

Thomas Cook

Travel

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Glorious Goa

Exotic escapes in
India's sunshine state



plus...

SICILY ST LUCIA GERONA NEW YORK DUBROVNIK CAPE VERDE LOS ANGELES

Take to the hills



*Head off the beaten track to Sicily's southeast
and you'll find some hidden gems: four enchanting
baroque towns perched high above the sea*

Words: Nione Meakin



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raggy mountains, plunging ravines, sweeping beaches, tiny wineries and ancient towns almost untouched by the 21st century – there's a lot to love about southeast Sicily. Though the island is autonomous from Italy, the region of Ragusa is, according to tour guide Francesca Belluardo Giovatto, even more distinct: "an island within an island", with so much to offer that many locals never leave.

Although its rich and complex history stretches back for centuries, it was after the devastating earthquake of 1693 that Ragusa rebuilt many of its beautiful hilltop towns and developed the identity by which it's now best known.

Today these towns, famous for their baroque architecture, are designated Unesco World Heritage sites, and considered among the most important in Sicily. What's more, they have never been more accessible to visitors, thanks to the recent expansion of Comiso Airport. And although you'll need a car and a fair bit of nerve (there are no motorways and driving can be a little hair-raising), Ragusa's most impressive hilltop towns are all less than an hour or so away, meaning it's possible to see the sights and be back at your hotel in time for a sundowner spritz by the pool. Here are some of the best spots to enjoy a very dolce vita.





High and mighty
Lofty Ragusa (previous
and opposite); the
cavernous Locanda
Don Serafino restaurant
(top left); Giardino
Ibleo (left); Piazza
del Duomo (below)



Corso Giuseppe Mazzini looks, appropriately enough, like a piece of cooked spaghetti: narrow, long and almost comically bendy. Cut into the side of a hilltop, the road was built in 1926 to unify Ragusa Ibla (the old town) and Ragusa Superiore (the new town, founded after the earthquake). It's a slightly terrifying drive – and there's an easier link road – but it's worth it for the spectacular views of Ragusa Ibla, where we spend most of our visit.

While the new town has its attractions, Ragusa Ibla is Sicily at its most picturesque. In the central Piazza del Duomo, a sloping street that runs down

from the Duomo di San Giorgio, our tour guide Francesca Belluardo Giovatto points out the Circolo di Conversazione, a 19th-century conversation club built in the classical style and still popular today; the Teatro Donnafugata – at just 98 seats, Italy's smallest private theatre – and the lush, palm-fringed greenery of the Giardino Ibleo, the oldest of Ragusa's public gardens.

In the basement of the Palazzo di Quattro is I Banchi, one of Ragusa's four Michelin-starred restaurants. "We have more even than [the Sicilian capital] Palermo," says Francesca proudly. "We produce extra-virgin olive oil here, cheese,

honey and chocolate. The food is good all over Sicily but it's very special in Ragusa."

We find out just what she's talking about later that evening at the two Michelin-starred Locanda Don Serafino. In the ancient, candlelit vaults we are served a tasting menu that shows off chef Vincenzo Candiano's exquisite twist on classic Sicilian cooking over nine courses. There's a plate of tender rabbit, an amberjack sandwich with saffron and almond cream, melting suckling pig with salted nougat, and Candiano's signature dish, an earthy, black squid-ink spaghetti. OK, we're convinced – this town is foodie heaven. ➡

Modica



Sweetness follows
Making chocolate the traditional way (above) at Antica Dolceria Bonajuto (below right); Duomo San Giorgio (right)



We descend into Modica, which is split between a gorge and a hilltop, half-expecting the whole place to smell of cocoa. Although it's best known as the "town of the 100 churches", it is almost as famous for its chocolate, made using techniques introduced by the Aztecs when Modica was part of the Spanish kingdom. A comprehensive history – and some quirky chocolate sculptures – can be found in Modica Chocolate Museum, but the tastiest way to learn more is by visiting one of the town's 40-plus chocolate shops.

Opened in the 1800s and now run by Franco Bonajuto and his grandson Pierpaolo, the sixth generation of the family, Antica Dolceria Bonajuto is Sicily's oldest chocolate shop. Despite its tucked-away location in a courtyard off Corso Umberto, the main street, the tiny, wood-panelled shop attracts thousands of visitors, like the ones "ooh"-ing and "ahh"-ing over the samples.

