

**The Gardens and Landscapes of Sicily**  
**Nick Wray in association with World Odyssey**  
**25 April – 05/06 May 2015**

Little changed over the centuries, this enchanting island is a unique blend of all that is best about the Mediterranean. There are many sights and experiences not to be missed, including some of the most perfectly preserved temples and theatres in the world at Siracusa & Agrigento.

The island is steeped in history but also in the pleasures of the senses. So, on your voyage of discovery do not forget the sea, glinting turquoise-clear and inviting, around more than 1,000 kilometers of coastline. These include the fashionable Taormina, perched some 700 feet above sea level with stupendous views of snow-capped Mount Etna and the bay of Naxos.

Sicilian cuisine is a tantalising display of exotic and colourful ingredients, perfectly complemented by the excellent wines of the island. Pasta comes in all shapes and sizes with many tasty sauces, and fish from the surrounding waters including swordfish, squid and numerous crustaceans and served with delicious sauces or simply with a dressing of olive oil, lemon and herbs.

25 April (Saturday)

Please make your way to London Gatwick for the Easyjet flight as follows:

Check-in London Gatwick	14:35 hrs
Depart London Gatwick	16:35 hrs
Arrive Palermo	20:25 hrs

On arrival into Palermo we will be met and transferred to Villa Esperia where we will check in for 3 nights.

**Palermo** on the North West coast of Sicily is the island's capital city and one of its leading ports. Of all Sicily's cities, it most strikingly embraces all aspects of the island's later history from the Arab, Norman and Spanish invasions to the influences of the Belle Epoque era.

The differing styles of architecture and artistic treasures are a feast for the eyes, while the city's turbulent history is ever present in the busy streets. Visitors can sample the animated local lifestyle in the enormous markets, particularly the Vuccaria, or delve into the historic past in the Cathedral, huge churches like Santa Caterina, a splendid example of Sicilian Baroque, museums, magnificent palaces, beautiful squares and a wonderful botanical garden.

Villa Esperia Hotel is located in one of the most exclusive areas in Mondello, in an ancient Liberty Villa, a few metres from the sea and a few minutes by car to the city centre. The rooms are completely restyled and furnished elegantly in keeping with the days when the villa was a private house. The hotel has 22 rooms with all comforts required and some with four-poster beds or sea-view.

**Villa Esperia Hotel (standard room)**

**(B)**

26 April (Sunday)

Today we will visit **Zisa Castle** and its Islamic museum. Located to the West of Palermo Zisa Castle dates back to the 9<sup>th</sup> – 11<sup>th</sup> Centuries it is one of the most attractive arab style buildings in Europe. Its name al-aziz meaning 'the splendid one' was completed in 1167 on the orders of Norman King William I de Hauteville, but planned and constructed by muslim architects and workmen, showing how much the Normans admired the Arab world, copying its lifestyles, ceremonies and customs. In the past ten years the house has been restored and a new garden built in a 'modern' arabic style to the front of the castle.

We visit **Orto Botanico di Palermo**. The garden serves as a botanical garden and a research and educational institution of the Department of Botany of the University of Palermo. The earliest beginnings of the gardens go back to 1779, when the *Accademia dei Regi Studi* created the chair of "Botany and medicinal properties". A modest plot of land was allocated to develop a small botanical garden dedicated to the cultivation of plants with medicinal benefits, for the twin objectives of general



learning and improving public health. This initial garden allotment soon proved insufficient for the purposes for which it was intended, and in 1786 it was decided to move to the present site, right next to the *Piano di Sant'Erasmo*. The new garden was opened in 1795; in the ensuing years it was improved, with the *Aquarium* (1798), a great pool hosting numerous species of aquatic plants, and the *serra Maria Carolina* (or Maria Carolina glasshouse), completed in 1823. The huge *Ficus macrophylla*, which is an emblem and a well-known attraction of the modern garden, was imported from Norfolk Island (Australia), in 1845. Today's garden, some 10 hectares (25 acres) was reached in 1892, following successive extensions. The garden lies some 10 metres above sea-level on top of red soil that has evolved on a calcareous tufaceous substratum. The gardens have been managed by the Department of Botany since 1985.

