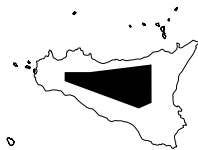


Central Sicily



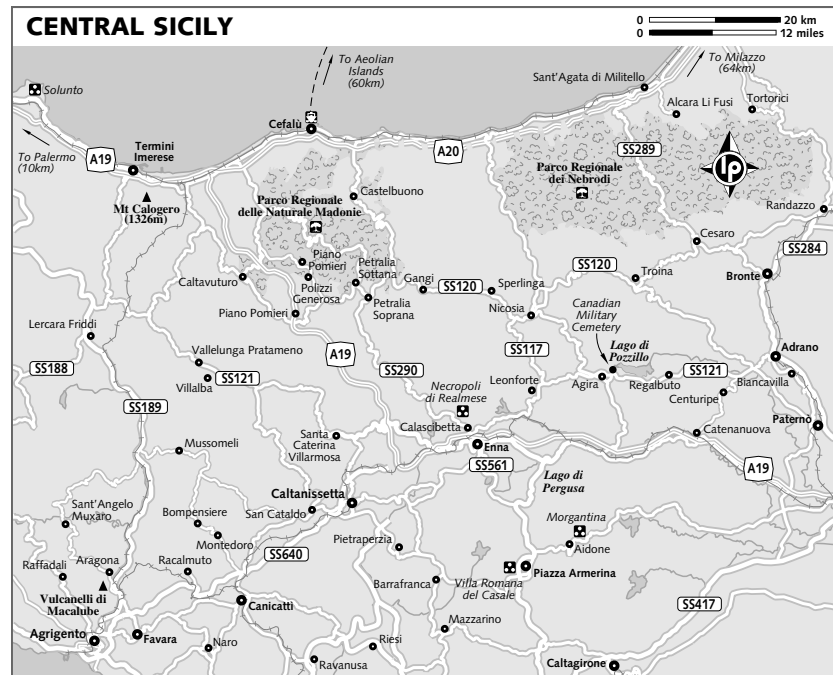
The centre of Sicily is a place of subtle moods and dramatic scenery, a place where severe mountain ridges cloaked in a patchwork of farms are interspersed with a series of atmospheric mountain towns. It is an ancient landscape redolent of the huge feudal estates from an era not long past, when hunger drove men to work in the harsh sulphur mines that surround Caltanissetta.

Today it is a place of great beauty and harsh economic realities, where farming and mining continue to power the local economy and create close-knit communities. These physically and culturally isolated towns retain the remnants of traditional Sicilian life, creating a fascinating province on an already fascinating island: Enna is the natural crossroads of the island; Lago di Pergusa is the source of the powerful myth of Persephone and Demeter; Piazza Armerina holds a famous Roman villa; and Caltagirone is a typical provincial town.

For more than a decade now, tour operators have been touting the area as the next big destination. Walking enthusiasts love this area too, as do people keen to get a break from the scorching summer temperatures, but tourist droves won't be crowding this area any time soon. It's still a region for independent travellers, especially those with their own vehicle – the public transport isn't as good as in the rest of Sicily.

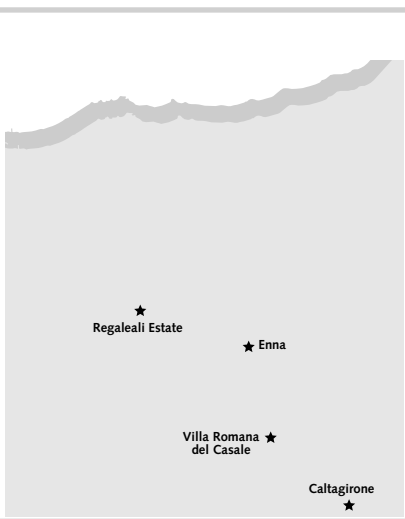
CENTRAL SICILY

CENTRAL SICILY



HIGHLIGHTS

- Spot a bikini-clad trio, leaping leopards and a tiny rhino in the breathtaking polychrome mosaics of the **Villa Romana del Casale** (p252)
- Lose your breath climbing Caltagirone's **Scalinata di Santa Maria del Monte** (p255), and see Sicilian history portrayed on the steps' ceramic tiles
- Get some fresh mountain air in Enna as you walk the ramparts of the **Castello di Lombardia** (p242)
- Catch the extraordinary rituals of Enna's **Holy Week** (p244), when religious confraternities parade the streets
- Learn to cook like a *monsù* under the tutelage of Anna Tasca Lanza at her home on the vast **Regaleali estate** (p258)



ENNA & AROUND

ENNA
pop 28,800 / elev 948m

Shrouded in myth, the township of Enna dominates the centre of the island with its monumental demeanour, grandiose palazzi (palaces or mansions) and churches and a crisp mountain air. Its unmatched views of the surrounding valley suggest that this has traditionally been the top dog in the province. The atmosphere here is different to that of other Sicilian towns, with the workaday feel of a town unperturbed by tourism.

Enna has long been the seat of a sacred cult of Demeter (also called Ceres; the goddess of fertility and agriculture) and in springtime the countryside surrounding the town is filled with the flowers that attracted Demeter's daughter Persephone (also known as Proserpina) to the shores of Lago di Pergusa. Throughout the Greek, Roman and Arab periods Enna supplied places far and wide with necessities such as grain and wheat, cotton and cane. It's a tradition that

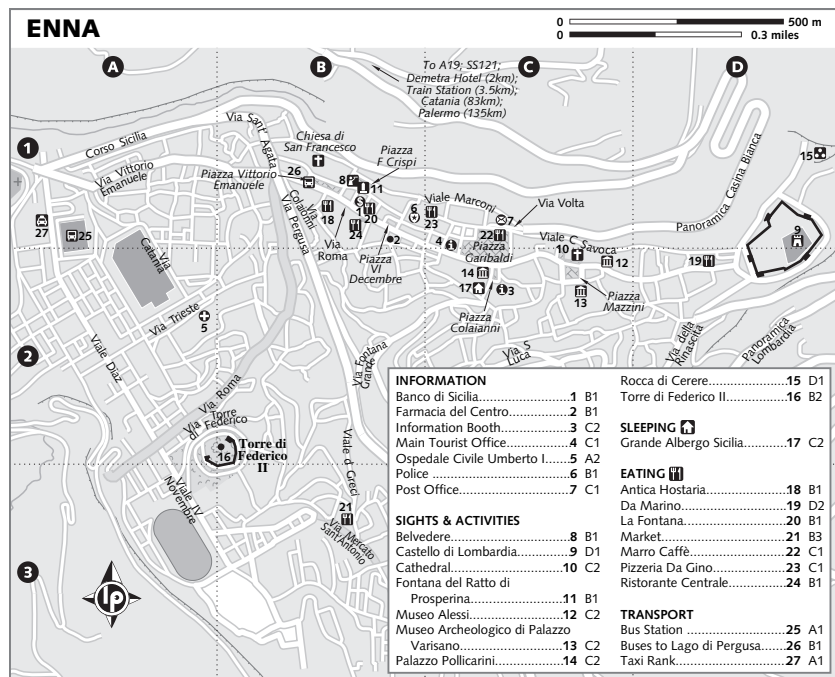
continues today, as Enna supplies a large proportion of the durum wheat used by the Italian pasta-manufacturing industry.

Orientation

The town of Enna is divided into two main areas: the historic centre on the summit of the hill (Enna Alta), and the modern town at its base (Enna Bassa). From the south you enter the lower part of Enna along the SS561, which becomes the main road, Via Pergusa. This road takes you all the way up to the historic centre. From the north (on the Palermo–Catania autostrada), you enter the historic town via the hairpin bends of the SP2. Turn left at the T-junction for Via Roma, which is the main street of historic Enna.

The intercity bus station is on Viale Diaz. To get to the town centre from the bus station, turn right from the station and follow Viale Diaz to Corso Sicilia. You then need to turn right again and follow it to Via Sant'Agata, which leads to Via Roma.

The train station is about 3km out of the town centre.



Information

EMERGENCY

Ambulance (☎ 0935 4 52 45)

Emergency Doctor (☎ 0935 50 08 96)

Police (questura; ☎ 0935 52 21 11; Via San Giovanni 2)

MEDICAL SERVICES

Farmacia del Centro (☎ 0935 50 06 50; Via Roma 315)

Ospedale Civile Umberto I (☎ 0935 4 51 11, first aid 0935 50 08 96; Via Trieste)

MONEY

There are plenty of banks along Via Roma.

Banco di Sicilia (Via Roma 367)

POST

Post office (Via Volta 1; ☎ 8am-6.30pm Mon-Fri, 8am-12.30pm Sat)

TOURIST INFORMATION

Information booth (Piazza Colaiaanni; ☎ 9am-1pm Mon-Sat) Next door to the Grande Albergo Sicilia.

Main tourist office (☎ 0935 52 82 88; www.apt-enna.com; Via Roma 413; ☎ 9am-1pm & 3.30-6.30pm Mon-Sat) Helpful staff with good maps and information.

