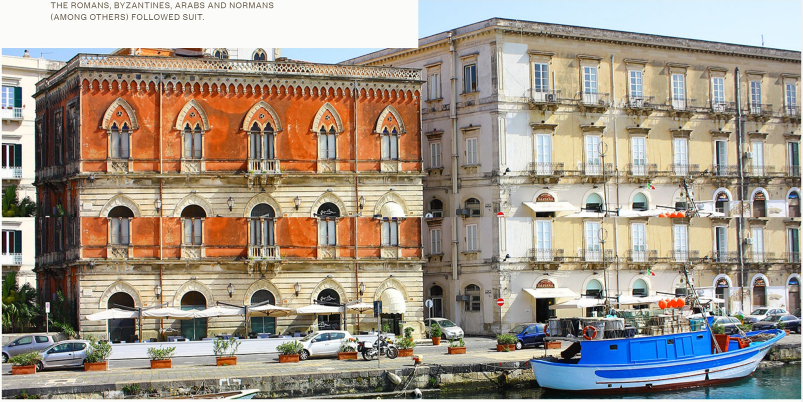
Ortigia: a Sicilian retreat where culture meets "la dolce vita"

THE ANCIENT GREEKS, WHO KNEW A THING OR TWO, CHOSE IT FOR THEIR FIRST SETTLEMENT IN THE REGION. THE ROMANS, BYZANTINES, ARABS AND NORMANS (AMONG OTHERS) FOLLOWED SUIT.



Ortigia, a tiny island off the south-east coast of Sicily, connected to the city of Siracusa (Syracuse) by bridge, has been a highly sought-after stretch of land ever since. Today a new tribe of invaders is descending on the island: artists, writers, bohemians, bon-vivants, alerted by subtle word of mouth and enchanted by the mild weather, the mirror-like Ionian Sea, the friendliness of the locals and a Sicilian "dolce vita". A creative tribe that is making this architectural jewel, peppered with Greek, Roman, Medieval and Baroque structures, an artistic retreat à la Saint Paul de Vence in France with a unique Southern Italian vibe.

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Ponte Umbertino.

Accessed via the hustle &amp; bustle of Siracusa, the island is a world away from the city.
Lose yourself in the maze of “vicoli” (narrow lanes) concealing ornate palaces with elaborately sculpted balconies, Baroque and Medieval churches, and idyllic courtyards where life seems to stand still.
Take a stroll around the “lungomare” (the island’s coastal perimeter road), dotted with small beaches and sunbathing platforms.

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Voltive alter in the chapel of San Sebastiano.

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Temple of Apollo.

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Palazzo dell’Orologio.

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Palazzo Montalto.

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View of Ortigia’s Lungomare.

Immerse yourself in the symphony of colours, smells and sounds of the Food Market, an explosion of Mediterranean joie de vivre where vendors call out in sing-song and spices scent the air. If visiting in May/June/July, don´t miss the Rappresentazioni Classiche, classic Greek tragedies held in the open-air Greek Theatre. And bear in mind that the island is a short hop away from the unspoiled beaches and cultural treasures of the south-east coast of Sicily, dubbed “the new Tuscany”. An exotic slice of Italy just a few hours away. Pack your bags!

Sicilian delicacies at Fratelli Burgio.

The food market enchants visitors with scents of various spices.

Fish assortment at the food market.

Freshly caught mussels.

SIGHT-SEE

Start your tour from the **Duomo Square**, the heart of the island, an expanse of dazzling white stone surrounded by Baroque palaces. Visit the majestic **Cathedral** built on the Greek temple of Athena, where the Doric columns are still visible. Peek into the courtyard of the magnificent **Palazzo Beneventano** del Bosco, still owned by the eponymous family. Pause in the penumbra of the **Santa Lucia Church** to admire the dramatic strokes of “The Burial of Santa Lucia” by Caravaggio, the first oeuvre in Sicily by the master of cinematic light. Explore the nearby **Bellomo Museum**, housed in a 12th century structure, boasting Sicilian art from the Byzantine era to modern times (the must-see is the “Annunciazione” by Antonello da Messina). Watch the swans frolic among the papyrus of the **Fonte Aretusa** (Fountain of Arethusa), a freshwater spring where the nymph Arethusa returned to earth according to Greek mythology. Make sure you visit the delightful museum of the imposing **Castello Maniace**, the castle on the island’s peak that served as the residence of Emperor Frederick. And admire the remains of the **Temple of Apollo**, the most ancient Doric temple in Sicily, each of whose timeworn stones tells its own story.

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Santa Lucia alla Badia church.

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Piazza del Duomo.

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Castello Maniace.

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La Foglia.

