

on-Sicily - print version pages culture and cuisine.

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The area - culture - places of interest

Foreign rulers, like the *Romans*, the *Greeks*, the *Elymians*, the *Normans* and *Arabs*, all left their mark on Sicilian culture. Today you can still visit many of the temples, churches, amphitheatres and castles that are part of Sicilian history. Most of these cultural places of interest can be easily reached from the coastal towns of *Balestrate* and *Castellammare del Golfo*.

On this page and the following pages you will find information about *Segesta*, *Erice*, *Selinunte*, *Marsala* and the *saline*, *Monreale*, *Palermo*, *Agrigento*, *Cefalù* and *Caccamo*.

The area - culture - festivities

Every season offers many chances to participate in local Sicilian festivities. The *sagre*, for instance, are particularly interesting. The main theme of these town festivals usually involves a typical Sicilian product, like the *cannolo* (sweet Sicilian dolce, see cuisine page), olive oil, *ricotta* cheese, truffles etc. During these *sagre* you have the possibility to taste all of these products while enjoying traditional Sicilian music and dance. If this is something of interest, we will be more than happy to see if there is a *sagra* being held during your stay in Sicily.

1.a. the area - culture - segesta

Segesta is located near *Balestrate* and *Castellammare*, and can be easily reached via the highway (exit *Segesta*). The two attractions are a temple and an amphitheater dating from the 3rd century BC. These are the only two remains of the city of *Segesta* which was founded by the *Elymians*. When *Troy* was destroyed, the *Elymians* escaped to Sicily and with the help of the *Romans* and later the *Greeks*, they succeeded in making *Segesta* become an influential city and the biggest rival of the city of *Selinunte*.

The *Doric* temple is located in a beautiful location, at the foot of the *Monte Barbaro*, and is still very well preserved. The fact that the temple was never covered with a roof and that there are no signs of a *cella* (the inner chamber of a temple) ever being constructed, suggest that the temple was never finished. It is very remarkable that it withstood several pillages.

The positioning of the amphitheater is very special as opposed to all other amphitheatres, in that it points to the North. This is probably because of the splendid view over the valley and the *Golfo di Castellammare*. In the summer months, you can see a variety of cultural events (live music, plays, etc) in this beautiful amphitheater.

You can reach the theater on foot but we recommend taking the bus, which departs near the ticket offices of the park.

1.b. the area - culture - erice

On the 750 meter high rocky mountain *Monte San Giuliano*, you will find the picturesque Medieval town of *Erice*. The town has many churches, but the most famous one is the *Chiesa Matrice*, built in 1314 AD. The church has a separate clock tower, the *campanile*, which served primarily as a watchtower. You can climb this tower to have a fantastic view over *Trapani*, *Marsala* and the *saline*

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(salt pans) and the *Egadi* islands *Favignana*, *Levanzo* and *Marettimo*. We recommend buying a complete pass which gives you access to the tower, several churches, and museums.

Erice has always been protected by its thick walls and the *Normand* castle *Pepoli e Venere*, which is now beautifully lit in the evening. Close to the *Torri del Balio* and the *Torretta Pepoli* (one of the symbols of *Erice*) there is a small castle, which in the 19th Century was turned into a villa. From here, you have a fantastic view over *San Vito lo Capo*.

In the summer months many local events are organized, making a visit to *Erice* even more interesting.

You can reach *Erice* by car or by *funivia*, a cable railway that will take you from *Trapani* close to the entrance gate of *Erice*.

1.c. the area - culture - selinunte

Selinunte, *Selinous* during the *Greek* period, is not as well known as the *Valle dei templi* at *Agrigento*, although it is one of the largest archeological parks in Europe.

At one time, *Selinunte* was an important city, but was reduced to a place of little or no importance after the *Carthageans* attacked in 250 BC. There are remains of 6 *doric* temples, one of which is still standing.

