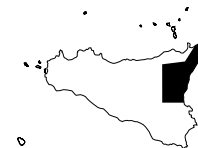


Ionian Coast



Magnificent, overdeveloped and unruly, the Ionian Coast is Sicily's most popular tourist destination, its commercial engine room and home to 20% of the island's population. Thriving cities like Messina and Catania do the Greeks proud – they are still centres of trade and business and house two of the largest universities on the island. Moneyed entrepreneurs have built their villas and hotels up and down the coastline, eager to bag a spot on Sicily's equivalent of the Amalfi Coast, a fortunate few owning the luxury homes of Taormina's Monte Tauro.

Above it all towers the muscular peak of Etna (3323m). With puffs of smoke billowing from its snow-covered cone, it's an ever-present reminder of the superficiality of success that rings its base. Like Californians, Etna's residents enjoy the good life to the full, waiting for the 'big one' that might sweep it all away. Nowhere is this more palpable than in the city of Catania, the capital of the Ionian Coast, destroyed by Etna in 1669 and rebuilt again in lava.

For tourists the Ionian Coast is an exciting destination, home to Europe's largest active volcano and its 590 sq km of well-managed national park. Within its boundaries it shelters some 20 farming communities, a far cry from the profiteering coastline. It is the largest unspoilt wilderness left in Sicily, home of the Titans and, as Aeschylus saw it, the column that holds up the sky.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Check out the chiaroscuro, baroque, cacophonous fish market and boisterous nightlife in **Catania's** (p199)
- Climb up to magnificent and volatile **Mt Etna** (p208) but don't lean into the crater!
- Admire the Scoglie dei Ciclopi as you swim, snorkel and sunbathe on the **Riviera dei Ciclopi** (p206)
- Pose on Piazza IX Aprile in the mini medieval town in **Taormina** (p190), or savour the views from the Teatro Greco
- Take a ferry across the **Straits of Messina** (p184) and enjoy the views as you leave or enter Sicily.





MESSINA & AROUND

MESSINA pop 250,000

Known to the ancient Greeks as Zankle (Sickle) for its beautiful curved harbour, Messina is situated at the northernmost point of the Ionian Coast and is staggeringly close to the Italian mainland. Wide boulevards, a practical grid system and elegant turn-of-the-century buildings make Messina an easy and pleasant city to get around, though you'll mainly find yourself here to catch a ferry to the Aeolian Islands or if you've entered Sicily from Reggio Calabria.

The Greeks mythologised the clashing currents of Messina's straits as the twin

monsters of Charbydis (the whirlpool) and Scylla (the six-headed monster), but the tremendous earthquake of 1908 altered the course of the treacherous waters and now the straits are a veritable highway of seafaring traffic. Strategically located at the heart of the trading routes that linked the Tyrrhenian Sea with the Mediterranean, Messina has always been prosperous and in the 18th century was famous for its four-storey mansions that overlooked the harbour. But all that was destroyed with the 1908 earthquake, one of the worst natural disasters to hit Sicily – it sank the shore by half a metre and killed 84,000 people. A new, earthquake-proof city had barely been rebuilt when it was flattened by Allied bombing

in 1943. In 2005 Messina nearly got an ill-conceived suspension bridge over the straits (see boxed text, p187) but the plan was thankfully cancelled by the new government.

Orientation

The main transport hub is at Piazza della Repubblica, at the southern end of the long waterfront. You will find the train station here and the Trenitalia (FS) ferries also arrive near here. The main intercity bus station is outside the train station, to the left on the piazza. To get to the city centre from Piazza della Repubblica, walk either straight across the piazza and directly ahead along Via I Settembre to the Piazza del Duomo, or turn left into Via Giuseppe La Farina and take the first right into Via Tommaso Cannizzaro to reach Piazza Cairoli.

Those coming by hydrofoil from Reggio di Calabria arrive about 1km north of the city on Via Vittorio Emanuele II, while drivers on the private car ferry (Caronte) from Villa San Giovanni land 3km further along, just north of the trade-fair area (Fiera).

Information EMERGENCY

Police (☎ 090 3 66 11, foreigners 090 36 65 19; Via Placida 2)

INTERNET ACCESS

Paritel Telecomunicazioni (Via Centonze 74; per hr €6; ☎ 9am–8pm) Telephones and internet connection.

MEDICAL SERVICES

Ospedale Piemonte (☎ 090 222 42 38; Viale Europa) Has a casualty service.

Pharmacy (☎ 090 34 54 22; cnr Via Cesare Battisti & Via Camiciotti; ☎ 24hr)

MONEY

There are numerous banks in the city centre – most with ATMs – and a currency exchange booth at the timetable-information office at the train station.

POST

Post Office (Piazza Antonello, Corso Cavour; ☎ 8.30am–6.30pm Mon–Sat)

TOURIST INFORMATION

Main Tourist Office (☎ 090 67 42 36; www.provincia.messina.it in Italian; Via Calabria 301; ☎ 9am–1.30pm & 3–5pm Mon–Thu, 9am–1.30pm Fri) Friendly, English-

speaking staff with good information about Messina and onward travel.

TRAVEL AGENCIES

Messina is full of travel agencies.

CTS (☎ 090 292 67 61; Via Ugo Bassi 93) Student travel group with special deals for students and those under 26.

Lisciotti Viaggi (☎ 090 71 90 01; Piazza Cairoli 13) Can assist with theatre tickets.

Sights

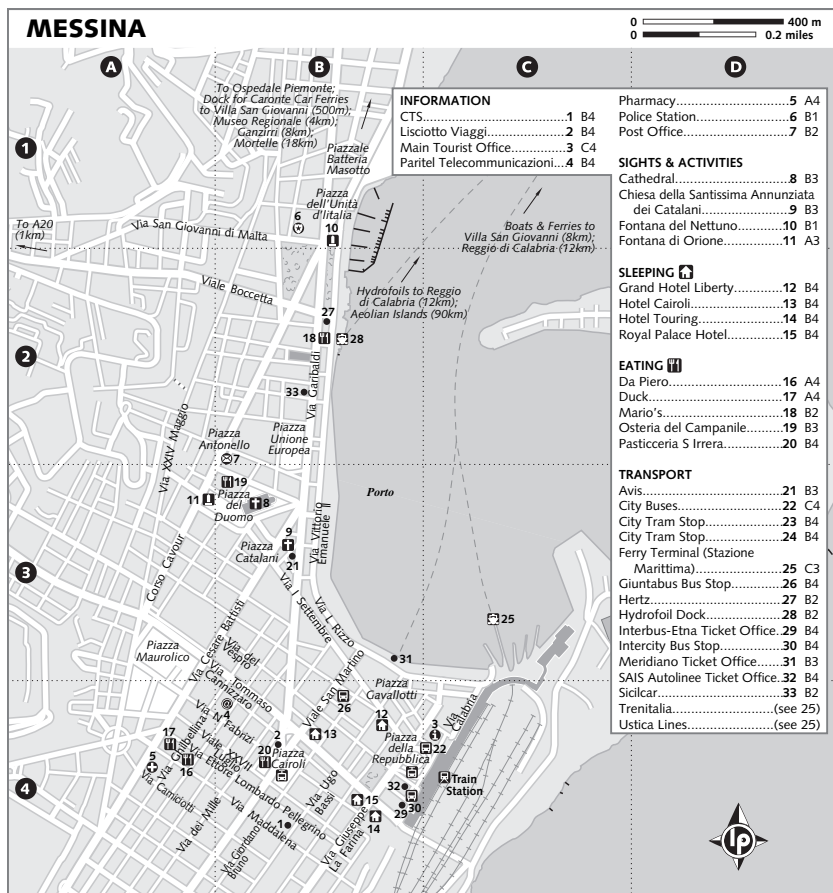
PIAZZA DEL DUOMO

Messina's Norman **cathedral** (Piazza del Duomo; admission free; ☎ 8am–6pm) is one of the most attractive churches in Sicily and if it hadn't been for its unfortunate history it would probably be on a par with the cathedrals of Cefalù (p135) and Monreale (p99).

Built in the 12th century, it suffered its first disaster in 1254 at the funeral of Conrad IV (son of Frederick II), when a mass of candles set the church on fire. Devastating earthquakes in 1783 and 1908 and a WWII incendiary bomb in 1943 put paid to the rest. The fire caused by the bombing destroyed all the frescoes and mosaics, incinerated the choir stalls and ruined the royal tombs. But the Messinese picked up the pieces and rebuilt it faithfully in the style of the original basilica with three mosaic apses. Some of the few original elements that were salvaged are the lovely stripy marble inlay and tracery of the façade and the Catalan-Gothic portal.

Inside the church is an impressive carved altar and an inlaid organ. Other treasures, such as the magnificent **Golden Mantle** (1668) designed by Innocenzo Mangani as a 'cloak' for the picture of *La Madonna della Lettera* (The Madonna of the Letter) that now sits on the altar, are kept in the cathedral's **treasury** (admission €3; ☎ 9am–1pm Mon–Sat). The letter the Madonna is supposed to have written was a blessing on the city of Messina, which suffered a terrible famine after converting to Christianity in AD 42.

Outside, the 60m campanile houses the world's largest **astronomical clock**, built in Strasbourg in 1733. The clock strikes at noon, setting in motion a slow-moving procession of bronze automata that have various historical and allegorical meanings (pick up the brochure from the tourist office for an explanation of each one) – watch out for the comical roaring lion and crowing cockerel. You can climb the **campanile** (admission €3.50; ☎ 8am–6pm) to see the enormous figures up close.



Facing the tower, the pale marble **Fontana di Orione** (1553) depicts a lounging Orion, the mythical founder of Messina. The fountain was constructed by Giovanni Angelo Montorsoli (pupil of Michelangelo) to commemorate the construction of Messina's aqueduct – the city's houses were the first in Sicily to receive running water. The figures that adorn it represent the Rivers Tiber, Nile, Ebro and Camaro.

OTHER SIGHTS

Tiny by comparison, the 12th-century **Chiesa della Santissima Annunziata dei Catalani** (Piazza Catalani; ☎ special services only) is a jewel of Arab-Norman construction. The statue in front of it is a monument to Don John of Austria,

who beat the Turks at the Battle of Lepanto in 1571.

Further north, where Via Garibaldi spills into Piazza dell'Unità d'Italia, is Messina's other great fountain, the 16th-century **Fontana del Nettuno** (Neptune's Fountain), also by Montorsoli. The figures are actually copies: the originals are housed in the museum. Opposite the fountain is Piazzale Batteria Masotto where you can enjoy views over the harbour and admire the huge golden statue of the **Madonnino del Porto**.

Picking up the city tram at Piazza Cairoli or the train station, you can take a pleasant gander up the sickle-shaped harbour. It is also the easiest way to reach the **Museo Regionale** (☎ 090 36 12 92; Viale della Libertà 465; adult/concession

DIRE STRAITS

When you see the tiny Messina Straits, you'll no doubt hear about the controversial plans of building a bridge across the waters, plans that were discussed during the 1960s and almost realised under Berlusconi, but finally dropped when Romano Prodi came to power in 2006.

The project was in the offing for some 30 years and made the EU's list of priority projects in 2004 but it was never a happy affair. The number of arguments against it was vast, starting with concerns by environmental organisations that feared that the enormous construction work would damage the delicate freshwater lagoons of Ganzirri and Mortelle and destroy the marine ecosystem. The residents weren't happy either, as nearly 800 homes would have been destroyed to make way for the mighty pylons (each as high as New York's Empire State Building) and more than 1200 people looked set to lose their jobs on the ferries. The bridge was estimated not to be able to withstand earthquakes, and its building was rumoured to be a vehicle for the enrichment of organised-crime networks from Sicily and Calabria.

The bridge was to be the world's longest suspension bridge, spanning a record-breaking 3300m (Japan's Akashi Kaikyo Bridge currently holds the title at 1991m) and rising 64m above sea level. An estimated 6000 vehicles per hour would have whizzed along its six lanes, while 200 high-speed trains would have traversed the two rail tracks each day.

But thankfully, Romano Prodi's ministers bagged the plans – much to the dismay of the centre-right Forza Italia party – after a total of 272 MPs voted in favour of abandoning the bridge proposal (232 voted for the building to continue). It is now planned that some of the estimated €4.4 billion which was to be spent on the bridge is going to be used to reinforce Sicily's infrastructure and better the ferry service across the straits.

€6/3; ☎ 090 67 37 55; www.hotelcairoli.it; Viale San Martino 63; s/d €45/80; ☎) Just off Piazza Cairoli, this is a convenient and comfortable budget hotel in Messina, though the décor is pretty nondescript. The owner is friendly, the beds hard and some rooms have sweet pieces of antique-style furniture.

Royal Palace Hotel (☎ 090 65 03; www.framon-hotels.com; Via Tommaso Cannizzaro 224; s/d from €89/125; ☎) Messina's most popular hotel is a real homage to the 1970s idea of hotel aesthetics: 106 rooms that line long and narrow corridors, low sofas and round lamp shades in the reception, along with lots of browns and oranges. The rooms are comfortable and James Bond would have loved all the buttons on the bed head and the electric shutters.

Grand Hotel Liberty (☎ 090 640 94 36; www.framon-hotels.com; Via I Settembre 15; s/d from €115/200; ☎) This is the most comfortable hotel in Messina. The Grand is a renovated corner palazzo with an old-world sense of luxury in the rooms and lots of marble, chandeliers and plush sofas and armchairs in the reception. The staff are helpful and speak English.

Eating

There are few good restaurants accessible on foot in the town, and on top of this many of them close in August. Messina is most famous

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Eating

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Sleeping

Despite being a major transport hub, Messina is not a tourist city and hotels and restaurants cater mainly for businesspeople and residents.

