



Sicily  
the infinite island





## The infinite island

*“Who has never longed at least to know it? Few people or no one; so universal is the fame of its beauty, and so much the memory of it is linked to the history of the most widespread civilisation.*

*“This is what we read in the preface to the big volume that the Italian Touring Club devoted to Sicily in 1933. Looking at the old photos, we cannot help noticing that the 60 years that have gone by have left their mark: they have darkened the facades of the old monuments, they have filled the squares and streets with cars, they have done away with black scarves and ancient customs, they have changed the face of the countryside.*

*Nevertheless, although its fame has been obscured, although the time are remote when Palermo was a prize mecca for the rich and powerful, impatient to meet the local jet set which was the outcome of centuries of nobility, yet still today it is worth knowing it, this Sicily with a thousand faces, at once poor and rich, closed and diffident in its noble decadence yet so anxious to be integrated in the modern world and modern times, “a nation rather than a region and, to boot, a plural nation, with so many different identities” (Bufalino).*

*“An island not sufficiently an island” (Borgese) or perhaps “too much an island”, mythological and concrete, dark and sunny, magnificent and terrible.*

### **Geography and geology**

Placed at the centre of the Mediterranean, Sicily is the biggest island in the latter (25,460 square metres). Around it there is a series of smaller islands: to the north the Aeolian Islands and Ustica, to the west the Egadi, to the south the Pelagie and Pantelleria (altogether 25,708 square metres). Its coast, prevalently rocky to the north, and sandy to the south, is 1000 km. long. There is great movement in the Sicilian landscape: the island is mountainous and hilly, with only one big plain near Catania.

The most important massif is the Etna one (the whole area of which is protected by a big nature park), in the eastern part of Sicily. The volcano, 3300 m. high, is active, and is the biggest one in Europe.

Along the northern coast, from east to west, there is a stretch of the Peloritans, the Nebrodi and the Madonie mountains, whose peaks go up to 2000 metres. Just west of the river Torto, the Madonie give way to irregular calcareous formations, isolated or in groups, dominating roundish low hills.

To the east, between Messina and Etna, the Peloritans continue, wholly similar to the mountains of Calabria. Further south, again in the eastern part of the island, there is a succession of tablelands formed by lava, tufa and above all calcareous rock, deeply carved out by gorges formed by erosion by water. Lastly, the

centre of Sicily is hilly. This is the so-called sulphurbearing plateau, with a height varying between 500 and 700 metres (with the exception of the hill on which Enna stands, almost 1000 metres high).

### **Climate**

It is decidedly Mediterranean, with hot summers and short and mild winters. The hours of the sunshine on average are 2500, against the 2000 of mainland Italy - and the 1800 of northern France. The not very abundant precipitations are concentrated in winter months from October to March. The highest temperatures are in July and August - average 26 degrees Celsius - and the lowest from December to February - average 10-14 degrees Celsius. The water temperature varies from about 16 degrees Celsius in winter to 27 in summer. For a trip to Sicily, which is not limited to bathing purposes, we recommend the spring and autumn months, in particular the periods from the middle of April to the middle of June and September-October.

### **Government and population**

Sicily, with the islands around it, is an Autonomous Region with a main town, which since 1946, has been Palermo, and since 1947 it has had its own Parliament. Its population is estimated to be about 5,000,000, with a density of 190 inhabitants per square kilometre.

## **The Chronological history of Sicily**

**Prehistory - 35000-5000 B.C.** Late Palaeo-lithic. The Sicilians lived on hunting and berries. Graffiti in grottoes on Monte Pellegrino and on Levanzo from this period.

**1900 - 1800 B.C.** Groups of Indo-European populations penetrated into Sicily, blending with the natives and starting the Bronze Age. Findings at Castelluccio, Naro, Filicudi, Syracuse and Pantalica.

**1400 B.C.** Traces of the Aegean-Cretan civilisation. The Erimi, founders of Erice and Segesta, and the Siculi came to Sicily. The latter brought the use of the horse and of copper, taught agriculture and the cult of the dead.

**1200 - 1000 B.C.** The Iron Age began. Findings at Barcellona Pozzo di Gotto, Monte Finocchitto (Noto), Sant'Angelo Muxaro. In the 11th to 10th centuries the Phoenicians came, founding Solunto, Motya and Palermo.

**The Greeks - 753 B.C.** With the foundation of Naxos by Greek settlers, Sicily entered into the history of the Greek Mediterranean. In the ensuing years many colonies flourished: Syracuse (734), Catania (729), Gela (689), Selinunte

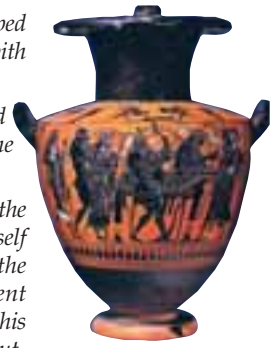
(650), Agrigento (582). The colonies developed and became true towns, rich and decorated with monuments.

**485 B.C.** Gelon, tyrant of Gela, conquered Syracuse, which in the ensuing years became one of the main cities in the Mediterranean.

**405 - 367 B.C.** Dionysius I the Elder reached the apex of his power in Syracuse, getting himself elected tyrant of the town. Together with the King of Persia, he was the most magnificent ruler of his days, thanks to the splendour of his court and the power of his army, capable of routing the Carthaginians who fought against the Greeks for the dominion over Sicily.

**316 - 289 B.C.** Agathocles, tyrant of Syracuse. After the death of Dionysius, he was the first seigneur capable of competing with the power of his predecessor, keeping out the Carthaginians and taking Syracuse back to its former splendour. After his death, the town was in the hands of weak governors until the accession of Jeron II (276 B.C.), a mild, yet firm king who made an alliance with Rome, a newborn Italic power. Vestiges of Greek Sicily in Syracuse, Agrigento, Selinunte, Segesta and Gela.

**The Romans - 264 B.C.** The Mamertines, an



**Finds in the  
Archaeological  
Museum of  
Agrigento.**





Palaeolithic graffiti in the Genovese grotto on Levanzo, in the Egadi archipelago.

Italic population who had occupied Messina, feeling threatened by the Carthaginians, turned for help to the Romans, who, supported in Sicily by Jeron II, started the first Punic War against Carthage. At the end of the latter the whole of Sicily - except for the ally Syracuse - was proclaimed a Roman province (241 B.C.).

**219 - 212 B.C. Second Punic War.** The Romans conquered and subjugated Syracuse too. Sicilian history under the Romans is not especially rich in events, except for the slaves' revolts (135 and 101 B.C.). It was a tranquil province, appreciated above all for agricultural production. Findings and vestiges at Termini Imerese, Tindari, Taormina, Catania, Syracuse, Piazza Armerina and other places.

**The Barbarians - 440 A.D.** Genseric, king of the Vandals, landed at Lilybaeum (now Marsala) and devastated Sicily. After a series of occasional raids in the ensuing years, in 468 he began a true dominion to last until 476. On the fall of the Western Roman Empire, Sicily was ceded to Odoacer, who in turn was to hand over the government to the Visigoths of Theodoric.

**The Byzantines - 535 Greek-Gothic War.** It was set going at the behest of Justinian, the eastern emperor, who wished to re-unify the empire. To Sicily general Belisarius was sent, who rapidly conquered the island, handing it over to the emperor. Sicily remained in the oriental orbit for almost three centuries, absorbing numerous

social and cultural aspects of it. Monumental vestiges at Randazzo, Castelbuono and Pantalica.

**The Arabs - 827** The Arabs landed at Mazara, starting the campaign for the conquest of the island. This was to be completed in a hundred years and marked a profound change for the social and cultural life of Sicily, which was hurttled into the Muslim world after centuries of Christianity. The Sicilian capital was Palermo, a splendid metropolis with an Islamic look. Monumental traces in Palermo, Favara, Cefalà Diana, Caccamo.

**The Normans - 1060** Led by Robert the Guiscard and Roger de Hauteville, the Normans, with the papal blessing, began to reconquer Sicily for Christianity. It was to take them 31 years. The descendants of Roger de Hauteville were to be kings of Sicily until 1194, and to leave recollections of a prosperous and pacific kingdom, the melting pot of the most diverse peoples perfectly integrated with one another.

It was above all Roger II, son of the previous Roger, that gave vital impulse to this kingdom, with a wise administration involving all the different races. The capital was still Palermo, a magnificent city adorned with palaces and gardens. Monumental traces in Palermo, Monreale, Cefalù, Messina, Piazza Armerina, Caccamo, Troina, Calascibetta, Favara and other places.





**The Hohenstaufens - 1194** With the coronation of Henry VI as king of Sicily, the throne went to the German family of the Hohenstaufens. On Henry's death the throne was to go to his son Frederick II (crowned in 1208), one of the greatest medieval monarchs. At his court in Palermo the arts, science and literature flourished, and indeed the first Italian poetic school was to come into being inside the walls of the Norman Palace. Monumental traces in Syracuse, Catania, Salemi and Agrigento.

**The Angevins - 1270** Frederick II's death started bitter struggles over the succession. The pope, who had long broken off with the Hohenstaufens, arbitrarily assigned the crown to Charles of Anjou and the latter's army, which had come to stake his claim, clashed with Frederick's direct heirs: his illegitimate son Manfred and his nephew Conrad. Having defeated both, Charles of Anjou acceded to the throne and, moving the capital to Naples, made an oppressive government, ill tolerated by the Sicilians. Monumental traces at Sperlinga.

**The Aragonese - 1282** Vespers Revolt. Starting in Palermo, this rebellion was to lead to the French being driven out of Sicily. The island's throne went to Pedro of Aragona, Manfred's son-in-law. Monumental traces in Palermo, Messina, Caltanissetta, Trapani, Agrigento, Taormina, Mussomeli, Aragona and Augusta.

**The Spanish - 1409** With the extinction of the Sicilian line of the Aragonese, direct relations between the island and the Spanish crown became closer. The marriage of Ferdinand of

Aragona to Isabella of Castille laid the foundations for the birth of a Spanish state also comprising Sicily. The island was governed by viceroys and was to belong to the Spanish crown for about 300 years. Monumental traces in Taormina, Palermo, Syracuse, Enna, Nicolosi and on the Egadi Islands.

**The Savoy and the Austrians - 1713** By the Peace of Utrecht, Sicily went to Vittorio Amedeo of Savoy. The Piedmont family was to have the island for just five years. In 1718 the Spanish set out to re-conquer it, though they were stopped by the Austrians. By the Hague Treaty (1720) Charles VI of Austria became the new king of Sicily.

**The Bourbons - 1734** After the battle of Bitonto between the Bourbon and Austrian troops, Sicily moved back into the Spanish orbit. Charles I of Bourbon, the son of the king of Spain, was crowned king of Sicily in 1735.

Monumental traces in Palermo, Noto, Avola, Ragusa, Modica, Catania, Syracuse and Trapani.

**The kingdom of Italy - 1860** After Garibaldi's exploits, Sicily was annexed to the kingdom of Italy. From then on the island was to share the fate of the new kingdom.

**Autonomy - 1946** At the end of World War II, Sicily became an autonomous region in the framework of the new Italian Republic. Its Parliament met in 1947 at the Norman Palace - as it already did over eight centuries ago.



**The Norman San Giovanni dei Lebbrosi Church in Palermo.**





Nowhere did so many people come together, love one another, fight against each other or just tolerate each other as in Sicily. Eyes, which are so light in colour as to seem transparent, peeping out under crow-black hair, words of Arabic origin interweaving with French terms, clear-cut Hellenic geometries seen side by side with Baroque curls and voluptuous art nouveau curves, are the result of all this, and Palermo, the capital, is the ripest fruit of a composite past. A past that for Palermo means slender Punic columns, red Islamic cupolas, gardens and water courses, boastful noble mansions and monumental churches, viceroys and saints.

It was founded by the Phoenicians on the seashore almost 3000 years ago, and it seems that at that time its name was Ziz, "flower". Certainly it was very beautiful, even if nothing is left of this city now, except for the trace of its first layout, followed for centuries: a long avenue leading from the sea to the low hill where - today as then - the palace of the government stands.

It was a base of the Carthaginians, then, after their defeat by the Romans, it was occupied by the latter. There are practically no vestiges of the Roman epoch either, though the city flourished under them. In fact it was in a rather marginal position with respect to the

heart of the empire and it became even more so with respect to Constantinople, when Sicily became part of the possessions of the Eastern Roman Empire.

In 831, after a siege lasting about a year, Palermo fell into the hands of the Arabs. This was the start of a new life for the city, which in a few years turned into a splendid metropolis, compared for its splendour to Cordoba and the Cairo. Palaces and mosques rose amid the splendid gardens of the "Western Medina" and the skyline was marked by numerous slender minarets. The city, which was called Balarm, was the capital of the Sicilian emirate and is said to have had 300,000 inhabitants.

In 1061 the Norman army led by Count Roger and Robert the Guiscard set out to reconquer Sicily. Eleven years later they got to Palermo. However, the coming of the new seigneurs did not lead to a decline of the Islamic city, quite the contrary. Though the Normans demolished the mosques, they used Arab architects in the construction of their sumptuous Palermo dwellings; and though they got a strong hold on the island, yet they left the administration of the kingdom in the hands of Islamic functionaries.

Under Roger II, Palermo - the capital of the new Norman kingdom - reached very great splendour. It was the centre of trade



# Palermo

between east and west and from all over came noblemen, traders, adventurers attracted by the mirage of the rich city and the sumptuous court. Palaces and churches in Arabic-Norman style were built, still one of the main attractions of Palermo.

This greatness continued under Frederick II of Hohenstaufen, who made his court the greatest centre of cultural life in those days. Never again, in the centuries that followed, was such magnificence attained, even though, under the Spanish, the city was enriched with splendid Baroque monuments.

A brief return of the past splendour came at the start of the twentieth century, when Palermo had its "belle époque", thanks to the success of young families of entrepreneurs who brought a wind of modernity to the city, raising not only the economic level but also the cultural and artistic one.

Since 1946, Palermo has been the chief city of an autonomous region. It is a modern and active city, with about 730,000 inhabitants, very rich in monuments from all epochs.

A thorough visit to the city and its environs takes about six days.

### Artistic vestiges

There are very few monuments dating from the period prior to the Norman domination and very few finds have been made in the course of the rather sporadic digging campaigns carried out over the years. Only a few remains of walls under the San Cataldo chapel remind us of the Punic past, while the remains of a patrician villa inside Villa Bonanno document the Roman presence.

Diggings carried out in the area known as "Castello San Pietro" have led to the finding of some tombs and remains of human settlements, but studies are still going on.

The most important vestige of the Arab period, which has remained more or less intact over the centuries, is the language.

The Sicilian dialect is very rich in Arabic influences and likewise there are numerous names which appear to be of Islamic origin (in Palermo, for example, Cassaro, Kalsa, Kemonia, etc.) The Palermo markets also have an Islamic impress which is further seen in almost all monuments from the Norman epoch, built by Arab workers.

**Norman Palace** - On the little hill where the palace now stands, probably both the Phoenicians and the Romans built a fortified citadel dominating the whole area of the city. However, nothing remains of these earliest constructions. The Arabs, after building a

castle there, abandoned it, because the emir preferred to move with all his functionaries and troops to the seaside Al-Halisah district.

It was the Normans, who restored the building and transformed it into a splendid palace. Its heart consisted in a very spacious royal room, also known as the green room, where the king held assemblies and banquets. The residential suites, the services and servants' quarters, were in different wings, connected by terraces, loggias and gardens rich in greenery and ponds, which already revealed the Arab-like taste of the sovereigns, who, here as elsewhere, used Islamic architects. From the stylistic point of view the palace is one of the high points of Fatimite palatial art in the west, because of both the architectural qualities and the abundant decorations, that the artists did in the various rooms.

After the death of Frederick II in 1250, began the decline of the palace, which went on for about three centuries, until the Spanish viceroys made it their residence. However, though they saved the palace from complete abandon, they also modified it in accordance with their own taste. Hence few of the rooms have maintained their original Norman look. Nevertheless, among these there are two authentic jewels: **Roger's Room** and the **Palace Chapel**. Roger's Room was originally a bedroom. It is a belvedere room looking out over the Gulf of Palermo. The walls are elegantly decorated with mosaics showing hunting scenes enlivened by stylised plants and figures. This is a rare example of mosaic art from the period, with roots in the Persian east and North Africa.

However, something, which by itself makes a visit to Palermo worthwhile, is the **Palace Chapel**. Begun in 1130, the year of Roger's coronation as the first king of Sicily, it was completed in 13 years and consecrated, as we know from an inscription in the cupola, in 1143. In this church, defined by Maupassant "the finest religious bijou dreamt of by human thought", you see the fusion of the multiple different characters that formed Sicily: European, Sicilian, Byzantine and Arab. The chapel has the shape of a western basilica with three naves, divided by granite columns with rich gilded Corinthian capitals; also in western style, though influenced by southern taste, are the decorated floors and the inlays in the steps, the balustrades and the lower part of the walls, as well as the gigantic ambo, studded with gold, malachite and porphyry, and the Easter candelabrum, a true bestiary in marble, donated by Archbishop Ugo of Palermo for the coronation of William,



the son of Roger II. The mosaics are among the finest products of Byzantine art, unrivalled in any Constantinople church. Among them we see Christ Pantocrator in the cupola, the Angels surrounding him and the Evangelists engrossed in their studies, which are the oldest mosaics. Lastly, the Islamic tradition is represented by the wooden ceiling with 'muqarnas' (stalactites), a most surprising ceiling for a Christian church. It is the classical ceiling that we would expect to find in the biggest and most elegant mosque, but never in a church. Intricate decorations adorn the stalactites and, something that is extremely rare in the history of Islamic art, the decorations comprise human figures. The Arab artists, in the tolerant atmosphere of Norman Palermo, decided to risk this type of design and thus, with the help of binoculars, today we can make out realistic scenes of daily life of dignitaries and busy maids.

**St. John of the Hermits** - It was founded at the behest of Roger II in 1142, and in the most splendid years of the Norman domination the annexed monastery was the richest and most privileged in Sicily.

The church, now no longer consecrated, is very small and, despite traces of tiles, mosaics and frescoes and the stalactite ceiling of the mosque on which it was built, it has no particular elements of interest to the layman. What is fascinating, instead, is the exterior of the building. The five red cupolas struck you first of all, a characteristic element of various Arabic-Norman buildings. Then there is the

garden: the construction is immersed in greenery and the colours of citrus fruit trees, agaves, bougainvilleas, roses, pomegranates and other flowering shrubs. The luxuriant plants climb up the walls, wind round the white columns of the little cloister, daze one with their scent. This is one of the most characteristic monuments of Norman Palermo, and is often chosen as a symbol of the city.

**The Cathedral (Madonna Assunta)** - It is in the oldest sacred part of Palermo, where the Phoenicians, the Romans, the Byzantines and the Arabs put up their own places of worship. After getting to power, the Normans were at once concerned to replace the Muslim mosque with a Christian church. Then in 1184 the archbishop of Palermo, Walter of the Mill, had the building demolished and started the construction of a splendid new cathedral, a symbol of religious power in the city. After just a year the church was consecrated and dedicated to Maria Assunta. In the ensuing centuries additions and restoration modified the original look.

The picturesquely incongruous union of styles gives life to a grandiose and on the whole not unpleasant overall effect.

The façade, closed in between two high towers with mullioned windows and little columns, is linked by two ogival arches to the campanile at the front of it. In the façade there is a big fourteenth-century portal with bronze wings. A picturesque portico in fifteenth-century Gothic-Catalan style, under which there is a very ornate portal also fifteenth century,



decorate the long right side.

Lastly, particularly beautiful and charming is the apse part, the only one which has maintained the original twelfth-century shapes. The interior, though big and bright, appears cold compared to the exterior. Along the walls there are Gagini statues of saints in marble.

In the first and second chapels in the right nave there are royal and imperial tombs, including those of Roger II, Henry VI of Hohenstaufen, Constance de Hauteville and Frederick II of Hohenstaufen, all imposing porphyry sarcophagi: in the family tomb we thus find the founder of the Norman kingdom of Sicily, its destroyer, the involuntary cause of its end and its last beneficiary.

Among the numerous chapels we must mention the one known as Santa Rosalia's, where, in a silver urn, done in 1631, the ashes of the patron saint of Palermo are kept. Lastly there is a very fine treasure, including precious objects and embroideries found in the royal and imperial tombs (particular mention must be made of the golden tiara of Constance de Hauteville), sacred vestments, chalices, censers, etc.

**Santa Maria dell'Ammiraglio or Martorana Church** - It was completed in 1143 thanks to a generous donation by Admiral George of Antiochia. An Arab traveller, Ibn Giobair, who visited it in 1184, defined it "the finest work in the world". Today, unfortunately, the church no longer has its original splendour, having undergone numerous modifications, which disfigured its original look. Nevertheless it remains one of the finest religious edifices in Palermo and indeed in all Sicily. In 1436 it was ceded to the nuns at the nearby "Martorana" convent, from which it takes its second name, as the chapel of the convent. In 1588, in order to contain the ever-increasing number of nuns, the edifice was enlarged: knocking down the original façade (replaced by a Baroque one) lengthened it, and the atrium and narthex were incorporated in the new construction. In 1683 the apse was demolished and replaced by a big chapel with frescoes.