**Villa Esperia Hotel (standard room)**

**(B,L)**

27 April (Monday)

This morning we visit **Villa Malfitana**. Located in its own walled park on Via Dante, not far from the Zisa, Villa Malfitana is essentially an 18th century English manorial estate in the centre of Palermo. The gardens and stately mansion were built for the Whitaker family, merchants instrumental in developing the Marsala wine industry.

We will then visit Palermo where we will visit the **cathedral in Palermo** central square. Founded in 1184, during Sicily's Norman period, Archbishop of Palermo Gualtiero Offamiglio founded the cathedral on the site of a Muslim mosque, which had itself been built over an early Christian basilica.

The archbishop's main aim was to surpass the glory of the magnificent cathedral of nearby Monreale, and the Palermo Duomo became an architectural battleground for "The Battle of the Two Cathedrals". Many additions were made to the original Norman structure over the years. The exterior was "Gothicized" in the 13th and 14th centuries, and the Spaniards made their mark in the 15th century. But if anyone could be called the culprit for the cathedral's playground of styles, it is the Neapolitan architect Ferdinando Fuga, who went with the mood of his day and in 1771 and 1809 gave both the exterior and the interior of the Duomo a sweeping Neoclassical style. The only section that the restorers didn't alter were the apses, which still retain their impressive Geometric decoration. From here we will visit the **Porta Nuova**, built in 1583 by the Viceroy Colonna to celebrate the victory of Charles V, the Hapsburg emperor and king of Sicily against the Turks, before visiting the Royal Palace. After which we will visit **San Giovanni degli Eremiti** near to royal palace with its Norman architecture and Arab roof, plus other places of interest in central Palermo including the theatre.

Next we travel further West to visit the Chinese palace located on the northern end of the **Parco della Favorita**. This is one of Palermo's strangest buildings a large and fully decorated Chinese palace. Built in 1799 for King Ferdinand III during the height of the European craze for all things Oriental, the palace exhibits an eclectic mix of Chinese influenced architectural styles. Set within the extensive Parco della Favorita the palace has a large Italian style parterre garden to the rear.

Located 15km South of Palermo the **Cathedral of Monreale** is one of the greatest extant examples of Norman architecture in the world. It was begun in 1174 by William II, and in 1182 the church, dedicated to the Assumption of the Virgin Mary, was, by a bill of Pope Lucius III, elevated to the rank of a metropolitan cathedral. The church is a national monument of Italy and one of the most important attractions of Sicily. It sits on the slope of Monte Caputo, overlooking the fertile valley called "La Conca d'oro" (the Golden Shell), famed for its orange, olive and almond orchards.

The cathedral interior contains the largest cycle of Byzantine mosaics extant in Italy, completed about 1200. The outsides of the principal doorways and their pointed arches are magnificently enriched with carving and coloured inlay, a curious combination of three styles - Norman-French, Byzantine and Arab. To the rear is a cloistered courtyard with some traditional planting.

**Villa Esperia Hotel (standard room)**

**(B,L)**

28 April (Tuesday)

This morning we will set off in good time to visit the vineyard at Tasca d'Almerita; the drive (2.5 hours) will take us along the coast before we head into the mountains of the interior. Here we will see a



more traditional Sicilian agricultural countryside of small villages, fields with wooded slopes and spring crops and wild flowers.

