



Welcome to our Sicily guide! The purpose of this book- let is to provide you with some background information to help you get the most out of your tour. You'll find a basic history as well as an introduction and orientation to the destinations we'll see along the way. We've listed the location of Internet cafes and restaurants and given you ideas to help you get the most out of your free time sightseeing. Your tour guide will of course be teaching you along the way, reinforcing some of the things in this booklet and giving you additional information.

Your input will help shape this and make it even more useful for future tour members. You can help improve it by letting us know when you find a great little restaurant, handy Internet café or a fascinating museum you visited during your free time.

Read through this before your tour and be sure to bring it with you on the tour as well. Our hope is that you'll find it useful.

We have a real passion for Sicily and look forward to sharing it with you.

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## Introduction

Many travelers who claim to “know” Italy have never set foot south of Rome. But plenty of Italophiles say that the fun starts once you leave Rome’s southern city limits.

Italians refer to Sicily and the rest of Italy south of Rome as the *Mezzogiorno*, which means midday and refers to the hot sun that blazes down much of the year. To many Italians Sicily is poor, backward and plagued by organized crime. Yet travelers find the region to be warmer, less expensive, and less touristed. Less English is spoken here and the people are friendlier, so practice your Italiano and your hand gestures!

The north with its Grand Canal, *David* and St. Peter’s is more familiar, yet in Sicily you’ll find sites the equal of anything you may have seen in the north of Italy. Stare face to face with some of the world’s best Byzantine mosaics in the cathedral of Monreale—a literal Bible in gold. Sit in Taormina’s Greek theater looking out at still-smoldering Mt. Etna and you can’t help but feel goosebumps. Marvel at the rich archaeological ruins of Siracusa dating to the 5th century BC. Explore the brilliant Roman floor mosaics in the Villa del Casale. The Greek influence is particularly strong in the south of Italy—we’ll see better preserved temples here than in Greece itself! Sicily has some of Italy’s best beaches and on this tour we made sure that you’ll have time to enjoy them. The cuisine of Sicily varies from one province to the next as do the wines. As the region was historically overrun by many foreign powers, you’ll

find many reminders that shape the multicultural society. The poverty here, particularly in the late 1800s and early 1900s, caused a large wave of emigration, much of it to the USA. Many locals have an uncle Tony in New York or a cousin Julia in San Francisco.

The land of the *Mezzogiorno* is a land of surprises and we are excited to discover them with you.

## General Geography

- Sicily is shaped like a triangle and has an area of 9,200 square miles, slightly larger than Vermont, about 10% of the landmass of Italy and the largest island in the Mediterranean.
- Population 5.2 million, out of Italy’s total population of about 60 million.
- Surrounded by three seas: Mediterranean on the southwest coast, Ionian on the east coast, and Tyrrhenian on the north coast. The Sicilian coastline is about 650 miles and much of that is beach.
- Home to Europe’s largest active volcano—smoldering, sputtering, 10,900-foot Mt. Etna. Actual height varies depending on effects of the most recent eruption!
- Located 2 miles from the “toe” of Italy’s boot across the Strait of Messina and 100 miles from Tunisia in North Africa.
- 4/5 of the island is mountainous, at one time an extension of the Apennine mountain range that runs down the spine of the Italian boot from when Sicily was actually still attached to the mainland.

Sicily is an island of “*bastardi puri*.” The world’s first multicultural society, Sicily’s history and culture are a patchwork of all of the civilizations who have at one time or another controlled the land and its people.

From the first wave of invaders (the Siculi and Carthaginians) to the subsequent Greeks, Romans, barbarian Vandals and Ostrogoths, Byzantines, Arabs, Normans, Swabians (Germans), Angevins, Spanish and finally Romans again under the guise of the Italian government, Sicily has been changing hands for 33 centuries. This revolving door of civilizations has produced a rich and culturally diverse treasure trove of artistic traditions, cuisine, architecture, and historic monuments to explore. And Sicilians in turn have spread their culture throughout the world. Between 1880 and 1910 over 1.5 million left Sicily for the US.

## General History

### Early Settlers

The earliest known inhabitants of the island were the Siculi, based in the east, the Sicani in the west, and the Elymni with settlements in northwestern Sicily. The Siculi were able to dominate and the island came to be named after them.

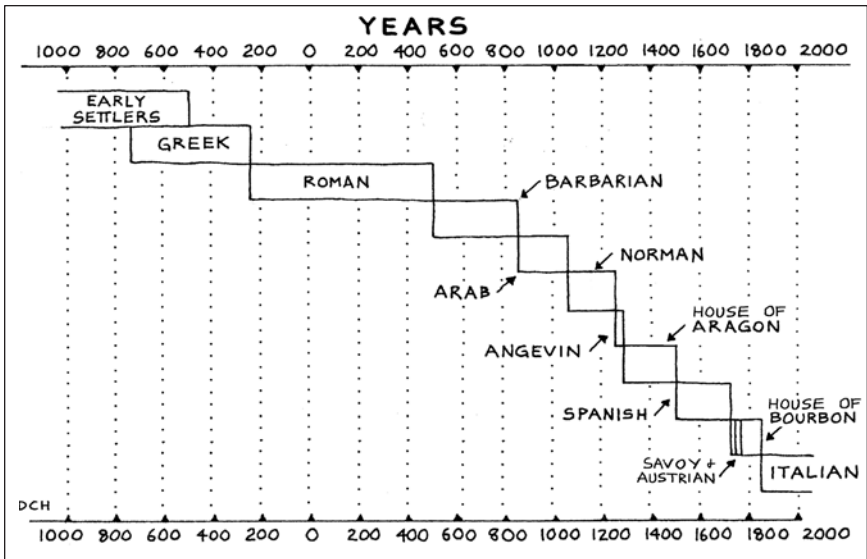
In the 8th century BC the Greeks settled in Sicily and Southern Italy, calling the new colony Magna Graecia. Wherever the Greeks settled they hellenized the locals, leaving their indelible mark in the way of artistic traditions (think ceramics and metallurgy), architectural styles (temples and theaters), and religious beliefs (mythology and worship-

ping practices). The Greeks enjoyed a comparatively advanced civilization and introduced new industries and agriculture to the island. It was the lush forests and abundant supply of lumber with which to make ships to replenish the navy that initially drew the Greeks to Sicily, having already deforested their own country. In addition, sheep rearing, cheese and wine making, olive oil production and fishing built a rich island economy. Some of the more famous ancient Greeks to call Sicily home include Archimedes of “Eureka!” fame, philosopher Empedocles, playwright Aeschylus, and mythological figures like the Cyclops, Persephone and Hephaestus. Early Sicilian architecture copied that of Greece, and throughout our travels we’ll see several examples of Greek architecture at Taormina, Siracusa, Agrigento and Segesta.

### Space Invaders

While the Greeks rested on their laurels, the Romans were roamin’, incorporating more and more territory and conquered people into their Republic, including Sicily after they won the Punic Wars against Carthage (starring Hannibal and his elephants). Sicily became the Republic’s first province, and the Romans referred to Sicily as “the Republic’s granary”, as her fertile soil and temperate climate fed the future Empire.

Sicily also became renowned as a playground for the rich and was a favorite vacation spot for Emperor Caligula. The incredible, fanciful mosaics that we’ll see at the Imperial Villa at Casale, a palatial hunting lodge of 40 rooms, offer a glimpse at the decadence of the wealthy Romans.



After the fall of the Roman Empire in the 5th century AD, Vandals, Goths and Byzantines occupied Sicily in (relatively) quick succession. The Byzantines would later leave their mark in the form of shimmering gold church mosaics in churches constructed for the Norman kings. After the Byzantines came the Arabs, making their full-fledged invasion of the island in the 9th century, bringing with them a knack for taking the best elements of previous societies and fine tuning them to their advantage (much like the Romans did).

Arabs honed Roman engineering skills and introduced Persian irrigating systems which enabled Sicily to become the most productive agricultural center in the Mediterranean. Arabs brought in new crops such as lemons, oranges, figs, mulberries and silk worms (for silk production), cotton, sugar cane, papyrus, palms, melons, and pistachio trees that influence Sicilian cuisine

even today. All of these crops, in particular the citrus groves, surrounding the port town the Arabs called Ziz (Palermo), gave the area its nickname Conca d'Oro (Golden Shell). The Arabs in Sicily are best remembered for the splendor of their court, seen today in their palaces and the church mosaics infused with superior craftsmanship and Islamic decoration, and also for their sophisticated and cosmopolitan society. During their reign Sicily was the most racially diverse land in Europe, home to Africans, Jews, Arabs (from Spain, Egypt and Syria), Berbers, Persians, Greeks, Lombards, and Slavs.

### Stormin' Normans

By the 11th century, the Normans (think Vikings or Norsemen who had settled in France, ancestors of William the Conqueror) had stealthily taken over the island, more by means of political manipulation than hostile invasion. The Popes in Rome needed

a guard-dog and were willing to offer control of Sicily to bandit brothers Robert, called Guiscard (the Cunning), and Roger Hauteville in exchange for a promise from them not to attack the Papacy.

The Normans under the royal family of Hauteville continued Sicily's cosmopolitan tradition, fully accepting the previously established Arabic, Latin and Greek heritage and artistic traditions of the island. The most famous of the Norman rulers was Roger II (1093-1154), who ruled most of Italy south of Rome with Palermo as the capital, and whose cathedral in Cefalù and sumptuous court in Palermo (Palazzo Reale and Cappella Palatina) attest to his importance as Europe's wealthiest ruler at the time. You'll see his Italianized name Ruggero II on many a Sicilian street and square.

The Normans were fairly benevolent conquerors who merged Arab and Byzantine artistic styles and left a lasting legacy like the stunning mosaics we'll see in Palermo, Monreale and Cefalù. During Norman rule the land was parceled out as fiefdoms or large estates, a system of feudalism that would eventually give rise to a notorious Sicilian phenomenon, the Mafi. When the last Norman ruler died without an heir, the throne passed to the Swabians and was ruled gloriously by Frederick II, "Stupor Mundi" (Wonder of the World) until his death in 1250.

### French v. Spanish

The next powerhouse to reign was the French House of Anjou (Angevins), headed by Charles I. At that time the title 'King of Sicily' was just another

notch in a king's belt. Most rulers happily grabbed the title but didn't actually live in Sicily, governing the island instead through representatives called viceroys. Charles I only once ever visited Sicily himself, en route from Malta to Naples. Under his reign, the estates of noblemen were confiscated in order to pay his French soldiers who were keeping order on the island. Not surprisingly, indiscriminate plundering and heavy-handed taxation directed by the faraway king led to uprisings among the locals, the most infamous being the Sicilian Vespers rebellion of 1282. On Easter Monday following Vespers as people were gathered after church services, French soldiers carried out a search for arms among the populace of Palermo. One of the soldiers molested a Sicilian woman and was killed on the spot. Subsequent vendettas resulted in the murder of every Frenchman in the city within a matter of hours. The test to see whether or not someone was French or Sicilian was his ability to pronounce the word *ciciri*, (CHEE-chi-ree—a tricky word meaning garbanzo bean). Frenchmen pronounced it SHEE-shi-ree and were summarily executed, including peaceable French monks from the monasteries. The uprising soon spread to the countryside until every last Frenchman on the island was slaughtered within weeks.

In response to the Sicilian Vespers uprising, Sicilian nobility enlisted their enemy's enemy, the Spanish House of Aragon, to protect the local populace and so the land passed into the hands of the Spaniards. Eventually an absentee Spanish king ruled Southern Italy



and Sicily through viceroys, and the island became little more than a cash cow for Spain. Sicily stewed among several different noble families for the next few centuries, boiling down to alternating and sporadic reigns by the Spanish, French and on one occasion Austrians until unification in 1860.

#### Scramble for Power

Europe in the 18th century was a time in which the royal houses of the continent were greedily scrambling for unclaimed territories to pad their empires, which in the 19th century would become the nations more or less as we know them today. The death of Spanish king Charles II in 1700 marked



an end to Hapsburg rule in Spain and Sicily was reduced to a bargaining chip on the poker table of the royal houses of Europe, finally being awarded to the relatively weak royal House of Savoy from Northern Italy in 1713 in the hopes that it would soon fall to the more powerful control of the British.

The Spanish weren't happy to see their empire parceled out and returned to fight for the island. After a furious scramble for control of the island involving the British Empire, Spain, and the Hapsburgs of Austria, the fortunes of Sicily once again swung to the Spaniards, this time under the royal House of Bourbon.

**The Move Towards Unification**  
Under the Spanish House of Bourbon, the whole system of nobility, aristocracy and feudalism in Sicily began to buckle in the 18th century. Bourbon rule left a legacy of marvelous city architecture, ornate weekend palaces in Palermo's suburbs, and grand, sweeping boulevards made especially for aristocratic carriage rides.

This sort of extravagant spending in the face of the abject poverty of the masses made the foreign kings very unpopular rulers. The time was ripe for revolution. Liberalism was the cry of the day, and several rebellions against taxation by the Spanish king preceded the drive for unification.





On May 11, 1860, nationalist patriot and swashbuckling general Giuseppe Garibaldi landed on the west coast of Sicily at Marsala with 1,000 volunteers in order to free Sicily from foreign Bourbon rule for representation by the Italian House of Savoy, rulers that controlled parts of NW Italy and present-day SE France. With support from the Sicilian peasantry and fierce guerilla warfare tactics, Garibaldi was able to defeat the Bourbon armies.

Within days he controlled Palermo in the name of King Vittorio Emanuele II of Piedmont (northern Italy), and Sicilians voted nearly unanimously for the unification of Italy. It is unclear if the Sicilians really knew what they were voting for, but hey, Italian unification certainly sounded better than the foreign occupation they'd experienced for centuries before.

## 20th Century

Things did not get significantly better for Sicily under unification. Being ruled from Rome was not that different from being ruled from Madrid or Paris. Poverty was all too common. Organized crime controlled many aspects of society.

These factors and the promise of a better life across the Atlantic caused over 1.5 million Sicilians to leave for the US between 1880 and 1910. Many others fled Sicily for jobs in the industrial centers of the north like Milan and Turin. During the Interwar years Mussolini called a halt to emigration on the grounds that it didn't look good for a super nation to have citizens fleeing due to poverty and that every man was needed to build Italy into the super state to which it aspired. The mass exo-

odus would resume again after the war once Mussolini was out of the way.

