

Travelling across history and art

Day-tours from Modica to discover the history and the art of Val di Noto, from the refined baroque architectures of Ragusa, Scicli and Noto to the greek fascination of Siracusa and Palazzolo Acreide and the famous Caltagirone pottery.



Guided tours:

- www.barocco-ibleo.net
- www.guideragusa.it

The baroque of Val di Noto

In 2002 the 8 towns of Modica, Ragusa, Scicli, Noto, Palazzolo Acreide, Caltagirone, Militello Val di Catania and Catania were included in the **Unesco World Heritage List** under the name of:

“The late-baroque towns of Val di Noto (South-Eastern Sicily)”

Among the reasons of this outstanding recognition was the *remarkable witness of the cultural and exuberant genius of the art and the architecture of late Baroque*, the above towns being *“the climax and the upper blossoming of the Baroque Art in Europe”*, as a result of the dreadful earthquake of 1693 which led to their stylistic homogeneity and the superb artistic quality.



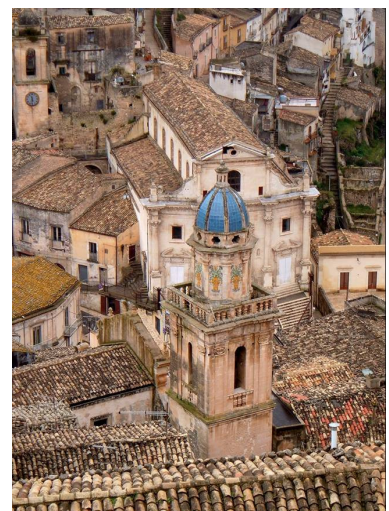
Ragusa and Scicli

Immerse yourselves into the baroque atmospheres of **Ragusa Ibla**, the most ancient part of the city, which lays on a rocky hill outstanding the valley. After the earthquake of 1693 Ibla was rebuilt and in the XIXth century the new upper Ragusa was constructed according to a regular urban plan.

A beautiful way to draw near Ibla is to go down from upper Ragusa along Corso Italia, stopping near the small norman church of S. Maria della Scala and gazing at the **marvellous view** over houses, palaces and churches of the baroque town. From this belvedere you can walk down the ancient stairs till the bottom of the town, passing close to the **church of S. Maria dell'Itria**, built by the Knights of Malta in 1639, as witnessed by the cross sign over the portal. At the end of the stairs, at the street corner, stands up **Palazzo Cosentini**, a majestic baroque building with precious **balconies carved with grotesque and allegoric figures and animals**.

Reaching the limit of the historical centre, you can see one of the most known symbols Ragusa Ibla, the beautiful gothic-catalan portal of S. Giorgio, the only part of the ancient medieval church which survived to the earthquake of 1693. Near, the quiet **Iblei gardens**, outstanding the valley, are worth a visit: among luxuriant plants they hide three churches and the Convent of Cappuccini. Take a moment to enter the church of Cappuccini to admire the **tryptic by Pietro Novelli** featuring the Virgin M aria among the Angels and the Saints.

Walking along the main corso XXV aprile up to **Piazza Pola**, on the left corner you will notice the plastic mass of the church of **S. Giuseppe**, a masterpiece by the **ingenius architect Gagliardi**, who also planned the Cathedral of S. Giorgio in Modica and



the Cathedral of **S. Giorgio in Ibla**, spectacularly standing up on the top a wide flight of steps at the end of **Piazza Duomo**, a picturesque square dotted by palms and surrounded by precious baroque palaces. On the left corner of the square, passing under the smart arch of **Palazzo Arezzi**, you can go up to the **University**, where there is a beautiful belvedere over **dome** of the cathedral and the baroque town.

Some suggestions: have a rest tasting **granita or icecream** at *Gelati Divin's*, on piazza Duomo, and have diner at one of the inviting trattorie around Corso XXV aprile, such as the refined *Serafino* near di Piazza Pola, or *la Rusticana* where the famous **Commissario Montalbano** was used to stop for a fresh fish lunch in the well known TV series.

