



American Horticultural Society  
Travel Study Program

# HISTORIC SITES & GARDENS OF MALTA & EASTERN SICILY

April 10 – 21 , 2019

WITH AHS TOUR HOSTS HOLLY AND OSAMU SHIMIZU  
AND TOUR LEADER SUSIE ORSO OF SPECIALTOURS



Dear Friends,

I personally invite you to join our latest American Horticultural Society tour: "Historic Sites & Gardens of Malta & Eastern Sicily," April 10–21, 2019.

When composing this invitation letter, I found it almost impossible to fit the highlights of this journey on these two islands in the Mediterranean into such a small space. The itinerary is overflowing with memorable and noteworthy experiences, but let me attempt the impossible.

First, we will visit Valletta, designated a World Heritage Site and the capital of Malta. We'll board a Maltese water taxi, locally known as a *dghajsa*, for a tour of Valletta's Grand Harbour. St. John's Co-Cathedral, built by the Order of St. John in the 1570s, is one of the finest examples of Baroque architecture in Europe. A highlight of any trip would be to view a Caravaggio painting; on this tour we will see three!

On Sicily, we'll tour the fifth-century B.C. Greek theater in Siracusa, where Aeschylus saw his own plays performed. The layers of architecture in the city are astounding, and it's no wonder it has been designated a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

Since the Middle Ages, the San Giuliano farm has employed organic farming methods, and we'll learn how and why the farmers do it. Le Stanze in Fiore — a unique garden of modern sculptures and 1,000 varieties of plants — will make a lasting impression.

If you're even the least bit familiar with Sicily, you've seen photos of Taormina's Greek amphitheater. We will visit this iconic attraction with its view of the sea and Mount Etna in the distance. It is an unforgettable experience.

Our superb accommodations will include Hotel Phoenicia, set on acres of gardens and within walking distance of the historic center of Valletta. The Grand Hotel Ortigia in Siracusa overlooks the bay. In Taormina, we will stay at the luxurious Belmond Grand Hotel Timeo, where gorgeous grounds and vistas of Mount Etna await us.

Our American Horticultural Society hosts for this trip will be Holly and Osamu Shimizu. Holly is a member of our AHS Board of Directors and recently-retired executive director of the United States Botanic Garden in Washington, D.C. She has worked in gardens in many parts of the world and hosted the popular Victory Garden television show on PBS for 10 years. Osamu is an accomplished landscape architect. Both Holly and Osamu have traveled extensively visiting gardens around the world and have a wealth of horticultural knowledge and experience to share.

Our tour leader is Specialtours' Susie Orso, who has arranged and led dozens of AHS Travel Study programs. Her years of experience and her insights — along with her invaluable personal contacts — will enrich this beautifully designed itinerary. This trip will be a bittersweet one; it is Susie's last with us, and we will bid her a fond farewell with best wishes for a well-deserved retirement.

Thanks to our many connections, we will be seeing private gardens and other sites that are not available to the general public. I highly recommend that you accompany us to Malta and Sicily. Space is limited and our Travel Study programs often sell out, so early reservations are advised. A convenient reservation form is enclosed in this brochure.

Most sincerely,

Beth Tuttle  
President and Chief Executive Officer



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Join AHS Hosts Holly and Osamu Shimizu and tour leader Susie Orso for this once-in-a-lifetime garden travel experience.

## Itinerary Highlights

### TUESDAY, APRIL 9

Leave the United States for Malta.

We are pleased that Nigel McGilchrist, whose talks were so appreciated during the AHS tour to Greece, will be joining us as lecturer during our stay in Malta and for our introduction to Siracusa.

### WEDNESDAY, APRIL 10 — VALLETTA, MALTA (D)

Our Mediterranean adventure begins! Upon the arrival of our connecting flight to Malta, we travel from Malta International Airport to our first accommodation, the luxurious Hotel Phoenicia, which is within walking distance of the center of Malta's capital, Valletta. Malta has an incredibly colorful history. St. Paul was shipwrecked here while on his way to Rome to be tried as a political rebel and is credited with converting the island's Roman leader to Christianity. In 1530, Holy Roman Emperor Charles V bequeathed Malta to the Order of Knights of the Hospital of St. John of Jerusalem, now known as the Sovereign

Military Order of Malta, who took the island through a golden age in the 17th and 18th centuries. Malta became a republic in 1974 and joined the European Union in 2004. We'll unwind with lunch independently, but then we'll hit the ground running with an afternoon orientation tour of Valletta's center. Designated a World Heritage Site, Valletta is designed on a grid system in an early example of modern city planning. We'll continue in town to Malta's renowned Upper Barrakka Gardens, whose terraced arches date to 1661. Our cameras will be busy thanks to the breathtaking views of the Grand Harbour. Not far away, Hastings Gardens form a small but shining gem on the west side of the City Gate. Once again, the panoramic vista is sublime, with views of the fortified town of Floriana. Our busy afternoon concludes as we return to the hotel for drinks and dinner.

