Fun in the Sicilian countryside

SOUTHERN PASSION

Italy's south offers stunning scenery, friendly locals, delicious food, incredible history and, of course, some fabulous riding roads

WORDS TIM WALKER **PHOTOS** ADRIATIC MOTO TOURS AND TW

Get away from the coast for some fantastic Sicilian roads

Tour group down at the beach in Scilla

SOUTH OF ROME THE WEATHER GETS WARMER, THE MEALS GET LONGER, THE PEOPLE BECOME FRIENDLIER, THE TRADITIONS GROW STRONGER AND THE SCENERY BECOMES MORE BREATHTAKING

I've been to Italy about a dozen times, starting with a honeymoon in the 1990s followed by business trips, car holidays with my family and two motorcycle trips. But none of those trips went south of Rome. I didn't venture farther south because I was told southern Italy is poor, crime-ridden, underdeveloped and dirty... and therefore not worth visiting. I was wrong.

Although southern Italy can be some of those things some of the time, its bad reputation is totally overblown. I discovered that when I took the Adriatic Moto Tours (AMT) South of Rome and Sicily Tour in October 2024. AMT is a Slovenia-based touring company with 20 years of experience. What I learnt was that south of Rome the weather gets warmer, the meals get longer, the people become friendlier, the traditions grow stronger and the scenery becomes more breathtaking.

And I learnt that southern Italians are passionate about their history and proud of their inheritance of the classical ruins there. Oh, and did I mention the roads are super fun to ride?

The 15-day tour starts and ends at Frascati, a small town south-east of Rome, which is easily assessable by a direct train route. Tour

riders can therefore easily explore the Eternal City before or after the tour if they desire.

The tour I joined was in October, so almost all of our riding days lacked the crushing traffic that plagues all of Italy in the high tourist season.

THE TOUR BEGINS

On the Sunday before the first riding day, we had an orientation and our first dinner together. The seven of us met our two Slovenian tour guides, Jure and Mitja, who would lead us for the next two weeks. On this tour I am the only solo rider; the others are two couples from the States and one French Canadian couple.

On Monday morning, our guides prepped us with a detailed description of the day's ride. We learnt about elevation changes, cultural highlights, and where we'd be stopping for coffee, meals and snacks. Plus, they outlined optional solo side trips anyone could take without fear of getting lost due to the programmed GPS units on our handlebars.

As it turned out, all riders had chosen BMWs. AMT's rental fleet includes mostly BMWs, but also Italian and Japanese makes. All are new or nearly new, and all are meticulously maintained. I rode a sleek black beauty: a BMW F 750 GS. I chose it because

Empty Sicilian road with Mount Etna as the backdrop

The incredible Taormina amphiteathre

it's a midsize machine that I knew I could really throw into the curves, of which there were sure to be many throughout this trip.

I instantly fell in love with my ride. It faithfully and promptly rendered my inputs and took me where I wanted to go, smoothing out some of the uneven cobblestone surfaces we encountered on our way out of town.

Our first day's ride was filled with nice bends and sweepers through the interior countryside and its olive groves and grape vineyards – reminiscent of Tuscany, just not as lush and green. My love affair with my BMW continued when we traversed the steep hairpin turns climbing up to the Benedictine monastery at Montecassino.

I just adored BMW's superb electronic throttle-by-wire system and its precise and near-instant adjustment of engine revs, especially in Dynamic mode. Without a lag time between a throttle twist and power to the real wheel, I had the extra confidence I needed to negotiate these very technical hairpin turns.

And what a destination for this first day! Our afternoon break was spent wandering about this imposing, white granite monastery and its perfectly landscaped and colourful gardens, accented with faint sounds of chanting monks wafting out from the interior chambers. It was the perfect introduction to the many great sites we would visit on this trip.

Upon arriving in Naples, we dined on world-renowned Neapolitan pizza, which everyone agreed lived up to the hype. We then boarded our ferry for an overnight trip to Palermo, Sicily's capital city.

Palermo Cathedral

RIDING SICILY'S ROADS

We arrived early in the morning and took a brief ride to escape the traffic mess of our ferry disgorging many hundreds of vehicles and passengers. After a quick breakfast together at a quiet seaside cafe, Mitja started his briefing with "You are going to love today's ride." (I discovered he would say that at almost every morning briefing. And every time he was right!)

Thus began the heart of this tour. We were as stoked as ever, looking forward to riding eight days in a counter-clockwise loop of the island and enjoying all it has to offer in riding thrills, sightseeing and spectacular cuisine. We headed out on a scenic loop that would take us to the town of Erice, on the island's western end, before returning us to our Palermo hotel for the night.

