

Sicily's Siracusa: Almost Grecian

Siracusa, once one of the great powers of the Western world, is absent from lists of most visited places in Italy. That's a shame, but it's good news for those of us who love history and prefer to avoid invading tourist hordes. Corinthian colonists founded Siracusa in 734 B.C. and it eventually rivaled Athens, and was on equal footing with Carthage and Rome. It was the city of *Archimedes*, *Pindar* and *Aeschylus*.

To spend time in Siracusa is to experience ancient Greece, well represented in the culture, amphitheatres and architecture of this city on Sicily's southeastern coast. Book a hotel in the most charming and oldest section of the city, the island of *Ortigia*. A short bridge connects Ortigia to the mainland part of town. There you'll visit the vast complex that includes the national archeological park and museum (*Parco Archeologico della Neapolis*) and the *Museo Archeologico Regionale*.

Ortigia was considered a sacred island, inhabited by priests and rulers such as the tyrant Dionysius. Now, in addition to its compact historic center and churches, it offers great shops and excellent restaurants. Facades of beautiful buildings face *Piazza Duomo*, but none is more striking than the main attraction, the Duomo itself: Norman windows, Byzantine chapels, Baroque façade, Spanish floors! This cathedral has served as a place of worship — continuously — for more than 2,500 years by people of different spiritual persuasions.

Once upon a time there was a place where pagans worshipped. In the 5th century B.C., Greeks built a temple to

Athena over that. In 1700, the Duomo gained its dramatic Baroque facade. In between, in the 7th century A.D., a Christian church was built over the Greek temple. The massive Doric columns were preserved.



Neil Weightman, flickr.com

Ortigia

Those columns are visible today, some embedded in the wall on the *Via Minerva* side of the Duomo, and others incorporated in the interior, connecting ornate iron gates that form a row of chapels. The most important chapel holds the silver statue of Saint Lucy, patron saint of the city. The 15-year-old Christian refused to marry a pagan and was martyred in 304 A.D. Her feast day is December 13.

The *Caravaggio* painting, *Burial of Saint Lucy*, is one of Ortigia's must-sees. It's part of the collection of the *Bellomo Regional Museum*, but while it's closed for restoration and renovation, the painting will be where it was originally intended to be: above the altar of the *Chiesa di Santa Lucia alla Badia* in the Piazza Duomo.

If you are in Ortigia on a weekend, there will almost certainly be weddings at the Duomo. When I visited in May, a beautiful young couple was walking to the *Largo Aretusa* for a photo op with the Ionian Sea serving as backdrop. Adults were clapping. A group of children parted and let the couple walk through the middle to hearty cheers.

If you can take your eyes off the bride, observe the guests. In Sicily, even daytime weddings seem to require some sparkle. The dresses I saw were elabo-

rate, ruffled, glittery, and long. The men's suits — no surprise — were impeccably tailored.

Ortigia's *Piazza Archimede* is practically modern, created in the late 19th century, but many buildings on the square date from earlier periods, such as the 15th-century *Palazzo Lanza-Buccheri*. The centerpiece is the gorgeous *Fontana di Artemide* (sometimes referred to as the Fontana di Diana, the other name for the goddess of hunting).

The fountain depicts the legend of the nearby freshwater *Spring of Aretusa*, which is that the Greek goddess Artemis (Artemide) saved her handmaiden Aretusa from unwelcome pursuit by a river god by turning her into a spring of water. The transformed maiden fled underwater and emerged in Ortigia. In ancient times this spring was the city's sole source of fresh water, and it is still bubbling up alongside the salt water sea today.

A recent discovery on Ortigia occurred in 1989 during the restoration of a medieval palazzo, *Alla Giudecca Residence Hotel*. Three Jewish ritual baths (*mikvah*), were found 30 feet down. The Jewish community, once quite large, was expelled during the Inquisition. These are the oldest Jewish ritual baths in Europe open to the public. Tours are available.