Intact in its splendid proportions remained only the Romanesque campanile, raised over the entrance to the original church, though unfortunately deprived by the 1726 earthquake of the little cupola surmounting it.

Entering the church you can still make out the original Greek cross layout which so struck Ibn Giobair. The mosaics at the Martorana, like those at Cefalù and the finer

ones at the Palace Chapel, were done by a group of artists who were brought on purpose from Constantinople to Palermo and worked here between 1140 and 1155. However, unlike those at Cefalù and the Palace Chapel, no later additions have been made to them.

At the entrance, on the northern side of the nave, there is a dedicatory mosaic in which George of Antiochia is portrayed at the feet of the virgin Mary - the latter has come down to us in a perfect state of conservation. On the other side we find what is perhaps the most precious treasure of the Martorana: a mosaic of Roger II symbolically crowned by Christ.

**Zisa** - The construction of this "solatium" (place of pleasure) was undertaken in the last years of his life by king William I and completed by his son William II. Hence it dates from between 1165 and 1167. Its name derives from the Arabic Al-Aziz, i.e. "splendid", and indeed still today it is one of the most magnificent Arab-Norman civic edifices in the world. According to Romualdo of Salerno, the king had the palace built in the Genoardo park and "surrounded it with magnificent fruit trees and beautiful gardens which he rendered pleasant with various watercourses and big fish-ponds". Over the years the Zisa has been restored and altered, not always with very good results, and it is only recently - as far as possible in its integrity - that it has been made available to the pub-

The Zisa Manor.





lic once again. The castle has been transformed into a “Museum of Islam” and brings together interesting items from the Arab civilisation in Sicily. Moreover, as in the course of the restoration work an endeavour was made to respect the original structure of the building as far as possible, a visit to the interior makes it possible to learn something about the architecture of medieval Islamic palaces. Of particular interest is the system for airing and cooling the rooms and, among the latter, the so-called Fountain Room, decorated with mosaics.

**Palazzo Chiaramonte or Steri** - This is the finest monument which has come down to us commemorating the powerful Chiaramonte family, which starting from the fourteenth century had a very important role in the political and economic history of Sicily. The historical head of the family was Manfred I, who also decided to show all his power through the construction of a big and magnificent fortified palace, a “Hosterium”, the first stone of which was laid in 1307. Construction was continued by his son Manfred II and his grandson Manfred III. After the decline of the Chiaramonte family, the building became the court of King Martin and then was used for the tribunals of the various governments that followed one another in Sicily, as well as the tribunal of the Inquisition. At present in the

building there is the office of the rector of the Palermo University. From a stylistic viewpoint the Steri is the main example of fourteenth-century Sicilian architecture in the so-called Chiaramonte style, which showmarked Islamic and Norman influences.

**San Francesco d’Assisi Church** - Built in the thirteenth century, it was several times enlarged and modified in the ensuing centuries. After the bombardments of World War II, radical restoration work was undertaken which gave back to the church its thirteenth-century appearance.

In the austere and high façade there is a magnificent Gothic portal surmounted by a big rosette. The vast interior, which shows the influence of the late Romanesque, has three naves, with big Gothic arcades. There are numerous works of art by famous sculptors and painters, including the Gaginis, Pietro Novelli, Francesco Laurana and Giacomo Serpotta.

**Praetorian Fountain** - It was originally created for the Florence villa of Don Pedro of Toledo by the mannerist architect Francesco Camilliani. However, Don Pedro’s son preferred to sell it to the Palermo council, and was paid an exorbitant sum for it. In 1574 it was brought to Palermo in 644 pieces and the sculptor’s son, Camillo Camilliani, was called on to put it together again. The whole square,

in which there are several elegant edifices, including Palazzo delle Aquile, the town hall, was laid out in a different way in relation to the fountain, which from then on became the boast and glory of the city.

Circular in layout, the fountain is made up of superimposed tubs on which there are allegories, divinities, animals' heads, all enlivened by the pleasant playing of the water. The iron railings around it were designed by Giovan Battista Basile and put up in 1858.

**Quattro Canti (Four corners)** - This is the better known name for the little Piazza Vigliena, which is the centre of the oldest part of the city.

It is also referred to as the "theatre of the sun", as it is lit up by the sunrays from dawn to dusk. The project for the layout of the square was made in 1608 and work began in the same year. Once the architectural work was done, it was possible to move on to the decoration of the four walls on three levels: at the bottom, four fountains, surmounted by statues each representing one of the four seasons; above them the statues of the Spanish monarchs Charles V and Philip II, III and IV; at the top, the four saints protecting the city: St. Christine, St. Olive, Santa Ninfa and St. Agatha.

The square was for a long time the centre of the city, a place for elegant promenades, exchanges of news and gossip, a market for servants seeking masters. It was also a symbol of the Spanish town planning reform, which sought to give magnificence to the two main streets in the city, Via Maqueda and the Cassaro, now Corso Vittorio Emanuele, by opening up a square at their intersection.

**Gesù (or Casa Professa) Church** - It stands on a rise full of dark crannies in which, according to the tradition, hermit saints once took refuge and where there are still early Christian tombs.

The first construction on the rise was a monastery of the order of St. Basil, built in the ninth century. Starting from this date, various edifices were built in this place, including five churches which were all absorbed by the first Jesuit church, founded in 1564. This church in turn was engulfed by another one, which was begun in 1591 and completed in 1633.

In 1943 a violent bombardment destroyed a large part of the prestigious monument. However, almost all the stuccoes and frescoes have been restored, giving the church its original look back.

The interior blends late Renaissance rigour with new Baroque spaciousness. Everywhere there is an uninterrupted cover-

ing of decorations, made up of the most diverse elements: flowers, fruit, leaves, animals, little putti, in an extremely lively and graceful inlay showing an almost infinite range of colours.

**The Oratory of the Rosario of San Domenico** - This little chapel was built in 1578 at the expense of the Rosario company, which was founded ten years earlier and brought together the richest traders and artists in the city.

Giacomo Serpotta entirely decorated it in the course of the second decade of the eighteenth century, producing a work of exceptional beauty. Along its walls bright sculptures, enlivened here and there by touches of gilding, present themselves to the admiration of the visitor, whose attention is drawn above all by the fine female figures - not exactly ascetic! - which portray the Virtues, surrounded by a myriad of putti.

Among the statues there are pictures showing the Mysteries, and the ceiling is decorated with a fresco by Novelli. The altar is decorated with a fine painting by Van Dyck, showing the Madonna del Rosario.

**San Lorenzo Oratory** - It was built around 1569 by the San Francesco company, near the church dedicated to the saint from Assisi. In 1699-1706 it was decorated by Giacomo Serpotta, who here achieved great formal perfection, creating his masterpiece. The artist's fantasy, free from all constraints, showed great creative capacity. An uninterrupted flow of joyful little putti frames reliefs with scenes from the lives of St. Laurence and St. Francis and allegorical statues, giving life to an overall effect of great beauty.

**Massimo Theatre** - It is one of the biggest and most magnificent theatres in Europe, designed by G.B. Basile, under whose direction work began (1875), to be completed by his son Ernesto (1897).

It stands in Piazza G. Verdi, a square made by demolishing a lot of Baroque buildings, some of great value. The theatre, with noble architecture inspired by neo-classicism, occupies a surface area of 7730







square metres and fully satisfied the desire for decorum and balance of the bourgeoisie in the last century.

#### **BAGHERIA**

*This town is placed in a valley full of citrus orchards, olive groves and vineyards. It was built up during the eighteenth century in the shadow of the villa of Prince Giuseppe Branciforti, who cultivated the land and built his villa in 1657.*

*In 1769 Salvatore Branciforti laid out the straight road that leads from the villa to the sea and the one intersecting it, which together became the axes for future development of the little town. The latter is well known for the numerous villas that the Palermo nobility built there as holiday homes in the eighteenth century.*

*Villa Gravina di Valguarnera was built in 1721 on a project by Tommaso M. Napoli. It*



*is the most sumptuous and best conserved one, also as regards the park around it. It is also the one being most faithful to the "classical" sixteenth-century design which involved two low buildings like curtains in front of the main one, a type of architectural layout which was highly successful in the eighteenth century and was widely applied in the construction of villas.*

**Cefalù.**  
Above,  
the façade of  
the Norman  
cathedral,  
built at the  
behest of  
Roger II.

To the right,  
Christ  
Pantocrator,  
a mosaic with  
a gilt back-  
ground in the  
cupola of the  
cathedral.





In front of the house a big area in a double hexahedron shape opens up and a big pincer-shape staircase leads to the entrance to the residential floor. On the landing there are statues by Ignazio Marabitti and inside there are rich decorations by Elia Interguglielmi.

**Villa Palagonia** was designed by the same architect as Villa Valguarnera and has

some of the same characteristics. However, wholly different is its originality and fame, linked not so much to the building in itself as to the incredible statues put there by one of the grandsons of the founder, reported on with a mixture of amazement and horror by eighteenth-century travellers, like Goethe, Brydone, Swinburne or Houël.



The latter did an accurate series of drawings allowing us to imagine what the villa of the extravagant nobleman was originally like. Ferdinand Gravina - this is the prince's name - seized by a bizarre fantasy, interpreted by many contemporaries as true madness - commissioned 600 monsters from various craftsmen and, judging by the results, they vied with one another to create the one which was ugliest, most deformed, most shocking or simply funny.

Today of this singular parade of statues there remain only 62 exemplars, placed all round the boundary wall of the villa, as if to court it in a grotesque gathering.

### CEFALÚ

Thanks to the strategic importance of the place, protected by an imposing rock, as well as to the fertility of the land, people settled in the Cefalù area starting from very remote times, as we know from finds made in the grottoes on the east side of the rock. However, the urban history of the place only began in the fifth century B.C.

From the later epoch date the remains of the megalithic walls which went round the little town at the foot of the rock.

It was precisely the latter, because of its dominant position, that gave the name to the settlement, known as Cephaloedium, i.e. "head", because of the shape of the rock. The place was refounded by Roger II in the twelfth century and laid out in a new way on the basis of the town plan that still characterises it. The meaning of this new foundation is grasped above all in the cathedral, the symbol and synthesis of Roger's power, which was not only political but also religious.

Starting from the second half of the thirteenth century, there was unchallenged supremacy in the town for the Ventimiglia family, whose residence was the Osterio Magno, a fortified palace founded in the Norman epoch, still to be seen in the main thoroughfare.

The little town, which became part of the royal estate in the second half of the fifteenth century, went through a period of tranquillity and wellbeing, interrupted by a phase of comparative decline in the nineteenth century, from which it has recovered in recent decades thanks to a flourishing tourist industry.

The **cathedral** (Transfiguration of Our Lord) was founded in 1130 at the behest of Roger II, who, according to a legend, had

Detail of the  
façade of  
the cloister  
in Monreale.



made a vow to have it built, if he came safe and sound through a terrible storm that struck his ship on the way to Palermo. The fury of the elements hurled him up on the shore of Cefalù, where the king laid the first stone of the imposing construction. This is undoubtedly one of the finest cathedrals in the world, a perfect example of the southern Romanesque style.

A striking feature of the façade is the two corner towers, added in 1240, whose massive bulk is lightened by mullioned and double-mullioned windows. It is decorated by an interweaving of two tiers of little false loggias which go from one extremity to the other. In 1472 an airy portico with triple arches was added to it.

In the interior there are three naves divided by two rows of marble columns on which seven arcades rest. The ceiling of the central nave is in painted wood and is an important example of Islamic art in Sicily.

The apse, the ceiling and the adjacent walls are decorated with gilded mosaics which culminate in a magnificent Christ Pantocrator, a perfect example of pure style and Byzantine craft, perhaps the most sublime representation of Christ in all Christian art.

Below there are the Virgin, the Angels, the Apostles, all placed in accordance with the liturgical hierarchy.

### MONREALE

On the slopes of Monte Caputo, 300 metres above sea level, this little town slowly formed in the late Middle Ages, around the Benedictine abbey and the monumental **cathedral**.

The latter (Santa Maria la Nuova) rose up in a short time in 1174-76, at the behest of king William II. According to a legend, he had the cathedral built after an apparition of the Virgin Mary, who revealed to him the place in which a rich treasure was buried. He was to use it for this purpose.

William was probably also motivated by the desire not to be inferior to his grandfather Roger, the founder of the Cefalù cathedral, of St. John of the Hermits and the Palace Chapel in Palermo. The big church was thus to serve to perpetuate his name over the centuries.

For the designing of the church Islamic architects linked to Fatimite art were called in. They transferred and adapted expressive modes and spatial solutions typical of palatial architecture in their own countries to Christian places of worship. Despite not always appropriate additions and restorations, the cathedral has come down to us substantially intact in its splendour.

The façade is decorated with a motif of little blind arches, today partly hidden by a por-

tico done in the eighteenth century, under which a big portal with bronze wings opens up, done in 1186 by Bonanno Pisano.

Along the left side there is another long portico, done in the sixteenth century by Gian Domenico and Fazio Gagini, and lastly we come to the three big apses, still intact and magnificent in their sandstone and lava decoration.

The interior of the cathedral still has the look that it had in the twelfth century (apart from the wooden ceiling, redone after a fire in 1811). The layout is that of a basilica, with a very vast surface area, 102 by 40 metres.

The walls are almost entirely covered with gilded mosaics totalling 6340 square metres. The general level of these decorations, regarding both design and execution, is surprisingly high. The execution of the mosaics was entrusted to Byzantine workers and the imagery is typically Greek.

Yet the relaxed stances of the characters, their softly draped garments, the rhythm of the movements, show a clear evolution in style with respect to the Palace Chapel and the Martorana church, a typically Italian evolution. At the end of the twelfth century, it was in fact Italian artists who were the leaders in imagery art.

The cycle of mosaics works out the concept of the triumph of Christianity in three different phases, showing: events prior to the incarnation (Old Testament); episodes from the life of Jesus (New Testament); events following the death of Christ, and lives of the Apostles (New Testament and Acts of the Apostles).

The whole is dominated by a gigantic Christ Pantocrator (the right hand alone is 2 metres long) in the main apse, representing the synthesis and goal of the whole complex representation.

The cloister, also dating from the epoch of William II, was part of a Benedictine abbey adjacent to the cathedral.

It measures 47x47 metres. Its layout undoubtedly belongs to the Christian area, but its general tone harks back to the spirit and atmosphere of Muslim courtyards with porticos. The little arcades delimiting the rich little garden are held up by 228 little twinned columns. They are all very richly decorated and with capitals inlaid with plants, animals and fantastic motifs. Of particular interest is the 19th capital on the west side, where we can see William II offering the cathedral to the Virgin Mary.

In the south corner, inside a little square area, there is a delightful fountain, whose crystalline water bursts forth from a little inlaid column.



# Agrigento

**A**splendid spring like the one that smiled at Aus this morning at sunrise, was certainly never granted to us during our mortal life. ...The Temple of Concord is seen just peeping out at the southern extremity of this plain which is all green and all flowers; to the east there are the sparse ruins of the temple of Juno; the ruins of all the other sacred edifices on the same straight line as the two mentioned do not present themselves to the eye of anyone standing high up, running more northward, along the coast, reaching out for another half hour towards the seashore ...

Still today little or nothing of the landscape that Goethe was able to admire in April 1787 has changed, and the Valley of Temples is the best known and most praised part of Agrigento. The monuments are what is left of the ancient city of Akragas which was founded in the sixth century B.C. by settlers from Gela and became, in the space of 100 years, "the finest city of mortals" (Pindar). Destroyed by the Carthaginians in 406, it was re-founded by Timoleon in 340 B.C. and enjoyed new moments of splendour, though inevitably heading for a decline, which became definitive with the Byzantine.

The ancient city was abandoned in the ninth century, after the Arab conquest, and the urban nucleus was restricted to a hill above and took the name Gergent.

After this it went to the Normans; the city was made a diocese and was embellished with numerous churches. Palaces and monuments also continued to be put up in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries and again in the seventeenth to eighteenth centuries. In 1927 the city took the name Agrigento and today it has 56,000 inhabitants.

*A visit of the town takes a day.*

## **Artistic vestiges -The Valley of Temples**

**The Temple of Olympic Jove** - "The sacred temples and that of Jove in particular prove the splendour of the city in that epoch. The other temples were burnt or ruined, since the city was conquered several times.

The Olympic temple remained roofless because a war started, and after the city having been ruined, the people of Agrigento were no longer able to complete it ...".

Thus Diodorus Siculus described this immense sacred edifice, absolutely one of the biggest in antiquity.

It has various peculiarities with respect to the building canons of the Greeks: a six-column peripteral building, more than 112 metres long and almost 57 wide (with a surface area of almost 6500 square metres) it was divided on



the outside by half-columns (7 by 14), 57 metres high and with a diameter of no less than 4.5 metres (!) protruding from a full intercolumnar wall. Built in the most splendid period of the history of Akragas, i.e. after the victory of Himera, this immense temple, over 30 meters high, presented a wholly new solution from the architectural point of view: telamons,



colossal human figures with their arms folded at the sides of their heads, so that they constituted an ideal plane supporting the enormous beams and hence participating, together with the columns, in the bearing function.

However the exact position of the telamons is not known for certain: various hypotheses have been formulated by scholars and the rele-

vant reconstructions in miniature are on display at the Agrigento archaeological museum, in the same evocative room where there you find the only one of the giants that is extant (a reproduction of the latter lies supine in the temple area).

At the same time the telamons were elements of architectural decoration of great

**In the verdant valley, a glimpse of the Temple of Hercules.**





importance and performed a precise symbolic function, that of commemorating in the Olympeion the triumph of Olympus over the Giants, when the latter attempted to climb up to the skies.

The people of Akragas had almost completed the construction of the colossal edifice (to get a further idea of the size, one should remember that the altar in front of it, as big as a normal temple, was used for hecatombs: sacrifices of one hundred oxen at a time!) and only the roof was missing, when the city was taken by the Carthaginians. Himilco sacked it and devastated its interior, but on account of its grandiosity and solidity failed to demolish it.

Thus despoiled of sculptures and ornaments, it remained standing until the Middle Ages when, because of neglect, weather erosion, earthquakes and the ferocity of Berber and Arab raiders, it was completely ruined. Though those ruins are still big today, they are nothing compared to the size of the Olympeion, the ruins of which were used over the centuries as building materials and principally to realise, on the order of Charles III of Bourbon and at the suggestion of the Agrigento bishop Lorenzo Gioieni, the wharf at Porto Empedocle (!!).

**The Dioscuri temple** - In the big sacred area surrounding the temple of Jove, where there are numerous shrines, traces of other temples and the agora, four columns soar elegantly up which are left from a little edifice built in the fifth century.

Its name presumably derives from the third ode of the Olympics sung by Pindar in the celebration of the feast of the Dioscuri.

The temple, Doric, a six-column peripteral building, was the smallest one on the sacred hill, but in shapes, number and position of the columns (6 by 13) did not break away from the other bigger ones.

Seriously damaged by the Carthaginians, it may have been restored and modified in the Hellenistic epoch, as is suggested by the stylistic differences to be found in it. Completely ruined in the ensuing centuries, it was partly rebuilt in 1836, when the four columns were put up with the relevant beams.

**The Temple of Hercules** - Perhaps the most ancient of the Akragas temples (end of sixth century) - as is documented by some archaic characters in the construction, like the elongated area (6 by 15 columns) and the tapering of the columns - and considered one of the most beautiful on the hill, it was certainly the most famous one in the city.

A six-column peripteral building, it measured 74 metres by almost 28, and hence had a surface area of about 2000 square metres and so



was second only to the Temple of Jove. It was certainly dedicated to the demigod, whose very fine bronze statue was kept at the back of the cell placed on a pedestal to be venerated by the townspeople.

Of the ancient construction - in a spectacular position above the Porta Aurea - unfortunately there only remain 8 columns (on which, though only slightly, we can make out traces of purple painting); four of them still have stupendous capitals, as well as the base and the remains of the altar.

Enriching this splendid monument, inside there was an extraordinary painting by Zeuxis, showing Alcmena and Hercules in his cradle strangling the serpents.

Of this work, wonderfully described by Pliny, it is recounted that, as it appeared exceptionally beautiful to the artist, he refused to cede it to anyone at any price, and decided instead to place it in the temple.

**The Temple of Concord** - "In the temple of Concord", writes Pietro Griffo, one of the most important scholars on Akragas, "the Doric architecture from the middle of the fifth century B.C. is seen in the whole gamut of refined subtleties that characterise its style.

The whole edifice, if one looks at it from a suitable position, offers even to the naked eye - in the base, the columns, the beams - curving and tapering like that which we know from other Greek temples (the last, chronologically, is the Parthenon) but which here perhaps attained such extremes of application as to make it an absolute masterpiece of forms with

pleasant rhythms, exquisite harmonies, impossible to express with words.

Fineries of this kind must also have been present in other Agrigento temples from the same period as this one, and here and there we have proof of this; but never again that overall perception through which the Temple of Concord, apart from the evocative effect of the grandiose landscape around it, is reflected in the sensibility of the visitor with vibrations which have something musical about them, with all the power of astonished enchantment.

And may God wish that the visitor arrive there at the magic hour of sunset: he will carry away an impression of it, which will never leave him again all his life."

Its name is wholly conventional, having been given to it because inside a Roman inscription was found referring to the consecration of a shrine to concord between Agrigento and Lilybaeum, which however has no connection with the temple.

