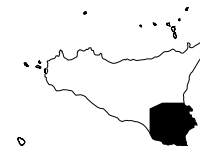


Syracuse & the Southeast



One of the most magical corners of Sicily, Syracuse and the southeastern part of the island brim with Sicilian baroque, historical remains, amazing food and some beautiful beaches and landscapes. At the same time this part of the world somehow manages to remain unflooded by tourism – how perfect is that?

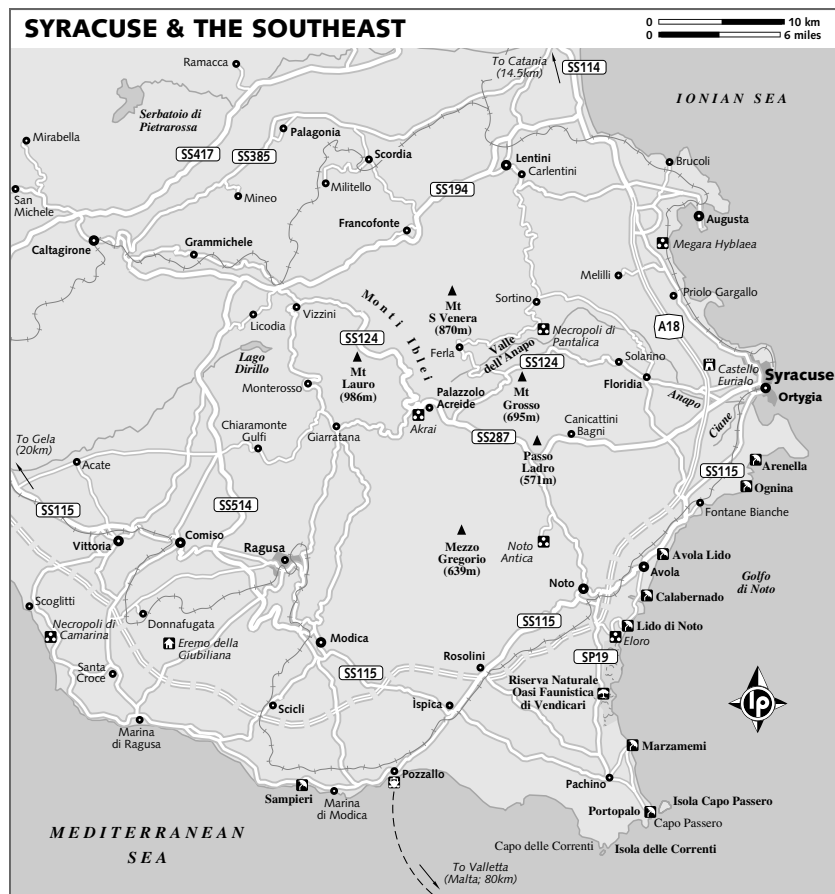
Starting with glorious Syracuse which, like some noble and elegant dame, just gets better with age, you'll likely find it hard to pull yourself away from this gorgeous city. But make sure you do, for a little further from Syracuse you'll reach the 'baroque triangle': Noto, a renovated shrine to Sicilian baroque and a paradise for lovers of the style; the friendly and charming Modica, where you'll eat and drink well, admire the dramatic baroque and sigh over the landscape of cluttered pastel-coloured palazzos; and finally, the knockout that is the largely undiscovered Ragusa, abundant with baroque and teeming with dozens of delightful B&Bs and great restaurants.

If that's not enough, the coastline running underneath Modica and Ragusa all the way east to Riserva Naturale Oasi Faunistica di Vendicari is full of long sandy and pebble beaches – most of which are relaxed and not too crowded in high season – so swimming opportunities in this area are top class too. There's no two ways about it: the southeast is a stunner.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Stroll down the magical streets of Syracuse's **Ortygia** (p217), where ancient Greece and 18th-century baroque jostle for space
- Delight in the beauty of baroque architecture and delicious food as you explore the relatively undiscovered **Ragusa** (p235)
- Indulge in the rich dark chocolate and the equally extravagant architecture in **Modica** (p233)
- Bask in the golden reflection of **Noto** (p228), a voluptuous baroque town, restored to its utmost glory
- Find some of Sicily's wildest and quietest beaches at the **Riserva Naturale Oasi Faunistica di Vendicari** (p232)





SYRACUSE

pop 122,900

It's quite possible that there isn't a more picture-perfect city than Syracuse (Siracusa) in the whole of Sicily. This oddly shaped city, sticking out on Sicily's southeastern tip, is divided into 'mainland' Syracuse and Ortygia island – the old part of town, which is connected to the mainland by a bridge.

Syracuse's history is hard to forget when you're walking through the narrow streets of Ortygia or getting sunstroke at the Greek and Roman amphitheatre and archaeological digs in the mainland part of town. It was, after all, a rival to Athens in power and prestige during the Greek period and its

illustrious past is visible in every nook, street and palazzo.

But Syracuse's modern guise is just as delicious: the city is a perfect mix of history, beauty, seaside fun and gastronomic delights, and a recent spring-clean of the historic centre has made it shine with a renewed beauty. Syracuse isn't a city you'll come to for the nightlife – it's in fact favoured by families and those looking for quiet pleasures – but if you want beauty and history sprinkled with summer delights and Mediterranean delicacies, you're in for a treat.

HISTORY

Syracuse is rightly proud of its illustrious history, which dates back 3000 years to the

time when the island of Ortygia was settled by Sicilian tribes. However, the foundations of the modern city weren't laid until the arrival of the Corinthians (734 BC) who expanded onto the mainland with a second town called Acradina four years later. The growing city of Syracoussai derived its name from a torrential stream, called the Syrakò, which flowed nearby.

Well protected and increasingly prosperous, Syracuse soon cut its ties with Corinth and began trading on its own, a new rival to the Mediterranean powers of Athens and Carthage. In 485 BC the 'tyrant of Gela', Gelon (540–478 BC), seized the city and ordered that the populations of all other Sicilian colonies transfer to Syracuse, triggering a sharp increase in the city's population. But the real turning point for the city's fortunes came with the defeat of the Carthaginians at the Battle of Himera (480 BC), which allowed the city to dominate trade in the Mediterranean basin. Understandably the successes of this upstart colony didn't go down well in Athens, embroiled as it was in the Peloponnesian War.

In 415 BC Athens assembled the largest fleet ever put together, to deliver Syracuse into its hands, but overconfidence, poor planning and weak supply lines were no match for Syracusan strategy and the fleet was almost completely destroyed. Syracuse's revenge was unmerciful: those prisoners who escaped execution were incarcerated for seven years in the city's notorious quarries.

Cruel and vicious though they often were, Syracusan tyrants commissioned an impressive programme of public works and patronised the finest intellectuals of the age. Luminaries flocked to Syracuse, cultivating the sophisticated urban culture that was to see the birth of comic Greek theatre. Pindar and Aeschylus were invited by Hieron I (r 478–66 BC); Dionysius II (r 367–343 BC) was greatly taken with the 'philosopher-king' theories expounded by his tutor Plato; and Hieron II (275–216 BC) patronised Archimedes.

Following Dionysius' death, the city entered a series of unsteady alliances aimed at preserving the status quo in the face of the new Roman threat. But not even the ingenious defences devised by Archimedes were enough to stave off the ransacking of the city by the Romans in 211 BC.

Under Roman rule Syracuse remained the capital of Sicily and was the seat of the praetors, but the city was in decline. It was briefly the capital of the Byzantine empire in AD 663 when Constans set up court here, but was sacked by the Saracens in 878 and reduced to little more than a fortified provincial town. The population fell drastically, and famine, plague and earthquakes marked the next 800 years. The Val di Noto earthquake in 1693, however, was the catalyst for energetic urban renewal as planners took advantage of the damaged city to undertake a massive programme of reconstruction in the baroque style.

Following the unification of Sicily and Italy in 1865 Syracuse was made a provincial capital and the city began to expand once more, a trend that continued with the ugly urban development of the postwar years.

ORIENTATION

Tidy and compact, Syracuse is a very manageable city to visit. The main sights are in two areas: on the island of Ortygia, and 2km across town in the Neapolis Archaeological Park. The train station is located to the west of the busy shopping street, Corso Gelone, and this is where you'll be dropped off if you arrive by bus. Walking to Ortygia will take you about 15 to 20 minutes – head down Corso Gelone and continue down Corso Umberto until you reach the bridge. Via Roma is the main street running through the centre of Ortygia. Free electric buses are now operating on Ortygia, starting from Piazza della Posta, and no nonresidents are allowed to park on the island. There is talk of making Ortygia totally pedestrian, though this is still being discussed. Stay on Ortygia for the atmosphere, great restaurants and good-quality hotels.

INFORMATION

Emergency

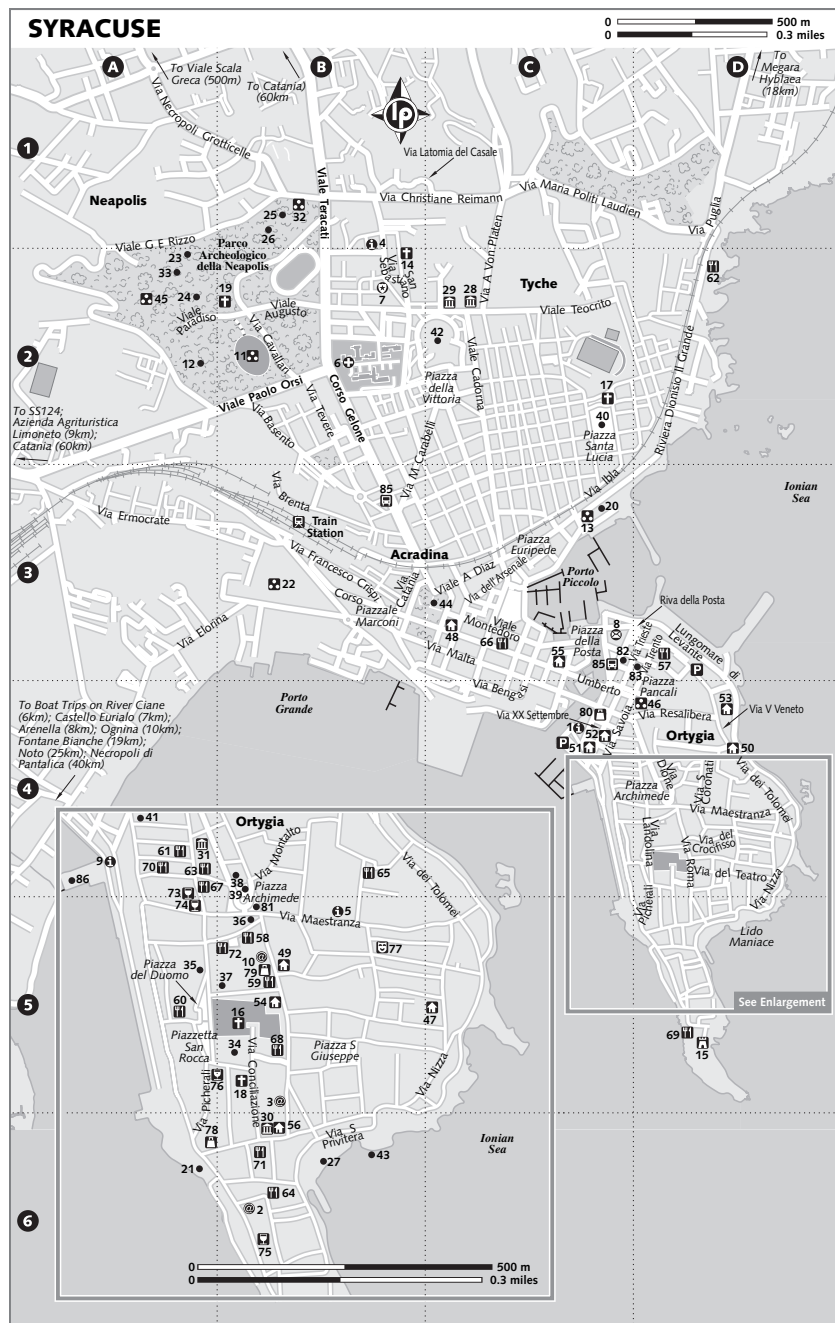
Police (☎ 0931 49 51 11; Via San Sebastiano)

Internet Access

Prices are around €6 per hour.

Eureka Web (☎ 0931 6 07 67; Via Castello Maniace 23, Ortygia; ☎ 9.30am–1.30pm & 4.30–9pm Mon–Sat) Other multimedia services available.

Internet Train (☎ 0931 46 87 97; Via Roma 122, Ortygia; ☎ 7.30pm–midnight Tue–Sat) Fifteen fast, flat-screen computers, colour printing, digital downloads and scanning. Also rents out mobile phones.



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Boccadifuoco.....	1	C4
Eureka Web.....	2	B6
Information Booth.....	(see 19)	
Internet Train.....	3	B5
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Ortygia Tourist Office.....	5	B5
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Web & Work (Via Roma 16-18, Ortygia; ☎ 10am-2pm & 4-10pm Mon-Fri, 11am-2pm & 4.30-9.30pm Sat, 6-10pm Sun) Other multimedia services available.

Medical Services

Ospedale Generale Provinciale (☎ 0931 6 85 55; Via Testaferrata 1)

Money

Numerous banks (all with ATMs) line Corso Umberto and there are banks on Corso Gelone. Ortygia is a little less prolific with its ATMs, but there are a couple around Via XX Settembre and on Via Roma.