But probably the most impressive part of the park are the remains of the city itself! Walking through the small streets of the city you can get a good idea of what it might have been in the glory days. From the city center, which is located close to the beach, you have a terrific view of the sea. We are sure that you will agree that this archeological park is really worth the visit!

1.d. the area - culture - marsala and the saline

Marsala is a coastal city located in the South-west of Sicily and is famous for its delicious wines. The city's name derives from the Arabian *Mars-el-Allah*, meaning "God's Harbor". The city center was partly destroyed during WWII and the harbor plays a huge role in Italian history. It was here that *Garibaldi* and his *mille* (1000 men strong militia) landed, in the year 1860 to start the armed struggle to unify Italy, known as the *Risorgimento*.

It is recommended that you visit *Marsala* in the morning. The market between the *Piazza Addolorata* and the *Piazza del popolo* is well worth a visit as are a few of the museums. There are two important museums, one of which is the archeological museum of *Capo Lilybeo*, which is located near the sea. Here you can admire the remains of a ship from the 3rd Century BC and its cargo containing many coins and jars. Close to this museum you will find two *enoteche* (wine-merchants) where you can taste typical Sicilian wines and liquors, like *Marsala*, *Zibbibo* or *Crema di Mandorla*.

Follow the road from *Marsala* in the direction of *Trapani* and you will see signs pointing you in the direction of the *saline*. These are salt pans where sunlight is used to evaporate seawater, therefore, ending up with salt. Following the coast, you will see the azure blue sea and the *Egadi* Islands, like *Favignana* and *Levanzo*, but also smaller islands, like the island of *Mozia*, which can be reached by boat from the *saline*.

The area is dominated by typical Spanish windmills and in one of them, the salt museum (see picture) is located. Near the salt museum there is a small bar where you can enjoy both a cold drink and a lovely sunset. It's nice to visit this area especially on the hotter days when standing close to the sea and feeling the wind blowing is both relaxing and refreshing!

1.e. the area - culture - monreale

Monreale is famous for its magnificent cathedral, which was built by order of *William II* in the spot where his father, *William I*, supposedly had found a treasure.

Monreale's Cathedral is one of the greatest examples of *Norman* architecture in the world. The 18th Century *portico* is flanked by two towers, one of which was damaged by lightning in 1807. The door panels in the *portico* were made by *Bonanno di Pisa* in the 12th Century.

The inside of the cathedral is even more beautiful. It took 15 years to complete the mosaics, which cover a large part of the cathedral's interior. These mosaics are very impressive. If you'd like to take better pictures of the beautiful interior, go to the front left of the church, where you will find a small box that operates extra lighting if you pay 50 Euro cents.

From the cathedral you can access the cloister. In one of the corners you will see a fountain, where it has been said that women who wash their hands in the water of this fountain will become 10 years younger. Another reason to visit *Monreale!!!*

From a park located behind the cathedral you have a great view over *Palermo* and in the tourist season there is a great bar selling their homemade *granita* (see cuisine page).

A visit to *Monreale* can be easily combined with a visit to *Palermo*. We will give you an itinerary which leads through the mountains to both cities. From the mountains you can overlook the valley with *Monreale, Palermo* and all its suburbs.

1.f. the area - culture - palermo

Sicily's capital *Palermo*, with its 750,000 inhabitants the fourth city of Italy, is known for its rich culture. It is impossible to visit all the historical places of interest in one day, but even in one day, you will be able to see how all of the rulers left their mark on the city.

You will find a mixture of different architecture from several different periods in the city's history, which makes a visit to *Palermo* such an interesting one.

Important places of interest are: the *Palazzo dei Normanni (Palazzo Reale)*, the cathedral, the *Quattro canti*, the *Teatro Massimo*, the *Politeama theater*, *Piazza marina*, the famous park near the coast and the *Santa Maria della Catena*, the *Palazzo Abatellis* and the *teatro / museo dei puppi* (puppet theater with typical Sicilian marionettes, the *puppi*), the Catacombs, the botanical gardens and many more.

