

Touring Stunning Southern Italy and Sicily

By Tim Walker #238512



A decade or so ago, I started putting small flag stickers on my helmets to represent each foreign country I visited on a motorcycle. I'm up to 17 countries now and may add more flags yet. But not this summer, because last year I returned for my third time to Italy—one of my favorite countries to tour on two wheels. While there's no new flag sticker on my helmet, I added countless new experiences, new memories, new favorite foods and new people I now consider friends.

Southern Italy and Sicily—the island just off the toe of the Italian “boot”—get little rain, remain temperate well into autumn, have stunning scenery and boast thrilling mountainous and coastal roads. The region also has ancient archeological sites rivaling those in Greece and elsewhere. Let's not forget about Sicilian cuisine, which critics regularly declare to be the best in Italy. Together, these elements make for an amazing part of the world to tour on two wheels, exactly what I did on an Adriatic Moto Tours “South of Rome and Sicily Tour” last October.

The tour starts and ends in Frascati, a small town southeast of Rome, easily accessible by train. On Sunday, I met my six fellow riders and our two Slovenian tour guides, Jure and Mitja, who would be leading us for the next two weeks. I was the only solo rider in the group, with two couples from the States and one French Canadian couple. Beginning with that evening's welcome dinner, we got to know each other by swapping photos of our motorcycles back home and telling tales of previous two-wheeled trips.

Anticipation and excitement were in the air that Monday morning when our guides prepped us with a detailed description of the day's ride, along with

optional side trips that riders could take separately from the group without fear of getting lost due to the pre-programmed GPS units on our handlebars.

As it turned out, all riders had chosen BMWs—including one who opted for the new BMW R 1300 GS Adventure. AMT's rental fleet includes many BMWs but also Italian and Japanese makes, all new or nearly new and meticulously maintained. I chose a pristine black beauty: a BMW F 750 GS, primarily because it's a mid-weight machine that I can throw into the curves, of which there were sure to be many throughout this trip.

Heading out, we got right into those curves and our first historical highlight of the tour when we headed southeast toward Naples and visited the serene Benedictine monastery at Montecassino, traversing challenging hairpin turns on our way up to the abbey and back down again.

ABS is great, but those turns brought an equally important technological innovation to me: BMW's superb electronic throttle-by-wire system and its precise and near-instant adjustment of engine RPMs, especially while in Dynamic mode. That system gave me extra confidence while negotiating the technical hairpin turns we rode that day and would encounter throughout the trip.

I'm also grateful that my ride was lightweight and easier to handle. I only used a tail case with just the day's essentials as Jure, our support guide, carried everyone's luggage in a van to our next destination. My 64-year-old body appreciated that!

Our ride next brought us to Naples, where we dined on world-renowned Neapolitan pizza, which everyone agreed lived up to the hype. Before boarding our ferry for an overnight ride to Palermo, Sicily's capital city, we took eight days to make a counterclockwise loop of the island.

This tour was fantastic because every day featured great riding, with only an occasional stint on Italy's divided multi-lane motorways—autostradas—when we needed to make time. When we rode on coastal roads skirting the sea, we had pleasant rides between small fishing villages or larger resort towns catering to the sun lovers who flock to Sicily's beautiful beaches.

Riding the coastal roads at higher elevations, we hugged bleached white cliffs and zoomed around sweepers and benders with a stunning blue vista of the Mediterranean Sea as the backdrop. The riding was equally

enjoyable when we headed inland to the interior mountains and plateaus. As a bonus, our riding took place without the crushing traffic plaguing this country during the high tourist season. The only blemish I can recall during this otherwise excellent tour was that some roads were less than perfect, requiring riders to remain vigilant going around blind curves, lest the road surface suddenly worsen.

The occasional rough stretch of road was more than made up for by the magnificent places we visited. Adriatic Moto Tours excels at picking the best routes for motorcyclists to enjoy and selecting great places to stop and explore along the way.

Left, Italian Pizza and Beer.

Below, An empty Sicilian road with Mount Etna as the backdrop.



Discussing routes of the day at the morning briefing.



The Paestum Greek Temples.