### THURSDAY, APRIL 11 — VALLETTA (B, L)

This morning Valletta is ours to explore. First and foremost is a visit to St. John's Co-Cathedral, built by the Order of St. John in the 1570s. The interior is considered to be one of the finest examples of Baroque architecture in Europe. Yet the most famous attractions here are two paintings by Italian master Caravaggio: *The Beheading of St. John the Baptist* (the artist's only signed painting) and *St. Jerome Writing*. We'll continue to the nearby Grand Master's Palace, built in the 16th century and modified up through the 18th century. It was the seat of the Parliament of Malta until 2015. We'll tour the Palace State Rooms and Armoury, now open to the public as a museum. After a short walk, we'll arrive at the Casa Rocca Piccola, a 16th-century palace with a small courtyard garden, where we will enjoy drinks with the noble de Piro family. That will set the mood for a fine lunch at Michael's restaurant; we'll be made to feel like family because the chefs are father and son. This afternoon will feature a visit to the Sacra Infermeria (Holy Infirmary). This former hospital was established in 1574 by the Order of St. John, whose members were charged with a holy mission to aid and protect pilgrims on their way to Jerusalem as well as tend to the sick. We will have the rest of the afternoon to spend as we please. Dinner on our own offers a chance to sample Malta's enticing cuisine.

### FRIDAY, APRIL 12 — VALLETTA (B, L, D)

Our busy day begins as we leave by coach. First stop is the delightful Howard Gardens, one of the biggest public gardens in Malta. With its benches, pathways, and grove of orange trees, it





is an ideal place to wander and relax before the adventure ahead. That adventure is Mdina, the ancient walled capital of Malta. It is known as the “Silent City” because of its narrow, quiet pedestrian streets. We’ll get to know it with a walk and then a visit to the Palazzo de Piro, a 17th-century palace that is now a cultural center, where we’ll enjoy refreshments in the Xpresso Cafe and Bistro. Next, we will continue to Palazzo Falson with its attractive courtyard garden. It is the former home of Capt. Olof Frederick Gollcher, an artist, scholar, and collector of art, antiques, and historical objects. Lunch will be at the Trattoria AD 1530, located at the prestigious Relais and Chateaux Xara Palace, a unique 17th-century estate. Next on our agenda is Buskett Gardens, a rare woodland area in Malta featuring conifers, orange trees, an olive and lemon grove, and cypress trees. At the edge of the gardens is the Verdala Palace, the official summer residence of the president of Malta. We will return to the hotel to freshen up before dinner at Adesso, a restaurant that specializes in contemporary Mediterranean cuisine.

### **SATURDAY, APRIL 13 — VALLETTA (B, L)**

This memorable, active day begins with a walk through Valletta and down to the Grand Harbour, where we will board the *Maryanne*, a traditional Maltese *dghajsa* or water taxi. The *Maryanne* will take us on a tour of the area, which has been used as a harbor since Phoenician times and later served as a strategic base for the British Royal Navy. We’ll disembark at Vittoriosa, also known as Birgu, for a walk through this picture-perfect port that is one of three fortified cities around the harbor. We will enjoy lunch on the lovely waterfront at Don Berto Restaurant. Next on the itinerary is the Chinese Garden of Serenity. This peaceful oasis encourages contemplation, with its fountains, Bamboo Garden, and zigzag corridor. We’ll return to the hotel before we take dinner independently.

### **SUNDAY, APRIL 14 — VALLETTA (B, L, D)**

Our day starts off with a visit to the San Anton Gardens. We’ll wander cobblestone paths lined by ancient jacarandas, cypresses, and Norfolk Island pines (*Araucaria heterophylla*) and stroll through fragrant orange and lemon groves. The Italianate-style gardens feature follies, sculptures, fountains, and a large variety of plants from around the world. What’s more, the gardens surround the stately San Anton Palace, the official residence of the president of Malta. Our morning continues at the privately owned Villa Bologna, a fine example of a traditional Maltese garden. The older section of the garden, which dates to the 18th century, is notable for its Baroque gateway and monuments. The newer garden’s fountains, ponds, walkways, vegetable gardens, and citrus orchards were added in the 1920s. The Dolphin Fountain and

surrounding lawns, as well as the Sunken Pond, are highlights. We’ll break for lunch at the Corinthia Palace Hotel, followed by time to enjoy the gardens there. Afterward, it’s back to the hotel to relax before dinner at Barracuda Restaurant, an 18th-century seafront villa with spectacular views of Balluta and Spinola bays.