Hotel Touring (☎ 090 293 88 51; www.hoteltouring-me.it; Via N Scottò 17; s €20-50, d €40-70; ☎) A cute little hotel near the station, newly renovated, with a slightly eccentric reception and decent rooms. The cheaper rooms share bathrooms, but most are spacious, simple and tasteful, with bits of antique furniture and (some with) traditional tiles. A good budget option.

for its quality swordfish. It is typically served *agghiotta*, a ravishing dish with pine nuts, sultanas, garlic, basil and tomatoes.

Pasticceria S Irrera (☎ 090 67 38 23; www.irrera.it in Italian; Piazza Cairoli 12; sweets from €1) An excellent *gelateria/pasticceria* (ice-cream/cake shop), which is famous for the Messinese snack *pignolata* (doughnut sticks covered with chocolate).

Duck (☎ 090 71 27 72; Via Ettore Lombardo Pellegrino 107A; sandwiches €4, steaks €12-14; ☎ Mon-Sat) This noisy bar/restaurant is about the most authentic pub in Sicily, with a well-priced menu and a long wooden bar crammed full of young professionals. Steaks are the big thing here; it is a mistake to order anything else.

Osteria del Campanile (☎ 090 71 14 18; Via Loggia dei Mercanti 7; meals €20-25; ☎ closed Sun Sep-Jun) This cosy hostelry with its warm wooden interior is a good choice if you are up near the cathedral. In summer, tables flood the outside area. Again, swordfish is the highlight of the menu.

Mario's (☎ 090 4 24 77; Via Vittorio Emanuele II; meals €25; ☎ Tue-Sun Oct-Aug) Opposite the hydrofoil dock, this specialist fish restaurant is highly regarded and popular with the locals. The antipasti are laid out on a buffet – a delicious mixture of fish and vegetables. This is also a great place to while away the time before the hydrofoil leaves.

Da Piero (☎ 090 71 83 65; Via Ghibellina 121; meals €35-45; ☎ 8-11pm Mon-Sat) A classy restaurant frequented by well-heeled Messinese who come here for a big night out. It is an excellent place to try the swordfish *agghiotta*. You'll need to make a reservation and dress stylishly – time to get that designer garb out.

Getting There & Away

BOAT

Messina is the main point of arrival for ferries and hydrofoils from the Italian mainland, only a 20-minute trip across the straits.

Trenitalia (☎ 090 66 16 74; www.trenitalia.it; Ferry Dock; passenger one-way/return €3/5, small car eg Fiat Punto (18) runs at least 20 fast boats a day to Reggio di Calabria (10 on Sunday). It also operates services to Villa San Giovanni on the Italian mainland. The boats bear either the old FS (Ferrovie dello Stato) or a new Bluvia insignia.

Meridiano Lines (☎ 090 641 32 34; Via L Rizzo) also runs hourly boats to Reggio di Calabria (24 hours Monday to Friday) for similar prices.

Caronte (☎ 090 371 83 24; Viale della Libertà; passengers/cars €1.50/9) has car ferries between Messina and Villa San Giovanni (40 minutes, 12 daily). The Caronte ferries are 1.5km north of the ferry dock; just follow the signs along Via Vittorio Emanuele II.

Ustica Lines (☎ 090 36 40 44; www.usticalines.it in Italian; Via Vittorio Emanuele II) runs daily hydrofoils to Reggio di Calabria (€2.80, 15 minutes, five daily). In summer Ustica Lines hydrofoils also connect Messina with Lipari in the Aeolian Islands (€16.50, 1½ hours, five daily).

BUS

Interbus (☎ 090 66 17 54; Piazza della Repubblica 6) runs a regular service to Taormina (€3, 1½ hours, hourly Monday to Saturday) and has a weekly connection to Rome (€33, 9½ hours, Saturday).

SAIS Autolinee (☎ 090 77 19 14; www.saisautolinee.it in Italian; Piazza della Repubblica 6) serves Palermo (€14.10, two hours, eight daily Monday to Saturday, two Sunday), Catania (€7.10, 1½ hours, half-hourly Monday to Saturday, two Sunday) and Catania's airport. The Catania bus travels via Taormina, Giardini-Naxos, Giarre and Acireale. SAIS Autolinee also offers a number of national services from Messina, including three weekly buses to Pisa (€60, 15 hours) and Bologna (€60, 14 hours via Florence and Siena). You can buy these online.

Giuntabus (☎ 090 67 37 82; Via Terranova 8) runs a service to Milazzo (€3.70, 50 minutes, half-hourly Monday to Saturday between 6.30am and 8pm, one Sunday). From there you can catch the ferries and hydrofoils to the Aeolian Islands.

CAR & MOTORCYCLE

If you arrive in Messina by Trenitalia ferry with a vehicle it is simple to make your way out of town. For Palermo, Milazzo and the Aeolian Islands turn right from the docks, get onto Via Garibaldi and follow it along the waterfront. After about 1km, turn left into Viale Bocchetta and follow the green autostrada (motorway) signs. To reach Taormina and Syracuse, turn left from the docks into Via Giuseppe La Farina and follow the autostrada signs for Catania.

If you arrive by private ferry, turn right along Viale della Libertà for Palermo and Milazzo and left for Taormina and Catania –

follow the green autostrada signs. Messina's streets are well signposted so you should find your way around easily.

If you arrive without a vehicle and decide to hire one, the usual car-rental companies are represented:

Avis (☎ 090 67 91 50; Via Garibaldi 109)

Hertz (☎ 090 36 37 40; Via Vittorio Emanuele II 75)

Sicicar (☎ 090 4 69 42; Via Garibaldi 187)

TRAIN

Hourly *diretto* (direct) passenger trains connect Messina with Catania (2nd/1st class €8/10, 1½ to two hours), Taormina (2nd/1st class €6/7.50, 40 minutes, hourly), Syracuse (2nd/1st class €13/19 intercity or €9/12 *diretto*, 2½ to three hours) and Palermo (€17/22 intercity or €11 *diretto*, 3½ hours). You can also get the train to Milazzo (€2.65, 45 minutes, 10 daily), but buses are generally faster. The train stations for Milazzo and Taormina are inconveniently located some distance from their respective town centres.

From Messina you can also take the train across the straits for Rome and Milan.

Getting Around

The easiest way to get around Messina is on the city tram that runs up and down the length of the town from Piazza Cairoli, via the train station (Piazza della Repubblica) up to the Museo Regionale. Like the bus, you buy a ticket for two hours (€0.90, from a ticket conductor at the stop).

City buses run from outside the train station to Ganzirri (79 and 81) and Mortelle (79 and 80). A two-hour ticket costs €0.90.

GANZIRRI

pop 170

Only 8km north of Messina, Ganzirri is a pleasant town that on summer evenings plays host to crowds of youths from the city, who come to gossip and flirt in the town's bars and restaurants.

It's a very pretty setting: the town rings a salty inland lake famous for its mussels, which is why it is a favourite dinner alternative to Messina. One of the most popular restaurants is the family-run **La Napoletana-Salvatore** (☎ 090 39 10 32; Via Lago Grande 29; meals €30-35). It has fabulous views and serves up a huge antipasti buffet and excellent pasta with clams.

Buses 79 and 81 serve Ganzirri from Messina's Piazza della Repubblica.

MORTELLE

pop 240

A further 10km from Ganzirri (around the tip of the island) is the area's most popular summer resort, *the place* the Messinese go to sunbathe and hang out. On summer evenings, you can hardly walk around for the number of scooters and motorcycles, while during the day you'll generally have to get down to the beach early if you want to get a good spot. It only takes about 40 minutes to get here by bus from Messina (No 79 or 80 from Piazza della Repubblica).

MESSINA TO TAORMINA

Squeezed by the long range of the Peloritani mountains to the west and the straits that separate Sicily from the mainland to the east, the thin ribbon of coastline that runs from Messina to Taormina is traversed by a spectacular cliff-hugging road. Although the coastal strip appears as one long development, tucked away in the Peloritani are a couple of quiet villages. Most interesting is tiny **Savoca**, located 4km inland from the grey pebble beaches of Santa Teresa di Riva.

If the village seems familiar it is because it appeared in *The Godfather*, as the picturesque setting for Michael Corleone's marriage to Apollonia. At the entrance to the town is the **Bar Vitelli**, also used in the film. This is the place to go for virtually everything in town: the keys to the churches and stories of when the Americans came to make 'that film'. The town also has a Capuchin monastery with its own miniature **catacombs** (admission by donation; ☎ 9am-1pm & 3-7pm) complete with a few mummified local bigwigs.

Three kilometres above Savoca is another hilltop village, **Casalvecchio Siculo**. If you drive through the village and turn left (after 700m), you descend through citrus groves to **Chiesa di San Pietro e Paolo di Agrò**, a monastery built of brick and lava. It was built for Greek Orthodox monks in 1172 and has a beautiful interior with stalactite vaulting and lavish polychromatic marbles. The setting is also gorgeous, on the banks of the Agrò river.

THE HIGH ROAD

Sicily has one autostrada running between Catania Nord and Messina and continuing to Sant'Agata di Militello. Here you must get off the autostrada and onto the SS113 as there is a huge gap in the motorway between Sant'Agata and Cefalù – another example of Sicily's ambitious and corrupt road projects that were never completed.

In order to access the autostrada you have to pass through a ticket barrier (press the button and take a ticket; there's no operator). You pay at the barrier where you exit.

You don't have to take the autostrada; you can make the same journeys along the traffic-logged SS113 (north to Milazzo) and the SS114 (south to Taormina).

- Messina–Taormina costs €1.70
- Messina–Catania costs €3
- Messina–Milazzo costs €1.70
- Messina–Sant'Agata di Militello costs €5.50

TAORMINA & AROUND

TAORMINA

pop 10,800 / elev 204m

Taormina's glitz and tourism inundation might make some visitors flinch, especially if coming from the quieter parts of Sicily. Spectacularly located on a terrace of Monte Tauro and with dominating views west to Mt Etna, the city is beautiful. However, its character is marred by the fact that it exists mainly to please the tourist troupes who pound the city's pavements, shop in its up-market boutiques and eat in its high-priced restaurants most of the year. Taormina's gorgeous churches are the most popular wedding venues in Sicily, and its stunning architecture is snapped by thousands of digital cameras per day.

Over the centuries Taormina has seduced an exhaustive line of writers and artists, aristocrats and royalty, and these days it is host to a summer film festival that packs the town with the international jet set. The city is far removed from the banal economic realities of other Sicilian cities, as it is cushioned by some serious wealth. The capital of Byzantine Sicily in the 9th century, Taormina is an almost perfectly preserved medieval town.

In July and August the town is packed with tourists; it is difficult to find accommodation and even dining can be a problem. Though it only gets really quiet in November – when most of Taormina's hotel and restaurant proprietors apparently go to Thailand for a month – a good time to come is at

either end of the high season (April to May or September to October), when everything quiets down a bit.

Orientation

The train station (Taormina-Giardini) is at the bottom of Monte Tauro. You'll need to hop on an Interbus (€0.85) to the bus station (for local and intercity services) on Via Luigi Pirandello. You'll arrive at Via Luigi Pirandello anyway if you come by bus. A short walk uphill from there brings you to the old city entrance and Corso Umberto I, which traverses the town.

Information

BOOKSHOPS

Mazza Giuseppe (Corso Umberto 9) A big newsagent selling all the foreign newspapers and a selection of foreign-language books.

EMERGENCY

Police (☎ 094 261 11 11; Piazza Badia 4)

Tourist First Aid (☎ 094 262 54 19; Piazza San Francesco di Paola; ☎ 24hr 16 Jun-15 Sep) Free medical service.

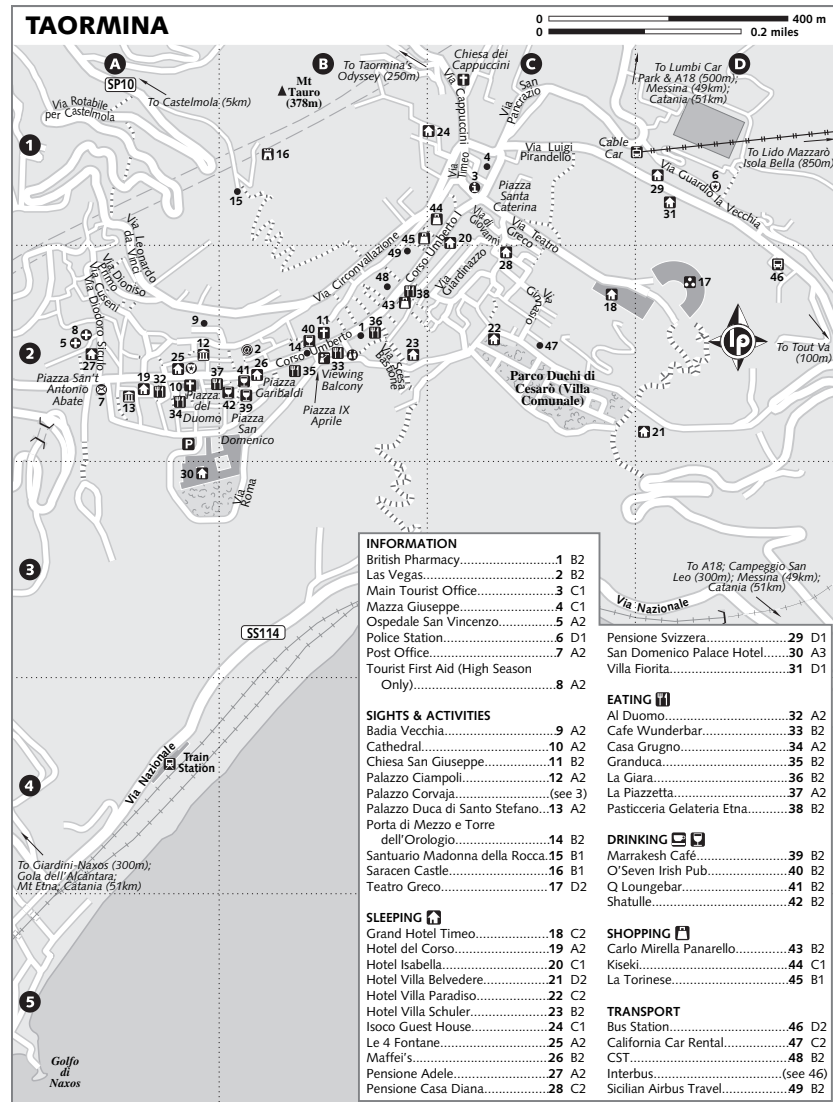
INTERNET ACCESS

Las Vegas (Salita Alexander Humboldt 7; per hr €6; ☎ 8am-1pm & 7pm-2am Tue-Sun) A slick internet bar with a bunch of fast computers and cocktails.

