

The Definitive Guide to Sicily's Val di Noto Region



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Head to Val di Noto if your idea of Sicily is a place that hasn't quite caught up with time, where the old glory of the past quietly remains.

In recent years, the success of the popular Italian TV series "Inspector Montalbano" brought tourism to the region and a hint of modernism is visible in the gastronomic scene, but this region still feels distinctly old world with the air tinged with a faint melancholy that sets the tone of *The Leopard* by Giuseppe di Lampedusa.

And quite naturally so. The area, situated in the lesser-known southeast corner of Sicily, was destroyed in 1693 by a devastating earthquake. Val di Noto now comprises eight towns which are Unesco Heritage Sites for achieving a remarkable architectural triumph. The towns were reconstructed in the late Baroque style, but don't expect the exuberant opulence found in Bernini's Rome. The presence of soft ochre-colored houses and churches is moving rather than awe-inspiring.



Stairs leading to the main street in the town of Modica (Photo: Juyoung Seo)

Wander through the narrow alleys and up hundreds of stairs to a myriad of churches. Walk past abandoned noblemen's villas and posters on the walls announcing the recently deceased villagers. There's often not a soul in sight as the intense sun heats up the stone-paved streets. Under a big tree, you will spot a small group of deeply tanned old men in crumpled blazers smoking and chatting away. Catch your breath sitting on the staircase leading

up to a duomo. When the church bells start ringing as the setting sun changes the palette of the town from a soft amber hue to bright orange, you realize that this is the vision of Sicily you had all along.

Here are a few unmissable towns that are near each other, each taking no more than a day to explore.

MODICA

The sight of Modica as you enter the town is dreamy. The heart of the town is nestled between two hills that form a small valley, with houses rising up the sides of each hill.

People sometimes fail to see the charm of Modica, as there is no piazza like in other towns. But remember that this was the chief town of the southeast province of Sicily for hundreds of years until authorities made Ragusa the new administrative capital in 1926. So this is a place where you will find grand old palazzi and glorious churches.



Modica in the evening (Photo: Juyoung Seo)

The best way to explore Modica is by walking up and down the stairs connecting Modica Bassa (Lower Modica) to Modica Alta (Upper Modica). Also, walk along the main road Corso Umberto for the shops, cafes, and restaurants. From Corso Umberto, climb up about 250 steps to Chiesa di San Giorgio, one of the most important architectural masterpieces of the Sicilian Baroque period. Originally built in the 11th Century, it adopted its current

splendid form when it was reconstructed after the earthquake. The view of Modica from the top of the staircase is sublime.

Should you feel more ambitious, explore Modica Alta, where houses are carved like caves into the rock, and head up to San Giovanni Evangelista, which occupies the highest point of the town.



San Giovanni Evangelista in Modica (Photo: Juyoung Seo)

Chocolate tasting is a must. In the 15th Century, when Modica was under Spanish control, chocolate (*xocolatl*) brought from the Aztec areas of South America was introduced to Modica. Here, they still make chocolate using the ancient recipe. The cacao paste is heated at a low temperature without milk or coconut butter to make granular, clean tasting bars. They often add cinnamon, orange or vanilla.

[Antica Dolceria Bonajuto](#) on Corso Umberto is the oldest chocolate maker in Sicily and has been around since 1880. Other than chocolates, they sell pastries, including cannoli and fried rice flour dough dipped in honey. Across the street, Caffè dell'Arte makes not only equally good chocolates but also high-quality gelato that can be savored at outdoor tables. Further down the street, Motycafé is modern and sells nicely wrapped products (from chocolates to 'mpanatigghi, Sicilian chocolate meat pie), perfect for souvenirs.

For fine dining, try [Accursio](#). It was opened by the chef who used to run the two Michelin-starred Locanda del Colonnello. [Osteria dei Saperi Perduti](#) on the main drag offers the exact opposite experience. It's casual, loud and so popular. It's a place where locals come for a pot of humble bean soup.

RAGUSA

After the earthquake of 1893, Ragusa was divided into two parts: one in the upper part of the town for people who wanted to build the city on a higher level and Ragusa Ibla for the rest of population who wanted to reconstruct the old destroyed town. The latter is where the main attractions are these days. The town was developed around Duomo di San Giorgio, which is perched on top of over 200 stairs. It's worth walking up to see the interior of this masterpiece by the famed Sicilian architect Rosario Gagliardi.

At the foot of Duomo is the lovely Piazza Duomo. There are many charming streets off of this piazza, such as Corso XXV Aprile.