### **MONDAY, APRIL 15 — SIRACUSA, SICILY (B, L, D)**

We will depart with our luggage this morning, and our first stop will be the gardens of Palazzo Parisio, an 18th-century palace that contains a treasure trove of delightful artifacts. We’ll tour the grand ballroom and family chapel before moving outdoors to explore the walled gardens, with orangery and a grotto dating to 1733. We will see kapok trees (*Ceiba pentandra*) and a profusion of flowering plants, including cinerarias, arums, tulips, freesias, more than 65 species of hibiscus, cascading geraniums, and a vast collection of bougainvilleas. After refreshments and a light lunch, we’ll continue to the airport for our afternoon flight to Catania, Sicily. From the airport, we’ll take a motor coach to Siracusa. This 2,700-year-old city, a UNESCO World Heritage Site, is notable for its rich Greek history, culture, and architecture. It was one of the major powers of the ancient Mediterranean world. Our first stop will be at the Parco Archeologico della Neapolis, one of Sicily’s greatest archaeological sites, featuring a fifth-century B.C. Greek amphitheater carved out of the rocky hillside. Tragedies written by Aeschylus were performed here in his presence in this 16,000-capacity amphitheater. Nearby is the Latomia del Paradiso (Paradise Quarry), a limestone quarry now filled with citrus and magnolia trees. Its Orecchio di Dionisio (Ear of Dionysius) is a 75-foot-high grotto extending more than 200 feet back into the cliff side. Next, we’ll see a Roman amphitheater created in the third century — one of the largest the Romans built in Italy. Across from the mainland, we’ll find out next accommodation on the island of Ortigia. The Grand Hotel Ortigia overlooks the bay, and its fine rooftop restaurant will inspire priceless memories. We’ll enjoy the view as we dine there this evening.

### **TUESDAY, APRIL 16 — SIRACUSA (B, L, D)**

Our first stop is the Museo Archeologico Regionale Paolo Orsi, where we’ll see treasures of ancient art discovered in eastern Sicily. We will return to Ortigia for a guided walk to the Temple of Athena, a Doric temple built in the fifth century B.C. Afterward, we’ll visit the Duomo di Siracusa, an ancient Catholic church that is included in a UNESCO World Heritage Site. We’ll break for lunch at one of the exceptional restaurants on Cathedral Square. A short walk from the cathedral is the church of Santa Lucia alla Badia. Although the church is notable in its own right, it also holds another work by Caravaggio, *Burial of Saint Lucy*. Our next

stop is the Fountain of Arethusa. According to Greek mythology, this fresh-water fountain is where the nymph Arethusa, the patron figure of ancient Siracusa, returned to the Earth's surface after escaping from her undersea home in Arcadia. The rest of the afternoon is at our leisure before a private dinner at Palazzo Beneventano del Bosco. Built around an enclosed courtyard in the late 18th century, the palazzo is an example of Sicilian Baroque architecture, a design that is carried through in the interior's sculptures and frescoes.

### WEDNESDAY, APRIL 17 — SIRACUSA (B, L)

We'll depart by motor coach for the Marchesi di San Giuliano estate, where the escort for our tour will be head gardener Rachel Lamb. This beautiful garden is divided into four areas: a fruit garden; an Arab garden with water basins and water lilies; an herb garden full of helichrysum, lavender, thyme, sage, rock-rose, myrtle, and other fragrant plants; and a tropical garden with palms and large cacti. The estate has used organic farming methods for many years to produce oil, wine, and citrus fruit — mostly oranges, but also lemons, limes, and red grapefruits. We will continue to Lentini to enjoy lunch al fresco and visit the gardens of Il Biviere at the Villa Borghese. There we'll have the pleasure of meeting Principessa Borghese's daughter-in-law, Virginia Gattai. The picturesque villa is surrounded by lush palms, roses, blue jacarandas (*Jacaranda mimosifolia*), parkinsonias, and a remarkable collection of succulents. We'll pay a visit to the villa's organic orange farm before we return to Siracusa for dinner on our own.