Email in advance and it's possible to arrange a tour of the kitchen area at the back, where much of the chocolate is still made. As one of the chocolatiers pours a bowl of the unctuous brown mixture into the original tin moulds, spokeswoman Alessandra Scucces offers us a taste. It's sweetly spiced, grainy – and a far cry from Dairy Milk. "Modica chocolate isn't like other chocolate," explains Alessandra. It's cooked at temperatures below 45 degrees so the sugar doesn't dissolve, she explains. This method also preserves the cocoa mass. "With other chocolates you can't really taste the cocoa; it's just sweetness. People try our chocolate and they say they won't go back."

By the time we waddle out, having consumed an Augustus Gloop-esque quantity of chocolate, pastries, a chilli chocolate liquor and even a beef and chocolate mincemeat, we're almost grateful for the endless steps and stairways required to see the rest of Modica's sights. We've got a lot of calories to burn off and, frankly, what better way to do it? ➡



Scicli



Arresting images
Scicli's town hall (top) is one of the main locations for the Inspector Montalbano TV series (above); the "golden city" of Noto (opposite)

"Skick-ley?" suggests my partner. "Skiss-ley?"

I try. Fortunately it takes far less time to get to this atmospheric old town, just a 20-minute drive from coastal Marina di Ragusa, than it does to learn how to pronounce its name (for the record, it's more like "Shig-ley"). You can hardly blame us for the confusion. Scicli is not very well known – unless you're a fan of the *Inspector Montalbano* TV series.

The town is one of several in the commune to be used as a filming location in the long-running show, whose popularity has given the area a huge tourism boost. When we find our way into the centre, crowds of people are gathered on the steps of the town hall on Via Penna, which stands in for Montalbano's police station, waiting for one of the guided tours available for just a few euros.

The police HQ building, not far away in Piazza Italia, is also open to the public.

Aside from its TV fame, Scicli turns out to be a buzzy place to spend a Saturday night. It feels like the whole town comes out to socialise in the many restaurants and bars dotted around. We manage to grab an outside table at Quore Matto, a pizzeria just across from the opulent Palazzo Beneventano, which was once described as Sicily's most beautiful baroque building and stays open late into the evening. Several glasses of wine later, the town is, if anything, just getting busier and we decide to take a look at the dessert menu. On it we discover a Montalbano mousse featuring ricotta, cinnamon and local chocolate, which it would be criminal to miss.

There are many reasons to visit Noto: the lovely sandstone architecture that has earned it the title of Sicily's "golden city"; the 18th-century cathedral perched at the top of a magnificent stairway; the sumptuous Palazzo Villadorata.

But we're on the trail of a more modest, if no less Italian, attraction – its famed granita. Outside of Italy, this concoction of crushed ice and flavoured syrup is often just a glorified slushie. In Sicily, where it originated as a means of dealing with the brutal heat, it's pretty much a religion. Noto's Caffè Sicilia is widely recommended as one of the best places to try it, not least because of the inventive flavours dreamed up by chef Corrado Assenza, the so-called "Heston Blumenthal of Italian confectionery".

After manoeuvring the car down the narrow labyrinth of streets and picking our way along the cobbles, we're well in need of refreshment. Making a choice proves tough, however. In addition to the granita, the menu also features unusual dishes such as tomato and cocoa cheesecake, a Campari sorbet, and gelato flavoured with curry powders. My partner isn't swayed and sticks to a classic coffee granita – as deliciously intense as you'd expect from an Italian coffee and served the traditional way with a fluffy brioche on the side. I regret ordering the goats' cheese and apricot gelato, but am a convert to the sophisticated lemon verbena granita. Caffè Sicilia's pavement tables, it transpires, are a great spot for people-watching. It's taken us a few days but we've finally got the hang of the local way of life. Sicily isn't a place to rush but to savour slowly, enjoying every bite. 

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Where to stay: SENTIDO Acacia Marina

The pretty seaside resort of Marina di Ragusa is a good pick for travellers looking to visit the region. Stay at the SENTIDO Acacia Marina, set back from the hubbub of the main promenade on a peaceful avenue, and you can fuel up at the hearty breakfast buffet before heading out on a daytrip. This gorgeous, 100-room hotel has its own sandy beach, a glorious 20,000 sq m tropical garden and two restaurants serving mouth-watering Sicilian cuisine. **Book at thomascook.com**

Photos: Alamy, BBC, iCorners, Getty



Noto