Post

Post Office (Piazza della Posta 15; ☎ 8am-6.30pm Mon-Fri, 8am-1pm Sat) Also offers currency exchange.

Tourist Information

Main Tourist Office (☎ 0931 48 12 00; www.ap-siracusa.it; Via San Sebastiano 43; ☎ 8.30am-1.30pm & 3.30-6.30pm Mon-Sat) English-speaking staff and a useful city map – ask about the cumulative tickets for the sites.

There is also an information booth at the Chiesa San Nicolò dei Cordari in the Parco Archeologico.

Ortygia Tourist Office (☎ 0931 46 42 55; Via Maestranza 33; ☎ 8am-2pm Mon-Sat & 2.30-5.30pm Mon-Fri) English-speaking staff and lots of good information.

Travel Agencies

Boccadifuoco (☎ 0931 46 38 66; Viale Mazzini 8) For information and tickets to Malta from Pozzallo.

Syrako Tourist Services (☎ 0931 2 41 33; www.syrako.it in Italian; Largo Porta Marina; ☎ 9am-1pm & 3-8pm Mon-Sat, tours Jul-Sep) Can help carless people to see more of the province. See p222 for tour details.

SIGHTS

Ortygia

The island of Ortygia is the spiritual and physical heart of the city. It is a living museum of a succession of epochs – Greek, Norman, Aragonese and baroque – purposefully combined in a harmonious symmetry. You can access the island across the Ponte Nuovo, past the inner harbour of quietly bobbing boats and rust red Venetian palazzi (palaces). In

recent years Ortygia has undergone some serious renovations, making it shine with a bright new lustre; it has also gone car-free (except for local parking), which means that the town now breathes with clean lungs (and so will you).

PIAZZA DEL DUOMO

Despite its baroque veneer, Syracuse's Greek essence is much in evidence, and particularly so in disguised architectural relics such as the Piazza del Duomo, the one-time acropolis of the Greek city, surrounded as it now is by baroque mansions constructed after the 1693 earthquake.

The piazza's centrepiece is the lofty façade of the **cathedral** (Piazza del Duomo; admission free; ☎ 8am-noon & 4-7pm), a Spanish shell of dramatic columns and Marabitti statuary designed by Andrea Palma, which thinly disguises the original Greek temple of Athena. The original 5th-century-BC Doric columns are visible both inside and out, and their weathered contours still support the cathedral roof. Even more extraordinary is an altar (*ara*) built by the Siculi three centuries earlier, the only surviving evidence of the island's first settlers.

The original Greek temple was renowned throughout the Mediterranean, in no small part thanks to Cicero, who visited Ortygia in the 1st century BC. The doors were adorned in gold and ivory, while the interior was lined with magnificent paintings of Agathocles fighting the Carthaginians. The roof was crowned by a golden statue of Athena that served as a beacon to sailors at sea; nowadays a statue of the Virgin Mary stands in the same spot.

North of the cathedral is the **Palazzo Municipale** or Palazzo Senatoriale, built in 1629 by the Spanish architect Juan Vermexio, nicknamed 'Il Lucertolone' or 'the lizard'. On the left corner of the cornice is the architect's signature: a small lizard carved into a stone. In recent years, excavations beneath the building have uncovered the unfinished remains of an Ionic temple, better known as the 'couch of Artemis', to whom Ortygia was dedicated. The mansion now serves as the city hall. To see the temple's remains, just ask at the gate. Attached to the cathedral's southern side is the elegant, 17th-century **Palazzo Arcivescovile** (Archbishop's Palace; ☎ 0931 6 79 68), which is home to the Biblioteca Alagoniana and some rare 13th-century manuscripts.

In the northwestern corner of the square is the **Palazzo Beneventano del Bosco**, which has a pretty 18th-century façade, while at its southern end is the **Chiesa di Santa Lucia alla Badia**, dedicated to St Lucy, the city's patron saint, who was martyred at Syracuse during the reign of the Roman emperor Diocletian.

FONTANA ARETUSA

Just south of Piazza del Duomo, along Via Picherali, is the Fontana Aretusa, where fresh water bubbles up as it did in ancient times when it was the city's main water supply. Legend has it that the goddess Artemis transformed her beautiful handmaiden Aretusa into the spring to protect her from the unwelcome attention of the river god Alpheus. In her watery guise Aretusa fled from Arcadia under the sea, hotly pursued by Alpheus, their waters mingling as she came to the surface in Ortygia. Now populated by ducks, grey mullets and papyrus plants, the fountain is *the* place to hang out on summer evenings.

MUSEO REGIONALE D'ARTE MEDIOEVALE E MODERNA

Housed in Ortygia's finest Catalan-Gothic mansion, the 13th-century Palazzo Bellomo, the **Museo Regionale d'Arte Medioevale e Moderna** (☎ 093 16 96 17; Via Capodici 14; adult/concession €6/3; ☎ 9am-1.30pm Mon-Fri, 9am-12.30pm Sun) has a sizeable collection of sculpture and painting dating from the Middle Ages up to the 20th century. Highlights include Byzantine icons and Spanish paintings and lots of bloodthirsty religious painting, of which *La Strage degli Innocenti* (The Murder of the Innocents) stands out for its ferocious energy.

Other exceptional pieces here are Antonello da Messina's *Annunciazione* (Annunciation; 1474) and Caravaggio's *La Sepoltura di Santa Lucia* (The Burial of St Lucy; 1609), which is presented in its own room. It is a huge work, half of which is a dark and brooding background, the composition a simple triangle of two gravediggers framing the lifeless body of St Lucy, the light catching her upturned chin. The brutish efforts of the gravediggers contrast starkly with the stillness of the spectators; the eye is naturally drawn to the central mourner whose red cloak provides the only splash of colour in an otherwise golden brown expanse. It is the highlight of the collection.

PIAZZA ARCHIMEDE & AROUND

Walking through the tangled maze of alleys that characterises Ortygia is an atmospheric experience. Right at the heart of the island is the handsome Piazza Archimede, with its 19th-century **fountain** (by Giulio Moschetti) of Artemis (the goddess of hunting) surrounded by handmaidens and sirens. The square is Syracuse's 'drawing room' and is surrounded by Catalan-Gothic palazzi, including **Palazzo Lanza** and the **Palazzo Platamone**, now home to the Banca d'Italia.

East of the piazza is Via Maestranza, the heart of the old guild quarter, behind which lies the labyrinth of the crumbling *Giudecca*, the old Jewish ghetto. During the renovations of Alla Giudecca hotel, an ancient Jewish **miqwe** (ritual bath; ☎ 0931 2 22 55; Alla Giudecca, Via GB Alagona 52; admission €5; ☎ 10am-7pm) was discovered some 20m below ground level. The baths were once connected to the synagogue, but were blocked up by members of the Jewish community when they were expelled from the island in 1492. It is a fascinating sight – the three deep pools intended for total immersion constantly bubble with freshwater, which now has to be pumped out of the chamber to prevent flooding. There is a separate, private pool that was for the sole use of the rabbi.

Also in the Jewish quarter is Syracuse's own brand of **Piccolo Teatro dei Pupi** (☎ 0931 46 55 40; www.pupari.it in Italian; Via della Giudecca 17), managed by the charming Mauceri brothers (see p225).

OTHER SIGHTS

At the entrance to Ortygia lies the **Tempio di Apollo** (Temple of Apollo; Piazza Pancali), one of the first Greek structures built here. Little remains of the 6th-century BC Doric structure, apart from the bases of a few columns.

At the southern tip of the island is the 13th-century **Castello Maniace**, built by Frederick II as part of a massive programme of construction that turned Ortygia into an island fortress. Still used as a barracks, the castle is generally off-limits to the public, except during the Ortygia and Greek Classical Drama Festivals (see p222) when it is the atmospheric venue for musical and theatrical performances.

The Mainland

Although it's not nearly as picturesque as Ortygia, you should still devote time to exploring the sights on the mainland. The Acradina quarter, directly across the bridge

from Ortygia, is the modern city, built on the site of the ancient settlement of the same name. To the northeast in the Tyche quarter are the city's extensive catacombs and the renowned Museo Archeologico Paolo Orsi. To see the real thing, go west to Neapolis and the archaeological park.

ACRADINA

Bombed twice during WWII (by the Allies in 1943 and then by the Luftwaffe in 1944), most of the Acradina quarter bears the unmistakable stamp of the postwar aesthetic: functional and not too pleasing on the eye. Near Piazzale Marconi the old **Syracusan Forum** (Foro Siracusano), once the site of the agora (marketplaces), is now bisected by a number of busy streets and overshadowed by some hideous architecture.

A few hundred metres west of the forum along Via Elorina, however, is a sight well worth visiting (though few ever seem to): the ruins of the **Ginnasio Romano** (Roman Gymnasium; admission free; ☎ 9am-1pm Mon-Sat), built in the 1st century. Despite the name, this was actually a small theatre at the heart of a building that also contained a large atrium and another theatre directly behind the stage.

Along the water to the east of the forum (take Via dell'Arsenale) are the fenced-off remains of the ancient **arsenal**, once a set of rectangular pits into which ships would be pulled for re-provisioning. Adjacent are the ruins of the **Edificio Termale** (Thermal Building), a Byzantine bathhouse where it is claimed the Emperor Constans was assassinated with a soap dish in 668.

North of the arsenal is one of the city's biggest squares, **Piazza Santa Lucia**, whose northern end is dominated by the **Chiesa di Santa Lucia al Sepolcro**. The 17th-century church is built on the spot where the city's patron saint, Lucia, an aristocratic girl who devoted herself to saintliness after being blessed by St Agatha, was martyred in 304. Underneath the church is an impressive network of **catacombs** (not open to the public) that are the largest in Italy after those in Rome.

CATACOMBS OF TYCHE

According to Roman law, Christians were not allowed to bury their dead within the city limits (which during the Roman occupation did not extend beyond Ortygia). Forced to go elsewhere, Christians conducted their burials

in the outlying district of Tyche and its underground aqueducts, unused since Greek times. New tunnels were carved out and the result was a labyrinthine network of burial chambers, most of which are inaccessible except the ones underneath the **Basilica di San Giovanni** (Via San Sebastiano; admission church/catacombs free/€4; ☎ 9am-12.30pm & 2.30-5pm Wed-Mon), directly opposite the main tourist office. The church itself is pretty, with its skeletal rose window open to the sun. In the 17th century it served as the city's cathedral and is dedicated to the city's first bishop, St Marcan, who was tied to one of its pillars and flogged to death in 254.

The **catacombs** here are, for the most part, dank and a little spooky. Thousands of little niches line the walls and tunnels lead off from the main chamber (*decumanus maximus*) into *rotonde*, round chambers used by the faithful for praying. All of the treasures that accompanied the dead on their spiritual journey fell victim to tomb robbers over the centuries bar one: a sarcophagus unearthed in 1872 and now on exhibition in the Museo Archeologico Paolo Orsi.

MUSEO ARCHEOLOGICO PAOLO ORSI

At the top of Viale Cadorna (which runs north from Piazza Euripede) is Sicily's most extensive archaeological museum, the **Museo Archeologico Paolo Orsi** (☎ 0931 46 40 22; Viale Cadorna; adult/concession €6/3; ☎ 9am-2pm Tue-Sat). Located in the grounds of the Villa Landolina, the museum (named after the archaeologist Paolo Orsi, who arrived in Syracuse in 1886 and devoted the next 45 years to uncovering its ancient treasures) contains a thoroughly well-organised and extensive collection. The museum is wheelchair accessible. At the centre of the building is a large atrium that serves as a reference point with information on the three sections of the museum.

The collection runs the gamut from prehistoric artefacts (such as the earthenware pots from Pantalica in Sector A), to early Greek settlements such as Megara Hyblaea, the most thoroughly excavated site on the island, to Syracuse itself and its satellite settlements at Eoro, Akrai, Kasmenai and Kamarina (showcased in Sector C). The star of the show is undoubtedly the sculpture, the development of which can be seen between the archaic work from Megara Hyblaea (Sector B), most notably the statue of a mother suckling twins, and the immodest modesty of *Venere Uscendo dell'Acqua* (Venus Emerging from the Water),

also known as the *Landolina Venus* (named after Saverio Landolina, who found it in 1806). Other treats are the lovely terracotta votive offerings to Demeter that were excavated next to the *Madonnina delle Lacrime* (once a sanctuary to Demeter), and more famously the grimacing terracotta face of the Gorgon with Pegasus. There is also an interesting selection of material found in the major Doric colonies of Gela and Agrigento.

Visiting the museum will easily take a whole morning, while the afternoon can be pleasantly spent in the Parco Archeologico della Neapolis (opposite).

MUSEO DEL PAPIRO

The small **Museo del Papiro** (☎ 0931 6 16 16; Viale Teocrito 66; admission free; ☎ 9am-1.30pm Tue-Sun) has exhibits including papyrus documents and products. The plant grows in abundance around the River Ciane, near Syracuse, and was used to make paper in the 18th century. The museum also features some interesting papyrus canoes and a copy of the Rosetta Stone.

