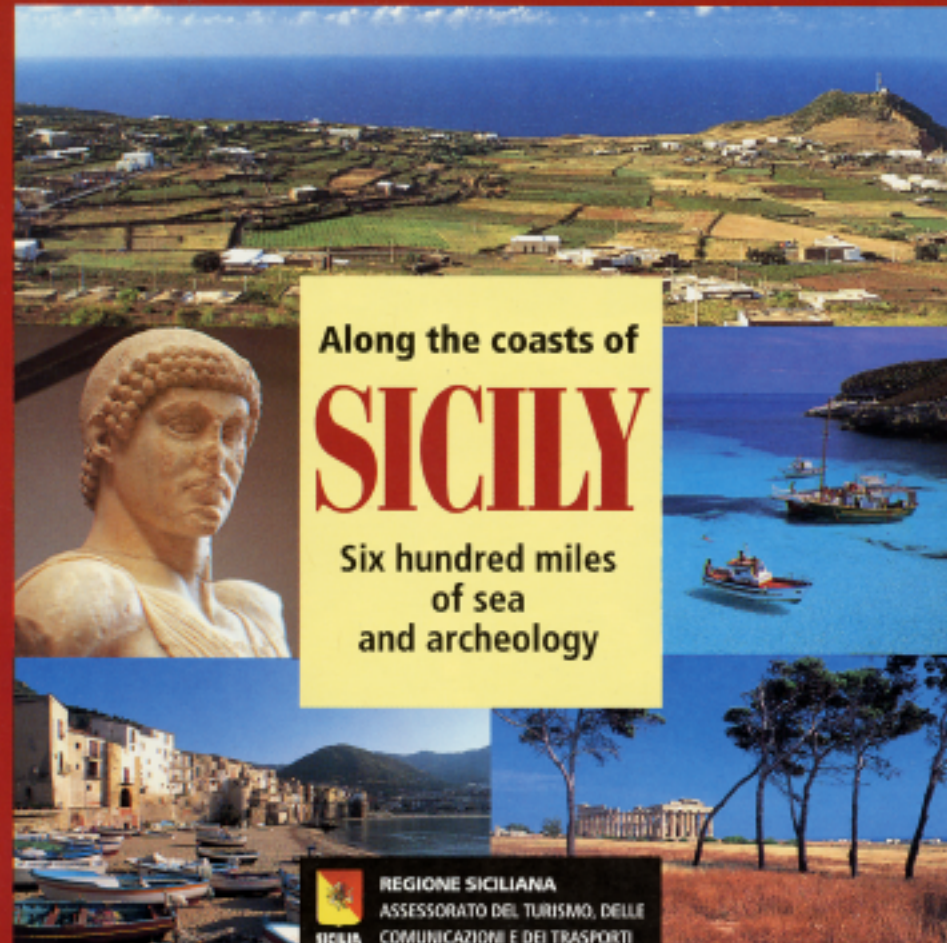


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Along the coasts of

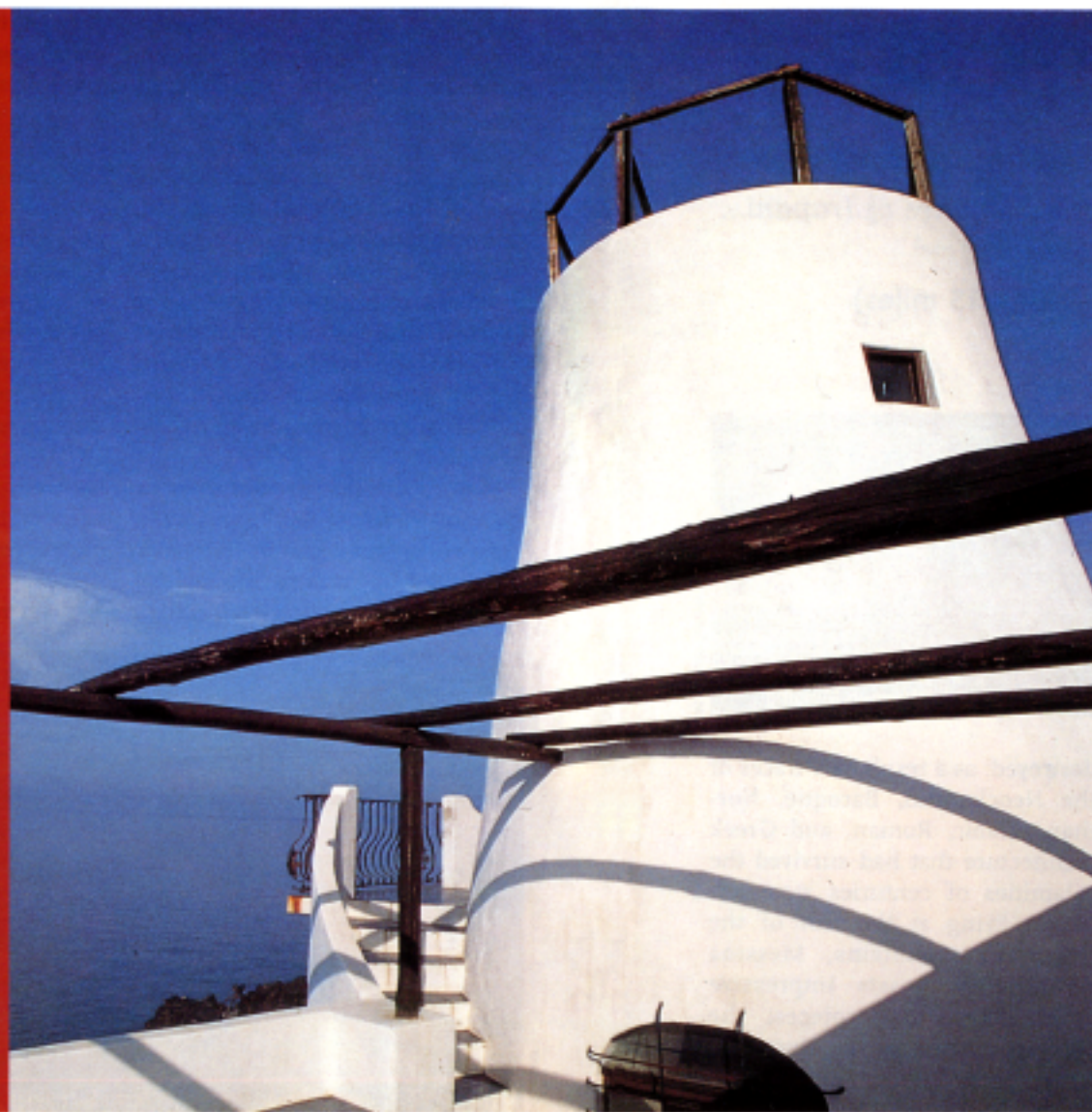
SICILY

Six hundred miles
of sea
and archeology



REGIONE SICILIANA
ASSESSORATO DEL TURISMO, DELLE
COMUNICAZIONI E DEI TRASPORTI

A practical guide to the most beautiful stretches of the Sicilian coastline and an indispensable tool for a vacation of sea, archeology, and the most authentic of Sicilian traditions. Begin your tour in Messina and see the island on three glorious itineraries. And for those who enjoy the remote, pristine outdoors, the fourth itinerary is devoted to all of Sicily's smaller islands.



M. Castaghi

Along the coasts of **SICILY**

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The Temple Coast

The Baroque Architecture of Modica, the Wonders of Agrigento, and the Wine Cellars of Marsala

From Scicli to Trapani (216 miles)

From Scicli to Gela

Scicli lies just inland from the coast, only a little above the southernmost tip of Sicily. Once a Norman city, it saw its greatest moment during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The plague and the earthquake of 1693 didn't break the spirit of its inhabitants: they sold everything they had—even the urn of San Guglielmo, now lost—

and rebuilt their city. A tenacious people, they worked over the course of three centuries to give Scicli its current face, a harmonious mixture of various styles.

