

FRUGAL TRAVELER

A Tour of Small-Town Sicily

A sampling of the island's beautiful vistas, ancient culture and what might be the best gelato in the world.

By Lucas Peterson

May 16, 2018

The rain lightly pelted my window just as dawn was breaking on the Ionian Sea. I was lying snugly in my hotel bed in Syracuse, the venerable, ancient city on the eastern coast of Sicily. I dozed off for another hour or so before I was awakened once more by morning light through the balcony window. Does travel get any better than this? I thought. I sat up and set my feet down on the floor. Wet. It was very wet. Rain had leaked in and flooded nearly half of my hotel room. To make matter worse, I had unwisely laid my laptop on the floor, along with my phone. I leapt to my feet, panicking, and ran to get the hair dryer.

It was a less-than-ideal situation, to be sure. But it was a rare moment of misfortune on what was otherwise a delightful trip: With a few open days in Sicily after a fruitful stay in Catania, I decided to stitch together a quick trip that took me through four cities in the southern and southeastern parts of the island. I got an excellent sampling of the island's beautiful vistas, a culture influenced by both ancient Greece and Rome, and fantastic regional food, including some of the best gelato I've ever tasted. And as usual, I set out with the goal of traveling comfortably without spending too much money.

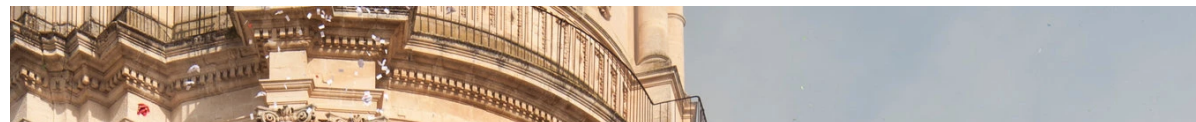
Siracusa, or Syracuse, settled by the Greeks in the 8th century B.C. and weathered by the Peloponnesian War and waves of Arab, Frankish and Roman invaders (among others), is worth a stop on any Sicilian tour. The city is particularly pleasant to visit because its compact *città vecchia*, or old city, is on the small, charming island of Ortigia; two bridges on the western side connect it

to the rest of the city. I arrived by train from Catania one afternoon (6.90 euros, a little over \$8, for a one-way ticket on the Trenitalia website) and dragged my roller bag through the narrow, labyrinthine alleys toward my lodgings.

My check-in at the Allegroitalia Syracuse Ortigia went smoothly, thanks to a young woman at the front desk named Gabriella. I'd booked an early spring special, which promised a second night at a rate of 79 euros (about \$96; the first night was 85 euros) in exchange for an upgraded room, breakfast, a free gift and complimentary admission to the Miqwe Jewish ritual baths across the street. The "free gift" was something of a let down (I believe it was the chocolate left for me near the bed) but the room and its view of the city's ceramic tiled roofs and, beyond that, a deep cerulean sea, were lovely. (Even the leak in my room ended up not being a big deal: My laptop and phone were fine. I turned my laptop off immediately, held it upside down, and dried it thoroughly. I was also given a new room.)

Ortigia can, and should, easily be conquered by foot. The buildings are classic Italy: weathered stone facades; plaster painted muted pinks and yellows; countless balconies overlooking the stone-paved streets. Many of the streets are so pinched and narrow that cars can't pass through (though motorcycles can), creating a more relaxed walking environment. Upon crossing the bridge into Ortigia, I stopped at the ruins of the Temple of Apollo — a 6th-century B.C. structure that had various incarnations throughout the ages as a Byzantine church, a mosque and Spanish barracks.

A walk down toward the Castello Maniace fortress at the southern tip of the island took me briefly down a long set of stairs to a small beach where I relaxed for a bit. While it's not white-sand luxury, there was plenty of attractive sea glass and I had it almost completely to myself. I then took an interesting tour of the Pupi Museum (3 euros), which catalogs a lengthy and complex history of puppetry in Sicily. The museum (there are also puppet performances) displays different figurines and details the history of puppet theater in Syracuse from the 19th century through its rebirth in popularity with the Vaccaro brothers, Rosario and Alfredo, in the 1970s.







Celebrations during the Festa di San Giorgio in Modica. Susan Wright for The New York Times

Ortigia is touristy, but in a way I found easy to give in to and embrace. I spent some time on its posh shopping street, Via Roma, looking in at the different stores and boutiques. I stopped into Moon, a fairly out-there gallery — the name stands for “Move Ortigia Out of Normality” — with some funky contemporary pieces like Marco Pettinari’s plexiglass sculpture “Elevazione.” I also poked my nose into Baco jewelry store, which had attractive handmade pieces made with stones like amethyst, quartzite and amazonite — bracelets starting from about 20 euros, and earrings from about 35.

My exploration of the island on a sunny, slightly windy afternoon took me to the western edge, where I walked up Foro Vittorio Emmanuele II, a long waterside promenade with plenty of pedestrian activity and even a few carnival-like games. I eventually found myself in the stunning, expansive Piazza del Duomo, a large plaza with the 7th-century Cathedral of Syracuse as its focal point. I took a quick tour (2 euros) of its rustic interior, which includes relics from St. Lucia, the patron saint of the city, including a bone from her left arm.