Mussolini's Fascist movement swept through Italy in the 1920s and 1930s. The only remains of this period in Sicily are a few train stations and public buildings like Palermo's massive post office on Via Roma.

Mussolini used Sicily for his Fascist propaganda, promising to eradicate the Mafi. By sending his "Iron Prefect" Cesare Mori to the island, Mussolini merely succeeded in driving organized crime deeper underground, thereby reducing its power temporarily. During WWII, the Allies used Sicily as a stepping-stone as they moved up from North Africa to invade the rest of Italy. The Mafi was used to help infiltrate the island, which caused a dramatic increase in their influence after the Allies moved on and later in the post-WWII period. An American naval installation remains a few miles south of Catania. The cities most damaged in the war were Palermo, Messina and Catania, particularly the port areas.

The Mafi trials of the 1990s and subsequent backlash are reminders that the power of this organization remains strong and will not go away easily. Many northern Italians feel like Sicily is simply a backward place that due to Mafi influence and the sheer laziness of the people sucks away millions of euros of northern tax contributions. Political parties like the "Lega Nord" advocate a separation of the North from the rest of Italy but few see this as realistic.

Lately Sicily is benefiting from EU monies and the infrastructure is slowly

improving. Former Prime Minister Berlusconi's vision of a bridge spanning the Straits of Messina promised to be the next economic miracle for the South but will probably never come to fruition—the plan has been discussed and debated since the 1930s and nothing has ever come of it. The more time that passes the more expensive building the bridge becomes and with Italy's current economic crisis, the less likely that funds will be directed to the project. Instead, the economic miracle of the 21st century is shaping up to be tourism, and a new generation of Sicilians is taking entrepreneurialism to heart. Tourist centers on the island are becoming better and better managed and more accommodating to the waves of tourists eager to explore the treasures of Sicily and to seek the hometown families of their forefathers.

Even today, thousands emigrate from Sicily every year. But long-dormant neighborhoods in Palermo are rising from the ashes. Local wine and olive oil have taken their place amongst the best in Italy. Sicilians are facing the future with the same blend of cautious optimism and fatalism that has been forged here for centuries.

## Sicilian Culture

### Trinacria

Ubiquitous symbol of Sicily, the word means triangular and reflects the shape of the island. The Greeks circumnavigated the island and noted that the three (*tri*) capes (*nacria*) at the extremities of the island formed a triangle.

Taken by Sicily's beauty, the Greeks likened her welcoming shores to the

legs of a woman. At the center of the symbol is a Gorgon, in Greek mythology a hideous woman with huge teeth, terrible claws and snakes for hair, whose very image could turn men to stone. Medusa is the best known of the Gorgons and personifies the terror of the seas. Sicily's flag, symbolizing the unique autonomy of the region, is a Trinacria on a gold and red shield.

### Of Puppets and Painted Carts

Medieval Europe comes to life in the form of artisan-made puppets and brightly painted pony carts. Traveling puppeteers have been entertaining Sicilians for centuries with their tales of saints, bandits and heroes, but the most favorite production in the Opera dei Pupi (puppet theater) is of French Paladins (knights), especially Roland (Rolando) and Renaud (Rinaldo), of Charlemagne's court and their battle against the Saracens for the hand of a beautiful maiden. Performances invariably include ferocious and gruesome swordfights—sometimes against dragons or crocodiles as well as infidels, elaborate costumes and props, and sophisticated sound effects. Although performances are in Italian, with the melodrama and graphic depictions of battles you'll have no problem following the story.

Puppets are carved from olive, lemon or beech wood and move by means of a metal bar running through the axis of the body and to the right hand (for better control during the swordfight) and a wire connected to the left hand. The puppets can easily weigh more than 30 pounds with their hand-beaten suits of armor and elaborate costumes and stand up to five feet tall, although more lightweight puppets are used

in performances today. Siracusa and Palermo have puppet theaters and frequent performances.

Colorfully painted carts are a reminder of how vividly Sicily's medieval history lives on in the minds of its people. Vibrantly depicted scenes of the Knights of the Crusades or biblical epics are embellished with fanciful designs covering every inch of the cart, often drawing on Sicily's Arabic heritage in the artisan's use of abstract design.

Unfortunately the tradition of painted carts has gone out of vogue and they're usually only seen in tourist areas except in cases of festivals or funerals though the style of painting is sometimes found on a Vespa scooter or tiny Fiat 500. To see examples of these beautiful carts, check out the one on display in Taormina's TI, or there's usually a pony-drawn cart hanging around Monreale Cathedral and Agrigento's Valle dei Templi for tourists to photograph for a tip, or you can stop by the Sicilian Cart Museum, located behind the apse of Palermo's cathedral.

### Wining and Dining

Sicily's cuisine is much more than pizza and pasta. It has evolved from a long history of poverty and a great variety of foreign influence. The island's bounty of sun-kissed fruits and vegetables grown in the fertile volcanic soil around Mt. Etna and its abundant supply of fresh seafood come together to produce delicious and eclectic dishes.

Breakfasts in Sicily are a non-event; simple pastry or roll and coffee are the typical offerings. Lunches and dinners are far more important, with multiple courses and imaginative dishes. Many

restaurants have buffets of delicious antipasti. You'll discover that Sicilians dine much later in the evening than you're probably used to, with restaurants opening no earlier than 19:30-20:00 and only just beginning to fill with locals around 21:00.

Explore marketplaces and *friggitorie* (fry shops or stands) for street food specialties like *arancini*: rice balls stuffed with ragù meat sauce and cheese; *panelle*: salty, quick fried, light garbanzo bean fry bread; *crocchè*: fried potato dumplings made with cheese, parsley and egg; or savory fried vegetables for a quintessential Sicilian dining experience.

Sicily's Arabic roots contributed the habit of mixing savory and sweet elements together, as in *caponata*: a sweet-sour ratatouille made from tomatoes, eggplant, olives and anchovies (every Sicilian household has their own recipe) usually eaten as an antipasto; *pasta con le sarde*: long strands of pasta tossed with fresh sardines, wild fennel, chopped onions, golden raisins, almonds or pine nuts with tomato sauce; or *involtini di pesce spada*: thin slices of swordfish wrapped around a filling of grated pecorino cheese, breadcrumbs, raisins and pine nuts.

Sicily's most famous pasta dish is *pasta alla Norma*: slowly simmered eggplant paired with tomato sauce and herbs and garnished with ricotta salata, named for Bellini's opera. Chicken or veal (*pollo o vitello*) *alla Marsala* are cutlets dredged in flour and sautéed in the dark sweet fortified wine Marsala, Sicily's answer to port or sherry from the west coast town of the same name.

The island's proximity to Africa means you'll find couscous and other Tunisian dishes on menus. Other specialties include grilled tuna and swordfish caught off the island's shores, sea salt from Trapani, honey from Zafferana, pistachios from Bronte and delicious olive oil. Capers grow wild and some say the best in the world are found here.

### *La Dolce Vita*

Not unlike the US, where the further south you go the sweeter the sweets become, Sicily has a great tradition of delectable cakes, pastries, and ice creams influenced by the sugar and exotic spices introduced by the Arabs in the 9th century. Americans are probably most familiar with *cannoli*, fried pastry cylinders filled with sweetened ricotta cheese and perhaps chocolate chips or pieces of candied citrus peel. Don't miss *cassata Siciliana*, a cake made from a kind of sponge cake, sweet ricotta, sugar, vanilla, chocolate chunks, pistachios, cinnamon, icing, candied fruit and *marzipan* (sweet almond paste).

Sicilian almonds are highly prized and often showcased in *pasta reale* (royal almond paste), so-called because this stiff paste is formed into the most fanciful and extraordinary shapes and realistically painted to resemble fruit, fish and shellfish, animals, etc.—so beautiful it was considered fit for a king.

Cool off with *gelato* (ice cream), once made from Etna's snow, which comes in hundreds of flavors. Sample them all! Sicilians often eat ice cream sandwiched into a soft bun called a *brioche* for breakfast! Or try a *granita*, a slushy made from refreshing fresh squeezed

citrus juice, almonds or espresso, topped with thick whipped cream.

Sicily's wonderful fruit can stand all on its own even against all these delicious desserts. Try figs and grapes, mandarins and blood oranges, or get a local to show you how to eat prickly pears (cactus fruit called *fi hi d'india*).

*Buonappetito!*

### Wine

Despite the fact that Sicily has a greater number of vineyards than any other region in Italy, a surprisingly low quantity of those grapes make Sicilian wine. The majority are shipped north, to blend with weaker reds in northern Italy and France. Most of the grapes that we'll see, particularly near Agrigento, are big, juicy and sweet table grapes eaten in Italy and throughout Europe. Others are dried for the raisins that are used liberally in the cuisine or used to make fortified wines.

Traditionally Sicilian wine (like much of the wine of the South) has been known more for the quantity, not the quality produced, but this is changing. Many wineries have hired winemakers from the North, who bring their expertise to the fantastic conditions Sicily has for growing grapes—lots of sun, plenty of well-draining hillside sites and the thin soil that the vines seem to prefer.

Sicily has dozens of worthwhile wines to explore, but note that many of the grapes are found in Sicily alone. One of the most recognizable reds is the full-bodied *Nerod'Avola*, which is comparable to Syrah. It can be a varietal, blended with other grapes like Sangiovese or with foreign grapes like

Merlot. Producers Milazzo and Planeta have had great vintages of *Nero d'Avola* recently.

From the clayey soils around the province of Trapani comes the DOC *Bianco d'Alcamo*, a pleasant, fruity, very dry soft white wine; pairs well with seafood or makes a nice *aperitivo*.

Local *enoteche* (wine shops) offer an extensive array of Sicilian wines. Lately more and more Sicilian wines are available in the US. Look for wines by Corvo, Regaleali and Donnafugata.

Marsala is the most famous wine produced in Sicily, though it was "invented" by a Liverpool wine merchant who fortified his wine to help it survive the long rough passage to England. This dessert wine is made from partially dried grapes, and named after a town in western Sicily. Marsala can be aged anywhere from 1-10 years, ranges from *dolce* (sweet) to *secco* (dry) and can contain as much as 18 percent alcohol. Traditionally served between courses, Marsala is now often paired with cheeses like *parmigiano* or *gorgonzola* or eaten with *zabaglione* custard. Mmmmm—*delizioso!*

Sicilians enjoy a *grappa* or *amaro* as a *digestivo*, or after-dinner drink. The brave may want to give fiery red *Fuoco d'Etna* a try. Bring a bottle of this liqueur home and it's sure to be a conversation piece!

## Mafia

Mafia is perhaps the first word that comes to mind when one thinks of Sicily. Actually Mafia is a generic term for organized crime, an institution that permeates the south of Italy. Each

region has its own name for the local Mafia in Sicily it's Cosa Nostra; Naples has the Camorra; and Calabria is home to La 'ndrangheta, the group that kidnapped the grandson of J. Paul Getty in the 1970s and sent a piece of his ear to prove they were serious.

The origin of the word may have its roots in the Arabic "*mu afah*" which roughly translates to strength and protection. The institution got its start in the Middle Ages, when feudal lords hired local outlaws to guard their estates in exchange for protection from royal authority.

The Mafia as we know it today began in the early 19th century in the form of secret brotherhoods intended to protect Sicilians from corruption and foreign oppression, but before long the brotherhoods were feeding on the same misery from which they pretended to defend the local citizens. Integral to the success of the Mafia is the code of silence called *omertà*, which enables the activities of the Mafia to remain secret.

After the massive wave of emigration from Sicily at the end of the 19th century, Cosa Nostra spread to the United States and was known as the Pizza Connection or Black Hand. During WWII the Mafia was used to help the Allies invade Sicily, giving them renewed strength after being suppressed by Mussolini's Fascism during the Interwar years. More recently, the Mafia has been exposed for what it is, a brotherhood of organized crime, a feat in and of itself considering the code of silence to which all Mafia and Sicilians are held.

The 1980s-90s were a tumultuous period of exposure of the Mafi stranglehold over Sicily, even revealing its affiliation with the highest echelon of politics. A strong government push to eradicate Mafi power in the early 1990s led the Mafi to strike back with the assassination of two prominent judges—Giovanni Falcone and Paolo Borsellino and resulted in the capture of Totò Riina, the so-called “boss of all bosses.” Today Palermo’s airport is named for these two anti-Mafi martyrs of the State.

Americans travel to Sicily with images of the movie *The Godfather* etched in their minds, but most tourists never see any hint of the Mafi besides the screaming headlines and an occasional anti-Mafi monument (see page 19 for a list of Palermo monuments). The Mafi continues to be a force that pervades all arenas of legitimate business and politics as well as illegal activities and hinders Sicily’s economy from progressing beyond a level of minimal subsistence in many areas.

## Palermo

(pop. 650,000, greater Palermo is about 1 million)

Palermo, Sicily’s capital, is an historically cosmopolitan city located in the curve of the bay known as the *Conca d’Oro* (Golden Shell), named after the warm colors of the citrus groves planted here between the sea and the backdrop of Monte Pellegrino.

Founded in the 8th century BC as a Phoenician settlement and later called Panormus (all port) by the Greeks, Palermo’s prized location with its excel-

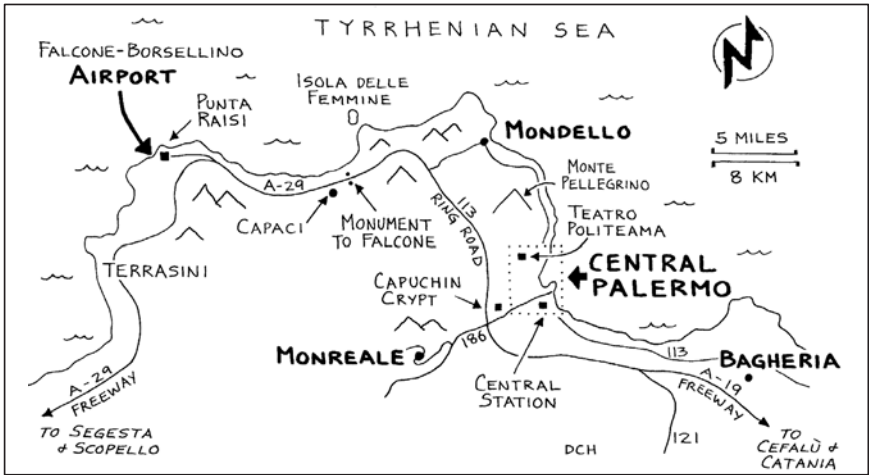
lent port has caused it to be coveted by a parade of successive invaders. The Romans, Barbarians, Byzantines, Arabs, Normans, Angevins (French), Aragonese, Bourbons (both Spanish), etc., have each left their lasting mark on the city in a wonderful patchwork of architecture. From glittering Byzantine mosaics to fortress-like Norman cathedrals, labyrinthine Arabic souks to opulent Sicilian baroque churches, neo-classical opera houses and hulking Fascist public buildings, Palermo is a treasure trove just waiting to be discovered.