SANTUARIO DELLA MADONNA DELLE LACRIME

Supposedly modelled on the shape of a tear drop, Syracuse's newest landmark building (it opened in 1994 and reaches a height of 102m) is a rather ugly architectural conceit. The cavernous **Santuario della Madonna delle Lacrime** (Sanctuary of Our Lady of the Tears; Viale Teocrito; admission free; ☎ 8am-noon & 4-7pm) was commissioned to house a statue of the Virgin that allegedly wept for five days in 1953 and bestowed over 300 miraculous cures within a matter of months.

The **Museo delle Lacrimazione** (Museum of the Lacrymation; admission €1.55; ☎ 9am-12.30pm & 4-6pm), underneath the sanctuary, explains the events of the miracle and objects associated with it.

During the construction of the church, work revealed an extensive network of houses and streets from the Greek and Roman periods, as well as the remains of another sanctuary to the goddesses Demeter and Kore (5th-4th century BC). Near the sanctuary some 5000 terracotta votive statues were found, the best of which are now in the museum. You can view the excavations, in Piazza della Vittoria, from outside the fence.

PARCO ARCHEOLOGICO DELLA NEAPOLIS

About 500m west of the museum is the extensive **Parco Archeologico della Neapolis** (☎ 0931 6 62 06; admission €6; ☎ 9am-2hr before sunset), Syracuse's most visited site – not surprising given its mighty, rough-hewn quarries, spectacular theatre and impressive, tumbledown ruins. Once past the entrance lined by souvenir stalls and drink stands, you can lose yourself in the shady groves of the quarries and the ample space around the ruins. The tourist information desk is disguised in the entrance to **Chiesa San Nicolò dei Cordari**, itself hidden behind a restaurant/café. You can pick up information and buy the cumulative ticket here (€6 archaeological park and museum, €8 archaeological park, museum and the Museo Regionale). The park is wheelchair accessible.

To get there, take buses 1, 4-6, 8, 11, 12 or 15 from Piazza della Posta to Corso Gelone/Viale Teracati. The walk from Ortygia will take about 30 minutes. If you have a car, you can park along Viale Augusto for €1 (no time limit).

Latomia del Paradiso (Garden of Paradise)

Enter the Latomia del Paradiso, a limestone quarry full of huge hollows and caves, planted with orange and olive trees, via the northern site. In Greek times the quarry was vaulted by a 'roof' of earth that collapsed in the 1693 earthquake, leaving it open to the sunlight. It was only after this that the gardens were planted. The Greeks ran the quarries along the lines of a concentration camp, putting prisoners to work cutting blocks of limestone out of the subterranean caves. The Athenians captured after the great sea battle of 413 BC were imprisoned here and held for seven years before being branded with the mark of the Siracusan horse and sold into slavery.

A renowned curiosity at the heart of the garden is the ear-shaped artificial grotto known as the **Orecchio di Dionisio** (Ear of Dionysius). According to Caravaggio, Dionysius must have had it built so he could listen in on the conversations of the prisoners, but it is most likely that the grotto – 23m high and 65m deep – was dug out as a rock quarry and later used as a sounding board for theatrical performances.

Next to it is the now-closed **Grotta dei Cordari** (Rope-makers' Cave), a grotto, supported by pillars, once used in the manufacture of rope;

in antiquity, humidity was an essential ingredient in rope manufacture and the cave had plenty of it. Linked to the Latomia del Paradiso by a tunnel is the **Latomia Intagliatella**, while a rocky path continues on to the **Latomia di Santa Venera**, another citrus-scented quarry. At the highest, most easterly point you will reach the **Necropoli dei Grotticelli**, a honeycomb of Hellenistic and Byzantine tombs, one of which is wrongly ascribed to Archimedes. These catacombs, like the catacombs of Tyche (see p219), were once part of the underground aqueducts designed by the Greeks.

Teatro Greco

For the classicist, the highlight of the Neapolis is the lustrous white Teatro Greco, hewn out of the rocky hillside. A masterpiece of classical architecture, the ancient theatre could seat 16,000 people and saw the work of Sophocles, Euripides and the last tragedies of Aeschylus, including *The Persians*, *Prometheus Bound* and *Prometheus Unbound*, which were first performed here in his presence. When the Romans took Syracuse in the 3rd century they made alterations to the theatre, mostly so that they could stage gladiatorial combats and *naumachiae* (mock naval battles) in the flooded arena. Some of the seats bear inscriptions to Syracuse's notables, namely Hieron II's family, and the gods. For the best views climb up to the tomb-riddled Via dei Sepolcri.

Every summer the theatre is brought to life again with a host of classical dramas, details of which you can obtain from the tourist office or the **Museum of Ancient Greek Theatre** (☎ 0931 48 33 78; Palazzo Greco, Corso Matteotti 29, Ortygia; ☎ 9am-6pm Wed-Mon). The museum showcases some of the wealth of material housed in the archives of the Istituto Nazionale Dramma Antico, including models, designs, playbills and costumes.

Anfiteatro Romano (Roman Amphitheatre)

In the southern zone of the Neapolis (same ticket), across the other side of the Viale Paradiso, is the 2nd-century-AD Roman amphitheatre, the third-largest in Italy after the Colosseum in Rome and the amphitheatre in Verona. It was used for gladiator fights and horse races. Roman punters used to park their chariots in the area between the amphitheatre and Viale Paolo Orsi. The Spaniards, little interested in archaeology, destroyed the site in

THE GREATEST SHOW ON EARTH?

Performances in Syracuse's theatre were pretty intense affairs, particularly during the six-day Feast of Dionysus, god of wine and merriment. Daily performances of a *tetracycle* (three tragedies and a satirical work thrown in for good measure) and no less than five comedies kept audiences glued to their seats from dawn till dusk. As the festival was essentially a hedonistic religious ceremony, the high point of the day's performance (usually during the third tragedy) saw the audience whipped into a frenzy of delirium described by Aristotle as 'catharsis', after which they were made to laugh for a few more hours and then sent home. After nearly 20 centuries without a festival, 1914 saw the start of a new series of productions.

Nowadays, the **Teatro Greco di Siracusa Festival** is held in May and June every year, with two Greek tragedies usually performed on alternate nights. Tickets start from €18 and go all the way up to €56 for seats on weekend evenings. You can splash out or get a standing ticket, but make sure you go and catch a show if you're in town during the festival. Find out what's on from the tourist office or the Museum of Ancient Greek Theatre (p221).

the 16th century, using it as a quarry to build the city walls at Ortygia. West of the amphitheatre is the 3rd-century-BC **Ara di Ierone II** (Altar of Hieron II). The monolithic sacrificial altar was a kind of giant abattoir where 450 oxen could be killed at one time.

ACTIVITIES

Syracuse is all about urban pleasures and there are few outdoor activities. However, what there is lives up to the high standards of everything else in this town. You can go swimming at one of the island's platform 'beaches' – a good **swimming spot** is a five-minute walk down Via S Privitera. It's local, free and there's decent swimming to be done.

If you want something more glam (though also a bit squashed) rent a pew on Syracuse's tiny **Lido Maniace** (www.lidomaniace.it in Italian; 2 people €10) – a rocky platform of sun beds and shades where you can dip into the water. Bigger, sandy beaches can be found at **Arenella** (bus 23), the best beach on the coast, with a blue-flag classification (which denotes it as an environmentally pristine beach; visit www.blueflag.org). A bit further south are the rock pools and inlets of **Ognina**, and further still the popular **Fontane Bianche** (bus 21 or 22 from Piazza della Posta).

TOURS

Like Palermo, Syracuse has a host of professional tour guides. They generally escort groups so prices are steep, ranging from €110 for half a day to €155 for a whole day (groups of up to 18 people). The tourist office has a list of guides and their numbers – you can negotiate directly for smaller groups.

Ente Fauna Siciliana (☎ 0931 71 73 35, 328 885 70 92; www.entefauanasiciliana.it in Italian; Viale Montedoro 79; per person mountain-bike trip to Cava Cardinale €10, trekking on Etna €6) Landlubbers should definitely undertake one of the excursions, including archaeological and botanical itineraries, run by this conservation group. The website should be your first port of call, as tours change and it supplies phone numbers for tour operators so you can make your bookings. Note: most tours are in Italian.

Sailing Team (☎ 0931 6 08 08, 335 785 03 44; www.sailingteam.biz; Via Savoia 14; 4-6 people €25) Departing at 10am and returning at 6pm, you can organise a sexier boat trip than the Selene to explore the coastline and snorkel to your heart's content. Sailing Team also charters boats and operates an exciting excursion to the Aeolians and Malta, a holiday in itself that runs into thousands of euros (check the website for prices).

Selene (1hr cruise per person €10; ☎ 12.30pm & 1.30pm Apr-Oct) This takes passengers around Ortygia on a ride that offers splendid views of the city. Don't forget to bring along a picnic lunch. The cruise departs from the dock near the Grand Hotel.

Syrako Tourist Services (☎ 0931 2 41 33; www.syrako.it; Largo Porta Marina; per person Castello Eurialo & archaeological park €15, Pantalica & Noto or Buscemi & Palazzolo Acreide incl lunch €45; ☎ 9am-1pm & 3-8pm Mon-Sat, tours Jul-Sep) Syrako can help you arrange guides and runs good tours, from classical to baroque itineraries, around the Neapolis and Ortygia.

FESTIVALS & EVENTS

Festival of Greek Classical Drama (☎ 0931 44 93 58; www.indafondazione.org; tickets €15-35) Today, Syracuse boasts the only school of Classical Greek drama outside Athens and the productions attract some of Italy's finest performers. Performances are held in May and June and are in Italian. Tickets are available online, from the tourist office or at the booth at the entrance to the Museum of

Ancient Greek Theatre (☎ 0931 48 33 78; Palazzo Greco, Corso Matteotti 29, Ortygia; open 9am to 6pm Wednesday to Monday).

Ortygia Festival (☎ 0931 48 36 48; www.ortigiafestival.it in Italian; Castello Maniace) Set in the dramatic castle, this September festival showcases avant-garde and experimental theatre, musical events and exhibitions.

Festa di Santa Lucia This annual procession on 13 December commemorates the city's patron saint. During the festival the enormous silver statue of the saint wends its way from the cathedral to Piazza Santa Lucia accompanied by fireworks.

SLEEPING

Syracuse prides itself on discerning tourism and this is certainly reflected in its excellent hotels. Most of the best options are on Ortygia, which is the location of choice due to its seductive atmosphere and great selection of restaurants. All the no-frills, cheaper options cluster around the train station.

Budget

Our pick Viaggiatori, Viandanti e Sognatori (☎ 0931 2 47 81, 333 897 83 51; www.bedandbreakfastsicily.it; Via Roma 156, Ortygia; s €35-50, d €55-75; ☎) An old palazzo at the end of Via Roma cradles Syracuse's loveliest B&B. Recently refurbished, this is a tasteful and stylish outfit with rooms decorated with shells, books and old postcards. The beds are super comfy, the bathrooms are gleaming and the two front-facing rooms have a joint balcony that looks onto Via Roma. The sunny roof terrace is perfect for breakfast and the friendly dog Nina will put a smile on anyone's face.

B&B Casa Mia (☎ 0931 46 33 49; www.bbcasamia.it; Corso Umberto 112; s €30-48, d €60-80; ☎) This home-away-from-home is a great choice on the mainland. Casa Mia is situated in an old mansion on Corso Umberto. Its rooms are furnished with family antiques and named after various family grandmas, and the family is adding 10 extra rooms to the existing 13. A good traditional breakfast is served on the internal patio.

Milano (☎ 0931 6 69 81; Corso Umberto 10; s/d €37/60; ☎) A cheap option near the station and not too far from Ortygia. The rooms are plain but decent, with TV.

B&B L'Acanto (☎ /fax 0931 46 11 29; www.beb Sicilia.it; Via Roma 15, Ortygia; s/d €50/75; ☎) The family-run L'Acanto is a very popular, value-for-money *albergo* (hotel). It has delightful, traditionally decorated rooms with artistic prints on the walls and embroidered-

ies above the beds. It's set around a pretty internal courtyard.

Midrange

Alla Giudecca (☎ 0931 2 22 55; www.allagiudecca.it; Via Alagona 52, Ortygia; s €60-75, d €96-120; ☎) A gorgeous set of houses in the old Jewish quarter contains these 23 wonderful apartments. Inside is a warren of vaulted rooms full of wonderful antiques and enormous tapestries, while cosy sofas cluster around huge fireplaces. During renovations an ancient Jewish *miqwe* was discovered (see p219).

Our pick Hotel Gutkowski (☎ 0931 46 58 61; www.guthotel.it; Lungomare Vittorini 26, Ortygia; s/d €80/110; ☎) You could say this is Sicily's most stylish hotel and you'd not be exaggerating. Designed with utmost simplicity and minimalism, the rooms are in soft olives and teals, many overlooking the vast stretch of sea outside (others are courtyard-bound), and the look is a mix of the marine and rustic. The hotel offers excellent excursions (€40 per person) to natural beauty spots, as well as Italian lessons. Booking in advance is advised.

Azienda Agrituristica Limoneto (☎ 0931 71 73 52; www.emmetti.it/Limoneto; Via del Platano 3; d €80-120; ☎) This big country farm set amid attractive citrus and olive groves, is noted for its organic produce and excellent restaurant. It's a lovely alternative to the city and a great base for exploring the countryside; the employees will help you with trekking itineraries. You will find it 9km from Syracuse along the SS124.