Once you tear yourself away from fascinating Ortigia, head over to Siracusa's most-visited site, Parco Archeologico della Neapolis, an immense spread of substantial Greek and Roman ruins. The two most distinctive is the *Teatro Grec*, the largest amphitheater in Sicily, which was carved out of the hill in the 6th century

continued on next page



Il Canina, flickr.com

Duomo

Siracusa *continued*

B.C. and held 15,000 spectators (now it seats about 7,000). *Prometheus Bound* was performed here, with its author, Aeschylus, in attendance. Well-attended classical dramas and comedies are staged at this theater every summer.

Across the park, the Roman Amphitheater, from the 2nd century A.D., is not as well preserved. It was used for gladiator battles and horse racing.

Nearby, what has to be one of the coolest caves on earth is the funnel-shaped Ear of Dionysius (*Orecchio di Dioniso*), the tyrant, not the god. It is part of the huge quarry that

provided stone for building the city. The echoes are tremendous, and if you are lucky someone with a fabu-

lous voice will start to sing as he or she approaches and enters. Our guide said "The Ear" was probably built by quarry bosses to spy on their workers, otherwise known as prisoners.

The Street of Tombs is an ancient street with votive niches and Byzantine graves next to a grotto that was fed with water from an aqueduct.

Be sure to stop in at *Archeologico Regionale Paolo Orsi*, whose collection



Teatro Greco

spans from prehistoric to the Greek colonies. If you see nothing else, the most important

piece is the headless *Venus Landolina* (or Venus Rising from the Sea) from the 2nd century B.C. The model is thought to have been a mistress of Alexander the Great. One of the most fun pieces is *Gorgon*, fanged and sticking out his tongue to once ward off evil spirits from the Temple of Athena.

Siracusa is a city of significant historical interest. But this is still Italy, after all, so it's also full of energy, warmth, serendipity, and great food and wine. Enjoy!

— Ann Cochran



Ear of Dionysius

The Details

Where to Stay

Hotel des Étrangers et Miramare

Passaggio Adorno, 10/12
(39) 931 319100
www.hotel-desetrangers.it

Rates: A double room with breakfast usually starts at 210€ per night but the hotel Web site offers up to 50% off rack rates.

There is a lot of marble in this stylish hotel. The elegant rooms are just that – elegant and not fussy, which is refreshing. Many of the 78 rooms have balconies overlooking the sea. The hotel is situated across the street from the Fonte Aretusa and has a rooftop restaurant with good western views of the port and mainland Siracusa.

Domus Mariae

Via Vittorio Veneto, 76
(39) 931 24858
www.sistemia.it/domusmariae

Rates: Start at 100€ per night, with breakfast.

The service is friendly and helpful at this converted convent, as one might expect from a business owned and managed by nuns. Six of the 12 rooms have views of the sea, looking east. Rooms are nicely furnished and have a small refrigerator; the beds are comfortable and bathrooms are modern. There's a roof terrace, chapel and library. It unexpectedly has free parking, right next door.

Where to Eat

Ottocento

Via Roma, 5
(39) 931 483003
www.ottocentoristorante.com
Open for lunch and dinner daily except Tuesday.

There's always local swordfish on the menu that also includes linguine with a pistachio pesto sauce – yum. The manager belted out a few tunes when I was there. Irresistible desserts come from the café on the

ground floor, where there is also a gourmet and ceramics shop. Ottocento is elegant but reasonably priced. I was told by my hotel concierge that locals love it for wedding receptions and parties, always a good sign.

Ristorante L'Ancora

Via G. Perno 7
(39) 931 462369
www.ristoranteancora.com

I had seafood here that defies translation, but it was all good and may have been netted just before lunch. Sit outside and gaze at the sea while you eat its bounty.

Shopping

This is the source of divine Ortigia candles and bath products (at *Le Antiche Siracuse*; Via Roma, 9; 39-0931-461365) made from natural local ingredients like lime and blood orange. Also for sale here: gorgeous ceramics, ancient coins reproduced

in gold and lesser metals, local honey and olive oils. Papyrus paper, painted and plain, is also popular, since it grows here in the Spring of *Fontana Aretusa* and along the town's short river, the endangered and protected *Fiume Ciani*. Outside North Africa, Ortigia is the only place papyrus grows wild.

Tour Guide

Lucia Iacono

(39) 347 7533898
luciaiacono@virgilio.it

Rates: 110€ for a half-day tour; 180€ for a full day.