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Fratelli Burgio serves Sicilian dilicacies on wooden boards

EAT

Volcanic soil and endless sun make Sicilian produce an explosion of flavour; fish is sourced from the surrounding waters. Eating in Sicily, where the sophisticated cuisine is influenced by Arab, French and Spanish traditions, is an art form, and Ortigia is no exception. Savour freshly caught fish in dishes such as the Tonno alla Matalotta (tuna fish with capers and olives) at la **Darsena da Iannuzzo**, where the passionate owner is the son of the founder and the veranda overlooks the fishing port. Enjoy cuisine from south-east Sicily and wines from Mount Etna at **Monzù**, a stylish venue next to the Duomo Square ideal for dining al fresco and people-watching. Sample products from the surrounding region at **A Putia**, a casual venue in the central via Roma, where the Pasta Arriminata with broccoli, pine nuts, anchovies and garlic is particularly memorable. For delicious home cooking by Nicoletta Pravato and sculptures by her husband Bepi, head to **La Foglia**, where the atmosphere is charming and the pasta home-made (don´t miss the Ravioli alla Norma with fresh tomato, basil and ricotta cheese). Pizza lovers will rejoice at **Pizzeria Timilia**, where the pizza dough is made with “timilia”, a local low-gluten grain bursting with minerals and vitamins, a real superfood. Vegans can get their fix at **Moon**, a cool bistrot where visiting musicians perform, while a meal in the outdoors Food Market is a real experience, with venues such as **Fratelli Burgio**, serving Sicilian specialities on wooden boards, or **Oz & Cappuccio**, co-owned by former bass player of “The Whitest Boy Alive” Marcin Oz, dishing up high quality street food made with the freshest fish (try the Swordfish Burger), will make you feel part of the local vibe.

SHOP

Looking for something Sicilian to bring home? Head to **Le Antiche Siracuse**, an airy boutique stocking a curated selection of top quality Sicilian products such as the sublime organic orange blossom honey by Masseria di Scifazzi or the jams by Marchesi di San Giuliano, as well as the uberchic swimming shorts by Olmaia and the fragrant cosmetics by Ortigia Sicilia. Local products from just one farm are available at **Trimarchi di Villa Marchese**, a sliver of a store where you can discover delicacies such as pistachio or almond pesto, hazelnut spreads, and the “capuliato”, a fabulous sundried tomato sauce made with the famous Pachino tomatoes. For design objects made in Sicily and typical Sicilian ceramics with a twist, head to **Arricreati Store** by interior designer Mariaconcetta Confalone. A selection of chic ethnic items such as embroidered Indian coats and jackets, cashmere shawls and Tibetan jewellery can be found at the **Boutique** of the Residence Hotel alla Giudecca. Extravagant, slightly Baroque and certainly unique are the jewels by designer **Massimo Izzo**, inspired by sea creatures and created with local stones and corals; visit his eponymous boutique to admire them.

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Arricreati.

Sweet Sicily
MIELE
MIELE
Sweet Sicily
© Thomas Gallagher

Le Antiche Siracuse.

© Thomas Gallagher

Boutique Hotel Algilá.

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The Residence Hotel alla Giudecca has suites with private terraces.

STAY

If a sea view is a must, choose the **Hotel Algilà**: occupying two 17 th century palaces on the lungomare, this boutique hotel, where each room is different, features deluxe spa rooms with sea-facing terraces equipped with a jacuzzi or mini-pool. Or stay at the charming **Hotel Gutkowski**, an intimate address where the décor is a mix of Sicilian antiques, recycled furniture, design objects and custom-made artisanal pieces, and most of the minimalist rooms have a sea view. The cosy 9 table restaurant serves typical Sicilian cuisine concocted with fresh regional produce. Built on ancient Jewish thermal baths, the **Residence Hotel alla Giudecca**, with Sicilian antiques and exotic artefact embellishing the communal areas, features suites with mini-kitchens and private terraces. Location is the strong point of the **Antico Hotel Roma 1880**, situated smack in the middle of the island on the central via Roma, a few footsteps from Duomo Square.

DAY TRIPS

"The limestone capital of Sicilian Baroque", **Noto** is a jewel of a town with an impressive concentration of magnificent palaces and churches: in summer, concerts, exhibitions and happenings bring it to life. If you want to spend the night in the area, check out French interior designer Jacques Garcia´s Maison des Oliviers (https://www.jacquesgarcianoto.com/).

Popularised by TV series 'Inspector Montalbano', the sleepy town of **Modica** is not just famous for its delicious chocolate produced to an ancient Aztec recipe: its stunning architecture is a mixture of magnificent Gothic and Baroque structures. On the last Sunday of the month, visit its antique market, where you can uncover real finds.

Baroque opulence interspersed with Neoclassical style is the hallmark of the delightful town of **Scicli** (a UNESCO World Heritage Site together with Noto and Ragusa Ibla), where the highlights include grand palaces, convents, churches and an impressive castle. The town is just a few kilometres away from the sandy beaches of Sampieri and Donnalucata.

Baroque "palazzi" and churches also abound in the lower area of Ragusa, **Ragusa Ibla**, one of the most picturesque towns in Sicily, separated from Ragusa superior, the more modern part, by a deep ravine. The view of the old town from above is breath-taking.

The **Vendicari Nature Reserve** is not only an ornithologist's paradise (flamingos and cormorants migrate here in autumn): with its lagoons, sandy dunes and one of the most beautiful beaches in Sicily (semi-deserted out of season), it is an unspoiled paradise. And there are also the remains of an original "tonnara" (tuna fishery).

The Ragusa Ibla district.

ARTICLE BY Alessandra Signorelli

BACK