MEDICAL SERVICES

British Pharmacy (☎ 094 262 58 66, night call-out 3381587988; Piazza IX Aprile 1; ☎ 8.30am-1pm & 4.30-8.30pm) Offers a night call-out service.

Ospedale San Vincenzo (☎ 094 25 37 45; Piazza San Vincenzo) Call the same number for an ambulance. It is outside Porta Catania.



MONEY

You will find plenty of banks in Taormina situated along Corso Umberto I; all of them have ATMs (*bancomat*). There are also some currency-exchange places located along the same street. Compare the commissions, as these can vary between outlets.

POST

Post Office (Piazza Sant'Antonio Abate, far end of Corso Umberto I; ☎ 8.30am-6.30pm Mon-Sat)

TOURIST INFORMATION

Main Tourist Office (☎ 094 22 32 43; www.gate2taormina.com; Palazzo Corvaja, Corso Umberto I; ☎ 8.30am-2pm & 4-7pm Mon-Sat) Busy tourist office

with multilingual staff. Loads of brochures on activities and services but you may have to queue to speak to someone.

Sights

TEATRO GRECO

Taormina's most famous sight just has to be the heavenly **Teatro Greco** (Greek Theatre; ☎ 094 223 22 20; Via Teatro Greco; adult/concession €6/3; 🕒 9am-7pm Apr-Oct, 9am-4.30pm Nov-Mar). This perfect horseshoe-shaped theatre, suspended between sea and sky, was built in the 3rd century BC and is the most dramatically situated Greek theatre in the world.

The Greeks had originally intended to make the most of the breathtaking views of Mt Etna and the Bay of Schisò, but the brutish Romans remodelled it in AD 1, obscuring the natural backdrop with a tall *scenae frons* (colonnaded backdrop). None too taken with tragedy, they also demolished the stage and orchestra pit, converting them into a semi-circular arena for gladiators.

In the 12th century the family of Spain's Costanza d'Aragona fancied the site as its villa and built a house over part of the theatre (to the right as you face the stage). Fortunately, time has swept many of these alterations away, and the crumbling backdrop once again reveals the stunning panorama.

In summer the theatre is used as the venue of the international arts festival, Taormina Arte (see opposite for details). In peak season the site is *very* busy and best explored early in the morning to avoid the crowds.

AROUND CORSO UMBERTO I

One of the chief delights of Taormina is simply wandering through its narrow medieval main drag, browsing the antique and craft shops, delis and designer boutiques. When these have exhausted their charms most folk retire to the gorgeous **Piazza IX Aprile** from where you can enjoy stunning panoramic views of Etna and pop your head into the cutest rococo church, **Chiesa San Giuseppe** (Piazza IX Aprile; 🕒 9am-7pm).

At the western end of Piazza IX Aprile is a 12th-century clock tower, **Porto di Mezzo e Torre dell'Orologio**, which leads you through into the Borgo Medievale, the oldest quarter of the town. Head down here to **Piazza del Duomo** where teenagers congregate around the ornate baroque fountain (1635), which sports a two-legged centaur with the bust of an angel, the symbol of Taormina. On the eastern side of the piazza is the **cathedral** (Piazza del Duomo;

admission free; 🕒 8am-noon & 4-7pm), constructed in the 13th century. It has survived much of the Renaissance remodelling undertaken by the Spanish aristocracy in the 15th century, which is better illustrated in the **Palazzo Duca di Santo Stefano** with its Norman-Gothic windows. Although it is not possible to access this palace, you can look at others such as **Palazzo Corvaja** (which houses the tourist office) and **Palazzo Ciampoli** (☎ 094 22 30 33; Salita Ciampoli 9), now the Hotel Palazzo Vecchio. The nearby **Badia Vecchia** (Old Abbey; Via Leonardo da Vinci) is a 14th-century Gothic building with Norman-Arab elements.

Above the town, and accessible by a tortuously steep staircase, is the peak of Monte Tauro (378m). It is adorned with the wind-swept ruins of a **Saracen castle** and the **Santuario Madonna della Rocca**. The castle and sanctuary are of little interest but the views are fantastic. By car they are 500m from the town centre along the road to Castelmola (see opposite).

VILLA COMUNALE

To get away from the crowds, wander down to the luxurious Parco Duchi di Cesarò, which is more commonly referred to as the **Villa Comunale** (Via Bagnoli Croci; admission free; 🕒 9am-midnight summer, 9am-10pm winter). They were created for Lady Florence Trevelyan Cacciola (1852-1907), who left England in disgrace after having had an affair with Edward VII. Now they are some of the most lovely public gardens in Sicily, full of magnolias, hibiscus, bougainvillea, cacti and cypress trees. Perfect for picnicking on a summer's day, the gardens afford some glorious views over the bay below and there is a children's play area.

Activities

To reach **Lido Mazzarò**, directly under Taormina, you need to take the *funivia* (cable car) on Via Luigi Pirandello (one way/return €1.80/3; 🕒 8am to 1am). This beach is well serviced with bars and restaurants, and private operators charge a fee for a space with umbrella and deck chair (€5 per person or between €10 and €12 for two deck chairs and an umbrella). To the right of the beach past the Sant'Andrea hotel and round the cape is the minuscule **Isola Bella** set in a stunning cove. You can walk here in a few minutes but it is more fun to rent a small boat from Mazzarò to paddle round Capo Sant'Andrea. Isola Bella was bought by Florence Trevelyan for a mere 5000 lire.

It is her house that you can see on the island. Now it is run as a nature reserve by the World Wildlife Fund and the craggy base is a wonderful snorkelling spot.

Given its size, this cove is best enjoyed out of season. Still, you can bag some personal space by renting a deck chair and umbrella (€5 per person). Mendolia Lido has changing facilities but the spot over by the Nike Diving Centre is quieter.

Nike Diving Centre (☎ 094 24 75 34, 3391961559; www.divenike.com; Lido Mazzarò; single dive €30, snorkelling equipment per day €10) can be found at the northern end of the beach. It offers a whole range of courses from Introductory (€40) to Advanced Open Water Diver (€260).

For a real sandy beach you will have to go to **Spisone**, just beneath the autostrada exit (left from the cable-car station and about a 10-minute walk). When you reach the Le Capinera restaurant, take the staircase on the right, go through a tunnel and out onto the large sandy beach.

Other activities involve short excursions around Taormina, one of the most popular being to the **Gola dell'Alcantara** (see the boxed text, p197). Panorama fanatics should head 5km up the hill to **Castelmola**, literally the high point of the area, with a ruined castle and sweeping views of, well, everything. Interbus makes an (almost) hourly run from Taormina (€1.30).

Tours

It is possible to take any number of excursions from Taormina. They are well organised, time saving and hassle free but it may be cheaper to rent a car for the day.

CST (☎ 094 262 60 88; Corso Umberto I 101) Runs coach excursions to destinations including Mt Etna (€27), Piazza Armerina (includes the Villa Romana di Casale and Caltagirone, €50), Palermo (includes Monreale, €45) and Panarea and Stromboli in the Aeolian Islands (€75). Prices exclude admission to museums and archaeological sites.

Sicilian Airbus Travel (SAT; ☎ 094 22 46 53; www.sat-group.it; 73 Corso Umberto I) Provides almost identical tours to CST for very similar prices.

Festivals & Events

Raduno del Costume e del Carretto Siciliano A parade featuring traditional Sicilian carts and folkloric groups. Usually held in autumn. Ask at the tourist office for details.

Taormina Arte (☎ 0942 2 11 42; www.taormina-arte.com) Films, theatrical events and music concerts in July

and August from an impressive list of international names. Contact them for details, programmes and bookings.

Sleeping

Taormina has plenty of (expensive) accommodation; in summer it is essential to book in advance.

BUDGET

The cheapest option in Taormina is to go for a room in a private house. The tourist office has a full list.

Campeggio San Leo (☎ 094 22 46 58; Via Nazionale, Località San Leo; per person/tent €4.15/14.45) Near the beach, this camp site has minimal facilities. Take the bus from Taormina to the train station and ask the driver to drop you off at the entrance. Children go free.

Taormina's Odyssey (☎ 094 22 45 33; www.taorminaodyssey.com; 2 Traversa A, Via G Martino; dm/d €18/50) Taormina's only hostel and one that has earned a flurry of complimentary letters from LP readers who rate highly its friendly atmosphere, lack of curfew and open kitchen. A seven-minute walk from the town centre.

Pensione Casa Diana (☎ 094 22 38 98; Via di Giovanni 6; s/d €25/50; 🕒) The ancient and lovely Signora Diana has only four simple rooms, and at these prices they are snapped up quickly. It is within spitting distance of the Greek theatre.

Le 4 Fontane (☎ 094 262 55 20; www.le4fontane.it; Corso Umberto 231; s €40-50, d €60-80; 🕒) Another excellent budget B&B, on the top floor of an old palazzo, Le 4 Fontane is run by a friendly couple and has three spacious, well-equipped rooms, two of which have views of Piazza del Duomo.

ourpick **Pensione Adele** (☎ 094 22 33 52; www.pensioneadele.it; Via Apollo Arcageta 16; s €34-50, d €65-90; 🕒) One of the best budget options in town, Adele's is a huge pastel-pink palazzo converted into a *pensione*. It's clean, the rooms are spacious and simple, and the location is pretty much perfect. It also has a very cheap shuttle to the beach, which includes chairs and umbrella for a mere €5 per person.

MIDRANGE

All midrange hotels offer a beach shuttle and have some parking, but you need to phone in advance and book a space. Prices vary between €10 and €14 per day.

ourpick **Isoco Guest House** (☎ 094 22 36 79; www.isoco.it; Via Salita Branco 2; s €60-95, d €80-115; 🕒) If you think of accommodation as more than just a

place to lay your head, then you'll love Isoco. Run by the friendly Michele (also responsible for most of the furniture and decoration), this is Taormina's best little hotel. Isoco sits on a small cliff, just minutes from the centre, with five rooms featuring a different artist. The Keith Haring room has the artist's famous beaming figurines supporting a table and being chairs, and the Herb Ritts room is like a photo-shoot set, with old cameras serving as lamp shades. Michele prepares a good breakfast and the garden has a small Jacuzzi for guests' use. Book well in advance.

Pensione Svizzera (☎ 094 22 37 90; www.pensione-svizzera.com; Via Luigi Pirandello 26; s €60-95, d €85-125; (P) (☎) (♿) (♿)) A very popular B&B teetering on the edge of a cliff with views over Mazzarò bay. Many of the rooms have balconies. The hotel can also organise tennis and diving.

Hotel Isabella (☎ 094 22 31 55; www.gaishotels.com; Corso Umberto I 58; s €72-100, d €112-152; (P) (☎) (♿)) Situated on the *corso*, the Hotel Isabella has a pretty exterior. Inside it's not quite as impressive and rooms are impersonally modern, although comfortable enough. It has its own private beach, Lido Caparena, and meals are served on the rooftop terrace.

Hotel Villa Paradiso (☎ 094 22 39 21; www.hotelvilla-paradisotaormina.com; Via Roma 2; s €95-120, d €150-200; (P) (☎) (♿)) Tucked around the back of Taormina, the Paradiso, with its charming, individually decorated rooms, is often overlooked. It has a relaxed atmosphere and each room has a balcony complete with two sun lounges.

Hotel del Corso (☎ 094 262 86 98; www.hoteldel-corsotaormina.com; Corso Umberto I 238; s/d €98/125; (P) (☎) (♿)) A modest family-run hotel with a welcoming character. It is one of the few hotels located in the Borgo Medievale, overlooking the stately Palazzo Duca di Santo Stefano and the Golfo di Naxos.

Villa Fiorita (☎ 094 22 41 22; www.villafioritahotel.com; Via Luigi Pirandello 39; s/d €110.50/125; (P) (☎) (♿)) A slightly dated hotel on the road into town. Still, it is reasonably priced and comfortable and has the added bonus of a swimming pool. The rooftop terrace is particularly lovely with all its flowers and gorgeous views of Mazzarò bay.

Hotel Villa Schuler (☎ 094 22 34 81; www.villaschuler.com; Piazzetta Bastione, Via Roma 1; d garden view €124-136, d sea view €148-178; (P) (☎) (♿)) Surrounded by shady terraced gardens and with views of Mt Etna, the rose-pink Villa Schuler is family-owned and preserves a homely atmosphere. A lovely

breakfast is served on the panoramic terrace. A great choice.

Ourpick Hotel Villa Belvedere (☎ 094 22 37 91; www.villabelvedere.it; Via Bagnoli Croce 79; s €100-200, d €118-220; (☎) 11 Mar-19 Nov; (P) (☎) (♿)) Built in 1902, the jaw-droppingly pretty Villa Belvedere was one of the original grand hotels, well-positioned with fabulous views and luxuriant gardens, which are a particular highlight. There is also a swimming pool with a 100-year-old palm tree rising from a small island in the middle.

TOP END

San Domenico Palace Hotel (☎ 094 261 31 11; www.thi.it; Piazza San Domenico 5; d €240-500; (P) (☎) (♿) (♿)) Originally a Dominican monastery, the San Domenico is Taormina's second luxury hotel and a historical monument in itself. Over the years it has hosted an illustrious list of names, from Marshal Kesselring who used it as his WWII headquarters, to Francois Mitterrand. The views may be unsurpassed but so are the prices.