**Tasca d'Almerita** is a fine wine producing estate in Sicily with an aristocratic background. It was founded in 1830 and has been the point of reference for ultra-high quality wine for over 100 years. While Sicily gained an unfortunate reputation in the 1950's - 80's for making bulk wine mostly used for blending, few wineries took the risky position of making fine wine. Tasca d' Almerita, however, was one of the fabulous and few exceptions. These days, Sicily is making some of the most exciting wines in Italy. The Tasca d' Almerita estate is set in pristine countryside. The winery is located on the Regaleali estate close to Vallelunga Pratameno and is one of the most beautiful in Sicily. While much of central Sicily is dry and arid, the area around this wine estate is lush and verdant, with scenic rolling hills. Both indigenous and international grape varieties are planted from the ubiquitous Chardonnay and Cabernet Sauvignon to flagship Sicilian varieties like Nero d'Avola, Nerello Mascalese, Catarratto and Inzolia. Tasca's wines are often blends of both local and foreign varieties. This winery regularly gets top marks in the wine press and now has faithful followers all over the world and exports to over sixty countries. Apart from vast stretches of over 1000 hectares of vineyards, the estate is also a working farm cultivating a wide selection of vegetables, herbs, and fruits each planted at the right moment and in accordance with local knowledge. Roses are grown which beautify the tables set in the salon of the baglio (farm villa). A full time cheesemaker is also on site.

The company is owned by Count Lucio Tasca (descendent of the original owners) and run by himself and his sons Alberto and Giuseppe.

After lunch we will take a tour around the cookery school, adjoining flower and herb garden with afternoon tea at cookery school, after which we will retire back to the farm house for the wine tasting and dinner.

**Tasca d'Almerita (Standard room)**

**(B,L,D)**

29 April (Wednesday)

After breakfast we depart to Agrigento for a morning walking tour.

Agrigento (Akragas) was one of the most thriving centres of Greek civilisation in the 5th century, B.C. A few miles away from the modern town, on a southern lower ridge, are still sited the great temples of the ancient city, surrounded by almond groves and ancient olive trees.

We will start at the **Temple of Juno** (Via Panoramica dei Templi, car park available). The tour of the archaeological park starts with the Temple of Hera (Juno) built at the very top of the hill. Magnificent views of the landscape, coastline and the Mediterranean Sea. Then walk for about one mile downhill and stop along the main path to admire the city fortifications and Byzantine arcades, the Temple of Concordia, the Temple of Herakles, the Temple of Zeus and the Sanctuary of Chthonian Deities (Temple of Castor and Pollux). As you listen to your guide you'll discover the secrets behind their construction, gain insight into the civilization that produced them and get to know the personages that made ancient Akragas "the most beautiful of mortal cities"

After the walking tour there will be the opportunity to visit the museum, we will then depart for Modica.

In Modica we will check into Hotel Principe d'Aragona where we will stay for 1 night.

The hotel Principe d'Aragona is a modern 4 star hotel located in the historical centre of Modica within walking distance of the main tourist attraction and shopping areas. With outdoor swimming pool, fully equipped with modern amenities: cable colour television, high-speed internet connections (free of charge), hairdryer, in-room safe, mini bar, satellite tv, air conditioning, telephone.

**Hotel Principe (Standard room)**

**(B,L)**

30 April (Thursday)

This morning we will have a walking tour of **Modica**. Modica, like the other towns in the Val di Noto, was badly damaged in the 1693 earthquake and largely rebuilt in Sicilian Baroque style. It is divided



into two parts, “higher” Modica and “lower” Modica, which are connected by numerous flights of steps. Palazzi and houses rise from the bottom of the gorge seemingly stacked one on top of the other. Magnificent churches, with their inspiring domes, bell towers and intricate facades, punctuate the red-tiled roofs and one is struck by the uniform beauty of the whole.

The centrepiece is undoubtedly the beautiful Church of San Giorgio, though the “Castello dei Conti”, surveying the town from atop a rocky outcrop, is also very impressive.

Typical of so many Sicilian towns, Modica has a long and varied history, complete with the usually toing and froing of successions of invaders. The town is the location for filming of the popular BBC detective series Inspector Montalbano.

This afternoon we will transfer to the Hotel Roma, Syracuse where we will check in for 2 nights.