The excellent state of preservation is due to a lucky episode: unlike the other pagan temples, which superstition and ignorance led the Christians to demolish (in accordance with an appropriate edict), in the sixteenth century it was converted into a Catholic church, dedicated to St. George.

On this occasion the arches in the walls of the cell were done and other alterations were made: however, this "conversion" made it possible to preserve it. It was only in 1788 that the building (apart from the arches) was restored to its ancient unrivalled form.

**On the opposite page, the columns of the Hercules Temple.**

**Above, one of the telamons.**





*In this magnificent sacrarium one can also perceive the absolute rigour of construction technique marking the temple, both in the precision with which the massive tufa blocks of the cell were squared off for the maximum reciprocal adhesion and in the grooving in the columns (done after the drums were placed on*

*top) whose thin strips, running along the columns themselves, give perfect correspondence between one drum and another.*

*In short, this is a sublime work of art, which superbly represents Greek culture in Sicily.*

*The Temple of Juno Lacinia - Its name,*



fire, which are extraordinarily still visible in the walls of the cell, remind us of that unlucky year 406 B.C. when this magnificent temple, almost wholly identical to that of Concord, was destroyed by the Carthaginians.

Nearby (to the east) one can still see a big altar for sacrifices and a stretch of road with deep grooves made by carts coming from gate III of the town.

**The Temple of Esculapios and the tomb of Thero** - This little temple, also from the fifth century, differs from the others both because of the unusual location outside the walls (below the Temple of Concord) and because of the shape (in antis) and the small size (about 20 by 10 metres).

Mentioned by Polybius, in connection with the Roman siege of 262 B.C., and by Cicero (in the *Verrines*), it housed a statue of Apollo by Miro, first stolen by the Carthaginians and, once returned to the people of Akragas by Scipio of Africa, stolen once and for all by Verro.

In the heart of the Roman necropolis which extends on the slopes of the hill outside the ancient walls (a few metres south of the Temple of Hercules), there is the tomb of Thero or Hereon, a magnificent example of Doric-Ionic architecture dating from the third century B.C., which, of course, has nothing to do with the tyrant of Akragas. Very probably the monument was put up by the Romans to commemorate the 300,000 soldiers they lost during the siege of the city.

**The San Nicola hill and the Hellenistic-Roman district** - This very rich archaeological area is at the centre of the plateau where the town stood, and we have certain knowledge of a succession of monuments, objects of worship, starting from archaic Greek times.

Here there stand out above all the Oratory of Phalaris, the *ekklesiaterion*, later transformed, in the republican period, into a *comitium*, and the church with the annexed San Nicola monastery.

The Oratory of Phalaris (whose name derives from the tradition according to which here there was the palace of the first tyrant of Akragas) is an elegant in antis building dating from the first century B.C., partly superimposed on the *ekklesiaterion*, considerably altered by the Goths.

This was the place of assembly of the townsfolk (there was room for 3000 of them), but today only the seats are left. In the same area the *bouleuterion* was recently discovered.

Immediately to the west of this extraordinary archaeological complex is the Hellenistic-

like that of the nearby Temple of Concord, is wholly conventional (due to confusion with the Temple of Hera at Croton), but it is nice to think that this temple, spectacularly placed on a cliff at the top of the eastern part of the magic hill, may have been the place of the worship of the goddess of fertility. The traces of

Roman district, an area of over 10,000 square metres, in which the magnificent urban complex extends, and part of this city, whose remains, superimposed, can be dated from the fifth to fourth centuries B.C.

Of very great importance, this residue of the city at the time of Timoleon and the Roman epoch allows the visitor to see the perfection of the Hippodamean street system, the big insulae and the remains of the magnificent buildings.

The description of this whole area would deserve much more space; here we will simply mention the "peristyle house", which is the most interesting one and still has several mosaic floors, the "two-storey house", with mosaics showing the magic symbol representing the movement of the sun, the "gazelle house", the "house of the abstract artist", and the "house of Aphrodite".

There are many other archaeological sites in Agrigento, which are worth visiting: we will mention just a few.

Near the cemetery, there are ruins of the Temple of Demeter and Kore, over which, in the Norman epoch, the San Biagio church was built; the rock shrine of Demeter with archaic Greek forms, presumably used for indigenous pre-Greek worship; the remains of Gate I and of the Greek fortifications. Inside the area of the Temple of Jove, there are numerous sacred areas, the swimming pool and the agora.

### **The old part of the town**

**Santo Spirito Abbey** - It is one of the finest Sicilian monuments. Built in 1260, the complex comprises the church and the adjacent Cistercian monastery. On the outside, the church has a magnificent portal in Chiaramonte style, surmounted by a rich rosette, in a more recent Baroque context. The interior is also from the eighteenth-century.

Here one can admire numerous stuccoes by Serpotta which fantastically decorate the walls; a sixteenth-century holy water font; a Madonna by Gagini (or by one of his school) and a magnificent wooden caisson ceiling done in 1758, showing the coat-of-arms of the Chiaramonte family - it was Federico Chiaramonte's wife, Marchisia Prefoglia, that made the foundation of the complex possible with a generous donation. The adjacent monastery, Badia Grande, dates from 1290.

It is embellished by a magnificent rectangular cloister, one of the oldest and best preserved in Sicily. In it various Gothic portals stand out: there is a splendid and imposing pointed arch, beside which there were mullioned windows, leading into the Chapter



Room. Inside the monastery there are some frescoes dating from the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries.

**San Lorenzo Chapel and underwater aqueducts** - Also known as the Purgatorio Church, it was built in the seventeenth century on the site of an older sacred edifice with the same name.

It has an elegant Renaissance-Baroque façade with two tiers of pilasters, a rich portal

**The high altar of the Santo Spirito church with Serpotta stuccoes.**

Done in the fifth century B.C. by the architect Phaeax. They were known all over Magna Grecia as one of the many wonders of the city.

**San Domenico Church** - In Piazza Pirandello there is the fine complex made up of the San Domenico church and the adjacent former monastery of the Dominican Fathers which was built over the palace of the Prince of Lampedusa.

It is an elegant seventeenth-century construction with a Renaissance-Baroque façade with two levels, and beside it there is a campanile. In the façade there is a big portal to the sides of which there are two columns surmounted by a tympanum split by a medallion showing St. Dominic.

The façade is completed by a row of pilasters enclosing the lateral niches and by a big central window. In the adjacent elegant edifice of the former convent, in which now the town hall is, there is the Luigi Pirandello theatre, done by G. B. Basile; after a long period, this has at last been restored, and has recovered its former splendours.

**The cathedral** - Heading northwards along the side of the San Domenico Church, to the left of the façade you enter Via Delle Orfane and you come to the vast square in which the cathedral magnificently looms up.

Founded towards the end of the eleventh century by the bishop of Agrigento, Gerlando, the building, in the Gothic-Norman style, was several times enlarged and altered from the fourteenth to the seventeenth centuries, and maintains its original look only in the magnificent windows to be seen on the right side.


It has a façade which you get to up a broad and soft flight of steps, beside which there is a magnificent unfinished fifteenth-century campanile, embellished by two tiers of Gothic-Catalan blind windows and by another window with a balcony surmounted by a fine and richly decorated rounded arch.

The interior has a Latin cross layout. There are three naves divided by rounded arches resting on octagonal pillars.

There is a magnificent and richly painted wooden ceiling, at the centre of which the two-headed eagle of Charles V is shown. Inside there are also rich stuccoes and frescoes giving an overall sumptuous effect.

In the right wing of the transept is the little San Gerlando chapel, surmounted by a finely modelled Gothic portal. In the chapel the Ark, a 1639 reliquary, is kept.

In the left nave is the De Marinis chapel and in the right apse there is a 1495 marble group of Madonna and Child. There are also numerous other sepulchres enriching the mag-



softened by two spiralling columns and by allegorical groups to the sides showing Faith and Charity and, high up, a big window. The interior has only one nave. Eight statues of female figures representing the Virtues, by Giuseppe and Giacomo Serpotta, embellish it.

To the left of the church, under a stone lion, is the main entrance to the ancient and perfectly conserved network of underwater aqueducts, which supplied Akragas with drinking water.





**Sciacca.**  
Above,  
Gothic rose  
window in the  
façade of  
the Carmine  
Church.

Right,  
a portal of  
Santa  
Margherita  
Church.

nificent interior of this great monument.

Of very great importance is the treasure of the cathedral, particularly rich in works of art of great historical and artistic value, among which stands out the very famous sarcophagus of Phaedra, a stupendous and very elegant Roman marbework from the early third century B.C. inspired by the fifth century Greek style.

Described and praised by all the great foreign visitors to Sicily in the eighteenth century, from Riedesel to Bartles, this masterpiece (momentarily kept at the San Nicola church) found in the Agrigentum Roman necropolis, represents episodes from the myth of Phaedra and Hippolyte.

Opposite the cathedral, in the same square, is the Bishop's Seminary founded by bishop Narullo in 1574 and completed in 1611; inside there is an elegant courtyard with a portico and two tiers of loggias.

**Santa Maria dei Greci** - Going along Via Santa Maria dei Greci you come to the church of the same name, in the oldest part of the medieval town.

It was built in the twelfth century, and its foundations stand on the base of a fifth-century Doric temple which some believe to be that of Athena, in the Akragas acropolis (where Gelias, a rich nobleman of Akragas, is said to have killed himself, to avoid falling into the hands of the Carthaginians).

The Santa Maria dei Greci Church, in front of which there is an elegant little courtyard, has a refined façade softened by a thirteenth-century Arab-Norman portal and by fine windows. The interior has three naves.

There is a fine ceiling which reminds one of the ceiling of the cathedral and it is enriched by traces of fourteenth-century frescoes. There is also a sixteenth-century wooden statue and a sarcophagus with the remains of a nobleman from Palermo.

There is a very narrow passage leading from the left nave to the northern base of the Doric temple where traces of the drums of its columns still can be seen.

#### **SCIACCA**

Palaeolithic tombs, together with numerous finds which have come to light in the last

few years, show that already in prehistoric times men settled along this stretch of coast.

These sites continued to be frequented throughout the subsequent period, by the Sicans, the Phoenicians, the Greeks, the Romans, the Byzantines and the Arabs.

Sciacca, called Xacca (from the Latin 'ex acqua', a clear reference to the warm waters which still gush out of its soil, forming a thermal basin which is one of the richest and most complete in the world) became one of the most active harbours on the island, and it is still so today. It was further embellished with monuments and the defensive walls were strengthened. All those who subsequently governed Sciacca enriched it with other works of art, so much so that - as we read in the guide to the town by Salvatore Cantone - there are "significant examples of architecture, sculpture and painting (not to speak of the so-called minor arts) from all ages."

**The cathedral**, which stands in Piazza Duomo, is dedicated to St. Mary Magdalene, and was founded way back in the twelfth century by Count Roger's daughter Juliet.

Of the original construction one can now only see the exterior of the three apses; the whole building was redone in the eighteenth century. The interior is divided into three naves by pillars. In it there are fine works of art, among which, in the fourth chapel on the right, a statue of the Madonna della Catena stands out attributed to Francesco Laurana.

At the western extremity of Corso Vittorio Emanuele there is the majestic **Palazzo Steripinto**, one of the most classical examples of plateresque art in Sicily. The building, founded in the fifteenth century, has a broad façade

made of diamond-tip ashlars, crowned by battlements.

Over the elegant Renaissance door there are three mullioned windows somewhat mitigating the austere look of the ancient palace.

**The Santa Margherita Church**, in the Gothic-Renaissance style, was founded in 1342 and redone about 250 years later. The façade is decorated by a fine Gothic portal dating from the year of foundation, while another elegant portal, a masterpiece by Francesco Laurana, can be admired on the side of the church.

The **San Salvatore** gate is one of the three left of those built in the imposing walls which in the sixteenth century girded the town - one can still see ruins of them in several places. The gate, right opposite the Santa Margherita Church, is a wonderful example of Spanish decoration blending together architecture and sculpture. The name derives from a nearby church, partly engulfed in the eighteenth-century Carmine Church, whose most interesting decorative elements are the majolica-covered cupola and the Gothic rosette in the façade.

There are about ten different thermal springs in Sciacca and the waters form a hydrothermal basin of rare completeness - there are notices of it in antiquity - suited to treating a vast range of disorders of various kinds.

Of particular renown are the San Calogero "stoves", two natural grottoes in which, thanks to the union of a karst phenomenon and a secondary volcanic manifestation, there is steam at a temperature oscillating between 38 and 42 degrees Celsius, very good for a sauna. According to a legend, Dedalus, who collected the hot vapour coming out of the ground in the caves, made the "stoves".

**Bottom,  
the Thermal  
establishment  
of Sciacca.**





# Caltanissetta

The Sicilian landscape shows major variations, being now soft and green, now arid and rugged, while in other places you see the azure of the sea, the black of the volcano, the grey of wrinkled mountains. The yellow colour of corn, sulphur and sun is the colour of Caltanissetta.

This town, built on a hill 600 metres high, was perhaps the ancient Nissa mentioned by Thucydides, or perhaps it only came into being with the Arabs, born of that Pietrarossa castle to which houses and cottages clung.

In 1086, when it was conquered by the Normans, its feudal history began, to go on until a quite recent past.

Great prosperity came to it from sulphur mining, reaching its climax at the start of our century. Today, overwhelmed by international competition, many mines are closed, and the times of the "carusi" who worked there appear very remote.

With intelligent promotional action, attempts are being made to recover the mines as places of collective memory, so that they can take on a tourist function.

A visit to Caltanissetta takes one day.

## Artistic heritage

**The Cathedral** - Dedicated to Santa Maria La Nova and St. Michael, it was built in Piazza Garibaldi in 1570-1622. Its broad façade is divided by pilasters and to its sides there are two campaniles (1840), with a middle portal in Baroque style.

The ceiling in the main nave was decorated with frescoes by the Flemish painter Wilhelm Borremans in 1720. In the barrel vault three big compositions stand out: the Immaculate Conception, the Crowning of the Virgin and the Triumph of St. Michael.

Around these "Saints", "Stories of St. Peter and St. Paul" and "The Old Testament" are placed. Elegant stuccoes complete the decorations in the nave. Borremans also did the big altarpiece of "The Immaculate Virgin and Saints" placed in the presbytery.

Among the works of art in the cathedral, there is a fine seventeenth-century wooden statue of "the Immaculate Virgin" with drapings in silver foil by Li Volsi; a sumptuous seventeenth-century organ with choir loft and painted, inlaid and gilded panels, and, in the left wing of the transept, a Crucifix attributed to Brother Umile da Petralia. Lastly, in the treasure there is a fine fifteenth-century Gothic censer.

Opposite the cathedral, in the centre of the square, there is the fine Fountain of Triton, with a bronze group done in 1956 reproduc-

ing famous mythological groups by the Caltanissetta sculptor Tripisciano.

**Palazzo Moncada** - It stands to the left of the Town Hall in Salita Matteotti. Built in 1635-1638 for Don Luigi Guglielmo Moncada, viceroy of Sardinia and Sicily and count of Caltanissetta, it was left unfinished, perhaps due to lack of money or because Don Luigi moved to Spain.

A summing-up of Sicilian Baroque, it has monumental exterior architectural forms and grandiose interior spaces; on the lively façade there are big ledges in the shape of human and animal figures, perhaps the catalysing symbol of the power of the seigneur.

The palace, whose imposing walls are two metres thick, was begun on a design by the Capuchin Brother Pietro da Genova, using architectural reliefs and stones taken from the Pietrarossa castle and sandstone from Monte Gebel-Habib.

The interior of the palace - which for 150 years, starting from 1819, was used as a Tribunal, Assise Court, Royal prosecutor's office and district prosecutor's office - underwent serious alterations for the rooms to be adapted to the various functions.

There is still an underground tunnel (referred to as "u trabuccu"), that started from the prison under the palace to come out near the Capuchin monastery in Viale Regina Margherita. In it, according to the tradition, anyone out of favour of the seigneur disappeared.

**Sant'Agata al Collegio Church** - Begun in 1605 for the Jesuits, its exterior is marked by a severe façade, done on a design by Natale Mesucci. The interior has a Greek cross layout. It is decorated with rich marble inlays in evident Baroque taste.

There is a fine altar with the Madonna del Carmine at the back of the right lateral arm, whose altarpiece is also profusely decorated with polychrome marble.

Opposite, in the left arm, another similar altar was decorated by Ignazio Marabitti with a big marble altarpiece of "St. Ignatius in Glory". Marabitti also did the marble cornice enclosing the altarpiece over the high altar, done in the seventeenth century by Antonio Scilla.

**Pietrarossa castle** - This castle, the only one in inland Sicily that is inserted in the urban texture, stands on the top of a solitary rock. It is of Arab origin and documents the new town settlement around the rock after the abandonment of the Sabucina- Santo Spirito territory, where people had settled in pre-Christian times.





*It suddenly collapsed on the night of 27 February 1567, perhaps because of an earthquake, leaving only a high tumbledown wall, a watchtower in open stone, embankments, bastions and a communication bridge.*

*The ruins of the castle now bear witness to a very important historical epoch for Caltanissetta, when it was a stronghold of royal power in the Middle Ages in the centre of Sicily and divided by struggles for supremacy.*

**Santo Spirito Abbey** - *It is three km. from the centre, immersed in a charming landscape which comprises the Imera valley, Pietrarossa castle, the outlines of Enna and Calascibetta and, on very clear days, Etna in the background.*

*It is the oldest church in Caltanissetta province, built long before its consecration on 2 June 1151. Founded by the Norman Count Roger and his wife Adelasia, it is a Romanesque church in the early Christian style with three*

*small apses divided by pilasters connected by little arches.*

*In the lunettes of the portal we note "Christ Blessing", a fifteenth-century fresco (for safety reasons and to avoid weather damage, the fresco on the portal is a replica of the original, which is kept inside); immediately to the right of the main entrance there is a Romanesque bath for baptism with immersion (practised from the beginning of Christianity until the twelfth century) and a seventeenth-century crucifix on a board.*

*In the apse to the left of the arcade there is the epigraph of the consecration. In the sacristy there is an original Arabic ark, a little Roman urn and a tin chalice, the use of which was forbidden first in 220 and then, once and for all, by Pope Leo IV in 855.*

*There are also paintings of major artistic value, a sixteenth-century chaise and ancient sacred texts.*

**Ruins of the original nucleus of Pietrarossa castle.**



Above,  
a glimpse of the  
cathedral.

On the opposite  
page the statue  
of Sant'Agata.

# Catania

**P**icturesque and noisy, Catania is the city of the volcano. Dark and closed like a grumpy god, Etna dominates from on high the continual comings and goings which enliven the city's streets, which symbolise an intrinsic characteristic of the people of Catania: their being hard workers. This was a quality which was noted by Bartels, a German scholar who visited Sicily in 1786 and defined Catania "a city of active people who put ruins back up and look courageously to the future." It is also a quality which has allowed this city to resurrect several times from its own ashes like a phoenix, ignoring earthquakes and wars - ancient and modern.

Highly suited to the people of Catania are the symbol of the city, the elephant, a good and strong animal, and their saint, Agatha, a virgin and martyr even capable of halting the fury of Etna with the supernatural force of her veil.

Catania is a dark city, built with black volcanic stone and yet absolutely sunny and luminous, on account of its 2528 hours of sun per year - the highest average in Italy. It is an ancient city, boasting of pre-Greek origins, yet sometimes more or less indifferent to its past so

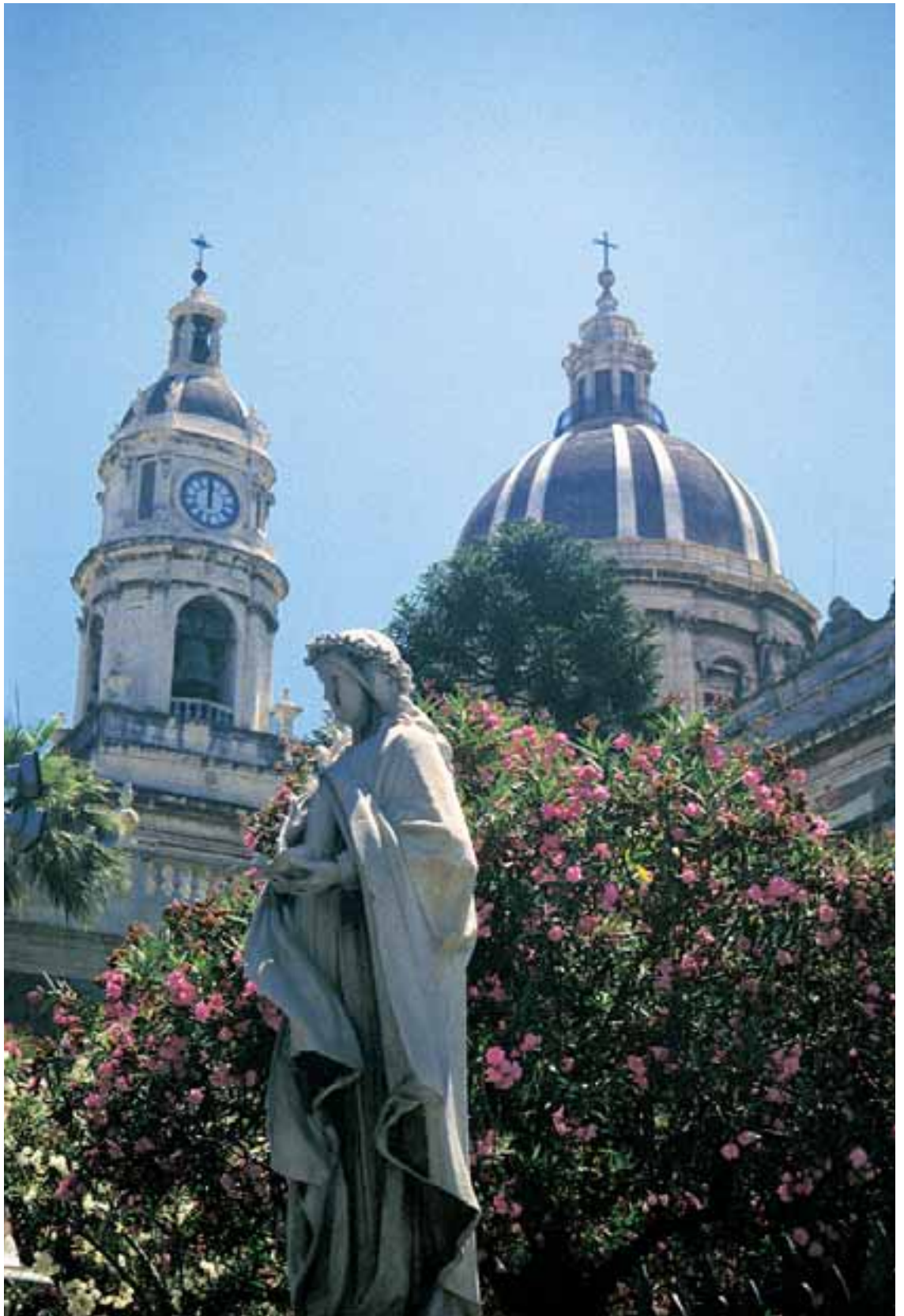
much so that the Greek Theatre is almost hidden at the end of a little street.