Sights

CASTELLO DI LOMBARDIA

Cloaked by mist, the streets of Enna feel like they might just float away if it weren't for the solid mass of the rampart walls and the steady bulwark of **Castello di Lombardia** (Piazza Mazzini; admission free; ☎ 9am-8pm). The original castle was built by the Saracens and later reinforced by the Normans; Frederick II of Hohenstaufen ordered that a powerful curtain wall be built with towers on every side. The wall is still intact but only six of the original 20 towers remain. Within the walls is a complex structure of courtyards; the closest one to the entrance, **Cortile di San Martino** (Courtyard of St Martin), is used in summer as an outdoor theatre (see p244). From the same courtyard you can climb up **Torre Pisano**, from where there are fabulous views – at least when the fog, an enduring element of Enna's weather, has lifted. Across the valley is the town of Calascibetta and to the distant northeast you can just about make out the towering peak of Mt Etna. Secret passageways once led to the octagonal **Torre di Federico II** (Tower of Frederick II; Via Torre

di Federico; admission free; ☎ 8am-6pm), which now stands in the town's public garden; once part of the town's old defence system, it stands nearly 24m high.

ROCCA DI CERERE

To the north of the castle a small road leads quickly down to the superbly sited foundations of the Temple of Demeter (Ceres to the Romans), the goddess of fertility and agriculture. In classical times it was the centre of a massive fertility cult, and in 480 BC the tyrant Gelon built a temple here lest his plans for the capture of Syracuse be foiled by a couple of bad harvests. The temple is also supposed to have featured a statue of King Triptolemus, the only mortal to witness the rape of Demeter's daughter Persephone by Hades, god of the underworld (see boxed text, below). In return for spilling the beans, Demeter taught Triptolemus the secrets of agriculture, from which Enna has benefited ever since. The temple's remains are not enclosed, and it's a great spot for a picnic or to take in the sunset.

ALONG VIA ROMA Cathedral

Back in town, Via Roma extends westwards from the castle (and also down to the south-

west of town), and is lined with most of the town's more important sights.

The best of these is the **cathedral** (admission free; ☎ 9am-noon & 4-7pm), which has a composite style that's the result of the waves of invaders who sought to possess the mountain eyrie. In 1446 a fire destroyed the church, which was slowly rebuilt in early baroque style over the next 200 years. The curious façade (complete with 17th-century bell tower) covers its Gothic predecessor, while the rich interior is almost entirely baroque in design. The dark grey basalt columns are worth looking at for their highly ornamented bases, which are carved with a series of grotesques such as snakes with human heads. Other points of interest are the Graeco-Roman remains (the base of the pulpit and stoup) from the Temple of Demeter; the medieval walls and Gothic transepts and some Renaissance artwork like the presbytery paintings (dating from 1613) by Filippo Paladino; and the altarpieces by Guglielmo Borremans. Ironically, the iron gate to the sacristy was taken from the *seraglio* (harem) in the Castello di Lombardia.

Museo Alessi & Museo Archeologico di Palazzo Varisano

Near the cathedral is the **Museo Alessi** (☎ 0935 50 13 65; Via Roma 465; closed to the public until further notice),

A DEVIL'S BARGAIN

The ancient cult of Demeter (called Ceres by the Romans; the goddess of fertility and agriculture) is all about the need to explain the workings of the natural world, and is influenced by the fundamental human concern with food. The central story of the cult, the tale of Hades' capture of Demeter's daughter Persephone (as known as Proserpina), is one of the most famous Greek myths.

According to a Homeric hymn of the 7th century BC, Hades (also called Pluto; the god of the underworld) asked Zeus for Persephone's hand in marriage. He was not refused and, emboldened, he raped and kidnapped her while she was gathering flowers around the Lago di Pergusa. When Demeter couldn't find Persephone she wandered the world distraught, forbidding the earth to bear fruit. Triptolemus, who had witnessed the rape, told her what had happened and in return Demeter granted him the secret of agriculture. She then went straight to Zeus to demand the release of her daughter, threatening the entire human race with never-ending famine. Stuck between a rock and a hard place, Zeus ordered Hades to release Persephone and sent Hermes to escort her back to earth. Hades agreed on the condition that she had not tasted anything in the underworld.

Persephone had not eaten during her time in the underworld, but Hades gave her a pomegranate for her journey back and she nibbled six of its seeds on the way. Hades immediately demanded her return and, in a spirit of compromise, Zeus decreed that Persephone would have to spend six months of the year in the underworld and six months with her mother. Demeter still mourns during Persephone's time in the underworld, bringing winter to the world; her joy at her daughter's return is heralded by the blossoms of springtime.

which houses the valuable contents of the cathedral's treasury. It was unfortunately closed in April 2007 due to a lack of funds, and locals and visitors are eagerly awaiting its reopening, which is due as soon as funds are found.

The museum's collection was originally the property of Canon Giuseppe Alessi (1774–1837), who left the collection to his brother with the intention that he then donate it to the Church. Eager to make a tidy profit, Alessi's brother actually sold it to the Church in 1860. Some of the pieces are stunning, such as the golden crown of the Madonna, encrusted with jewels and enamels, by Leonardo and Giuseppe Montalbano; it dates from 1653.

On the far side of Piazza Mazzini from the cathedral is the **Museo Archeologico di Palazzo Varisano** (☎ 0935 2 47 20; admission €2; ☹ 8am–7pm), which has a good, if small, collection of artefacts (labelled in Italian) excavated from throughout the region. Of particular interest is the Attic-style red-and-black *krater* (drinking vases) found in the town itself.

About 100m further down Via Roma, on the southwestern side of Piazza Colaiani next to the Grande Albergo Sicilia, is the Catalan-Gothic **Palazzo Pollicarini**, one of Enna's most handsome buildings. Although it has been converted into private apartments, you can still nip in to take a peek at the medieval staircase in the central courtyard.

Belvedere

All roads in Enna must eventually lead one to Piazza F Crispi and the wonderful belvedere (viewing point) that overlooks the opposite hilltop town of Calascibetta. In the evenings the piazza is absolutely heaving with Enna's smooching teenage population, but hustle your way through the crowd to enjoy the sunset over the rust-red buildings of Calascibetta. In the centre of the piazza is the **Fontana del Rato di Prosperina** (the Fountain of the Rape of Proserpina), commemorating Enna's most enduring legend. It is actually a copy of Giovanni Lorenzini Bernini's original, which is in the Galleria Borghese in Rome.

Festivals & Events

Holy Week Held in April, this is a living reminder of Enna's esoteric past, smacking of pagan rites and occultism. Thousands of people wearing hoods and capes representing the town's different religious confraternities participate in a solemn procession to the cathedral.

Grand Prix (☎ 0935 2 56 60) Between April and October, Formula 3 racing takes place at the Autodromo di Pergusa, 9km south of Enna. Take bus 5.

Festa di Maria Santissima della Visitazione On 2 July an effigy of Enna's patron saint was traditionally dragged through the town on a cart called La Nave d'Oro (Golden Ship) by farmers wearing just a white band over their hips! Today the band has been replaced by a long sheet. The feast is accompanied by fireworks.

Castello di Lombardia Hosts nightly plays and performances of a medieval nature during summer. Ask the tourist office (p242) for details.

Sleeping

Enna has only one hotel in the historic centre. There is a second hotel on the way out of town on the SP2.

Demetra Hotel (☎ 0935 50 23 00; Contrada Misericordia 55121; s €51–78, d €83–110; (P) ☹) Demetra offers a modern standard of accommodation: laminate floors; neat, sterile rooms; and all the mod cons. It is some way out of the historic centre so it's only really viable if you have a car.

Grande Albergo Sicilia (☎ 0935 50 08 50; fax 0935 50 04 88; www.hotelsiciliaenna.it; Piazza Colaiani 7; s €55–72, d €70–120; (P) ☹) Enna's only hotel has a crude concrete façade that disguises an Art Nouveau interior with lots of coloured glass and gold-framed pictures. Refurbished in 2005, the rooms are nicely decorated, with warm colours and good, firm beds, though the bathrooms are still waiting for the next wave of renovations. The same is the case with the balconies, which are crumbling.

Eating

Unlike the coast, the staple here is meat, and local specialities usually involve some cut of mutton or beef and a tasty array of mushrooms and grilled vegetables. Local dishes include *castrato* (charcoal-grilled castrated ram) and *polpettone* (stuffed lamb or meatballs). Soups and sausages are also a feature.

RESTAURANTS

La Fontana (☎ 0935 2 54 65; Via Volturo 6; meals €20; ☹ closed Fri) Right opposite the fountain on the little piazza, this little restaurant is run by an eccentric older couple who've decorated the place in a mixture of kitsch and Art Nouveau. Mostly frequented by tourists, it's friendly and the food is straightforward Sicilian fare. It has outdoor seating on the piazza in summer.