The heart of this amazing city beats along Via Francesco Mormina Penna, lined with churches, patrician dwellings, late-Baroque buildings, and nineteenth- and twentieth-century palaces. The most notable sights are the eighteenth-century part of this central Via and the Palazzo Benevento, built in the eighteenth century and the only one of its type in all of Sicily, adorned with grotesque masks and figures mingling in a fantastic web of motion. Above the rooftops of the city rises the Church of San Matteo, lying on the hill of San Matteo; once it was the ancient Church of Madre di Scicli, but it was later trans-



The Gela territory

G. Cozzi/Westside

M. Tondello/Photo Store



Sun and stone: the palazzi of Scicli



buttress that was instrumental in the consolidation of the territory and fundamental in developing the ancient irrigation network for cultivation of the land below. At the very top, where the sky and earth meet, the Greek theater fuses with the natural slope of the hill against the perfect backdrop of the bay of Schisò. "When you arrive at the top of the walls of stone that rise not far from the beach, you come upon peaks that are united by a semi-circle. He who sits there, where the [ancient Greek] spectators used to sit, at the highest point, cannot help but admit that the audience of a theater has never had such a spectacle before him." Goethe wrote these inspired words when he arrived in Taormina on May 7, 1787. To see a play here, indeed, is an amazing and truly unforgettable experience. (For more information, you can contact the Azienda Autonoma at Piazza Santa Caterina, 011/39/0942/23243.)

Just a few kilometers to the south, in the bay of Schisò, you will discover the Giardini Naxos, a famous seaside town and a cosmopolitan meeting ground for the entire island. Here you can visit the amazing excavation at



The Gole dell'Alcantara

Naxos, site of a settlement that dates back to the sixth century B.C. The Greeks first landed here in 735 B.C., centuries before the Romans began to expand their empire. Legend holds that it was Theocles and his men who first set foot on these shores, forced to anchor here by a sudden storm. Cape Schisò, with its serene and beautiful sandy beaches and its port ideal for commercial development, suited him well. As soon as Theocles and his men were settled, they were quick to build an altar in honor of the god Apollo. The temple later became an important sanctuary and mandatory stop for Greeks passing through before

they would set sail for their beloved homeland. A terrible and bloody conflict would mark the end of Naxos in 403 B.C.: the city was destroyed by descendants of the very people who had founded it centuries before.

As you head inland and you move beyond the archeological site, you can follow the route along the Alcantara river that leads to the Gole dell'Alcantara, a series of breathtaking gorges. These geological formations were sculpted in the black stone—they almost look like deep wounds in the rock—by the water in the basalt rock produced by the prehistoric eruption

RAGUSA, THE KINGDOM OF BAROQUE

Ragusa is undeniably the greatest example of Baroque architecture in all of Sicily. Its religious and municipal buildings, its churches and palaces represent an innovative impulse in Baroque art. A veritable army of architects and contractors have painstakingly

reconstructed Ragusa's buildings stone by stone after the many earthquakes the town has endured over the centuries. Amazing examples of Baroque sculpture adorn the buildings, their balconies and their arresting façades, and more than a handful of artists have made a permanent

mark in art history with their work in this wonderful city. In Ragusa you will see sirens, monsters, old men, fauns, and horses chasing each other around the buildings with a grace unmatched elsewhere. Mythological, historical, and Christian figures are paired with monsters and

bizarre animals dating back to the Greek temples and Romanic cathedrals, a unique network of games and oddities that oscillate between wonderment and sarcasm. Each decorative element, each balcony, has its own identity; no two are alike, and nearly all are worth a second look.



A Baroque palazzo in Noto

F. Di Lorenzo

ture and ancient country houses mingle. On the first Sunday in October in Sortino, the beekeepers hold the *Festa del Miele*, the Festival of Honey, a tradition that has been enacted with great fervor and enthusiasm for millennia.

Not far from the sea you can visit Noto, a magnificent town and a capital of Sicilian Baroque, built on two levels. The view from Noto is perhaps one of the most stunning in all of Sicily. The main street in Noto is Vittorio Emanuele, and each of the three piazzas in this amazing city is the site of a church and monumental staircase. In the center of the city, the Duomo—its cupola unfortunately fell in 1996—is a tragic open wound still awaiting radical reconstruction and restoration.

