

### **What can I expect on a pilgrimage?**

St. Francis Pilgrimages began after Bret and Katia Thoman, SFO responded to a spiritual experience while on retreat in Loreto, Italy in 2004. The pilgrimage is a deeply personal spiritual experience to which each pilgrim responds differently. Some have told us that it has been a major spiritual event in their lives, while others felt led to make life-changing decisions afterwards. People regularly say they felt 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. Further, our (Bret and Katia's) vocation as Secular Franciscans influences the spirituality.

### **Do you organize pilgrimages only within Italy?**

Yes, because we know Italy best. We divide the year between the US and Italy, and we are residents of both countries. Our experience as dual citizens of both Italy and North America 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'?**

As long-term residents of Italy, we know intimately many special places and communities off the beaten path. There is a special spirituality in visiting 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 directly with hotels and bus companies. Most US 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 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 over 27 groups composed of 700 people of 19 different nationalities to Italy.

### **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. Bret has an MA in Italian and worked for an airline in customer service. Additionally, he worked as an airline pilot for three years. Bret has a certificate in Franciscan studies. 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.*