Al covo de' I beati Paoli, one of the most well known restaurants in *Palermo*, is located on the East side of *Piazza Marina*. The owner offers on-Sicily guests a special discount. (see extras page)

1.g. the area - culture - agrigento (valle dei templi)

Agrigento was founded by the *Greeks* and was called *Akragas*. Unfortunately, the beautiful city was later almost all destroyed by the *Carthageans*.

Fortunately, several temples have survived in the *Valle dei Templi* (temple valley). Next to the park are many other interesting findings including a garden with rare plants and trees that are maintained by a group of enthusiasts. This garden is certainly worth the visit.

1.h. the area - culture - cefalù

Cefalù is a beautiful coastal town, East of *Palermo*. The *Norman* cathedral, built in the 12th Century towers above *Cefalù* and can be seen from afar.

Cefalù, with its small streets, is clearly a Medieval town and the *Porta Marina* is the last remaining, original entrance gate. Through this gate you have a wonderful view of the sea and *Cefalù's* harbor. Another famous attraction is the Medieval wash-house, where not too long ago, the older women of *Cefalù* still went to do wash clothes. The cathedral and the *Museo Mandralisca* (art museum) are also worth the visit.

If you fancy a nice walk, you can climb the *rocca*, the rocky mountain, at the foot of where *Cefalù* is located. From there you will have a fantastic view and you will see the remains of a 13th Century castle.

1.i. the area - culture - caccamo

There are more than 200 castles in Sicily! One of the most beautiful examples of a *Norman* castle is the one in *Caccamo*. The castle is built on a large rock and overlooks the valley. Close to the entrance gate a group of local volunteers has authentically decorated a small house. In this small museum you can see how the people lived in the old days and if you speak a little Italian, the volunteers are more than happy to tell you more about the town's history. You will be surprised to see that entire families lived in small house like this, which by today's standards, would not be suitable for more than two people. At the end of the tour, you can purchase typical, local products.

For a town with only 8500 inhabitants, *Caccamo* has a surprising number of churches: 46 in total! Among, the most interesting, are the *Duomo*, the *SS. Annunziata*, and the *San Benedetto alla Badia*, which is known as the most beautiful church of *Caccamo* and also contains magnificent *Baroque* art.

In the valley you'll see Sicily's biggest artificial lake. You can arrive there via the *Ponte Chiaramontano*, a 12th Century bridge crossing the river the *San Leonardo*.

2.a. the area - cuisine - snacks

The Sicilian cuisine consists of many different and tasty dishes. Obviously we can't mention all of them on this page, we will, however describe a few of its most famous dishes, starting with the "snacks":

The arancina:

The *arancina* literally means “small orange” and is a famous Sicilian snack. You can buy this ball of rice, either filled with minced meat and green peas or with ham and cheese, in almost every Sicilian bar. The most delicious *arancine* are made by a bar in the town of *Alcamo*, close to *Balestrate* and *Castellammare del Golfo*.

Pane e panelle:

Panelle are thin, fried slices of dough made from chickpeas, frequently served in a bun. It’s a popular snack which is also served as antipasti in restaurants.

Pane con la milza:

Pane con la milza, “*pani cà meusa*” in dialect, is a favorite treat, especially in the city of *Palermo* and has a rather salty taste. This sandwich made of fried beef spleen is served with a slice of fresh Sicilian lemon and some grated local cheese (*caciocavallo*). Although the *pane con la milza* can be found in many Sicilian towns and cities, the people from *Palermo* are convinced that “their” *pane con la milza* is simply the best!

The sfincione:

You shouldn’t confuse the *sfincione* with the pizza, although both are made with similar ingredients. The *sfincione* is in a way, the Sicilian equivalent of the Italian pizza. The base is thicker than that of a pizza and is covered with a mixture of tomatoes, onions, anchovies, cheese (*caciocavallo*), olive oil, oregano and bread-crumbs. You can eat this treat both cold and warm.