Ristorante Centrale (☎ 0935 50 09 63; www.ristorantecentrale.net; Piazza VI Dicembre 9; meals €20–25;

☹ closed Sat) Very central (hence the name), this friendly, family-run place has a feast-like buffet of antipasti, and cooks up typical mountain dishes of meat, sausages, mushrooms and vegetables. The menu of Sicilian specialities changes daily. The décor is a cacophony of pictures and plates.

our pick Antica Hostaria (☎ 0935 2 25 21; Via Castagna 9; meals €30; ☹ closed Tue) Enna's best restaurant has made it into the Slow Food Movement bible thanks to its pork *ragù* (sauce), an ancient mountain staple. The chef only makes it in the winter months, however, so you can opt for simpler things if you're here in the summer. The *orecchiette* (ear-shaped pasta) with broccoli and black olive paste is very good, as is the pasta carbonara with asparagus. Also try the *castellane* (conical macaroni) with mussels and mushrooms.

Historic **Pizzeria Da Gino** (☎ 0935 2 40 67; Viale Marconi 6; pizza €6–8; ☹ closed Wed) has outdoor seating, and is absolutely buzzing with teenagers. Good atmosphere and great views.

Another good pizzeria is **Da Marino** (☎ 0935 2 52 22; Viale C Savoca 62; pizza €6–8; ☹ closed Wed); it's near the castle.

CAFÉS

Marro Caffé (☎ 0935 50 23 36; Piazza Vittorio Emanuele 21) This is a good café for both the summer and winter months. It's popular with a 25-and-up crowd, who come here for coffee, snacks, drinks and aperitivi. The interior is sleek and there's a covered outdoor seating area for the cooler months.

SELF-CATERING

There is a **market** (Via Mercato Sant'Antonio; ☹ Mon–Sat) every morning where you can find basics such as fresh fruit, bread and cheese.

Getting There & Around

There is a **bus station** (☎ 0935 50 09 05; Viale Diaz) in the historic town, from where **SAIS Autolinee** (☎ 0935 50 09 02) runs services to Catania (€10.30, 1½ to two hours, 10 daily Monday to Saturday, three Sunday) and its airport, and to Palermo (€8.80, 1¾ hours, six daily Monday to Saturday, one Sunday). It is possible to reach Agrigento via Caltanissetta (€3.30, one hour, three daily Monday to Friday), and regular buses also run to Piazza Armerina (€2.75, 45 minutes, eight daily Monday to Saturday, two Sunday).

The train station is inconveniently located at the bottom of a steep hill 3.5km northeast of the town centre. Trains service Caltanissetta (€2.65, 40 minutes, seven daily), Catania (€4.65, seven daily) and Palermo (€7.50, four daily), and you can purchase tickets from the machine on the platform. That said, you're best off not bothering with the train at all.

Local buses (single trip/day pass €1.35/2.10) make the run from the train station to town hourly (except Sunday, when you might have to wait a couple of hours between buses).

You can call for a taxi on ☎ 0935 50 09 05. There is also a **taxi rank** (Viale Diaz) near the bus station.

LAGO DI PERGUSA

Lago di Pergusa, 9km south of Enna, is Sicily's only natural lake, and the source of all that mythology (see boxed text, p243). It seems incredible that developers have been allowed to destroy the lake, which was first ringed by a motor-racing track in the 1950s and then further diminished by the excessive development of its shores. Now it seems Persephone's lake is disappearing fast, with the vegetation and bird life on its shores all but vanished. Brackish water laps against the sandy beaches, which in summer are crammed with tourists escaping from Enna. It must be one of the most sacrilegious and shameful fates visited on any classical site.

The area around the lake has a few hotels that are a popular alternative to those in Enna.

Park Hotel La Giarra (☎ 0935 54 16 87; www.parkhotellagiara.it; Via Nazionale 125; s €60–80, d €90–109; (P) ☹) is a nice, small hotel in a quiet location on the lake. Rooms are comfortable, with all the mod cons, and the restaurant is also good.

To get there, take bus 5 from Piazza Vittorio Emanuele in Enna (€1.35, every hour from 7am to 9.30pm).

NORTH OF ENNA

The winding SS121 makes its way out of Enna in a northeasterly direction through some of the most splendid inland scenery on the island before it eventually reaches Catania. There are a couple of towns, such

as Calascibetta and Nicosia, that are worth a stop, if only to get a sense of what Sicilian life is like away from the tourist trail. All the towns mentioned are reachable by bus from Enna; check at the tourist office or the bus terminal for departure details and prices. Without a doubt, the best way to explore this area is with your own transport, as some services are nonexistent after the morning peak hours.

CALASCIBETTA

pop 4800 / elev 691m

A mere 2km north of Enna across a valley and the A19 motorway lies the hilltop town of Calascibetta, built by the Arabs who laid siege to Enna in 951. More than 100 years later, in 1087, Roger I also camped on the hill when he besieged the Arabs. Seemingly ambivalent about the influence of modernity, Calascibetta is a densely packed maze of little streets above an enormous drop (on its eastern side) to the valley below. The 14th-century **cathedral** (admission free; ☎ 9am-1pm & 3-7pm), dedicated to St Peter, is worth popping your head into.

Only 1km or so northwest of town is the well-signposted **Necropoli di Realmese** (admission free; ☎ 24hr), where some 300 rock tombs dating from 850 to 730 BC have been found.

The town is within easy access from Enna by SAIS Autolinee bus (€1.35, 11 daily Monday to Saturday, two Sunday) from the main bus terminal.

LEONFORTE

pop 14,100 / elev 603m

A further 18km northeast along the SS121 is this attractive baroque town, founded in 1610 and once renowned for its horse breeding. Leonforte's most imposing building is the **Palazzo Baronale**, which has an ornate façade. The town's **cathedral** houses some good wooden sculptures, but the real sight of interest is the **Granfonte**. Built in 1651 by Nicolò Branciforte, this lavish fountain is made up of 24 separate jets against a sculpted façade. The fountain is about 300m down a small road from the cathedral; follow the signpost.

Interbus has frequent departures between Enna and Leonforte (€2.70, 35 minutes, 12 daily Monday to Friday, two Saturday). Buy tickets on the bus or at Bar Venticinque in Leonforte.

AGIRA

pop 8300 / elev 650m

From a distance, Agira rises up in an almost perfect cone, with the ruins of its medieval Norman castle at the top. The town was colonised by Timoleon in 339 BC and was later captured by the Romans, who added substantially to the existing Greek settlement. The Augustan historian Diodorus Siculus was born here and declared that the amphitheatre was matched in beauty only by that of Syracuse. Apart from a few unremarkable traces, there is little that remains of the town's distinguished past (it had an important mint for 500 years), although its churches house some precious artefacts: **Chiesa di Santa Maria Maggiore** holds a 15th-century triptych, while the treasury of **Chiesa di San Salvatore** has a jewel-encrusted medieval mitre.

From Enna, SAIS buses head to Agira (€2.85, 1¼ hours, 10 daily Monday to Friday, two Saturday). There are also SAIS buses between Agira and Troina (three daily).

REGALBUTO

The road to Regalbuto (about 14km north-east of Agira) is more interesting than the town at the end of it. A couple of kilometres out of Agira (signposted to your left), atop a little hill, is a well-tended **Canadian Military Cemetery**, where the bodies of 480 soldiers killed in July 1943 lie. Further on, still to your left, is a large artificial lake known as the **Lago di Pozzillo**. This is a great spot for a picnic amid the almond trees and prickly pears. Under no circumstances try to pick one of these pears without gloves: although they look harmless enough, they are covered in tiny, painful needles that are very difficult to remove from your skin.

CENTURIPÉ

pop 5800 / elev 730m

About 13km past Regalbuto on the road to Adrano and Mt Etna is a turn-off south for this little town, known as the *Balcone di Sicilia* (Balcony of Sicily) on account of its commanding position on a ridge in front of Mt Etna. The approach from the turn-off (you will need your own transport) brings you through 7km of lovely citrus groves and then uphill into the town, which has been fought over many times due to its strategic importance. The last battle occurred in 1943; when the Allies captured the town, the

Germans realised that their foothold in Sicily had slipped and they retreated to the Italian mainland. The town centre was partially destroyed by Allied bombs and much of it is now a collection of uninspiring modern buildings. The sole exception is the 17th-century pink-and-white **cathedral**.

NICOSIA

pop 14,800 / elev 724m

Of all the hill towns, Nicosia is the quietest and most fascinating. Set on four hills, this market town has played its part as a Greek city, Byzantine bishopric, Arab fort and Lombard stronghold. During the Norman era it was the most important of a series of fortified towns that stretched from Palermo to Messina, but the new autostrada (motorway) has sunk Nicosia into profound solitude. Between 1950 and 1970 nearly half the village emigrated and now only old men linger in the piazze, talking in their own blend of Gallo-Italic (a Lombard dialect unique to Nicosia, Aidone, Piazza Armerina and Sperlinga).

Sights

Although the town is full of fine buildings and churches, Nicosia's architectural legacy is in an alarming state of decay. Many of the buildings were damaged in the 1968 earthquake, and the elegant portico of the **Cattedrale di San Nicolò** still sports headless statues, as yet unrepaired. The cathedral dominates the central piazza, Piazza Garibaldi, and incorporates a Catalan-Gothic campanile built on an original Moorish tower. Inside is a baptismal font by

Domenico Gagini and a wooden crucifix by Fra Umile di Petralia, which is carried through the town on Good Friday.