The historical crossroads of the city is the Quattro Canti, or four corners. Two major roads, Via Maqueda (which changes names several times along its length) and Corso Vittorio Emanuele intersect here, dividing the historic center into four quadrants: La Kalsa and the Vucciria neighborhoods southeast of the Quattro Canti near the harbor, while Albergheria and the Capo districts (behind the cathedral) lie roughly northwest of the intersection.

In addition, there’s the area near the harbor, known as La Cala district. As you walk north up Via Maqueda from the Quattro Canti, you’ll pass two massive theaters that serve as additional Palermo landmarks—Teatro Massimo and Teatro Politeama. Our hotel is roughly equidistant between them.

## Getting around Palermo

Most sights are within walking distance of the theaters Massimo and Politeama and the Quattro Canti; to save your feet, take advantage of the city buses. Buy tickets from kiosks at bus hubs



(Stazione Centrale, Piazza Indipendenza, Teatro Massimo), either €1.30 per ride (€1.70 if you buy it on board), valid for two hours, or €3.50 for all day ticket. Ask at the TI for a bus route map or confi which buses you can take to complete your sightseeing plan.

**Tourist Information**—There are a couple of TI kiosks in downtown Palermo near our hotel: in Piazza Castelnuovo in front of Teatro Politeama (tel. 091/740-1111, Mon-Fri 8:30-14:00 & 14:30-18:30, closed Sat-Sun) and a seasonal kiosk on Via Cavour. Pick up a map and a copy of *Un Ospite a Palermo*, the comprehensive tourist information magazine listing sights and opening hours, markets, theaters, public transportation info, and airport transfer info.

**Self-Service Laundry**—corner of Via Volturmo and Capo, a few doors toward Teatro Massimo. L'Oblo-Via Volturmo 62 (open Mon-Fri 8:45-19:30, Sat 8:45-14:30, closed Sunday, tel. 333/803-2824).

## Internet

Ki Point is closest to the tour hotel but has only a few terminals (Mon-Fri 9:00-13:00 and 15:30-19:00, Sat 9:00-13:00, closed Sat eve and Sun, Via A. Gravina #101, tel. 091/612-9292).

Internet AmstellItalia is open 9:00-21:00 daily, located across from the laundry, on Via Volturmo #71 near Porta Carini.

Internet Cafè & Phone Center—Via Bari #50, one block off of Via Maqueda about halfway between Teatro Massimo and Quattro Canti (open 8:00-22:00 daily).

English Bookstore—Feltrinelli has a small English book section on Via Cavour #133, one long block from Teatro Massimo towards the harbor (open Mon-Fri 9:00-20:30, Sat 9:00-21:00 and Sun 10:00-13:30 and 16:00-20:30, tel. 091/781-291).

## Sights

The following are a few sites we'll see as a group and others to keep you



busy if you arrive in Palermo a day or two before the tour or stay on after your tour ends. Pick up a copy of the tourist magazine *Un Ospite a Palermo* for a more comprehensive list of what to do and see in Palermo and confi your sightseeing plan at the TI, as many churches and museums are closed for restoration.

There are a few combination tickets called *biglietti cumulativi* that will save you money if you plan to visit more than one of the covered museums. Here's the rundown:

Galleria Regionale in Palazzo Abatellis + Castello della Zisa + Cloisters of S. Giovanni degli Eremiti + Monreale Cloisters (we'll see this as a group) + Palazzo d'Aumale in nearby Terrasini = €24, valid fi e days

Galleria Regionale in Palazzo Abatellis + one of the following: Castello della Zisa + Cloisters of S. Giovanni degli Eremiti + Monreale Cloisters (we'll see this as a group) + Palazzo d'Aumale in nearby Terrasini = €10.50, valid three days

Any two of the following sights: Castello della Zisa + Cloisters of S. Giovanni degli Eremiti + Monreale Cloisters (we'll see this as a group) + Palazzo d'Aumale in nearby Terrasini = €9, valid three days

**Puppet Museum**—For a close look at the traditional Sicilian folk art of puppets, check out the International Marionette Museum with its collection of puppets from Sicily and Naples, as well as Africa and Asia, and Punch and Judy from England, located near the harbor and

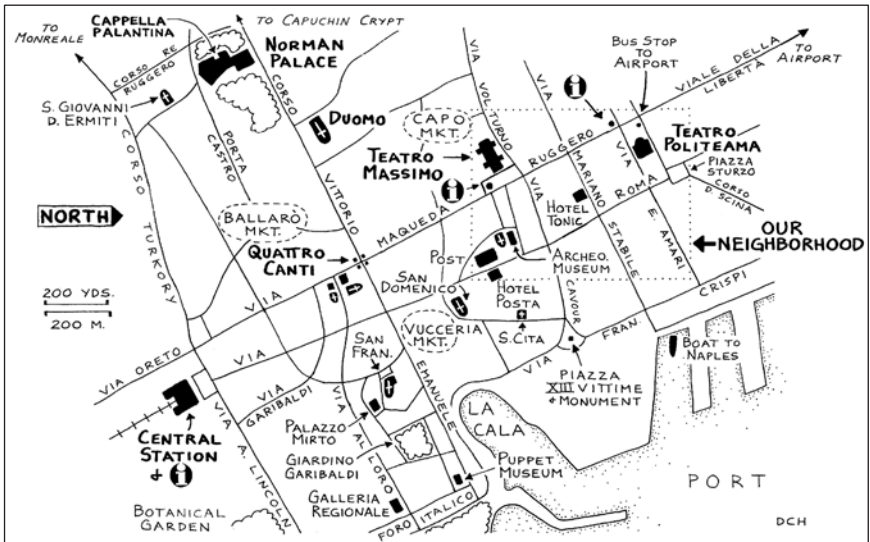
Piazza Marina at Via Butera 1, €5, Mon-Sat 9:00-13:00 and 16:30-18:30, Sat 9:00-13:00 and Sun 10:00-13:00, tel. 091/328-060.

**Cappuccin Crypt**—Intrepid travelers with a curiosity for the morbid will enjoy a visit to the ghoulish crypt of the Cappuccin monks. For centuries the Cappuccins preserved their dead brethren using a special embalming process and then displayed the mummified corpses in order to convey the message, "that which we are, you will become." After a while, noble families asked to be "buried" in the Cappuccin's crypt, the bodies arranged by gender, vocation, virgins, and children. Today this practice of mummifying the dead has been discontinued but over 8,000 skeletons and mummies testify to the macabre custom, the most recent done in 1920, an almost perfectly preserved child of five years.

The Crypt is about a 20-minute walk from Piazza Indipendenza or you can take the #327 bus from the northwest side of the square (8 o'clock as you're facing the gate of the Royal Palace), tickets sold at bus ticket kiosk on northeast side of the square. Open daily 9:00-12:30 and 15:00-17.30, donation of €3 required, no photographs permitted but postcards for sale, Piazza Cappuccini 1, tel. 091/212-117.

Comments from past tour members tell us that we should remind you that this site is what it is—a musty "basement" full of a bunch of dead bodies dressed in faded and frayed clothing. It is interesting but definitely not for everyone!

**Cappella Palatina**—A visit to this evocative chapel dating from the 12th century gives an idea of the sophistication and



cosmopolitan craftsmanship of the Norman kingdom during the Middle Ages. Glorifying the chapel commissioned by the Norman king Roger II are dazzling mosaics done in Byzantine style, partly by Islamic laborers. Since it is against the custom of Islamic religion to depict human forms, Muslims conveyed the mysterious nature of God by creating intricate geometric patterns. Christ Pantocrator dominates the apse mosaic on a background of solid gold, a promise of a heavenly afterlife for the faithful. The Arabic ceiling and the inlaid, multi-colored marble floor complete the dynamic, eye-popping interior (Piazza Indipendenza, entrance located on the backside of Palazzo dei Normanni, €8.50, during special exhibits, €10, open Mon-Sat 8.30-16.30, Sun 8.30-12.00, tel. 091/705-4749).

Museo Archeologico Regionale A. Salinas—Closed for restoration but may reopen in 2013. The museum houses an

impressive collection of ancient artifacts dating from all of the most important periods of Sicilian history: Phoenician, Greek, Roman and Saracen. Highlights include a bronze Aries, extraordinary hand-beaten gold crowns, a very fine bronze Hercules and Stag sculpture, 4th-century BC armor, helmets and shields straight out of the *Illiad* with barnacles and seashells fossilized on them, several large fragments of the Greek temple at Himera, the Palermo Stone with Egyptian hieroglyphs (similar to the Rosetta Stone), and replicas of cave drawings found in the Paleolithic Grotta d'Addaura on Monte Pellegrino outside the city.

Located between Teatro Massimo and Via Roma in Piazza Olivella #24, Tue-Fri 8:30-13:45 and 15:00-18:45, Mon, Sat & Sun 8:30-13:45, tel. 091/611-6805, WCs on left in the courtyard as you enter and on first floor, head right at the top of the stairs.

**Teatro Massimo**—This great Art Nouveau theater was built in the late 19th century to rival the opera houses of Vienna and Paris and serve as a symbol of freedom after Garibaldi liberated the Sicilians from the Bourbons. Teatro Massimo underwent desperately needed repairs in the 1970s and due to political and financial snags remained closed for 23 years, one year longer than its original construction lasted. More recently, the climactic final scene of *Godfather III* was filmed on its monumental staircase.

Today operas, ballets and concerts take place nearly year round and tickets range from €7-100 depending on the performance. Call 800/907-080 toll free (within Italy only) or 091/605-3380 to book tickets or visit [www.teatromassimo.it](http://www.teatromassimo.it) to book online or get performance information. Guided visits in English are conducted Tue-Sun 10:00-14:30, last about 25 minutes and cost €8, call to confirm times of English visits, tel. 091/605-3267, Piazza Verdi 9.

## La Cala District

**Palazzo Mirto**—To get a sense of the lifestyle of Palermo's 19th-century rich and famous, pay a visit to this aristocratic mansion, replete with opulent, eclectic period pieces. One of several homes belonging to the Princes of Mirto (a town in northeastern Sicily), it was willed to the Ministry of Cultural Assets by the last surviving family member and turned into a museum in the 1980s. Rooms are uniquely decorated in Baroque style with the family's original furnishings, with one elegant salon done up *a la chinoise*, modeled

after the rooms in the Chinese Villa of King Ferdinand in Naples. Open Tues-Fri 9:00-19:30, Mon, Sat & Sun 9:00-13:00, €4, Via Merlo 2, tel. 091/616-4741.

**Galleria Regionale della Sicilia in Palazzo Abatellis**—Sicily's medieval art collection is on display in a 15th-century palazzo that still retains its Catalan-Gothic and Renaissance characteristics, just a few blocks away from the haunting Banyan trees entrenched in the Giardino Garibaldi park. Highlights of this small, well-planned museum include an elegant, tranquil bust of Eleonora d'Aragona by 15th-century sculptor Francesco Laurana, the haunting *Triumph of Death* by an unknown artist, and an evocative *Annunciation* by Sicilian Renaissance painter Antonello da Messina. Open Tues-Fri 9:00-18:30, Sat-Sun 9:00-13:30, closed Mon, €4.50, covered by *biglietto cumulativo*, Via Alloro 4, tel. 091/623-0011.

**Markets**—Although we'll probably visit a market during our walking tour of the city, you may want to explore some on your own. Markets in Palermo are chaotic festivals of colorful fruits and vegetables, street food including fry stands and tripe wagons, fresh swordfish and live chickens, and household goods like cheese graters, laundry soap, and slippers. Markets are a wonderful way to experience the heartbeat of the city and learn more about local culture through food.

The most famous market in Palermo is the crusty Vucciria, which sprawls near the church of San Domenico off Via Roma, although Ballarò market,

south of Quattro Canti around Carmine convent is said to be more “authentic.” Markets generally run all day except Sundays and are sleepy during mid-afternoons with many stalls shut down for siesta.

Note that street markets are paradises for photographers—and pickpockets. Wear your moneybelt!

## Anti-Mafi Monuments

Falcone’s Obelisk—along the freeway in Capaci halfway between Palermo and the airport you’ll see two red obelisks marking the spot where anti-Mafi judge Giovanni Falcone’s car was blown up in 1992 killing him, his wife and several bodyguards.

Falcone’s Tree—located on Via Notarbartolo just off Viale della Libertà, this tree is a pilgrimage site for those wishing to pay tribute to this courageous judge.

Monument to the 13 Victims—located near the harbor where Via Francesco Crispi and Via Cavour come together.

## Daytrip to Mondello

It’s just a quick seven miles (half hour bus ride) north of Monte Pellegrino to a beautiful mile long, sandy beach and small seaside resort. Once an old tuna-fishing village, Mondello is where the locals flock to escape the busy city. Stroll the town, taking in its ruined medieval watchtower, striking Art Nouveau pier and occasional Belle Époque villas. Catch bus #806 or #833 from Viale della Libertà (northwest of Politeama). Swimming is still nice even through October and off-season it’s not very crowded.

Buses run every 30 minutes until 14:30, then hourly. Buy tickets from tobacco shops, €1.95 each way.

## Daytrip to Bagheria

Bagheria, nine miles east of the city, was once a summer retreat for Palermo’s noble classes from the 17th-19th centuries and is home to the ostentatious baroque villas that were all the rage during that time.

