

WANDERLUST



## Cities by the Sea

In southeastern Sicily, Val di Noto offers small-town charm, world-class architecture and even stunning beaches.

By Kate Maxwell Photographs by Diego Mayon

GIVEN THE DISTANCES to be traveled and the imperfect roads, conventional wisdom stipulates that even ambitious short-term visitors to Sicily stick to either side of the island. There's no wrong choice, though it's the eastern coast that's home to the majestic Mount Etna, Europe's highest active volcano. That was also the side favored by the Greeks, who colonized Sicily between the eighth and sixth centuries B.C. (before the Romans, the Byzantines, the Arabs, the Normans and the Bourbons all took their turn), making a bustling capital out of Syracuse. In more recent times, the hilltop town of Taormina has been the popular eastern-facing destination — it was even the site of the 2017 Group of 7 summit. As its cobblestone streets have become ever more crowded, though, the Val di Noto region — which is a two-hour drive south and includes the towns of Ragusa, Modica and Noto — and the nearby city of Syracuse are finding new life.

Following the 1693 Sicily earthquake, locals rebuilt this cluster of towns in the late Baroque style of the day, with central piazzas anchored by stone churches with carved griffins and tiers of Corinthian columns. Thanks to funding from the European Commission, many of the towns' buildings were restored in the early 2000s, which spurred entrepreneurs to open small, jewel-like hotels and restaurants. Noto, especially, contains many pre-eminent examples of Sicilian Baroque — it was built anew six miles from the original city, the still half-standing Noto Antica — as well as other attractions, from antique shops to a nature reserve filled with grazing flamingos.

And yet, Val di Noto still feels fully alive. The steps of Noto Cathedral are routinely used as seating for junior-school performances, while women sell fresh blood oranges at the daily market on Syracuse's island offshoot of Ortygia. This exquisite port town is a good place to begin a tour of the region, having been continuously inhabited for 3,000 years, with beauty left over from multiple points of the area's varied history. Next door to the white-stone Duomo is another church that houses a late masterpiece by Caravaggio, who arrived in Sicily in 1608 after escaping from prison in nearby Malta.



Clockwise from far left: the courtyard-facing entrance to Seven Rooms Villadorata; in one of the hotel's lounges, a frescoed ceiling and a Mis en Demeure chandelier that mimics an 18th-century model; the lobby of Musciara.



### STAY

**Dimora delle Balze** In a rural expanse west of Syracuse and north of Noto, you'll find this 11-bedroom hotel, which opened in 2017 in a 19th-century fortified *masseria*. Its owner, Elena Lops, began restoring it eight years earlier, offsetting the earthy pale-yellow limestone walls and Cementine-tiled floors with velvet barrel chairs and slatted-back Kettal sofas. Guests can lounge by the saltwater pool or in any of the three large courtyards — or wander the 60-acre grounds filled with lavender, olive trees and an organic vegetable garden that supplies the compound's kitchen. [dimoradellebalze.com](http://dimoradellebalze.com)

**Seven Rooms Villadorata** Right near Noto Cathedral is Nicolaci Palace, with wrought-iron balconies and corbels adorned with centaurs, sirens and winged horses. The 18th-century Prince Nicolaci and his descendants once lived in the 90-room house, part of which now functions as a discrete hotel. Its high-ceilinged suites are elegantly appointed with antique mirrors and tufted armchairs, while

breakfast — ricotta pie, fennel salami and candied orange rinds — is served at a long dining table beneath a draped crystal chandelier. Make sure to browse the handmade soaps for sale on the ground floor; their artisanal spirit harks to Seven Rooms's bucolic sister property, Country House Villadorata, which is five miles outside of town and surrounded by prickly pear trees. [7roomsvilladorata.it](http://7roomsvilladorata.it)

**Musciara** There are plenty of lovely public swimming spots on Sicily's southeastern coast, from the shallow water of San Lorenzo to the lagoons and rocky coves of the Vendicari nature reserve. This 17-room resort across the bay from Ortygia, however, comes with its own arc of private chaise-lined beach. A former tuna factory, the hotel is decorated with Baroque-style furniture and faded kilims, and in the lounge, a purple whale-tail chair sits by a picture window looking out to the sea. The terrace restaurant, which serves pesce crudo and grilled octopus, also promises an arresting view. [siracusaresort.it](http://siracusaresort.it)





Clockwise from top left: a corner of the L'Annunciata bedroom at Dimora delle Balze, named not for the painting shown here but for one by the 15th-century artist Antonello da Messina; the Palazzo Castelluccio foyer with original trompe l'oeils; Noto's Chiesa di Montevergine at sunset; Dimora delle Balze's saltwater pool; at Palazzo Castelluccio, a 19th-century re-creation of one of the celestial globes Louis XIV commissioned from Vincenzo Coronelli; the Lungomare d'Ortigia road and walkway, which wraps around the southeastern part of the island.