Hotel Gran Bretagne (☎ 0931 6 87 65; Via Savoia 21, Ortygia; s €85-90, d €110-115; ☎) This handsome, small hotel has friendly management and is situated in a great location at the beginning of Ortygia. The rooms are spacious and airy in blues and whites, some with fresco-covered ceilings. There's a nice and big communal area with massive oval sofas around a glassed-in underground medieval wall.

Domus Mariae (☎ 0931 2 48 54; www.sistemiam.it/domusmariae; Via V Veneto 76, Ortygia; s €110-115, d €150-155; ☎) This former school for nuns has been transformed into an elegant, comfortable hotel. It has huge rooms with sea views and balconies, and the toffee-coloured bathrooms are sizable too. The street-view doubles are cheaper (€135 to €140). The nuns, who run the place, really know how to turn out an impeccable room.

Top End

Hotel Roma (☎ 0931 46 56 26; www.hotelroma.sr.it; Via Minerva 10, Ortygia; s €99-130, d €149-200; (P) (♿)) Right in the centre of Ortygia just behind the cathedral is the beautifully restored Hotel Roma. Intimate, efficient and convenient, this is an excellent luxury option with helpful staff.

Grand Hotel (☎ 0931 46 46 00; www.grandhotelsr.it; Viale Mazzini 12, Ortygia; s/d €155/250; (P) (♿)) Big and brash, the Grand Hotel is Ortygia's top-class hotel with all the requisite amenities and none of the character of some of the smaller hotels. It caters to a well-heeled, largely American clientele and has a spectacular rooftop restaurant that is great in the evenings. A shuttle bus transfers guests to the hotel's private beach.

EATING

Ortygia is the place for restaurants, and you'll find little reason to go and eat on the mainland part of town.

Restaurants

Solaria Vini & Liquori (☎ 0931 46 30 07; www.enotecasolaria.com; Via Roma 86, Ortygia; snacks from €5) The perfect place if you want to buy wine and taste it before you commit, or if you just want to have a bit of a snack and a good glass of wine. It's a small, rustic winery on the main street, with snacks of cheese, olives, prosciutto, anchovies, sardines and other Mediterranean delicacies, and the choice of wine is excellent and wide-ranging.

Sicilia in Tavola (Via Cavour 28, Ortygia; pasta €6-8; ☎ closed Sun) A tiny rustic restaurant that specialises in fresh pasta dishes (try the speciality of the house, seafood ravioli). It fills up quickly in the evenings so reservations are advised.

Il Gattopardo (Via Cavour 67a, Ortygia; meals €15-20, pizza €3.50-7) Tucked away in Via Cavour this hugely popular, unpretentious restaurant specialises in simple and delicious dishes and in the evening everyone comes here for a pizza. Great fun and full of weird African and South American souvenirs – someone did too much shopping on their travels.

our pick La Gazza Ladra (☎ 340 060 24 28; Via Cavour 8; meals €20; ☎ closed Mon & Jul & Aug) A favourite of students and young professionals, this place is as informal as they get, while still making such excellent food that it features in the Slow Food guide. Try the *pasta alla siracusana* (with anchovies, breadcrumbs and almonds), a local speciality, and tuck into the fresh fish of the day.

Trattoria Archimede (☎ 0931 6 97 01; Via Gemellaro 8, Ortygia; meals €25; ☎ closed Sun evening & 3 weeks in Jul) The most authentic restaurant in Ortygia, with B&W photographs of the island as it once was. Three formal dining rooms serve an array of seafood dishes and pasta. The menu changes often so you never get bored.

Trattoria Pescomare (☎ 0931 2 10 75; Via Landolina 6, Ortygia; meals €25) Near the cathedral, the Pescomare serves up a pleasing selection of local fish dishes and a wide range of pizza. Grab a spot in the vine-covered courtyard and feast on the *spaghetti alle cozze* (spaghetti with mussels).

Le Baronie (☎ 0931 6 88 84; www.ristorantelebaronie.com; Via Gargallo 26, Ortygia; meals €25; ☎ closed Mon) Offering a boisterous atmosphere in an old Catalan-Gothic mansion, Le Baronie prides itself on traditional cuisine with a twist, such as swordfish with a pepper-and-brandy sauce. There is also a pleasant garden dotted with sarcophagi.

La Medusa (☎ 0931 6 14 03; Via S Teresa 21-23; meals €25) A traditional restaurant run by a mother-and-daughter duo who take pride in the size and presentation of the dishes – the huge risotto is served in a big white shell (yes, shell) and the salads are brought out in dishes the shape of a boat. The sizable *primi* (first courses) are enough for two, so be aware of the danger of over-ordering. The fish and seafood are delicious and reasonably priced, and the wine is decanted into apothecarylike bottles. Good, no-nonsense service and great food.

Jonico-a Rutta 'e Ciauli (☎ 0931 6 55 40; Riviera Dioisio il Grande 194; meals €25-30, pizza €3.50-8; ☎ closed Tue) Very inconvenient but worth the trek or taxi ride, Jonico is right on the sea with a wonderful terrace and a hearty Syracusan menu including steak with tomato, eggplant and white-wine salsa. The roof garden serves pizza in the evening.

our pick Taberna Sveva (☎ 0931 2 46 63; Piazza Federico di Svevia 1-2; meals €30) A fantastic place to eat, with a big terrace in a peaceful square and excellent food. Try the *gnocchi al pistachio* or the *cassarecie* (short, curled pasta) with fresh tomatoes for *primi*, and follow it with a tuna steak covered in sesame seeds. The tiramisu is excellent, as is the local wine. The service is relaxed and friendly, and you'll get to enjoy your food whilst listening to tarantellas (traditional music written to accompany a dance named tarantella) belting out of the stereo – a very Sicilian experience.

Trattoria la Foglia (☎ 0931 6 62 33; www.lafoglia.it; Via Capodieci 21, Ortygia; meals €30) An eccentric owner/chef and her vegetarian husband have made this place into something of a cult Syracusan restaurant, but the tiny portions and relatively high prices make the eclectic interior take a back seat. The menu features whatever seafood and vegetables are fresh that day and the bread is home-baked. They also have a one- to two-bedroom flat to rent on Ortygia, its décor in the same eclectic style as the restaurant.

The **Antico Mercato** (old market; www.anticomercato.it in Italian; ☎ daily) is in the streets near the post office. The market is busy until about 1pm; there is also a market restaurant.

Cafés

Gran Caffè del Duomo (Piazza del Duomo 18, Ortygia; tourist menu €12) You'd normally avoid a place like this, thinking it screams 'location + expense', but a reasonable tourist menu and prime position in this beautiful square makes it a viable option.

our pick Biblios Cafe (Via del Consiglio Reginale 11, Ortygia; ☎ 10am-1.30pm & 5-9pm, closed Wed, Sun & Sep) This café is nestled in a bookshop that supports a range of cultural activities (readings, language courses and dance lessons). It has a cosy, relaxed atmosphere and internet access, and turns into a nice little bar in the evenings.

Caffè Minerva (Via Roma 58, Ortygia) A popular, people-watching café serving a good range of Sicilian cakes and pastries, the best cup of tea on the island and a nice, frothy cappuccino.

If you want a good café on the mainland, the **Pasticceria Tipica Catanese** (Corso Umberto 46) is a great option.

DRINKING

Syracuse is a big university town and as a result weekdays are buzzing (most of the students go home on weekends, so things are a little quieter then). The most popular drinking spot on Ortygia is Piazzetta San Rocca with its cluster of bars with outside tables.

San Rocca (Piazzetta San Rocca, Ortygia; cocktails €5) This is the smoothest of a bunch of bars that take up this whole piazza. Great spot for early-evening drinks before heading on to a restaurant – if you can fit anything else in after that many crisps and olives.

Café Giufá (☎ 0931 46 53 95; Via Cavour 25, Ortygia; ☎ closed Mon winter) A fun bar that spreads onto the tiny square at the back, the Giufá has some good DJs who like reggae, jungle and dub beats, and the crowd – including the bar staff – are jolly and friendly. Beer's the name of the game here.

Il Sale (Via dell'Amalfitana 56/2, Ortygia) Here you'll find a little disco-oriented place with crowds sitting outside on the small terrace under an olive tree. Drink beer or cocktails (€5) and enjoy the night sky above.

Peter Pan (☎ 0931 46 89 37; Via Castello Maniace 46/48, Ortygia; glass of wine €4-7; ☎ 10am-2.30pm & 7.30pm-2am) Brunch, beer, books, cocktails and live music make this tiny wine bar an excellent place to while away some time. It also serves a limited menu of cheese and charcuterie to soak up those huge glasses of wine.

ENTERTAINMENT

Apart from the healthy programme of Classical Greek and contemporary theatre, and live music that is staged in various venues throughout the city (see p222), Syracuse has its own very popular puppet theatre.

Piccolo Teatro dei Pupi (☎ 0931 46 55 40; www.pupari.it in Italian; Via della Giudecca 17; tickets €5; ☎ 9.30pm Tue, Thu & Sat, 5pm Sun) Managed by the Mauceri brothers, Syracuse's puppet theatre is thriving. Beware with very small children as the shows can be a bit violent: lots of noise and beheading of dragons. The workshop, where you can purchase puppets, is at No 19 and the company also has a small museum (which was moving location at the time of research, so check the website for updates).

SHOPPING

Shopping in Syracuse is as pleasant as everything else; the alleys of Ortygia are full of sweet little boutiques selling quality products that will not look out of place once you get them home.

Izzo Oro (☎ 0931 2 23 01; Via Roma 30/32, Ortygia) You will find handmade jewellery here; Carlo and Massimo work with Sciacca coral and gold. Some of the pieces are very ostentatious but some are lovely, modelled on Greek coins and theatre masks.

Two contemporary ceramic shops are **Circo Fortuna** (☎ 0931 6 26 81; Via Capodieci 42, Ortygia) and **Lecomari** (Via Salvatore Chindemi 21, Ortygia).

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Boat

There are a number of services from Malta to Pozzallo (see p235). For information in Syracuse, check with the Boccadifuoco travel agency (see p217).

Bus

Unless you're coming from Catania or Messina, more often than not you'll find buses faster and more convenient than trains. **Interbus** (☎ 0931 6 67 10; Via Trieste 28) buses leave from the main bus station, located on Corso Gelone. They connect with Catania (€4.50, 1½ hours, half-hourly Monday to Saturday, eight Sunday) and its airport, and Palermo (€14, four hours, four daily Monday to Saturday, three Sunday).

AST (☎ 0931 46 27 11; bus station at Corso Gelone) runs a local network to Piazza Armerina (€8, four hours, one daily), Noto (€3, one hour, 12 daily Monday to Saturday) and Ragusa (€6, two hours, nine daily Monday to Saturday). Buses leave from the bus stop on Corso Gelone. AST also runs buses to Palermo (€12, four hours, six daily Monday to Saturday, three Sunday).

Car & Motorcycle

By car, if arriving from the north, you will enter Syracuse on Viale Scala Greca. To reach the centre of the city, turn left at Viale Teracati and follow it around to the south; it eventually becomes Corso Gelone. The road between Catania and Syracuse is the SS114 and between Syracuse and Noto it's the SS115. A motorway is supposed to connect the SS114 and SS115, but it starts and ends virtually in the middle of nowhere some kilometres out of Syracuse.

There is a very large underground car park on Via V Veneto (free) on Ortygia and another at the marina (€1). Please note that at the time of writing you can enter Ortygia to drop off and pick up your luggage, but you must leave your car at the designated parking area, since the island allows resident parking only.

Train

More than a dozen trains depart daily for Messina (1st/2nd class €17/12, 2½ to three hours) and Catania (€5 to €7.50, 1½ hours). Some go on to Rome, Turin, Milan and other long-distance destinations. For Palermo (€17.20, six to 10 hours) you will have to change at either Catania or Messina.

There are several slow trains from Syracuse to Noto (€2.65, 30 minutes) and Ragusa (€5.85, 2¼ hours).

GETTING AROUND

If you arrive by bus, you'll be dropped at the bus station at Corso Gelone. Electric (free) buses go around Ortygia from Piazza della Posta. To get to the archaeological park, get bus 1 from the main bus stop. Bus 11 goes to Castello Eurialo (below). City buses cost €0.85 for two hours, irrespective of the number of buses you take.

You can hire a bicycle or scooter at **Allakatalla** (☎ 0931 6 74 52; Via Roma 10; bicycle/scooter per day €10/30) travel agency. It does get very busy so try and book in advance.

AROUND SYRACUSE

Castello Eurialo

Seven kilometres west of the city in the outlying quarter of Epipolae is the **Castello Eurialo** (☎ 0931 71 17 73; admission free; ☞ 9am-1hr before sunset), the stronghold of Syracuse's Greek defensive works. Built during the reign of Hieron II, Castello Eurialo (Euryalus Castle) was adapted and fortified by Archimedes and was considered impregnable. Unfortunately for Syracuse, the castle was taken by the Romans without a fight. The views back to Syracuse make it worth the trip. To get here take bus 11 from the main bus station on Corso Gelone or the archaeological park.

Megara Hyblaea

The area north of Syracuse is a largely unattractive sprawl of refineries and heavy industry, but right in the middle of it are the ruins of the ancient settlement of Megara Hyblaea, founded in 728 BC by Greeks from Megara. Its history is largely unfortunate: razed to the ground and all its inhabitants evicted in 483 BC by the tyrant Gelon, it was rebuilt on the same spot by Timoleon in 340 BC but only survived until 213 BC when it was destroyed for the second time by the Roman general Marcellus. A small population continued to live there until the 6th century, but it has been abandoned ever since. You'll need your own car to get there – it's 25 minutes (20km) north of Syracuse on the SS114.