A city of frivolous people, devoted to gossip like in Brancati's plays, but at the same time painfully aware of the tragic reality of life, of the need to roll up their sleeves against the mafia and other criminals who submerge their city with cement and corruption.

Katane was founded on the fuming ruins of a Sicilian burgh by Chalcidian settlers in 729 B.C. Its name means "hill", and indeed the acropolis was built on a hill, in the area now occupied by the big Benedictine monastery. In the course of time, around it there rose temples, a hippodrome, a gymnasium, the mint, an odeon, aqueducts and thermae.

In 476 B.C. Jeron of Syracuse conquered the prosperous town. He deported the inhabitants to Leontonoi, re-populated the town with people from Syracuse and new Doric settlers and gave it the name "Etna". However, the people of Katane were only in exile for 15 years: in 461 they returned to their town and gave it its former name back, and swore eternal hostility to Syracuse.









*In 415 they allowed the Athenians to use their town as a base in the war against Syracuse and this brought new destruction to it: having defeated his enemies, Dionysius I, the tyrant of Syracuse, turned his anger on Katane, leaving it at the mercy of his soldiers.*

*In 263 B.C. Katane was taken by the Romans and declared a colony. Under the emperor Augustus, its population greatly increased, and it was embellished with prestigious new buildings (like the grandiose amphitheatre) while others were restored.*

*In the course of the ensuing centuries Catania followed the vicissitudes of all Sicily, though its destiny was a little different from that of the rest of the island because of its peculiar intimate rapport with the volcano.*

*The history of the city was linked not only to human affairs but also to the whims of Etna, a dispenser of life but also of death and destruction. One could list various dates: 1169, when a major earthquake caused the death of some 15,000 people; 1669, when the lava got as far as the harbour and fell hissing into the sea, leaving nothing but despair behind it; 1693, when the whole city was wiped out by the earthquake, which buried in the ruins some 16,000 innocents.*

*However, the latter date also brought happier things with it. In the last years of the seventeenth century there was busy reconstruc-*

*tion, whose finest fruits are still the city's boast.*

*A visit to Catania takes two days.*

### **Artistic heritage**

**The Elephant Fountain** - Placed at the centre of Piazza Duomo, it was done by Giovan Battista Vaccarini. It comprises an elephant in lava stone from the Roman epoch and an Egyptian obelisk in Syene granite with hieroglyphics regarding the worship of Isis. In a peculiar combination of sacred and profane the elephant holds up the obelisk, which is surmounted by a ball and the insignia of St. Agatha: the cross, the lily, the palm and the angelic table.

*The elephant, like the tortoise, is often represented as an animal holding up the world and it is considered a cosmic animal in that its body contains the structure of the cosmos: four pillars holding up a sphere.*

**The Cathedral of St. Agatha** - Built in 1078-93 over the Thermae of Achilles, from that epoch it preserves the three apses and the body of the upper transept.

*It was later rebuilt by Girolamo Palazzotto after the 1693 earthquake, with materials coming from other buildings like for example the Roman columns in the main façade, done by Vaccarini, who took over thirty years to complete them. Scholars consider the façade too*

**Above,  
Ursino Castle,  
now housing  
the Civic  
Museum.**

rigid with respect to the irradiation of the columns. The marble balustrade is from the nineteenth century and in it alternate vases and statues of saints.

Inside the cathedral are the tombs of Vincenzo Bellini and of Aragonese kings, including Frederick II, and Constance of Aragona, the wife of Frederick III. On the right wall a very ornate portal closes off the chapel, where the relics and treasure of St. Agatha, the patron saint of the city, are kept.

There are celebrations for this saint for over a month, from 5th January to 12th February, but the climax of the feast is on 3-4-5 February, when the bier with the relics of the saint is taken round the city.

**Ursino Castle** - The castle was built at the behest of Frederick II of Hohenstaufen in 1239-50 and now houses the municipal museum.

Once surrounded by the sea, in the fourteenth century it was the residence of the Aragonese royal family; transformed in accor-

dance with Renaissance taste in the sixteenth century, it was surrounded by lava in the 1669 eruption and hence now stands on the mainland.

The edifice has a square layout with four cylindrical keeps at the corners and had semi-cylindrical towers, only two of which are left, halfway along each side. Similar to the Castel del Monte castle in Apulia, Ursino castle blends together Hohenstaufen rationalism and the Arab taste for stereometry. On the pointed arch over the entrance there is an aedicule with the Hohenstaufen eagle seizing a hare.

The museum, in which there is also the Benedictine collection, part of that of the princes of Biscari and the donations of Baron Zappalà-Asmundo, is at present being restored, and so it is only possible to visit the entrance and courtyard of the castle.

**The Roman Theatre and Odeon** - The theatre had a diameter of about 87 metres and could seat 7000 people. It was built on a side of



The Roman Theatre, with room for 7000 spectators.







the hill on which there was a Greek acropolis, and we cannot rule out the possibility that originally it was actually founded by the Greeks. The orchestra, which has a diameter of 29 metres and a marble slab floor, is often flooded by the waters of the river Amenano.

Under the present pit there are traces of two other distinct pits; they all date from the imperial Roman age.

Adjacent to it is the Odeon, only recently reopened to the public, which was used for choir rehearsals and competitions and could seat 1300 spectators. The space between the pit and the external wall was divided into seventeen rooms, sixteen of which are left.

**Badia di Sant'Agata Church** - Done by Giovan Battista Vaccarini in 1735-67 it stands in Via Raddusa with an elegant façade, the openings in which have frames in white calcareous stone. Convex in the interior part, the construction resolves itself into a concave shape higher up with great balance. It is surmounted by a cupola which optically harmonises the surrounding buildings. Inside, all the surfaces are in white stucco, on which the altars in yellow Castronovo marble stand out. The floor shows a rich design with fascias interwoven with big flowers and volutes in white marble on a grey background.

**Palazzo Biscari** - Done by Francesco Battaglia, it is a magnificent example of the Catania Baroque. The façade, which looks out on the harbour, is classical and shows a rectangular terrace. The portal leads into a courtyard dominated by a pincer staircase typical of Baroque villas in the Palermo area too; the south side is the oldest, probably done on a project by Alonzo Di Benedetto, while the parts to the east were done on a project by Giuseppe Palazzotto in 1750. The interior was completed in 1766. One is struck above all by the ballroom, which according to Blunt is the first expression of rococo decoration in Sicily. It has the shape of an elongated octagon terminating in an alcove, which is believed originally to have contained a "lit de parade". At the centre of the concave ceiling there is an oval skylight, through which the eye runs to an outer cupola, decorated with an allegorical fresco, that takes light from windows under the level of the inner cupola; a gallery goes round the skylight and here, during balls, the orchestra was seated. The rocailles decoration was probably done by stucco workers from Venice or Bavaria; the frescoes are by Sebastiano Lo Monaco. In the gallery on the marina there is a winding staircase also showing the Catania rococo style.

**Via Crociferi** - It starts from Piazza San Francesco d'Assisi, passing under the arch of



St. Benedict (1704). This is one of the most significant areas for the Catania Baroque. It owes its name to a religious order who looked after the sick.

Most of the buildings in Via Crociferi were done on projects by Vaccarini or close collaborators of his, like Giuseppe Palazzotto and, instead of aligning themselves to the perspective axis of the street, they "compose" the street.

Particularly worthy of attention are the Jesuit College with the adjacent San Francesco Borgia, San Giuliano and San Benedetto churches.

Saverio Fiducia, letting Via Crociferi speak in the first person, writes: "Then celestial music rained down from the choir lofts and choirs on the bent backs of the devout, and the smoke of incense, coming out of the grandiose marble portals, wrapped me too in a scented atmosphere, rising sweetly towards the fastigia silvered by the moon ..."

**The San Nicolò l'Arena Benedictine Monastery** - Around 1136 some Benedictine fathers retreated to meditate on Etna and founded the San Leo monastery with the help of Count Errico. However, inclement weather, eruptions and earthquakes forced the monks to go down to Nicolosi to the San Nicolò Monastery which was originally built for sick monks.

Since the situation there was not much better and there was the threat of thieves, around 1550 they decided to move to Catania and the monastery was built, the second biggest in Europe, which now houses the Faculty of

On the left, the Benedictine convent, also described by Federico De Roberto in his novel "I Vicerè".

Above, a detail of Palazzo Biscari.



**Above,  
the Church  
of San  
Sebastiano  
in Acireale.**

*Letters and Philosophy. After the 1693 earthquake, which had almost completely destroyed the church and the monastery, work was done, among others, by Antonino Amato, Francesco Battaglia and Vaccarini.*

*After the Baroque portal and the courtyard, a pincer-shaped staircase of honour leads into the building. You thus come to the corridors organised along the two cloisters. The first one, with a neo-Gothic church, like the second one has doors and big windows done on a design by Antonino Amato. You get to the second cloister along the clock corridor; it has a 1606 marble portico, and, at the centre, the remains of a seventeenth-century marble fountain.*

*In the west wing of the monastery there*

*are the united civic and Recupero libraries: opened in 1897, they are made up of the original nucleus of 50,000 volumes of the library of the Benedictine fathers, to which there were added the libraries of the suppressed religious corporations, the one donated by Baron Ursino Recupero (made up of about 40,000 volumes and booklets, it is a precious collection for local and Sicilian history), that of the poet Mario Rapisardi and a Sicilian newspaper library.*

**Roman amphitheatre** - *What remains of this magnificent edifice, probably dating from the second century B.C., is on one side of Piazza Stesicoro, along which it originally extended as far as what is now Via Penninello. It could seat 16,000 and was 31 metres high.*

The lower corridor is well preserved all along, and the arena, second only to that of the Coliseum in Rome, had a diameter of 71 metres. One notes a curious mixture of building materials - basalt, calcareous stone and red bricks - conferring a particular variety of colours on the building.

### ACIREALE

Acireale came into being 3000 years ago on the banks of the streams into which the river Aci divides. In 1000 B.C. it became a Phoenician emporium of major importance and 300 years later it was colonised by the Greeks, who called it Xiphonia, meaning "sword", perhaps because of the shape of the promontory on which it stood.

Later, the Romans called it Aci, from Akis, a word with the same meaning as Xiphonia. The story of the town is marked by conquests, devastations - wrought not only by men but also by Etna - and reconstructions. Today Acireale stands on a terrace looking out on the sea - a position chosen in the fourteenth century - and has the look that it took on in the eighteenth century after the 1693 earthquake. Side by side with Byzantine and Moorish elements, which survived the earthquake, we hence find many Baroque aspects.

The main monument is the **Cathedral**, built around the end of the seventeenth century; it has a façade in Gothic style done in the early twentieth century, on a design by Giovan Battista Basile, in which there is a Baroque portal (1667-72).

The interior is divided into three naves. There are frescoes by Giuseppe Sciuti and Pietro Paolo Vasta. Other works of art include a holy water font by Antonello Gagini (1525) and a silver statue of Santa Venera (to whom the church is dedicated together with the Virgin of Assumption) in the chapel of the same name. In the sacristy the bier of the saint herself is kept, used in the procession in her honour.

Also outstanding is the **San Sebastiano Church**, with a lively Baroque façade decorated with putti, statues, friezes and festoons. The interior is divided into three naves, and is decorated with frescoes by Pietro Paolo Vasta.

### CALTAGIRONE

Finds dating from the Neolithic and the first half of the Bronze Age testify to the presence of man in the place, where Caltagirone has stood since the remotest times. The Arabs built a castle there - which soon became a primary military objective - and around it developed an urban centre, about which however we

know little or nothing as regards the period before the Norman conquest in 1090.

Few buildings remain from before the 1693 earthquake and hence the little town has a typically Baroque look. Caltagirone is famous for the beauty and quality of its splendid ceramics, which began to be made in prehistoric times, thanks to the abundance of the required raw material.

**The Cathedral**, in Piazza Umberto I, is right at the heart of the town. It was founded in the Norman period, but redone at the start of the last century. It has a fine façade in the art nouveau-flowery style of the early twentieth century. Not far away is the long building of the **Captain's Court**, in whose front at intervals there are portals and windows by Giandomenico Gagini (sixteenth-seventeenth centuries). Among the Baroque churches special mention must be made of the Jesuit **Gesù Church** and the **San Giacomo Church**.

Lastly, there are the fine and majestic **Santa Maria del Monte steps**, decorated with coloured ceramic tiles, built in 1608 to link two parts of the town at different levels.

Below,  
Caltagirone.







can still be seen, yellow and white, solitary, less mysterious, certainly, than at one time.

It is not a true "tourist attraction" like so many other monuments in Enna, but it is worth having a look at, possibly while you are admiring the panorama, which is one of the most celebrated in Sicily: from the top of the Pisan Tower, on clear days, you can make out the African Sea, an evanescent azure that melts into the sky.

On all other sides there are hills and mountains, as far as the eye can see, and, over it all, Etna, with the top hidden by cotton wool clouds and white veils.

Certainly it was the very breadth of the panorama that convinced first the Sicans and then the Siculi to settle here, where they could easily defend themselves.

Archaeology has provided proof of these prehistoric presences. For example, the Guardiola grotto was already a collective tomb in the Neolithic epoch.

However, we know little about the first settlements: systematic excavation only began in 1978.

In the seventh to sixth centuries B.C. the town was under Greek influence and its importance increased more and more as the main place of worship of Ceres.

Henna, at the centre of a land rich in legends and myths, also attracted interests that were more human than religious: possession of this florid town was indispensable not only to complete an unchallenged dominion over Sicily but also for the enjoyment of the products of the fertile land around.

In 307 B.C. Henna had to submit to the dominion of Syracuse, and later, after a brief period of independence, to that of the Romans.

Every new conqueror of Sicily, in order to obtain lasting power, had to face the adversaries perched up in the little town in the Erei mountains and often only betrayal made conquest possible.

This was the case of the Arabs, who only got in thanks to betrayal by a Byzantine prisoner. And it was also the case of the Normans, who, having laid siege to the town in 1061, only succeeded in taking it by deceit in 1088.

At the end of the Arab domination, with the advent of the Normans, Henna, which had become Castrogiovanni (from the Arabic Qasr-Jannih, which in turn came from the Latin Castrum Hennaë) was enriched with religious monuments, an enrichment which went on all through the Middle Ages and endowed the town with a major patrimony which in some respects can still be seen today.

A visit to Enna takes one day.

“We sported in the meadows gathering lovely flowers, irises, the beautiful crocus and young roses and lilies which had just bloomed, stupendous hyacinths and narcissi, with them and with the crocus that immense land flowered and while I gathered them with my soul all blissful the earth broke and from it leapt out the god ...”

Thus begins the story of Persephone, the sweet daughter of Ceres, goddess of fertility, abducted by Pluto on the shores of Lake Pergusa, at the foot of Enna, a town which has always been a magic place, the epicentre of the most ancient myths of Sicily, those linked to fertility and the land.

Ceres had her temple at Enna, a much venerated one, to which gifts and legates came from all parts, and from here she set out in search of her daughter, desperately calling her, indifferent to the land turning arid.

Ceres' Rock, on which her shrine stood,

# Enna

## Artistic heritage

**Lombard Castle** - It is the most important vestige of the fortifications which girded Henna. Built on the citadel which caused Enna to be called "Urbs inexpugnabilis", it was defined by Strabo the most beautiful fortress in Sicily, and its origins are very ancient. What you visit today is the result of numerous alterations undertaken by every new conqueror.

Among the most important modifications were those made by the Arabs, who transformed it into a true stronghold, and by the Hohenstaufens, who gave the definitive layout to the outer walls, and lastly by Frederick of Aragona, who chose it as his own dwelling. Its name probably derives from the Lombard garrison entrusted by the Normans with the control of the castle, although actually the Arabs called Lombardy the eastern coast of the Adriatic and the areas in Calabria occupied by the Normans and so the name may have a more ancient origin.

The irregular layout of the fortress, which is one of the best preserved in Sicily, reminds one of the castles built by Frederick in Apulia, in particular the one at Lucera; its overall surface area is 26,230 square metres. The castle is divided into three courtyards - San Nicola, Maddalena and San Martino - separated by robust walls reinforced by towers, so that the capitulation of one courtyard did not weaken the resistance of the others. The most interesting courtyard is the San Martino one: here there are remains of the royal apartments, of a church, of the royal room, as well as those of an underground rock oratory confirming the antiquity of the fortified place, certainly preceding the present castle. From this courtyard you can get to the Pisan Tower, also known as the "Eagles' tower", because of the presence of numerous birds of prey on its battlements in ancient times.

**The Octagonal Tower** - Set to guard the southern area of the town, it has remained intact and rises solitary at the centre of a public garden.

This tower is also known as "Frederick II's tower". Historians have not yet succeeded in establishing its age for certain: there are those who maintain it dates from the time of the Hohenstaufen emperor Frederick II, others from the time of Frederick of Aragona, while others date it from the epoch of Manfred.

However, the most fascinating theory is the one which identifies it with the ancient geodetic centre of Sicily. Twenty-four metres up on the top of this tower, ancient astronomers, making reference to this centre,



are believed to have given life to the delimitation of the island and the creation of its road system. Later the Arabs are believed to have used the same starting point to divide the island into three "valleys".

On the ground floor there are narrow ogival mullioned windows, on the first floor two broad rectangular decorated windows, opened in 1457. The third floor has no roof. You get to it up 2 winding staircase cut out in the thickness of the wall (3,3 m.) and from the top - as from every point in Enna - you can admire a very vast panorama.

**The Cathedral** - This is the main monument in Enna. It was probably founded - perhaps on the ruins of a temple dedicated to Persephone - in 1307, the year of the birth of Pedro, when his mother, Queen Eleonora, expressed her desire to restore "the main temple in the town". Almost entirely destroyed by a fire in 1446, it was rebuilt starting from

Left, the Lombard Castle.

Above, the octagonal tower.





1451: work on it went on almost throughout the sixteenth century.

The sixteenth-century façade is dominated by a high seventeenth-century campanile with two tiers of pilasters. On the right side there are two portals: one, done in the sixteenth century by Jacopino Salemi, in Renaissance taste, decorated at the centre by a low relief of St. Martin and the poor man; while the other, known as the Porta Santa (Holy Gate), is in Gothic style. On the outside, also noteworthy, are the apses and the transept, originally dating from the fourteenth century, and an arch which was part of the ambulatory of the cemetery of the church, the only element left of a cloister portico.

The interior has a Latin cross layout with three naves divided by black alabaster columns with richly decorated bases and capitals. In particular, the second on the right and the second on the left are true masterpieces by Giandomenico Gagini. Also particularly worthy of attention are the three chapels in the transept: the one on the left, dedicated to the Most Holy Sacrament, appears once again, after restoration, in the original fourteenth-century look; the right chapel is dedicated to the patron saint of Enna, the Madonna of Visitation, whose simulacrum, kept in the chapel, is carried in a procession every year on





2 July; the central chapel, done in the sixteenth century, is dedicated to the Virgin of the Assumption, and is richly decorated in all parts with stuccoes, statues and pictures illustrating various moments in the life of the Virgin Mary. Lastly, the ceiling of the church, made up of three types of carved caissons, is a true work of art in walnut: particularly fine is the one over the central nave and the transept, done by the sculptor Scipione di Guido, who worked on it for five years with his assistants. He also did the choir lofts in the central nave and the choir of the high altar.