Lucy was born in Siracusa on St. Lucy's Day (December 13). She has a degree in foreign languages from Catania University and speaks English and German fluently. She has given tours to the family of George H.W. Bush, actors Jessica Lange and Steve Martin as well as designer Giorgio Armani.

Explore the Seaside Paradise of Cefalù

Approaching *Cefalù* often evokes a gasp. Its buildings seem to be tumbling down an incline onto a spit of land that stretches out to the Tyrrhenian Sea. Exploring its winding, narrow, medieval streets and squares and strolling along the *lungomare* (seaside promenade) casts a *dolce vita* spell.

Captured in the Oscar-winning film *Cinema Paradiso*, this fishing village is on a rocky crescent of the northern coast of Sicily 50 miles to the east of *Palermo*, which is an hour away by train, 90 minutes by car.

Join the natives in the social event of the day, the evening *passeggiata* (little walk) down the main street, *Corso Ruggero*, lined with clothing, jewelry, textile and ceramics shops. *Via Vittorio Emanuele*, close to the sea and becoming the *lungomare*, has restaurants, bars, and souvenir shops. Although the whole town is photo-worthy, the tiny fishing harbor is a must-click, with colorful boats and fishing nets drying in the sun.



lindawild, flickr.com

Slightly inland, a massive limestone promontory, *La Rocca*, rises 900 feet in elevation, dominating the townscape. The strenuous 40-minute climb to the top is worth the effort. Aside from expansive views, there are remnants of old fortifications and the *Tempio di Diana* from the 5th century B.C., among the oldest ruins in Sicily.



hui Ornelas, flickr.com

Having been inhabited for centuries, Sicily's King Roger II decided Cefalù needed to be updated and organized a

reconstruction in 1131. He extended the city up the hill, guided by the old Roman streets and preserving the town design that remains today.

While he was at it, he built the grand *Duomo di Cefalù*. Instantly recognizable, two four-story towers soar above their surroundings. The architecture is referred to as Norman but it is more accurately Sicilian Romanesque.

The interior is rich in well-preserved mosaics, none more dramatic than the large Christ Pantokrator (almighty), his hand raised in benediction. Its glittering gold background dominates the apse, above a Madonna, archangels and apostles.

The legend of this cathedral is that Roger II, lost at sea in a violent storm, made a deal with God: if he lived he would construct a fine cathedral in the Almighty's honor. The truth may be more related to a political rivalry, but themes of gratitude



girilame, flickr.com

and miracles — in the form of loaves and fishes — are part of the city's shield. If you'd like a little more culture before hitting the beach, try the eclectic museum, the *Mandralisca*, featuring one masterpiece, painted in 1465 by *Antonello da Messina*. The subject of his Portrait of an Unknown Man is said to be as enigmatic as the *Mona Lisa*. You be the judge.

In season, Cefalù is unmistakably a beach town. The beach is one of the best in Sicily and the region's weather is usually warm well into October, an ideal time to visit.

— Ann Cochran

The Details

Where to Eat

Al Gabbiano

Via Lungomare Giardina, 17
(39) 0921 421495
Open for lunch and dinner every day except Monday.

Directly across from Cefalù's most popular beach, this woodsy-looking tavern has timbers and exposed stone. You can't go wrong with fresh-grilled fish, particularly locally caught swordfish, fava beans on the side.

Osteria del Duomo

Via Seminario, 3
(39) 0921 421838
Open for lunch and dinner.
Closed Wednesday between September and June.

You wouldn't expect a sophisticated restaurant with great food and fair prices to be on the square in front of the famous cathedral, but that's the delightful case with Osteria del Duomo. Best dishes include smoked fish and seafood salads.

Where to Stay

Villa Gaia

Via M. V. Pintorno, 101
(39) 0921 420992
www.villagaiahotel.it

Rates: A double room with breakfast ranges from 110 to 190€, depending on the season.

Guests have the best of both worlds at this hotel: it's across from the beach and a 10-minute walk to the center of town. Bathrooms are spacious and modern. Free parking is a real bonus in tiny Cefalù.

The original name for Cefalu was the Greek *Kephalos*.