Nature sleeps soundly, uncontaminated, in the Riserva Naturale di Vendicari, formed of three highly humid areas. It is a refuge for a great number of migratory birds that seek rest after crossing the sprawling expanse of sea. It is here that you will discover one of the most classical visions of Sicily, burning yellow in the sun along the green waters of an idyllic river and the white beaches of the Isola delle Correnti, meaning "The Island of the Currents." Portopalo, surround-

ed by the dwarf palms on the banks of a gorgeous sea rich with fish and lobsters—with water that is as clear as it is crystalline—is comfortably nestled along a stunning coastline—a network of bays, small islands, and cliffs. At the end of this



The countryside of Vendicari

amazing and inspirational journey you will discover the small island of Cape Passero: 91 acres of flat calcareous rock dominated by a fortress that was built by Charles V and destroyed in the sixteenth century by Turkish pirate Mohammed Dragut; it was rebuilt many years later in order to defend the coastline from other potential invaders and still stands today—a monument to the island's glorious past. ■



formed into a shining sentinel of a past long gone.

Heading inland, Modica sits on top of a cliff, its grottoes abandoned merely a few years ago. With its stairways and enviable geographic position, "it is a town shaped like a pomegranate split in two," as one imaginative writer put it, "near to the sea but still in the country, half of it lying on the spur of a cliff, the other half scattered at the foot of the cliff." Baroque architecture reigns, yet there has been a mixture of influences: the Romans and the Arabs have all passed through this land, but it was the Normans who brought the city to its peak of splendor when they fortified the nucleus of Modica, protected naturally by two rivers.

The face of the city changed during the nineteenth century, when riverbeds were filled due to flooding

and Corso Umberto I, the city's principal thoroughfare, was adorned with splendid architecture. Today the center of Modica is the Piazza del Municipio, which is found at the intersection of two now-filled riverbeds. Above the beautiful piazza lies the castle, its clock tower dating back to the eighteenth century. To one side of the piazza stands the Church of San Domenico with its single, ornate nave. Nearby, the Church of San Giorgio, with its towering stairway of two-hundred-and-fifty steps, seems to touch the sky. While in Modica, be sure not to



Fishing in the port of Marsala





A view of Piazza Armerina

S. COZZI/ISTOCK

miss the Museo Ibleo delle Arti e Tradizioni Popolari, where you can see meticulous reproductions of farm houses and artisan works. And, of course, make it a point to sample and enjoy the many traditional desserts of this area, one more delicious and tempting than the next.

With the sea now behind you, you will pass through a countryside dotted with old farm houses huddled in small communities until you come upon Ragusa, founded in the third millennium B.C. The town is divided into two sections, one high and one low. One of Ragusa's true jewels is the Church of San Giorgio, rising prominently at the top of a long stairway. By no means less

MOSAICS IN PIAZZA ARMERINA AND CERAMICS IN CALTAGIRONE

When in 1929 excavations of the Villa del Casale began, just a few miles from Piazza Armerina, no one could predict what would be found among the ruins. The discovery of the first mosaic opened the way to a systematic hunt that quickly brought about a most amazing discovery: a floor of great artistic value, 11,483 square feet covering a dwelling built in 300 B.C. to house Roman politicians. The mosaics of Piazza Armerina are the most important example of the Romans' artistic

presence in Sicily. Visitors are greeted by figures with candelabra in hand lining the floor of the vestibule. Various animals gaze out from within their medallions, while in the west wing a dancer seems to move, her dress flapping about her. Tender lovers fish and hunters make a sacrifice to Diana. The walkway of the *Grande Caccia*, the "Great Hunt," is adorned with a scene from an African safari. In the east wing, Orpheus plays, and ten girls sport bikinis as they exercise. The northern section boasts one of the

Villa's great masterpieces: the scene of Ulysses and Polyphemus. If Piazza Armerina is the kingdom of mosaics, Caltagirone celebrates ceramics in all colors, shapes and sizes. The tradition of terra-cotta is ancient, refined over the centuries of foreign domination and Arab and Spanish influence, and it is in Caltagirone—called an "aerial city" by one English traveler—that this art form is elevated to the highest level. A perfect example is the one-hundred-and-forty-two steps of the grand stairway that leads from the Piazza

del Municipio to the Church. On the evening of the feast of San

Giacomo, the stairway is boldly illuminated, making a visit to

Caltagirone on July 25th particularly alluring.



The majolica of Caltagirone

A. PINOBBE