### MORGANTINA

The village of Morgantina is about 6 km from the village of Aidone. Way back in 1955, thanks to systematic diggings carried out by the Archaeological Mission of Princeton University, a town was identified there in its various architectural and urban phases, going from the Hellenistic to the Roman period.

A first phase of occupation is to be ascribed to the Iron Age (1000-850 B.C.), and it is documented by ceramic fragments and remains of huts, as regards the upper area of the hill called the "Citadel". Further down, at the foot of the latter, various digging campaigns brought to light the ruins of the shrine of Demeter and Kore, the "stoàs", the mar-

kets, the Senate hall or bouleuterion, the chapels, the theatre, the chthonic shrine of the agora, the ekklesiasterion, the big kiln, the state granary, all structures belonging to the town of the Hellenistic and Roman periods. The link between these two realities, which are so different, is provided by the settlement in this place of a strong Greek-Chalchidian component coming from Katane, roughly in the first half of the sixth century B.C. In the fourth and third centuries the town reached the apex of its greatness. Though favoured by the prosperity of the period of Jeron, because it sided with the Carthaginians in the Second Punic War, the town was attacked and destroyed by joint regular Roman soldiers and Hispanic mercenaries in 211 B.C. Assigned from that time on to these Hispanic people, it was not well reconstructed, and its approximate reconstruction did not reflect its past greatness. Embroiled in the slave wars, it declined in architecture (the theatre became a quarry), and Morgantina was gradually abandoned, so that its life as a town came to an end in the second or first century B.C. The main monument is the **theatre**.

### PIAZZA ARMERINA

Rich in medieval monuments, Baroque palaces, elegant religious edifices and gardens,

On the opposite page, top, a view of Enna; below, the urn of dead Christ in a Good Friday procession in Enna.

Above, the vestiges of the theatre at Morgantina, a Hellenistic town near Aidone.

it is on the top of three heights in the inland hilly area of Sicily. The town is of late medieval origin, having risen in the twelfth century from the ruins of the older Piazza, destroyed by William I for having given hospitality to rebel barons.

**The Cathedral**, dedicated to the Virgin of Assumption, dominates the whole town from on high. It was built at the start of the seventeenth century on a previously existing church; of the latter remains only the lower part of the campanile in Gothic-Catalan style. Among the various works of art inside there is a precious fifteenth-century wooden crucifix, the work of a not clearly identified "Piazza Armerina cross artist".

A short distance from the town, on a hill, one can visit the **Sant'Andrea priory**, built at the behest of a nephew of Roger I, Simon count of Butera, in 1096. The interior is decorated with frescoes from the twelfth, thirteenth and fifteenth centuries; among other things, they show the Passion of Christ.

To Piazza Armerina is linked above all the **Roman Casale villa**, one of the most important archaeological finds in Sicily. It was built in the third or fourth century A.D. for an unknown client, identified by scholars with a member of the Roman senatorial aristocracy or even of the imperial family.

Whoever he was, the owner of the villa was a very rich man, who loved luxury, convenience and art. For the decoration of his prestigious country residence he had good mosaic workers come from Africa and for five years they devoted themselves to the creation of splendid mosaics that still today give us a vivid image of Roman life and mythology. On a surface of about 3.500 square metres there is a succession of hunting and dancing scenes, mythological characters and animals, fishermen and all sorts of plants and fruit, models and leaders of a style of mosaics that in subsequent centuries became widespread in Italy, France and Spain. Centuries later, Arabs and Normans lived between these walls, making all the modifications they deemed necessary to adapt the villa to their own needs, also unfortunately damaging the original structures.

In the twelfth century a terrible flood gave rise to a river of mud which, having invaded the valley, destroyed the upper part of the villa, entirely covering it.

But it's an ill wind that blows nobody good, they say, and in this case the saying proved true: if on the one hand the mud destroyed the ceilings, which must have been splendid, on the other hand it protected the



mosaics which have thus come down to us more or less intact. Digging campaigns, conducted in an almost amateur fashion at first but afterwards more systematically, led, in 1950, to the recovery of the villa, under the guidance of the archaeologist Gino Gentili.

The residential complex is made up of four distinct groups of buildings, each used

The wild pig hunt, detail of the mosaic "the big hunt" in the Roman villa at Piazza Armerina.





for different functions of social life, hospitality, rest, etc. Under the ground there are still the servants' quarters, the stables, the warehouses and other buildings. Of particular interest: the *thermae*, which occupy various rooms, and which, in addition to the mosaics, show traces of the system used for the water supply at the villa; the big hunt ambulatory,

decorated with scenes showing the hunting and capture of beasts; the room of the ten female gymnasts with ten women performing various sports; the apartments of the lord of the villa, in which, among other things, there are a decoration showing Ulysses and Polyphemus and the celebrated "erotic scene".

# Messina



One is highly tempted - when dealing with the history of Messina - to let oneself be carried away by the magic of legend and to lose oneself in myth and fable.

Besides few cities are so rich in folk beliefs as the city on the Straits: from Carybdus to Glaucus, from Mata and Grifone to the White Dame, from Colapesce to Morgan le Fay, the origins and very history of Messina are permeated with these extraordinary events.

But scientists and archaeologists, less poetic and more historical than the ancient writers, less fanciful and more rational, have reconstructed the "true" story of this extraordinary place, and they tell us that it is not true that Neptune separated Sicily from the mainland with a single trident blow and that Saturn, enamoured of the beauty of this place, founded the ancient city there.

If there are few notices referring to the pre-Greek period - on the shores of the Straits Siculo farmers and hunters and Phoenician merchants left traces of their presence - there are more abundant ones about the Hellenic colonisation of the site.

It was, besides, precisely here, in the short stretch of Ionian coastline going from the Straits to Syracuse that the Greek adventure in Sicily began, with the foundation of Zancle, Naxos and Syracuse. Here, those settlers coming from Cuma and Chalcis, around 756 B.C. (or 730 or 727 B.C., according to the versions of different historians), founded their town, Zancle, or "sickle".

It was possible to reconstruct the planimetry of that ancient settlement - most probably laid out on the south side of the big harbour - on the basis of archaeological finds: a regular layout with edifices divided from one another by narrow passages, some sacred structures like that of a shrine from the late eighth century B.C., at the extreme tip of the tongue of land that closes off the harbour and, also funereal monuments like the one (in Largo Avignone) in the area of the necropolis itself, in the form of an underground chamber.

The vicissitudes of the city - Zancle, Messana, Messina - were always to be closely connected to the economic and strategic importance of the site itself: a place of encounter and clash for so many peoples and for the most diverse interests.

Conquered and reconquered by Sicilian Greeks and by Carthaginians, Messana - this was the name given to it by the tyrant of Reggio - was to be the first Roman colony in Sicily and, during the last two centuries before the Christian era - was to reach a position of major importance, so much so that

Cicero defined it "civitas maxima et locupletissima". This splendour was to last at least until the fall of the Western Roman Empire (476 A.D.), that is to say the start of the barbarian invasion, to recover with the Byzantines, becoming a "protometropolis" of Magna Grecia and Sicily.

Recovering its role as an important strategic port-of-call in relations with the east, and getting control of the Calabrian shore, fortified and administered by structures of its own, Messina succeeded, at least until 843 A.D., in holding out against a new invasion, that of the Muslims.

After a new grave period of decline - the city was to be abandoned by its people and to be re-peopled only in 956, under the Arabs - it was to become Norman in 1061 and to receive from the Normans privileges that were at the basis of a municipal constitution to last until the seventeenth century.

Messina then went to the Angevins and became an important military port at the time of the Crusades, so that its commercial and cultural strength increased.

These were the last centuries of great splendour for the city on the Straits. The wealth, the great development in terms of town planning and monuments, the political importance, were reflected in the major development of culture, and in Messina there was a flourishing of men of letters and humanists, thinkers and artists. One name stands out among them all, that of Antonello.

Then its decline started again, thanks to both man and nature. Rebellng against the Spanish in 1675-78, the people of Messina held out as long as they could count on the help of the French, but then came under Spanish dominion once again.

The Spanish repealed all the centuries old privileges of the city on the straits, demolished the senatorial palace and built - as a severe warning - the imposing San Ranieri citadel. Then the plague, which in 1743 emptied the city, the 1783 earthquake, the furious bombardments by Frederick II of Bourbon - the "bomb king" - the terrible earthquake of 1908 - sixty thousand victims and the destruction of 90% of the buildings - and devastation with the allied bombings of 1943, were to do the rest, largely wiping out the signs of a splendid past.

Yet it is misleading to think of Messina as a completely "new" city, substantially rebuilt after the 1908 earthquake and the bombings of World War II: the same dogged and victorious resistance of the people of Messina that defeated Charles of Anjou in

Messina,  
the Cathedral  
with the campanile  
enlivened by  
a big astro-  
nomic clock.







**The church of the Catalans, a successful blend of various styles.**

*1282, also made it possible to overcome the culpable greed and barbaric behaviour of man and also the innocent ferocity of nature.*

*Today Messina is a beautiful and charming city, rich by nature and also thanks to what the people have succeeded in preserving and reconstructing.*

*A visit to Messina takes one day.*

#### **Artistic heritage**

*Santa Maria d'Alemanna (or degli Alemanni) - The beautiful ruins of this church lie in Via Sant'Elia and Via Santa Maria Alemanna. These ruins are very important, as they are the only vestige of Sicilian Gothic architecture. Built in the first half of the thirteenth century, for the Order of Teutonic*



knights, the church was gradually abandoned starting from the end of the fifteenth century and in 1808 it ceased to be used as a church. Although wars and earthquakes preyed on this little Hohenstaufen bijou, in its ruins it still preserves all its characteristics of elegance and refinement.

#### **Santa Maria Annunziata dei Catalani**

It is one of the most precious treasures of Messina. Built in the second half of the twelfth century under the Normans, probably on a previous church, it has a simple but elegant thirteenth-century façade, in which there are three portals; it also has a cupola and splendid apses. It is a very elegant example of successful blending of styles - Byzantine, Romanesque, Arab and Norman. The interior has three naves on columns with barrel and cross vaults and the cupola rests on Byzantine pinnacles.

In the little square in front of the church there is the bronze statue of John of Austria who in 1571 won the battle of Lepanto, defeating the Ottoman fleet; he is shown in the act of crushing the cut-off head of Al Pasha, the commander of the fleet. Also interesting are the low reliefs in the base, commemorating some moments in the historical event.

**The Cathedral** - The stupendous Norman building was built in 1160 under the reign of Roger II and altered in the fourteenth and sixteenth centuries. It has a basilica layout divided into three by a double row of columns with three semicircular apses, beside which the fine campanile soars up.

The cathedral, which is one of the oldest churches in all Sicily, is a symbol of the misadventures of the city on the Straits, but also of the desire of the people of Messina never to surrender to the inevitable.

In the thirteenth century it suffered a terrible fire, and in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries earthquakes, was almost entirely destroyed by the 1908 earthquake and, once reconstructed, badly damaged by American bombs in 1943.

Today, in its splendid façade, it conserves three magnificent portals from the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, the main one of which, completed by Pietro di Bonato in 1468, was originally started by Baboccio da Piperno, the fourteenth-century artist who did the statue of the Madonna originally placed in the lunette and now kept at the local museum. Some windows and the fine rosette have also been recovered and restored.

Inside, where there is a fine painted wooden ceiling, of major interest are the numerous sepulchral monuments, among which that of



Cardinal Guidotto de Tabiatis stands out, a fourteenth-century work by Goro di Gregorio; twelve altars dating from the sixteenth century; a St. John, probably by Antonello Gagini; and a relief of St. Jerome, from the fifteenth century. There is a very fine treasure, with refined gold, silver and woven objects, done by local craftsmen known all over Europe. Adjacent to the church is the fine campanile,

**The main portal of the Cathedral.**



several times reconstructed, in which there is the biggest astronomic clock in the world, made in 1933 in Strasbourg: made up of numerous animated dials showing hours, days, months, planets and religious feasts, at midday it puts on a true music and animation spectacle lasting a quarter of an hour: a spectacle not to be missed, just as one must not miss the climb up the campanile itself (height 65 metres), which is possible from 9 am to 1 pm.

**Orion's Fountain** - A sixteenth-century monumental work by Montorsoli, showing Orion, one of the mythical founders of the city.

**Neptune's Fountain** - Also done by Montorsoli, in 1557, it is in Piazza Unità d'Italia.

Several times altered, the fountain shows Neptune placating the waters of the Straits.

## TAORMINA

The origins of this town can be dated to prehistory: in the late Bronze Age a group of Siculi settled on top of a hill looking out on the Ionian coast of Sicily. In the little town of Tauromenion the inhabitants of Naxos, destroyed by Dionysius I of Syracuse, took refuge. Dionysius occupied it in 392 B.C. It shared the fortunes of Greek and Roman Sicily. There was a decline, but it picked up again with the Byzantines, and in 902 it was one of the last places to surrender to the Arabs.

The Islamic domination was always ill accepted, and the people rebelled twice. After the second revolt, in 969, the destruction of the place was decreed, and only the fortification protecting Naxos, called Tambermin, was saved. In the thirteenth century, after the foundation of some convents, Taormina too was given a new lease of life, though it remained little more than a village. Its real fortune began in the nineteenth century, when, after a visit by Goethe, who praised its beauty all over Europe, it became almost a must in the "Grand Tour". The visitors in the last century were the fore-

runners of the very numerous tourists who every year visit Taormina, the capital of Sicilian tourism.

The main monument is the ancient **theatre**, not only because of its intrinsic artistic value, but also because of its picturesque position. The panorama to be enjoyed from up there has even been defined the "panorama par excellence", something you really must not miss once you are in Sicily. It is the second biggest ancient theatre on the island (diameter 109 m.) after that of Syracuse and was built in the Hellenistic epoch (third-second century B.C.). Modified and enlarged about 300 years later, it was used by the Romans for gladiatorial fights. The theatre, whose acoustics are outstanding, is used for musical and theatrical shows in summer.

The Romans also built the **Odeon**, a little edifice at the back of the present-day Saint Caterina church, perhaps the bouleuterion (meeting place) the **Naumachia**. The latter, together with the theatre, is the second main vestige of the Roman town and also one of the biggest Roman monuments on the island. It was a big terrace protecting a now no longer extant cistern. It seems that naval battles were held there, and hence the name.

**Palazzo Corvaja**, built in the fifteenth century on a structure from the previous century, was the seat of the Sicilian Parliament in 1410. On the front there is a fascia in which there are inscribed a series of moral sentences in Latin. Further up, on the first floor there are big double-mullioned windows. The inner courtyard is very picturesque.

The **Cathedral**, dedicated to St. Nicholas, was built in the thirteenth century. Later, in the fifteenth, sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, it was altered. Its squared-off and severe look reminds one of Norman cathedrals.

The main portal, surmounted by a small rosette and flanked by two ogival mullioned windows, was done in 1636 in the Renaissance style; two other portals, from the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, are respectively on the left and right sides (the first one in particular is outstanding).

The interior has three naves; there are interesting paintings by Antonino Giuffrè (1436) and a polyptych by Antonello de Saliba (1504). The elegant **palace of the dukes of Santo Stefano**, built in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, is a fine example of Sicilian architecture.

The imposing perimeter walls are lightened by double-mullioned windows, four down below and four - more elegant - on the residential floor.

Above, the Fountain of Orione.

Right, Cariddi, a detail of the Neptune Fountain.







## TINDARI

Founded on the site of the Siculo village of Abaceno in 396 B.C. by Dionysius I of Syracuse, as a military outpost against possible Carthaginian raids, Tyndaris was one of the last Greek colonies in Sicily. Growing rapidly, the town played a major strategic role in guarding the Tyrrhenian maritime routes and went through all the painful vicissitudes of the conflicts between Siceliots, Carthaginians and Romans for the control of the island. Occupied by the Carthaginians in 246 B.C., it was conquered by the Romans ten years later and afterwards became one of the five Roman colonies, enjoying all the privileges of this status. A very big landslide, an earthquake, in 365 A.D., and the devastations by the Arabs, in 836, put an end to the adventure of Tyndaris; but its beauty survived.

The **theatre**, probably built at the end of the fourth century A.D., was completely restructured and transformed into an arena during the Roman epoch, with the demolition, unfortunately, of the stage.

The **basilica** was a big meeting room with arches, originally structured on three floors and giving access to the agora. It probably dates from the end of the first century B.C., wonderfully blending Greek and Roman styles and techniques. Only the first of the three floors of which it was made up is pre-

served fairly well; it consists of a single broad nave covered by a series of nine arches, two of which are still standing (one was reconstructed in 1956) together with part of the two perimeter walls. One should also see the **thermae**, perhaps dating from the third century A.D., with interesting mosaics; the **Roman houses** with courtyards and columns, dating from the imperial period; the street layout, organised around three decumans intersected, by steep transversal streets, and the long stretches of **walls**, among the most grandiose and best preserved ones in Sicily.

The **shrine of the Tindari Madonna** stands on the site of the ancient agora, right at the top of Cape Tindari. It is a mecca for pilgrims on account of the effigy of the Black Madonna, a Byzantine work which is considered miraculous.

Tindari is also one of the most beautiful places on the island in terms of nature and landscape: from up there, at a height of 230 metres above sea level, there is an extraordinary scenario.

Particular mention must be made of the Olivieri lagoon, now a nature reserve. Formed by cordons of sand and gravel, greatly varying in shape with the currents and waves of three little pools - Verde, Marinello and Vergolo - it is an important calling place for interesting birds during migrations.

Above,  
Taormina, the  
ancient theatre.

Right, Tindari,  
the ruins of the  
basilica, a big  
meeting room  
which gave  
access to the  
agora.







# Ragusa

Above, the facade of the Cathedral of Ragusa.

Right, view of the old part, Ibla.



Ragusa is right at the heart of the “land of the carob, the olive and honey” wonderfully described by Gesualdo Bufalino, sweetly revealing, before our eyes, silent and tranquil scenarios, uniform flatness broken by the limpid geometries of low walls which trace out non-existent labyrinths. It stretches out white and grey on a long and narrow rock spur between two deep and steep valleys. A third valley, almost an isthmus, separates the two nuclei of the town: Ibla, to the east, the oldest part, with an irregular and picturesque layout, rich in splendid Baroque edifices, and upper Ragusa, to the west, with a modern look, extending towards the south, spanning the Santa Domenica quarry with three bold bridges. Thus is it seen from a distance, with the clear eye of the visitor.

From close up Ragusa is a sleepy provincial town, Sundays spent walking in the main thoroughfare, with the ambition of having a solution for everything; peeping between closed shutters hiding the cool of splendid ancestral mansions; counting the doves amid the twirls of the rich Baroque sculpting the houses. Ragusa is an old man-sized town; woman-sized, child-sized, clean, the colour of stone, in the air like a scent of honey. Ibla, the ancient Hyblea Heraia of the Siculi, who dominated the valley of the Irminio, was colonised by the Greeks of Syracuse and over the cen-

turies shared the fate of the whole of Sicily, going through the dominions of the Romans, the Byzantines, the Arabs, the Normans, the Angevins and the Spanish. Totally destroyed by the terrible earthquake of 1693, it rose up again, extending to the west and being decorated with fine Baroque monuments, which you come across practically everywhere.

A visit to Ragusa takes one day.

## Artistic heritage

**The Cathedral** - Dedicated to St. John, it rises imposingly at the junction of the two main streets of upper Ragusa, Via Roma and Corso Italia. It was built starting from 1694 and looks out, with a broad hanging terrace, on Piazza San Giovanni.

The broad and lively façade is flanked by a massive bell tower ending in a cusp.

The interior has three naves; in it there are nineteenth-century chapels decorated with fine stuccoes.

**Santa Maria delle Scale** - It is a little church founded for the Cistercians in the fourteenth century, near the long flight of steps connecting upper Ragusa to Ragusa Ibla. It was rebuilt after the earthquake, preserving, outside, the original Gothic portal and pulpit, and, inside, the four chapels with Gothic and Renaissance arcades.