The route took us along the island's northern coast on roads skirting the sea, taking us through small fishing villages and larger resort towns catering to the sun lovers who flock to Sicily's beautiful beaches. When our route veered a bit up and away from the coast, we had stunning blue vistas of the Mediterranean as we hugged bleached white cliffs and zoomed around the sweepers and bends.

We spent a good part of the middle of the day in Erice, which sits high atop an imposing hill dominated by the Castello di Venere (Venus Castle). From its many towers, we enjoyed splendid views overlooking the rugged west coast.

Returning to Palermo in the afternoon, we turned inland a bit and experienced our first taste of the island's interior mountains and plateaus. We all had a blast navigating through one sweeping curve and being blissfully thrown right into the next one.

On Day 4, we rode out from Palermo and proceeded inland and south on secondary roads towards Corleone, which has gained notoriety through *The Godfather* films and books. Although fictional, *The Godfather* character Vito Corleone is based on real organised crime figures from Corleone. Of course, we stopped for a group photo at the town's edge to show that we had visited this famous landmark.

Valley of the Temples near Agrigento on the southern Sicilian coast

Group in front of the famous baroque Cathedral in Noto

GLORIOUS SIGHTSEEING

The day's ride delivered us to the southern coast and the renowned Valley of the Temples near Agrigento, where we experienced the first of several fascinating ancient archeological sights on this tour.

The site boasts some of the largest and best-preserved ancient Greek buildings and temples. It was hard to take a bad photo of these magnificent and mostly intact structures; they fill up a photo frame and the late-afternoon sun made their red limestone facades absolutely glow.

On our ride from Agrigento to Syracuse on Day 5, we stopped at the hilltop town of Noto, famous for having a single cohesive architectural style. All its major buildings were rebuilt in the elaborate Baroque style after an earthquake destroyed the town in 1693. The entire town looks like a movie set, with carved pastel-coloured limestone facades and black wrought-iron balconies. Parts of HBO's *The White Lotus* were filmed there.

We had overnights in three more delightful towns before leaving Sicily: Syracuse, Cefalú and Taormina. Our hotels were all top-notch, four stars or better. Whenever possible, AMT selects well-appointed boutique hotels or family-operated facilities. And they all prepared us every morning for the day's ride with a hearty buffet-style breakfast (included in the AMT tour price, as are dinners) featuring fresh, superbly prepared and seasoned foods this country is famous for. What's not to love about starting

Cannoli, a classic and delicious Sicilian dessert

Central market in Palermo, Sicily

Castellammare del Golfo is a typical Sicilian coastal village

each day with a delightfully sweet cream-filled cannoli washed down by a cappuccino?

Taormina was especially splendid. This chic resort town is perched on the side of a mountain, and from the medieval piazza we enjoyed a stunning view of Mount Etna. We gazed upon the Teatro Greco, dating to the third century BC, and we spied on sunbathers on the popular Gulf of Naxos beaches below.

On our rest day in Taormina there was an optional 140km ride to nearby Mt Etna and back. Unfortunately, that day was one of our few rainy days on this tour, so no one opted for this. Photos from previous tours have shown fantastic scenery with the imposing backdrop of this very active volcano.

At this point in the tour, I reflected upon how grateful I was that my ride was kept lightweight and easier to handle in the curves. I had just a top case carrying only the day's essentials. No side cases were needed as Jure transports everyone's luggage in a support van and delivers it to your hotel room before you arrive. My 64-year-old body appreciated that!

Another plus of this tour is that there were only occasional stints on Italy's divided multi-lane motorways — the autostradas. We only took those when we needed to make good time. I can think of only one blemish on this otherwise delightful tour. Some roads were less than perfect, requiring riders to remain vigilant going around blind curves lest the road surface suddenly worsened.

SICILY'S CUISINE, THE BEST IN ALL OF ITALY

As we prepared to return to the mainland, I reflected on what food critics say: While food is an art in all of Italy, it is a religion in Sicily. I can confirm this is true. Sicilian cuisine is known for its unique flavour combinations and use of fresh, local ingredients, such as seafood from the always nearby Mediterranean Sea. Most menus were therefore filled with pasta and seafood combinations, with favourites being mussels, octopus, squid and various species of freshly caught fish. Sardines are a favourite and are served on their own or in the flavourful pasta con le sarde, incorporating pine nuts, fennel and raisins.