DETOUR: THE RIVER CIANE & THE OLYMPEION

A popular diversion between May and September is a boat trip up the Fiume Ciane, a mythical river dedicated to the nymph Ciane, who tried to thwart the abduction of Persephone by Hades – the spring, 2km upriver, is said to have been formed by her tears. The river habitat, a tangle of lush papyrus, is unique and endangered – the only place outside North Africa where papyrus grows wild. The plant was originally a gift to Hieron II by the Egyptian Pharaoh, Ptolemy. Along the way, you can check out the ruins of the Olympeion, a temple from the 6th century BC.

The embarkation point for the boats is 5km outside Syracuse on the SS115. Turn left just after you cross the bridge over the River Ciane. With **boat rentals** (☎ 0931 6 90 76, 368 729 60 40; per boat up to 8 people from €40), the bigger the group the better. In summer it is constantly busy so this shouldn't be a problem for individuals. To get there, take bus 21, 22 or 23 from the main bus station on Corso Gelone.

THE SOUTHEAST

The mountainous interior of the southeast, dominated by Monti Iblei, lacks the popular appeal of the coastline and has, therefore, preserved its rural atmosphere. The landscape here is gently rugged, characterised by weathered limestone cliffs and cut through by deep gorges and valleys, one of which contains the mysterious Pantalica necropolis, the largest pre-Greek necropolis on the island. Although the region is difficult to explore without your own transport, it is worth the effort. Amid the dry-stone walls is a catalogue of Unesco World Heritage sites: Sicilian baroque towns, each with its own eccentricities, from noble Noto to chocolate-eating Modica and groovy Palazzolo Acreide.

VALLE DELL'ANAPO

For some beautifully wild and unspoilt countryside take the SS124 (via Florida) northwest from Syracuse and turn off onto the byroad for Ferla. After about 36km this will bring you into the **Valle dell'Anapo** (Anapo Valley; signposted), a deep limestone gorge protected by the **Forestry Commission** (☎ 0931 46 24 52; near Cassaro; ☞ 7am-1hr before sunset). Should you want to explore the area you must leave your car at the car park near the Forestry hut and take one of the walking maps provided (paths marked A are unchallenging; paths marked B are harder). In spring, the valley is awash with flowers between the rock faces, and picnic tables dot your route.

Necropoli di Pantalica

A further 10km from the Valle dell'Anapo, on a huge plateau above the valley, is the site of Sicily's most important Iron and Bronze Age

necropolis, the **Necropoli di Pantalica** (admission free; ☞ 9am-sunset), with more than 5000 tombs of various shapes and sizes honeycombed along the limestone cliffs. The site is terribly ancient, dating between the 13th and 8th century BC, and its origins are largely mysterious although it is thought to be the Siculi capital of Hybla, who gave the Greeks Megara Hyblaea in 664 BC. Very little survives of the town itself other than the **Anaktron** or prince's palace.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

The site is a difficult place to reach unless you have your own transport. If you don't, your best bet is to ask at the tourist office in Syracuse or at a travel agent to see if any tours of the area are available. These deals can come and go – see p222 for details of tour operators.

PALAZZOLO ACREIDE

pop 9000 / elev 670m

Almost completely off the beaten track, Palazzolo Acreide is a charmingly down-to-earth town full of surprising baroque architecture. The original medieval town was abandoned after the 1693 earthquake and a new Palazzolo was built in the shadow of Akrai (see p228).

The handsome town is centred on Piazza del Popolo, itself dominated by the massive bulk of the 18th-century **Chiesa di San Sebastiano** and the **Palazzo Municipale**, which is home to the **tourist office** (☎ 0931 88 20 00; www.palazzolo-acreide.it; ☞ 9.30am-1pm & 3.30-6.30pm Mon-Sat). To get to Piazza del Popolo from Piazza Pretura (where buses depart and arrive), walk up Via San Sebastiano. North of the square, at the end of a tight lane, is Piazza Moro and two other exquisite baroque churches: on the northern

side of the square is the **Chiesa Madre** and on the southern side the **Chiesa di San Paolo**. At the top of Via Annunziata (the main road leading right out of Piazza Moro) is the fourth of the town's baroque treasures, the **Chiesa dell'Annunziata**, with a richly adorned portal of twirling columns.

Off Piazza del Popolo is the **Casa-Museo di Antonino Uccello** (☎ 0931 88 14 99; www.antoninouccello.it; Via Machiavelli 19; admission free; ☎ 9am-1pm), formerly the home of the poet and scholar (1922-79) and since 1984 a museum. Uccello devoted himself to preserving what he feared was disappearing from Sicilian life, so this is the place to go if you want to see what 18th-century farmers would have worn or how they ground olives to make oil. The museum houses a traditional stable, bedroom and living quarters. Only 10 people are allowed in at a time, and a custodian will escort you. Ring the doorbell to gain admission.

Akraï

The **archaeological park** (☎ 0931 88 14 99; admission €2; ☎ 9am-7pm) is a 20-minute walk southwest of the modern town along Corso Vittorio Emanuele. It covers the site of ancient Akraï, Syracuse's first inland colony established to defend the overland trading route to other Greek settlements such as Akragas.

The most impressive ruin is the **Greek theatre**, built at the end of the 3rd century BC and later altered by the Romans, who needed it for sittings of the local senate. This perfect semicircle once had an audience capacity of 600. Behind the theatre are two *latomie* (quarries). The quarries were later converted into Christian burial chambers – a fascinating sight, especially when you think about how many bodies were in there. The larger of the two catacombs, the **Intagliata**, has catacombs and altars cut into its sides, while the narrower one, the **Intagliatella**, has a wonderful relief of a large banquet cut into the rock face; it is thought to date from the 1st century BC. Other remains are the hardly recognisable **Tempio di Afrodite** (Temple of Aphrodite), south of the Intagliata, and the **Tempio di Persefone** (Temple of Persephone), off to the west of the theatre.

South of the archaeological zone are the stone sculptures known as the **Santoni** (Holy Men). The 12 statues are set in rock and devoted to the goddess Cybele, herself depicted on a seat. The largest figurative complex de-

voted to this particular goddess was created sometime during the 3rd century BC. It's a five-minute walk down to the statues, but you'll need to wait for a group to go with the guide, who'll want to drive down – see if you can cadge a lift. The area around the statues is closed to the general public.

Sleeping & Eating

Senatore (☎ 0931 88 34 43; fax 0931 88 34 44; Largo Senatore Italia; s/d €39/60; P ☎) One of Palazzolo's few hotels, the Senatore is fairly modern and has comfortable, if uninspiring, rooms with TV.

Hotel Santoro (☎ 0931 88 38 55; fax 0931 88 36 92; www.hotelsantoro.com in Italian; Via San Sebastiano 21; s €35-45, d €55-65; ☎) Not exactly luxurious, but a hop, skip and a jump from Piazza del Popolo. The rooms have a TV, a fridge and heating.

Alfredo (☎ 0931 88 32 66; Via Duca d'Aosta 27; tourist menu €15) A good choice just off Piazza del Popolo where the focus is on Sicilian meat dishes. The *salsiccia e costata di maiale* (sausages and roast pork chop) will fill you up.

Il Portico (☎ 0931 88 15 32; Via Orologio 6; meals €25, set menu €35; ☎ closed Tue & Nov) This formal little restaurant has swagged rose curtains, high-backed chairs and florid painted ceilings. The menu focuses on Iblean mountain dishes with lots of roasted and grilled meats and mushrooms.

Getting There & Away

Unless you have your own transport, the only way to get here is by AST bus from Syracuse's main bus station (€3.25, one hour, 14 daily Monday to Saturday). You can buy tickets onboard.

NOTO

pop 23,100 / elev 160m

Flattened by the 1693 earthquake, Noto was rebuilt by its noble families in the grand baroque style and is now the finest and most coherent baroque town in Sicily – its exuberant style tamed by the rational grid work and an innate sense of symmetry. It's been almost completely renovated since 2002, and the gleaming baroque architecture is dazzling. You'll see Noto in its 1960s guise in Michelangelo Antonioni's film *L'Avventura* (1960), where the postcoital Monica Vitti wanders through the main square, glared at by Noto's entire male population.

Orientation

Intercity buses drop you at the Giardini Pubblici (public gardens), a nice shady park that meets Porta Reale at the beginning of Corso Vittorio Emanuele, the town's main street.

Information

EMERGENCY

Ambulance (☎ 0931 89 02 35)

Police (☎ 0931 83 52 02; Via Maggiore) On the eastern extension of Via Aurispa.

INTERNET ACCESS

Salvo Cataneo Photography Lab (☎ 0931 83 52 51; Via Cavour 100; per hr €6; ☎ 9am-1pm & 4-7pm Mon-Sat) Two laptops with a fast connection at a photographer's studio.

MEDICAL SERVICES

Hospital (☎ 0931 57 12 25; Via dei Mille) On the way out of town towards Noto Antica.

MONEY

There are banks with ATMs on Corso Vittorio Emanuele, near Porta Reale.

POST

Post Office (Via Zanardelli 2; ☎ 8.30am-5pm Mon-Fri, 8.30am-1.30pm Sat)

TOURIST INFORMATION

Tourist Office (☎ 0931 57 37 79; www.comune.noto.sr.it; Piazza XVI Maggio; ☎ 8am-2pm & 3.30-6.15pm

Mon-Sat) An excellent and busy office with multilingual staff, a free map and loads of information on the province.

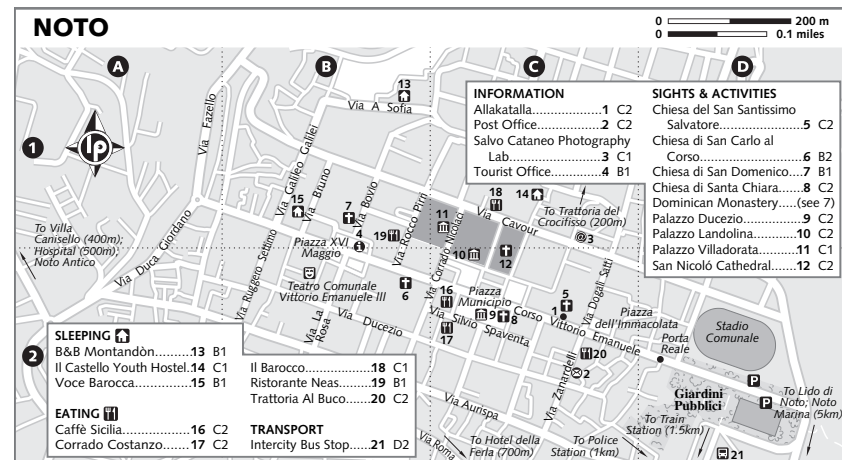
TRAVEL AGENCIES

Allakatala (☎ 0931 83 50 05; Corso Vittorio Emanuele 47; bicycle/scooter per day €10/30) Wears various hats including that of tour guide.

Sights

Most of the important monuments line Corso Vittorio Emanuele. A structural report commissioned in 1986 revealed the precarious state of Noto's buildings – the result of decades of neglect and plenty of minor earth tremors – many of which were on the brink of collapse. In fact, in 1996 the dome of the cathedral did collapse, although thankfully no one was inside at the time. Apparently local authorities knew that it was cracked but did nothing to repair it. The incident did, however, galvanise the authorities into action, resulting in many of Noto's most important buildings being carefully restructured. The town is now looking as good as new.

Pride of place is naturally given to the recently renovated **San Nicolò Cathedral**, which stands centre stage in Noto's most graceful square, the Piazza Municipio. Following its dome's collapse and subsequent restructuring, the cathedral was scrubbed of centuries of dust and dirt and is now once again gleaming in its peachy glow. The June 2007 reopening was a major event in town, with the inhabitants keen to see the cathedral looking brand-new. A fabulous place from which to see the cathedral



NOTO'S NATIVITY

Although a town called Noto or Netum has existed here for many centuries, the 'modern' town dates back to the devastating earthquake of 1693. One week after the event, architect Giuseppe Lanza, duke of Camastra, was given the biggest commission of his life: build a town from scratch. He set about his task with a stubborn single-mindedness and a blatant disregard for the wishes of the now homeless townspeople, who were horrified when they heard that the new town was to be 15km away.

In rebuilding Noto, Lanza's true genius lay in his choice of collaborators. With the help of the Flemish military engineer Carlos de Grunemberg, master craftsman Rosario Gagliardi and the architects Vincenzo Sinatra and Paolo Laisi, the new Noto put into practice a revolutionary idea based on the creation of two quarters, one for political and religious administration, the other a residential area. Both quarters were built with a careful emphasis on symmetry and visual harmony; indeed, the warm gold and rose hues of the local stone soften the heavily embellished palazzi and churches, giving the town a permanent sunset-light hue.

Despite the townspeople's initial reservations, the final results must have made them fall in love with their new town: what they saw was an almost perfect urban plan of crisscrossing parallel streets, tricks and treats of perspective and grand set-piece piazze, and indeed, the finest baroque town around.

is **Chiesa di Santa Chiara** (Corso Vittorio Emanuele; admission to roof adult/concession €1.50/1; ☎ 10am-7pm) on the opposite side of the street. You get excellent views of the cathedral and the whole of Noto from the top of the church.