**Ibleo Garden** - This is the municipal park of Ragusa Ibla. Inside it is the San Domenico Church.

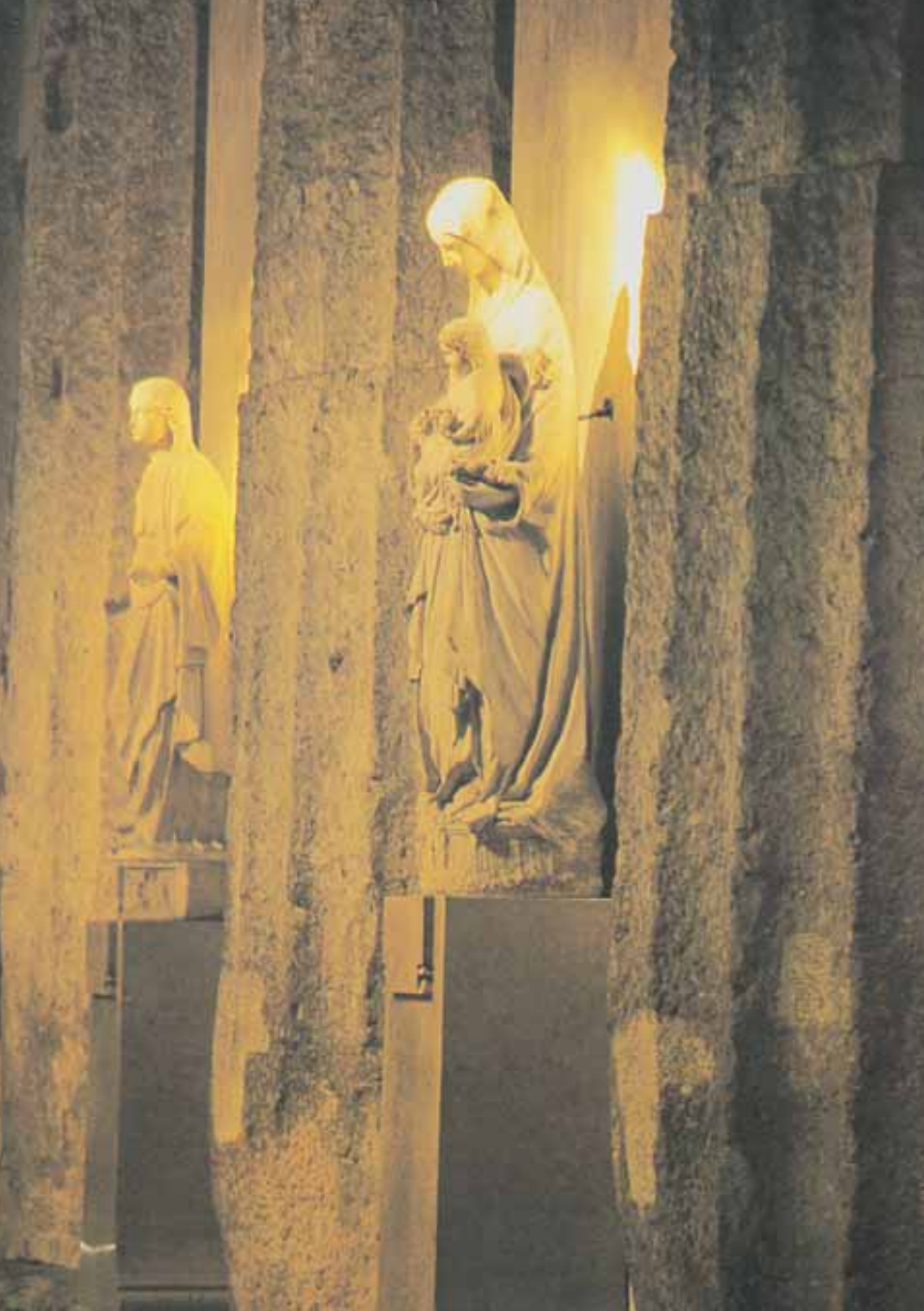
Not far away is the Capuchin Church, whose importance is linked to the fact that the triptych painted by Pietro Novelli is kept here, and the ancient portal of the tumble-down San Giorgio Vecchio Church, a fine example of Gothic architecture.

**The St. George Church** - It rises high over Piazza Duomo from the top of an imposing flight of steps leading to the portal surmounted by beautiful low reliefs showing scenes from the martyrdom of St. George. The high and soaring façade, almost seeming to want to reach the sky, is a masterpiece by Rosario Gagliardi (who also did - among other things - the similar splendid façade of St. George at Modica).

The interior has a Latin cross layout. Inside the majestic Serassi organ stands out, which since 1881 has been called Organum Maximum, since it is the biggest one ever built by the Serassi company. In addition to the arches and the decorated ceilings, there are 33 storied windows, twelve of which show scenes from the martyrdom of St. George, the patron saint of Ibla (St. John is the patron saint of upper Ragusa).









“It is small, pretty, seated on the shores of the gulf with gardens and promenades going down as far as the waves.”

Syracuse, in the words of Guy De Maupassant, who visited it in the late nineteenth century, is something quite different from the magnificent metropolis that it was in the fifth century. At that time, when Dionysius I reigned, it was one of the biggest and most powerful cities in the Mediterranean, embellished by temples and palaces, gardens and fountains, rich in terms of money, culture and power.

It was an ideal city according to Plato, who visited it several times, placing in it his hopes for political and social renewal.

It was a magnificent city according to Simonides, Pindar, Bacchilides and Aeschylus, who sang of its beauty.

A city of enormous military power, capable of checkmating the terrible cities of Carthage and Athens.

Syracuse was founded in 734 B.C. by settlers from Corinth who were inspired, in choosing the name, by the local name for a nearby marsh, called Syrakā. It is highly unlikely that these settlers already had any inkling of the great future that their colony was destined to have, but it is certain that expansion began almost immediately, with the subjugation of all the nearby places.

In the fifth century the influence of Syracuse was felt all over the Mediterranean and to this city there are linked events which were decisive for the history of those years: the defeat of the Carthaginians near Himera in 480 B.C.; the defeat of the Etruscans at Cuma in 474, preventing their southward expansion; the victory over the Athenians in 413, in one of the most grandiose naval battles of antiquity. It was only with great sacrifices and deceit that in 212 B.C. the Romans succeeded in taking the city, which had the wonderful defences done by Archimedes.

Despite a certain decline, Syracuse remained the best known and most important city in Sicily, and indeed the eastern emperor Constant II for a period made it the capital of his empire.

It was only with the Arab conquest, in 878, that Syracuse lost its supremacy among Sicilian cities and its true slow decline began. The dominations common to all Sicily were shared by Syracuse too, which never again reached the incredible vertices of the fifth century, but changed into that tranquil city that it is today, the silent and proud heir to a magnificent past.

A visit to Syracuse takes two days.

## Artistic heritage - Ortigia

### The Temple of Apollo and Artemis -

The ruins of this temple are in Largo XXV Luglio. It dates right back to the seventh century B.C. and hence is the oldest Greek temple in Sicily. Over the centuries it was converted into a Byzantine church, a mosque and then a Christian basilica, and of all these successive constructions traces were found in the course of digging campaigns in 1938-43. The temple was Doric and shows some peculiarities due to its antiquity.

**The Cathedral** - It is in Piazza Duomo, surrounded by elegant Baroque palaces (the latter are a particular feature of Ortigia, and are disseminated all over the island), and occupies an ancient sacred area.

Diggings here and in the immediate vicinity have made it possible to reconstruct the development of the building right from the Siculo settlement. There was a Ionic temple, the only one of its kind known in the Greek west; its sparse ruins can be seen in the basement of the Town Hall.

The cathedral is the outcome of successive transformations made to the grandiose temple of Athena, probably built by the Diomenides, the family founded by Gelon, the first tyrant of Syracuse.

It was a six column per row peripteral building, with 36 columns almost 9 metres high with a diameter of 2 m. Its magnificence was celebrated by Cicero. To get an idea, one need only think its doors were made of gold and ivory. On its top shone the golden shield of Athena, guiding navigators. In about the seventh century the intercolumns were closed and the temple transformed into a Christian church, later proclaimed a cathedral.

The façade, which dates from the eighteenth century, is imposing and lively, decorated with statues and Corinthian columns.

The interior, of the basilica type, has three naves: the middle one occupies what was the cell of the ancient temple, whose columns protrude from the walls. There are numerous works of art, among which we will mention the painting on wood with a golden background showing St. Cosimo, attributed to Antonello da Messina, in the Crocifisso chapel; the Gagini statue of the Madonna della Neve, on the altar in the left apse, the only one from the Byzantine church; the gaudy Baroque high altar, the flat part of which is a monolithic block from the beams in the Temple of Athena.

**The Fountain of Arethusa** - In a square looking out over the sea, this little fountain, inhabited by white ducks and surrounded by slender papyrus, is the symbol of the relations



# Syracuse

The interior of Syracuse cathedral: along the left nave there stand out very clearly the columns of the Temple of Athena.



between Syracuse and the mother-city Corinth, never interrupted despite the distance. The legend has it that Arethusa, to get away from the impetuous love of Alpheus, threw herself into the sea. The goddess Artemis, taking pity, transformed her into a spring which, disappearing under the ground in Greece, reappeared this side of the sea at Ortigia. Alpheus was changed into a river, but this was not enough to keep him away from his beloved nymph: his waters too crossed the sea, to burst out in a spring not far from the Fountain of Arethusa.

**Maniace Castle** - Now incorporated in a barracks, it rises imposingly on the waterfront at Ortigia. It was built at the behest of Frederick II in about 1239. The castle, which blends military architecture with the elegance of a court, still preserves the external thirteenth-century structure with a square layout, with massive corner towers.

The entrance is decorated with a magnificent marble portal in the Gothic style. The great fortress, whose name derives from "Eurvelos", i.e. "nail with a broad base", was protected to the west by three big moats, the third of which was connected to the whole defensive system, made up of an intricate maze of tunnels and passages with an overall length of 480 metres, and of five towers a full 15 metres high.

**The Neapolis archaeological park**

**The Latomie** - These are the quarries from which the material was obtained which

was used to build up Syracuse. The most interesting one is the Paradise Latomia, immersed in a luxuriant garden. In it there is the so-called "Dionysius' Ear", a big artificial grotto in which there is an extraordinary acoustic effect of amplification.

It is narrated that the tyrant, who gave the grotto its name, standing near an appropriate crack at the top of the cave, listened to every word, even whispered, of the prisoners in it. Not far away there is the appropriately named "rope makers' cave". Lastly, further on, there are the Intagliatella and Santa Venera Latomie, which are the smallest ones.

Seven thousand people were put in the latomie to do forced labour - they were the survivors of the enormous Athenian army defeated by the Syracuse army in 413 B.C. It is narrated that some of them were freed simply because they knew Euripides' verses by heart. Most of them perished miserably.

**The Greek Theatre** - It is the most perfect example of theatre architecture that has come down to us and it was one of the biggest theatres in the Greek world (diameter 138.6 m.). We have notices of it starting from the fifth century B.C., when Syracuse was already one of the most important cultural centres in the Mediterranean.

However, the form in which we can admire it today is a later one and was probably done in the second century B.C.

In the theatre, hewn out in the rock of the hill, the "premières" of tragedies and comedies by famous authors, like Aeschylus and

**The Fountain of Arethusa, on the islet of Ortigia, which is the oldest part of Syracuse.**



Epicharmus, were performed and the stage is still used today: every two years, the National Institute for Ancient Drama organises Greek classical performances here.

**Jerón's arena** - The remains of this gigantic structure are a short distance from the theatre. This was an altar, almost 200 metres long, on which the town's public sacrifices were made.

**The Roman amphitheatre** - Dating from the third or fourth century A.D., it is an elliptical shape, with external diameters of 140 and 119 metres, so that it is only slightly smaller than the Verona arena.

Starting from 1526 the Spanish began systematic despoiling of the Neapolis monuments to build the Ortigia fortress, obviously doing grave damage to the structures, which were probably still well preserved at that time.

The monuments were brought to light in digging campaigns starting from the nineteenth century.

**Euryalus Castle** - In the Epipolis district, it was built at the behest of Dionysius I at the start of the fifth century B.C. and is one of the most interesting military complexes in the ancient Greek world.

It is a big fortress with a surface area of 15,000 square metres, at the junction of the north and south walls of Syracuse, in a raised place, whence one could easily observe a large part of the territory and the sea around the city. It was redone several times in subsequent centuries to adapt it to new military and technical requirements.

## NOTO

Noto is believed to have been founded by Sican populations, at the time of the fall of Troy, on the Mendola hill. Falling into the hands of the Syracuse conquerors, the town assimilated Hellenic customs and rites, and was raised to the rank of a "gymnasium".

Coming under the Roman domination, as a federate city, in the imperial epoch it was declared a Latin 'municipium', a singular condition which brought the town considerable privileges, like that of being able to govern itself with its own laws.

Conquered by the Arabs, who made it a highly armed stronghold, it took the present name and was the capital of one of the three "valleys" into which they subdivided Sicily. After two centuries of Islamic domination, in 1090 Noto negotiated surrender with Roger.

The history of Noto has been determined not so much by men as by nature: in 1693 it was destroyed by the earthquake which struck all south-western Sicily.

Conceived of like a big theatre without wings, as a big and open, lively and flowing town, Noto returned to life, sumptuous and superb, on the side of the Meti hill, on the southern slopes of the Iblei mountains.

The architectural vicissitudes of the new town were dominated by the artistic fancy of three architects, Rosario Gagliardi, Vincenzo Sinatra and Paolo Labisi, who succeeded in developing an amazing masterpiece showing architectural unity.

These were three different personalities



The Greek theatre, one of the biggest in the world.



which, though living and working in the provinces, conferred on the town an original impress which goes beyond the rigid Baroque idiom, being enriched with Renaissance, pseudo-Spanish and neo-classical elements and giving life to a fanciful and dreamy style.

The **triumphal arch**, along the main thoroughfare, marks the start of the town. Surmounted by three symbolic sculptures - a tower with battlements (power), a dog (fidelity) and a pelican (sacrifice) - the monument was erected during a visit to Noto of Ferdinand II of Bourbon, who inaugurated it in 1838. The royal gate was built in the typical golden calcareous stone used in the previous century for churches and palaces in the town.

The **San Francesco all'Immacolata Church** rises at the top of an imposing flight of steps at the right of the main thoroughfare. It was built, together with the annexed convent,

in 1704-45. The church has a single nave, in accordance with the Franciscan custom. All white, the walls are decorated with rococo-style stuccoes.

The **Santa Chiara Church**, by Gagliardi, a delicate Baroque expression, was built in 1785. The interior, small and oval, decorated with stuccoes and putti, has its rhythm marked out by twelve columns, and it is one of the most interesting examples of spatial solutions by this architect.

The **Santissimo Salvatore monastery** is the biggest edifice in the town, built in 1710-91 on a rectangular area of 11,000 square metres. On the first floor flat twin pillars frame the big windows, whose rich decoration is reminiscent of the Portuguese plateresque style.

Then follows a protruding wing which acts as a key in the construction conception; it



patron saint of the town, San Corrado, is kept.

Opposite the cathedral there is **Palazzo Ducezio**, which houses the Town Hall.

Designed by the architect Sinatra, the palace, raised with respect to the square in which it stands, was built in 1746-1830 with a single floor. A hundred years ago a second floor was superimposed on it which has damaged the original neo-classical look. Of interest, inside, is the representation room, rich in gilding and stuccoes.

Not far away there is **Palazzo Villadorata**, which looks out on Via Nicolaci, a narrow side street. The broad façade is enlivened by protruding balconies in wrought iron held up by all sorts of ledges, with human and animal figures amid volutes and arabesques, the most extreme manifestation of Noto Baroque.

Built in 1731, the palace, which for a long time was the residence of the princes of Villadorata, was recently largely purchased by the town council. In it there are ninety rooms, and in the ceilings there are eighteenth-century frescoes. In May in Via Nicolaci there is a traditional flower procession. At the end the street is closed off by the **Montevergine Church**, attributed to the architect Sinatra. On the outside it is concave in shape, closed off between two lateral towers; inside there is only one nave, along which there are Corinthian columns.

The **Crocifisso Church** is the second one in the town after the cathedral. It stands in the upper part of Noto, in Piazza Mazzini.

Designed by Gagliardi (1715), it is the richest church in works of art. Inside there are two, column-bearing lions from the Romanesque epoch, recovered from the ruins of the Crocifisso church in the old town; there is also the white marble statue of the Madonna della Neve done in 1471 by Francesco Laurana.

A bracket of one of the balconies of the Zocco Palace in Palazzolo Acreide.



rises imposingly like a tower over buildings and cupolas around it, and leaves no doubt about the superiority of this monastery compared to other orders. This impression is emphasised by the rich stone decoration and the railings in wrought iron.

The **Santissimo Salvatore Church**, built at the end of the eighteenth century, rises in a big square. Its particular feature lies in the traces, in the façade, of the transition from Baroque to Classicism.

The **Cathedral**, which stands at the top of a monumental staircase, was begun just a few months after the earthquake, but was only completed in 1770. The façade, devoid of ornaments and extravagances, incorporates Baroque motifs and classical elements. The three naves of the church are divided by high pillars with double pilasters. In the chapel at the back of the right nave the silver ark of the



#### **PALAZZOLO ACREIDE**

*Akrai, from which the modern town descends, was the first colony founded by Syracuse (664 B.C.) in the course of its expansion towards inland Sicily. It was an important station for controlling the so-called Selinunte Way linking Syracuse to the towns on the southern coast.*

*We have notices of it starting from the Roman and Byzantine epochs. The first notices of present-day Palazzolo date from the twelfth century, when a village developed around the Norman castle which is no longer extant. The growth of the medieval town was arrested by the 1693 earthquake, after which, however, Palazzolo was rebuilt and enlarged.*

*From this reconstruction date the **San Paolo Church**, built by architect Sinatra, with an interesting façade preceded by a portico, rich in decorations and statues, and the **Annunziata Church**.*

*The latter is one of the oldest in Palazzolo. Particularly striking is the façade, decorated by a Baroque portal with spiralling columns and stone decorations. Inside there is a refined high altar with marble inlays which is quite well preserved.*

*The **Akrai archaeological area** is not far from the centre. The parts so far discovered*

*refer to the Hellenistic and late Roman periods, though there are also older finds. The diggings have brought to light the 'plateia' (main street) connecting the two main town gates (the "Syracuse" and "Selinunte" gates), and the little theatre, still well preserved and used for performances. Not far away is also the bouleuterion (meeting place) and the Intagliatella and Intagliata latomie, in which there was worship of the dead, and which were used later, in the early Christian age, as dwellings and a burial place. The latomia of the so-called "beast temples", in the western part of the hill, was also frequented for the worship of dead heroes. Behind the latomie, on the hill over the theatre, one can see the foundations of an archaic temple dedicated to Aphrodite.*

*Nearby, in the Santicello area, there are the "Santoni" (big saints), twelve rock sculptures - unfortunately rather ruined - done in twelve niches hewn out in the rock. They are connected to the worship of Cybele, the Great Mother of Gods, and mostly show the goddess herself, standing, sitting with three lions or in the company of other characters difficult to identify. The complex, which is the most complete and vast which has come down to us, dates from the third century B.C.*

**Above, the Greek theatre at Akrai, the ancient nucleus of which is now Palazzolo Acreide.**

**Right, view of Trapani.**





**A**t the foot of rugged Mount Erice, which seems to watch over it, Trapani extends as far as the sea, stretching out on an arched promontory.

Along the coast adjacent to the town, and then gradually away along the coast as far as Marsala, heaps of salt glisten white on the shore, guarded by windmills that, with their big blades, stand out against the sea like fantastic monsters. Opposite, often wrapped in a slight haze making their outlines uncertain, there emerge three islands, the Egadi, welcoming the visitor coming from the sea.

Trapani is a little town, in its sea cradle, with the slightly shabby look of those who hide their treasures so as to show them only to people who can really appreciate them.

Historically the origins of Trapani are believed to date from the Sicans, who are supposed to have founded a village here, but perhaps, as ancient writers recount, it grew up on the sickle that Ceres dropped, while she desperately wandered around seeking her daughter Persephone, abducted by Pluto. What is certain is that on these shores numerous more or less fantastic peoples followed one another. Starting with the Cyclops, then came the Elimi, the Giants, the Trojans, the Phoenicians and many others, but Trapani only acquired importance in 260 B.C., when Hamilcar brought here the

inhabitants of Erice, the town of which it had long been the emporium (harbour).

During the Roman domination the town lost much of its prestige. The only major event was the arrival of the Jews, who liked it so much here, that they founded a very important community. Trapani followed in the shadow of the vicissitudes of the rest of Sicily, coming into the limelight of history in the thirteenth century, when Frederick of Aragon conferred privileges on it. Trade flourished: tuna and refined coral objects, hard stones, wood were sold all over the world then known.

The town was a base for crusaders' ships going to the Holy Land, and there were consulates of the Catalans, the Genoese, the Venetians, the Pisans, the French and many others. The apex of its power was reached under Charles V, who landed here on his return from Tunis and conferred other particular privileges on the town, allowing it to improve its position further. In the eighteenth century there went up Baroque buildings which are still a feature of its old part. The activity of the harbour, though less than in the past, is still at the centre of the town's economy.

A visit to Trapani takes one day.

#### **Artistic heritage**

**The shrine of the Madonna of the Annunciation** - This is the main monument



# Trapani



octagonal apse; in the chapel there are frescoes representing episodes from Genesis.

Behind the high altar there is the access to the shrine proper, at the back of which there is the chapel of the Madonna, done in 1530. The big outer marble arch was done by Antonello, Antonio and Giacomo Gagini, who decorated it with fine reliefs (Eternal Father and Prophets).

On the altar there is the magnificent Madonna with Child, done by Nino Pisano and his workshop. According to the most widely held opinion, the statue came to Trapani in the early years of the fourteenth century, brought by a knight of the Order of Jerusalem of Pisan origin, who commissioned the work.

The folk tradition has it, that the latter at first took the statue with him to the east, but a few years later decided to make it safe against the Saracens and set out for the west with the precious simulacrum. Then, during the voyage, the boat was caught by a storm and the knight made a vow to leave the statue on the first land, he should touch.

It chanced, that this was Sicily, which since then has given hospitality to it. In the work the artist succeeded in blending rare beauty, great nobility and fineness, and the evocative statue was for centuries a model for the works of local artists from Laurana to Gagini, who sought above all to equal the very sweet and ineffable smile of the Madonna which has made the statue famous.