From Piazza Garibaldi, pick up Nicosia's most impressive street, Via Salamone, lined with crumbling Franco-Lombard palaces and convents. At the top of the steep hill is the 19th-century **Chiesa di Santa Maria Maggiore**. It's another reconstruction, as the original 13th-century church was destroyed by a landslide in 1757. In 1968 the bell tower was demolished by an earthquake and its bells rehung on a low iron bracket – the chime you hear is electric. Inside is a lovely marble polypytch by Gagini. From the terrace the ruins of a Norman **castle** are visible on a rocky crag above the town.

Sleeping & Eating

Accommodation is in short supply here, and is usually to be found in the form of converted farmhouses. Though the farmhouses are generally charming, you almost always need your own transport to reach them.

Baglio San Pietro (☎ /fax 0935 64 05 29; www.baglio-sanpietro.com in Italian; Contrada San Pietro, Nicosia; s/d €40/80; 📍) Only 750m from the entrance to Nicosia (on the SS117 to Agira) this large country *baglio* occupies a lovely rural setting and has 10 comfortable rooms. It's a working farm, and offers mountain biking and horse riding – it's perfect if you fancy a quiet, relaxing time with the option of a bit of muscle work.

La Cirata (☎ 0935 64 05 61; SS117, Contrada Cirata; meals €25; ☎ closed Mon) The cavernous La Cirata,

DETOUR: NICOSIA TO ABBAZIA DI MANIACE

From Nicosia the SS120 skirts the border of the Parco Regionale dei Nebrodi, travelling across some of the most beautiful scenery on the whole island. For 32km the tortuous road climbs the mountains until the lofty village of **Troina** comes into sight. Situated on a 1120m ridge, this is Sicily's highest town. This austere and scruffy medley of houses was Roger's first Norman diocese, won in 1082 when Roger and his new bride Adelaide took refuge in the Chiesa Madre.

Continuing in an easterly direction on the SS120 you enter the volcanic landscape of Etna's northeastern slopes, with views over the 1823 lava flow. The hills are covered with nut orchards; in fact, nearly 80% of Italy's pistachios come from here. After 37km, just past Cesaro, you will arrive at the **Abbazia di Maniace** (☎ 095 69 00 18; Maniace; admission free; ☎ 9am-1pm & 3-7pm), a fortified abbey set in a wooded hollow. It was also established by Roger (the chapel still has its Norman ceiling) and named after the Byzantine general Maniakes, who helped him defeat the Saracens. However, the estate is better known for its connection to Nelson, who was awarded the title of duke of Bronte in 1799, a title only relinquished by his descendants in 1981. The castle keeps lots of Nelson memorabilia and looks more like an English manor house than a Sicilian palazzo (palace or mansion).

5km south of town, is the best place to eat around Nicosia. In summer the place is a popular stop for bus tours and local wedding parties, all of whom come here for the solid rustic cuisine, including a lip-smacking lamb roast.

There are a couple of bars on Piazza Garibaldi that can rustle up a sandwich or even a hot dish at lunch.

Getting There & Away

Nicosia is served by Interbus buses from Enna (€5.80, 40 minutes, three daily Monday to Friday), Catania (€5.80, two hours, 10 daily Monday to Friday, three Sunday) and other towns throughout the region. Buses arrive and depart from Piazza Marconi. You can buy your tickets from Bar del Passeggero by the bus stop.

SPERLINGA

A 15-minute drive west along the SS120 (about 13km) from Nicosia will bring you to Sperlinga, an interesting small town nestled beneath its impressive castle rock. The castle was the only place in Sicily to give refuge to the French during the Sicilian Vespers (1282), hence the saying 'Whatever pleases Sicily, only Sperlinga denies'. The town is also famous for its prehistoric cave system, which makes the sandstone mountain look like a piece of Swiss cheese. Both the caves and the **castle** (☎ 0935 64 31 77; admission €2; 🕒 9.30am-1.30pm & 4-6.30pm) are accessible.

A REGION BLIGHTED

By the end of the 19th century Sicily was officially the chief area of emigration in the world, with nearly 1.5 million Sicilians trying their luck elsewhere. Although it was an islandwide problem, the effect of the depopulation was greatest in the western interior. Novelist Leonardo Sciascia captured the huge emigration with his stories *The Long Crossing* and *The Test*. You can find them, with other great stories about Sicily, in his collection *The Wine Dark Sea*.

It is hardly surprising that Sciascia was able to capture the Sicilian longing for a better life so vividly. He grew up in Racalmuto, and his own grandfather worked in the sulphur mines that once dominated the countryside of Caltanissetta. By 1900 Italy had a world monopoly on the trade, but life was not so rosy for the 16,000 miners working in 300 mines. At the age of nine, Sciascia's grandfather went to work down the mine – children were used as they were the only ones small enough to crawl through the suffocating galleries at a depth of 60m. Naked, maltreated, clawing the sulphur out of the pits with their bare hands – it must have been a hellish existence, and many only saw the light of day once a week. The grandfather of Sicily's greatest novelist taught himself to read and write in the evenings, enabling his son (Sciascia's father) to become a mine clerk.

By the end of the 19th century American sulphur was beginning to dominate the markets and the consequent collapse of the Sicilian industry started the huge exodus of rural poor.

GANGI

This beautiful hilltop town is definitely worth a visit if you like soaking up a quiet atmosphere. The town produced two well-known 17th-century painters, Gaspare Vazano and Giuseppe Salerno, the latter nicknamed *Lo Zeppo di Gangi* (the Cripple of Gangi). You can see Salerno's impressive *Last Judgement* (1629) in the town's lovely **Chiesa Madre**. On the second Sunday of August, the whole town is decorated with ears of wheat for the **Sagra delle Spighe**, an ancient festival that goes all the way back to the Greek cult of Demeter.

From Gangi it is only 12km to Petralia Sottana, the gateway to the Parco Naturale Regionale delle Madonie.

There is some excellent rural accommodation around Gangi, and many of the *agriturismi* (farm stays) in the area have good restaurants.

Tenuta Gangivecchio (☎ 0921 64 48 04; fax 0921 68 91 91; www.tenutagangivecchio.com; Contrada Gangi Vecchio; r incl half board per person €60; 📍) is a former 14th-century Benedictine convent now run by the Tornabene sisters, who also run a highly regarded cookery course. It is a perfect base from which to explore the Madonie park. Children aged under 10 aren't accommodated at Easter and New Year.

Casale Villa Rainò (☎ 0921 64 46 80; www.villaraino.it in Italian; Contrada Rainò; s/d €45/70; 📍) is a wonderful brick-built manor house in a

gorgeous rural setting. The interior is cosy and intimate, with rugs and roaring fires, and all the rooms are individually styled with antiques and family knick-knacks. The restaurant is famous and it attracts diners from all around.

To get to Gangi by car, take the SS120 from Nicosia (19km) or from the Tyrrhenian Coast. Sais Autolinee has a bus connecting Gangi with Enna (via Sperlinga and Calascibetta; €7.90, two hours, one daily Monday to Saturday).

SOUTH OF ENNA

South of Enna the landscape alters from severe mountain scenery to gentler cultivated fields dotted with busy market towns. Piazza Armerina and Caltagirone are typically provincial, and both have an attractive historic centre and a bustling atmosphere that's independent of tourism. The remains of the Greek city of Morgantina, east of Aidone, are considerable and worth more than the trickle of visitors they receive. The real highlight, however, is just outside Piazza Armerina at Casale, the site of one of the most extraordinary finds from antiquity: a sumptuous Roman villa with the largest and best-preserved collection of mosaic works of art in the world.

PIAZZA ARMERINA

pop 20,900 / elev 697m

Set amid some of the most fertile territory on the island, this town (simply called Piazza until the 18th century) takes its name from the Colle Armerino, one of the three hills on which it is built. It is actually two towns in one: the original Piazza was founded by the Saracens in the 10th century on the slope of the Colle Armerino, while a 15th-century expansion to the southeast was redefined by an urban grid established in the 17th century.

You can easily spend a day or two wandering around its labyrinthine streets and seeing the extraordinary Roman villa. With the addition of a couple of nice hotels and restaurants, Piazza Armerina becomes an unexpected treat.

Orientation & Information

The small **tourist office** (☎ 0935 68 02 01; Via Cavour 15; 🕒 8.30am-12.30pm & 3-7pm Mon-Fri) is in the town centre just off the central Piazza Garibaldi. Members of staff speak only Italian. There

is a helpful **information point** (☎ 0935 68 70 27; www.guardalasilicia.it in Italian; Via Umberto 1; 🕒 9am-7pm) with English-speaking staff, who can give you free town guides and maps of the Roman Villa (maps are often unavailable at the site itself). If you continue up Via Cavour you will reach the cathedral, which sits dramatically right at the top of the hill.

The main road into town is Via Garibaldi, and a one-way system takes you out along Via Roma. The main shopping street is Via G. Mazzini, where you will find internet access at **S@binet** (☎ 0935 68 73 85; Via G. Mazzini 35; per hr €6; 🕒 4-8pm Mon, 9.30am-1pm & 4-8pm Tue-Sat).

