

### **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 that it was a catalyst leading to 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 and spirituality as Secular Franciscans (Third Order Franciscans) within the Catholic tradition influences the spirituality.

### **What is different about your pilgrimage?**

Most pilgrimages, particularly those organized by large companies, have a more touristy approach. Most pilgrimage companies use guides who often do not understand the spiritual significance of pilgrimage. Our guides are chosen because of their spiritual commitment and their understanding of what it is a pilgrim is seeking on pilgrimage. Further, when creating itineraries, we strive to take groups to local places off the beaten path that we know. We introduce pilgrims to our friends and our favorite secret spots thereby creating a personalized experience. People tell us over and over that our pilgrimages are unique and special.

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

Primarily yes, because we know Italy best. We live in the US, but we spend a lot of time each year 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. Although Bret and Katia don't personally accompany as many groups as they used to, nevertheless they constantly gather feedback from participants and tweak the itineraries 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. As a result, we regularly develop lasting friendships with pilgrims.

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

Our lives in Italy have led to an intimate knowledge of many special places off the beaten path. It is a unique experience to visit the quiet places, as 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 as well, so cities like Rome do play an important in the pilgrimage.

### **Why do your pilgrimages cost less than others?**

A typical 10-day pilgrimage to Italy can easily cost \$4,000. Our prices are less primarily because we book travel services directly with hotels, religious lodgings, guides, bus companies, etc. Most US tour operators book their tours through local Italian travel agencies that add a commission to the prices. Also, we often work with smaller religious or family-run hotels that offer simpler (but comfortable) lodgings. Further, as a small company, 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 usually includes all ground bus transportation, room at double-occupancy, continental breakfast, and one meal per day. The main meals are home-cooked and consist of two or three courses. The price does not include tips or gratuity (estimate \$10/day), or optional travel insurance. Airfare, when added, includes taxes and surcharges. 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, retreat centers, youth groups, colleges, Franciscan fraternities or regions, families, and others. Many of our group leaders organize trips with us annually or every other year. Most groups come from the US or Canada, but we have worked with groups originating in Ireland, Malaysia, Guam, Japan, and Singapore. All of our groups are English speaking.

### **Do you personally accompany every pilgrimage?**

In the beginning when we were only organizing a few trips per year, either Bret, Katia, or both would accompany each pilgrimage. However, due to the obligations of family life, we now personally accompany fewer pilgrimages per year. The other pilgrimages are led by Italian guides, priests, group leaders, or a combination thereof.

### **Are you a travel agency?**

We are not a travel agency; i.e. we do not receive commission from any travel suppliers from any bookings we make. We are considered a tour organizer or a tour operator.

### **How long have you been organizing pilgrimages?**

We have been in business continually since 2004. Since then, we have organized and accompanied over 50 groups composed of more than 1,200 people of 21 different nationalities.

**What is your background, and what qualifications do you have?**

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 worked for Delta airlines in customer service and later worked as an airline pilot for several years. Bret Thoman is the owner and president of St. Francis Pilgrimages, LLC. St. Francis Pilgrimages carries errors and omissions professional liability insurance. Above all, however, our personal dedication and commitment to pilgrimages derives from our vocation as Secular Franciscans and our Catholic faith.

*Contact us for a list of references.*