The suggestive **Ibla Grand Prize** is an international summer musical competition, taking place along the streets, the squares and the palaces of the historical centre.

Going up to **Ragusa superiore** stop at the **Cathedral of S. Giovanni** and at the **Archeological Museum**, housing important finds which date back to the ancient people of Siculi and to the several cultures that followed each other in South-Eastern Sicily. Enjoy a rest at the tasteful *Di Pasquale* pastry shop, facing on the street aside the Cathedral and famous for the wide range of cakes and pastries of sicilian tradition.



Scicli is reachable in only 20 minutes from Modica taking the road passing through the luxuriant valley beyond the train station, or also following the main road from the commercial area which leads to the top of the hill outstanding the baroque town, with a beautiful **view over the baroque structure of S. Matteo church**.

In the historical centre, don't miss **Mormino Penna square** and the near **Beneventano Palace**, marvellous example of baroque architecture with majestic balconies carved with odd masks and phantastic animals. Passing close to the elegant church of **S. Bartolomeo** and following the street to S. Matteo, you can notice the several caves in the rocky mountain which were inhabited throughout the ancient times up to XX century, now being partially abandoned or occupied by timeless handicraft shops. At the top of the road follow the path to S. Matteo and stop to admire the view over the town and the sea from the belvedere, surrounded by the wild rocky walls of the mountain.

You can buy tasteful **arancini and focacce** in the bakeries of the historical centre and, should you pass here at Easter, don't miss "**Gioia**", a crazy religious feast of Resurrection crossing the streets of the town.



The baroque armony of Noto

Noto, half an hour far from Modica, is the **symbol of reconstruction**. As a result of the earthquake of 1693, the city was completely destroyed and the works of reconstruction were entrusted to a spanish-sicilian noble, Giuseppe Lanza, duke of Camastra, who make it rebuild 16 km south of the original place, hiring **the most famous architects of that time**, **Vincenzo Sinatra, Paolo Labisi and Rosario Gagliardi**. The new city was built in a very short time, according to a symmetric and harmonious urban plan.

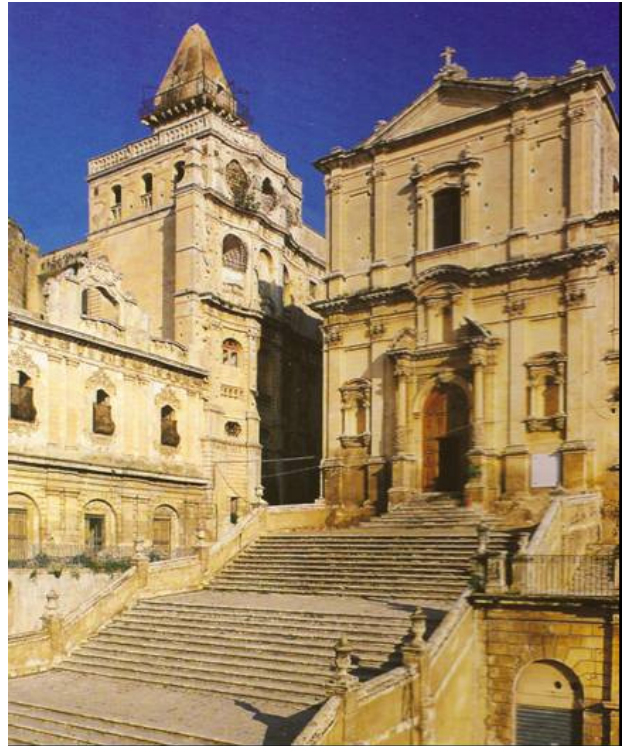
Unfortunately during the XXth century Noto was affected by a progressive deterioration caused by urban traffic and by the weaknesses of the local limestone, along with the lack of restoration, which led to the ruinous collapse of the dome of the Cathedral in 1996. Recently only the structure has been taken to a new splendour after an extremely long work of restoration. Crossing the elegant **Porta Reale** (XIXth century), you enter the historical centre and walk along Corso Vittorio Emanuele III, faced by beautiful noble palaces, by the majestic **Monastery of S. Salvatore** (housing the Municipal Museum), up to the graceful **Piazza del Municipio**, the heart of the city, surrounded by the most refined buildings and by the imposing **Cathedral**, at the top of a spectacular flight of steps and flanked by two bell towers.