The **post office** (Piazza Falcone e Borsellino; 🕒 8am-6.30pm Mon-Fri, 8am-12.30pm Sat) is on Piazza Falcone e Borsellino.

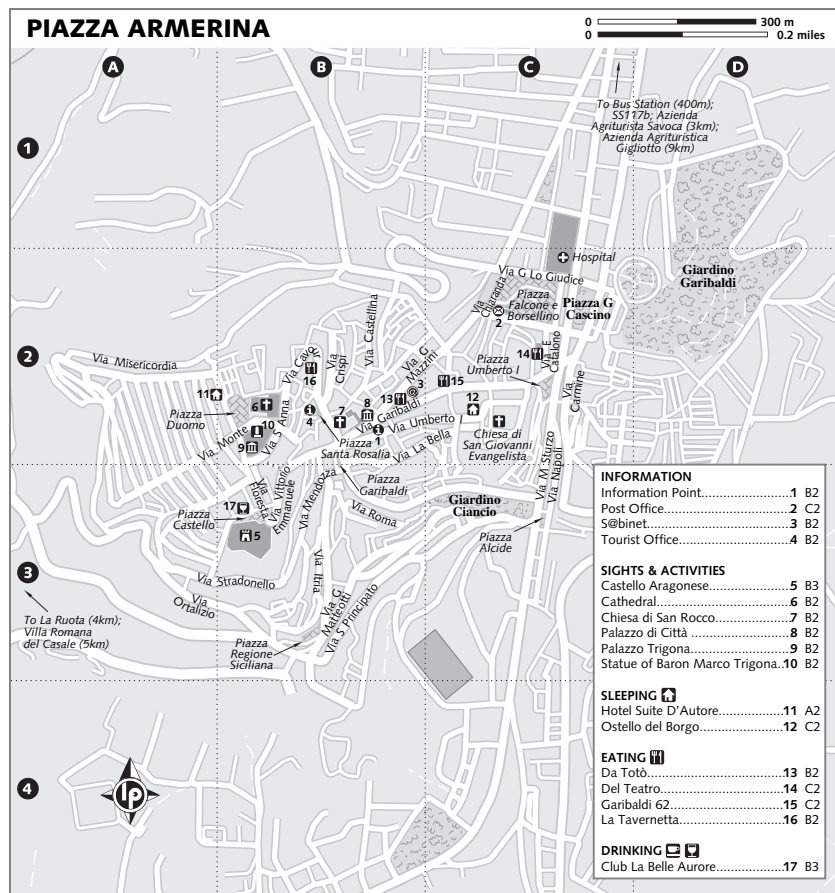
Sights

Piazza Armerina is an elegant town although many of its palazzi are quite rugged-looking. Its fate is to be upstaged by the Roman villa 5km to the south, but take your time and spend a day or two at the town's lovely historic centre.

You can spot the dramatically sited dome of the huge **cathedral** from a few kilometres away. It rises majestically from the hilltop and the terraced houses skirt its base in descending tiers. Make your way up here to enjoy the belvedere. The façade dates from 1719 and the dome was added in 1768. The airy blue-and-white interior contains an altar, behind which is a copy of a Byzantine painting, *Madonna delle Vittorie* (Virgin of the Victories), the original of which was supposedly presented to Count Roger I by Pope Nicholas II. Opposite the cathedral is the baronial **Palazzo Trigona**, and a **statue of Baron Marco Trigona** – who financed the cathedral's construction – stands in the square.

Off Piazza Duomo is **Via Monte**, the arterial road of the 13th-century city, with its warren of tiny alleys fanning out like the ribs of a fish bone. This is the town's most picturesque quarter. Alternatively, take Via Floresta, beside Palazzo Trigona, to arrive at the ruins of the 14th-century **Castello Aragonese**.

From the castle, Via Vittorio Emanuele leads you down to the heart of the town, where Piazza Garibaldi is overlooked by the elegant **Palazzo di Città** (Town Hall; 🕒 closed to the public) and the **Chiesa di San Rocco** (known as the Fundrò); the latter has an impressive doorway carved out of tufa.



Festivals & Events

Held on 13 and 14 August, **Palio dei Normanni** is a medieval pageant celebrating Count Roger's capture of the town from the Moors in 1087. There are parades and other festivities, as well as a joust. See the tourist office (p249) for details.

Sleeping

Piazza Armerina has limited accommodation on offer.

Ostello del Borgo (☎ /fax 0935 68 70 19; www.ostellodelborgo.it; Largo San Giovanni 6; dm/s/d €17/45/60; ☑) This restored convent is a great budget option if you don't mind the crucifixes above your head and the bare, austere interior. The staff are friendly and speak

English, and there's internet access (€3 per hour) and bicycle rental. It is right in the historic centre.

Azienda Agriturista Savoca (☎ 0935 68 30 78; www.agrisavoca.com; Contrade da Polleri; per person €30-40; ☑) This is a good rural retreat, located about 3km from Piazza Armerina on the road to Mirabella.

Azienda Agrituristica Gigliotto (☎ 0933 97 08 98; www.gigliotto.com; Contrada Gigliotto, SS117; s/€70-80, d/€80-100; ☑) An ancient *masseria* (manor farm) dating back to the 14th century, Gigliotto is set in rolling countryside 9km south of Piazza Armerina. It is a fantastic rural retreat where you can learn how to make ricotta, help pick grapes, go horse riding or swim in the farm's lake. Everything is organic.

A ROOM WITH A VIEW Vesna Maric

It's not often that you can go into a hotel and walk out with a bed, chair, mirror or lamp without being chased by security. And it's even less common that you'll be encouraged by the owner to do so. OK, I've fibbed a little: Ettore Messina, the owner of Piazza Armerina's extraordinary hotel-cum-gallery Suite D'Autore, won't be happy if you simply walk out with his furniture – you do have to pay for it – but it is true that you can buy every single thing you see in the hotel. 'Where did this idea come from?' I asked Ettore.

I befriended a couple of teachers at the University of Art and Design in Palermo, and we had this idea to start a competition for the design students to come up with innovative bits of furniture for the hotel. We'd wanted to sell the pieces and make the competition work both for the students and for us. Soon after, we had 100 people working on the art for the hotel. There were Italian and international artists and students, and people who'd approach me wanting to exhibit and sell their work here.'

And indeed, as you walk into the hotel, you're already coveting the bicycle-seat bar stool or the nutty lampshade that looks like a flock of birds flying off into the sun. But where does he keep getting this great art from? 'I find the art and the artists as I travel. I was on holiday in Belarus, and I found these amazing artists there. I invited them all to the hotel and 40 of them came to Piazza Armerina on a bus from Belarus to produce and exhibit their work here. It was amazing. There are artists approaching me almost every day. It's something new for our town, and the locals seem to like it.'

He shows me around the seven rooms, flicking all the switches on and off, letting me sit on the champagne cork stool, demonstrating the sliding walnut cupboard that glides across the wall and cleverly hides blankets. Each room has *Nessun Dorma* (No-One Shall Sleep) etched across the mirror. Is this some sort of homage to Puccini or Pavarotti? 'No, no,' Ettore laughs. 'It's a message to our guests that this isn't the place to sleep, but to enjoy the space. We don't mean it literally, of course. The guests should sleep very well indeed.'

our pick Suite D'Autore (☎ 0935 68 70 27; www.suitedautore.com; Via Monte 1; d €100-140; ☑) Suite D'Autore is a playful, beautiful and original hotel that doubles as a gallery, meaning that everything you use, lie or sit on is produced by artists and can be bought. Opened in July 2007, it's a fantastic place to stay, especially if you like to spend time in your room. Each of the seven rooms is themed after a period in design, so Fluidità features the famous Bocca (Mouth) sofa and a snazzy round bed, while Stravaganza has pop art and futuristic elements, and so on. The welcoming owner (see A Room with a View, above) is bound to pass on his passion for the project.

Eating & Drinking

Da Totò (☎ 0935 68 01 53; Via G Mazzini 27; meals €20; ☑ closed Mon) A popular and down-to-earth trattoria (informal restaurant) with traditional and uncomplicated pasta dishes, risottos and meat mains. It's a good place for a simple lunch or dinner with a bit of local wine.

Del Teatro (☎ 0935 8 56 62; Via Teatro 1; meals €20-25; ☑ closed Mon) Tucked down the side of the local theatre is this good trattoria, which serves

excellent pizzas and good pasta dishes; try the *pappardelle alla Norma* (pasta with tomatoes, aubergines and salted ricotta). Tables are set outside in summer.

La Tavernetta (Via Cavour 14; meals €20-25; ☑ closed Sun) On the way up to the cathedral, this unpretentious, popular local trattoria is much loved for its simple, good-quality food. Try a plate of delicious pasta with tomatoes, followed by a piece of meat (usually lamb or veal). A carafe of local red is a great addition.

La Ruota (☎ 0935 68 05 42; Contrada Paratore Casale; meals €30; ☑ 12.30-3pm) About 1km from the Roman villa is this exceptional restaurant, renowned throughout central Sicily for its hearty rural fare. The house speciality is the *coniglio all stemperata* (rabbit stewed with tomatoes, olives and capers).