The cathedral is surrounded on all sides by elegant town houses such as **Palazzo Ducezio** (Town Hall; ☎ 0931 83 52 01; admission free; ☎ 8.30am-2pm & 3-7pm Mon-Fri) and **Palazzo Landolina**, once home to Noto's oldest noble family. The only palazzo to be restored to its former glory is the **Palazzo Villadorata** (Palazzo Nicolaci; ☎ 0931 83 50 05; Via Corrado Nicolaci; adult/concession €3/1.50; ☎ 10am-1pm & 3-7pm Tue-Sun), whose wrought-iron balconies are supported by a swirling pantomime of grotesque figures – mythical monsters, griffins, cherubs and sirens. Inside, richly brocaded walls and frescoed ceilings give an idea of the sumptuous lifestyle of Sicilian nobles.

Two other piazze break up the long *corso*: to the east, Piazza dell'Immacolata and, more notably, to the west, Piazza XVI Maggio, overlooked by the beautiful **Chiesa di San Domenico** and the **Dominican monastery**, both designed by Rosario Gagliardi. On the way to Piazza XVI Maggio, climb the campanile of **Chiesa di San Carlo al Corso** (bell tower; admission €1.55; ☎ 9am-12.30pm & 4-7pm) for some excellent views over Noto.

In the opposite, easterly direction, towards the grand Porta Reale is the **Chiesa del Santissimo Salvatore** with its adjoining nunnery, which was reserved for the daughters of local nobility. The interior is the most impressive in

Noto, but it is unfortunately closed to the public. The fountain suspended on a wall next to it remained after Noto's streets were lowered in 1840 to facilitate the movement of carriages.

Festivals & Events

Infiolata Noto's colourful flower festival, held on the third Sunday in May, is when artists line the length of Via Corrado Nicolaci with works of art made entirely of flower petals.

La Notte di Giufà Music and storytelling from dusk until dawn with musical acts from around the world. Held at the end of July.

Sleeping

There is very limited hotel accommodation in Noto, but there's a plethora of good B&Bs. Ask at the tourist office for a detailed list, otherwise check out www.notobarocca.com (in Italian).

Il Castello Youth Hostel (☎/fax 0931 57 15 34; ostel-lodinoto@tin.it; Via Fratelli Bandiera 2; dm €15) Right in the centre of things in a beautiful old building, this place is the pride of Noto and great value for money. There are 68 beds and an open-all-day policy.

our pick B&B Montandon (☎ 0931 83 57 93; www.b-bmontandon.it; Via A Sofia 50; s €25-40, d €50-75; ☎ ☎) A beautiful B&B in a crumbling old palazzo – real old Noto. You enter via imposing vaulted hallways and the bedrooms are lovely and light with elegant furnishings. Upper rooms have panoramic views over the town.

Voce Barocca (☎ 0931 57 33 29; www.vocebarocca.com in Italian; Via Bruno 15; s €25-40, d €50-80; ☎ ☎) A small,

two-room B&B in an old palazzo right off the main street, Voce Barocca has a traditional, mismatching décor, a nice little roof terrace and good breakfasts that keep the punters happy. Book in advance.

Villa Canisello (☎ 0931 83 57 93; www.villacanisello.it; Via Pavese 1; d €70-90; ☎ ☎) This quiet farmhouse is at the western end of Corso Vittorio Emanuele, past Piazza N Bixio, about 15 minutes' walk from the centre. It has a nice garden, but quite stuffy rooms that don't justify the price. The breakfast is decent and the food home-grown.

Hotel della Ferla (☎ 0931 57 60 07; www.hotelferla.it; Via A Gramsci; s €48-78, d €84-120; ☎ ☎) This small hotel with 15 rooms is modern, efficient and within easy walking distance of the historic centre. It also has invaluable parking facilities and very helpful management to help with itineraries and recommendations around town.

Eating

The people of Noto are serious about their food: take time to enjoy a meal and follow it up with a visit to one of the town's excellent pastry shops, where the *gelati* and *dolci* (sweets) are divine.

Trattoria Al Buco (☎ 0931 83 81 42; Via Zanardelli 1; mains €20; ☎ closed Mon) This bustling and popular place is a good cheap option in Noto, and the locals like it as well. There are several vegetarian options and the fish is fresh and delicious.

our pick Trattoria del Crocifisso (☎ 0931 57 11 51; Via Umberto 46-48; meals €25) The best restaurant in Noto (and for miles around), this Slow Food-selected trattoria serves such

good food that you'll immediately forgive the slightly starchy service. Try the *linguine* with *vongole* (clams) and tuna steak in an orange, cinnamon and sesame sauce or tuna in a pistachio and sesame sauce – both are equally exquisite. A dessert must be the pistachio *semifreddo* (ice-cream cake), creamy and encrusted by gem-green pistachio pieces.

Il Barocco (☎ 0931 83 59 99; Via Cavour 8; meals €25) Another brilliant place to eat in Noto, tucked into a converted stable block of the Palazzo Astuto-Barresi. The eccentric character of the owner and chef is everywhere – from the graffitied walls (signatures from appreciative clientele) to the spaghetti with limpets.

Ristorante Neas (☎ 0931 57 35 38; Via Rocco Pirri 30; meals €25-30; ☎ closed Mon) You'll find a high standard of both food and service at this place, which opens up its terrace in summer. Try the *linguine allo scoglio* (with mixed seafood), or the legendary fish soup.

Getting There & Away

Noto is easily accessible by AST and Interbus buses from Catania (€5.75, 2¼ hours, 12 daily Monday to Saturday, seven Sunday) and Syracuse (€2.75, one hour, 12 daily Monday to Saturday). From June to August only, buses run frequently between Noto and Noto Marina (in the winter there is a school bus service). Trains from Syracuse are frequent (€2.65, 30 minutes, 11 daily), but the station is located 1.5km south of the bus-station area, so it's not as good an option for coming or going.

I SCREAM, YOU SCREAM, WE ALL SCREAM FOR ICE CREAM

People have said that Noto has the two best *gelaterie* (ice-cream shops) in the world. And, having tried them both, we can't argue with this statement. It's now up to you to decide if you agree. The famous **Corrado Costanzo** (☎ 0931 83 52 43; Via Silvio Spaventa 9) has the best ice cream, and you should indulge in at least a lick of the pistachio, a bite of the chocolate, or a chomp of the *amaro* (a dark liqueur) flavour. Around the corner, **Caffè Sicilia** (☎ 0931 83 50 13; Corso Vittorio Emanuele 125), which has been operating since 1892, excels in the art of the *granita* (a drink made of crushed ice with fruit juice). Depending on the season, try the *fragolini* (tiny wild strawberries) or *gelsi* (mulberry) flavours, or go for the classic *caffè* (coffee) or *mandorla* (almond). If you're not worried about calories, throw in a brioche and a bit of fresh cream on top, and you'll have a real Sicilian experience.

Both places make superb real *cassata* (made with ricotta cheese, chocolate and candied fruit), *dolci di mandorle* (almond cakes and sweets) and *torrone* (nougat), which are perfect for sharing (or not) with your friends back home.

AROUND NOTO

Noto Marina

If you fancy a swim, there's the pleasant **Lido di Noto** at Noto Marina, 15 minutes (5km) from Noto by car or bus – there are four buses per day to Noto Marina from July to September (one way/return €1.50/3), but ask at the tourist office for bus service out of the summer season.

An attractive hotel in Noto Marina is the **Villa Mediterranea** (☎ 0931 81 23 30; www.villa.mediterranea.it; Viale Lido; s €75-125, d €90-150; P ♻️ 🚰), located right on the seafloor.

Eloro

On the coast 9km southeast of Noto are the ruins of the ancient Syracusan colony of Helorus, or **Eloro** (admission free; 🕒 8am-2pm). The town, founded in the 7th century BC, is still in the early stages of being excavated, but so far a portion of the city walls, a small temple dedicated to Demeter (Ceres in Roman mythology) and a theatre have been uncovered. When the site is closed you can still get a look at the place through the fence. You'll need your own transport to get there, or you may fancy walking from Noto Marina. The walk is about 4km long and there are lovely views of the coastline along the way.

On either side of the hill where the sparse ruins lie are long, sandy beaches comparatively free of the usual crowds. Unfortunately, a storm-water drain spills into the sea at the beach to the south.

Riserva Naturale Oasi Faunistica di Vendicari

Less than 1km south of Eloro is the northern boundary of the **Riserva Naturale Oasi Faunistica di Vendicari** (☎ 0931 57 14 57; admission free; 🕒 9am-6pm Apr-Oct, 9am-5pm Nov-Mar), a wonderful stretch of wild coastline protected from voracious developers. The reserve is made up of three separate marshes and a splendid crescent-shaped, sandy beach. You'll have to walk about half an hour to get to the beach, but once you get there, you'll feel like you're in heaven.

Crisscrossed by medieval water channels constructed when the saltpans were in use, the reserve is replete with old fortifications, an abandoned tuna plant and a rugged Swabian tower. More importantly, the reserve protects all manner of water birds, including the black-winged stilt, slender-billed gull and Audouin's gull; bird-

watchers are well catered for by special observatories. Marked tracks meander through the marshes.

It is possible to reach the park by taking the SAIS bus connecting Noto and Pachino, or on the Interbus bus from Largo Pantheon, the street behind the public gardens in Noto.

Avola

With a reputation for producing excellent almonds (nicknamed *pizzuta*), Avola is a pleasant day trip from Syracuse or Noto. Town-planning buffs will appreciate the hexagonal shape of the town's design, created when the town had to be rebuilt after the earthquake. The open and harmonious nature of its architecture and public places is pleasing – look for **Chiesa Madre San Nicolò** in Piazza Umberto I.

To get there, take an AST bus from Syracuse (€2.10, 12 daily Monday to Saturday, four Sunday) or Noto (12 daily Monday to Saturday, four Sunday). In Noto, buses arrive at and depart from Piazza Vittorio Veneto, about five minutes' walk from Piazza Umberto, down Corso Vittorio Emanuele.

Trains connect Avola with Syracuse and Noto, although the train station is not quite as handy as the bus station.

The Cape Area

Sicily's southeastern cape doesn't offer much in the way of excitement, but the various African, Maltese and Arabic accents that pervade the area make it a sensual place to visit. **Pachino** is a wine-growing area surrounded by sandy beaches, while **Marzamemi**, 5km away, is a rather lovely fishing town with an old tuna fishery and tuna-based gift/craft shops. **Portopalo di Capo Passero** is popular in summer and has a nightly fish market from sunset at the port. The small island off the coast is Isola Capo Passero, with a castle and nature reserve. **Isola delle Correnti**, at the bottom of the cape area, really is the end of the line, and has a charming bay, thankfully free of pollution.

Interbus has buses to Pachino from Syracuse and Noto (11 daily Monday to Saturday).

If you're coming by car, take the SS115 to Noto, then follow the signs south to Pachino. Marzamemi is northeast of Pachino, while Portopalo di Capo Passero is southeast.

MODICA

pop 52,900 / elev 296m

Modica is blooming into a wonderful base for any discerning traveller: it's a beautiful town with sun-bleached, pastel-coloured houses that tumble down from Modica Alta (High Modica) to Modica Bassa (Low Modica). There are fantastic places to eat, the baroque architecture is breathtaking, the chocolate produced here is known throughout Italy, and to top it all off, there are some great beaches nearby. It's a town that really allows you to see and live life as it's lived by the locals, and many an unsuspecting visitor has fallen in love with Modica's wily charms.

Once a powerhouse in the region and the personal fiefdom of the Chiaramonte family, Modica lost its pre-eminent place to Ragusa. Despite this, Modica's inhabitants feel proud of their town's illustrious history, and will no doubt mention – in a fit of local patriotism – that Modica is better than Ragusa.

Orientation

Modica is divided into two parts: Modica Alta tumbles into a deep valley where once a raging river flowed right through the town, and becomes Modica Bassa. Following a devastating flood in 1902, the river was transformed into Corso Umberto I and Via Giarrantana, the main axes of the town. The huge hill will test your legs, especially if you intend to walk around the entire town in a day (not advisable).

The train station is located just over 500m west of Corso Umberto I, past Via Vittorio Veneto. It's better to get the bus, as you'll be dropped off near the intersection of Corso Umberto I and Via Garibaldi. The bus trip is also better in terms of scenery.

Information

Police (☎ 113; Piazza Matteoti)

Post Office (Corso Umberto I) Just near Chiesa di San Domenico.

Tourist Office (☎ 0932 76 26 26; Via Grimaldi 32; 🕒 8.30am-1.30pm & 3-7pm Mon-Sat, 8.30am-1.30pm Sun) Can supply the odd map or list, but no English is spoken.

Sights

The highlight of a trip to Modica is the **Chiesa di San Giorgio** (Modica Alta; admission free; 🕒 9am-noon & 4-7pm), easily one of the most extraordinary baroque churches in the province. Gagliardi's

(of Noto and Ragusa fame) masterpiece, it is a vision of pure rococo splendour perched at the top of a majestic 250-step staircase. Erected in the early 18th century, the church has a daringly tall façade, while the interior is full of polychromatic marbles. Viewed from below, the swirling confection looks as if it might float away. Its counterpoint in Modica Bassa is the **Cattedrale di San Pietro** (Corso Umberto I; admission free), another impressive church atop a rippling staircase lined with life-sized statues of the apostles.