There are number of places to visit around the piazza, among them the Ipogeo di Piazza Duomo (5 euros), a series of underground tunnels cut into the soft limestone surrounding the city. While the tunnels, which served as a World War II-era bomb shelter, are interesting, I would have liked to know more. I gleaned from an Italian-language pamphlet (all that was available) that the tunnels dated to the 1600s, but could have used a guide or even just some information from an employee.

Walking around the city is a visual feast — from the piazza to the Fountain of Diana in the center of the island — but the real feast is, well, actually feasting. I lucked out and snagged the last free table at Sicilia in Tavola, a small restaurant with a warm, cozy atmosphere and fresh, handmade pasta. My helpful server told me that spaghetti alla siracusana (10 euros) was “typical Syracuse” — thick spaghetti noodles served with anchovies, garlic, parsley and bread crumbs. It was simple, well-prepared, and very powerful (those anchovies!). An obligatory Aperol spritz cost me an additional 5 euros.

The star of my Syracuse eating tour, though, lay behind an unassuming orange awning in the Ortigia street market on the north end of the island. Several people I’d spoken to, including Gabriella from my hotel, recommended Caseificio Borderi and its huge, generous sandwiches. I walked in and ordered one of their signature submarine-style creations that featured, among other things, thinly sliced beef, fresh mozzarella, peppers, tomatoes, olives, capers and oranges for a bit of acidity and sweetness. It was the size of a small football and cost just 5 euros — and could easily have made for two filling, delicious meals. One of the friendly owners, Nazarena, said I would be welcome to come back and make cheese with her husband.

My adventures didn’t stop in Syracuse. I used the city as a jumping off point to explore other cities in the region, including a day trip to Noto, a small city that was just a 3.80-euro train ride (about 30 minutes) from Syracuse. I’d decided to travel to Noto in part because of its beauty, including its stately cathedral and beautiful Church of San Domenico, both of which I visited. But I was really there because of Corrado Assenza, an acclaimed gelato, cake and pastry magician who was recently profiled on Netflix’s “Chef’s Table: Pastry.”

I walked from the train station into the center of town, making a beeline toward the two cafes and gelaterias I’d read about online: Caffè Costanzo and Mr. Assenza’s Caffè Sicilia. They both had, I was lead to believe from my online research, comparably excellent gelato. While Caffè Costanzo was quite respectable (I paid 3.50 for two flavors stuffed into a brioche bun), I found Caffè Sicilia superior.

For my cone (2.50 euros), I had one scoop of chocolate and one of almond with cinnamon — each intensely flavorful and impeccably smooth. I also sampled torrone (nougat) and ricotta, the latter of which perfectly balanced sweetness and tangy sharpness. But the gelato wasn't the only star at Caffè Sicilia. A cassatina (4 euros), which resembled a small cake, was wrapped in a colorful marzipan casing and about as perfect a version as I could have hoped for. A cannolo (3 euros) stuffed with ethereal sheep's milk ricotta was wrapped in a light, flaky shell that wasn't remotely greasy or heavy. I took my treats to go, though plenty of people were eating in the small, quiet dining room.

One of the elements that distinguishes Caffè Sicilia is its use of local produce, an area where Sicily really shines. I went out past the Porta Reale di Noto on the eastern end of the city, a large structure resembling L'Arc de Triomphe, and bought a bag of Sicilian bitter almonds (3.50 euros) and some dried Sicilian tomatoes (2 euros) from some roadside vendors.

In the laboratory of Bonajuto, a famed chocolate shop in Modica. Susan Wright for The New York Times

If my visit to Noto was all about the food, my next stop, the mountainous and undulating city of Modica, was merely mostly about the food. Modica was nearly obliterated after a 1693 earthquake and consists of upper and lower areas, joined together by steep, narrow roads and staircases. The town is slightly sleepier than Syracuse, but specializes in a delicious trade: chocolate making.

Modican chocolate is made using an ancient recipe taken from the Aztecs. The beans and sugar are worked by hand and the resulting product has the same raw, grainy texture characteristic of Mexican chocolate. I visited the shop Bonajuto one afternoon, my glasses fogging up upon joining a crush of 20 people inside. Like in Bill's candy shop at the beginning of "Willy Wonka and the Chocolate Factory," people were excitedly perusing different flavors of chocolate and nibbling on samples. Bars vary in cost from around 2 to 3 euros, but I got more than my fill trying the various samples: lemon, cardamom and salt, all of which were quite tasty. (Work off that sugar by trudging up to the beautiful Cathedral of St. George — it's a healthy climb up, but the views from the 18th-century church are fantastic.)

The most delightfully unexpected meal, though, came in the city of Licata on the southern coast. I wandered over to the restaurant L'Oste e Il Sacrestano during my one night in Licata, after having spent the afternoon walking around the city center and along the quaint Marianello beach. The five-course fine dining meal I enjoyed for just 48 euros was wonderful, on top of being a bargain. A creative twist on pizza wherein the raw albacore that served as the dough base was outshone by a tasty riff on pasta with clams, which in turn was topped by a dish of tender baby octopus.

While frugal traveling is certainly about saving money, it's also about getting great value: L'Oste e Il Sacrestano provided a meal I would have paid twice the price for.

Lucas Peterson is the Frugal Traveler columnist. He has written for GQ, Lucky Peach, Eater, LA Weekly and Food Republic. His video series for Eater, "Dining on a Dime," is now in its 11th season. @FrugalTraveler