Garibaldi 62 (☎ 0935 68 85 37; Via Garibaldi 62; meals €30-35; ☑ closed Sun evening & Mon) This is a new restaurant that's currently the hottest spot on Piazza Armerina's restaurant map. The interior is elegant, with a relaxed up-market atmosphere, and the terrace, dotted with palms and shielded by white canopies, is lovely. The kitchen has a modern take on

traditional seasonal cuisine and the wine list is patriotic, with Sicilian wines ruling the roost.

Club La Belle Aurore (☎ 0935 68 63 33; Piazza Castello 5) If you're looking for a good bar head up to the castle, where you will find this funky place. Behind its somewhat dilapidated exterior is a stylish bar with an internal patio.

Getting There & Away

SAIS buses connect Piazza Armerina with Enna (€2.75, 45 minutes, eight daily Monday to Saturday, two Sunday); bear in mind that some of these buses arrive in Enna Bassa, not the historic centre. There is also an AST bus to Syracuse (€7.75, two hours, one daily) and frequent services to Catania (€19.30, 1½ hours, nine daily Monday to Saturday).

AROUND PIAZZA ARMERINA Villa Romana del Casale

The extraordinary Unesco World Heritage-listed **Villa Romana del Casale** (☎ 0935 68 00 36; www.villaromanadelcasale.it; adult/concession €6/3; ☎ 8am-7pm, ticket office shuts at 6pm) is easily the most important Roman site in Sicily. It was thought to be the property of Maximian (Maximianus Hercules), coemperor during the reign of Diocletian (AD 286-305) – hence its other name, the Villa Imperiale. Although other surviving villas testify to the magnificent lifestyles enjoyed by wealthy Romans – for example, Hadrian's villa at Tivoli and Diocletian's getaway retreat in Split, Croatia – the Casale country residence stands out for its sheer size coupled with the breathtaking extent (3535 sq metres) of its polychrome floor mosaics.

Given the early date of the mosaics, what impresses scholars most is their naturalism, range and fluidity – they cover every aspect of provincial Roman life. Erotic, playful and full of vitality, the scenes are very human; they lack the frosty symbolism of Byzantine mosaic work and, consequently, the detail is striking. A leopard pounces on the back of a deer and blood flows from a deep gash, silly putti (cherubs or cupids) smirk and children play, while ladies lounge in seductive poses. You could spend hours here spotting all the different and amusing scenes.

HISTORY

The villa is made up of four connected groups of buildings, which date from the

early 4th century and were built on the site of a more modest 2nd-century home (possibly a hunting lodge). Scholars believe that the buildings were maintained until about the year 1000, after which they were abandoned to local squatters and destroyed by the Norman king William the Bad in 1160.

In the 12th century the entire area was covered by a landslide that left the villa under 10m of mud for some 700 years. From 1761 onwards, intermittent attempts were made at excavation, but it wasn't until the 1950s that serious work began revealing the main structure and the mosaics.

The work continues today and large parts of the estate – including the extensive slave quarters and outbuildings – remain covered. The fact that the mosaics have been underground for so long has largely proven to be a blessing in disguise; in 1991 they were badly damaged by a flood, which suggests that had they not been covered they would hardly have survived nearly 2000 years of inclement weather and petty vandalism.

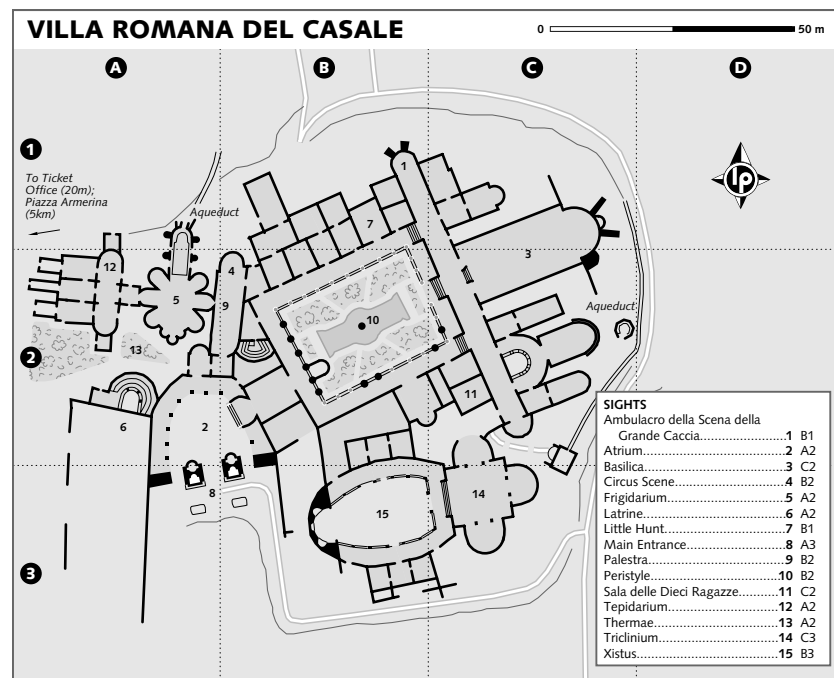
However, the perspex roof that now covers the mosaics creates a sweltering greenhouse effect in summer, with temperatures reaching nearly 40°C and humidity at 80%. Unesco is so concerned that it has now deemed the mosaics 'at risk'.

INFORMATION

The villa is located in a wooded valley 5km southwest of Piazza Armerina. There is an official car park at the top of the road that descends to the villa; it costs €1 and a guardian is on duty. It is about a five-minute walk down to the ticket office, which enters the site directly. Near the entrance there is a café with toilets.

Unfortunately, the villa is besieged by hordes of tourists in the summer – some 2000 per day are deposited by bus tours. This can make the experience very frustrating as the raised walkways are narrow. Get here early if you want to avoid the tour groups (they start arriving at 9.30am); another good time is the lunch hour between 1pm and 2pm. There is no wheelchair access to the site.

There is an explanatory plan of the site, which is sometimes available at the ticket office. Otherwise you can get hold of a copy at



the tourist office in Piazza Armerina (p249) or at one of the many souvenir stalls that line the road down.

The site's raised walkways carry visitors through the house's many rooms in a particular sequence. The description below follows the order of that sequence.

SIGHTS

The **main entrance** leads through the remnants of a triumphal arch into an elegant **atrium** (forecourt). To the west are the substantial **thermae** (baths), all-important in a Roman house. They incorporate a **tepidarium** (warm room), where you can now see the exposed brickwork and vents that allowed hot steam into the room, and a **frigidarium** (cold room), where the radiating apses contained cold plunge pools. The small **latrine** is a good indication of the house's elegance – it is adorned with a brick drain, a marble washbasin and rich mosaics.

As you walk through the villa proper, the western side of the massive **peristyle** is lined with amusing animal heads. This was the central courtyard, where guests would have

been received before being taken through to the **basilica** (throne room), which you can view through a window. As you walk along the west side of the peristyle you can look down into the **palaestra** (gymnasium), which has a splendid mosaic depicting a **circus scene** from the Circus Maximus in Rome (the room is also known as the Salone del Circo or Circus Room). Of the rooms on the northern side of the peristyle, the most interesting is the second-last one called the **Little Hunt**, depicting a hunting scene in exquisite detail. But this is merely an appetiser for what follows.

A small staircase brings you to the eastern side of the peristyle and the **Ambulacro della Scena della Grande Caccia** (Ambulacrum of the Great Hunting Scene), a long corridor (64m) depicting the hunt and capture of the Romans' favourite gaming animals – tigers, leopards, elephants, antelopes, ostriches and a rhino – animals they eventually hunted to extinction in North Africa. The first figure is resplendent in a Byzantine cape and is flanked by two soldiers, most likely Maximian himself and two members of his

personal legion, the Herculiani. The detail, action and energy of the mosaic makes it one of the finest pieces of work ever found.

At the far end of the corridor, steps lead south around the peristyle and the **Sala delle Dieci Ragazze** (Room of the 10 Girls), home of the famous bikini girls – actually athletes pumping iron and lifting tiny bell jars. Interestingly, in the far left-hand corner you can see that the mosaic covers a second mosaic floor; Maximian wanted the very latest in home décor and ordered the entire place redone, an extraordinary extravagance.

The walkways then lead through the rest of the house. On the other side of the long corridor is a series of apartments, whose floor illustrations reproduce scenes from Homer, as well as mythical subjects such as Arion playing the lyre on a dolphin's back, and Cupid and Faunus wrestling. Of particular interest is the **triclinium** (banquet hall), with a splendid depiction of the labours of Hercules, where the tortured monsters are ensnared by a smirking Odysseus. It is far larger in scale than the previous rooms and reminiscent of the epic work of Michelangelo. To view the **xistus** (elliptical courtyard), which you can see from the triclinium, you have to exit the building and walk around the apse. As it is uncovered, the mosaic work here is not well preserved.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Autolinee Urbane runs buses from Piazza Armerina to the villa in the summer only (€0.70, 30 minutes, six daily 1 May to 30 September). Buses depart from Piazza on the hour (9am to 11am and 3pm to 5pm), and return on the half-hour (9.30am to 11.30am and 3.30pm to 5.30pm).