Grand Hotel Timeo (☎ 094 2 38 01; www.framon-hotels.com; Via Teatro Greco 59; d/stg from €250/360; (P) (☎) (♿) (♿)) The line of sleek Mercedes Benzes with personal drivers should be enough to tell you that this is Taormina's premiere hotel. Surrounded by spectacular panoramic views, the rooms feature baroque-style furnishings, which are dark and sumptuous, and the terrace is truly glamorous.

Eating

Eating out in Taormina isn't necessarily the best value or best quality you'll find, but there's a lot of posing to be done, if that's your thing. Be discerning about where you eat, because there are many overpriced restaurants.

RESTAURANTS

La Piazzetta (☎ 094 262 63 17; Via Paladini 5; meals €30; (☎) closed Mon winter) Tucked in the corner of the very picturesque Piazzetta Paladini. Recommended.

Granduca (☎ 094 22 49 83; Corso Umberto 172; pizza €10, meals €30-35; (☎) Thu-Tue) Eating delicious oven-baked pizza on the spectacular terrace of Granduca is an experience not easily forgotten. It also has a wide-ranging international menu. It's very popular so a reservation is highly recommended if you want to be sure of getting a table.

Al Duomo (☎ 094 262 56 56; Vico Ebrei 11; meals €35-40; (☎) Mon-Sat) The discreet Al Duomo has an

intimate terrace that overlooks the cathedral and has hosted a number of celebrities. The stewed lamb and fried calamari are simply delicious. Reservations are required.

Casa Grugno (☎ 094 22 12 08; Via Santa Maria dei Greci; meals €35-40) With an Austrian chef in the kitchen, don't expect typical Sicilian fare. The food at Casa Grugno is most fashionable and this remains Taormina's most fashionable eatery. The Catalan farmhouse where the restaurant is ensconced gives it great atmosphere.

Maffei's (☎ 094 22 40 55; Via San Domenico de Guzman 1; meals €40-45; (☎) Tue-Sun) A small restaurant with a pretty courtyard garden and some of the best fish dishes in Taormina. Here you can enjoy a cornucopia of fish, cooked to your liking, however, it is always a good bet to go for the house special.

La Giarra (☎ 094 22 33 60; Vico la Floresta 1; meals €40-45; (☎) 8.15-11pm, Tue-Sun Sep-Jul) This stylish Art Deco restaurant and piano bar serves grilled fish and delicious pasta with inventive sauces such as lemon and shrimp. It has a well-heeled clientele (Ava Gardner used to dine here) and the sniffy *maitre d'* will turn you away if you're not dressed appropriately. Reservations are required.

CAFÉS

Cafe Wunderbar (Piazza IX Aprile 7; coffees €3.50, alcoholic drinks €5.50-7) A poseur paradise on Piazza IX Aprile, serving the most delicious *latte di mandorla* (almond milk). Perfect for a warm summer's evening.

Pasticceria Gelateria Etna (112 Corso Umberto) A quaint little coffee shop-cum-*pasticceria* selling traditional sweets, cakes and liqueurs.

Drinking

Marrakesh Café (☎ 094 262 56 92; Piazza Garibaldi 2; cocktails €5.50; (☎) 6pm-3am) An Arabian-themed cocktail bar with candlelit, mosaic-topped tables. Its outdoor tables draw a cosmopolitan crowd in summer.

Shatulle (☎ 094 262 61 75; Piazza Paladini 5; cocktails from €5.50) A gay and lesbian bar that has one of the best terraces around. A great atmosphere and it's open all year round.

Q Loungebar (☎ 094 22 12 96; Piazzetta Paladini 6; cocktails €5.50-7; (☎) Tue-Sun) Another stylish bar in this busy piazza. White and brown leather stools and banquettes give it a sleek modern look. Drinks are served with olives, nuts and crisps. Don't bother with the food.

O'Seven Irish Pub (Largo Giuseppe La Farina; snacks €2.60-5.20; (☎) 24 hr) Tucked behind the Torre dell'Orologio is this pleasant pub with outdoor seating – perfect for watching the *passeggiata* (evening stroll).

Shopping

Taormina is a shoppers' paradise full of high-quality ceramic goods, lace and linen tableware, antique furniture and jewellery. Corso Umberto I is where the better shops are; Via Teatro Greco tends to be much more touristy although it does have a couple of gourmet grocery shops. Shops in Taormina tend to stay open late (until around 10pm) and can often arrange packing and shipping to your home address (for a fee).

La Torinese (☎ 094 22 33 21; Corso Umberto I 59) A good deli that stocks lots of wine, preserves, capers, liqueurs and honey.

Kiseki (☎ 094 262 88 61; www.kisekijewels.com; Corso Umberto I 55) One exceptional jeweller that utilises natural materials like shells, coral, semi-precious stones and lava.

Carlo Mirella Panarello (Via A Marziani) If ceramics are your thing, this workshop produces original designs that have a lovely naive quality. Ring the bell to be admitted.

Getting There & Away

BUS

The bus is the easiest way to reach Taormina. **Interbus** (☎ 094 262 53 01; Via Luigi Pirandello) services leave for Messina (€3, 1½ hours, five Monday to Saturday) and Catania (€4.50, 1½ hours, four Monday to Friday). The Catania bus also services the train station and Giardini-Naxos (€1.60). There are also services to the Alcantara Gorge (€4.70 return, four daily) and up to Castelmola (€1.30, 15 minutes, four daily).

CAR & MOTORCYCLE

Taormina is on the A18 motorway and SS114 between Messina and Catania. Parking is a complete nightmare and Corso Umberto I is closed to traffic. The **Lumbi car park** (☎ 094 22 43 45; (☎) 24hr) is north of the town centre. It provides a shuttle service to the centre from Porta Messina.

California Car Rental (☎ 094 22 37 69; Via Bagnoli Croce 86; Fiat Punto with air con per day/week €78/339, Vespa 125 per day/week €30/189) rents out cars and motorcycles at reasonable prices, with added

extras such as unlimited kilometres, free child seats and hotel drop-off.

TRAIN

There are regular trains along the Ionian Coast, but the awkward location of Taormina's station is a strong disincentive. If you arrive this way, catch an Interbus bus up to the town. The buses run roughly every 30 to 90 minutes (much less frequently on Sunday). Bear in mind that in summer, the bus pulls up close to full, so you may have to wait for the next one. Trains run from Taormina to Messina (2nd/1st class €6/7.25, 40 minutes, hourly). From Taormina to Catania is just as regular (2nd/1st class €3/4.25, 45 minutes).

GIARDINI-NAXOS

pop 9270

This small town 5km south of Taormina is a popular alternative for accommodation and though it has one of the longest pebbly beaches on the Ionian Coast the town itself is nothing to write home about. Giardini-Naxos' economic engine is tourism and the summer months see the long beach packed with Italian families and package tours. If you're after a quieter place, head down the coast towards Catania and the Riviera dei Ciclopi.

Giardini-Naxos is the location of the first Greek settlement in Sicily. According to legend, the Greeks stayed well clear of the Sicilian coastline, believing it to be inhabited by monsters. This belief was encouraged by Phoenicians eager to keep the Greeks away from the western Mediterranean, but when the Athenian, Theocles, was shipwrecked along the eastern shore he found that the stories were untrue. He returned soon after with a group of Chalcidian settlers and the town of Naxos was founded in 735 BC.

The Naxos ruins are not nearly as impressive as those in other Sicilian excavations. Apart from a 300m stretch of wall, a small temple and a couple of other structures, the best part of a visit is simply to amble through the lemon groves. A small **museum** (☎ 094 25 10 01; Via Schisò; admission €2; ☎ 9am-7pm) has bits and bobs uncovered during the excavation.

The **tourist office** (☎ 094 25 10 10; Via Tysandros 76; ☎ 8.30am-2pm & 4.30-7.30pm Mon-Sat) can help you with accommodation lists and handy maps of the area.

Regular Interbus buses leave from the Taormina bus station on Via Luigi Pirandello (see p195) for Giardini-Naxos. To get to the town from its train station, turn left as you exit the station and follow the signs for about 10 minutes.

Sleeping & Eating

Giardini-Naxos is chock-full of accommodation. If you want to be close to the sea, try the following.

Hotel Nike Giardini-Naxos (☎ 094 25 12 07; www.hotelnike.it; Via Calcide Eubea 27; s €35-54, d €70-109; ☎ ☼) A larger, Mediterranean-style hotel, situated about 3km from the train station in a small rocky bay near the Naxos site. It has marvellous views of Taormina and Etna, and its terraced gardens descend to its own pier and private beach.

Hotel La Riva (☎ 094 25 13 20; www.hotellariva.com; Via Tysandros 52; s €55-77, d €70-110; ☎ ☼) A lovely little family-run hotel with 40 rooms, all individually decorated with traditional Sicilian furnishings. It has great character for Giardini-Naxos and your hosts are charming, making you feel like a guest rather than a paying customer.

Giardini-Naxos is also full of cheap restaurants, most of which are along the waterfront. One good example is **La Cambusa** (☎ 094 25 14 37; Via Schisò 3; pizza €2.60-8). With sea views, ocean breezes and a good list of pizzas, this is one of the town's better choices.

CATANIA & AROUND

CATANIA

pop 310,000

Catania is Sicily's most vibrant (and second-largest) city, the modern, forward-looking sister to traditional Palermo. Much renovated over the last five years, Catania's lava stone buildings are dramatic against the blue skies, its piazze and boulevards are wide and inviting and, come night time, the streets are full of students having fun at the zillion bars and clubs. The city's famous fish market is one of Sicily's most impressive – you'll find yourself outstared by massive swordfish first thing in the morning, and invited to witness sea creatures you never knew existed. All this happens under the watchful puff of Etna which, having erupted once again in September 2007, keeps the city's inhabitants on their toes.

DETOUR: GOLA DELL'ALCANTARA

A relatively short drive up the winding SS185 from Naxos will get you to this series of vertiginous lava gorges known as Gola dell'Alcantara (derived from the Arabic *al qantara*, meaning bridge). The weirdly shaped twisting rock formations were created when a red-hot lava flow hit the water, splintering the basalt into lava prisms. The lava went on to create Capo Schisò at Giardini-Naxos.

The gorge is now protected. The water is freezing, even in summer, and in winter (November to March) it is forbidden to enter the gorge due to the risk of flash flooding. The **Gola Alcantara office** (☎ 0942 98 50 10; admission €4.50) hires out the necessary waders (€5). The lift down into the gorge is beside the car park. It is also possible to reach the gorge by the stairs on the main road, 200m uphill from the lift entrance.

You could stop off here on your way to Mt Etna. Otherwise, Interbus has buses from Taormina to Gola dell'Alcantara (€4.70 return, one hour, four daily Monday to Saturday).

There are great places to eat in the city and some gorgeous B&Bs to go home to. Combine these with the nightlife, friendly people, amazing architecture and some impressive sights, plus the proximity of beaches, and you get Sicily's best city by a mile.

History

Katane was founded by the Chalcidians in 729 BC. For 300 years it tussled with Syracuse for control of the region, before it was sacked by the Romans in 263 BC, and occupied by the Byzantines (AD 535), the Saracens (878) and the Normans (1091). By the mid-17th century Catania was a prosperous urban centre that enjoyed a sophisticated trading network with the rest of the island.

Mt Etna's eruption in 1669 covered most of Catania in boiling lava, killing 12,000 people, destroying the city and reconfiguring the landscape. The fertile countryside was devastated and the starving local population was finished off by the 1693 earthquake, which killed 20,000 people.

The following year Giuseppe Lanza, the duke of Camastra, organised a committee to rebuild the city with a view towards minimising the potential damage of another Etna eruption. Under the supervision of the brilliant architects Giovanni Vaccarini and Stefano Ittar, a new street grid was created that allowed for spacious squares and streets of differing widths, all of which would provide escape routes and greater shelter when Etna stirred once more. In keeping with the dominant architectural style of the period, the new city was thoroughly baroque in appearance. Years of neglect had left many of

Catania's elegant palaces and churches in decay but recent renovations, which started around 2002, have brought back the beauty of the city's flamboyant baroque style.

Orientation

Catania's main train station and intercity bus terminal are situated a 15-minute walk east of the city centre, near the port on Piazza Giovanni XXIII. Southwest of the square is Via Vittorio Emanuele II, which runs east-west through the heart of the city, while Via Etnea runs north-south from Piazza del Duomo. Most sights are concentrated around and west of Piazza del Duomo, while the commercial centre of Catania is further north, around Via Pacini and Via Umberto I.

Information

EMERGENCY

Police (☎ 095 736 71 11; Piazza San Nicoletta)

INTERNET ACCESS

Prices are €6 per hour.

La Internetteria (Via Penninello 44; ☎ noon-midnight Mon-Sat, 6.30-11.30pm Sun) A nice café serving snacks and drinks. Speedy computers.

LEFT LUGGAGE

Train Station (per bag per 12hr €3.90; ☎ 24 hr)

MEDICAL SERVICES

Farmacia Del Centro (☎ 095 31 36 85; Via Etnea 107; ☎ Sep-Jul) Late-night pharmacy.

Spedale Garibaldi (☎ 095 759 43 66; Piazza Santa Maria di Gesù)

Spedale Vittorio Emanuele (☎ 095 743 54 52; Via Plebiscito 628) Has a 24-hour emergency doctor.



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MONEY

Banks are along Corso Sicilia and several have currency exchanges. There is also an exchange office at the train station. Plenty of ATMs can be found along Via Etna.

Banca Nazionale del Lavoro (Corso Sicilia;

☎ 8.30am-1.30pm & 2.30-4pm Mon-Fri) Has an ATM.

