# The 'island museum': Sicily's UNESCO sites / Journey to World Heritage Sites goes from Valley of the Temples to Mount Etna

**Thursday 6 November, 2025**

Sicily is an open-air museum.

Many peoples have passed through this land: there have been Phoenicians, Byzantines, Bourbons, Normans, Arabs, Piedmontese, Romans, Greeks.

Their legacy is not only recorded in the history books, but also at the island's seven UNESCO World Heritage sites, which are worth a visit.

In 'The Wandering Life,' Guy de Maupassant writes that the hill of the Valley of the Temples in Agrigento evokes in the ghosts of the past and the gods of Olympus. And it is indeed so: a visit entails immersing oneself in a landscape suspended between legend and history. After starting in Agrigento, a good itinerary with an archaeological theme must then continue eastward to Siracusa and the nearby Necropolis of Pantalica. A visit here is dominated by prehistoric mystery: there are more than 5,000 cave tombs carved into the rock walls in the canyon created by the Anapo and Calcinara rivers. Siracusa, on the other hand, offers one of the most extraordinary historical stages of the Mediterranean, showing the different ruling powers and the continuous development of the city over the centuries.

In the same area, you can then discover the late Baroque cities of theVal di Noto - Ragusa, Modica, Scicli, Noto, Caltagirone, Palazzolo
Acreide, Militello Val di Catania and Catania. These eight towns and cities are united by the fact that they were rebuilt after the 1693 earthquake and were declared World Heritage Sites for their extraordinary stylistic unity and interpretation of European Baroque in the Sicilian style. This does not mean that if you have visited one, you have seen them all: each has a special nature, a charm to be discovered.

The same goes for Piazza Armerina, where one can find another piece of Sicilian history - the mosaics of the Villa Romana del Casale, a sumptuous late Roman mansion that holds more than 3,500 square meters of perfectly preserved floor decorations, making it a figurative encyclopedia of the life and power of the empire.

But some works of art in Sicily are also the stuff of legend. It seems that to escape a storm while at sea, Roger II, king of Sicily vowed to erect a church at the place where he landed. Arriving in Cefalù, he kept his promise, creating a majestic cathedral, consecrated in 1267. It is a monument that, with its twin towers, dominates the town, while the Christ Pantocrator of the apsidal mosaic welcomes visitors from all over the world in breathtaking fashion.

This can be the first stop of Sicily's Arab-Norman itinerary, recognized by UNESCO in 2015. From Cefalù, the journey continues to Palermo, the heart of it, going from the Palatine Chapel in the Norman Palace to the Zisa, passing by the Cathedral of the Holy Virgin Mary of the Assumption, the Church of San Giovanni degli Eremiti, those of the Martorana and San Cataldo, as well as the Admiral's Bridge. A few

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kilometers away, stands the last piece of the route: the Cathedral of Monreale, commissioned by William II the Good in the 12th century. One again there is a legend behind it: the king is said to have fallen asleep under a carob tree while hunting, and Our Lady appeared to him in a dream to tell him of the presence of a treasure. But perhaps the triumph of the golden mosaics inside today's church are the real wealth of Monreale.

But nature can become art too. Those who see Mount Etna, which, with its spectacular, unpredictable eruptions, has shaped the landscape of the area over the millennia, know this well. It, too, is among Sicily's UNESCO heritage sites, as is the archipelago of the Aeolian Islands: Lipari, Vulcano, Salina, Stromboli, Panarea, Filicudi and Alicudi. They are an open-air geological museum, where each island tells a different story, from the craters of Stromboli and Vulcano to rich clumps of capers.

Ms. Daniela Lo Cascio - Head of the Department of Tourism, Sport and Entertainment of the Region of Sicily

Phone number: +39 095 7470254
E-mail: daniela.locascio@regione.sicilia.it
**Website:** https://www.visitsicily.info/

## Company Contact:

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