Villa Palagonia boasts a grotesque menagerie of gnomes, gargoyles and giants that decorate the house and grounds. Scenes from *The Leopard*, the movie based on di Lampedusa’s novel depicting the decadent, dying, grandeur of Sicilian aristocracy, were filmed in Villa Valguarnera’s hall of mirrors, while scenes from Sicilian author Luigi Pirandello’s *Kaos* were set in the villa’s oval courtyard. Villa Cattolica houses the museum and tomb of Sicily’s greatest modern painter, Renato Guttuso, as well as a gallery of 20th-century art. Trains run 3-4/hour from Stazione Centrale, take 10 minutes.

## Eating in Palermo

The following listings are all located near Teatro Massimo.

La Mensa del Popolo—Locals flock to the “people’s mess hall” which specializes in fresh seafood and couscous as well as Sicilian cuisine in Via Mariano Stabile #58, tel. 091/325-943, open daily.

La Traviata offers exotic Tunisian fare and pizzas, seafood and meat entrees either indoors or under a canopy in Piazza Olivella #18, daily 12:00-14:30 and 20:00-1:00, tel. 091/328-861.

Ristorante Pizzeria Italia—Modesto and Lea serve up reasonably priced home-cookin' and wood-fired pizzas in a comfy family restaurant just a block in front of Teatro Massimo on Via Orologio 54, tel. 091/589-885, Tue-Sat 19:30-24:00 or until after theater lets out, closed Mon.

Il Mirto e la Rosa is a local favorite, offering piping-hot pizzas and Sicilian dishes in a cheery dining room or from a few tables *al fresco* (daily, tel. 091/324-353, Via Principe di Grantatelli 30).

Antica Pasticceria Mazzara is a Palermitano institution serving simple pastas for lunch, and artful pastries (sweet or savory) and gelato anytime of day. For fancy table service outside, pay 20 percent cover, otherwise figure out what you want, then pay at the cashier, and lastly order at the counter. You can grab a seat inside for no extra charge. Get creative with communicating to the cashier what you want to order from the display case as not much English is spoken. (Via G. Magliocco, 19, one block north of Teatro Massimo, behind the big Banco di Sicilia building on the west side of the Via Maqueda, bar/gelateria 7:30-21:30, lunch served 12:00-15:30, tel. 091/321-443).

The area around Piazza Olivella (a couple of blocks in front of Teatro Massimo) has several *doner kebab* (Middle Eastern pita sandwiches stuffed with meat and vegetables) joints if you want something quick and cheap, and there's a grocery store (Mon-Sat 8:00-14:00, 16:00-20:30, closed Sunday) in the square if you'd like to assemble a picnic. This neighborhood is packed

with young people in the evening, hanging out in the square or frequenting the cheap watering holes in the area or the Aboriginal Caf , which boasts some of the city's few public Internet terminals.

The La Cala district near the port is a scruffy place that is slowly becoming gentrified. One neighborhood institution is Focacceria San Francesco, a bustling place for pizza, focaccia and other specialties enjoyed by such illustrious patrons as Roger VII, Giuseppe Garibaldi, and Luigi Pirandello. Only the brave sample the infamous Malfalda (tripe & lung sandwiches). Located on Piazza San Francesco opposite the church. From Quattro Canti follow Via Vittorio Emanuele towards the water. Take a right on Via Paternostro and follow the crowds.

## Transportation Connections

Palermo's modern and easy-to-manage Falcone e Borsellino (AKA Punta Raisi) airport is located 20 miles northwest of Palermo in the suburb of Cinisi and has car rental agencies and easy connections to downtown Palermo.

### Getting to/from Palermo to Falcone e Borsellino Airport:

Your best bet is the bus. Prestia e Comand  shuttle buses will run you from the airport to the Politeama Theater in downtown Palermo (the stop nearest to our tour hotel, about a five-minute walk away) or to the central train station (Stazione Centrale). Exit the airport and look for shuttle buses to the right of the terminal ( 6, buy ticket from driver, departs airport every 30 minutes starting at 6:30-24:00; takes about 50 minutes depending on

traffic). From the Politeama bus stop, stand with the theater on your left and head straight in the same direction the bus was traveling. Turn right onto Via Richard Wagner and follow it four blocks to Via Mariano Stabile. Hotel Tonic is on the other side of the intersection at #126. To get to the airport, this same service (the stop is to the left of the Politeama façade as you're facing it, on the corner of Via Turati and Viale della Libertà) will drop you off at the departures hall. It runs from 04:00-23:00, tel. 091/586-351. You can take your bag with you on the bus or use the luggage storage under the bus, but don't expect the driver to help you load or unload.

The less convenient Trinacria Express train shuttles between Stazione Centrale and the airport for about €5.50, buy tickets at ticket windows in Central Train station (runs from 4:45-22:05, takes about 45 minutes, departs about hourly), ends at airport one level below ground fl

Taxis from the airport to downtown hotels run about €50 depending on traffic, time of day, number of bags, etc. It is wise to confirm at least a rough idea of the price before departing.

## Monreale

This town located in the hills south of Palermo is known for one of Sicily's great sites—the stunning Norman cathedral literally wall-papered with golden mosaics that tell the stories of the bible. Built in the 12th century, the mosaics were done by the same craftsmen who did Cefalù's cathedral that we will see later. Bring coins to put in the coin-operated boxes throughout the church to illuminate the interior.

A local guide will give us a tour of the interior, after which you'll have some

free time. A stairway towards the back of the church leads up to the roof (small admission fee) and allows you to get a close look at the beautiful geometric stonework. Outside the church you can wander around to the back to see the designs from below. A visit to the cloisters offers a chance to see the intricately carved capitals up close.

## Cefalù

(pop. 18,000)

The historic center of Cefalù has retained its medieval character, dominated by the fortress-like hulk of the Norman cathedral with its craggy, mountainous backdrop. Explore this fi an's village, poking around Cefalù's alleyways festooned with colorful laundry, strolling its sandy beach or hiking up to the ruined temple and castle above town. As you wander about town, pop into the laundry (*lavatoio*) dating from the 9th century for a peek at how locals did their washing in tubs fed by a spring, even until recently.

The picturesque fi an's harbor has been the setting for many movies, including the 1989 fi *Cinema Paradiso*. Pop up onto the Belvedere Marchiafava just off Piazza Crispi, to a tranquil spot to sit, write in your journal and contemplate the sea or have a picnic where the ancient Greek walls provide the foundation for a 16th-century citadel. To the east you'll spot the *faro* (lighthouse). Cefalù is a great place to practice the fi art of the *passaggiata* (evening stroll), *gelato* in hand, or to enjoy an *aperitivo al fresco* in the Piazza Duomo as you people-watch.

## Orientation

There are basically four parts to Cefalù: the beach, the old town, the hill above the town and the new town. The beach is golden sand and the sea is perfect for swimming. Float on your back; you can take in the whole town in a single glance. Just a few portions of the beach are private. Cefalù's old town is bisected by Corso Ruggero, the bustling pedestrian main drag. You'll find many restaurants and shops as well as the TI along this arterial. In the center is the café-filled Piazza Duomo and the Duomo (cathedral) itself. The hill (La Rocca) is linked to the old town by a staircase and then a trail that leads to great views, the temple and the fortress ruins. You'll most likely have no need to spend much time in the new town unless you need to find the train station.

While the view from the La Rocca is magnificent, an easier way to get a great shot of Cefalù is to simply head down the beach and go left until the town and the mountain above it fill your viewfinder. Best in the late afternoon.

Tourist Information—Corso Ruggero 77, Tel. 0921/421-050, open Mon-Sat 9:00-13:00 and 15:00-19:30, closed Sun.

## Free Time Activities

Your day here will be more or less free. Cefalù has been a favorite of many tour members as it offers something for every taste.

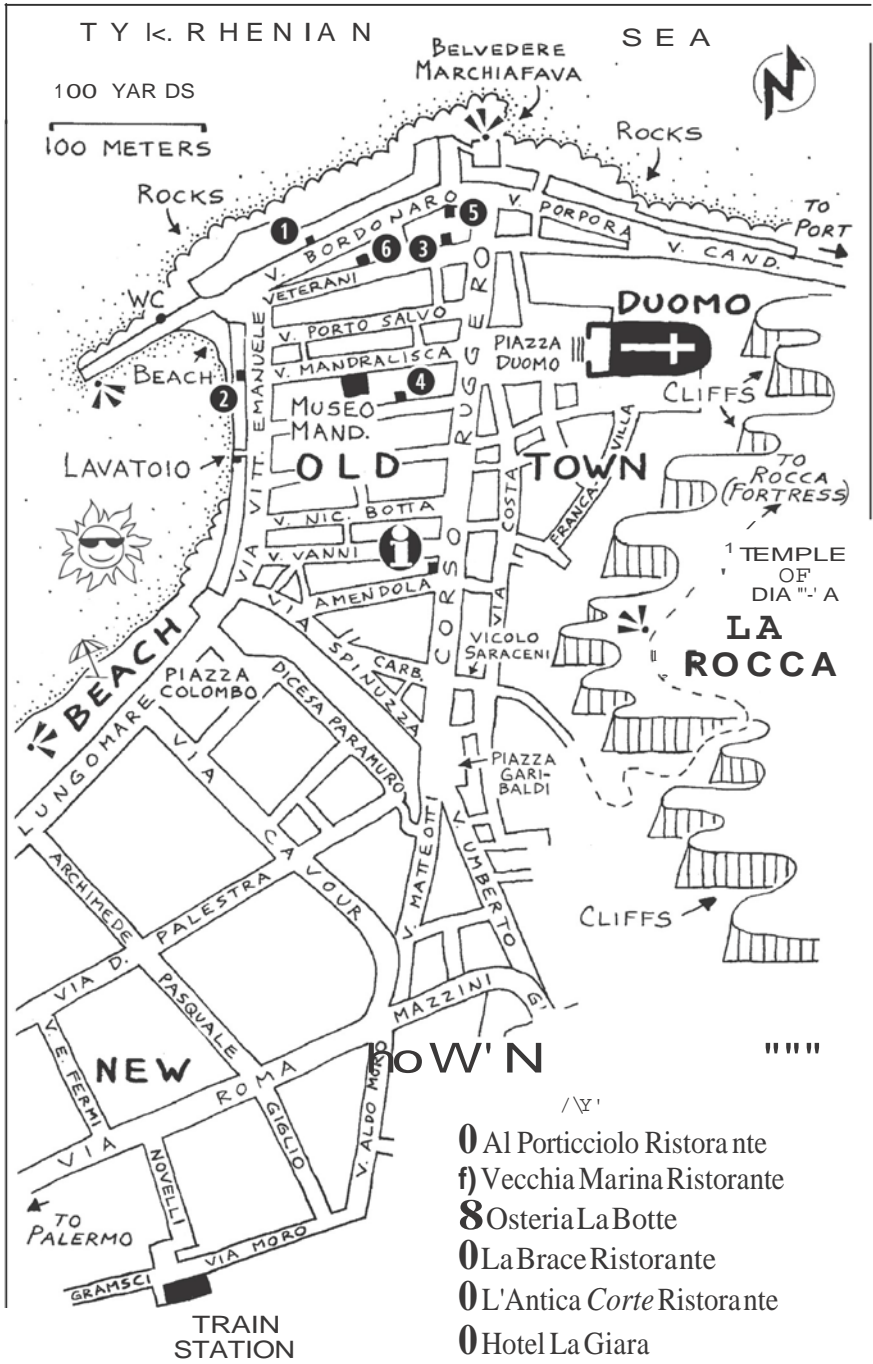
Duomo—Built in gratitude by Norman king Roger II for the safe haven he found at Cefalù during a violent storm at sea, the 12th-century Duomo contains the oldest and some say the finest Byzantine church mosaics in Sicily. The

cathedral is fortress-like with its twin towers standing against the mountainous background. Most of the interior is pretty plain, allowing the mosaics in the apse to stand alone, rendering them all the more powerful. The portrait of Christ Pantocrater (creator of all) is thought to be the purest rendition of His image, the locks of hair falling across His forehead giving an added feeling of humanity, the dazzling gold background conveying His majesty and the glory of heaven to the faithful (daily 9:00-13:00 and 15:30-18:30; summer 8:00-12:00 and 15:30-19:00).

La Rocca—Fantastic views await those who make the hike up to the Temple of Diana and the ruins of the fortress. Find the staircase next to the Banco di Sicilia in Piazza Garibaldi on Corso Ruggero and climb it up to the trail head. You'll climb 20 minutes up a steep trail to reach the Tempio di Diana, a prehistoric structure later built upon in the 5th century BC and dedicated to Diana, goddess of the moon, forest and childbirth. Veer left of the temple and continue up to the right of the crag, past remnants of a medieval wall and up to the ruined Rocca (fortress) at the top. While the Rocca and Temple leave much to the imagination, the views from the top are worth the climb. Be sure to take water with you, as it's a strenuous hike, about an hour roundtrip. To save energy, do this in the morning when much of the trail is in shade.

Museo Mandralisca—This small museum of objects collected by the Baron Mandralisca focuses on Sicilian culture and is worth a wander. Of particular note are a Greek *krater* (wine jar) depicting a tuna salesman hacking up fish for a





customer and a work by Sicily's most famous Renaissance artist, Antonello da Messina's *Portrait of an Unknown Man*, who wears a self-satisfied smirk. Ancient terracotta vases, lamps, pots, figurines, 19th-century place settings of noble families and stuffed fauna from the area fill the museum's three floors.

Take a peek into the window just uphill from the museum for a look at the Mandalisca family's olive oil warehouse. Open daily 9:00-19:00, €5, Via Mandalisca 13, straight ahead and downhill from the cathedral, tel. 0921/421-547.

## Dining in Cefalù

Al Porticciolo's sea view terrace is a gorgeous backdrop for expertly prepared seafood and pastas and a divine version of *cassata Siciliana* (ricotta-spongecake confection), €20-35/person, reservations smart for terrace seating, Thu-Tue 12:00-15:00 and 19:00-24:00, closed Wed, Via Carlo Ortolani di Bordonaro #66, tel. 0921/921-981.

Vecchia Marina has fresh seafood, creative pastas and elegant desserts in a waterfront dining room on Via Vittorio Emmanuele #73, closed Tue during low and mid-season, daily otherwise, tel. 0921/420-388.

Osteria La Botte is family-run and serves tasty grilled fish, traditional Sicilian specialties and good, affordable wine in an intimate dining room presided over by hardworking Toti and crew. Via Veterani 6, tel. 0921/424-315, open Tue-Sun, closed Mon.