Walking is the best way to soak up the charm of the town but on a hot day there is a small train which you can hop on. Despite the touristy nature of the ride, it's a convenient way of seeing the town, with impressive terracotta-colored houses, palazzi and numerous churches, including the sites where the TV series Inspector Montalbano was filmed.



Duomo di San Giorgio in Ragusa (Photo: Juyoung Seo)

While in town, [Ristorante Duomo](#) is not to be missed if you want to have a taste of Sicily in its finest form. At this two Michelin star restaurant, chef Ciccio Sultano serves outstanding dishes using local ingredients from the sea and the Iblean Mountains. They accommodate children and will happily put together simple child-friendly dishes. He also runs the bakery I Banchi where wholesome breads are freshly baked every day using ancient local flours. Try Castelvetro bread made of Timilia flour and Ragusa bread, of Russello flour.

NOTO

Noto attracts the most tourists of all towns of Val di Noto. It's the grandest of all -- but also the most touristy. The main street, Corso Vittorio Emanuele, is packed with street vendors selling cheap souvenirs, which you don't see in other parts of the region.

If there's a reason to overlook these factors and visit Noto, it is because it's a place that saw the culmination of splendid Baroque city planning. The entire town glows in amber color with the buildings made of local limestone. In contrast to other towns, it's defined by its linear, logical and orderly layout, as seen in the splendid architecture neatly arranged along the main street. Start the walk from Porta Reale to the east. Along the way, you'll see many spectacular buildings such as San Nicolo Cathedral and Palazzo Ducezio (and its hall of mirrors) across the street.



San Nicola Cathedral (Photo: Juyoung Seo)

But the honey-hued glory of the architecture is not the only thing that draws tourists to this town. Caffè Sicilia on the main drag has been around since 1892 and is famous for its granita. Sicilians often eat granita or gelato inside a brioche, making a kind of ice cream sandwich. Also popular here is cappuccino ghiacciato (ice coffee with almond milk granita).

At lunch time, head to [Ristorante Manna](#). Part of the hotel called 7 Rooms Villadorata housed in the grand Palazzo Nicolaci, it's stylish and modern without losing its touch with tradition. Using locally sourced fresh ingredients, they serve dishes that are substantial yet elegant.



Ristorante Manna (Photo: Juyoung Seo)

SCICLI

Small and much less well-known than Ragusa or Noto, Scicli is all the more special because of that.

For a small town that is not mobbed by tourists, there's something quite chic about this place. It shows in the design of the signs outside the stores and on the neatly-kept streets.

Explore the parts of town around Via Francesco Mormino Penna, which has many sumptuous buildings including the exuberantly decorated Church of San Bartolomeo.

For lunch, cross Via Nazionale and head to Ristorante Baqqalà on Piazzetta Ficili for alfresco dining. This small restaurant serves fresh and hearty seafood dishes.



Ristorante Baqqalà (Photo: Juyoung Seo)

After lunch walk up Via Matrice. Go through a neighborhood where locals live until you reach Chiesa di San Matteo at the top of the hill, which is not known to most tourists. As the sublime view of the town unfolds at your feet you can't help but reflect on the human triumph of reconstructing life after a ravaging catastrophe, all glowing gloriously in the blazing Sicilian sun.



Scicli from Chiesa di San Matteo (Photo: Juyoung Seo)

WHERE TO STAY

Casa Talia in Modica:

You have to walk about 200 steps down to the town and they offer minimum amenities. So why stay here? It's hands down the best spot in town to enjoy the sweeping view of Modica. The stone

houses were lovingly restored and converted into a boutique B&B hotel by a Milanese couple in 2005. Most rooms come with a private terrace and a simple breakfast -- yogurt, fruits, freshly baked pastries, juice, and coffee -- is served in a cave-like room.



The view of Modica from Casa Talia (Photo: Juyoung Seo)

7 Rooms Villadorata in Noto:

If a grand palace is more your style, this is the place. High ceilings with frescoes, antique furniture, and airy space dominate this stylish hotel converted from an 18th Century palazzo, a private residence of Prince Giacomo Nicolaci. All of the rooms come with a view, whether it's of a market, the Church of San Carlo or the courtyard. The breakfast is served on the large terrace upstairs overlooking the town. The stylish restaurant Manna is a must-try for modern Sicilian dishes.



Noto from the terrace of 7 Rooms Villadorata (Photo: 7 Rooms Villadorata)

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