POST

Post Office (Via Etna 215; ☎ 8am-6.30pm Mon-Fri, 8.30am-12.30pm Sat)

TOURIST INFORMATION

Tourist Office (www.apr.catania.it in Italian; ☎ 8am-8pm Mon-Fri, 8am-2pm Sat) airport (☎ 095 730 62 66); city centre (☎ 095 730 62 33; Via Etna 63); train station (☎ 095 730 62 55); Via Cimarosa (☎ 095 730 62 22, 095 730 62 11; Via Cimarosa 10-12) Has brochures and maps on the city and Etna. Some English is spoken. You can get the *Lapis* leaflet here, which lists all sorts of entertainment events, live music, jazz, theatre, art exhibitions, restaurants and bars.

TRAVEL AGENCIES

You can book train, ferry and air tickets at the following agencies:

CIT (☎ 095 31 35 77; Via Antonino di Sangiuliano 205)

Sestante Vacanze (☎ 095 31 35 17; Via Antonino di Sangiuliano 208)

Sights

PIAZZA DEL DUOMO

The central square of Catania, **Piazza del Duomo**, is a World Heritage site. Surrounded by magnificent, sinuous buildings, the piazza is a sumptuous example of Catania's own style of baroque with its contrasting lava and limestone. In the centre of the piazza is the city's most memorable monument, the smiling **Fontana dell'Elefante** (Fountain of the Elephant; 1736). This comical statue is composed of a naive elephant, dating from the Roman period, surmounted by an improbable Egyptian obelisk. The elephant, with its upturned trunk, is known locally as *Liotru* and is the symbol of the city. It belonged to the magician Eliodorus (8th century AD), who reputedly made his living turning people into animals, and thus is believed to retain some magical powers that help calm the restless activity of Mt Etna.

Facing the statue is Catania's other defence against the volcano, St Agata's **cathedral** (☎ 095

THE MASTER OF SONG

In his short life (he died when he was 34) Vincenzo Bellini composed 10 operas, including the trio that made his fame: *La sonnambula* (The Sleepwalker), *I puritani* (The Puritans) and *Norma*. Unlike his bel canto contemporaries, Bellini refused to rely on the tried-and-tested seductive melodies that made such hits out of operas like Rossini's *Il barbiere di Siviglia* (The Barber of Seville) and Donizetti's *Lucia di Lammermoor*. Unperturbed by the ease with which his fellow composers reeled off operas (Rossini wrote an average of one opera every two weeks!), Bellini tried to write works that didn't rely on pretty melodies at the expense of a well-crafted story. Although successful during his short career, Bellini's style fell out of favour after his death and his operas struggled for recognition until the 1950s and the revival of the bel canto style. Wagner, however, recognised Bellini's genius and wrote that his music was 'strongly felt and intimately wound up with the words', a powerful emotional combination brought to dramatic life by Maria Callas in her 1953 performance in the title role of *Norma*.

32.00 44; Piazza del Duomo; admission free; ☎ 8am-12pm & 4-7pm), with its impressive marble façade sporting two orders of columns taken from the Roman amphitheatre (see opposite). Inside the huge vaulted interior lie the remains of the city's patron saint, the young virgin Agata, who resisted the advances of the nefarious Quintian (AD 250) and was horribly mutilated (her breasts were hacked off and her body was rolled in hot coals). The saint's jewel-drenched effigy is ecstatically venerated on 5 February in one of Sicily's largest *festas* (festivals; see opposite).

Today the best show in town is **La Pescheria** (Piazza del Duomo; ☎ 5-11am), the bustling fish market and the adjoining **food market** (Piazza del Duomo; ☎ all day). The shouts of the fishmongers, the hundreds of gleaming fish, the massive swordfish and dozens of squid displayed on the wooden tables are unforgettable (and delicious too!). This street show is not to be missed at any cost and if you're staying in self-catering accommodation it is heaven for a fantastic lunch. The **Fontana dell'Amenano** at the entrance of the food market is Tito Angelini's commemoration of the River Amenano, which once ran overground and on whose banks the Greeks founded the city of Katane.

EAST OF PIAZZA DEL DUOMO

A few blocks northeast, you'll stumble onto the lovely Piazza Bellini, dominated by **Teatro Massimo Bellini** (Via Perrotta 12). It is named after Vincenzo Bellini, Catania's most famous export and the father of a vibrant modern musical scene (see boxed text, above), and is one of the largest theatres in Europe, with a sumptuous, gilt-encrusted interior.

Further east on Viale Africa is the renovated sulphur refinery building, **Le Ciminieri**

(☎ 095 734 99 11). The renovation involved transforming the refineries into a cultural centre while preserving their original character – a bit like the Tate Modern in London. It houses a collection of modern art and a permanent exhibition of WWII memorabilia, art and photography. Enquire at the tourist office about temporary exhibitions and cultural events, or pick up the *Lapis* leaflet.

CASTELLO URSINO

If you walk south from Piazza del Duomo, through the impressive **Porta Uzeda** (built in 1696) and down to Piazza Federico di Svevia, you'll come across the imposing fortifications of the 13th-century Castello Ursino, built by Frederick II. The grim-looking fortress, surrounded by a moat, was once on a cliff top overlooking the sea; following the earthquake of 1693 the whole area to the south was reclaimed by the lava and the castle became landlocked. Inside is the **Museo Civico** (☎ 095 34 58 30; Piazza Federico di Svevia; admission free; ☎ 9am-1pm & 4-8pm Mon-Sat), the repository of the valuable archaeological collection put together by Catania's most important aristocratic family, the Biscaris. It also houses treasures from the monastery of San Nicolò and some Roman artefacts.

WEST OF PIAZZA DEL DUOMO

The city's most interesting street is probably Via Crociferi. At the southern end, on Piazza San Francesco, is the **Museo Belliniano** (☎ 095 715 05 35; admission free; ☎ 9am-1.30pm Mon-Sat, 9am-12.30pm Sun & public holidays), the former home of Vincenzo Bellini, now a small museum with a good collection of the composer's

memorabilia, including original scores, photographs and his death mask.

Opposite the museum is the 18th-century **Chiesa di San Francesco** and just up the street is the **Arco di San Benedetto**, an arch built by the Benedictines in 1704. According to legend, the arch was built in one night to defy a city ordinance against its construction on the grounds that it was a seismic liability. On the left past the arch is the imposing **Chiesa di San Benedetto**, built between 1704 and 1713. Inside is some splendid stucco and marble work.

Past the church, off Via Crociferi, are the ruinous remains of the **Roman theatre** and a small rehearsal theatre, the **Odeon** (Via Vittorio Emanuele II 266; theatre & odeon €2; ☎ 9am-1.30pm & 3-7pm).

Back on Via Crociferi, you'll find the **Chiesa di San Giuliano** (1738-51), designed by Vaccarini, about halfway up the street on the right-hand side. The convex central façade makes for an interesting effect. Further on you'll notice the excavations that have resulted in the whole street being closed off to traffic: here, at the crossroads with Via Antonino di Sangiuliano, a section of the old Roman road and a sizable floor mosaic have been uncovered. You can peer over the boarding to take a look.

CHIESA DI SAN NICOLÒ ALL'ARENA

Directly opposite Chiesa di San Giuliano is the tiny Via Gesuiti, which leads west to Piazza Dante and Sicily's largest church, the Chiesa di San Nicolò all'Arena. Commissioned in 1687, work on the building was interrupted by the earthquake of 1693 and then by problems with its size – it is 105m long, 48m wide and its cupola is 62m high. The church was never completed. It has a terribly ugly façade, a stark contrast to the rich embellishments that adorn the city's other baroque structures. The cavernous interior is equally devoid of frills, the long walls interrupted by a series of altars that are almost completely bare. The presbytery features a splendid organ crafted by Donato del Piano.

Directly behind the church and part of the same complex is the massive Benedictine **Monastero di San Nicolò all'Arena**, built in 1703 and now part of the city's university. It is the second-largest monastery in Europe and has some lovely internal cloisters and one of the most valuable libraries on the island,

complete with its original bookcases and 18th-century majolica-tiled floors.

VIA ETNEA

Via Etnea is an impressive wide boulevard and Catania's main north-south artery. It runs from Piazza del Duomo right up through the city and into the foothills of Mt Etna. Via Etnea is a bright street with lots of shops and cafés, and at its heart is Piazza dell'Università. Facing each other on the square are two buildings designed by Vaccarini – the **Palazzo dell'Università** to the west and the **Palazzo Sangiuliano** to the east. The former is the city's university.

A further 300m north is the large and modern Piazza Stesicoro, whose western side is dominated by the sunken remains of the **Roman amphitheatre**. It doesn't look like much today, but in its heyday (around the 2nd century BC) it could seat up to 16,000 spectators and was second in size only to the Colosseum in Rome. What you see from the street is only a part of the once-massive structure, which extended as far south as Via Penninello. You can explore part of the vaults and get an idea of the true size of the theatre from a diagram.

A little walk away from Piazza Stesicoro you will find the church of **Sant'Agata al Carcere** (admission free; ☎ 8am-12pm & 4-7pm Tue-Sat), built above the dungeons where the saint was imprisoned and tortured. You can ask the custodian for permission to take a peak at the gloomy prison cell below the church.

For relief from the madding crowd, continue north along Via Etnea and cut in left behind the post office for the lovely gardens of the **Villa Bellini**, with loads of trees and places to sit, and a floral clock.

Festivals & Events

Festa di Sant'Agata Hysterical celebrations where one million Catanians and tourists follow the Fercolo (a silver reliquary bust of the saint covered in marvellous jewels) as it is carried along the main street of the city. There are also spectacular fireworks during the celebrations. Held 3 to 5 February.

Catania Musica Estate Classical music festival in July.

Etna Jazz Ask at the tourist office for information on this jazz festival, also held in July.

Settimana Barocca A week of baroque concerts, pageants and other performances in July.

Sleeping

Catania is probably the best place in Sicily for reasonably priced, stylish hotels. This makes

it an excellent base for exploring the Ionian Coast and Etna. Quality top-end hotels, however, are a bit thin on the ground.

BUDGET

Camping Jonio (☎ 095 49 11 39; www.camping.it/italy/sicilia/jonio; Via Villini a Mare 2; per adult €6-10, per tent €6-12, bungalow per person €20-50) This place is about 5km northeast of Catania, close to a beautiful rocky beach. To get there, catch bus 334 from Via Etna. It also has bungalows. The services are decent here and if you fancy the beach and don't mind not being inside Catania, it's a good budget option.

Agorà Hostel (☎ 095 723 30 10; www.agorahostel.com; Piazza Currò 6; dm €18-20, d €40-50; 📺) A classic youth hostel with rooms of six to 12 beds and some doubles. There is no lockout, an internet point is provided (€3 per hour) and you can do laundry (€4 per wash). Its location near La Pescheria makes it a good base for self-caterers, and its bar is one of the coolest in Catania (see p204). The hostel (and its website) is a mine of information about itineraries on Etna and around Catania.

Pensione Bellini (☎ 095 715 09 69; www.bellinihotel.com; Via Landolini 41; s €35-45, d €49-60; 📺) This friendly little *pensione* just off Piazza Bellini is an excellent budget option and provides good, comfortable accommodation. The young couple running it is friendly and helpful. Breakfast is included if requested.

our pick B&B Opera (☎ 3492689998; www.bbopera.it; Via Antonino di Sangiuliano 129; s €40-50, d €60-70; 📺) B&B Opera is what happens when you get gorgeous décor, good prices, fab location and great management in one place. Sitting on the top of an old palazzo, this converted space has five large rooms with domed ceilings, modern and stylish furnishings and gleaming bathrooms. There's a kitchen that you can use freely as well as a small terrace. The friendly manager, Lydia, is a dream. If only every town had as good a place as this...Book in advance.

Pensione Rubens (☎ 095 31 70 73; www.rubenshotel.it; Via Etna 196; s/d €45/75; 📺) Seven huge, spacious rooms are kept in tiptop condition by the affable Signor Caviezel. The wide windows are double-glazed and the rooms are quiet and restful, with floral furniture and tall ceilings. There's a large pink reception, a coffee room where black-glass chandeliers swing from the ceiling, and aristocratic furniture glams up the space. A great choice.

Hotel Moderno (☎ 095 32 65 50; www.albergomoderno.it; Via Alessi 9; s/d €59/79; 📺) The Moderno is more modern in name than in appearance, with drab 1970s rooms that can be a bit sad. It's only good if there's nowhere else; its saving grace is its location, near Via Crociferi, and the fact that the manager is friendly.

our pick B&B Crociferi (☎ 3478975729; www.bbocrociferi.it; Via Crociferi 81; s €50-65, d €65-85; 📺) Another stunning B&B, consisting only of three rooms (so book in advance), all of which have domed and frescoed ceilings and small balconies looking at the street below. The owner Teresa is a lover of all things Indian, and the décor – which could easily feature in a style magazine – reflects this. There's a gorgeous, plant-filled kitchen with traditional Sicilian ceramics where you have your breakfast.

MIDRANGE

Hotel La Collegiata (☎ 095 31 52 56; www.lacollegiata.com; Via Paolo Vasta 10; s €45-50, d €75-85; 📺) With lovely rooms in terracottas and burgundies, some overlooking Piazza dell'Università and others a peaceful courtyard, La Collegiata is great value for its excellent location and pleasant atmosphere. You need a coupon (€3) from reception to get breakfast from one of the bars on Via Etna.

Hotel Etna 316 (☎ 095 250 30 76; www.hoteletna316.it; Via Etna 316; s €55-65, d €75-90; 📺) The charming Hotel Etna is opposite the Bellini gardens and has really good rooms with comfy wrought-iron beds, big windows, traditional tiles or wooden floors, and ochre walls. It's a peaceful place with a sunny lounge and breakfast room. The service is good and discreet.

Hotel del Duomo (☎ 095 250 31 77; www.hoteldelduomo.it; Via Etna 28; s/d €75/100; 📺) The very central Hotel del Duomo occupies the whole wing of an ancient palazzo. Front rooms have great views over Piazza del Duomo, which is particularly lovely at night. The décor is classic and the service friendly.

