

What can I expect on a pilgrimage?

The pilgrimage is a deeply personal spiritual experience to which each pilgrim responds differently. Some have told us that it has been a major event in their lives, while others felt led to make life-changing decisions afterwards. People regularly say they feel personally involved in the pilgrimage. The variety of spiritual encounters – talks, reflections, prayer, fellowship, art, nature, community – all together create the spirituality of the pilgrimage. Our vocation as Roman Catholic Secular Franciscans and faithfulness to the magisterium influences the spirituality.

Do you organize pilgrimages only within Italy?

Yes, because we know Italy best. We live part of the year in the US and the other part in Italy. Our experience as dual citizens of both Italy and the US allows us to create an experience based on our understanding of both cultures. We personally accompany each pilgrimage and constantly gather feedback, tweaking the pilgrimages as necessary. Our itineraries are developed from our personal experience and firsthand knowledge of the places and people in Italy. We regularly keep up with the local hotels, restaurants, and suppliers to ensure their standards. We will take you off-the-beaten path and introduce you to our friends and favorite secret spots offering a highly personalized experience. As a result, we regularly develop lasting friendships with pilgrims. Some have compared our pilgrimages to eating a good Italian meal at a local family-run *trattoria* versus a chain restaurant.

Why do your itineraries include places 'off the beaten path'?

Our roots and extensive experiences in Italy, have led to our intimate knowledge of many special places off the beaten path. It is special to visit the quiet places, while the touristy crowds in the big cities can detract from the overall experience. Many of our pilgrims frequently comment that the highlight of their pilgrimage was the charm and beauty of the smaller places. However, it is important to visit the great pilgrimage sites, so cities like Rome do play an important in the pilgrimage.

Why do your pilgrimages cost so much less than others?

A typical price for a 12-day pilgrimage to Italy can easily cost \$4,000. Our prices are less primarily because we organize all travel services directly with the providers (i.e. hotels, guides, and bus companies). Most travel companies rely on local Italian travel agencies who mark up the prices and pay hefty VAT taxes. Also, we often work with smaller religious- or family-run hotels that offer simpler (but

comfortable) lodgings. As a small travel organizer, we do not have the overhead that many big companies do. Finally, our primary objective is to create a spiritual experience and not generate a high-end financial return.

What is included in the price?

The promoted price is per person and the ground-only price includes all ground bus transportation, room at double-occupancy, continental breakfast, and one meal per day. For breakfast expect coffee, croissants, cereal, yogurt, etc. The main meals are home-cooked and served in two or three courses. The price does not include tips or gratuity (estimate \$10/day), or optional travel insurance. Single-occupancy rooms are limited and may be available at an additional charge.

What kind of groups do you work with?

We have worked with parishes, youth groups, colleges, Franciscan groups, families, and others. Groups have originated from the US, Canada, Ireland, Guam, and Singapore. Presently, 65% of our groups are repeats of previous groups.

Are you a travel agency?

No, we are a tour operator who organizes and leads pilgrimages. We are not paid commission by travel suppliers on any travel we organize.

How long have you been organizing travel?

We have been in business continually since 2004. Since then, we have organized and accompanied 30 groups composed of 700 people of 19 different nationalities.

What is your background and what qualifications do you have in the travel industry?

Katia has a degree from the University of Perugia in tourism studies and has worked in several hotels in Assisi. Bret has a Master's in Italian and a certificate in Franciscan studies. He was an airline pilot for three years. St. Francis Pilgrimages is a member of the World Religious Travel Association. Bret Thoman is the owner and president of St. Francis Pilgrimages, LLC.

Contact us for a list of references.