Outside summer you will have to walk the signposted 5km; it's downhill, not too strenuous and takes about an hour. The walk back is only steep in the last part. Taxis (parked all over town) will take you there, wait for an hour and drive you back to Piazza Armerina for about €20 – not bad value if you're in a group.

If you have your own car, head south along the SS117.

Aidone

If you're in Aidone, it's worth popping into the **Museo Archeologico** (☎ 0935 873 07; Convento dei Cappuccini; admission €3; 🕒 8am–1hr before sunset). This collection houses finds from the excavations

at Morgantina but it's not nearly as large or significant as it should be – a staggering amount of the good stuff has been stolen from Morgantina and smuggled out of Sicily. One object worth seeing, however, is a large 3rd-century-BC bust of Persephone.

You can get to Aidone by SAIS bus from Enna (€3.25, 50 minutes, two daily Monday to Friday). AST buses run from Piazza Armerina to Aidone (€0.70, 15 minutes, 10 daily Monday to Friday, two Saturday and Sunday). There is no central taxi service in Aidone, just individual taxi drivers. You could, however, ask the **local tourist office** (☎ 0935 8 65 57; Via Mazzini 1) to help you.

Morgantina

About 4km beyond the town of Aidone are the noteworthy **remains** (☎ 0935 8 79 55; admission €3; 🕒 8am–6.30pm) of this sizable Greek colony, spread across two hills and the valley between. Morgeti, an early Sicilian settlement, was founded in 850 BC on Cittadella hill, but this town was destroyed in 459 BC and a new town was built on the second hill, the Serra Orlando. It reached its apogee during the reign of the Syracusan tyrant Hieron II (269–215 BC). In 211 BC the town took the losing Carthaginian side during the Second Punic War and was delivered by the Romans into the unmerciful hands of a Spanish mercenary called Moericus, who promptly stripped it of its wealth. By the reign of Emperor Augustus, it had lost all importance and was eventually abandoned. In 1955 archaeologists identified the site and began its excavation, which continues to this day.

The centre of the town is the **agora** (market-place), spread over two levels. A trapezoidal stairway linking the two was also used as seating during public meetings. The upper level had a **market**; you can still see the walls that divided one shop from the next. The lower level was the site of the **theatre**, which has been preserved in excellent condition.

To the northeast are the **residential quarters** of the city, holding what must have been houses for the town's wealthy class, as testified by the ornate wall decorations and handsome mosaics in the inner rooms. Another residential quarter has been found behind the theatre and its considerable ruins are well worth checking out.

Morgantina is an easy detour if you have your own transport but a difficult proposition

if you don't. There is no way of getting there by public transport; you can get an SAIS bus from Enna to Aidone (€3.25, 50 minutes, two daily Monday to Friday) and either take a taxi or walk 3km along the SS288.

CALTAGIRONE

pop 37,500 / elev 608m

The elegant baroque town of Caltagirone is renowned throughout Sicily for its ceramics, which have been produced here for more than 1000 years thanks to the high-quality clay found in the area. Although the town's earliest settlers worked with terracotta, the arrival of the Arabs in the 10th century saw the beginnings of a lucrative ceramics industry. Not only did the Arabs give the town its name (from the Arabic *kalat* and *gerun*, meaning 'castle' and 'cave'), but they introduced the wide array of glazed polychromatic colours, particularly yellow and blue, that have distinguished local ceramics ever since.

The town was destroyed in the earthquake of 1693 and rebuilt in the baroque style that now characterises the whole of the southeast. In Caltagirone this is given its own unique twist with the liberal use of majolica tiles; the Ponte San Francesco is even adorned with ceramic flowers.

The ceramics industry might have died out in the early 20th century if it weren't for the efforts of Luigi Sturzo (who later moved into politics and campaigned actively for land reforms); he founded the prestigious School of Ceramics, and today tourism ensures that ceramics are once again big business in the town.

Orientation

Caltagirone is divided into an upper and lower town. All buses stop on Piazza Municipio in the upper town, where most of the town's sights are located. AST buses depart from in front of the Metropol Cinema on Viale Principe Umberto in the lower town, but stop at Piazza Municipio on the way. The train station is located in the lower town, at the western end of Viale Principe Umberto, along with Caltagirone's accommodation options. If you are travelling by bus and just planning a quick visit, you can go right up to Piazza Municipio, but if you plan on staying here overnight you should get off in the lower town.

Information

The **Tourist Office** (☎ 0933 3 41 91; www.comune.caltagirone.ct.it; Via Duomo 7; 🕒 9am–1pm & 4–7pm Mon–Fri, 9am–1pm Sat) is conveniently located just off Piazza Duomo. It has an excellent website and helpful staff who hand out a free map of the town.

Sights

Caltagirone's upper town is a bustling centre of activity with some gorgeous baroque buildings and churches. The most evocative sight is a set of steps, **Scalinata di Santa Maria del Monte**, which rises up from Piazza Municipio to the **Chiesa di Santa Maria del Monte**, at the top of the town. Each of the 142 steps is decorated with hand-painted ceramics, and no two are the same. On either side of the steps are rows of ceramic workshops where you can watch local artisans ply their handiwork. Some shops also make the traditional terracotta *presepi* (crib figurines), which are formally exhibited between 6 December and Christmas. The steps are also the focus of the Feast of St James (Festa di San Giacomo), the town's patron saint (see below).

In the south of the upper town is the **Museo Regionale della Ceramica** (Regional Ceramics Museum; ☎ 0933 5 84 18; Via Roma; admission €6; 🕒 9am–6.30pm), where you can trace the history of ceramics from prehistoric times to the present day.

Festivals & Events

During the **Festa di San Giacomo**, held on 24 and 25 July, the Scalinata di Santa Maria del Monte is lit up by more than 4000 oil lamps while a religious procession makes its way through town from Chiesa di Santa Maria del Monte.

Sleeping

There are some sweet B&Bs in Caltagirone's old town. Prices are the same year-round.

Gualtiero (☎ 0933 3 42 22; Piazza San Francesco d'Assisi 20; d €55) A small, six-room place with a slightly dingy feel and low beds. Its main bonus is the fabulously picturesque views of the Chiesa dell'Immacolata from its balconies.

Il Piccolo Attico (☎ 0933 2 15 88; Via Infermeria 82; 2–4 person apt €60) An excellent option for two or four people, this little attic apartment is homy, cosy and superclean, with fantastic views over Caltagirone. The elderly couple who run the place are friendly enough, and Mamma makes the breakfast in the morning.

TESTA DI MORO

You'll see the *testa di Moro* (Moor's head) in almost any Sicilian institution, shop, hotel or restaurant, usually with a plant sticking out of it. The man's head – usually with African features, a moustache, and wearing a turban – is often coupled up with a woman's head, and the woman sports grapes, oranges and other Mediterranean fruit on her head. The roots of this design are a little less lustrous, however. It symbolises the beheadings of the ruling Arabs by the invading Inquisitionist Spaniards, who saw it as their 'holy duty' to rid Europe of anything non-Christian. The heads were hung around Sicilian towns as warnings to the Arabs and represented signs of victory for the Christians. They somehow came to be replicated in clay, supporting Sicily's flowerpots along the way.

La Pilozza Infiorata (☎ 0933 2 21 62; www.lapilozza.infiorata.com; Via SS Salvatore 97; s/d €70/90; 🍷) This airy, bright B&B has welcoming rooms decorated in white and sky blue, and is scattered with bits of tasteful antique furniture, so that you feel like you're walking into a French countryside maison. Breakfast is served on the sweet terrace in the warmer months. A great, central location.

Grand Hotel Villa San Mauro (☎ 0933 2 65 00; www.framon-hotels.com; Via Porto Salvo 14; d/ste from €98/174; 🍷 🍷 🍷) One of the luxury Framon chain, the Villa San Mauro is extremely comfortable and has a wonderful panoramic terrace with views over the town. You'll find it at the southern end of town, near Chiesa di Santa Maria di Gesù.

Eating

Caltagirone's restaurants may not be two a penny, but what's there is good.

La Piazzetta (☎ 0933 2 41 78; Via Vesprì 20; meals €20; 🍷 closed mid-Aug–mid-Sep) This small restaurant specialises in strictly regional cuisine, with fantastic dishes such as fresh pasta with pistachio pesto for *primo* (first course), and a fillet with asparagus for mains. A real treat.

Non Solo Vino (☎ 0933 3 10 68; Via Vittorio Emanuele 1; mains €20; 🍷 closed Mon) Though it looks pretty uninviting from the outside, this place is a good working-man's diner where you can get wine and a decent mixed grill. It's the perfect cure for a hard day's ceramic shopping.

La Scala (☎ 0933 5 77 81; Scalinata Santa Maria del Monte; meals €25; 🍷 closed Sun) Situated in Caltagirone's ceramic heart, on the long flight of steps leading to the Chiesa di Santa Maria del Monte, this is an atmospheric place to enjoy fresh pasta and local wines.