Walking down Corso Umberto I, with its many fine mansions and churches, is a very pleasant experience. Heading south you will pass the **Chiesa Santa Maria del Carmine** (Piazza Matteoti), the **Chiesa di San Giovanni Evangelista** (off Piazza San Giovanni), ending at **Chiesa Santa Maria delle Grazie**, whose convent (Palazzo dei Mercedari) has since been converted into the **Museo Civico** (Via Mercè; admission free; 🕒 9am-1pm Mon-Sat), with a well-ordered display of finds from Modica and Cava d'Ispica. Upstairs is the separate and private **Hyblean Museum of Arts & Crafts & Popular Traditions** (☎ 0932 75 77 47), which is only open on request. It is worth phoning up to arrange entrance as it houses a wonderful ethnographical collection set out in workshop context. Especially good is the laboratory for making chocolate, which will set you up nicely for a chocolate feast at Antica Dolceria Bonajuto (p234).

Another noteworthy church is **Chiesa di Santa Maria di Betlem** (Via Marchesa Tedeschi), where a marker points out the highest point of the 1902 flood.

Courses

Arts and crafts courses in mosaics (per person one week €750) and painting (per person one week €650) were set up by a worthy local initiative aiming to integrate tourism with local development. The courses are run through the **Albergo i Tetti di Siciliando** (☎ 0932 94 28 43; www.siciliando.it; Via Cannata 24, Modica Bassa), which also provides accommodation (see below).

Sleeping

Our pick Albergo i Tetti di Siciliando (☎ 0932 94 28 43; www.siciliando.it; Via Cannata 24, Modica Bassa; s €24-34, d €42-60; 🕒) Hidden away in a small street off Corso Umberto, this *albergo* must be the most welcoming, intimate place in town (and possibly in Sicily), thanks to its owners, Valeria and Rosa. They'll not only

tell you everything there is to know about Modica (in excellent English), but you'll get a good breakfast, your own key, and you can attend one of the courses they organise here. The rooms are simple and sizable, many with dreamy views of Modica's tightly packed houses that seemingly teeter on top of each other. You can rent mountain bikes for €10 per day (or €50 per week).

Carrube e Cavalieri (☎ 0932 94 18 37; www.carrubeecavalieri.it; Corso San Giorgio 111, Modica Alta; s €30-35, d €60-65; 🍴) A new B&B right next door to the Chiesa di San Giorgio, with predictably awesome views, this place has seven rooms that are all spacious, simply decorated and have gleaming new bathrooms. Ask for a room with a balcony-view of the church and you'll risk spending far too much time gazing at the gorgeous baroque curves. The owner is friendly and speaks English.

Dei Ruta (☎ 0932 75 56 00; www.deiruta.it; Via Moncada 9, Modica Alta; r per person €30-35; 🍴) Another San Giorgio church-gazing B&B, with huge rooms in an old palazzo. The atmosphere is of a family house, with a communal kitchen and friendly landlady. The traditional tiles on the floors give the rooms character, and it's all flawlessly clean.

Hotel Relais (☎ 0932 75 44 51; www.hotelrelaismodica.it; Via Tommaso Campanella, Modica Bassa; s/d €60/95; 🍴) Housed in a converted palazzo (just off Corso Umberto I, near Teatro Garibaldi), this attractive hotel in the historic centre has individually decorated rooms with all the mod cons and large French windows. There is an elegant rooftop garden – perfect for an aperitif.

our pick **Hotel Mohac** (☎ 0932 75 41 30; www.hoteldemohac.it; Via Tommaso Campailla 15; s €55-65, d €90-105; 🍴) A swanky new joint, Hotel Mohac dedicates its 10 rooms to different poets and writers (such as Pablo Neruda and Salvatore Quasimodo), decorating each with good-looking antiques, chaise longues, writing tables, and big comfortable beds. There's a nice, greenery-shrouded balcony that doubles as a breakfast area, and the downstairs bar/café is relaxing and cool. A good, stylish place to stay.

Eating & Drinking

Modica has some very good restaurants, many of which are modestly priced.

Antica Dolceria Bonajuto (☎ 0932 94 12 25; www.bonajuto.it; Corso Umberto I 159) Mass production of chocolate has meant that the chocolate

industry has moved on since the early days, but not in Modica. Here the method remains the same and to taste the crunchy, black stuff – flavoured with cinnamon, vanilla and orange peel – head straight for the famous Antica Dolceria Bonajuto. Also try the famous *mpanaticghi* (South American empanadas filled with meat and chocolate). See p160 for an interview with the owner.

our pick **Baccanti** (☎ 0932 94 11 33; Via Grimaldi 72; meals €15-20) This little-sister restaurant to Taverna Nicasastro offers the chance to try all the delicious food served in the big restaurant, but at deflated prices. The fresh pasta is excellent, and you can get meaty dishes like rabbit here, as well as fish and seafood. Try some wine too, and if you can't choose for yourself, ask the friendly sommelier.

Taverna Nicasastro (☎ 0932 94 58 84; Via S Antonino 28; meals €25) The traditional *taverna* where Modica's families go for lunch and dinner is selected in the revered Slow Food guide for its excellent wine list and fine food. The menu is quite meaty, with sausages, rabbit and pork, though you'll find green beans and tomato stews there too. Desserts are good, though a glass of sweet wine is even better.

Fattoria delle Torri (☎ 0932 75 12 86; Vico Napolitano 14, Modica Alta; mains €30-35; 🍴 closed Sun evening & Mon) Worth going to only if you're wanting to splash out, this very upmarket restaurant offers food that is exquisite, but small of portion and high on eye-pleasing presentation. The seafood is gorgeous, wonderful when combined with a crisp, dry white wine such as Cerasuolo di Vittoria, and heart-warming broad-bean-and-ricotta ravioli.

Hemingway (☎ 340 093 52 28; Via Grimaldi 36; 🍴 7pm-late) This is Modica's coolest bar, with books and cushioned outdoor seating, where everyone gathers after 11pm to drink beer and chat away to friends, and where you're likely to find a DJ party several times a month.

Getting There & Away

There are plenty of buses and trains to Modica from Syracuse (10 daily buses Monday to Saturday) and Ragusa (all under €5.20).

AROUND MODICA

Modica is surrounded by pretty countryside full of rambling lanes leading you to interesting sights and pleasant country towns. **Scidi** is just such a town, full of more wonderful baroque architecture – in particular Palazzo

Beneventano and Palazzo Fava – and framed by rocky cliffs. It is well off the beaten track and there is seldom another tourist in sight.

Head down to **Modica Marina** (€1.20, six buses daily) and **Sampieri** (€1.50, three buses daily) for long sandy beaches, as well as rocky coves. Both are popular with the town's youth, with bars and loungers (bed and umbrella for two €10) on the sand, though there are vast unpopulated areas if you walk along the beaches, where you can be undisturbed by the crowds.

A similar town, southeast of Modica, is **Ispica**, located at the head of the 13km-long gorge known as **Cava d'Ispica** (☎ 0932 95 11 33; admission €2; 🍴 9am-1.30pm & 3-6.30pm). Long used as a Neolithic burial site, the caves were later transformed into cave dwellings in the Middle Ages. The gorge is tranquil and verdant and you can follow an overgrown path along the whole length of the valley.

South of Ispica is **Pozzallo**, a pleasant resort town, where you can catch the ferry to Malta.

Getting There & Around

Scicli, Pozzallo and Ispica are all accessible by bus and train from both Modica and Ragusa. If you're driving from Syracuse, take the SS115 and follow the signs to the towns.

Virtu Ferries has services between Pozzallo and Malta (single/return high season €93/125, 1½ hours, two daily except Tuesday and Saturday). Departures are usually at 9am and 9.30pm. The **Virtu office** (☎ 0932 95 40 62; www.virtuferries.com; Via Studi 80) is in front of Via Lungomare Raganzino. In Pozzallo, there's a free courtesy bus that will take you from the ferry dock to the town centre (to the train station it's €2.75).

RAGUSA

pop 69,700 / elev 502m

Classic, quiet and dignified, Ragusa is a delightful provincial town almost completely overlooked by tourists, though judging by the renovations and the town's resulting appeal, not for much longer. Dozens of B&Bs, fantastic restaurants, ice-cream parlours and bars have sprouted, and staying a few days here is an absolute dream. You can walk from the steep heights of Ragusa Superiore (Upper Ragusa), down the curving streets and countless stairs that lead to Ragusa Ibla (Ragusa's old town) and count the baroque spires as you descend.

Like every other town in the region, Ragusa Ibla (the old town) collapsed after the 1693 earthquake and a new town, Ragusa Superiore, was built on a high plateau above the original settlement. But the old aristocracy was loathe to leave the tottering palazzi and rebuilt Ragusa Ibla on exactly the same spot. The two towns were only merged in 1927, thus creating the two towns in one that prevails today. A perilous bus ride or some very steep and winding steps connect the two towns.

Orientation

The train station is on Piazza del Popolo and the intercity bus station is on the adjacent Piazza Gramsci. From the train station, turn left and head along Viale Tenente Lena, across the bridge (Ponte Nuovo) and straight ahead along Via Roma to reach Corso Italia, the upper town's main street. Turn right on Corso Italia and follow it to the stairs to Ibla, or follow the winding road to the lower town.

Information

EMERGENCY

Ambulance (☎ 113)

Police (☎ 0932 62 49 22; Via Rasparidi) Next to the town hall.

MEDICAL SERVICES

Hospital (☎ 0932 62 14 10; Piazza del Popolo) Opposite the train station.

MONEY

ATM (Piazza del Duomo)

Banco di Sicilia (Via Roma) Has an ATM; located opposite Mediterraneo Palace.

POST

Main Post Office (Via Ecce Homo, Ragusa Superiore;

🍴 8.30am-5pm Mon-Fri, 8.30am-1.30pm Sat)

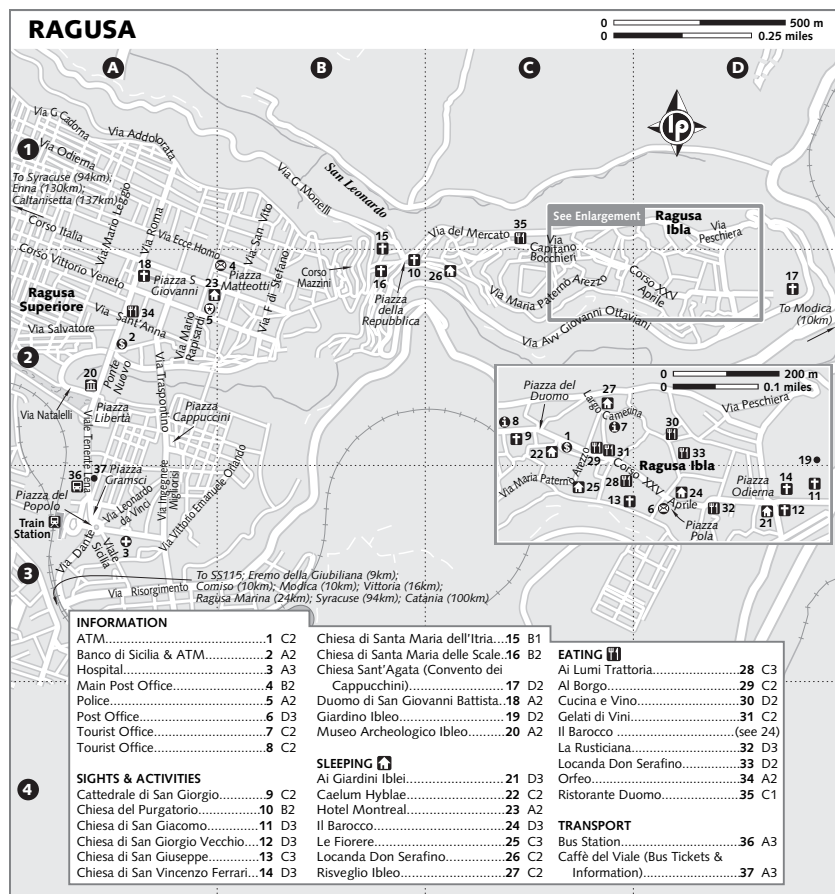
Post Office (Piazza Pola, Ragusa Ibla; 🍴 8.30am-5pm Mon-Fri, 8.30am-1.30pm Sat)

TOURIST INFORMATION

Tourist Office (☎ 0932 22 15 11; www.ragusaturismo

.it in Italian; Via Capitano Bocchieri 33; 🍴 9am-1.30pm & 3.30-6pm Tue-Sun) Helpful tourist office in Palazzo La Rocca. Also has an excellent map of the town and an interesting booklet, *In Barocca*, about baroque buildings throughout the province.

Tourist Office (Largo Camarina 5; 🍴 9am-1.30pm & 3.30-6pm Tue-Sun) Staff here can help with booking rooms in the old town.



Sights

RAGUSA IBLA

Your first sight of Ragusa Ibla will be the breathtaking views from the hairpin bends of Corso Mazzini. It is a lovely picture, the austere grey of the buildings nestled amid the green countryside, lifted by splashes of colour here and there from painted palazzi and the majolica-tiled dome of the **Chiesa di Santa Maria dell'Itria**. If you have the time, the old town is best accessed via the *salita commendatore*, a winding pass made up of stairs and narrow archways taking you past the remains of the 15th-century **Chiesa di Santa Maria delle Scale**, from where there's a good viewing point. Keep going down and you come to Piazza della Repubblica and the **Chiesa del Purgatorio**,

whose main altar features a depiction of *Anime in Purgatorio* (Souls in Purgatory) by Francesco Manno.

