out-of-print or hard-to-find titles, www.abebooks.com or www.buteobooks.com which specializes in ornithology books.

Birds

Mullarney, Killian and Lars Svensson and Dan Zetterstrom. *Birds of Europe*. Princeton Field Guides. Princeton University Press: Princeton, NJ, 2010 (second edition). This is the most important natural history book for this trip. It is probably the best all around field guide to the birds of Europe.

History, Philosophy & Culture

The suggested reading list for the cruise is applicable to the pre- and post-trips.

Sicilian History:

Norwich, John Julius. *Sicily: An Island at the Crossroads of History*. Random House: New York, NY. 2015. This is a superb book that has been well-received by reviewers. The author’s use of wit and personal opinion further enlivens an already well-constructed book. Highly recommended for anyone who seeks to gain a grasp of what is a very complex history.

Robb, Peter. *Midnight in Sicily: On Art, Food, History, Travel, and La Cosa Nostra*. London: Faber and Faber, Ltd. 1998. This production is less travel writing and more of an eye-opening look at modern Italian history. Specifically, Robb chronicles then ongoing efforts to prosecute seven-time Prime Minister Giulio Andreotti for a variety of terrible crimes stemming from his links to organized crime. Throughout the book the reader is presented with beautiful images of art, food, and travel in Sicily, while digesting stories of crime and corruption. A fascinating read.

Maltese History:

Bradford, Ernle. *The Great Siege: Malta 1565*. Open Road Media: New York, NY, 2014. The blow-by-blow account of the epic Turkish siege of Malta in 1565 is told in thrilling, page-turning fashion.

History, Culture & Philosophy:

Cahill, Thomas. *Sailing the Wine Dark Sea: Why the Greeks Matter*. Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group: New York, NY, 2004. An outstanding book that chronicles the contributions of the ancient Greeks to the development of modern politics, thought, warfare, and civilization.

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Novels:

All three novels are in the category of Historical Fiction and are presented here not in traditional bibliographical order, but according to chronological order in which the stories takes place. All are highly recommended.

Renault, Mary. *Mask of Apollo: A Novel*. Vintage Books: New York, NY, 1988. Set in 4th century B.C.

Greece, the story is narrated by a tragic actor who carries with him a theater mask of Apollo that takes on a life of its own. Much of the story also takes place in Syracuse where the narrator's friend is trying to convince the ruler, Dionysius the Younger to accept the rule of law.

Di Lampedusa, Giuseppe Di, *The Leopard*. Pantheon: New York, NY, 2007 (a recent edition). Set in 19th century Sicily, Di Lampedusa tells an engaging story of a dying Sicilian ruling class threatened by a coming revolution.

Sciascia, Leonardo. *The Day of the Owl*. Set in 20th century Sicily, this is a story about organized crime that showcases the complexity of unraveling a murder mystery in which the mafia is involved.

Films:

“*Cinema Paradiso*” 1988. Starring Antonella Attili and Enzo Cannavale

“*Divorce Italian Style*” 1962. A great comedy film about Sicily starring Marcello Mastroianni.

“*The Godfather*” 1972. Frances Ford Coppola's epic saga of a Sicilian clan's rise to power in America features an all-star cast.

“*The Leopard*” 1963. The novel by Di Lampedusa was also made into a famous Italian film by Luchino Visconti starring Burt Lancaster as the Sicilian prince.

“*Mafioso*” 1962. Starring Alberto Sordi.

TIPPING: All tipping (restaurants, porters, drivers, local guides, and ship's crew) is included. If you feel one or all of your VENT leaders, or any local guide has provided exceptional service, it is entirely appropriate to tip. We emphasize that such tips are not expected and are entirely optional.

RESPONSIBILITY: Victor Emanuel Nature Tours, Inc. (VENT) and/or its Agents act only as agents for the passenger in regard to travel, whether by railroad, motorcar, motorcoach, boat, or airplane and assume no liability for injury, damage, loss, accident, delay, or irregularity which may be occasioned either by reason of defect in any vehicle or for any reason whatsoever, or through the acts or default of any company or person engaged in conveying the passenger or in carrying out the arrangements of the tour. VENT and its agents can accept no responsibility for losses or additional expenses due to delay or changes in air or other services, sickness, weather, strike, war, quarantine, or other causes. All such losses or expenses will have to be borne by the passenger, as tour rates provide for arrangements only for the time stated. The right is reserved to substitute hotels of similar category for those indicated and to make any changes in the itinerary where deemed necessary or caused by changes in air schedules. The right is reserved to cancel any tour prior to departure, in which case full refund will constitute full settlement to the passenger. The right is reserved to substitute leaders on any tour. Where this is necessary, notification will be given to tour members. No refund will be made for any unused portion of the tour unless arrangements are made in sufficient time to avoid penalties. The prices of the tours are based on tariffs and exchange rates in effect July 27, 2016 and are subject to adjustment in the event of any change therein. The right is reserved to decline to accept or to retain any person as a member of any tour. Baggage is at owner's risk entirely. The airlines concerned and their agents and affiliates are not to be held responsible for any act, omission, or event during the time passengers are not on board their aircraft. The passenger ticket in use by said airlines, when issued, shall constitute the sole contract between the airlines and the purchaser of these tickets and/or passenger. The

services of any I.A.T.A.N. carrier may be used for these tours, and transportation within the United States may be provided by any member carrier of the Airline Reporting Corporation.

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