Il Palazzo dei Marchesi di Santa Barbara (☎ 0933 2 24 06; www.imarchesidisantabarbara.it; Via San Bonaventura 22; meals €25-30) Sitting inside a

grand palazzo, this is Caltagirone's poshest restaurant. The lighting is a little unforgiving, but the food is good, and the service attentive and friendly. Try the *caponata* (a combination of tomatoes, aubergines, olives and anchovies) for starters, and follow it up with a creamy aubergine risotto. A fillet with seasonal mushrooms is a delicious main. The desserts are a feast of *cannoli* (pastry tubes stuffed with sweet ricotta) and *semifreddi* (literally 'semifrozen'; a cold, creamy dessert).

Shopping

There are about 120 ceramics shops located all over town. The highest concentration is found around the Scalinata di Santa Maria del Monte and Piazza Umberto I. See p162 for more information on Caltagirone's ceramics.

Le Maioliche (☎ 0933 5 31 39; www.varsallona.it; Discesa Collegio 1) This reliably creative and innovative local ceramicist produces some interesting designs as well as the more traditional *testa di Moro* (Moor's head; see above).

Getting There & Away

Caltagirone is served by SAIS Autolinee buses from Enna (€4.40, 1½ hours, three daily Monday to Saturday, one Sunday) and Palermo (€9.70, three hours, two daily Monday to Saturday, one Sunday). There's an AST bus from Syracuse (€4.90, three hours, one daily Monday to Friday) and buses from Piazza Armerina (€2.75, one hour, eight daily Monday to Saturday, one Sunday).

The town is also served by trains from Gela (€3.05, 40 minutes, nine daily) and Catania (€5.05, 1¾ hours, 10 daily).

THE WESTERN INTERIOR

You'll get no clearer sense of the effect of poverty in Sicily than when travelling through the western interior. Unlike other parts of the island, this area has never known prosperity and has been largely ignored by Sicily's conquerors and city builders. For centuries the bleached landscapes were divided into large *latifondi* (landed estates), and today it is still an area of rolling hills dotted with small towns. It receives fewer visitors than any other spot on the island and, although the tourist authorities have done their optimistic best to promote the area for its wild and natural beauty, it is difficult to imagine anything changing for a long time.

CALTANISSETTA

pop 60,900 / elev 568m

A big and busy town, Caltanissetta is the provincial capital of the western interior, but it has been a victim of the misfortune and Mafia meddling that has tainted this whole region of Sicily.

It was originally a Saracen settlement, and was captured and subsequently reorganised by the Normans in 1086. The city was badly damaged in the war and now contains little of historical or cultural interest. Today it is a market town grown prosperous on sulphur mining; when the industry collapsed in the 1970s, potassium and magnesium mining took its place. Either way there is nothing picturesque about Caltanissetta. Still, it is the transport hub of the region and you will undoubtedly pass through it.

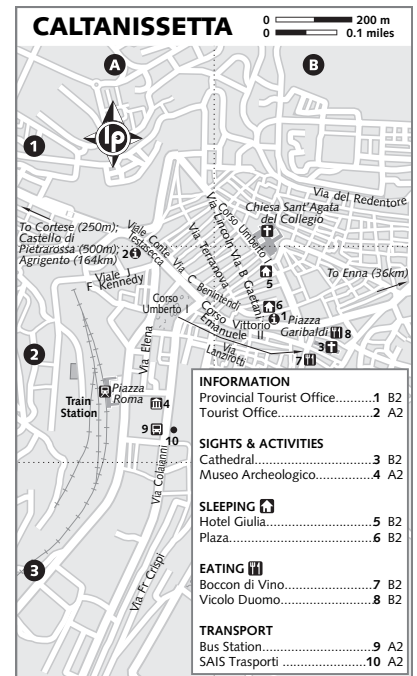
Orientation

Caltanissetta's train station is west of town on Piazza Roma. The bus station is close by, around the corner on Via Colaiani.

Information

Provincial Tourist Office (☎ 0934 53 04 11; Corso Vittorio Emanuele II 109; 🍷 10am–noon Mon–Fri, 10am–noon & 4–6pm Wed) Located just off Piazza Garibaldi, this office is more involved with regional statistics.

Tourist Office (☎ 0934 2 10 89; Viale Conte Testasecca 20; 🍷 9am–1pm Mon–Fri, 9am–1pm & 4–6pm Wed) The better of the two offices. It is about 300m north of the train station.



Sights

The centre of Caltanissetta is Piazza Garibaldi, a scruffy square singularly lacking any life. It's dominated by the huge **cathedral** on one side and the Town Hall on the other. The cathedral has a late-Renaissance appearance that breaks the baroque mould, but substantial alterations made in the 19th century have ruined the overall effect. Inside (if you find the church open) are frescoes by Guglielmo Borremans.

The most interesting sight in town is the **Museo Archeologico** (☎ 0934 2 59 36; Via Colaiani 3; adult/concession €2.50/1.50; 🍷 9am–1pm & 3.30–7pm, closed last Mon of month), about 100m east of the train station. The displays are mostly from prehistoric times and include finds from digs conducted in the 1950s, including vases, tools and rare terracotta figurines from the Bronze Age, and early Sicilian ceramics. Also of interest are finds from a number of necropolises spread about Caltanissetta's hinterland. One such necropolis was known by the Arabs as *Gebel Habib*, meaning 'Mountain of Death'. The museum was closed at the time of research.

To the west of town, but within easy walking distance of Piazza Garibaldi, are the ruins of the **Castello di Pietrarossa**, precariously balanced on a rocky outcrop. There isn't much left of the castle but the walk and the views from the rock are pleasant enough.

Sleeping & Eating

Hotel Giulia (☎ 0934 54 29 27; www.hotelgiulia.it in Italian; Corso Umberto I 85; s/d €42/60; 📍) This small hotel is the best option in town. Centrally located with friendly staff and plain but comfortable rooms, it represents good value. It also has a good restaurant, Ristorante Archetto, around the corner.

Plaza (☎/fax 0934 58 38 77; Via B Gaetani 5; s/d €46/65; 📍 🚗) A modern hotel with large, bald rooms. Still, it's close to the centre of town and the train and bus stations, and the rooms are comfortable enough.

Boccon di Vino (☎ 0934 58 27 64; Corso Umberto I 146; meals €20; 🚫 closed Sun) This new little wine bar-cum-trattoria has a reasonably priced menu that changes daily. There's good antipasto and mixed grill, or you could just opt for a glass of wine and some nibbles.

Cortese (☎ 0934 59 16 86; Viale Sicilia 158; meals €25; 🚫 closed Mon) Cortese is another good restaurant serving local specialities such as *pasta con frutti di mare e funghi* (pasta with seafood and mushrooms).

Vicolo Duomo (☎ 0934 58 23 31; Piazza Garibaldi 3; meals €30; 🚫 closed Sun & lunch Mon) An extraordinarily good restaurant for Caltanissetta, way above the standard of anything else in town. Tucked in a corner of Piazza Garibaldi and decorated along stylish modern lines, it is full of contented diners lingering over their delicious food until well after 4pm. It has the Slow Food Movement badge of approval.

Getting There & Away

The town is well served by buses and trains from all corners of the island. **SAIS Trasporti** (☎ 0934 56 40 72; Via Colaianni) serves Agrigento (€7.80, 1½ hours, 10 daily Monday to Saturday) and Catania (€7.80, 1½ hours, nine daily Monday to Saturday). It has its own

ticket office, opposite the bus station. Buses depart from the station. SAIS Autolinee serves Enna (€3.30, one hour, three daily Monday to Saturday); purchase your tickets in the café in the bus terminal. Astra has buses to Piazza Armerina (€2.70, one hour, five Monday to Saturday); buy tickets on the bus.

There are also trains to/from Agrigento (€4.25, 1½ hours, 10 daily), and also to/from Enna (€2.65, 40 minutes, seven daily). Note that you are better off getting the bus to Enna, because the length and steepness of the road connecting Enna's train station and town centre can be taxing.

If you plan on travelling into the western province from Caltanissetta, you're better off organising your own transport.

WEST OF CALTANISSETTA

The area west of Caltanissetta is wild and lawless, a Sicilian Timbuktu in terms of its remoteness. Two of Sicily's most powerful dons lived out their lives comfortably here: Don Calógero Vizzini, Sicily's first postwar Mafia mayor, lived in **Villalba**, 35km west, while Don Genco Russo, his successor in the 1950s and '60s, lived down the road in **Mussomeli** (20km south of Villalba). Both men ran their hideously depressed towns like personal fiefdoms, portraying themselves as Robin Hood figures. Vizzini's tombstone even cheekily laments the death of a gentleman.

The imposing 14th-century **Castello Manfredonico**, just to the east of Mussomeli, is a reminder of other feudal oppressors. Set on a rocky crag that rises from the flat fields, it has wonderful views of the valley.

To reach Villalba take the SS122b north from Caltanissetta, turn off onto the SS121 to Santa Caterina Villarmosa, then turn onto the SS121, which will take you directly to Villalba. If you continue along this road for 5km you will reach Vallelunga Pratameno, which borders on the vast and beautiful **Regaleali estate** (www.tascadalmerita.it). This winery is still largely run like a feudal estate by the Tasca family and you can spend a wonderful week here enrolled in Anna Tasca's cookery course (see p52).

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