La Brace Ristorante specializes in grilled meat and seafood and offers

reasonably priced meals served under a medieval rib-vaulted dining room. Open Tue-Sun 13:00-14:30 & 19:00-23:30, closed Mon & Tue at midday, Via XXV Novembre 10, tel. 0921/423-570.

L'Antica Corte is another good choice for well-priced local cuisine and wood-fired pizzas—dine inside or outside in the tiny courtyard, Corso Ruggero 193 or Cortile Pepe 7, tel. 0921/423-228, Fri-Wed 12:00-15:00 and 19:00-24:00, closed Thu.

## Taormina

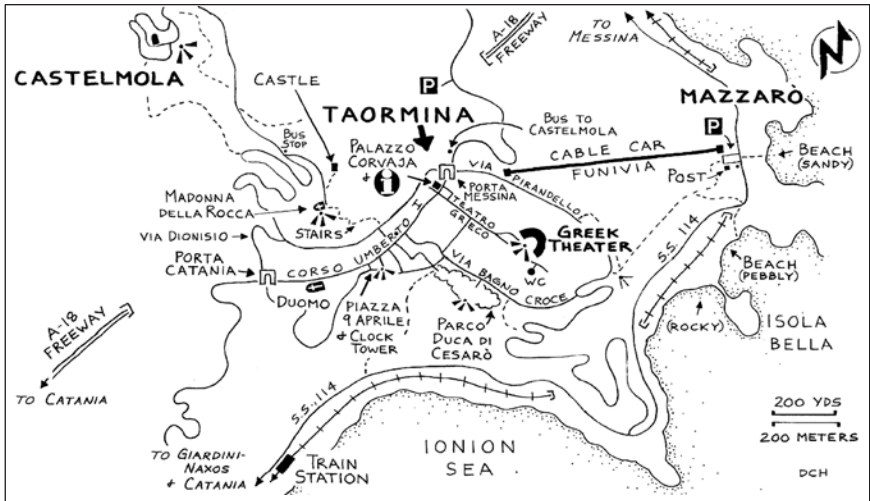
(pop. 12,000)

Situated high on Mt. Tauro, overlooking the Ionian Sea and smoldering Mt. Etna, Taormina has long been a favored haunt among the *literati* and jet setters and is Sicily's most famous resort. Taormina is a wonderful setting in which to practice *il dolce far niente* (the sweetness of doing nothing) while strolling the charming medieval city center and enjoying the stupendous views.

The town is dominated by the main drag, Corso Umberto I, with dozens of little alleys snaking off each side, and a grand panorama of the bay from Piazza IX Aprile. Three medieval gates mark the corso, one at each end, and a middle gate which doubles as a clock tower you can actually walk through.

Tourist Information: Located on ground floor of Palazzo Corvaja, open Mon-Fri 8:30-14:00 and 16:00-19:00, closed Sat and Sun tel. 0942/23-243.

Internet: Las Vegas located up an alley off Corso Umberto I between the clock tower and the Duomo on Salita Alex Humboldt #7, open daily 10:00-22:00.



Internet Point/Edicola on Corso Umberto I #214, 75 meters past the Duomo on the right, open daily 8:00-21:00.

### Free time activities

**Palazzo Corvaja**—The ground floor of this historic palace houses the TI, where you'll find not just maps and a staff who can answer your questions but a display of puppets and a decorated cart. Upstairs is an interesting little museum of Sicilian folk life, featuring a curious look at Sicily's superstitions (open Tue-Sun 9:00-13:00 and 14:00-20:00, closed Mon).

**Parco Duca di Cesarò**, (a.k.a. Trevelyan Gardens), a wonderful park 10 minutes' walk below Corso Umberto I or the theater, is a nice place to wander along shaded paths with picnic perfect benches. A little exploration will reveal some fanciful "follies" made of brick, a cannon used in WWI and a small torpedo submarine used in WWII.

**Best Views:** From the Greek theater, from Piazza IX Aprile, from Madonna della Rocca (a 20-minute uphill walk/stair climb from Corso Umberto I), and from town of Castelmola (see map above).

**Castelmola**—To reach this tiny village perched high above Taormina, ride the bus or take a taxi up, then walk down (being careful of stretches with no railing and of the occasional donkey). From Piazza S. Pancrazio, you can catch a local bus to take you up to Castelmola (€1.50 one way, €3.00 round trip, buy tickets from driver). A taxi up to Castelmola Castle will set you back about €20 for up to four people.

While Taormina proper has no beaches, the sea and beach access are just a few minutes away by cable car (*funivia*). You can walk down as well but allow at least 30 minutes and bring a map.

**Mazzarò beach** is a fine sandy, fully-outfitted cove. Here you can rent towels, lounge chairs and umbrellas,

snorkels, masks and fins, paddleboats and kayaks. Delfino restaurant with its *al fresco* dining overlooking the sea is a reasonable and handy lunch or romantic dinner spot, open daily, tel. 0942/23-004.

The Isola Bella beaches are free since they are part of a nature preserve but can be crowded. There are nearby stretches of pebbly beach which offer towel, chair and snorkel rentals.

Privately owned boats make hour-long excursions around the grottoes, including the Grotta Azzurra (similar to Capri's Blue Grotto but much bigger inside), Isola Bella, and to otherwise inaccessible coves for a swim. While prices can be soft (negotiate), expect to spend about €25/person, but group rates are possible. Many boats have snorkel equipment aboard; if you just want to have a look at undersea life, you can save money by doing your snorkeling during the excursion and not renting the equipment once you're back ashore. Both beaches have diving centers for more adventurous marine exploration.

Picnickers can stock up on supplies and made-to-order sandwiches at the Capricci Gastronomia in Mazzarò, open daily 8:30-20:30, just three minutes' walk from the funicular station, turn right onto the road. If you took the stairs down from Taormina, it's about 25 yards to your left from the bottom of the staircase.

#### Getting to the Beaches:

Funicular: runs every 15 minutes Tu-Su 8:00-1:00 and Mon 9:00-1:00, €2 one-way, €3.50 round trip, public WCs in stations. Once you are at the lower

funicular station, Mazzarò's beach access (*spiaggia*) is from the parking lot of the funicular near the road. Look for the waist-high, salmon-colored walls surrounding the stairwell. For Isola Bella beaches, exit the *funivia*, go through the parking lot and head right on the road. The stairs down to the beach are next to La Baia restaurant and directly across from the stairs leading up to Taormina.

By foot from Taormina: Walk past the funicular station in Taormina, then past the bus terminal (on the right side of the road) and to the piazza on the left. You'll see stairs leading to Mazzarò, the beachside town. These stairs are not well lit at night. Once at the bottom, head across the street to get to Isola Bella beaches, and left to the funicular station to get to Mazzarò beach.

#### Dining in Taormina

La Buca—With fantastic terrace seating overlooking the bay, La Buca serves up moderately priced delicious homemade pastas, fresh seafood, and traditional Sicilian cuisine as well as pizzas. Located on Corso Umberto I #140, tel. 0942/24-314, open daily.

La Botte has a huge *antipasto* buffet—one plate equals one trip to the buffet. Make it your whole dinner. Piazza Santa Domenica 4, tel. 094/224-198, Tue-Sat 12:00-15:00 and 19:00-24:00, closed Mon.

La Dracena is a worthwhile splurge with seating on a lovely garden patio or intimate dining room. Sample homemade pastas and the freshest grilled seafood, tel. 0942/23-491, Via M.

Amari 4, head down the alley behind Duomo to the end.

Tiramisù is a cozy, affordable restaurant for Sicilian specialties like *involtini di pesce spada* (stuffed swordfish rolls) or *pasta alla Norma* (fried eggplant and salted ricotta with penne) and of course, the national dessert, *tiramisù* (open Wed-Mon, closed Tue, 150 yards uphill from Porta Messina on Via Cappuccini 1, tel. 0942/24-803).

Vecchia Taormina has wood-fired pizzas and homemade pastas in a rustic, homey setting just inside Porta Catania on Vico Ebrei #3 off Corso Umberto I, tel. 0942/625-589, open daily 12:00-15:00 and 18:30-24:00.

Da Cristina Panificio offers great snacks of local specialties like *arancini* (breaded, fried rice croquettes) with sauce, pistachios and other variations, Messina-style pizzas, and baked pastas on the cheap, it's tucked down a side street just behind the fountain on Piazza Duomo. Dine at one of the few wee tables or on a bench nearby. Via Strabone 2, tel. 0942/21-171, open Thu-Tue from 9am-20.30, closed Wed.

SMA Supermarket—Just uphill from Piazza S. Antonio has everything you need for picnics and toiletries. On Via Apollo Arcageta #19, open Mon-Sat 8:00-21:00, Sun 8:30-12:30.

Alimentari Managò—Pick up picnic supplies and made-to-order sandwiches at this little grocery tucked below the Naumachie. On Via Calapitrulli 16, tel. 0942/24-971, open Mon-Sat 7:00-13:00 and 17:00-21:00, closed Sun and at midday.

## Mt. Etna

Europe's largest and most active volcano, Etna dominates Sicily. Its elevation is 10,990 feet, but this varies slightly depending upon the effects of the last eruption. Most of the recent eruptions have been on the southeast side, including the November 2007 eruption that spewed an ash cloud into the sky and disrupted Catania's Fontanarossa airport's flight schedules for four days. The eruption of 2002 destroyed the cable car and much of the Rifugio Sapienza tourist complex on the mountain's southern flank which has since been rebuilt. For their safety, curious visitors are prohibited to get close to the eruptions but sometimes the hot-tempered mountain displays nature's fireworks—often visible from Taormina. One of the biggest recorded eruptions dates back to 1669, when Catania was nearly overwhelmed and several outlying villages were destroyed by an enormous lava flow, the evidence of which can still be seen along the freeway.

Weather permitting (and barring eruptions!) we will drive up to the newly rebuilt Sapienza area at 6,500 feet to take a closer look. This may involve a short walk around one of the Silvestri craters, cinder cones formed by the 1892 eruption. As we drive up the slopes of the mountain, signs of recent eruptions are everywhere, including stranded buildings with only their roofs visible.

You don't need to be a volcanologist to recognize the two main types of lava, (which have vowel-filled Hawaiian names): *aa*, pronounced "ah-ah", has a reddish or brownish color due to oxida-

tion. It is rough and chunky in texture and looks like it would hurt to walk on it. *Aa* is normally formed by fast-moving flows that harden quickly, giving it its jagged shape. The other type, *pahoehoe* (pronounced “paw hoey-hoey”) is darker in color and looks like melted fudge. Usually formed by slower-moving flows that harden more slowly, *pahoehoe* has a smoother appearance than *aa*. It is interesting to see how nature has reclaimed the lava-covered slopes. In fact nearly half of Mt. Etna’s surface area is designated as a national park to protect the fragile ecosystem and limit development.

## Siracusa

(pop. 124,000)

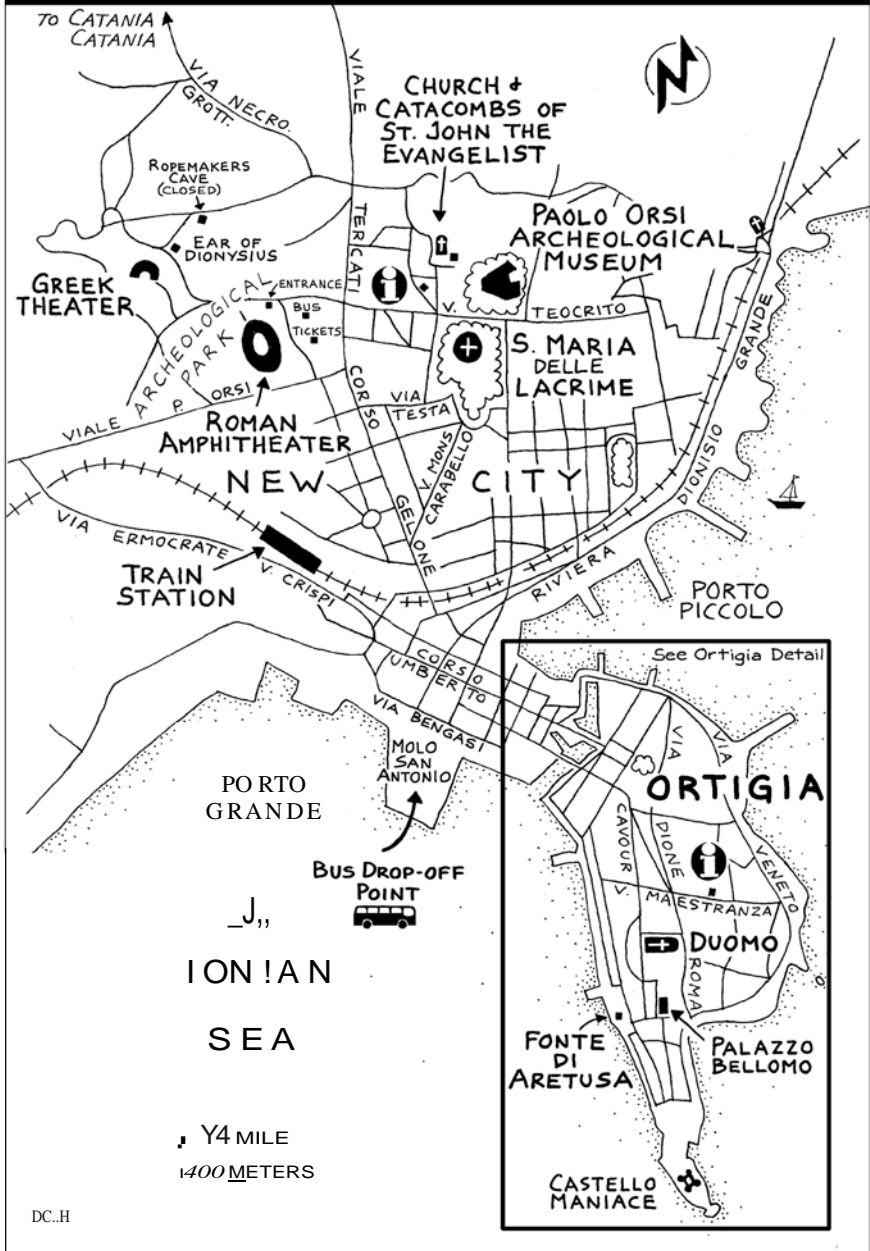
Siracusa is one of the oldest and historically the most important of the settlements of Magna Graecia. The city consists of the island of Ortygia which is the historic core of the city and is connected to the modern city by three bridges. The modern section of Siracusa was built adjacent to the archeological park and the majority of the Greco-Roman ruins we’ll see. Founded in 734 BC by Greek colonists from Corinth, the earliest settlements were on the Ortygia, the bird-shaped island named ‘quail’ in Greek. Later the settlement encompassed nearby subcolonies until the population of the colony surpassed that of Corinth.