There are very few hotels in Ortigia, and the Antico Hotel Roma 1880 is the most centrally located, actually next door to the cathedral, which is located in the old Doric Temple of Minerva.

The hotel, founded in 1880, is framed on one side by the cathedral and on the other by the Archbishop's Palace and overlooks Piazza Minerva, which is a continuation of the Piazza Duomo that runs alongside the Doric columns of the Temple, and onto Siracusa's most central road, Via Roma.

The rest of the afternoon will be at leisure.

#### **Antico Hotel Roma (Standard room)**

**(B,L)**

01 May (Friday)
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This morning we will take a half day walking tour of Siracusa.

**Siracusa** in Saracen, Byzantium and Bourbon times, the city suffered invasion and then 'salvation' from opposing forces. Siracusa, 'the fairest of cities' according to the Roman Cicero, was a powerhouse of intellectual thought in that part of the Mediterranean colonised by the Greeks.

Not surprisingly, Siracusa has a wealth of remains, including the pillars in the splendidly simple Christian cathedral dating from the seventh century BC. Its magnificent 15,000-seat theatre, the best preserved outside Greece, was the venue for the first nights of some plays by Aeschylus, the greatest of Greek dramatists. Classical plays are still performed here today.

The island of Ortigia joined to the mainland of Siracusa by two bridges, is a fascinating web of ancient buildings and narrow streets with two main piazzas buzzing with an assortment of bars and cafes; after the walking tour you will have the afternoon to explore the city on your own.

Note: Coaches are not allowed into central Siracusa so we will have to transfer to smaller minibuses which will shuttle us to the hotel.

**Siracusa** is a historic city in Sicily, the capital of the province of Syracuse. The city is notable for its rich Greek history, culture, amphitheatres, architecture, and as the birthplace of the preeminent mathematician and engineer Archimedes. This 2,700-year-old city played a key role in ancient times, when it was one of the major powers of the Mediterranean world. Siracusa is located in the southeast corner of the island of Sicily, right by the Gulf of Syracuse next to the Ionian Sea.

The city was founded by Ancient Greek Corinthians and became a very powerful city-state. Siracusa was allied with Sparta and Corinth, exerting influence over the entire *Magna Grecia* area of which it was the most important city. Once described by Cicero as "the greatest Greek city and the most beautiful of them all", it later became part of the Roman Republic and Byzantine Empire, after which Palermo overtook it in importance, as the capital of the Kingdom of Sicily. Eventually the kingdom would be united with the Kingdom of Naples to form the Two Sicily's until the Italian unification of 1860.

In the modern day, the city is listed by UNESCO as a World Heritage Site along with the Necropolis of Pantalica. The inhabitants are known as *Siracusans*. Siracusa is mentioned in the Bible in the Acts of the Apostles book at 28:12 as Paul stayed there.



**Antico Hotel Roma (Standard room)****(B,L)**

02 May (Saturday)

This morning we will depart Siracusa for **Marchesi Di San Giuliano (Villasmundo)** where we will be given a tour by Head Gardener, Rachel Lamb.

The estate of San Giuliano has been owned by the family of the Marquis Paternò Castello di San Giuliano for over 800 years. Situated between Catania and Siracusa, with Mount Etna in the distance, the land is very fertile and cultivated mainly with citrus trees species, mostly orange, but also lemon, lime, red grapefruit, mandarin, Nova clementine and bitter orange. The first orange trees were planted here around 1800 as it was found that this region of Sicily was particularly suited to the cultivation of Blood Oranges, which are unique to this area.

The San Giuliano farm covers around 55 hectares, 50 of which are dedicated to growing varieties of citrus fruit. There are also ancient groves of Sicilian species of olives and nut trees. The estate has for many years and continues to use traditional organic farming methods with insect pests being controlled by beneficial insect predators known as biological control. The estate has a small farm kitchen producing marmalades and biscuits following family recipes, using only fresh fruit from the estate. Products are found in selected shops all over the world. The garden has been planted to contain many exotic species including palms, yuccas, agaves and fragrant shrubs and is laid out around the old house and farm buildings with extensive views of the citrus groves and Etna beyond.