In front of the Cathedral is the **Council House**, planned by architect Sinatra, and besides, in via Nicolaci, you can admire the odd **Palazzo Villadorata**, with eccentric balconies carved with griffins, angels and bearded figures. It's worth while visiting the palace inside to grasp the golden splendour of the past, to look at the view from the big windows, and to discover the cellars where ruins of the ancient settlement are still visible.

Don't miss tasting **granita** at *Caffè Sicilia* in Corso Vittorio Emanuele, and **ice creams and confectionery** at the famous *Bar Costanzo* in via Spaventa, just behind the Council House.

Should you come to Noto in spring, in the third sunday of May via Nicolaci houses the marvellous artistic flower exhibition called **Infiolata**.

Noto antica (Ancient Noto), reachable by your own car only, keeps the ruins of the doors and the walls of the settlement dating back before 1693. There is not so much to see, nevertheless the place on the whole is suggestive and it's very pleasant to walk along the paths through the ancient urban centre, full of typical mediterranean plants, with panoramic views over the rocky valley and the sea.



Siracusa, a travel across the time

Unmissable stop of the eighteenth century “Gran Tour” of poets, artists and intellectuals who were visiting Italy coming from all over Europe, **Siracusa** is a condensed mix of history one hour only far from Modica.

The **Archeological Area** and the fascinating **Ortigia**, with its narrow streets, its admirable baroque buildings and the marvellous Piazza del Duomo, need the necessary slowness to appreciate the atmospheres, so plan one full day at least.

Enjoy the night in one of the typical restaurants in the bastions of the harbour tasting the best **sicilian sea food receipts**.



The ancient **Syracusae**, coinciding with the **small island of Ortigia**, was founded around 733 a.C. by **greek colonies**, who came here following the will of the oracle of Delfi. Making alliance with the other greek cities of Agrigento and Gela, Siracusa won against the armies of Cartagine and became one of the most powerful commercial and maritime cities of ancient world under the tyrant Gelone. The building of the most remarkable monuments, erected by the efforts of the slaves from the battles, dates to that time.

Having one of the most powerful fleet of that time, the greek city of Athen was led to intervene in order to control the ambitious aims of expansion of Siracusa. However the Great Expedition of 413 a.C. failed and Siracusa was blamed by all ancient world for having segregated the prisoners of Athen in horrible conditions inside the sadly famous “**latomie**” throughout seven long years : some of them are still open to visits today inside the Archeological Area. The **Latomia del Paradiso**, housing a luxuriant garden of orange trees, palms and magnolia trees, is the most famous one for the popular **ear of Dioniso**, an artificial cave so called by the painter **Caravaggio** being as like as an auricle. Its special acoustic features, according to the legend, had been used by the tyrant Dionigi to secretly listen to the conversations of the prisoners from Athen suspected of being potential conspirators.



The **tyrants of Siracusa** longed for power and were clever to keep it, trying to show a cultural attitude which made friction with their warlike behaviour. **Gerone I** invited the famous Pindaro and Eschilo, who probably was present at the show of his last theatrical works *Prometeus chained* and *Prometeus freed*. The cruel **Dionigi I**, who ordered the construction of **Eurialo Castle**, the most beautiful and well preserved greek building in the Mediterranean (out of the modern city), was even used to join the poetry competition which took place yearly during the Olimpiadi. **Gerone II** was wiser, being able to defend the city from the roman rule by means of diplomacy and renouncing to expansion politics. He committed to erecting important buildings such as the **Ara di Gerone II** (Altar of Gerone II) and the enlargement of the **Greek Theater**, the capacity of which went up to 15.000 spectators.

In June absolutely don't miss **the greek tragedies in the theater** starting from sunset, in a really unique environment (www.indafondazione.org)

After the death of Gerone II, along with all other sicilian cities, Siracusa made alliance with Cartagine against Rome during the second «punica» war. The Romans besieged Siracusa throughout two years, being hindered by the ingenious machineries – such as the famous burning mirrors – invented by the well known greek scientist and philosopher **Archimede**, but in 211 b.C. Siracusa was finally conquered and sacked and Archimede himself was killed by a soldier despite the opposite orders by roman general Marcello.