**The Cathedral** - Dedicated to St. Laurence, it was built in 1635 on a previous fourteenth-century church, in the place where since 1129 there had been the lodge of the Genoese, who left a trace in a coat-of-arms inside the edifice. The elegant Baroque portal was enriched in the eighteenth century by an airy portico and a cupola, bizarrely flanked by smaller cupolas. The interior is decorated in the early Baroque style. There are numerous works of art, including a Crucifixion attributed to Van Dyck.

**Santa Maria di Gesù Church** - It dates from the first half of the sixteenth century. The façade has mixed Gothic and Renaissance forms and in it there is a fine pseudo-Catalan portal. At the back, to the right of the presbytery, there is the Staiti Chapel, inside which, under a refined marble canopy by A. Gagini (1521), there is a glazed terracotta statue of Madonna degli Angeli, a fine work by A. della Robbia (1435-1525).

**Collegio Church** - It was built in the first half of the seventeenth century, with a solid Renaissance structure with fine sculptural decorations. The interior has a latin cross layout with three naves and is harmoniously decorat-

in the town. It was erected in 1315-32, later enlarged and then totally redone in 1760. The façade is the original one and is decorated by a magnificent rosette and an early fifteenth-century Gothic portal. On the little side portals there are two sixteenth-century statues of the Angel and of the Madonna of the Annunciation.

Inside there are in particular two chapels to visit: the Sailors' Chapel and the Fishermen's Chapel. The former is to the left of the presbytery and was built in tufa in 1514-52. In its warm yellow colour there are blended different styles and motifs - Gothic, Renaissance and oriental - interpreted with abundance of decoration with a local flavour. The other chapel, on the opposite side, dates from the sixteenth century. It has a square layout, surmounted by an

Above, Trapani, the Church of Annunziata.



ed with mixtilinear marble and stuccoes. On the high altar there is a marble low relief of the Immaculate Virgin by I. Marabitti (1766) and in the sacristy a magnificent walnut cupboard with very delicate eighteenth-century carvings.

**Palazzo Ciambra** - It is in Via Giudecca in the Jewish Quarter. It is a typical example of the plateresque style of Catalan derivation, which spread in Sicily from Spain in the sixteenth century. The palace which now looks rather old - it dates from the middle of the sixteenth century - was once splendid thanks to the use of carved stone and the richness of the ornaments. A fanciful artist translated into stone the subtle fascination of the work of the goldsmith and of gems in the processing of which the Jews were unchallenged masters.

### ERICE

It stands on the top of a solitary mountain, which dominates Trapani, the valley and the sea. Its origins are very ancient and mysterious, wrapped in legend. On the peak first there was a temple, dedicated to a female divinity of fertile nature. She was always highly venerated by all Mediterranean peoples and her main concern was to protect sailors, who from a distance saw the fire that burnt in the sacred edifice and also gave them their bearings. Soon a powerful fortress was built there, fought over by Phoenicians, Greeks, Carthaginians and Romans. It was destroyed by the Carthaginians in 260 B.C. and the inhabitants were taken to Trapani. In the Roman epoch the old fortress was of little importance. Not so the temple, which indeed was set at the head of a religious confederation of seventeen Sicilian towns and permanently defended by a garrison. There are no further notices of the town and shrine until the Arab epoch, when it reappears with the name Gebel-Hamed. During the Norman domination and in subsequent centuries Erice got the look that has come down to us and is its main attraction. All gathered in a triangular perimeter, it is one of the most singular little towns in Sicily.

The narrow cobbled streets, the small squares, the tiny flower-filled courtyards, rich handicraft comprising ceramics, confectionery and carpets, make it a mecca not to be missed on any excursion in the Trapani area.

**The Cathedral** was built in the second half of the fourteenth century and was dedicated to the Virgin of the Assumption. It is preceded by an imposing isolated campanile, originally a watchtower.

In the fifteenth century to the façade there was added a rectangular portico on four ogival arches. The interior shows a hybrid Gothic

style, on account of modifications made in 1865. In it there are numerous paintings, sculptures and other artistic objects attributed to well-known Sicilian artists, such as Laurana and Mancino.

There is a **castle** which stands on the ruins of the ancient temple of Venus. There are remains of it from the fifth to seventh centuries B.C., on a high isolated rock which in ancient times people got to on a drawbridge. It was rendered impregnable by the Normans, who added walls with battlements.

At the start of this century some drums of columns and fragments of cornices from the temple were found; they date from the Roman modification. Later, remains were also found of a mosaic floor. Around the castle there are the Balio gardens, which are magnificent for their terrace arrangement and the variety of plants grown there. They take their name from the Norman governor ("Bajulo") who resided in the adjacent castle.

The **medieval towers** are the outpost of the Castle of Venus, to which they were joined by imposing walls. They were partially reconstructed in the middle of the last century at the behest of Count Pepoli, who also built the little Pepoli Tower, a manneristic construction in a vaguely Moorish style.

### MARSALA

Its origin is believed to date from 397 B.C.,

Below, Erice, the fourteenth-century Mother church.





when the Phoenician inhabitants of Motya, after their defeat by Syracuse, took refuge on the Lilybaeum promontory, founding a town there to be called Lilybaeum, which became the last and most powerful bulwark of Phoenician power in Sicily. In 241 B.C., after various vain attempts, the Romans succeeded in getting hold of it; the town became a Roman province, it was given a quaestor and a praetor, and long remained the most important port on the island. This preeminent position was maintained throughout the Middle Ages, until, in the sixteenth century, Charles V blocked the harbour to defend the town from pirate attacks. However, the remedy was worse than the evil, because from then on Marsala (which had got this name in the meantime, from the Arabic Marsa-Ali) began inexorably to decline.

In Italian history its name is linked to the landing of Garibaldi, who started here the exploit to lead to the unification of the Kingdom of Italy. Most people, however, know it rather as the place of production of the refined liqueur named after it. The first production plants, called "bagli", came into being here in 1773 through the initiative of an Englishman, G. Woodhouse.

Marsala, in its different varieties, is now known all over the world.

The **Cathedral**, dedicated to St. Thomas,

was founded in the Norman age and subsequently modified until the eighteenth century, when it was rebuilt in a grandiose fashion, though remaining unfinished. Seriously damaged in the course of the last war, it was restored and the façade, of which only the lower tier had previously been done, was completed. Inside, it is decorated with numerous works by Gagini and his school.

The real treasure of the church is made up of eight big sixteenth-century tapestries of the Flemish school, donated by archbishop Lombardo, who in turn had received them from Philip II of Spain. They measure four metres by four and, in a rich setting of flowers, fruit and allegories, they represent episodes from the war of Titus I against the Judeans.

The **thermae** are the main edifice discovered in the area of the ancient Lilybaeum, amid ruins of other buildings, remains of the boundary wall, bits of the ancient harbour, necropolises, ceramics, sculptures and various objects. Dating from the third to fourth centuries B.C., they were very probably part of a grandiose building complex, as is testified by the continual finds in the surrounding area.

#### **MOTYA**

An ancient legend has it that Hercules once had his herds robbed. After long seeking





the “tophet”, consisting of a shrine inside which there is a cemetery, where there were placed the remains of human sacrifices offered to cruel Phoenician divinities like Baal Hammon, who demanded the sacrifice of the firstborn male. In 397 B.C. Motya was destroyed by Dionysius of Syracuse, and the survivors moved to the mainland, founding the colony of Lilybaeum, now Marsala.

From then on this little island remained uninhabited, until Joseph Whitaker, enamoured of the place, bought it. The results of the diggings he set going were displayed in one of the low buildings of his villa, which thus became a museum. Off Motya, in the late 1970's, the wreck of a Punic ship was found. Unique in the world, it is on display at the Baglio Anselmi Museum in Marsala.

### MAZARA DEL VALLO

The ancient town looks out on the Sicilian Channel to the left of the river Mazarò, presumably on the site where the Phoenicians founded the commercial colony Mazara, a native name perhaps meaning “castle”. Thanks to its position, it acquired importance both as a port and as a fortress. It flourished to some extent during the Roman domination too, and there are some vestiges of the latter period.

It attained true splendour under the Arabs. They landed at Mazara to start the colonisation of the island and placed the town at the head of one of the three administrative districts into which they divided Sicily. The various Islamic travellers who visited it praised the fertility of its territory, the quality and quantity of commercial activities, the economic prosperity, the flourishing plantations and gardens, the beauty of the edifices. All this has indelibly remained in the town, the street layout having been handed down intact.

With the coming of the Normans, the town was enriched with churches, convents and monasteries, and a boundary wall was put up round it. New monuments were later built in the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries, and in 1852, with the demolition of Roger's walls, expansion began in the surrounding area. Particularly interesting to visit is the canal harbour, built on the estuary of the river Mazarò, the commercial centre of the town. On it one of the oldest districts looks out: along the shores there lived Arab traders, whose blood has been visibly perpetuated in the veins of the local people. When motor and other fishing boats come in in the morning, there is a continual shouting very much reminding one of the ancient cries of merchants of the past. This is

them in vain, he was fortunately helped by a woman named Motya, who pointed out to him a cave in which the animals were hidden. Out of gratitude, our hero decided to found a town in honour of the woman and to give it her name. Historians have handed down to us the story of a town founded in the eighth century B.C., on an island in the Stagnone lagoon, no bigger than 40 hectares (100 acres) which, thanks to its favourable position on trade routes, very soon became one of the most florid Phoenician colonies in the Mediterranean.

The town was surrounded by high walls, in which at intervals there were watch towers, semicircular battlements, typical of Semitic architecture, and two gates which are still well preserved. Its economy was based mainly on trade and on the production of ceramics.

It was an important naval base, and so a 'kothon' was built there, that is to say, a dry dock for repairing ships, which, after the bigger one at Carthage, is the only one found in the western Mediterranean.

According to Diodorus Siculus, the town had elegant houses and sumptuous palaces, but the residential area has not yet been excavated and at present only two houses are visible: one of them has floor mosaics with black and white pebbles, showing real and fantastic animals. Among the most interesting areas discovered is

The Doric Temple at Segesta.



Above, Temple E of Selinunte. This archaeological area is one of the most important in the Mediterranean.

one of the most important fishing ports in Italy, with an annual production of about 200,000 quintals of fish.

The main monument is the **Cathedral**, dedicated to San Salvatore. It was originally built at the end of the eleventh century and then totally redone in 1690-94.

There are a few vestiges of the original construction, and specifically the walls of the transept and the apse, decorated outside with niches, as in the ancient pseudo-Arab style of the Norman epoch. The most outstanding work of art among those kept inside the church is a "Transfiguration", a marble composition of six statues done, with a marked folk taste from sacred representations, by Antonio Gagini in the 1430's.

#### SEGESTA

The town was founded in the pre-Hellenic age by the Elimi, a population of uncertain ori-

gin, probably oriental. It soon took on major importance, both economically and because of its strategic position between the Punic towns on the northern and western coasts. It was the eternal enemy of Selinunte, against which in 409 B.C. it called for the help of the Carthaginians, who razed Selinunte to the ground. The destruction of Selinunte marked once and for all the entry of Segesta into the Punic orbit, but this had no influence on the customs of the people that, on the contrary, became more and more Hellenistic. Under the Romans, the town was well treated, thanks to a "blood relationship" supposed to exist between the two peoples, but nevertheless it declined, and its name was quite forgotten.

So far little of it has been excavated, though diggings have already brought to light the first vestiges of the ancient dwellings. Two monuments have also been brought to light: the **theatre** and the **temple**. The former, founded in the fifth century at the top of Monte Barbaro, in a very picturesque position, was rebuilt in the Hellenistic age and now has the look dating from that period.

The pit has a diameter of 63 m. and is well preserved, while of the stage there only remain the lower structures. The theatre is used for international performances especially poetry, reading, ballet and ancient tragedies. The temple is probably the main building of a suburban shrine which is still unexplored. Also built in the fifth century, it is a six column per row peripteral building. It is unfinished; the grooves were not made in the columns, and there is no trace of a roof and a cell. The temple looms up solitary on a hill in a very charming position, and it is one of the most perfect and best preserved examples of Doric art.

#### SELINUNTE

On a soft little hill the ruins of Selinunte extend, rightly considered one of the most important archaeological areas in the Mediterranean and indeed in all Europe. Founded in the course of the seventh century by settlers from Megara Hyblaea, it was the westernmost outpost of the Greek territories in Sicily. Hence it was here that for about three centuries there was the encounter and clash between the Greek and Phoenician-Punic civilizations which long marked the life of the peoples of the lands around the Mediterranean. Selinunte had developed over the centuries, until it became the most grandiose city of Hellenistic Sicily, especially on account of its colossal temples, the only ones in Sicily that were decorated with sculp-





tures. Its inhabitants, proud of so much power, felt invincible, and when in 409 B.C. the people of Segesta, with whom there had been constant quarrels, called on the Carthaginians to help them, they were not very worried. But they were wrong. An army of 100,000 men landed in Sicily and laid siege to Selinunte. Despite a strenuous defence, the town succumbed and the enemy seized it. Historians tell us of a true massacre; 16,000 people were killed, 5,000 taken away as slaves. Every building was sacked and destroyed, including the magnificent temples, desecrated by warriors thirsty for booty. Selinunte never recovered, despite the generous efforts of a Syracuse man, Hermocrates, who, in the ensuing two years, tried to get its walls rebuilt. There exist no traces of subsequent settlements, until the Byzantine domination. In the latter period, among the ruins hermits and religious communities settled, and, later, during the Arab domination, Muslim tribes. In the course of time, ancient Selinunte was wholly forgotten, and it was only in the sixteenth century that the historian T. Fazello identified its site. In the nineteenth century began a systematic digging campaign. The archaeological area divides into two main zones; that of the eastern temples and the acropolis.

**Temple E**, according to an inscription, was dedicated to Hera. Built in the fifth century, it is one of the best examples of a Doric temple. Four metopes from it are now at the archaeological museum in Palermo.

**Temple F**, in the archaic style, was built in the sixth century. It is the one which was most despoiled, yet here too some metopes were found which represent Athena and Dionysius fighting with the giants.

**Temple G** is one of the biggest temples of classical antiquity. It seems it was dedicated to Apollo, the god who guarded the people of Selinunte. They began to build it in 580 B.C. but one hundred years later it was still unfinished. The temple has a surface area of about

6.000 square metres, and around it there is a peristyle of 46 columns 16,27 m. high, with a circumference of 10,7 m.

From the enormous mass of its ruins there emerges the solitary shaft of a column, restored in 1832, which can give an idea of what a grandiose building it was.

In the irregular area of the **acropolis**, which is girded by walls 2 - 3 metres thick, gates and towers have been recognised. In this area there were six big temples in addition to smaller religious buildings. These temples too are referred to with various letters of the alphabet. Of particular importance is **Temple C**, the biggest in the acropolis, built in the middle of the sixth century at the highest point in the terrace. The two pediments - inside which there was a terracotta Gorgon mask now at the archaeological museum in Palermo together with the metopes from the same temple - were covered with slabs of terracotta decorated with flower motifs. We will also mention the so-called "small metopes" temple which has yielded six metopes, the oldest sculptures coming from Selinunte, since they date from the start of the sixth century B.C. At the northern extremity of the acropolis you can see the main gate, defended by imposing fortifications, dating partly from the ancient city and partly from the reconstruction by Hermocrates.

## THE CUSA QUARRIES

Although they are not part of the archaeological area proper, the quarries from which the people of Selinunte got their building materials are very interesting to visit, at least for the charming beauty of the archaeological park encompassing them. Silvery olive trees, as far as the eye can see, surround the big drums meant for columns, abandoned here for over 2000 years. Some still in the rock, others ready to be transported to Selinunte, the imposing drums emanate something mysterious, linked to the secret of the building of the temples.

Above,  
the Motya island.

On the following pages, a splendid exemplar of dwarf palm and a bay in the Zingaro reserve.

# Parks and reserves



The creation, in 1980, of the Zingaro nature reserve, the first in Sicily, led to the passing of a series of decrees which in thirteen years have outlined the map of the protected areas on the island.

Today in Sicily there are three nature parks - Etna, Madonie and Nebrodi - which, without a break, involve a set of environments of very great value in terms of nature and landscape, amounting to 200,000 hectares - the biggest protected area in Italy - and over one hundred nature reserves and fauna oases, for a total of almost 150,000 hectares, equal to 15% of the island's surface.

## ZINGARO

The first nature reserve set up in Sicily takes in a stretch of about seven kilometres of splendid and absolutely unspoilt coastline looking out on the Gulf of Castellammare and the mountain chain serving as a magnificent setting for little bays and imposing cliffs. Zingaro is very important for the great richness of rare and endemic plants, and it is perhaps even more so as regards fauna: the existence of very varied ecological niches permits very great variety of fauna, not to be found in other places on the island.

At the Zingaro reserve at least thirty-nine species of birds nest and reproduce, mainly

birds of prey, including the pilgrim falcon, the windhover and the buzzard. The reserve is also of great archaeological importance, because in the spectacular Uzzo grotto there was one of the first prehistoric settlements in Sicily.

Magnificently organised for public enjoyment (paths with exact indications, shelters, waterplaces, picnic areas, museums, carparks, etc.), the reserve can only be visited on foot, as there are no roads inside it.

The itineraries best representing the various aspects of Zingaro are three: one going all along the coast from the south-east entrance (Scopello side) to the north entrance (San Vito side); one going halfway and then turning into one of the higher Zingaro zones and back to the sea; and a more difficult one, practically a complete tour, taking in both the coast and the whole upper part of the reserve.

## ETNA

The biggest volcano in Italy and indeed in Europe, it goes up to 3,323 metres, with a circumference, at the bottom, of about 250 km. and an overall volcanic surface area of 1,400 square km.

Although it is active and has many times shown its destructive potential, its highly fertile slopes are cultivated and inhabited by









thousands of people. Etna, to which there is linked many a myth, and which Pindar defined a "column of the sky", is made up of several lesser eruptive centres and two bigger eruptive mouths, Trifoglietto, which is where today there is the grandiose Bove Valley, and Mongibello. The latter pushes its path down to a depth of 50 km. and in 3.000 years has never been quiet very long.

Past eruptions have given rise to curious rock formations like "dykes" and "bombs" - lava flows and petrified lava masses - or "dagale" covered with vegetation and even "needles" emerging from the sea near Acireale. Eruptions have also caused the particular shape of some zones like Salto della Giumenta (Mare's Leap) and Monti Rossi (Red Mountains).

There are three vegetation zones on Etna corresponding to different heights. In the first (from the coast to 1500 metres above sea level) we have typical maritime vegetation along the shore, and then citrus fruits, nuts, pistachios and olives.

Then follow the first woods, with oak, chestnut and pine trees. Between 1.500 and 2.000 metres above sea level there are beech

and birch (*Betulla aetnensis*) woods, and among them big clumps of golden broom. Lastly, amid the ashes and lapilli, there is Sicilian astragalus, *Anthemis nobilis* and *Senecio*.

There are so many different ways of making an excursion on Etna, that we find ourselves in serious difficulty about recommending any particular itinerary.

The network of roads (state highways, provincial highways, council roads, forestry roads, tracks) now existing offer different opportunities for climbing up the volcano and visiting places on it, all interesting, or for making charming outings into the woods, or lastly for getting to other former craters of the Etna complex. At all events, the simplest way to discover Etna is to go round by car: it will take about five days to see it all.

There are a lot of itineraries for those who love trekking; we advise them to apply to a specialised guide.

#### THE MADONIE

The territory of this park comprises the highest peaks in Sicily - except, of course, for Etna. In the Madonie there are almost 50% of



the flora species on the island and various endemic species of great importance, like the *Abies nebrodensis*, a relict from the third Ice Age. In the woods there are oak trees, manna elms and chestnut trees with thick undergrowth of holly, *Asperula* and prickly plum plants. Visiting the vast Madonie area is certainly a unique experience: in it there is a great number of varied and charming environments, including high peaks, medium hills, the very fine stretch of sea washing the Tyrrhenian edge of the park itself.

Any season can be chosen for this visit. It can be made in winter, when the highest tops are covered with snow, sometimes very abundant; in spring, when all the colours of the dense Madonie undergrowth explode; or in summer, when, between one bathe and another at Cefalù or at other splendid seaside resorts nearby, you want to get away from the heat for a while. To visit the park you can make a loop round it, including a visit to all the towns and villages in the park itself and, of course, to the zones, which in terms of landscape and nature offer the most interesting sights.

#### **THE NEBRODI**

This mountain chain - part of the Sicilian Apennines (formed by both Madonie and Peloritans) - extends for about 70 km. parallel

to the northern coast of the island. Marked characteristics of the natural landscape of the Nebrodi are the absence of symmetry between one face and another, the varied modelling of the mountains, the very rich vegetation and the humid environments.

Some sites are particularly important in themselves because of peculiar features, constituting unique entities which are sometimes essential for the structure of the general geological and ecological balance: the Cesarò Biviere (pool), the Rocche del Crasto, Lake Trearie, the woods at Mistretta, Monte Pomiere, San Fratello and Mangalaviti are some of them.

The vegetation, which was one of the fundamental reasons for setting up the park, is extremely varied and divides into three different levels, as on Etna.

The first, up to 1000 metres, is subdivided into various bands: while the lower ones are cultivated, on the highest there are oak trees, cork oaks, euphorbias and turkey oaks.

