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Syracuse: A step into antiquity

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Seaside View of Syracuse

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Stand within a 15,000-seat Greek theater dating back to the 5th century B.C. where the classics of Euripides, Sophocles and Plato were performed. Brush up against historic Doric columns in Piazza Duomo and admire the grandeur of the baroque architecture of [Sicily's](#) museumpiece town of **Syracuse**, once the major city in the ancient world and birthplace of mathematician Archimedes.

[Syracuse](#) was founded by Corinthians in 734 B.C. on the attached island of Ortygia, as the oldest meeting point for a variety of cultures, arts, and intellectuals. In 2005, the city became part of the UNESCO Heritage site with its narrow cobblestone streets and surrounding elaborate Greek and Roman architecture. In 2017, the town will celebrate its 2,750th birthday.

Today, it also touts some of the best gelato in Sicily.

The city is just a 1 ½-hour bus ride from the major city of Catania on the eastern coastline. Syracuse, with a population of approximately 130,000 inhabitants, is composed of the mainland or new town, and Ortygia, the old town or historic center.

At the beginning of the new town, separated by a footbridge, are the remains of the Temple Apollo from 6th century B.C. Once ensconced with ivory and gold knobs on its doors and surrounded by stately columns, this structure was believed to be the oldest example of Doric architecture in the western hemisphere.

The Deputy Mayor Francesco Italia comments about Syracuse, “This ancient heritage doesn’t belong to us but to humanity.”

A minimum of two days are needed to explore the major monuments and areas on foot within several main archeological sites of the new town to the remainder of time wandering through Corso Matteotti and Via Roma viewing the historic streets and architecture of the old town of Ortygia. Here are the **top ten sites** to see on your journey into the past:

New Town

- **Museo Archeologico Paolo Orsi** contains some 18,000 pieces displayed in chronological order, dating from prehistoric to ancient Greek times. In the museum is the sarcophagus of Adelfia from IV century A.D. which depicts 13 scenes from the Old Testament. Also on view is the statue of Venus from the 2nd century A.D.

- **Parco Archeologico della Neapolis**, built in 1952 to 1955, was created to enclose the oldest monuments of the city. It houses the 15,000-seat **Greek Theater** where during the summer months there are live classical Greek plays performed as they were in 5th century B.C. Also nearby is the giant grotto, **Ear of Dionysius**, named by painter Caravaggio after visiting Syracuse in 1608. The legend goes that the tyrant Dionysius enclosed prisoners here so that he could eavesdrop on them due to the special echo chamber in the grotto.

- **Santuario della Madonna delle Lacrime (Church of Tears)** stands as a modern cone-shaped tower amid the ancient landscape. Built in 1953 in a form of a teardrop, this sanctuary houses the statue of the Virgin Mary which said to have wept for five days and whose tears performed hundreds of cures.

Temple of Apollo, dated 6th century B.C., is the oldest example of Doric architecture in the west. It is located at Piazza Pancali at the footbridge to the entrance to Ortygia.

- **The Morning Marketplace** is just behind the area by the Temple of Apollo where fresh produce, fish, meats, and local goods are sold each morning from around 8:00 to 1:00.

Old Town

- **Piazza Archimede and Fountain of Artemis** is the first major square that you approach on your walk along the main avenue of Corso Matteotti which was built in the late 19th century. The stunning fountain is an elaborate design of horses and figures.
- **Porta Marina** is a short walk from the square with seaside cafes and a walkway to view the riveting view of the Ionian Sea. Here is the city's only surviving city gate.
- **The Piazza Duomo** is the grandiose square of baroque buildings created after the major earthquake of 1693. The Cathedral is a must to see. It was built upon the Greek Doric temple dedicated to Athena, with columns still visible on inside and the outside on Via Minerva. Next door is the palatial Palazzo Senatorio (Senators' Palace or City Hall) and nearby is the Palace of Benvenuto del Bosco and Episcopal Palace. The area is entrenched with cafes to enjoy people watching and relaxing after a day's touring by foot.
- **Caravaggio's The Burial of Saint Lucia** painting is located near Piazza Duomo in the Bellomo Museum. It used to hang over the main altar of the Basilica of Saint Lucia on the mainland.
- **Jewish Baths or Bagno Ebraico**, dated around 500 A.D., were only discovered 25 years ago after the renovation of the Alla Giudecca Hotel. Three bath pools were hidden beneath piles of soil. From a Jewish population of 5,000, there are now an existing 40 Jews remaining in the community to use the miqwe (mikvah), or purification baths with fresh spring water, a ritual used by married women.

With so much to see and do in [Syracuse](#), there is also the memorable medieval town of **Noto** worth seeing, which is just 55 minutes away by bus. The town is an example of baroque and renaissance architecture at its best.

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