The end of the rule of Siracusa changed the balances of ancient world. Under the control of the Romans the city decayed, even if always succeeded in keeping a predominant role over the other sicilian cities. In the Neapolis, where now is the Archeological Area, **the Roman Amphitheater** was built to satisfy the desire for competitions: by the length of 140 mt, it became **one of the biggest theatres of ancient world**.

During the Christian era the city played an important role, as the several **catacombs** still witness, being **the largest italian network of christian tombs after the roman ones and the oldest all over Sicily**. You can visit the catacombs in the district of Tyche near the **church of S. Giovanni**, the suggestive stone skeleton of which still stands after the earthquake of 1693.

In the surroundings there are the **Museum of Papyrus** and the very interesting **Archeological Museum**, where you can admire its masterpiece, the **Venere Anadiomene** (literally "rising from the sea"), a wonderful expression of sensuality, probably a roman revisal (1st cent. A.D.) borrowed from an original greek piece by Prassitele.

Visit also the **Sanctuary of Madonna delle Lacrime** (Madonna of the Tears), with its majestic tear-shaped architecture, housing a small statue of Madonna who is told to have cried bloody tears throughout 5 days in 1953.

Around the 7th century A.D. Siracusa became the capital of the bizantine empire for a short time, but after it decayed again during the arab, norman and medieval ages.

Ortigia, the heart and the soul of Siracusa itself, is worth while being crossed by loosing yourself along its narrow streets, discovering the squares, the secret corners, the trendy cafes, following the smell of the sea.

Starting from Piazza XXV luglio, you meet the ruins of the **Temple of Apollo**, perhaps the first Doric temple to be erected in Sicily. After you reach Piazza Archimede, surrounded by gothic-catalan monuments and marked by a central fountain dating back to the beginning of 20th century and featuring the nymph Aretusa, symbol of Ortigia, just in the moment of being transformed into a spring.

Getting to the **bastions**, you can admire the famous **Castle Maniace**, built by emperor Federico II at the entrance of the port in the 13th century (currently not open to visits being a military zone). Its massive square structure surrounded by towers is one of the few medieval buildings which survived to the earthquake of 1693, along with the refined **Palace Montalto**, located in the homonymous lane near Piazza Archimede, dating back to the 15th century.

The very elegant **Piazza del Duomo** is certainly **the most scenografic and harmonious place** of the city: by its long-shaped plan, it is surrounded by beautiful baroque buldings such as the Council House, **Palazzo Vermexio**, housing the foundations of an ancient Ionic temple, **Palazzo Beneventano**, the church of **Santa Lucia alla Badia** and the superb **Duomo**, **perfect example of stylistic blend of different ages**. It was erected in the 7th century on an **existing Doric temple**, the massive columns of which are still well visibile in the walls of the aisles and in the western norman side of the cathedral, which got its baroque look with the collapse of the old structure during the earthquake of 1693.

The **Regional Museum of Medieval and Modern Art** is worth a visit: housed in the marvellous **Palazzo Bellomo** and **Palazzo Parisio**, it holds two such masterpieces as the **Annunciazione by Antonello da Messina** and the **Seppellimento di Santa Lucia by Caravaggio**.

Proceeding from the museum to the sea along via Capodieci, you finally reach Piazzetta Largo Aretusa, where the famous **Fonte Aretusa (Aretusa spring)** comes out, being mentioned even in the ancient words of the **oracle of Delfi** who led the first greek colonies to leave for Siracusa. This fresh water spring, celebrated by Virgilio and Pindaro, is connected to the myth of nymph Aretusa, who escaped from love of the greedy god-river Alfeo and swam up to this place from Peloponneso asking for the help of goddess Artemide, who transformed her into a spring. Nevertheless the obstinate Alfeo succeeded in getting to her by flowing underwater in the sea and finally merging his waters with her ones. The spring, surrounded by papyrus plants, has always caused **great suggestion on travellers and writers of the 18th century Gran Tour**, and it is now a usual stop along the night walk of the people of Siracusa.