### THURSDAY, APRIL 18 — TAORMINA (B, L)

We'll deepen our exploration of Sicily as we leave (with luggage) for Canalicchio to visit two private gardens on the slopes of Mount Etna, the tallest active volcano in Europe. Our first stop is Le Stanze in Fiore, an exotic, unique garden of modern sculptures, ponds with lotus flowers and water hyacinths, and 1,000 varieties of plants. The 17-acre garden surrounds a neoclassical country villa built in the 19th century. Its Oriental Garden will surprise and delight us with its strong symbolic connotations. We'll continue to the town of Sant'Agata li Battiati for a light lunch in the garden at Parco Paternò del Toscano, which boasts 40 varieties of palms and a rock garden. Next, we'll arrive at our accommodation in Taormina. Overlooking the Ionian Sea, the Belmond Grand Hotel Timeo has terraced gardens and a spectacular view of Mount Etna. Over the years, the hotel has hosted many glamorous celebrities, including Elizabeth Taylor, Audrey Hepburn, and Sophia Loren. Taormina was invaded by the Greeks, Romans, French, and Spanish, all of whom left their mark on this beautiful city. We will dine independently tonight.

### FRIDAY, APRIL 19 — TAORMINA (B, L)

We'll spend some time this morning touring the hotel gardens. Above the hotel is Taormina's Greek theater, the second largest in Sicily (after the one in Siracusa). This iconic attraction dates to the third century B.C. and is still frequently used for performances and concerts. The nearby public gardens of Taormina feature stunning views of both the sea and the city. We continue our day with a trip to Casa Cuseni, an art museum and a bed and breakfast. The private garden includes terraces that represent a remarkable feat of careful design and skillful engineering. It is filled with exotic trees, fountains, wisteria-draped pergolas, and secret nooks. We'll take a break for a light buffet lunch on the terrace, then the afternoon is at our leisure. A change of pace is in

store this evening, with a lecture by Charles Sacamano, author of *Persephone's Path: A Guide to Sicily's Roadside Plants*. This helpful handbook identifies plants, shrubs, and trees on Sicily — an indispensable guide for your certain return trip here! Tonight, it's dinner on our own.

### SATURDAY, APRIL 20 — TAORMINA (B, L, D)

Remarkable nurseries are the order of the day. We will begin with a visit this morning to the nursery of Malvarosa, which specializes in pelargoniums and jasmine. No trip to Sicily would be complete without seeing Radicepura, a park, nursery, and overall horticultural hub. This labor of love was founded 50 years ago by Venerando Faro, who still runs it with his sons. Some 3,000 plant species and more than 7,000 varieties are archived here. Radicepura hosts researchers, garden designers, and even horticultural tour groups. We'll continue with a private lunch at the home of Evira and Giuseppe Grassi before returning to Taormina. We will have the rest of the afternoon to spend as we please before coming together for farewell drinks and dinner at the hotel.

### SUNDAY, APRIL 21 — (B)

This morning, we'll leave for Catania's airport and bid farewell to Sicily as we depart for our flights back to the United States. If there are a number of members who wish to extend their stay in Sicily, we can arrange an extension tour for the group.

*Although revisions of this itinerary are not anticipated, the AHS and its travel partners reserve the right to make changes, with or without notice, that may become necessary.*





Announcing the American  
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## JOIN US FOR MEMORABLE EXPERIENCES, INCLUDING:

- Valletta, the capital of Malta, designated a World Heritage Site
- The renowned Upper Barrakka Gardens in Valletta
- St. John's Co-Cathedral, one of the finest examples of Baroque architecture in Europe and home to two masterpieces by Caravaggio
- Two private gardens on the slopes of Mount Etna
- Siracusa, a UNESCO World Heritage Site and one of the major powers of the ancient Mediterranean world
- Taormina's Greek theater, an iconic site with a spectacular view of Mount Etna

## OUR ACCOMMODATIONS ARE EQUALLY OUTSTANDING:

- Hotel Phoenicia in Valletta is a member of the Leading Hotels of the World; it's set on several acres of gardens and is within walking distance of the historic center of the city.
- Grand Hotel Ortigia on the island of Ortigia overlooks the bay and boasts a rooftop restaurant.
- Belmond Grand Hotel Timeo in Taormina is set on beautiful grounds with views of Mount Etna.

Please refer to the enclosed reservation form for pricing and instructions for reserving your place on this AHS Travel Study Program tour. For more information about Travel Study Program tours, please contact [development@ahsgardening.org](mailto:development@ahsgardening.org) or (703) 768-5700, ext. 127 or ext. 132. Information is also available at [www.ahsgardening.org/travel](http://www.ahsgardening.org/travel).

Designed with the connoisseur of garden travel in mind, the American Horticultural Society Travel Study Program offers an exceptional itinerary that includes many exclusive experiences and unique insights. Your participation benefits the work of the American Horticultural Society and furthers our vision of "*Making America a Nation of Gardeners, A Land of Gardens.*"