Hotel Novocento (☎ 095 31 04 88; www.hotelnovocentocatania.it; Via Monsignor Ventimiglia 37; s/d €85/100; 📺) An elegant hotel at very reasonable prices. Inside, the Art Nouveau interior gives it a classy feel and bedrooms are decorated with turn-of-the-century furnishings. There is no restaurant but breakfast is served in the hotel café.

Hotel Savona (☎ 095 32 69 82; www.hotelsavona.it; Via Vittorio Emanuele 210; s/d €100/140; 📺) Another good hotel located just off Piazza del

EATING & DRINKING IN THE STREET

One of Catania's best features is that, come evening, the market area (p200) turns out a number of food stalls that cook and serve the meat and fish they didn't sell during the day. Head here after 7pm and you'll see several of the daytime stalls turned into plastic-chair outdoor diners. Pick your piece of meat/fish and enjoy a plate of antipasti and some house wine. You'll pay around €15 for a plate of antipasti and a main, followed by some watermelon or whatever is in season. It's simple, delicious food, the proprietors are friendly, and the atmosphere always jolly. Perfect.

Another speciality of Catania is the tubular kiosks that dot the streets (Via Etna has many) and serve the traditional nonalcoholic drink: a lemon, orange or mandarin cordial, or a very special fizzy lemon concoction. Stop by in the evening (they usually open after 6pm) and be refreshed the Catanian way.

Duomo. Back rooms overlook a quiet inner courtyard while other rooms have views over scattered rooftops backing the hotel. There's no lift and the stairs are very steep, so watch out if you have heavy bags.

Katane Palace Hotel (☎ 095 747 07 02; www.katanepalace.it; Via Finocchiaro Aprile 10; s €127-160, d €147-160; 📺) A restored palazzo with discreet, elegant, top-class service. The rooms are warmly furnished and the restaurant, Il Cuciniere, is excellent, with a menu drawn from local ingredients and wines.

TOP END

Grand Hotel Excelsior (☎ 095 53 70 71; www.thi.it; Piazza G Verga; s/d €195/345; 📺) Catania's only five-star hotel is the Excelsior, in an ugly Fascist-era building on Piazza G Verga. It is much less attractive on the outside than it is on the inside and has a floor for nonsmokers and an internal garden.

UNA Hotel Palace (☎ 095 250 51 11; www.unahotels.it; Via Etna 218; r from €358; 📺) A new, white, gleaming six-floor, four-star hotel from the UNA chain, with sleek, blindingly white rooms, black and gold furniture and a rooftop garden bar that serves cocktails and aperitivi at sunset. It's posh all right, but you can get a great bargain if you book online.

Eating

Like true sybarites the Catanians love to eat, and dining out in Catania is a real pleasure. Pretension is set aside for quality food and a noisy, companionable atmosphere.

Don't miss the savoury *arancini* (fried rice balls), *cartocciate* (bread stuffed with ham, mozzarella, olives and tomato) and *pasta alla Norma* (pasta with tomatoes, aubergine and salted ricotta), which originated here.

RESTAURANTS

Marrakesh (Via Landolina 52; dishes €6-9; 📺 8pm-1.30am Thu-Tue) A North African eatery and bar near Piazza Bellini. Serves couscous, *makluba* (a spicy chicken stew with aubergines, tomatoes, onions and almonds with rice) and *tagine*. In summer tables are set up outside and there is nearly always live music or belly dancing.

Via Coppola (☎ 095 31 29 09; Via Coppola 39; pizza €6.50-8) The best thing about this place is its atmospheric setting in a quiet street, where the tables are covered by a canopy and surrounded by flickering candles. It's popular with Catanians for its good pizza and is great for a low-key dinner.

Osteria i Tre Bicchieri (☎ 095 715 35 40; Via S Giuseppe al Duomo 31; cheese plates €10, fondue €20; 📺 8pm-midnight Tue-Sun) The dark wood-paneled interior creates the perfect atmosphere for this classy wine bar, which stocks over 1000 different labels. Huge glasses of wine are served with tasty crudités, and the fondue is great fun on evenings of live jazz.

Trattoria La Paglia (☎ 095 34 68 38; Via Pardo 23; meals €20-25; 📺 Mon-Sat) This is a great-value, simple trattoria with a nice view of the La Pescheria market, from which it gets its fish and seafood. It serves straightforward fresh pasta and fish dishes and is good for lunch or dinner.

our pick Metró (☎ 095 32 20 98; www.ristorante.metro.it; Via Crociferi 76; meals €25-30; 📺 Mon-Fri, lunch Sat) A gastronomic delight sitting right near the top of Via Crociferi, with outdoor tables. The food here is to die for: traditional Sicilian with a modern touch. No wonder Metró gets a shining review in Slow Food. Try the *pasta alle vongole* to start and go for the succulent *tonno a cipollata* (tuna steak topped with caramelised onions) as a main. Finish with seasonal fruit or the pistachio-and-chocolate *semifreddo*. The wine list is great too.

Trattoria Casalunga (☎ 095 31 13 19; Via Biondi 19; meals €25-30; ☹ Mon-Sat) A homely, family-run, Slow Food-awarded restaurant presided over by patron Nino, this is a good place for a simple Sicilian dinner of pasta with seafood, tuna steak or a seafood platter with a hearty green salad. Finish with some fruit.

Sicilia in Bocca (☎ 095 250 02 08; Via Dusmet 31/35; meals €25-30; ☹ Tue-Sun) Fabulous medieval atmosphere in the old sea wall. A favourite of the bohemian crowd, which flocks here for its famous traditional fish recipes.

ourpick Osteria Antica Marina (☎ 095 34 81 97; Via Pardo 29; meals €30; ☹ Wed-Mon) A rustic-style trattoria near the fish market, this is the place for fresh fish of the day. Slow Food praises the local favourite, a raw anchovy salad, and rightly so. The décor is solid wooden tables and rough stone walls. Reservations are essential.

ZenZero (☎ 095 32 01 11; Via Vittorio Emanuele II 201; meals €30; ☹ 8-11pm Tue-Sun) Set on the roof terrace of an old palazzo that overlooks a peaceful square off the main road, ZenZero is the young people's eating place of choice in Catania. It's a welcome change from the world of pasta, serving international dishes like tempura or Argentine steak. It's also a good place for an aperitivo, and the flower-laden terrace is divine.

Ambasciata del Mare (☎ 095 34 10 03; Piazza Duomo 6; meals €30-35; ☹ Tue-Sun) A tiny restaurant on the side of Piazza Duomo (right by the fountain), this is a great spot for the fish market offerings, so tuck into the sardines, or the swordfish cooked in sea water (amazing). If you can fit in a *cannoli* (pastry shell stuffed with sweet ricotta), go for it: they are delicious. Another Slow Food champion.

La Siciliana (☎ 095 37 64 00; Viale Marco Polo 52; meals €35-40; ☹ dosed Sun evening) Considered one of Catania's best restaurants, La Siciliana serves traditional fare cooked to perfection. Try the breaded cutlets, roast lamb or the huge selection of seafood. Reservations are required and you will need a taxi or car to get here.

CAFÉS

Pasticceria Caprice (Via Etnea 30) An old-style *pasticceria*, this café is highly recommended. Located on Via Etnea, it is the perfect place to come during *passaggiata*. Try a selection of minitarts filled with fresh fruit.

Spinella (☎ 095 32 72 47; Via Etnea 300) This is probably Catania's most famous *pasticceria*;

one taste of its produce – especially the ricotta-filled *cannoli* – will tell you why.

Café Charmant (Via Etnea 19-23; ☹ 24hr) An elegant, modern café good for morning snacks and breakfast with street-side tables for people-watching.

SELF-CATERING

Every morning except Sunday, Piazza Carlo Alberto is flooded by the chaos of a produce market, known locally as **La Fiera** (☹ 7am-noon Mon-Sat), not dissimilar to a Middle Eastern kasbah. The other major market is **La Pescheria** (off Piazza del Duomo; ☹ 5-11am Mon-Sat). It is a huge fish market set out over several courtyards and alleys where fishers shout out their catch of the day. You can buy fresh mussels and sea urchins to eat on the spot.

Drinking

Not surprisingly for a busy university town, Catania has a reputation for its great nightlife. There are dozens of cafés and bars serving cheap and tasty snacks and offering a good mix of music and drinks. Via Vasta, off Via Etnea, and Piazza Bellini is where a lot of the action takes place and Wednesday nights are big student nights out. Opening hours are generally from around 9pm to 2am.

Tertulia (Via Mario Rapisardi 1-3; ☹ 4.30pm-1.30am daily Sep-Jul) This nocturnal bookshop and café is a mix between a stylish teahouse and bar. There is occasional live music, literary evenings and book presentations. There is also internet access.

Agorà Bar (☎ 095 723 30 10; www.agorahotel.com; Piazza Currò 6) The bar and restaurant of the Agorà Hostel are a great venue for a drink. This neon-lit cave 18m below ground where a stream bubbles to the surface was used by the Romans as a spa. Now a cosmopolitan crowd lingers over drinks in the lava cavern.

Perbacco! Wine Bar (☎ 347 093 79 88; Via Vasta) Quite a large bar with sofas and cushions laid out under burgundy canopies, Perbacco! is a real hit with the Catanians, who hang out here until the wee hours, enjoying the variety of wines.

Lino's Coffee Shop (☎ 095 31 51 60; Via Antonino di Sangiuliano 225; ☹ 9am-midnight) An excellent coffee shop attached to the Mondadori bookshop, Lino's has a massive variety of coffees. The *granite* (flavoured crushed ice) are also popular and this is a perfect place for reading your book in a quiet, cool atmosphere.

Wine Bar (☎ 3387602772; Via Montesano 19) With simple décor and a loyal crowd of glass-whirlers, this lovely and simply named bar serves a massive variety of Sicilian and international wines, as well as some snacks to go with the booze.

Rendez Vous Wine Bar (40 Via Teatro Massimo) An elegant place with a modern look and canary-coloured lamp shades, the Rendez Vous is right at the end of the Via Teatro Massimo bar strip. It has tables and chairs on the little balcony outside, but the crowd spreads out onto the street below too.

L'Insonnia (Via Teatro Massimo 1) Opposite the elegant Rendez Vous, L'Insonnia is home to those lovers of night fun, Catania's boho crowd, who sit on the benches outside the bar and chat, drink and smoke till dawn breaks.

Heaven (Via Teatro Massimo 39) A cool lounge bar with massive leather sofas in the street and electric-blue lighting inside. Disco music is favoured by the young crowd, though not much dancing goes on.

L'Incognito (Via Teatro Massimo 22) Woven chairs and palm trees make L'Incognito's outdoor area feel like a tropical corner despite the fact that it's right on Piazza Bellini. It's a popular place for a drink and chat and starts getting busy only after 10pm.

Over Time Pub (☎ 3491678469; Via Rapisardi 16-18) A unique place in the city, Over Time brings out real poker tables on Monday nights and the local crowd puts poker faces on and comes out to play. Check it out, it's quite fun just to watch.

Stag's Head (Via Rapisardi 7-9) Opposite Over Time, the Stag's Head has huge speakers out the front and the tables are permanently full, mostly with students drinking beer and mouthing the words to whatever song is playing.

Nievski Pub (☎ 095 31 37 92; www.nievski.it in Italian; Scalinata Alessi 15; mains €5-6.50; ☹ 1-4pm & 8pm-2am Tue-Sat) On the heaving Scalinata Alessi, this is a good place to mingle with Catania's alternative crowd. Cuban revolutionary posters adorn the walls and the menu uses organic, fair-trade produce for its Greek and Cuban dishes.

Joyce (☎ 3498107896; Via Montesano 46; ☹ 9pm-2am Tue-Sun 16 Aug-19 Jul) Joyce is an Irish pub where you can enjoy pints of Guinness in a pleasant courtyard. It's quite a popular place and quieter than the wacky Waxy's across the street.

Waxy O'Connors (Piazza Spirito Santo 1) A really popular place, where many come to listen

to (sometimes pretty dodgy) live music and watch the dancers shake their booties. It doesn't appeal to everyone, but many love it. Across from Joyce.

Entertainment

To see what's going on (jazz, opera, theatre, puppet shows etc) pick up a copy of *Lapis* (free and available throughout the city).

LIVE MUSIC & CLUBBING

Ixtlan (Via Teatro Massimo 33; ☹ 6pm-2am) A legendary pub, putting on impromptu jazz performances and jamming sessions. Good bar- and buffet-style snacks from 6pm to 9.30pm.

ourpick Zo (☎ 095 53 38 71; www.zoculture.it; Piazzale Asia 6; ☹ 1pm-2am Sep-Jul) Part of a cultural complex hosting events and exhibitions, the bar/café/restaurant serves good food in an impressive venue – the converted sulphur works, Le Ciminiere. The weekends host live music and dancing.

Mercati Generali (☎ 095 57 14 58; www.mercati.general.org; Km69, SS 417; ☹ 11pm-late) The student population's favourite club, this place is out of town (so you'll need your own transport or a taxi) and it hosts the best parties around. DJ Talvin Singh has played here, as well as many good international and local DJs. You'll find Ninja Tunes-released artists on the list, as well as some of Berlin's promising names.

THEATRE

Teatro Massimo Bellini (☎ 095 730 61 11; www.teatro.massimobellini.it; Via Perrotta 12) Ernesto Basile's Art Nouveau masterpiece, restored to its brilliant former glory, stages opera, ballet and music concerts. Its programme runs from October to May and you can book tickets online.

Getting There & Away

AIR

Catania's airport, **Fontanarossa** (☎ 095 30 45 05; www.aeroporto.catania.it) is 5km southwest of the city centre and has domestic services and European flights (mostly via Rome or Milan). Air Malta, Lufthansa and Alitalia all have regular flights to Fontanarossa, while British Airways and Air Berlin offer direct flights from London and Berlin respectively. In the summer you may be able to pick up some cheaper charters with British Midland, JMC or Hapag-Lloyd Flug (see p296 for more details). To get to the airport, take the special Alibus (bus 457, €0.85) from outside the

train station, although many of the services from Catania to, say, Taormina or Syracuse, will also stop at the airport. There is also an hourly shuttle to Taormina (€5, one hour, 7am to 8pm). All the big car-hire companies are represented at the airport.