Another case in point is melanzana (eggplant/aubergine), which is traditionally used as a meat substitute. There were several eggplant aficionados in our group and they fell in love with caponata, an original Sicilian eggplant with olives, capers and a sweet and sour tomato sauce. My favourite Sicilian creation was arancini, stuffed rice balls coated with breadcrumbs and fried. And for dessert, I couldn't resist cannoli, the sweet pastry stuffed with a variety of flavoured cremes, most often pistachio.

ARRIVEDERCI SICILY

Day 10 returned us to the Italian mainland via a short 20-minute ferry ride crossing the Strait of Messina. Our first overnight stop was Tropea, on a stretch of coastline called the Coast of the Gods, one of Italy's most popular summer holiday destinations.

We arrived mid-afternoon (a typical pattern for this tour), which gave us time to wander through this old town perched atop an imposing cliff. The views from the main piazza were delightful, with the byzantine-style Santa Maria monastery, set on a steep, craggy outcrop, being particularly stunning when lit up at night.

At the morning preview of our ride from Tropea to Maratea, Mitja said that at 335km, it would be our longest day of riding, and that much of it would be along the west coast with its twisty roads and scenic views of the sea. AMT excels not only at picking the best routes for motorcyclists to enjoy, but also at selecting great places to stop and explore along the way. A case in point was this day's ride, which was awesome, as predicted, and took us up to the 22m-high statue of Christ the Redeemer atop Monte San Biagio. We arrived at the "golden hour" when the late afternoon sun shines with a pleasing glow.

The statue is just 8m shorter than the more well-known Redeemer statue towering over Rio de Janeiro. Riding up to the statue was a unique experience: 11 back-to-back hairpin turns, not carved out of the hills but on elevated

Riding into the hills out of Castellammare del Golfo

A stretch of winding Calabrian road between Tropea and Maratea

The amazing Amalfi Coast

MID-AFTERNOON, WE ARRIVED AT THE STUNNING AMALFI COAST AND ITS NARROW, CLIFF-HUGGING ROADS, HEAVY TRAFFIC AND SHEER DROP-OFFS TO THE SEA BELOW

stilts not unlike the tall pillars supporting soaring suspension bridges. I was thrilled! While it's hard to pick a favourite day of riding on a tour with so many memorable routes, I think this was it.

The next highlight was riding along the beautiful Amalfi coast. But first we stopped to tour Paestum, which is famous for its ancient Greek temples dating from about 550 to 450 BC that are among the best-preserved ancient Greek temples in the world.

Mid-afternoon we arrived at the stunning Amalfi coast and its narrow, cliff-hugging roads, heavy traffic and sheer drop-offs to the sea below (with insufficient guard rails, in my opinion). Because we were on two wheels, we had an advantage when manoeuvring. Still, several of us had close calls when oncoming traffic skirted the centreline around bends.

On our rest day in the picturesque seaside town of Minori, a van transported us to Pompeii, which meant we could swap our riding gear for more comfortable shoes and clothes during our three-hour visit under the hot Italian sun. The well-preserved ruins there offer a unique snapshot of Roman life, frozen at the moment it was buried by volcanic ash and pumice by the violent eruption of Mount Vesuvius in 79 AD. I can't adequately convey the deep feelings this place evoked in me; it moved me emotionally more than any other place I've ever visited.

TOASTING A SUCCESSFUL TRIP

Our last riding day started with steep, hairpin climbs leaving Minori and heading inland, where we enjoyed one last day of twisties in the mountainous region of Campania. Arriving in Frascati, we toasted the successful completion of an amazing trip by raising flutes of champagne that awaited us.

We toasted our guides, Jure and Mitja, who did an amazing job managing their official duties while also being friendly and outgoing, adding an extra bit of fun to our trip. Mitja and Jure have guided many tours, and on and off throughout the trip we tried unsuccessfully to get them to reveal their favourite. But on this final day, they did admit that the sightseeing and the food on this tour are the best!

So don't be put off by southern Italy's undeserved bad reputation. Tour this amazing region on a motorcycle and experience the incredible variety it has to offer: beaches, mountains, active volcanoes, well-preserved archeological sites and, of course, the best Italian food ever. *ARR*

FAST FACTS

Adriatic Moto Tours South of Rome & Sicily Tour
Duration: 15 days
Distance: 2600km
Highlights: Rome, Palermo, Valley of Temples, Mt Etna, ancient cities of Taormina and Syracuse, Maratea, Amalfi Coast and Pompeii
Cost: From €7190 (rider) (approx. AU$12,700); €5320 (pillion) (approx. AU$9400)
Email: info@adriaticmototours.com
Website: www.adriaticmototours.com
Phone: +386 30 465 555

More info
https://www.adriaticmototours.com