Aside from the churches and palazzi that literally line your route wherever you go, the best thing to do about town is to wander through its narrow streets and sun-drenched squares, which look even better on a soft summer night. If you continue east along Via del Mercato (which has great views of the valley below) you'll get your first side view of palm-planted Piazza del Duomo, whose western end is dominated by the **Cattedrale di San Giorgio** (1744). It is one of Gagliardi's most elegant churches and its convex façade is the focal point of the piazza. The wedding-cake structure is divided into

three tiers, each level supported by gradually narrowing Corinthian columns and punctuated by jutting cornices. The interior is not quite as sumptuous, although there are two paintings by Dario Guerci and a statue of St George on horseback. A close second is the smaller **Chiesa di San Giuseppe**, east of Piazza del Duomo. The elliptical interior is topped by a cupola decorated with a fresco of the *Gloria di San Benedetto* (Glory of St Benedict; 1793) by Sebastiano Lo Monaco.

At the eastern end of the old town is the **Giardino Ibleo** (☎ 8am-8pm), a pleasant public garden laid out in the 19th century, perfect for a picnic lunch. In its grounds are the remains of three medieval churches: **Chiesa di San Vincenzo Ferrari**; **Chiesa di San Giacomo** (☎ 9am-1pm & 3.30-7pm), the 1563 church with a badly damaged but interesting painted ceiling; and **Chiesa Sant'Agata** (Convento dei Cappuccini; ☎ 9am-1pm & 3.30-7pm), with an fine altarpiece and three great examples of painter Pietro Novelli's work (*Assumption of the Virgin*, *Sant'Agatha* and *Santa Caterina d'Alessandria*). There's also the Catalan-Gothic portal of what was once the large **Chiesa di San Giorgio Vecchio**, but is now mostly ruined. In the lunette there is an interesting bas-relief of St George killing the dragon.

RAGUSA SUPERIORE

The centrepiece of Ragusa Superiore, and a symbol of its urban renewal, is the enormous **Duomo di San Giovanni Battista**, built between 1718 and 1778. An elegant, terraced square fronts the ornate façade made asymmetrical by Mario Spada's pretty campanile.

South of the cathedral, off Via Roma, is the **Museo Archeologico Ibleo** (☎ 0932 62 29 63; Via Natalelli; admission €3; ☎ 9am-1.30pm), an important archaeological museum housing finds from prehistoric times and from the Greek site at Camarina on the coast. Also of interest are the ceramics from the caravan centre of Scornavacche, including a reconstructed kiln. Don't miss the mosaic-floor remains from Santa Croce Camerina, near the end of the loop around the museum. Unfortunately, if you don't read Italian, gleaning information about the finds will be a problem.

Sleeping

Most of Ragusa's large hotels are in the upper town; however, there are tons of new,

small hotels and B&Bs in Ragusa Ibla and this is certainly the best place to stay.

Ai Giardini Iblei (☎ 338 286 18 58; www.aigiardini.it in Italian; Via Normanni 4, Ragusa Ibla; s €30-50, d €60-70; ☎) As the name suggests, this delightful little B&B is right by the Giardino Ibleo, and next door to the portal of Chiesa di San Giorgio Vecchio. Run by an Italian-Brazilian family, the welcome is warm and the four rooms are simple but comfortable, with blush-coloured walls and large bathrooms (the triple has a bath). Breakfast is served in the small kitchen. Book in advance.

our pick Risveglio Ibleo (☎ 0932 24 78 11; www.risveglioibleo.com; Largo Camerina 3, Ragusa Ibla; r per person €34-42; ☎) An excellent B&B in an old palazzo, this place sports a large apartment on the 1st floor that's decorated like a 1960s novelist's pad. It sleeps two to four people, and it's perfect for a couple who want to spend some time pretending they live in Ragusa. There's also a double room on the ground floor, with high ceilings, antique furniture, wooden floors and a wrought-iron bed. The owner is friendly and speaks good English. It's true value for money here, so book in advance.

Le Fiorere (☎ 0932 62 15 30; www.bblefiorere.it; Via Maria Paternò Arezzo 104, Ragusa Ibla; s €40-45, d €65-75; ☎) Just around the corner from Piazza del Duomo, Le Fiorere has three sweet rooms, each with fridge and stove. The owner even brings you fresh pastries and bread for breakfast, and you can park for free in the internal courtyard. Only one room has air conditioning, so specify if that's your preference.

our pick Caelum Hyblae (☎ 0932 22 04 02; www.bbcaelumhyblae.it; Salita Specula 11, Ragusa Ibla; s €45-50, d €90-100) A stylish, family-run B&B, with seven immaculately turned out rooms with white walls, pristine beds, and an airy, marine atmosphere. The reception is all books, writing tables and a piano, and the place breathes quiet sophistication. The rooms have views of the cathedral, as does the roof terrace. Note that there is no air conditioning, but the family guarantees that the building's thick walls are enough to keep things cool.

Hotel Montreal (☎ 0932 62 11 33; www.hotelmontreal.sicily-hotels.net; Corso Italia 70, Ragusa Superiore; s/d €70/9; ☎) In the upper town, this place is easy to find and comfortable – stay here if you don't want to go hunting around the old town. Rooms are modern and the service is efficient and friendly.

ROYAL RAGUSA

Eremo della Giubiliana (☎ 0932 66 91 19; www.eremodellagiubiliana.it; Contrada Giubiliana, SP per Marina di Ragusa 7.5km; d/st€240/820; 📍 🚻) The Eremo is a wonderful homage to history and authenticity. Its white tower dominates the highland above Ragusa Marina in a ruggedly wild estate of carob trees and dry stone walls. The estate used to be part of the old fief of Renna and the structure was a fortified hermitage. The Knights of St John used the hermitage in the 16th century after which it was bought by the Nifosi family, whose last heir, Vincenza Iolanda Nifosi, is responsible for its sensitive restoration. Nowadays it is a luxurious retreat offering a catalogue of wonderful excursions on foot, by 4WD or even in the estate's private plane (to Lampedusa, Tunisia, Mt Etna and Palermo).

To reach it, take the road from Ragusa to Ragusa Marina and after 9km turn off right and follow the signs.

Il Barocco (☎ 0932 65 23 97; www.ilbarocco.it; Via S Maria La Nuova, Ragusa Ibla; s/d€80/125; 📍 🚻) Owned by the Cabibbo family, which also runs the massively popular restaurant of the same name (see opposite), this was once a carpenter's workshop. It's a tastefully done-up hotel, with unfussy and comfortable rooms.

Locanda Don Serafino (☎ 0932 22 00 65; www.locanda donserafino.it; Via XI Febbraio 15, Ragusa Ibla; d from €148; 📍 🚻) A plush three-star hotel that prides itself on its upmarket service, with comfortable rooms, vaulted ceilings, and a stylish décor all-round. A good splash-out opportunity, especially considering that the hotel has its own beach at Marina Ragusa, 20km from here. The eponymous restaurant (see opposite) is very popular.

Eating

Like Modica, Ragusa has a good selection of restaurants, all of them located in the old town.

our pick Gelati Di Vini (☎ 0932 22 89 89; www.gelati divini.it in Italian; Piazza del Duomo 20, Ragusa Ibla; ice cream from €1.50) The name of this place indicates that (some of) the ice cream is wine-flavoured, and it plays with the idea that they are 'divine' of flavour. And dare we say it, it's some of the best ice cream we've tasted in Sicily. There are such adventurous and marvellous-tasting flavours here that you might just find yourself unable to leave Ragusa without trying another one. The carob is powdery and subtle, the peach is like eating the fruit itself, the cinnamon is sweet and exotic, and the cardamom aromatic and seductive. Try the moscato d'Asti wine flavour (sweet wine) for a real Ragusa ice-cream experience. Divine indeed.

Al Borgo (☎ 0932 65 12 03; Piazza del Duomo 3, Ragusa Ibla; bruschetta €5) Right in front of the lovely

cathedral, Al Borgo is the ideal place to catch the afternoon sun while you snack on one of the sizable bruschettas, topped with tomatoes, ham, olives or anchovies. You'll be sure to witness a wedding from here, and it's the perfect people-watching place.

La Rusticana (☎ 0932 22 79 81; Corso XXV Aprile 68, Ragusa Ibla; meals €20-25) A great budget option that serves meat and fish dishes to a boisterous crowd of loyal locals who come here for the generous portions and the relaxed vine-covered terrace. Try the *spaghetti con le cozze* (spaghetti with mussels).

Ai Lumi Trattoria (☎ 0932 62 12 24; Corso XXV Aprile 16, Ragusa Ibla; meals €25) Right on the main street, where the *passaggiata* (stroll) unfolds before your dining table, Ai Lumi is a great opportunity to eat well in elegant surroundings, without having to pay a lot for the experience. The fish soup is a favourite here, and the fish and meat menus offer local delicacies. Enjoy some wine too and watch Ragusa stroll.

our pick Cucina e Vino (☎ 0932 68 64 47; Via Orfanotrofia 91, Ragusa Ibla; meals €25-30) One of Ragusa's foremost restaurants, this Slow Food electee is a friendly place with pleasant terrace seating that overlooks the street. The menu is unusual, with things like rigatoni in a lamb sauce or ricotta ravioli in pork juices. The mains are in a similar vein, with stews of pork belly and tomato, or lamb and artichokes. Great for a rich dinner, enjoyed with some potent red wine.

Orfeo (☎ 0932 62 10 35; Via Sant'Anna 117, Ragusa Superiore; meals €25-30) Another Ragusa Slow Food-championed restaurant, this time in the upper part of town. Orfeo goes for the simple Sicilian cuisine that sports seafood and fish, but also likes to offer lamb, veal and pork, and it serves some fabulous sausages with Nero

D'Avola wine sauce. The climb up or down to the restaurant will certainly aid digestion.

Il Barocco (☎ 0932 65 23 97; Via Orfanotrofia 29, Ragusa Ibla; meals €25-30) Il Barocco is so popular that reservations are essential and eating in the vaulted dining room or on the kerbside is a boisterous, enjoyable affair. You simply must try the delicious and excellent-value grilled-meat platter (€22 for two people).

Locanda Don Serafino (☎ 0932 24 87 78; Via Orfanotrofia 39, Ragusa Ibla; meals €30-35; 📍 closed Tue) An excellent restaurant in the atmospheric barrel-vaulted caverns of an old stable block. Head right to the back to the furthest and most intimate room and dine on rabbit stuffed with pistachios or tender pork and mushrooms.

Ristorante Duomo (☎ 0932 65 12 65; Via Capitano Bocchieri 31, Ragusa Ibla; meals €70, tasting menu €100; 📍 closed Mon) This five-star restaurant is one of Sicily's poshest, with a friendly, though extremely formal, service and atmosphere. The Duomo combines ingredients in an imaginative and unconventional fashion while sticking close to traditional favourites such as tomatoes, pistachios, fennel and almonds. Five small dining rooms keep things intimate.

Getting There & Around

Ragusa is accessible by train from Syracuse (€5.70, 2¼ hours, eight daily), Noto (€4.25, 1¼ hours, eight daily) and Gela (€3.80, 1¼ hours, six daily).

Interbus-Etna Trasporti (information and tickets at Caffè del Viale, Viale Tenente Lena 42), runs daily buses to Catania (€6.60, 1¼ hours, 10 daily Monday to Friday, five Saturday and Sunday). **AST** (☎ 0932 68 18 18) runs the local network to Modica (€1.95, 20 minutes, 16 daily Monday to Saturday), Noto (€3.15, two hours, 11 daily Monday to Saturday) and

Syracuse (€5.50, 2½ hours, 10 daily Monday to Saturday). There is usually only one bus to each destination on Sunday. An AST timetable is posted on Piazza Gramsci where AST and SAIS buses stop.

City buses run from Piazza del Popolo in the upper town to Piazza Pola and the Giardino Ibleo in the lower town of Ragusa Ibla.

AROUND RAGUSA

Ten kilometres west of Ragusa, on the SS115, is the town of **Comiso**, with plenty of baroque buildings and churches to look at, including a rare survivor of the earthquake of 1693, the Chiesa di San Francesco (13th century). Six kilometres west of Comiso is **Vittoria**, founded in 1603 by Vittoria Colonna, hence the name. The town has baroque buildings and is a wine-making centre for the region.

North of Comiso (take the SS514) is **Chiaromonte Gulfi**, with churches, decent views of the countryside and delicious ham. It was founded by Manfredi Chiaromonte, the Count of Modica, and is famous both for its high-quality olive oil (accredited by the *Denominazione d'Origine Protetta*; DOP), cured hams and pasta, and its eight museums (www.comunechiaromontegulfi.it; 📍 5-8pm Sat, 10am-1pm & 3-7pm Sun).

Approximately 20km southwest of Ragusa is **Castello di Donnafugata** (admission free; 📍 9am-1pm Tue-Sun), a 19th-century building with some remnants of its 17th-century predecessor. It looks even older than that though, as it was designed in the Venetian-Gothic style – don't confuse it with the Donnafugata of *Il Gattopardo* (The Leopard) though!

A car is definitely the best way to see these towns; although train and bus services exist from Syracuse, frequency can be a problem.

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