## EAT

**Manna Noto** A block over from Nicolaci Palace, in what used to be the prince's wine cellar, is one of Noto's best trattorias, its barrel-vaulted rooms now filled with Bertoia chairs, starburst pendants and mounted maiolica. The dishes, too, are a satisfying mix of classic and contemporary — try the linguine with seared red prawns or the tagliatelle with duck Bolognese. As in its former life, the space also carries an impressive array of Sicilian wines, from the peppery Nero d'Avola to the dessertlike Malvasia delle Lipari. [mannanoto.it](http://mannanoto.it)

**Caffè Sicilia** Over the course of 127 years, this corner cafe in downtown Noto has built a reputation as Sicily's (and some say the world's) best spot for gelato, perhaps because, like his parents and grandparents before him, Corrado Assenza, one of its owners, makes expert use of local nuts and citrus — don't miss the Montezuma flavor, a heady mix of chocolate, cinnamon and orange- and lemon-candy peel. A glass case holds equally delicious pastries, but the real star may be the granita: Patrons linger over

creamy almond-scented bowls of it at the parasol-covered tables out front. [caffesicilia.it](http://caffesicilia.it)

**Crocifisso** In Noto, it's not uncommon to see people making impromptu picnics out of sfincione (focaccia pizza) and pane di casa from the family bakery Panificio Maida. On the other end of the spectrum is the elegant Crocifisso, with white tablecloths, polished black floorboards and dim lighting. The sommelier Gianmarco Iannello's European-centric list stretches to Greece and Slovenia and features a number of orange wines (made with the grapes' skins intact). The 60-euro five-course tasting menu features artichokes with licorice and mussel-topped cacio e pepe, while the à la carte options include such Sicilian classics as fava-bean soup with ricotta and spaghetti alla chitarra with sardines, sultanas and fennel. [ristorantecrocifisso.it](http://ristorantecrocifisso.it)

## SHOP

**Chiodo** In a tiny courtyard near Ortigia's Piazza Duomo, where you'll find the church that houses

Caravaggio's "Burial of Saint Lucy," this boutique and sometimes exhibition space is dedicated to the work of Italian designers and craftspeople. Chiodo means "nail," and the shop's ethos is further reflected in its exposed beams and rough-hewn wooden slats. There's a wide-ranging edit of bohemian staples: buttery leather clutches, leaf-print silk dresses, elegant straw hats, statement jewelry made of brass and round-frame sunglasses from the 1980s. [chiodoshowroom.wordpress.com](http://chiodoshowroom.wordpress.com)

**Ortigia** Started in 2006 by the British-born Sue Townsend, a founder of Crabtree & Evelyn who now lives in Florence, this independent, all-natural soap and scent company is named for the southeast Sicilian island, even if the palm tree and leopard graphics on its packaging are taken from a Byzantine mosaic in Palermo's Palazzo dei Normanni. At the Ortigia location on the island thruway of Via Roma, the shelves are lined with candles and body products infused with jasmine, amber or pomegranate

(as well as silk scarves and candy-colored glass plates). The blends were developed in collaboration with the noted Florentine perfumer Lorenzo Villoresi, who has also worked for Armani and Gucci. [ortigiasicilia.com](http://ortigiasicilia.com)

## SEE

**Palazzo Castelluccio** One of Noto's six grand palaces, Palazzo Castelluccio is open most days for guided tours. It was built in 1782 and shuttered in the 1980s with the death of its last marchese owner. In 2011, an anonymous Frenchman inspired by "The Leopard," Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa's 1958 novel about a Sicilian nobleman, purchased the property and began decorating it with period-style flourishes such as golden candelabras, acanthus-leaf-carved urns and a flamboyant leopard-print tiled floor. There are also portraits of various Sicilian royals and a Canaletto-style landscape. But it's not all high glamour. Though out of use for decades, the 1950s-era kitchen still smells distinctly of cheese. [palazzocastelluccio.it](http://palazzocastelluccio.it) ■