Turkey and ilex oak trees are also present on the successive level (up to 1400 m.) together with beech trees. The latter go on up to the greatest height (Monte Soro, 1847 m.).

Lastly, there are maple trees, elms, then the yew, rarities in the Nebrodi. In the undergrowth there is holly, hawthorn, butcher's broom and other plants.

**Bottom, a wood in the Nebrodi Mountains.**

**On the following pages, left, Salina; right, Stromboli.**





# The islands

## THE AEOLIAN ISLANDS

*On the routes of the mythical Ausonians and Cnydian sailors north-east of the Sicilian coast, whipped by a salty wind, the Aeolian archipelago spreads out, like a fan, its seven enchanted isles which, because of their explosive volcanic nature, are sisters of the Hawaiian islands, the pearls of the Pacific.*

*The Aeolian islands, starting in remote times, were colonised by Neolithic peoples interested in exploiting obsidian, an insuperable material for making carving tools. Between the sixteenth and fourteenth centuries B.C., the islands became an important commercial stage on the metal way, and in particular on the tin route, which from the British Isles went down to the orient, passing through the Straits of Messina.*

*Later, in the Roman epoch, the archipelago prospered with the sulphur, alum and salt trade, which however gradually declined, until the islands were abandoned. This was due to further eruptions and also to the fact that the Second Nicea Council designated them a dwelling of the devil and a place of physical manifestations of this disturbing presence. Then in the Norman epoch the islands were*

*gradually re-peopled and started a new season of splendours, taking on what is more or less their physiognomy now.*

*Vulcano still appears like a relict of the world's prehistory, perennially fuming amid lava flows and mud bubbling with gas. The eruptive mouth rises to a height of 386 metres, where the big crater, which you can get to without too much difficulty and peril, raises its crest which dominates the western and eastern harbours, the Valley of Monsters and the profiles, gradually further and further away, of the other islands.*

*Well worth a visit are the alum grottoes and the sulphur mines, where in the Bourbon epoch a population of damned people lived forced to extract the precious mineral. On the coast, in the north-western part of the island, there is the imposing Cavallo (horse) grotto, along the wild and half-deserted shore which slopes gently down to the sea with the black Gelso beaches over which there is an euphorbia scrub and twisted prickly pear plants.*

*Lipari, as you approach it, appears lively and picturesque, dominated by the rock on which the ancient town stands; it has always been the heart of the archipelago. In its muse-*







um, which is one of the most interesting in the Mediterranean, there are countless vestiges of the history of the island and the successive stratifications, as in a gigantic palimpsest of a period of 5000 years of civilisation perfectly legible in the open diggings among the imposing walls with bastions.

On Lipari a volcanological tour is an absolute must, amid flows of obsidian and white expanses of pumice, materials with the same chemical composition, differing only in their state: the former glassy, spongy the other one, because of the sudden reduction of temperature in the magma in the final phase of eruptions.

Between Canneto and Acquacalda, two nice maritime burghs not yet ruined by mass tourism, along the sea, in the direction of Punta Castagna, lies the spectacular obsidian flow of the Rocche Rosse (Red Rocks). Between the Pomiciazzo gorge and Lami, a lunar landscape heralds in the now inactive crater of Monte Chirica, beyond which the soft cliffs of Campobianco go down to the sea and into the crystalline waters off the Porticello beach. Likewise unrivalled are the panoramas that one can enjoy from the Quattrocchi heights towards the monumental Perciato cliffs, to the sides of which there are the picturesque "needles", beyond which the gaseous and sulphurous fumes of Vulcano rise.

But Lipari is not only this. It is also in the old part of the town, a nice salon from the Umberto period with windows and balconies as

delicate as lace, from which multicoloured cascades of geraniums and delicate carnations descend. An island for all tastes, with shady gardens scented with jasmine and basil, sunny terraces facing the sea, where gastronomic hospitality is perpetuated with its own physiognomy and traditions.

On **Salina** one must not fail to visit Monte Porri and Monte Fossa delle Felci. On the latter, at almost 1000 metres above sea level, the ancient crater has been colonised by gigantic aquiline ferns which are added to the luxuriant vegetation of Salina, conferring on the latter an almost tropical look.

Not far away, **Filicudi** and **Alicudi**, between which the soaring spire of the Canna rock stand out against the horizon. Both distant from the din of mass tourism, they offer scope for abandon and meditation, which are unthinkable at the noisy latitude of our civilisation. Near Canna, sea beds rich in sponges and coral offer unexpected sights for those who love underwater photography.

Another highly fascinating sight in the archipelago is the basalt rocks of Basiluzzo, Dattilo and Lisca Bianca facing Panarea, with which, as Strabo tells us, they once formed a single island, Evonimos, which a cataclysm split into the present ones. Monumental solitudes characterise this group of rocks near which, from imposing mouths of submerged fumaroles, gurgling bubbles of gaseous vapours rise, which, in ancient times, were the scenario of probable worship of Hephaestus.





On **Panarea**, on the Cala Junca cliff, Capo Milazzese conserves intact the vestiges of a culture which here went on from 1440 to 1270 B.C., giving rise to a settlement of major archaeological interest.

Further along, **Stromboli** rises out of the water with the dry symmetry of its shapes perennially crowned by eruptive fumes. Its impervious Ginostra harbour is the smallest one in the world, while, beyond the fire zone, where moaning and hissing the lava touches the sea, the villages of Piscità, Ficogrande and Scari, open up, airy and white, gathered around the white mass of the San Vincenzo church. Beyond the very black glassy beach, where there are reeds rising from the abysses of the Tyrrhenian, raises Strombolicchio, the primeval duct of the volcano, a fanciful natural sculpture in which fire, water and wind have left their eternal impress.

#### THE PELAGIE ISLANDS

A raft of calcareous stone between the sea and the sky, **Lampedusa** emanates a strange and ambiguous fascination. Flat and almost devoid of vegetation, infinitely solitary because of the absence, on the horizon, of any reference point, it has very beautiful coasts. An absolute must for anyone visiting Lampedusa is a trip to the Isola dei Conigli (rabbit island), a tiny islet declared a nature reserve, in whose dunes the Caretta Caretta turtle lays its eggs. Another place which is a must is the shrine of the Madonna di Porto Salvo, about which there

are various legends. The island is a mecca for very exclusive tourism, for those who are true nature lovers and not in search of social pleasures.

**Linosa**, which is little more than a volcanic rock, came up from the sea bed through successive eruptions, in the course of millennia, in the "fire line" of the Italian geological system.

Totally different from nearby Lampedusa, a calcareous offshoot of the Tunisian plateau (indeed, with the nearby rock Lampione, geologically it is unquestionably part of the African continent), it is the emerging tip of a submerged volcano going down to a depth of 1000 metres.

The coast is very jagged and dark, while inland there are fertile plains around three craters - Monte Rosso, Monte Nero and Monte Vulcano. The natural environment, both terrestrial and maritime, has remained practically intact and is extremely charming.

#### PANTELLERIA

Set between Africa and Sicily, nearer to the black continent than to our own, Pantelleria, a volcanic island, can be considered a true nature paradise. Its shape is circular and culminates, at the centre, in Montagna Grande ("big mountain") from whose top, on dry clear days, one can admire that spectacle of incomparable beauty which is the view of the African and Sicilian coasts in a single vista.

Of volcanic origin, it still shows residual

Above,  
the gulf of  
Santa Maria  
at Salina.



**Typical  
constructions  
of Pantelleria.**

signs of its ancient activity, both around the now spent crater of Montagna Grande - where there are twenty-four mouths locally known as 'cuddie', and inside the crater itself, where there is the "Venus' mirror" pool, fed by thermal springs whose temperature can go up to 50 degrees Celsius - and in other places, where there are other activities, such as fuming vapours, called "lavare" or "mofete".

Morphologically, the area is very interesting: beaches, splendid coasts, rich in needles, like the famous natural "Elephant arch"; no less famous and fascinating are the numerous grottoes on Pantelleria, including the very

interesting "Pertusa di Notaro", also known as the "Cold cavity" because of the cold air coming out of the cracks in it.

One should not miss the easy excursions to the "Bagno dell'acqua" ("water bath"), to Montagna Grande, to Punta Spadillo, to the pretty Gadir village, to the Western Bay, the Turks' Rock, Scauri, Monte Sant'Elmo and the Sesi, very ancient megalithic cupola-shaped tombs.

**THE EGADI**

Favignana, Levanzo, Marettimo, are islands perhaps less known to tourists, and for





*this reason good places for those who do not love mass tourism.*

*This archipelago, already inhabited in pre-historic times - when it was still attached to the mainland - though it has never been the theatre of important historical events (except for a naval battle which took place in the stretch of sea dividing Favignana and Levanzo, between the Romans and the Carthaginians), has always attracted the attention of sailors in the Mediterranean, especially that of pirates, who regularly stopped here to get water.*

*The first true appearance of these islands in history dates from the fifteenth century, when*

*they were transformed into a "barony of the tuna fish" and assigned to Giovanni de Karissima. It was thanks to tuna fishing that the three islands, and especially Favignana, in the space of a few decades reached great prosperity, shared by everyone, from the last fisherman to the entrepreneurs.*

*The latter were first Ligurians, who acquired the archipelago in the seventeenth century and then the Florios, a powerful Palermo family, whose mansion, built by architect Damiani Almejda, can still be admired on Favignana.*

*Thanks to the Florios, the 'mattanza'*

**The natural  
"swimming  
pool" at  
Ustica.**



**Egadi Islands,  
the bay of  
Punta Lunga  
at Favignana.**

(slaughter), processing and preservation of the tuna fish was given a new lease of life. Still today this activity is a vital one in the economy of the islands.

*Favignana*, the biggest of the three islands, is also the one with the best accommodation facilities. The little village, all gathered around the harbour, still has some buildings of a certain value, like the little mansion of the Florios and some small Baroque churches. Its name is indissolubly linked to the tuna fish. Here, indeed, there is the biggest tuna processing station in the Mediterranean, which, decisive for the island's economy for centuries, is once again picking up now. You can easily get anywhere on the island on a bicycle, as it is rather flat. It is largely tufa rock, which has been used since time immemorial in building. Along the paths deep quarries open up, partly hewn out by man, and partly caused by sinking of friable rock; they are surrounded and covered by low bushes. The coasts, rich in cran-

nies, little bays and grottoes, are bathed by a clear turquoise sea with splendid reflections.

*Levanzo* is known above all for the Genoans' grotto, which conserves decorations and graffiti considered the most interesting in Italy. On the walls the accurate hand of an unknown artist of 10,000-15,000 years ago traced out men, women and children, animals and fish, thus handing down to us an unknown ancient world. One should also not miss the natural beauties of the island, which has nothing to envy her sisters.

*Marettimo*, the furthest from the Sicilian coast, is perhaps for this very reason the most unspoilt, but also the most different. Mountainous, unlike the other two, it hides in the bowels of its caves freshwater springs, and it is covered with incredibly luxuriant spontaneous vegetation, partly consisting of very rare or even unique plants. In the tiny white village the accommodation is at the homes of fishermen, from whom one can hire a boat to go





round the island, which is absolutely the most interesting excursion (this also goes for the other islands), since it makes it easy to discover the most inaccessible beauties of the coast, above all the grottoes. Among the latter, particular mention must be made of the Cammello (camel), Bombarda and Presepe (crib) grottoes, with stupendous and unrivalled colours.

## USTICA

From finds made on this island, which is 57 km. from Palermo, it appears that the first inhabitants were Phoenicians or Carthaginians. Coins, mosaics and various everyday objects also testify to the presence of the Romans, who called it Ustom, "burnt", which gave the present name. From the eighth century it was an Arab dominion, with a single interruption during the Norman domination - in the course of which the Benedictine convent and the Santa Maria church were built. It was only in 1763, after repeated attempts, that the

Spanish government succeeded in occupying and re-populating the island, which was afterwards fortified by the Bourbons. The new population was brought from the Aeolian Islands, and it is for this reason that the inhabitants preserve customs and dialect from the latter.

The main attractions of Ustica are its magnificent sea beds, protected, starting from a few years ago, by the setting up of a marine reserve. Coming to the island, you usually land at the Santa Maria harbour, which the black volcanic sand under the surface of the water gives a deep turquoise colour.

There are various interesting excursions: for example, you can go up to the fortress, at 157 meters on Cape Falconara, where there is a magnificent view of the whole island, the sea and the Sicilian coast, or sail round the island, visiting the numerous grottoes along the coast. Among them we will mention the Grotta Azzurra, Grotta della Pastizza and Grotta di Blasi.

The natural  
"swimming  
pool" at Ustica.

# Flora and Fauna



The major geological and climatic differences found in Sicily between one area and another, even neighbouring ones, permit the development of a very varied flora, boasting exemplars of plants being typical of northern climates and subtropical ones. Along the coastal zones, and up to a height of 300 metres, there are above all citrus fruits, olives and vines.

Almost all these plants, which today are found all over the island, were actually imported by the successive conquerors of the island: for example, the Greeks and Phoenicians brought the vine, the olive, the fig and the pomegranate; the Arabs - among other things - the lemon and the almond. The orange was only grown starting from the fifteenth century, like the tomato and the prickly pear, imported to Sicily after the discovery of America. Lastly, the mandarin orange was introduced at the start of the nineteenth century.

On the slopes of the mountains, and up to 600 metres, there is luxuriant Mediterranean scrub, made up of various shrubs: broom, lavender, rosemary, wild olive, dwarf palm, lentisk and others. There are also cork oaks, oleanders, carobs and tamarisks.



The great forests that covered the whole island having disappeared, woods are found only on the summits of the main mountain chains - the Nebrodi, the Madonie, the Peloritans - and on Etna.

Cork and other oaks, chestnut trees and beeches are the trees making up these woods, and there are now only rare clumps of pines and Sicilian fir.

The local flora also includes the oleander and the plane tree, as well as plants introduced by man in more or less recent times: in addition to the previously mentioned prickly pear, vine and fruit trees, we find agaves, palms, ficus, cedars, mulberries, eucalyptuses and all sorts of flowers.

Changes in climate and environment,

together with indiscriminate destructive action by man, have considerably reduced the presence of wild animals on the island.

The big mammals have mostly disappeared, as have most of the birds of prey, the only significant presences being those of the wild cat, the marten, the dormouse (rare) the hedgehog, the wild rabbit, the hare and the weasel.

Among birds there are the falcon, the pilgrim hawk, the windhover, the kite and the eagle, the rock partridge, the imperial crow.

Some migratory birds also stop off in Sicily, such as common species of waders, the pink seagull, the greater sea swallow, the spoonbill. There are a great number of insects and invertebrates: among snakes, special mention must be made of the very beautiful spotted grass snake.



# Gastronomy

Sicilian gastronomy, though in general it is quite homogeneous, varies greatly in detail from province to province. The varying distance from the sea and the availability of different products have caused this difference, but the variety of dishes is also due to the different dominations that followed one another in Sicily, which felt the influence of both Europe and Africa.

**Starters** - Apart from the very vast choice of vegetables in oil, in salt and pepper dip, or fried in oil, which are offered in great abundance, there are also some specialities: rice "**arancine**", for example, "**beccafico**" sardines, "**panelle**" and "**cazzilli**" in Palermo.

**First courses** - If in Palermo the queen is pasta with sardines - closely followed, however, by baked pasta - in Catania the first course par excellence is "**pasta alla Norma**", which takes its name from the masterpiece by Vincenzo Bellini.

Another great Sicilian, Pirandello, gives the name to spaghetti with tomato and chunks of "**tuma**" cheese found in his home town, Agrigento.

Again on the coast, in Trapani, the Arab influence has given cous-cous, which rather than a first course is a complete meal. In Messina, you must taste the "**sciuseddu**", a delicious vegetable soup with little meat balls and cheese, and lastly, in inland Sicily, in Caltanissetta, the tasty "**cavateddi**".

**Meat** - From the famous "**falsomagro**" - a roll of meat filled with hard-boiled eggs, ham, mincemeat and **caciocavallo** cheese, cooked in wine and tomato sauce - to sausages, from bittersweet rabbit to stuffed pork - particularly found in Ragusa province - there is a whole series of gastronomic delights. Also very common are kid and lamb, generally barbecued and flavoured with all sorts of aromas that Sicily offers abundantly.

**Fish** - Even more varied - if possible - is the choice of fish: "**scoppularicchi**" (fried squids and tiny sepias) in Syracuse, "**stum-**

**mi abbuttunati**" (stuffed mackerels) in Catania, "**stoccu a missinisi**" (cod with vegetables) in Messina. And then again swordfish, tuna fish - still caught, in Trapani, with the ancient "**mattanza**" - lobsters and seafood, big fish and small ones, simply grilled and served with tasty "**salmoriglio**", which is a sauce made of olive oil, lemon, salt, pepper, parsley and - sometimes - garlic.

**Vegetables** - Only imagination can set a limit to the preparation of vegetables: beans, artichokes, mushrooms, olives, tomatoes, onions, egg plants, cauliflowers are flavoured with the most varied aromas, steamed, roasted, fried in oil or left raw, to form - alone or in company - delicious salads or accompaniments: "**alivi cunzati**" (olives flavoured with little peppers and pickles), "**milinciani a parmigiana**" (egg plants fried and then baked with tomato sauce and parmesan cheese), artichokes stuffed with parsley and anchovies (Agrigento).

**Desserts** - Desserts have always had a place of honour in Sicilian cuisine: honey and almonds have always been the main ingredients, together with soft very sweet full whey cheese, the basic element of "**cassata**". In Messina there is the predominance of the excellent "**pignolata**", in Syracuse the "**blancmange**", made with almonds, is a must, as is the "**cuccia**", and in Catania there are the "**little olives of St. Agatha**".

Separate mention must be made of ice creams and above all of iced lemon, coffee, etc. which in the morning in summer is consumed with a blob of cream and a warm bun. There are all sorts of possible tastes!

**A little of everything** - Lastly, we must at least mention the excellent cheeses (ricotta, tuma, caciocavallo, primosale) and the pizzas; a particular kind is "**sfinciuni**", soft pizza with tomato and onions on it, the "**schiacciate**" which, especially in Ragusa province, are flavoured in every way imaginable.

In the end the wines. Among these we will mention the Alcamo whites, the Vittoria Cerasuolo, Marsala, Moscato, Malvasia, the Etna wines and the Caltanissetta bitter liqueur.





# Useful Information

## **What to buy**

Sicilian handicraft is very varied, and each area has its peculiarities. This is particularly evident when you look at the different types of ceramics to be found on the island. In Sicily there are big clay quarries from which the raw material is very easily extracted, and some places, like Santo Stefano di Camastra or Caltagirone, base their economy almost exclusively on the production of ceramics. Each of them has an ancient tradition as regards shapes and decoration, but beside these new decoration trends are emerging. In addition to vases, plates, cups of all kinds, shapes and sizes, one can buy lamps, candlesticks, tiles and figurines for cribs. A typical Sicilian product is the coffa, a pleated and decorated basket available in various sizes. In Erice you can buy delightful multicoloured hand-woven carpets. More or less everywhere, there are embroidered objects, such as tablecloths, blankets, sheets, towels and napkins. Lastly, the classic souvenir is the little Sicilian cart and the traditional puppet, both available in all sizes.

## **Bank opening times**

Banks are open from 8,15am to 1,20pm and from 2,45pm to 4pm every day except Saturdays and holidays.

## **Shop hours**

Shops are generally open from

9,00am to 1,00pm and from 4,00pm to 7,30pm with slight variations. In tourist resorts shops are often open all day. In addition to Sunday closing, there is a half day in the week, the day depending on the type of shops. Some big stores do not close for lunch.

## **Post office hours**

Post offices are open from 8,30am to 1,15pm; on Saturdays and on the last day of the month from 8,30am to 11,20. Closed on Sundays. The following offices are open in the afternoon (until 6,30pm):

### **Palermo:**

Corso Pisani, 246; Piazza Verdi, 7; Via Danimarca, 54; Via Roma (Central Post Office); piazza Unità d'Italia; Via Alcide de Gasperi

### **Messina:**

Via Garibaldi, 190; Via XXVII Luglio, 5; Piazza Antonello

**Catania:** Viale Africa; Corso Italia, 33-35; Viale Rapisardi, 82

## **Currency**

The Italian currency is the Euro (€)

## **Tips**

A tip is always appreciated but not mandatory. The amount depends on the service performed.

## **International phone calls**

You can phone overseas from any private or public phone by dialling the country code preceded by 00 (e.g. to call Munich, in Germany, you must dial 00 followed by 49 - international code - by 89 - city code - and the subscribers number).

You can make reverse charge calls or credit card calls by calling the operator in your own country by dialling a special number (for information call 176 Information service every day from 8am to 11pm). Italian public phones take coins of 10, 20 and 50 cent of €, telephone cards costing 1-2,50-5-7,50 €

## **Stamps**

Letters and postcards to Italy and EEC: 0,41 €.

Letters and postcards to non-EEC countries: 0,52 €. All charges indicated are for mail weighing less than 20g.

## **For regional transports visit the site:**

[www.regione.sicilia.it/turismo/trasporti](http://www.regione.sicilia.it/turismo/trasporti)

## **For city transports, visit the sites of the commons.**

## **For museums and archaeological areas visit the site:**

[www.regione.sicilia.it/beniculturali](http://www.regione.sicilia.it/beniculturali)

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