BOAT

The ferry terminal is south of the train station along Via VI Aprile.

Virtu Ferries (☎ 095 53 57 11; www.virtuferries.com) runs express ferries from Catania to Malta. Ferries depart Catania's Molo Centrale at the port at various times (one departure a week March to May and four a week between 24 July and 3 September). The ferry trip takes around three hours and tickets cost from €83 one way, €104 return and from €130 if you take a car.

Società Adriatica (☎ 095 713 91 41) connects Catania with Ravenna (Emilia-Romagna; €90, 36 hours). You can buy tickets at the Sestante Vacanze travel agency (for details see p199).

TTT Lines (☎ 095 746 21 87; www.tttlines.it in Italian) has a daily ferry from Naples to Catania leaving at midnight Monday to Saturday and 7.30pm on Sunday (€28/76 passenger/car, €125 double cabin, 10½ hours).

BUS

Intercity buses terminate in the area around Piazza Giovanni XXIII, in front of the train station, and depart from Via d'Amico, which is one block up. Although intimidating at first glance, Catania's bus station is superefficient and easy to navigate, far surpassing the rather plodding train service.

AST (☎ 095 746 10 96; Via L Sturzo 230) runs similar services to SAIS and Interbus, as well as to many smaller provincial towns around Catania, including Nicolosi (€3.55, 50 minutes, half-hourly).

Interbus-Etna Trasporti (☎ 095 53 27 16; Via d'Amico 181) runs buses to Syracuse (€4.50, 1¼ hours, half-hourly Monday to Saturday, eight Sunday), Piazza Armerina (€20, 1½ hours, nine Monday to Saturday) and Taormina (€4.30, 1½ hours, four Monday to Friday).

SAIS Autolinee (☎ 095 53 62 01; Via d'Amico 181-187) serves Palermo (€13.20, 2½ hours, 17 daily), Agrigento (€13, three hours, 14 daily Monday to Friday, seven Saturday and Sunday) and Messina (€7.10, 1½ hours, half-hourly Monday to Saturday, two Sunday). It also

has a service to Rome (€45, 14 hours) which leaves at 8pm.

CAR & MOTORCYCLE

Catania is easily reached from Messina on the A18-E45 autostrada (see boxed text, p190) and from Palermo on the A19. From the autostrada, signs for the centre of Catania will bring you to Via Etnea. Bear in mind that driving in Catania is only for the brave (or heavily insured). If you must drive, the best time to arrive and leave is between 2pm and 4pm or on Sunday, when everyone is safely at home and not in their cars.

TRAIN

Frequent trains connect Catania with Messina (2nd/1st class €8/10, 1½ to two hours, hourly) and Syracuse (€5, 1½ hours, 18 daily). There are less frequent train services to Palermo (€12, 3½ hours, six daily *diretto*) and Agrigento (€11.50, an agonisingly slow 3½ to 4½ hours, five per day). The private Circumetnea train line circles Mt Etna, stopping at the towns and villages on the volcano's slopes. See p208 for more information.

Getting Around

Many of the more useful **AMT city buses** (☎ 095 736 01 11) terminate in front of the train station. These include: Alibus (station to airport every 20 minutes); buses 1 to 4 (station to Via Etnea); buses 4 to 7 (station to Piazza del Duomo). A two-hour ticket costs €0.85. In summer a special service (D) runs from Piazza G Verga to the sandy beaches. Bus 334 from Via Etnea takes you to the Riviera dei Ciclopi and the beautiful Norman castle at Acì Castello (admission is free).

For a taxi call **CST** (☎ 095 33 09 66). There are taxi ranks at the train station and on Piazza del Duomo.

RIVIERA DEI CICLOPI

One pleasant surprise for visitors to Catania is the quality swimming and little-visited towns a little north of the city.

To travel along the coast, take one of the regular Interbus services from Catania to Messina (€1.30; about 30 minutes). In Acireale, the buses stop along outside the public garden at the end of Corso Umberto. In Acì Trezza and Acì Castello the buses stop along the main road.

Acireale

About 17km north of Catania, and occupying a magnificent position on the Ionian Coast, Acireale is a true discovery for lovers of Sicilian baroque, and could be said to be one of the few 'off-the-beaten-track' towns on the island. It's surprisingly tourist-free, considering its position between Taormina and Catania, and it has fantastic baroque architecture, thermal baths, good food and a lively morning market. Acireale, like much of this coast, was destroyed in the 1693 earthquake, and its baroque beauty owes its dues to the city's aristocrats and merchants who financed the rebuilding effort.

ORIENTATION & INFORMATION

The **tourist office** (☎ 095 89 52 49; Via Romeo 1; ☎ 8am-2pm & 3-9pm) is just off Piazza Duomo, and the staff are friendly and speak good English. Piazza Duomo is the heart of the city, with Corso Umberto, Acireale's main drag, running north, while Via Ruggero Settimo trickles south and out of town. Via Cavour takes you to Piazza San Domenico and the market area.

SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES

To see Acireale's stunning architecture, start at the very centre of town, the **Piazza Duomo**, where the tall spires of the restored **cathedral** watch over the city. The cathedral is richly frescoed by the work of Pietro Paolo Vasta and it's hugely popular for hosting wedding parties. The **Basilica dei Santi Pietro e Paolo** sits on the eastern corner of the square, and on its right is the impressively long **Palazzo Municipale** (Town Hall), stretching down Via Romeo. One of the city's arteries, Via Ruggero Settimo, takes you south to the gorgeous **Basilica di San Sebastiano**, one of the most beautiful examples of Acireale's baroque architecture. It has a breathtaking altar, and its dome is adorned by Pietro Paolo Vasta's frescoes. Don't miss the **Chiesa di San Domenico** and the **pescheria** (fish market) area that surrounds it – Acireale's market is the perfect place to explore all the goods without the crowds (like those in Palermo or Catania). If you're into puppets, Acireale has some great shows at the **Teatro dell'Opera dei Pupi** on Via Alessi (between Piazza Duomo and Piazza San Domenico). The theatre is also a puppet museum, hosting performances every Sunday at 6pm. For performances on other days check the tourist office.

DETOUR: SANTA MARIA LA SCALA

For a real track (even) less beaten, head down to the tiny fishing village of Santa Maria La Scala, 2km downhill from Acireale. If you follow Via Romeo down from Piazza Duomo, across the main road and down onto the small towpath, you'll soon find yourself in tranquil surroundings with gorgeous coastal views. The village consists of a tiny harbour crowded with technicolour fishing boats, a church, some houses and a black lava-rock beach next to the harbour. Check out one of the trattorie for daily fish offers.

For a bit of sulphur bathing, a tradition and a must-do in Acireale, head to **Terme di Santa Venera** (☎ 095 768 61 11; www.term-acireale.com; Via delle Terme 1; treatments from €21; ☎ 7am-1pm Mon-Sat).

FESTIVALS & EVENTS

Acireale hosts one of Sicily's best **carnivals** (during Lent), when the streets are filled with flowers and floats and the whole town is out in the street. There's also a jazz festival, **Made in Sicily**, in September (dates change so check www.comune.acireale.ct.it, in Italian, for details), hosting Italian and international jazz talent.

SLEEPING

Acireale has a dozen decent B&Bs, should you decide to stay the night.

San Sebastiano Holidays (☎ 3333258894; www.sansebastianoholidays.com; Piazza Odigitria 3; s €30-45, d €55-80; ☎) A very simple place with clean rooms and white furniture, close to the central Piazza Marconi and the fish market.

our pick **Al Duomo** (☎ 3479078323; www.alduomo.org; Via Calì 5; s €50-60, d €70-80; ☎) The best pick of Acireale's places to stay is this four-room apartment in a restored palazzo just off Piazza Duomo. It's colourful and stylish, with a luxurious feel. There's a communal living room and window seating, and the (included) breakfast is eaten in the bar across the street.

EATING

Fish is the best thing to go for here, thanks to the restaurants stocking up daily on fresh catches from the market.

L'Oste Scuro (☎ 095 763 40 01; Piazza Leonardo Vigo 5-6; meals €25) Fish, pasta and good desserts are

accompanied by views of the Basilica di San Sebastiano. Try the generous antipasti for two (for a bargain €10), consisting of lemony anchovies, amazing *caponata*, sweet aubergines and other small-dish delights, followed by grilled squid or one of the fresh daily catches prepared in sea water.

La Taverna (Piazza Marconi; meals €25-30) A good lunchtime option right on the fish market square. You can savour the daily catches here – the locals recommend its simple but delectable dishes.

La Casa del Grecale (☎ 095 60 51 05; www.lacasadelgrecale.it in Italian; Via Santa Caterina 51; set menu €30) An excellent reason for visiting Acireale is a superspecial lunch at this gorgeous 18th-century villa perched on the hillside behind the town in its own lemon grove. If driving, turn off the SS114 at the signpost for Acireale into the village of Santa Caterina. After 20m you will find the villa on your left-hand side, adjacent to Hotel Aloha d'Oro.

Aci Trezza

A few kilometres south of Acireale is Aci Trezza, a fishing village and a good place to satisfy your seafood appetite. It's famous for the surreal, jagged basalt rocks, **Scogli dei Ciclopi**, that protrude from the sea and bejewel the coast. They were supposedly thrown by the blinded Cyclops (who lives in Etna) at the fleeing Odysseus. The rocks are best observed from the tiny Piazza Bambini del Mondo, just along the main *lungomare*, where you can plonk yourself down on a bench and watch fearless local kids diving off the rocks.

Aci Trezza is also popular with young crowds in the summer, who come here to sunbathe on the wooden platforms. There's nothing to do here apart from swim, sunbathe and read.

If you decide to stay the night, a decent option is **Grand Hotel i Faraglioni** (☎ 095 093 04 64; www.grandhotelfaraglioni.com/it/; Lungomare Ciclopi; s €95-110, d €105-130; 🏠), in a futuristic building with comfortable rooms. It's equally popular for La Terrazza, where locals and visitors head for pizza, aperitivi and the fabulous views.

Another good place to eat is **Ristorante Il Pontile** (☎ 095 711 68 16; www.ilpontilecapodaqua.it; Lungomare Ciclopi 133; couscous €24-28, meals €25-30), with a terrace over the water, overlooking Cyclops' rocks. It specialises in fish and couscous.

There are tons of trendy lounge bars along the beach. Check out **Café de Mar** (Lungomare Ciclopi; ☎ 8pm-late) right next to Grand Hotel i Faraglioni, where white sofas and armchairs are scattered across a palm-tree shaded garden. **La Scivola** (Lungomare Ciclopi; ☎ 9pm-late) has DJs and hosts parties in the summer.

Aci Castello

Aci Castello is a small town only 1km from Aci Trezza, and is a popular destination for swimming, sunning and snorkelling. It's also only 9km from Catania's city centre (take AMT bus 334 from Piazza Borsellino), so you can head out here for your day's swimming if you're staying in Catania. It's a lava **beach** (sharp on the bum!) and in summer wooden platforms are erected for sunbathing ease.

Apart from swimming, the real attraction in Aci Castello is the **castle** (adult/concession €2.50/1; ☎ 9am-1.30pm & 3.30-7pm Tue-Sun May-Sep, 9am-1pm & 3-5pm Tue-Sun Oct-Apr) that gives the town its name. Another popular wedding venue, the dark, brooding castle resembles an abandoned ship overlooking the sea. It was built in the 13th century and was the base for the rebel Roger di Lauria in 1297, who was replaced by Frederick II of Aragon after some serious battling over the castle. It's in surprisingly good shape considering the assaults it has endured in battles and from volcanic fury. It's a moody and atmospheric building, with sweeping, windy views of the horizon.

MT ETNA & AROUND

MT ETNA elev 3323m

Sicily's most prominent landmark is Europe's largest live volcano and one of the world's most volatile. At 3323m it towers over the Ionian Coast, dwarfing everything beneath it; its smoking peak is visible from almost everywhere on this side of the island, and is a heart-stirring (and sometimes heart-stopping!) sight. As a symbol of power, creation and destruction it's hard to beat, and the effect of this extraordinary volcano should not be underestimated.

Since 1987 the volcano and its slopes have been part of a national park, the Parco Naturale dell'Etna, a territory that

encompasses a fascinatingly varied natural environment from its severe, almost surreal summit, with its breathtaking panoramas, to deserts of lava and alpine forests.

History

Triggered by a combination of volcanic and regional tectonic activity more than half a million years ago, a number of eruptive centres appeared off the east coast of Sicily. The most recent phase of volcanism, about 35,000 years ago, created the present-day stratovolcano known as Etna.

In ancient times Etna's summit was frequently lit up by spectacular pyrotechnic displays. Not surprisingly, the eruptions featured in some very early writing. The classical world saw the volcano in mythological terms as the home of the god Plutone and of the Titans who predated Zeus and rebelled against him. In the 18th century BC, Homer mentioned Etna in his story of Ulysses (Odysseus) and the Cyclops, and in *Prometheus*, Aeschylus describes Etna as a 'column holding up the sky', with the giant Tifone ('Typhoon') at its base.

Recorded history is littered with eruptions, including major ones in 475 BC, AD 1169, 1329 and 1381, all of which saw molten rock flow right down to the sea. The most devastating eruption occurred in 1669 and lasted 122 days. A massive river of lava poured down Etna's southern slope, destroying 16 towns and engulfing a good part of Catania.

The first documented visitor to Etna was in 1493: Pietro Bembo, who wrote *De Aetna* telling of his adventures. This encouraged an influx of English, German, French, Dutch and Danish travellers. In 1773 English physicist, Patrick Brydone, published his *Tour Through Sicily & Malta*, and his lyrical descriptions of the ascent to the crater inspired many aristocrats to visit.

