

Mediterranean Coast

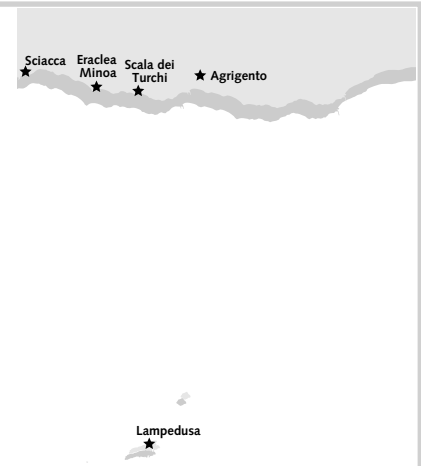


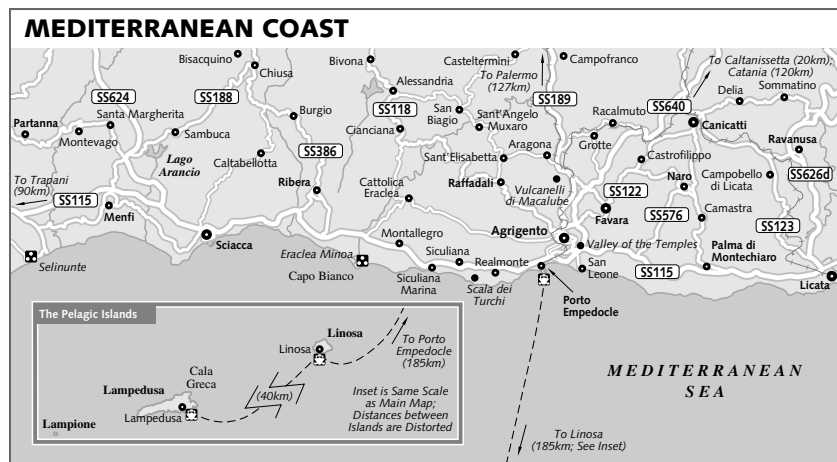
The Mediterranean coast is one of Sicily's most contradictory areas, with stunning natural and archaeological beauty cheek-to-cheek with the ugly face of brutal modern development. The gorgeous Valley of the Temples and Agrigento's sandy beach have Gela's industrial wasteland and Agrigento's cement tower blocks as their backdrop, but travel a little further west and you'll discover the beauty of the Scala dei Turchi – an amazing, glowing-white limestone cliff which curves against the blue of the sky and the sea. The quiet beach at Eraclea Minoa has one of Sicily's better camp sites, while Sciacca celebrates the carnival like no-one else around. The Pelagic Islands of Lampedusa and Linosa offer quiet and isolation (outside of the high season) and some amazing diving. Lampedusa, often caught on film, is also caught in immigration controversy, thanks to its position between Africa and Europe. This area is also the birthplace of some of Sicily's most famous intellectuals, such as Greek philosopher and physiologist Empedocles, writer Luigi Pirandello and novelist Leonardo Sciascia.

The Mediterranean coast has also been in the grip of a mesmerising torpor: its landscape is scattered with skeletons of unfinished housing projects and roads. The mafiosi of the 1980s moved from Palermo forming a new organisation known as *La Stidda* (meaning 'star'), infiltrating southern towns like Agrigento and Gela. Consequently, the whole town council of Gela had to be suspended for 'criminal ties' back in 1992, though its progressive new mayor is improving the town's shady reputation.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Have your socks knocked off by the formidable ruins of Agrigento's **Valley of the Temples** (p261)
- Be awestruck by the beauty that is the **Scala dei Turchi** (p268)
- Swim, scuba dive and sunbathe in the dreamy blue waters off **Lampedusa** (p270)
- Soak up the sun and get a full-body mud mask on the beach at **Eraclea Minoa** (p269)
- Dance around at the cacophonous and varicoloured carnival at **Sciacca** (p277)





AGRIGENTO & AROUND

AGRIGENTO

pop 55,900 / elev 230m

Busy, brutish and beleaguered, Agrigento is Sicily's oldest tourist site (first put on the map by Goethe in the 18th century) thanks to the magnificent Greek ruins, the Valley of the Temples. Unfortunately overshadowed by towering modern apartment blocks, this splendid ancient site loses much of its immediate impact. It is only when you get down among the ruins that you can appreciate their monumentality.