Siracusa’s strategic location on the sea gave rise to its rapid growth, powerful position and expansion. In the 5th century BC the city fell into the hands of the tyrant Gelon from the settlement of Gela and he moved his power

base to Siracusa. Under Gelon Siracusa entered a period of even greater strength and prosperity. During Gelon’s reign the city saw the rise of cultural icons in the form of the Greek poet Pindar, who wrote of Gelon’s escapades, and playwright Aeschylus who penned some of his famous tragedies here. Gelon defeated the Carthaginians in the Battle of Himera in 480 BC and succeeded in ridding (for the time being) the entire southeast coast of them, allowing him to dominate trade in the Mediterranean and enrich the city’s economy. Gelon’s next naval victory was over the Etruscans at Cumae and he established a trade monopoly over the lower basin of the Tyrrhenian Sea, further increasing the wealth of Siracusa. By the middle of the 5th century BC, Siracusa had become such a powerhouse of trade that the city came into conflict with Athens, against which it was waging the Peloponnesian War at the time. Athens sent an expedition to destroy the competition but failed miserably and 7,000 Athenian POWs died working in the stone quarries (latomie). Meanwhile the Carthaginians sought revenge against Siracusa for their defeat at Himera. Dionysius I was the next great tyrant of Siracusa and succeeded in fending off attacks by the Carthaginians as he built up the city whose beauty, power and prestige had grown to rival Athens. The city reached the height of its strength and cultural achievement under his rule, due in part to the fortifications erected and the literary and intellectual tradition which attracted the likes of Plato, Cicero and Livy to his city.

Unfortunately, the heirs of Dionysius were not as capable and the downfall

## Siracusa





of the city began with a series of inept tyrants constantly at odds with one another. By the 3rd century, the Roman Republic was encroaching on Southern Italy, and though Sicily became one of the first Roman provinces, Siracusa managed to stay out of the first Punic War Rome fought against Carthage. It was also during the 3rd century that native Siracusan scientist, engineer and mathematician Archimedes of "Eureka!" fame invented war machines that helped Siracusa, allied with Carthage during the second Punic War, stave off a two-year siege by the Romans. Archimedes was accidentally killed during the siege and Siracusa fell quickly after to the Romans, ending the city's independence. Once again under the control of the Roman Republic, Siracusa remained an important city in that she was the capital of the province of Sicily as well as a buffer and stepping stone between the Roman Republic, North Africa and Greece but continued to decline from its previous position of power and wealth. Siracusa served briefly as a capital of the Byzantine Empire but was sacked by the Arabs in the 9th century. For the next 800 years the population of the city dropped dramatically due to famine, plagues and earthquakes. The devastation wrought by the massive earthquake of 1693 provided an opportunity to completely restructure the city in the latest Baroque style. After the 19th-century unification of Italy, the city became the capital of Siracusa province and began to expand once again. Siracusa proper suffered two bombardments during WWII (one by the Allies in 1943 and one by the Germans in 1944) after which the damaged quarter of the

city was rebuilt chaotically in an ugly, modern fashion. Recently the island of Ortygia has made a Herculean effort to restore the quarter to its former beauty.

## Orientation

The island of Ortygia, where we'll sleep for two nights, is a wonderful blend of Ancient Greek temples, medieval fortresses, Baroque facades and monumental Fascist architecture. When the modern center of Siracusa moved to the mainland after WWII, many of the residents moved away from Ortygia too, leaving the island depopulated. But in recent years, there has been a rebirth of the island community as buildings have been renovated, hotels forged from older structures and as restaurants and bars breathe new life into the historic center. Be sure to explore the many layers of history housed in the Duomo, a fascinating look at the way societies recycle and incorporate earlier buildings into contemporary structures. The Duomo was built by Byzantines in the 7th century AD on the ruins of a 5th-century BC Temple to Athena. The pagan temple, built to commemorate the tyrant Gelon's 480 BC victory over the Carthaginians at Himera, was remade into a Christian church, symbolic of Christianity's victory over paganism. The Normans later raised the height of the roof, added side chapels and a façade, which fell off after an earthquake in the 16th century. In the 18th century today's Baroque façade was added and the hodgepodge was complete. The beauty of the cathedral is enhanced by the presence of uniform Baroque palaces surrounding the square, erected in the



1700s as part of the urban renewal program following the 1693 earthquake.

The Fonte di Aretusa is an evocative waterfront spring which feeds into a pond constructed in the 19th century and today is bedecked with papyrus plants, a stately fig tree, and inhabited by figs and Peking ducks. This was one of the most famous fountains in the Greek world, celebrated by poets Pindar and Virgil as the disembodied spirit of the water nymph Arethusa. According to myth, virtuous Arethusa was bathing in a river, not realizing it was the river god Alpheus. Once she discovered his presence, she fled in order to maintain her chastity as a handmaiden of the virgin goddess Artemis. While Alpheus pursued her, she perspired profusely and dissolved into a stream. Artemis opened the ground of the island Ortygia for her to hide in, but Alpheus flowed through the sea to mingle with her waters.

Castello Maniace, at the southern tip of the island, was built by Frederick II in the 13th century as part of the transformation of Ortygia into an island fortress. The castle has been open to the public since 2009.

Ortygia's puppet theater carries on the cultural tradition of handmade puppets performing epic stories of Charlemagne's knights battling against the Saracens in a folk art theater with hand-painted backdrops. The puppet museum traces the evolution of Siracusa-style puppets, the birth of the puppet theater and the artisan workshop where the puppets are created (open Mon-Sat 11:00-13:00 and 16:00-18:00, closed Sun, Via della Giudecca #17, tel 0931/465-540).

Ortygia's Regional Museum of Medieval and Modern Art is currently closed for restoration, although Mannerist artist Caravaggio's *Burial of St. Lucy* has been relocated to the church of Saint Lucy alla Badia in Ortygia's Piazza Duomo.

Ortygia's helpful Tourist Information office is open Mon-Fri 8:30-13:45 and Wed 15:00-17:30, closed Fri afternoons and all day Sat and Sun, Via Maestranza 33, tel. 0931 464 255.

Lavanderia offers drop off laundry service for about €8 per load (wash, soap and dry). Open Mon-Sat, closed Sun, at #13 Corso Umberto I, tel. 327/540-6891.

## Sights in the Modern City

Archeological Park of the Neapolis—Siracusa's Archeological Park is located in the Neapolis or New City quarter created by Hiero II in the 3rd century BC. The city quarter was abandoned during the Middle Ages and then used as a quarry in the 16th century by Holy Roman Emperor Charles V to build fortifications. Despite their destruction the ruins are still quite impressive, the Greek Theater being the highlight of the park.

Siracusa's Greek Theater is one of the largest in the world, measuring 455 feet across and able to seat up to 15,000 spectators. Greek playwright Aeschylus premiered some of his most famous tragedies on this stage.

The Greeks built their theaters nestled in hillsides, often with spectacular views. They believed in a balance between the man-made and the natural environment. The theater's shape was semi-circular to aid with acoustics,

enabling every patron to hear the performance, despite where they were seated. *Cavea* were tiered seating, with the first row dedicated to priests and dignitaries. The *skene* or stage was on a high platform behind a circular orchestra where sacrifices were sometimes made. Imagine attending a performance here! Acoustics are superb—if you position yourself in the center of the stage a friend sitting in the top row can hear you whisper!

But the Greeks did not just build their theaters in a hillside because they wanted to. They had to, for support, as they lacked the ability to build with arches and concrete (two later Roman innovations). The Romans then put two theaters together and using their advanced engineering skills created a freestanding amphitheater—Rome's Colosseum is the most famous example of this.

While the theater was reconstructed in its present form by Hiero II in the 3rd century BC, it was renovated under the Romans, who built a stage set, obscuring the panoramic backdrop so prized by the Greeks. The bellicose Romans had little use for psychological dramas and classical comedies, so they used the theater for gladiatorial games and staged mock sea battles in the orchestra.

Today Greek tragedies are once again performed in the theater in summertime.

East of the theater is one of the stone quarries, the *latomie del Paradiso*, from which much of the stone used to build the Neapolis came and which has now been turned into a lush garden of citrus trees, pomegranates, succulent

cacti and bougainvillea. Carved into the rock wall are two man-made grottoes, the so-called Ear of Dionysius and the Ropemaker's Cave. Fugitive painter Caravaggio gave the Ear of Dionysius its name, due to its form of a huge elfin ear measuring 69 feet to the top and 211 feet deep. The nickname also comes from its reputation of having acoustics which conveyed the whispers of the political prisoners held inside to the ears of the tyrant Dionysius eavesdropping at the top of the stone cliff. The Ropemaker's Cave offered perfectly humid conditions in which to make the ropes used by the navy.

The Roman Amphitheater—One of the largest Roman amphitheaters in the world, Siracusa's amphitheater is partly hewn out of the rock and spans 390 feet across the short axis and 459 feet on the long side.

Paolo Orsi Archeological Museum—This is Sicily's most extensive archeological museum dedicated to Paolo Orsi, the great archeologist responsible for uncovering many of Siracusa's archeological treasures and late director of the museum's collections. The museum is a modern floral-like structure situated in the leafy green gardens of a villa. The ground floor of the museum covers Sicily's geology, plant and animal fossils and prehistoric peoples in three sections, all arranged with their distinct historical, social and environmental context. Highlights from Section A (covering prehistory) include complete prehistoric dwarf-hippo and elephant skeletons. Section B exhibits focus on Greek colonies on the island dating from the 8th century BC and the ancient Greek artifacts from Ortygia

and Siracusa proper. Section C displays finds from Siracusa's subcolonies and Hellenized settlements around the island. The upper floors exhibit covers the island's Roman, early Christian and medieval periods. We'll visit the museum with a local guide who will show us the highlights of the museum and help us sift through the millennia of Siracusa's history.

Church and Catacombs of Saint John the Evangelist—Right in the middle of modern Siracusa are the evocative ruins of the Gothic church of San Giovanni. Built in the 1200s by the Normans on the foundations of a 7th-century church, an earthquake demolished all of the outer structure but the walls, the original apse and the 14th-century rose window. The importance of the church goes back to its foundations, when the land was used for the crypt of a 3rd-century martyr. The floor church almost immediately excavated below the crypt to create discreet burial grounds for Christians which were in use from the 3rd to the 6th centuries. The catacombs contain thousands of burial niches, some for individuals, others for entire families, all centered around a main tunnel adapted from a Greek aqueduct. Later in the 7th century the crypt was transformed into a subterranean basilica which still has frescoes dating from the Norman reconstruction. Mandatory guided visits are bilingual (English and Italian) and depart every 30 minutes. Last visits begin at 12:30 for the morning and at 16:00 in the afternoon. Tickets cost €5. An €8 combo ticket covers the Catacombs and Basilica of Santa Lucia. Open Tue-Sun 9:30-12:30 and

14:30-16:00, closed Mon, located on Via S. Giovanni.

Santuario di Santa Maria delle Lacrime—The big concrete shuttlecock church in the center of downtown Siracusa is the Sanctuary of Holy Mary of the Tears, built to commemorate a miracle which occurred in Siracusa in 1953. For three days at the end of August that year, a chalk painting of Mary of the Immaculate Heart began to cry human tears. Multitudes gathered to witness the sight, and a committee nominated by the Vatican analyzed the tears and found them to be human. In December 1953, the archbishop of Sicily gave permission for a sanctuary to be constructed in honor of the miracle. Building began in 1966 and ended in 1995, thanks to funds contributed by private donors and by the regional government of Sicily. The church stands approximately 283 feet high and can hold a congregation of 11,000 worshippers. Museums in the crypt contain ex-votos or dedicated trinkets given in thanks for answered prayers and all kinds of casts and braces from healed limbs of the faithful as well as the original chalk painting of Mary herself.

Palazzo Bellomo—This 13th-century Catalan Gothic palace hosts a hodgepodge of medieval, Baroque, and contemporary works of art, primarily from local artists across the centuries. Their masterpiece, the *Annunciation* by Antonella da Messina, may likely be on loan to another museum. Very minimal English descriptions. (€8, Tue-Sat 9:00-19:00, Sun 9:00-13:00, closed Mon, last entry one hour before closing, Via Giuseppe Maria Capodiceci #16, tel. 0931/69-511).

## Dining

The following listings are all located on Ortygia.

Vite e Vitello is respected for its typical Sicilian meat dishes and its traditional pasta and vegetable dishes served at reasonable prices in a simple dining room from an open kitchen. Sample breaded, grilled steak, homemade sausages and ribs or veal *involtini* (rolls). Located on the corner of Via Maestranza and Piazza Corpaci, tel. 0931/464-269, Mon-Sat 12:30-15:00 and 19:30-22:30, closed Sun.

For waterfront dining, check out restaurant row on Via Lungomare Alfeo, just south of Fonte Aretusa. Several trattorias of more or less equal quality and price range serve up seafood, pizzas and pastas to hungry tourists. Browse the menus and the ambience to fit the place and budget that suits you.

Zsà Trattoria Pizzeria serves up delicious wood-fired pizzas, pastas, seafood and landfood to crowds of Sicilians who recognize a great value and appreciate friendly service (Via Roma #73, tel. 0931/464-280, closed Mon).

Castello Fiorentino is the local's favorite pizzeria and budget dining room buried in the heart of Ortygia. Inexpensive pizzas *primi* and *secondi*, closed Mon, Via del Crocifisso 6, tel. 0931/21-097.