Our next day took us to the beautiful town of Erice and its medieval castle high atop an imposing hill. Adjacent to the castle was a large, lush botanical garden where we were able to enjoy splendid views overlooking the rugged west coast. The following day, we toured the renowned Valley of the Temples near Agrigento on the southern Sicilian coast. Some of the most significant and best-preserved ancient Greek buildings and temples can be found here. I found it hard to take a bad photo of these magnificent and mostly intact structures.

Leaving Agrigento and riding toward Syracuse, we stopped at the hilltop town of Noto, famous for its single, cohesive architectural style. After an earthquake destroyed the city in 1693, all significant buildings were rebuilt in the elaborate Baroque style creating a town looking like a movie set, with its carved pastel-colored limestone facades and black wrought-iron balconies. Indeed, parts of HBO's *The White Lotus* were filmed there.

Our group then enjoyed overnights in the delightful towns of Syracuse, Cefalù and Taormina before we left Sicily, where we leisurely dined outdoors and window-shopped along centuries-old quaint streets or central piazzas bordered by ornate buildings. Taormina, a chic resort town perched on the side of a mountain, was exceptionally splendid. From the medieval piazza

there, we enjoyed sweeping views of Mount Etna, gazed upon an ancient amphitheater and spied on sunbathers on the Gulf of Naxos beaches below.

Preparing to return to the mainland, I reflected on my fond memories of Sicily, including the delicious dishes our group enjoyed. After a week of Sicilian cuisine, we witnessed the truth in what many food critics say: While food is an art in all of Italy, it is a religion in Sicily.

Upon our return to the Italian mainland, our first overnight stop was Tropea, along a stretch of coastline called the Costa degli Dei—the Coast of the Gods—one of Italy's most popular summer holiday destinations. We arrived mid-afternoon, giving us time to wander through the old town perched atop an imposing cliff. Again, the views from the main piazza, especially the byzantine-style Santa Maria monastery, are set on a steep, craggy outcrop, which is particularly stunning when lit up at night.

Realizing that our trip had only four days left, I felt a bit sad. To be honest, this trip has been a bit of a strain on this old body of mine, so I was okay with wrapping it up soon. My sadness was tempered by the thrill of the great riding and sights we had seen over the last few days.



Some of those sights included the 22-meter-high statue of Christ the Redeemer built atop Monte San Biagio, the ancient ruins at Paestum, the Amalfi coast and a full-day tour of Pompeii.

Riding up to the statue was a unique experience that included 11 back-to-back hairpin turns not carved out of the hills but built upon elevated stilts like the tall pillars supporting soaring suspension bridges.

The ruins of Paestum are famous for their three ancient Greek temples (two to Hera and one to Athena) dating from about 550 to 450 B.C. They are among the best-preserved ancient Greek temples in the world.

Next came the roads on the beautiful, world-renowned Amalfi coast—a combination of challenging riding conditions, heavy traffic, and sheer drop-offs along the cliffs making the Amalfi Coast a difficult place to navigate, even for the most experienced drivers.

Because we were on two wheels, we had an advantage, and that made all the difference. Where drivers on four wheels had close calls when oncoming traffic skirted the center line around curves, we just zipped on by!

On our rest day in the Amalfi coast town of Minori, we took a van to Pompeii, meaning we could swap our riding gear for more comfortable shoes and clothes during our visit under the hot Italian sun. The well-preserved ruins in Pompeii offer a unique snapshot of Roman life, frozen at the moment the town was buried by volcanic ash and pumice from the violent eruption of Mount Vesuvius in 79 A.D.

Our last day started with steep climbs from the Amalfi coast and heading inland, where we turned northwest and enjoyed one last day of twisties in the mountainous region of Campania.