Agrigento itself is obscured by the aesthetic myopia of the 1960s and 1970s, but despite this, this compact medieval town is deserving of more than just a cursory glance. In ancient times the Greek poet Pindar (5th century BC) declared the people of Akragas (Agrigento) 'built for eternity but feasted as if there were no tomorrow'. Nowadays the modern town, with its savvy inhabitants, has more in common with the character rather than the aesthetics of its ancient counterpart. It is one of the most lively and aggressive towns in Sicily and if you are up for Naples you will be able to handle the *furbi* (cunning) Agrigentans whose notorious crime families are reputedly key players in the multibillion-dollar narcotics trade.

History

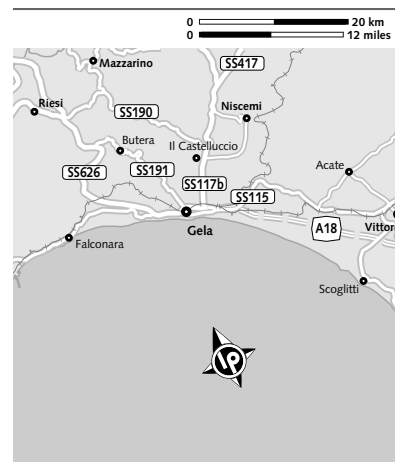
Established by settlers from Gela and Rhodes in 581 BC, Akragas was conceived

as a Greek lookout post to monitor potential Carthaginian invasions. This threat was temporarily eliminated following a resounding victory at the Battle of Himera in 480 BC, after which the building of the Temple of Zeus began with a fresh slew of slave labour. At the time, it was reckoned that Akragas was home to 200,000 citizens. Pindar described the city as 'the most beautiful of those inhabited by mortals'.

The good fortune of Akragas came to an abrupt end in 406 BC, when the old enemy Carthage finally overcame Greek resistance. However, it was reclaimed in 338 BC by the Corinthian general Timoleon, who instituted a liberal and democratic regime. The Romans took the city in 210 BC and renamed it Agrigentum, encouraging the farming (hence the name) and trading sectors. They thus laid the foundations for the city's future as an important centre of commerce under the Byzantines.

In the 7th century the bulk of Agrigentum's inhabitants moved up the hill to the site of the present-day city, virtually abandoning the old town. Although experts are still at a loss as to exactly why such a shift occurred, it has been suggested that it was to fend off the island's latest conquerors from North Africa, the Saracens. Despite its best efforts, Agrigento fell to the Saracens at the start of the 9th century.

Agrigento did not change much until the 19th century, when the western half of the city was built. In the 20th century the urban



sprawl flowed down the hill and into the valley. The town was heavily bombed by the Allies in WWII, and the postwar period saw the bulk of the unimaginative rebuilding still visible today. This effort was particularly ruinous for the Valley of the Temples as construction affected the valley's appearance, leading to accusations that Agrigento's cultural and environmental heritage was being destroyed.

Orientation

All public transport arrives at and departs from the centre of town. Intercity buses arrive in Piazza Rosselli, just off the northern side of Piazza Vittorio Emanuele. The train station is about 300m south, on Piazza Marconi. Lying between the two is the green oasis of Piazzale Aldo Moro, situated at the eastern end of Via Atenea, the main street of the medieval town. Frequent city buses run to the Valley of the Temples south of the town (see p268).

Information

There are banks on Piazza Vittorio Emanuele and along the main street, Via Atenea. Outside of banking hours, you can try the exchange office at the post office and another at the train station, although the rates are mediocre.

Ambulance (☎ 0922 40 13 44, 118)

Information booth Piazzale Aldo Moro (Map p262;

☎ 9am-1pm & 3-7pm); Valley of the Temples (Map p263;

☎ 8am-7.30pm summer only) The booth in Piazzale Aldo Moro has more maps and a little more information than the tourist office if pushed, while the booth in the Valley of

Temples has a map of the archaeological park and information on guides.

Internet Train (Map p262; ☎ 0922 40 27 83; www.internettrain.it; Cortile Contarini 7; per hr €6; ☎ 9.30am-9pm Mon-Sat) Excellent internet point with 10 fast, flat-screen computers and all the accessories, with scanners and digital-picture-download facilities.