For picnic supplies you'll find a couple of small grocery shops on the corner of Via Roma at #121, open Mon-Sat 6:30-14:00 and 16:30-21:00, Sun 7:30-13:30 only, tel. 0931/60-941, and in Via della Giudecca #9-11, open Mon-Sat 7:00-14:00 and 16:00-20:00, closed Sun, as well as to-go pizza at Via

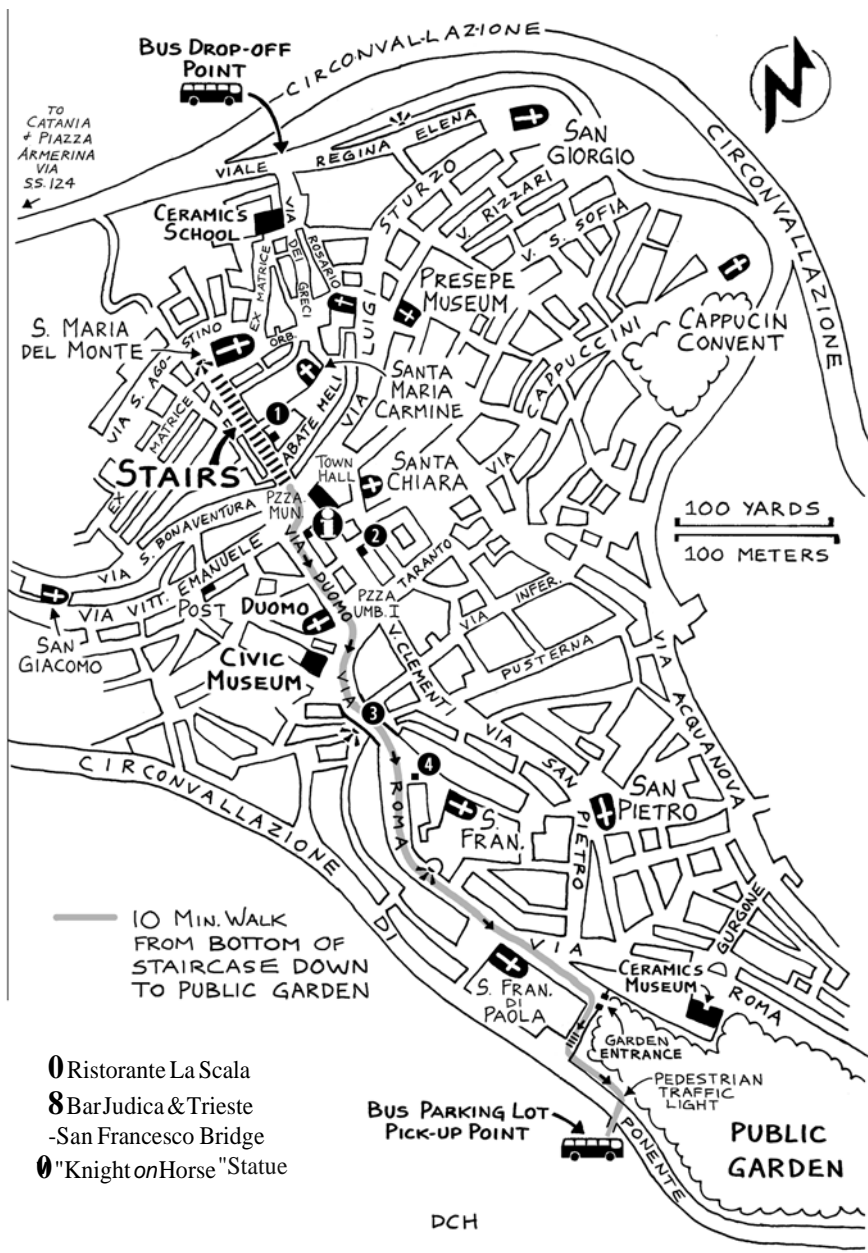
della Giudecca #7. There are two great spots for picnics on Ortygia: the Belvedere San Giacomo and the Bastione San Giovannello, both on the east side of the island.

## Caltagirone

(Pop. 39,000)

Caltagirone's claim to fame is its culture of colorful ceramics-making. The arrival of the Arabs in the 10th century turned the humble local craft of pottery into a profitable industry. The Arabs contributed the multicolored, complex patterns typical of Islamic art, in particular the brilliant blue and yellow color scheme famous to Caltagirone. Another theme for ceramics made here are the *presepi*, nativity scenes so dear to Italian Christmas tradition. A vast array of figurines can decorate the manger as though the baby Jesus were born in a humble Sicilian village, making a more personal connection for the poor faithful to the miracle of Jesus' birth.

The Scalinata di Santa Maria del Monte is the dramatic centerpiece underscoring Caltagirone's ceramics trade. The staircase was originally built in the early 17th century to connect the old, upper town with the newer Piazza Municipio but was then a series of shorter flights of stairs. In the 1880s they were connected to become a monumental staircase with 142 steps. The hand-painted majolica tiles were added in the 1950s, and more recent artisan ceramics shops lining the steps beckon visitors to admire works in progress and browse for souvenirs. The *scalinata* is the focus of the Festa di San Giacomo (July 24-25), the town's patron





saint, when the stairs are lit with 4,000 oil lamps and a religious procession solemnly promenades from the church to the center piazza and back again.

You'll have free time during our stop to visit the Museo Regionale della Ceramica ceramics museum, which features a wonderful collection of the 18th- and 19th-century rustic nativity figures with the contemporary clothing, faces and gestures that bring such realism into the sacred tableau of the Christmas story (€4, daily 9-18:30, Via Giardino Pubblico, tel. 0933 58 418).

Caltagirone's Giardino Pubblico is a lovely park with manicured gardens and ceramic tiled benches just perfect for a picnic lunch.

## Dining

Il Ristorante della Scala is a handy, good-value lunch option located on the Scalinata at #8, tel. 0933 57781.

Bar Judica e Trieste offers a variety of *piruni*, Caltagirone's version of *calzone*. *Piruni* come stuffed with ham, cheese and tomato sauce or broccoli, sausage and cheese, or spinach, etc. You can dine in (no service charge) or take your lunch *da portar via* (carry out) and enjoy it on a bench in the Giardino Pubblico (Via Principe Amadeo #22, tel. 0933/22021).

Free public WCs are located inside the Galleria Don Sturzo Tourist Information center in Piazza Municipio.

## Villa del Casale

Located three miles outside the town of Piazza Armerina, the floor mosaics in this 4th-century Roman villa are some

of the best-preserved of their type in the world and make this site well worth a visit.

The villa was a luxurious hunting lodge used (some believe) by the Roman emperor Maximian. After being abandoned in the 1200s, the villa was covered by a mudslide that protected the mosaics until systematic excavation in 1880s. The display of the mosaics here is *in situ*, a term archeologists use to describe an artifact that has been left in place instead of carved out of a floor or wall as most of the frescoes and mosaics at Pompeii were. A unique system of elevated metal catwalks lets you walk through the villa and gaze directly down at the mosaics. The clear floor glass panels above simulate the original roof long since gone. It also contributes to a "greenhouse effect" within the villa, so wear clothes you can layer in case you get too warm.

From the ticket office, walk down the road to the villa. The visit follows a more or less one-way system and begins at the *thermae* (baths), goes around the *peristyle* (main courtyard) and continues to the *ambulacrum*. This long skinny corridor is one of the highlights of the visit where elaborate hunting scenes, with lions and tigers and bears (oh my!) and other exotic animals come to life. Nearby, the room of the ten bikini girls reminds us that there is really nothing new under the sun. The route continues to the *xystus* (elliptical courtyard) and the *triclinium* (formal dining room) with some fine mosaics including *The Labors of Hercules* and ends at the private apartments.

Villa del Casale is in the midst of extensive renovations to clean and restore

the mosaics, enhance the protective roof structure covering the sprawling excavations and improve traffic flow. Crowds can be large, certain sections may be unexpectedly closed and the going can be slow on the elevated walkways, but if you find a space between groups you will be able to get outstanding views. Despite the crowds and any disruptions we may experience due to the renovations, all in all this is truly a “wow” experience.

To reach the site from the parking lot, follow the main road lined by a gauntlet of tourist stalls that rivals Pisa in its tackiness. The WC is located in the gift shop, below and off to the right.

## Agrigento

Once part of the territory known as Magna Graecia or greater Greece, Sicily is home to some of the best Greek ruins in the world. Agrigento is famed for its world-class *Valle dei Templi* (Valley of the Temples), an incredible concentration of Greek temples in varying states of ruin and reconstruction. We’ll explore the major temples of the Valley with a local expert who will shed light on these monuments to the Golden Age of Tyranny.

The temples reflect the wealth and luxury of ancient Agrigento, (called Akragas by the Greeks), once the hedonistic center of Magna Graecia. Built in the 5th century BC on a ridge near the sea so as to be visible from the sea, the temples served as a beacon to sailors and to demonstrate the might of the gods protecting the sacred city.

The temples are in the Doric style as all Sicilian temples are. This means

fat columns with a simple capital or top. Ionic columns are more slender and have a scrolled top while the Corinthian capital is more ornate and fluted. To keep the styles straight, remember that the more ornate the style of capital, the more syllables the name of the style has.

The Greeks sought perfection in line and proportion when it came to the architecture dedicated to the worship of their gods. There were formulas by which the temples were built and which dictated the numbers of columns on each side, one aspect of perfection controlled by the architects. Optical illusions were another key to the success of this perfection. For example, columns taper slightly inward yet our eye “corrects” them to vertical. If they were straight, your eye would perceive them to be leaning away from the center, causing the structure to appear as though it were going to collapse. Columns are fatter in the middle than they are at the tops and bottoms so as to appear as though the wooden beam and tile roof were compressing them, giving the viewer a sense of stateliness, importance and permanence. The flutes of the temples bow up slightly to offset the eye’s perception of a level fluted sagging. If you were to stand on the ground at the opposite side of a temple from a friend, you’d only see each other from the waist up due to the convex floor.

Greek temples all had an inner chamber or *cella* in the center that housed the sacred altar, to which only the priest would have had access; worshippers stayed outside.

While it was one of the most famous and richest cities of Magna Graecia, Agrigento never really recovered after being sacked by successive waves of Carthaginians, Romans (twice) and Barbarians. Byzantines destroyed all but one of the ancient shrines in the 6th century AD on the grounds that they were pagan.

Henry Adams, a turn-of-the-century American writer, once described Agrigento and its temples as “Athens with improvements.” Located on a ridge above the temples on the site of the old acropolis, the town itself now resembles modern day Athens with its industrial development, smog, and high-rise apartment buildings. And despite the draw of the *Valle dei Templi*, Agrigento town has not benefited from the tourist revenue and in our short time here is not worth a visit.

## Segesta

Segesta is another worthwhile stop famous for some wonderfully preserved Greek ruins. Segesta was originally founded by the Elymians who claimed to be descendants of Troy. Hating the Greeks who had defeated them in the Trojan War, they sacked nearby Selinunte until being overrun by Siracusa around 300 BC.

Segesta boasts two monuments to Magna Graecia: an unfinished 5th-century BC Doric Greek temple and a theater dating from the 3rd century BC. The natural setting of the Doric temple in a field of wildflowers and tall grasses evokes the mystery of pagan Greek religion, while the theater has dramatic

views of the sea and sky as its backdrop. Greek plays are still performed here on summer evenings.

The tourist center of the archeological site at Segesta has a book and souvenir shop/café with pastries and sandwiches that you can enjoy at shaded outdoor tables. Public restrooms are in another building 50 yards from the bookshop. To reach the temple, walk up the hill and across the parking lot and take the stepped trail up (about 10 minutes total from the bookshop). Your ticket will be checked at both the temple and theater so be sure to hold onto it.

Most Greek temples had a chamber or *cella* in the center that housed the sacred altar, yet no remains have been found here. The roof is open to the bird-filled sky but ought to have been once crossed by wooden beams that supported a roof of clay tiles. Like the *cella*, no trace exists that the roof was ever finished. The stone (limestone) for the columns, flutes, and pediment was quarried from a quarry across the valley behind the temple.

To reach the theater take a five-minute ride on the shuttle bus that departs from the theater entrance kiosk every half hour or so (can be more frequent depending on demand, costs €1.50 one way or roundtrip, purchase tickets from the bookshop cashier). Otherwise it's about a 20-minute uphill walk along the paved road through the fields of flowers and wild fennel. Consider taking the bus up and walking down. You'll enjoy a fabulous panorama of the temple and the surrounding landscape as you descend.

Near the theater, you'll see some scant excavations from a mosque and Arab-style housing which was pulled down in the 13th century to make space for a Norman castle. There are also ruins from a late medieval church, which was built by shepherds and local landholders and used in one form or another until the 19th century.

## Appendix

Here is a cast of characters you'll find in our guides referring to along the way:

### People:

Archimedes—2nd century BC, classical world's most brilliant scientific mind, he cried "Eureka" (I have found it!) when he figured out the theory of displacement. Also invented calculus, the Archimedean screw for lifting water, mirrors that burned the Roman fleet, the lever, and pi.

Persephone—beautiful daughter of Demeter, the goddess of agriculture. In a deal with Hades, she was required to spend one-third of the year with him in Hades. The time she spends down there corresponds to the Sicilian winter, when fields are fallow and all is brown.

Roger II (Ruggero)—Norman king who ruled Sicily during the Golden Age of the 12th century.

Antonello da Messina—Sicily's most famous Renaissance painter, his *Portrait of an Unknown Man* is in Cefalù's Mandralisca Museum, and his *Annunciation* is housed at the Palazzo Abatellis Regional Art Gallery in Palermo.

Caravaggio, 1571-1610—17th-century renowned Baroque artist. Caravaggio (Michelangelo da Merisi, originally from a small burg outside Milan in the north) fled to Sicily and later to Malta under penalty of death by decapitation for having killed (accidentally) a Roman citizen during an argument over a tennis match. During his exile to the South, Caravaggio's themes became darker and more morose as he drew nearer to the end of his short life, waiting in vain for an 11th-hour pardon.

from the pope, whose court had come to appreciate Caravaggio's works.

Vincenzo Bellini, 1801-1835—born in Catania. Bellini is considered the master of the *bel canto* style and founder of the romantic style of opera. He tried to write operas with a good, well-crafted story, not just pretty melodies. *Norma* is his most famous work and is the only opera to have a pasta named after it!

Roger VII (Ruggero Settimo)—19th-century Italian politician, diplomat and activist for Sicilian independence.