2.b. the area - cuisine - antipasti, primi e secondi piatti

Obviously the Sicilian cuisine consists of more than snacks! Some of the famous and less known dishes are:

Pasta con le sarde:

This is by far the most famous and most appreciated Sicilian dish. It’s a pasta with sardines and fennel, and in *Palermo*, it is also served with tomato sauce, pine nuts, and currants. In the city of *Catania* on the other side of Sicily the sardines are frequently replaced by anchovies. The dish is then called *pasta cche masculini* (*masculini* means anchovies in the local dialect).

La caponata:

The *caponata* is a vegetarian dish made from fried vegetables (usually eggplant and sweet peppers) mixed with olives, capers and celery. It has a sweet and sour taste and is often served as an *antipasto* (starter)

Sarde a beccafico:

This traditional Sicilian dish from *Palermo* is made from sardines, filled with bread-crumbs, pine nuts, cinnamon, grapes, currants and anchovies. We recommend you try this delicious dish!

Bistecca alla palermitana:

One of the most famous dishes on the island is *Bistecca alla palermitana*! It is a breaded veal cutlet baked, not fried, and delicious when served with a little lemon juice.

The list of delicious, Sicilian dishes is simply just too long to try and mention every single one of them. Therefore, your only other choice is to come visit the beautiful island of Sicily and explore the Sicilian cuisine yourself!

2.c. the area - cuisine - i dolci

Some typical Sicilian sweet treats (*dolci*) recommended by on-Sicily.com:

The cannolo:

Years ago this dolce was only eaten during carnival, but nowadays it's one of the most famous Sicilian treats which you can buy all throughout Sicily. Just like the Sicilian *cassata*, the *cannolo* was introduced during the *Arabian* domination. It's a tube-shaped shell of fried pastry dough, filled with a sweet, creamy filling of sweetened ricotta cheese and chocolate. For those who are not that hungry, there's the possibility to order the *cannolicchio*, the smaller version of the *cannolo*.

The cassata:

Also a typical Sicilian treat that you simply must taste! Of this glazed cake, prepared with sweetened ricotta cheese, sugar and candied fruit, exist many versions. Sometimes a layer of almond paste is added and in certain parts of the island the cassata is less sweet. The sweetest *cassata* is the one made in *Palermo* and is considered the best one in Sicily (especially by the *Palermitani*, the inhabitants of *Palermo*)!

Gelato con brioche:

Ice-cream (*gelato*) obviously is not typical Sicilian, but the combination with a sweet bun (*brioche*) is something you will probably not often see in the north of Italy. "A bun with ice-cream?" you might ask. Yes, indeed it may sound a little strange, but once you have tasted one, you probably won't go back to buying ice-cream in a cone. The quality of the Sicilian ice-cream is excellent because the fresh fruit that is used is very sweet and flavorful, due to the amount of sun hours on the island of Sicily. There are literally hundreds of flavors, from the "standard" fruit flavored ice-cream, to ice-cream with pistachio, chocolate ice-cream with red (hot) peppers, *sette veli* (seven layers of different kinds of chocolate), the *cassata* ice-cream and so on. The best ice-cream is handmade, so when in Sicily, look for a *gelateria artigiana*, to be sure the ice-cream is handmade!

La granita:

The basic *granita* is made from water (finely chopped ice), sugar and lemon, and is very refreshing. There are a variety of different flavors, such as peach, pear, almond, chocolate, pistachio and many more. In bars, *granita* is usually served with a *brioche* (a sweet bun) on the side, however, many places will serve it on the bun, in which case it's called *brioche con granita*.

Le cassatelle:

The *cassatelle* are *dolci* filled with sweetened *ricotta* cheese and chocolate, covered with a sugar icing. The shape of a *cassatella* looks like a small *calzone*, the famous folded pizza. The best *cassatelle* are made in a bar in the coastal town of *Castellammare del Golfo*, close to *Balestrate*.

Obviously the best way to get to know the Sicilian cuisine is to come and visit Sicily for a beautiful and relaxing holiday!