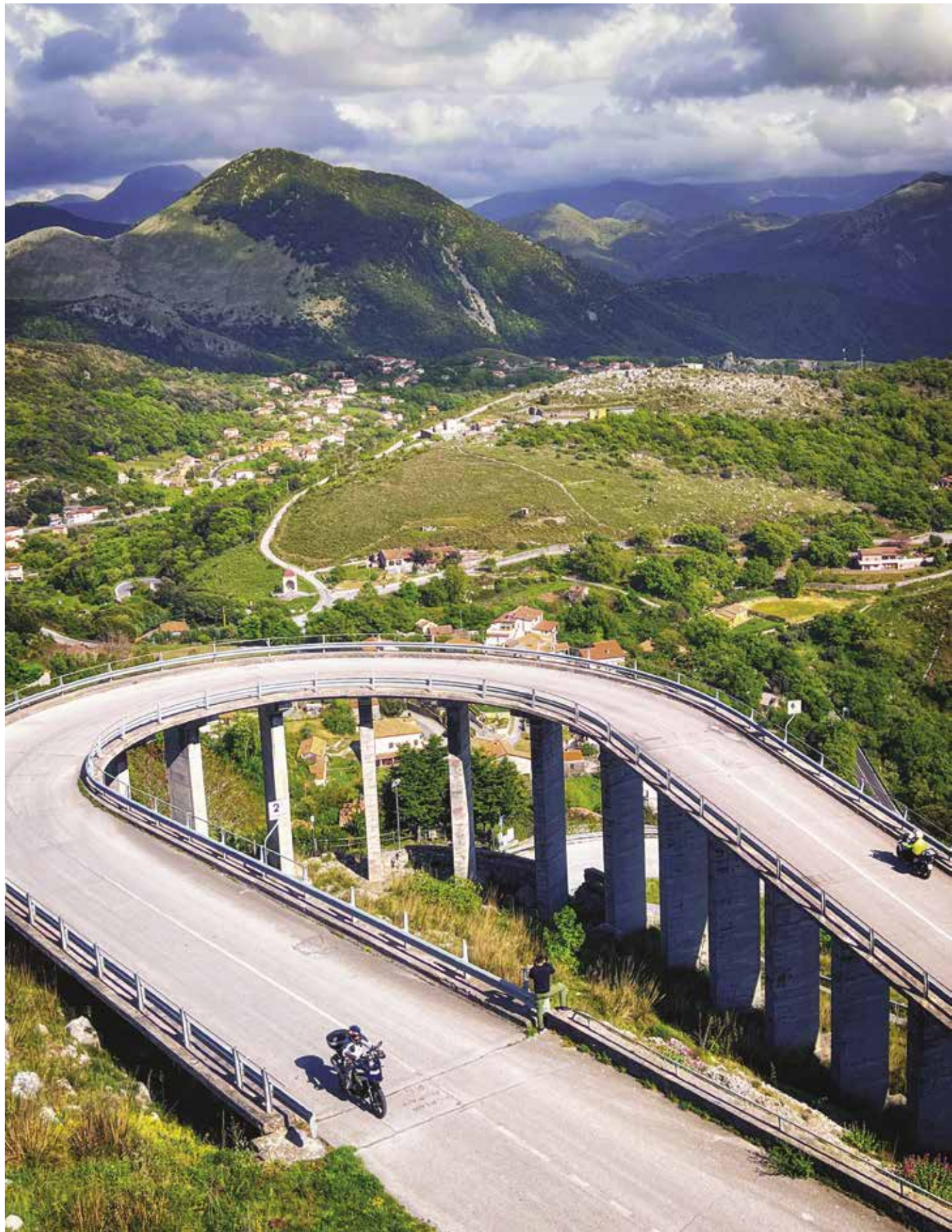
Top, A Vespa, a Fiat and some oranges—a quintessential Italian sight.

Bottom, The view from my Taormina hotel room.





Beautiful Positano along the Amalfi Coast.



Back-to-back hairpin turns on our way to the *Christ the Redeemer* statue.

A group photo at the *Christ the Redeemer* statue.



Once we arrived in Frascati, we toasted the successful completion of our fantastic trip by raising flutes of sparkling white wine set out for us. We congratulated ourselves for finishing a memorable tour that mentally and physically challenged us on more than one occasion. We also toasted our guides, Jure and Mitja, for their fantastic job managing their duties while adding some fun to our trip.

Finally, it was time to say goodbye to my new riding friends while lingering over a final dinner together. May we meet again someplace down the road!

For more information on Adriatic Moto Tours, visit adriaticmototours.com. **ON**



Tim Walker lives in St. Paul, Minnesota, and most of his motorcycling is as an urban commuter. To get his fix of mountain twisties, he heads to Europe nearly every summer and hops on a rented BMW. His favorite places to visit are Italy, the Balkans and Romania. He is a recently retired MSF-certified RiderCoach, and promotes safe riding wherever he finds himself in the world.



Back at the hotel in Frascati and a toast to a successful tour.