After a light lunch we travel to **Contrada Case Biviere Villa Borghese, Lentini** where will we tour the gardens with the owner Princess Borghese.

Legend states that it was here that Hercules, a son of Jupiter's, offered the hide of the Nemean lion he had defeated to Ceres, goddess of agriculture, and had a lake built, 'Lacus Erculeus', which owes its name to him. At a later date this same lake was to be called 'Beverè' by the Arabs, meaning 'watering place for flocks and fish hatchery'. The Palermo State Archives house the original document of King Marino's Edict (1392) documenting that the feud going by the name of 'Il Biviere di Lentini' was granted to one of the maternal ancestors of the present owners Principe Scipione Borghese and his wife, Principessa Maria Carla Borghese in 1968. Reclaimed in the thirties to combat malaria, the lake was deserted by fishers and hunters alike and the house fell derelict. The house was restored and the garden created by Princess Maria Carla Borghese, who restored the house and created a truly unique Mediterranean garden out of the former lake shore. Lush palms, blue Jacaranda, yellow flowering of *Parkinsonia*, old roses intertwining with the Yucca's and a remarkable collection of succulents flanking the old harbour wall of the antique port make for a remarkable garden with some very fine specimen plants.

From here we will then transfer to the Donna Carmela where we will check in for our remaining 3 nights.

Donna Carmela is a luxury boutique hotel owned and set amid Faro Piante the largest Mediterranean plant nursery in Europe. This 19th-century Sicilian house has been expertly refurbished to create a contemporary hotel with a calm and classy feel. From the house extensive views fan out to the Mediterranean sea to the East and Mount Etna to the West. Piante Faro's Mediterranean plant nurseries whose plants have been used to plant up the hotel garden make this area a spectacular place.

**Donna Carmela (Standard Room)****(B,L)**

03 May (Sunday)

This morning we depart for Catania Botanic Gardens for a private tour. In 1858 today's garden was established by Francis Roccaforte Tornabene, with first plantings in 1862 of specimens obtained from other botanical gardens in Sweden, France, Naples, and Palermo. Originally on the outskirts the Botanic Garden has been enveloped into the city and provides a green oasis in a dense built up suburb. It was enlarged in 1865 with a new area dedicated to cultivation of indigenous Sicilian species, and in the early 1900s further enhanced by creation of the Giardino Botanico "Nuova Gussonea" on Mount Etna for cultivation of native mountain plants. The garden is divided into two main sections: the Hortus Generalis (13,000 m<sup>2</sup>) which collects mainly exotic plants and the Hortus Siculus (3000 m<sup>2</sup>) which cultivates Sicilian species. The Hortus Generalis is divided into squares, set off by limestone steps, with



two small greenhouses for succulents, a tropical greenhouse used primarily for the cultivation of palms by seed and for cultivation of exotic plants including many economic plants, and three circular tanks for aquatic plants. The Hortus Siculus is divided into narrow rectangular flower beds bordered with lava stone, containing plants arranged by family. The garden grows many fine specimens of cacti, succulents and palms and has spectacular neoclassical administration buildings at its centre.

Afterwards we will visit the garden at **Il Giardino di Villa Trinita** for a tour. Villa Trinita is located on a rural estate in Mascalucia which has belonged to the Bonajuto family for at least eight generations. The garden is full of native and exotic species; agavae, plams, aloes, strawberry trees and pomegranates. The garden has many artifacts including raised terracotta 'saje' for irrigating orchards and 'gebbia' for collectiong water devised by ancient Arab culture.

We will have lunch at the Villa and spend some time here before travelling back to Donna Camella.