In more modern times Etna has claimed its fair share of victims, despite the fact that it is monitored by 120 seismic activity stations and is under constant satellite surveillance. In 1971 an eruption destroyed the observatory at the summit, and another in 1983 finished off the old cable car and tourist centre. Nine people died in an explosion at the southeastern crater in 1979, and two died and 10 were injured in an explosion at the same crater in 1987. In 1992 a stream of lava pouring from a fissure in the southeastern slope threatened

to engulf the town of Zafferana Etnea. The town was saved when the Italian Air Force dropped a pile of breeze blocks in the lava's path. In 2001-02 and 2003 Mt Etna's most spectacular explosions in 40 years caused immense damage to the infrastructure on the southern side of the mountain (see p210). Luckily the reconstruction of the villages was not damaged in the September 2007 eruption, which lasted for two days and caused nothing more than a fantastic night scene of lava fountains, which were several hundred metres high (available for viewing on YouTube or www.volcanoetna.com).

Orientation & Information

The two main approaches to Etna are from Piano Provenzano on the northern flank and Rifugio (Refuge) Sapienza on the southern flank. The 2001-03 eruptions of the volcano destroyed the refuge at Piano Provenzano and the village is being slowly reconstructed. You can pick up information at a number of sources, the most convenient being the main tourist office in Catania (see p199).

The official office of the **Parco Naturale dell'Etna** (☎ 095 82 11 11; www.parcotna.ct.it in Italian; Via del Convento 45, Nicolosi; ☎ 9am-2pm & 4-7.30pm) is in Nicolosi on the south side. Further up at Rifugio Brunek is another **information point** (☎ 095 64 73 52; Rifugio Brunek; ☎ 9am-3pm); and at Rifugio Sapienza you will find the **Etna Sud Tourist Office** (☎ 095 91 63 56; ☎ 9am-4pm).

On the northern side of the mountain the local **tourist office** (☎ 095 64 73 52; www.procolinguaglossa.it in Italian; Piazza Annunziata 5; ☎ 9am-3pm) in Linguaglossa is the best source of information.

For up-to-date information on eruptions and weather forecasts, and for a detailed account of the mountain's geology and history, take a look at www.etnaonline.it (in Italian).

Sights & Activities

The volcano is made up of four summit craters and is surrounded by 200 major and secondary cones dotting its flanks. Measuring roughly 7km by 5km, the Valle del Bove, a depression on the eastern side of Etna, is a caldera formed after a cone collapsed several thousand years ago.

It is absolutely forbidden to approach the summit craters and after all the activity it would very foolish to do so. At the summit it is always windy and temperatures can fall below

WHAT TO TAKE

- Solid comfortable walking boots are essential for walking on the craters. The loose gravel-like lava is very slippery to walk on and in many places the ground underfoot is hot. The Parco Naturale dell'Etna even prints a disclaimer on its tickets abdicating responsibility for people who do not wear hiking boots – you'd be surprised at how many people actually wear their sandals up there!
- For trips up Stromboli and Etna you will need all the high-altitude gear: warm clothes, a wind jacket, warm headgear, gloves and a compass.
- Bring a mat, sleeping bag, fire-lighting equipment and a torch if you plan on camping. Note that this is only permitted at official camp sites.
- Pack sun-block, sunglasses and a hat. It's really easy to burn up there, and that's the sun we're talking about, not the lava.
- Bring bottled water – the local supplies are limited and often not reliable.
- A mobile phone is an excellent safety precaution, although it may not work in certain locations.

freezing, so come prepared. Do wear suitable footwear. Jackets and boots can be hired at the cableway station at Rifugio Sapienza.

RIFUGIO SAPIENZA

With a daily bus link from Catania via Nicolosi, the southern side of the volcano presents an easy option for an ascent towards the craters. The AST bus drops you off at the Rifugio Sapienza (1923m) from where **Funivia dell'Etna** (☎ 095 91 42 09; www.funiviaetna.com; cable car €23, cable car, bus & guide €42.50; ⌚ 9am-4.30pm) runs a cable car up the mountain to 2500m. (The ticket office accepts credit cards and cash.)

Once out of the cable car you can attempt the long walk (3½ to four hours return) up the winding track to the authorised crater area (2920m). If you plan on doing this, make sure you leave yourself enough time to get up *and* down before the last cable car. Otherwise you can hop on one of the Mercedes-Benz trucks (bus with obligatory guide €19.50).

On a clear day the landscape above the cable-car station is simply stunning, the perfect black cone of the Cratere Sud-Est offset by a bright blue sky. The guided tour takes you on a 45-minute walk around the Bocca Nuova, a new crater formed in the latest eruptions. Along its rim the ground is still hot, the magma in its crater simmering at 400°C. On the eastern edge the Valle del Bove falls away in a precipitous 1000m drop, smoke billowing up from its depths and enveloping you on the ridge above. You feel like you have reached the very edge of the world.

PIANO PROVENZANO

Before the eruptions in 2001–03, Piano Provenzano (1800m) was Etna's main ski resort. The eruptions changed all that – the refuge, five ski lifts, ski runs and hotels were all swept away in a huge lava flow. On your way up you can see how the lava flattened the trees that line its edges at peculiar angles.

Now things are slowly getting back on track and all the infrastructure is once again being rebuilt. There are small wooden kiosks selling water, food and souvenirs and a portacabin sells tickets (€37) for regular truck excursions to the summit craters. Again, you can make the three-hour walk if you start early enough.

This side of the mountain is considerably quieter than Rifugio Sapienza and the landscape is quite different, with thick, dappled pine forest (the Pineta Ragabo) full of holidaying Italians with their barbecues. You need your own car to get here as there is no public transport from Linguaglossa, 16km away.

Tours

Acquaterra (☎ 095 50 30 20; www.acquaterra.com; Via A Longo 74, Catania) Excellent guided tours around the northern side of the volcano, from where you see a different volcanic landscape.

Centro Ippico Amico del Cavallo (☎ 095 46 18 82; www.amicodelcavallo.com; Via A Gramsci 27, Misterbianco) This well-run stable is 8km west of Catania. Horse trails include a seven-hour trek through Etna farmland, a two-day trek along the Simeto river and a

five-day trek around the summit. For other stables pick up the booklet *Itinerari a Cavallo* from the tourist office in Catania (p199).

Etna Experience (☎ 095 723 29 24; www.etnaexperience.com) A well-regarded agency with tours to Bove Valley and hikes up to the craters.

Ferrovia Circumetnea (FCE; ☎ 095 54 12 50; www.circumetnea.it; Via Caronda 352a, Catania; ⌚ 8am-5pm) FCE has some good tours to Mt Etna and the surrounding area. You can also take the train around the base of the volcano.

Gruppo Guide Alpine Etna Nord (☎ 095 64 78 33; www.guidetnanord.com; Piazza Santa Caterina 24, Linguaglossa) Runs a similar service as the Etna Sud (below), only to the north side.

Gruppo Guide Alpine Etna Sud (☎ 095 791 47 55; www.etnaguide.com; Via Etna 49, Nicolosi) The official guide service on the mountain runs day or multi-day itineraries for around €180 per day with a guide. It also has a hut at Rifugio Sapienza from where it runs a daily trek into the Valle del Bove (€55, four hours, departs 9am).

Sleeping & Eating

Accommodation on Etna is limited. Catania is the best alternative base. If you do plan to stay around the mountain be sure to book in advance as rooms are at a premium, especially in summer.

SOUTH

Camping Etna (☎ 095 91 43 09, fax 095 791 51 86; Via Goethe; per person/tent €4.40/9.20; ⌚ Apr-Oct) A camp site set in woodland within easy walking distance of Nicolosi (signposted).

ostello della Gioventù Etna (☎ 095 791 46 86; etnahostel@hotmail.com; Via della Quercia 7; dm €26) If you don't fancy camping but need a cheap bed, this very good Nicolosi hostel is the answer to your prayers. It's close to both Catania and the volcano.

Gemmellaro (☎ 095 91 13 73, fax 095 91 10 71; Via Etna 160; s €27-50, d €40-79; ⌚) Located in Nicolosi, the three-star Gemmellaro is an acceptable hotel choice offering comfortable rooms.

Rifugio Sapienza (☎ 095 91 63 56; www.rifugiosapienza.com; Piazzale Funivia; s/d €49/98) Completely refurbished after the 2001–03 eruptions, the Sapienza refuge offers very comfortable accommodation right next to the cable car. It also has a restaurant.

Airone (☎ 095 708 18 19; www.hotel-airone.it; Via Cassone, Zafferana Etnea; s €70-80, d €100-120) A sweet little hotel in the bustling market town of Zafferana Etnea, full of rustic charm. The hotel also has a good restaurant and nice location.

WHO'S AFRAID OF ETNA'S HOT BREATH? *Vesna Maric*

To an outsider, living under Etna seems like a disconcerting business. As a child you learn about the historical lava wipe-outs and that the big old volcano erupts almost annually. To your average neurotic, this must mean anxiety aplenty. I asked Pascal Bresson, one of the people from the Acquaterra agency who takes people up and down Etna on a daily basis, how people cope with living under such a potentially dangerous volcano.

'Local people aren't really scared of the activities of the volcano. Etna is part of their landscape. They know that places were destroyed by Etna, and it's just part of their history. No one gets caught up by fears over the smoke on top of Etna and what might happen next.' And what about the tourists, do they get frightened of going up? 'You see, Etna is an effusive volcano, which means that there are no explosions, ie no general possibility of flying rocks landing uncomfortably close to wandering tourists. That means that it's safe to go up to the top and look at it.' I give him an unsettled look. 'Basically, no, most people have no fears about it. In fact, there are so many people who travel from all parts of Italy when Etna erupts, coming over to see the 'lava show'. It can be very beautiful.'

It's all very well to say that, I point out, but what about the Piano Provenzano and the damage done there? 'Well, it's true that despite all the monitoring there was no forecast for the Piano Provenzano activity,' says Pascal. 'But having said that the scientists knew there was a fracture – an east to west fracture that could be subject to activity at any point – it's just that they weren't expecting lava to come and cover Piano Provenzano. I guess it's just not a very precise science.' I thank him and go off on my clamber up the old volcano, anxiously watching the puff on top of the cone in case it gets any larger. But as the walk progresses, my fears melt away as if covered by, erm, lava, and I conclude that Pascal is right. It's a beautiful place indeed.

NORTH

Rifugio Brunek (☎ 095 64 30 15; Bosco Ragabo; B&B/half board €26/39) A rustic refuge situated in the tranquil Ragabo pine forest on the eastern slopes of Etna. Designed as a chalet, it has pleasant rooms and a dedicated and helpful host. The restaurant serves fresh local produce.

Hotel Scrivano (☎ 095 92 11 26; www.hotelscrivano.com; Piazza Loreto, Randazzo; s/d €45/85; 📍 🚗) A very pleasant hotel in quiet Randazzo, run by the Scrivano family. Its rooms are modern and comfortable and the restaurant is well regarded locally.

Getting There & Away

Having your own transport will make life much easier around Mt Etna, but there are some public transport options.

BUS

AST (☎ 095 53 17 56) runs buses from Catania to Rifugio Sapienza (€3.80, one hour). It leaves from the car park in front of the main train station in Catania at 8.15am, travelling via Nicolosi. It returns from Rifugio Sapienza at 4.30pm. You can buy your tickets on the bus. You can also drive this route (take Via Etna north out of Catania and follow the signs for Nicolosi and Etna).

SAIS and FCE buses connect Linguaglossa with Fiumefreddo, on the coast (from where other SAIS and Interbus buses run north to Taormina and Messina and south to Catania). There was no public transport up to Piano Provenzano at the time of research. If driving, follow the signs for Piano Provenzano out of Linguaglossa; it is 16km.

TRAIN

Another option is to circle Mt Etna on the private train, **Ferrovía Circumetnea** (FCE; ☎ 095 54 12 50; www.circumetnea.it; Via Caronda 352a, Catania). You can catch the metro from Catania's main train station to the FCE station at Via Caronda (metro stop: Borgo) or catch bus 429 or 432 going up Via Etna and ask to be let off at the 'Borgo' metro stop.

The train follows a 114km trail around the base of the volcano, from where you get great views of the mountain and the lush vegetation

at its base. It also passes through many of Etna's unique towns like Adrano, Bronte and Randazzo (see below). It takes two hours to reach Randazzo (€4). To continue from here you will need to get another train for Giarre on the coast (another hour).

AROUND MT ETNA

The villages around Etna's base make for a wonderful tour right off the beaten track. They all have a unique character influenced by their proximity to the volcano. The countryside is also extremely pretty, especially in springtime when the orchards and citrus groves are in full flower. Heading west out of Catania along the SS121 you will come to baroque **Paternò**, surrounded by orange groves and dominated by a huge 14th-century **Norman castle**, where Frederick II took his last breath. North of Paternò is **Biancavilla**, founded by Albanian refugees in 1480, and 3km further north is scruffy **Adrano**, home of the Sikel god of fire, Adranus. Adrano is a formal market town, like Randazzo, with all activity centred around Piazza Umberto. This town's **Norman castle** rises from a huge fortified base and is powerfully impressive. It was once a Bourbon prison but now houses a minor museum.

From Adrano, the SS284 heads directly north through acres of nut groves (chestnuts, walnuts, pistachios and almonds) to **Bronte**. Here the landscape becomes more rugged, interspersed with chunks of lava flow dating to 1823. Bronte itself is trapped between two lava flows, and you can detour from here to the Abbazia di Maniace (see p247 for details).

By far the most interesting town around the volcano is grey **Randazzo**, a small medieval town that has consistently escaped destruction despite its proximity to the summit. Its crenellated churches were the focus of three embattled communities: the Italians in **Cattedrale di Santa Maria**, the Greeks in **Chiesa di San Nicolò** and the Lombards in **Chiesa di San Martino**. Until the 16th century each of the churches took turns to act as the cathedral for a three-year term, until the Italians won out. The heart of Randazzo is Piazza Municipio.

From Randazzo the SS120 will take you back to the coast through Linguaglossa.

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