Luigi Pirandello, 1867-1936—author and playwright from Kaos near Agrigento. *Six Characters in Search of an Author* is his most famous work. His ironic style focuses on life's inherent contradictions and explores the nature of truth. He won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1934.

Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa, 1896-1957—aristocratic (prince of Lampedusa, duke of Palma and Montechiaro) author of *The Leopard*, a famous epic novel set during the time of Italian Unification that has been called a "Sicilian Gone With the Wind."

Falcone and Borsellino—two anti-Mafia judges assassinated by the Mafia in the 1990s, now considered modern-day martyrs.

## Sicilian Architectural Vocabulary

### Greek

The Greeks came to Sicily in the 8th and 7th centuries BC and became powerful enough by the 5th century BC to keep Carthage at bay, trade with much

of the Mediterranean world and send victorious chariot teams to the Olympic Games in Greece. Their architecture copied that of their homeland, yet the Sicilian Greeks had no indigenous marble. Instead (as we'll see) they used local limestone, often covered up (as we won't see) with stucco made of limestone and sometimes marble dust. The arts of painting and sculpture were generally less advanced than what was going on in Greece.

Become familiar with these architectural terms and you'll get more out of the wonderful Greek ruins we'll see. The diagram on the next page will help you locate these terms.

### Temple features:

column—a vertical support consisting of a base, shaft and capital

Doric—earliest and simplest style with a fl capital (top); all Sicilian temples are Doric

Ionic—"middle aged" style, recognizable by curlicue or ram's horn capitals

Corinthian—newest order, identified by ornately carved capitals resembling acanthus leaves

capital—top of the column

entablature—stone beam supported by the columns

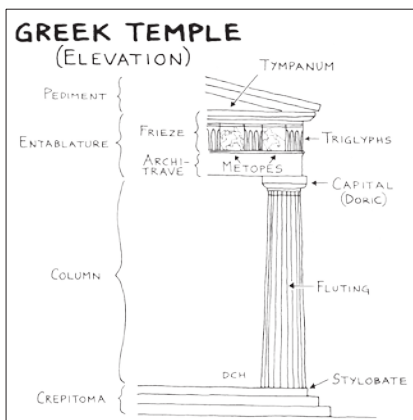
triglyphs—carving on the entablature

metopes—low-relief carvings found between the triglyphs

frieze—the triglyphs + the metopes

pediment—triangular structure atop the entablature

cella (or naos)—inner room of a temple



## Theaters

orchestra—circular stage where chorus chants, sings and unfolds the plot acted out on stage

cavea—lower tier of seats of the theater

skena—stage of the theater

## Churches

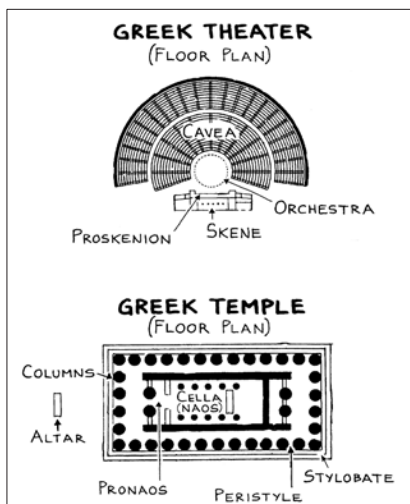
Duomo—the cathedral of a town, which is the seat of the bishop; derived from Domus, or House (of God)

nave—the long part of a church

transept—the crossing “arm” in a church floor plan

apse—end of church opposite the entry and site of altar

Christ Pantocrator—image of Jesus depicted in many mosaics, means “ruler of all.” Typically this is a stern and formidable Christ. In His left hand are the gospels that say Christ is light of the world and from His right hand He blesses the viewer.



## Other

mosaic—art form which uses millions of pieces of glass or ceramic tile (*teserae*) arranged to form pictures, like pixels of a photo in low resolution

fresco—a tempera (egg-based) paint applied over a layer of partially wet plaster, often on a wall or ceiling of a church

forum—political, commercial and religious center of a Roman town

acropolis—literally “high city”, a ridge atop which Greeks often built their cities

## Packing Tips

In the next column is a handy weather table to give you a better idea of what kind of clothes to pack. Sicily is warm, even into late October, so be sure to bring along clothes you can layer. There are several opportunities for swimming and the water is usually warm enough to swim in from May–October. Despite its well-deserved reputation for sunshine, Sicily gets some rain, which can surprise you with torrential downpours. Bring a rain jacket and/or an umbrella; clothes that can easily drip dry are convenient.

Much of Italy's history and culture can be explored in its churches, a few of which we'll see, and most of which have dress codes: shoulders and knees must be covered regardless of age or gender. Consider packing zip-off pants or a scarf you can throw across your shoulders so that you don't miss out.

Laundry facilities all over Italy are scarce, especially in Sicily. Italian households all own their own washing machines so there's very little demand for laundromats. Dry cleaners charge an arm and a leg to clean your clothes and often cannot get your cleaned clothes back to you in 24 hours or less. Fortunately the weather in Sicily is kind and hand-washed clothes dry quickly, usually within 24 hours. It's helpful to bring along a clothesline; we sell a bungee-type line in our online travel store: <http://travelstore.rickstevens.com>. Take care not to drape wet clothes over 500-year-old furniture, and it's best to keep your drying laundry out of sight of the maids. Your shower or the wardrobe in your hotel room is perfect for this.

If you are lucky enough to find a coin-operated laundry, please let your guide know so we can share the information. Cheapskate's laundry tip: save time and money by only washing your clothes at the laundry. When you get your wet clothes back to your room, hang them to dry. They're usually ready to wear in less than 24 hours.

## Palermo Average Temperatures and Rainfall

	Lows	Highs	Rainfall*
Mar	51	61	2.3
Apr	55	65	1.7
May	60	71	1
Jun	67	77	0.5
Jul	73	82	0.2
Aug	74	83	0.2
Sep	70	79	1.6
Oct	64	73	3.9

\*average in inches



## Telephones

Smart travelers use the telephone to reserve or reconfirm rooms, get tourist information, reserve restaurants, confirm tour times, or phone home. Generally the easiest, cheapest way to call home is to use an international phone card purchased in Italy. This section covers dialing instructions, phone cards, and types of phones

### How to Dial

Calling from the US to Italy, or vice versa, is simple—once you break the code.

#### Dialing Domestically Within Italy

Italy has a direct-dial phone system (no area codes). To call anywhere within Italy, just dial the number.

Land lines start with 0; mobile lines start with 3; toll-free lines start with 80; and expensive toll lines begin with 8, followed by any number other than 0. Keep in mind that Italian phone numbers vary in length; a hotel can have, for example, an eight-digit phone number and a nine-digit fax number.

#### Dialing Internationally to or from Italy

If you want to make an international call, follow these steps:

- Dial the international access code (00 if you're calling from Europe, 011 from the US or Canada).

- Dial the country code of the country you're calling (39 for Italy, or 1 for the US or Canada).
- Dial the local number. Note that in most European countries, you have to drop the zero at the beginning of the local number—but in Italy, you dial it.

**Calling from the US to Italy:** To call a Florence hotel from the US, dial 011 (the US international access code), 39 (Italy's country code), then 055-289-592.

**Note:** You might see a + in front of a European number. When dialing the number, replace the + with the international access code of the country you're calling from (00 from Europe, 011 from the US or Canada).

#### Public Phones and Hotel Room Phones

To make calls from public phones, you'll need a prepaid phone card.

There are two different kinds of phone cards: insertable and international. (Both types of phone cards work only in Italy. If you have a live card at the end of your trip, give it to another traveler to use up.) Coin-op phones are virtually extinct.

**Insertable Phone Cards:** This type of card can only be used at a pay phone. These Telecom cards, considered "official" since they're sold by Italy's phone company, give you the best deal for

calls within Italy and are reasonable for international calls. You can buy Telecom cards in denominations of €5 or €10 at tobacco shops, post offices, and machines near phone booths (many phone booths have signs indicating where the nearest phone card sales outlet is located).

Rip off the perforated corner to “activate” the card, and then physically insert it into a slot in the pay phone. It displays how much money you have remaining on the card. Then just dial away. The price of the call is automatically deducted while you talk.

**International Phone Cards:** These are the cheapest way to make international calls from Europe—with the best cards, it costs literally pennies a minute. They can also be used to make local calls, and work from any type of phone, including your hotel room phone. To use the card, dial a toll-free access number, then enter your scratch-to-reveal PIN code. If you’re calling from a hotel, be sure to dial the “freephone” number (starts with “80”) provided on your card rather than the “local access” number (which would incur a charge).

You can buy the cards at small newsstand kiosks, tobacco shops, Internet cafés, hostels, and hole-in-the-wall long-distance phone shops. Because there are so many brand names, simply ask for an international phone card (*carta telefonica prepagata internazionale*, KAR-tah teh-leh-FOHN-ee-kah pray-pah-GAH-tah in-ter-naht-zee-oh-NAH-lay). Tell the vendor where you’ll be calling the most (“*per Stati Uniti*”—to America), and he’ll select the brand with the best deal.

Buy a lower denomination in case the card is a dud. Travelers have had good luck with the Europa card, which offers up to 350 minutes from Italy to the US for €5.

**Hotel Room Phones:** Calling from your hotel room can be cheap for local calls (ask for the rates at the front desk first), but is often a rip-off for long-distance calls, unless you use an international phone card (explained earlier). Some hotels charge a fee for dialing supposedly “toll-free” numbers, such as the one for your international phone card—ask before you dial. Incoming calls are free, making this a cheap way for friends and family to stay in touch (provided they have a good long-distance plan for calls to Europe—and a list of your hotels’ phone numbers).

**US Calling Cards:** These cards, such as the ones offered by AT&T, Verizon, or Sprint, are the worst option. You’ll save a lot of money by using an international phone card you’ve purchased in Italy.

**Metered Phones:** In Italy, some call shops have phones with meters. You can talk all you want, then pay the bill when you leave—but be sure you know the rates before you have a lengthy conversation. Note that charges can be “per unit” rather than per minute; figure out the length of a unit.

### Mobile Phones

Many travelers enjoy the convenience of traveling with a mobile phone.

**Using Your Mobile Phone:** Your US mobile phone works in Europe if it’s GSM-enabled, tri-band or quad-band, and on a calling plan that includes

international calls. Phones from AT&T and T-Mobile, which use the same GSM technology that Europe does, are more likely to work overseas than Verizon or Sprint phones (if you're not sure, ask your service provider). Most US providers charge \$1.29-1.99 per minute while roaming internationally to make or receive calls, and 20-50 cents to send or receive text messages.

You'll pay cheaper rates if your phone is electronically "unlocked" (ask your provider about this); then in Europe, you can simply buy a tiny SIM card, which gives you a European phone number. SIM cards are sold at mobile-phone stores and some newsstand kiosks for \$5-15, and generally include several minutes' worth of prepaid domestic calling time. When you buy a SIM card, you may need to show ID, such as your passport. Insert the SIM card in your phone (usually in a slot on the side or behind the battery), and it'll work like a European mobile phone. When buying a SIM card, always ask about fees for domestic and international calls, roaming charges, and how to check your credit balance and buy more time. When you're in the SIM card's home country, domestic calls are reasonable, and incoming calls are free. You'll pay more if you're roaming in another country.

Many smartphones, such as the iPhone, Android, and BlackBerry, work in Europe (note that you can use the AT&T iPhone—but not the Verizon model—in Europe). For voice calls and text messaging, smartphones work the same as other US mobile phones (explained earlier). But beware of sky-high fees for data downloading

(checking email, browsing the Internet, streaming videos, and so on). The best solution: Disable data roaming entirely, and only use your device to go online when you find free Wi-Fi. You can ask your mobile-phone service provider to cut off your account's data roaming capability, or you can manually turn it off on your phone (look under the "Network" menu). If you want Internet access without being limited to Wi-Fi, you'll need to keep data roaming on—but you can take steps to reduce your charges. Consider paying extra for a limited international data roaming plan through your carrier, then use data roaming selectively (if a particular task gobbles bandwidth, wait until you're on Wi-Fi). In general, ask your provider in advance how to avoid unwittingly roaming your way to a huge bill. If your smartphone is on Wi-Fi, you can use certain apps to make cheap or free voice calls (see "Calling over the Internet," on the next page).

**Buying a European Mobile Phone:** Mobile phone shops all over Europe sell basic phones. The mobile phone desk in a big department store is another good place to check. Phones that are "locked" to work with a single provider start around \$40; "unlocked" phones (which allow you to switch out SIM cards to use your choice of provider) start around \$60. You'll also need to buy a SIM card and prepaid credit for making calls. (Italian friends tell us that TIM is a reliable Italian mobile phone company.)

**Renting a European Mobile Phone:** Car-rental companies and mobile phone companies offer the option to rent a mobile phone with a European

number. Some hotels even rent or loan phones. While this seems convenient, hidden fees (such as high per-minute charges or expensive shipping costs) can really add up—which usually makes it a bad value. One exception is Verizon’s Global Travel Program, available only to Verizon customers.

### Calling over the Internet

Some things that seem too good to be true...actually are true. If you’re traveling with a wireless device (such as a laptop or smartphone), you can use VoIP (Voice over Internet Protocol) to make free calls over the Internet to another wireless device (or you can pay a few cents to call from your computer to a telephone). If both devices have cameras, you can even see each other while you chat. The major providers are Skype ([www.skype.com](http://www.skype.com), also available as a smartphone app), Google Talk ([www.google.com/talk](http://www.google.com/talk)), and FaceTime (this app comes standard on newer Apple devices). If you have a smartphone, you can get online at a hotspot and use these apps to make calls without ringing up expensive roaming charges (though call quality can be spotty on slow connections).

### Useful Phone Numbers

Italy’s toll-free numbers start with “80.” These numbers—called *free-phone* or *numero verde* (green number)—can be dialed free from any phone without using a phone card. Note that you can’t call Italy’s toll-free numbers from America, nor can you count on reaching America’s toll-free numbers from Italy.

Any Italian phone number that starts with “8” but isn’t followed by a “0” is a toll call, generally costing €0.10-0.50 per minute.

### Emergency Needs

English-Speaking Police Help: 113

Ambulance: 118

Road Service: 116

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