**Donna Carmela (Standard Room)**

**(B,L)**

04 May (Monday)

This morning we depart the hotel and travel to **Taormina** to visit the Greek theatre, then visit private garden Casa Cuseni. The most remarkable monument remaining at Taormina is the ancient theatre the *teatro greco*, or "Greek theatre", which is one of the most celebrated ruins in Sicily, on account both of its remarkable preservation and of the surpassing beauty of its situation. It is built for the most part of brick, and is therefore probably of Roman date, though the plan and arrangement are in accordance with those of Greek, rather than Roman, theatres. The present structure was rebuilt upon the foundations of an older theatre of the Greek period. With a diameter of 120 metres (after an expansion in the 2nd century), this theatre is the second largest of its kind in Sicily (after that of Siracusa); it is frequently used for operatic and theatrical performances and for concerts. From the fragments of architectural decorations still visible illustrating theatre is of the Corinthian order, and richly ornamented. Some portions of a temple are also visible, converted into the church of San Pancrazio.

Next we travel to **Casa Cuseni**. Created by Robert Hawthorn Kitson in 1873-1947, who visited Sicily for health reasons and decided to stay. The house and garden built into the hillside are testament to his professional skill as an engineer. It represents an outstanding example from a short period when British domestic designs were a great influence in Europe, and when Italy had taken up the Stil Liberty for her own use. The house built on a series of small terraces has dramatic views over Etna, the bay of Naxos and the roof tops of Taormina. Combining Renaissance elements mixed with Rococo sense of fun. A rich profusion of plants are planted onto each terrace originally carved from the rock by local women to cultivate almonds.

Casa Cuseni, with its gardens, furniture and paintings is a Casa Museo, a significant contribution to Italian architectural design which has uniquely maintained its associations with the arts in England and Italy at the beginning of this century. The House was Robert Kitson's primary residence for forty years, and represented part of his devotion to Taormina. A sign of his evaluation in the town was the urgent request for his return to the Commune after Second World War, when he was appointed President of the Commission established to supervise the reconstruction of the bomb-damaged town. That the Corso and piazza of old Taormina still preserve so many of their historic feature, which Kitson's own art celebrated, may therefore be associated with him no less closely than his great contribution to the town, Casa Cuseni and its gardens.

Lunch will be provided by the owner at Casa Cuseni to be followed by a couple of hours at leisure in Taormina before we head back to Donna Carmela.

**Donna Carmela (Standard Room)**

**(B,L)**

05 May (Tuesday)

Today is at leisure until we transfer (40min drive) to Catania airport for the return flight to the UK.

Today there is an optional excursion to travel up Mount Etna exploring the native plants en route. You will arrive back at the hotel to meet the transfer to the airport should you wish to take the flight this evening.



**British Airways BA2595 (Economy Class)**

Check in Catania 17:15 hrs  
Depart Catania 19:15 hrs  
Arrive London Gatwick 21:30 hrs

**Donna Carmela (Standard Room)**

**(B)**

06 May (Wednesday)

This morning will be at leisure – after lunch transfer to the airport for the flight back to the UK.

**Easyjet (Economy Class)**

Check in Catania 14:20 hrs  
Depart Catania 16:20 hrs  
Arrive London Gatwick 18:35 hrs

**END OF SERVICES**

**Price per person:**

**£ 2,245.95 - based on 2 people sharing a double/twin room**

**£288.75 – single supplement**

**NOTE: The above price does NOT include flights. When available World Odyssey are happy to book the flights for an administration charge of £30pp.**

**Our services include:**

- Accommodation as listed
- A private coach and driver throughout
- The services of your tour guide (Nick Wray)
- Meals as detailed
- Guiding as detailed
- Entrance fees / donations to the gardens

**Our services do not include:**

- International flights
- Meals other than mentioned
- Drinks and personal expenses
- Tips and porters at the hotels
- Any other items not mentioned
- Mount Etna excursion.

**The meal plans on each day are represented by the following symbols:**

**B: Breakfast    L: Lunch    D: Dinner**