Palazzolo Acreide, among greek and baroque memories

Following the road from Modica Alta to Giarratana and crossing a perfect countryside dotted with master's villas, "carrubi" trees and dry stone walls, you reach **Palazzolo Acreide** in less than one hour. The town prides very ancient origins and took its name from the greek colony of *Akrai*, the ruins of which are still visible inside the **archeological area** (9.00 am-2 hours before sunset, sometimes closed at lunchtime), where there is a very nice **greek theater**, seating up to 600 persons and dating back to the end of the reign of Gerone II. Nearby there are two "latomie" (rock caves), called **Intagliata** and **Intagliatella**, keeping christian and byzantine tombs inside.



It's worth while asking the guardian the way to the so called **Santoni**, about 10' walk from the archeological site: it consists of a series of 12 figures carved in the rock, featuring the **mysterious mother-goddess Cibele**, a Middle Eastern divinity connected to the worship of fertility, surrounded by priests, lions and other gods. The name given to these statues dates back to the 3rd century B.C. at least and reveals the feeling of respect and fear that this divinity has been suggesting since the ancient times up to recent times.

The **baroque historical centre** spreads around the main Piazza del Popolo, overlooked by the majestic facade of the **Cathedral of S. Sebastiano**, at the top of a wide flight of steps, and by the 19th century Council House. By walking along the lanes of the town, marked by many buildings of character, it's worth while stopping at **Museum-House of Antonino Uccello** (all days 9-13, 15.30-19) in via Macchiavelli 19, dedicated to the poet and anthropologist who devoted 30 years of his life to the study and the preservation of the traditions and the folklore of his land. The building houses up to 5000 tools and memories of the rural tradition and represents the widest evidence of popular art of Eastern Sicily.

Should you come to Palazzolo in winter, let yourself be overwhelmed by the frenzied **Carnevale**, along with the Sagra of sausage (the local cooking is famous for the pork just as that one of Chiaramonte Gulfi) and strong red wine. **From 26th to 29th June** take part to the **spectacular religious feast of S. Paolo** along the streets of the town.

The famous Caltagirone pottery

The city of **Caltagirone** is about 75 km from Ragusa following SS. 514 Ragusa-Catania or 60 km from Palazzolo Acreide following SS. 124 to Buccheri – Vizzini.

Caltagirone is told to date back to a **pregreek age**, even if its name comes from the arab period (from *calata*, "castle" and *gerun*, "caves"), but nowadays its name is famous all over the world for the production of the **extremely valuable pottery**. The **arabs themselves** contributed to the blossoming of the pottery market, by teaching the secrets of the majolica working process to the local people, (that glazed polychrome colors, especially yellow and blue, which would have marked the sicilian pottery handicrafts).



Just as all other urban centres in Val di Noto, the current look of Caltagirone comes from the late-baroque reconstruction after the earthquake of 1693, who also led to the large use of ceramics in architecture, whereas the 19th century was marked by the spreading of a more figurative gusto, which you can still admire today in the precious artworks of the **Museum of Pottery**. Near the **Cathedral**, revised during the 19th century, there is the **Pottery Permanent Show** (open 9-20 all days), set out in Piazza Umberto and in the premises close to Via V. Emanuele, probably the **best place for shopping of modern pottery**.

For the best appreciation of the contribute of craftsmen to the urban architecture go to the famous **stair**, an imposing flight of marvellous hand coloured ceramics steps leading up to the hill of Maria del Monte. On one side of the stair you can visit the **artisan shops and art galleries** of the local ceramists. During the **religious feast of S. Giacomo** (24th-25th July), the steps of the stair are evocatively enlightened by thousands of small lamps wrapped into coloured paper.

If you like tasting a **refined menu** with good quality/price ratio go to the restaurant *I marchesi di Santa Barbara*, near the bottom of the stair and housed in an imposing noble palace in via S. Bonaventura 22, with summer terrace and also piano music in the weekends.