Main tourist office (Map p262; ☎ 0922 2 04 54; www.agrigento-sicilia.it; Via Cesare Battisti 15;

☎ 8.30am-1.30pm Mon-Fri) Staff have maps and brochures, but are not overly helpful.

Ospedale Civile San Giovanni di Dio (Map p262; ☎ 0922 40 13 44; Via Giovanni XXII)

Police (questura; Map p262; ☎ 0922 59 63 22; Piazzale Aldo Moro 2)

Post office (Map p262; Piazza Vittorio Emanuele;

☎ 8.30am-6.30pm Mon-Fri, 8.30am-12.30pm Sat)

Sights

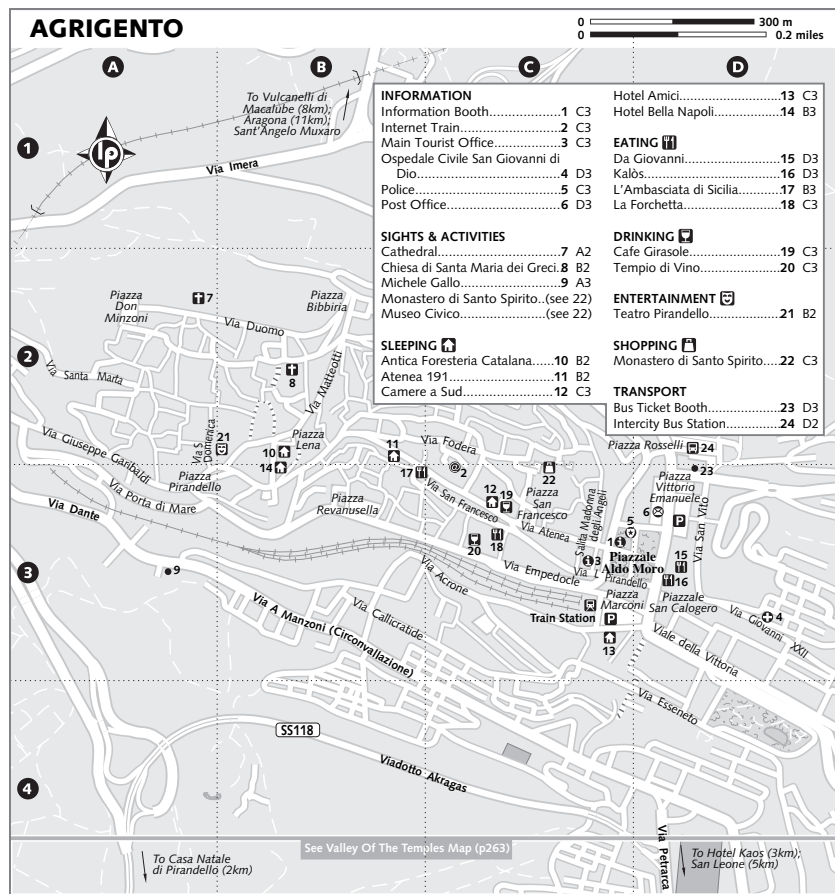
VALLEY OF THE TEMPLES (VALLE DEI TEMPLI)

One of Sicily's premier attractions, the Valley of the Temples (Map p263) is a Unesco World Heritage-listed complex of temples and old city walls that remain from the ancient city of Akragas. The site is a reason in itself to visit the Mediterranean coast of the island. The five Doric temples actually stand along a ridge, not a valley, designed to be visible from all around and a beacon for homecoming sailors. In varying states of ruin, the temples give a tantalising glimpse of what must truly have been one of the most luxurious cities in Magna Graecia. After visiting the area, Goethe waxed lyrical: 'We shall never in our lives be able to rejoice again, after seeing such a stupendous view in this splendid valley.' The most scenic time is in February and March when the valley is awash with almond blossoms.

Orientation & Information

The **archaeological park** (Map p263; ☎ 0922 49 72 26; adult/concession €6/3, incl archaeological museum €10/5; ☎ 9am-7pm) is divided into eastern and western zones by the main SS118 road (Via dei Panoramica Templi) leading to the temples from town. A very useful website with lots of information on the site and guides is www.lavalledeitempli.it.

By the entrances to the two zones is the car park and **main ticket office** (Piazzale dei Templi) where you can inquire about guided tours (see p265) or pick up an audio guide (€5, English and Italian only). There are also public toilets and a convenient



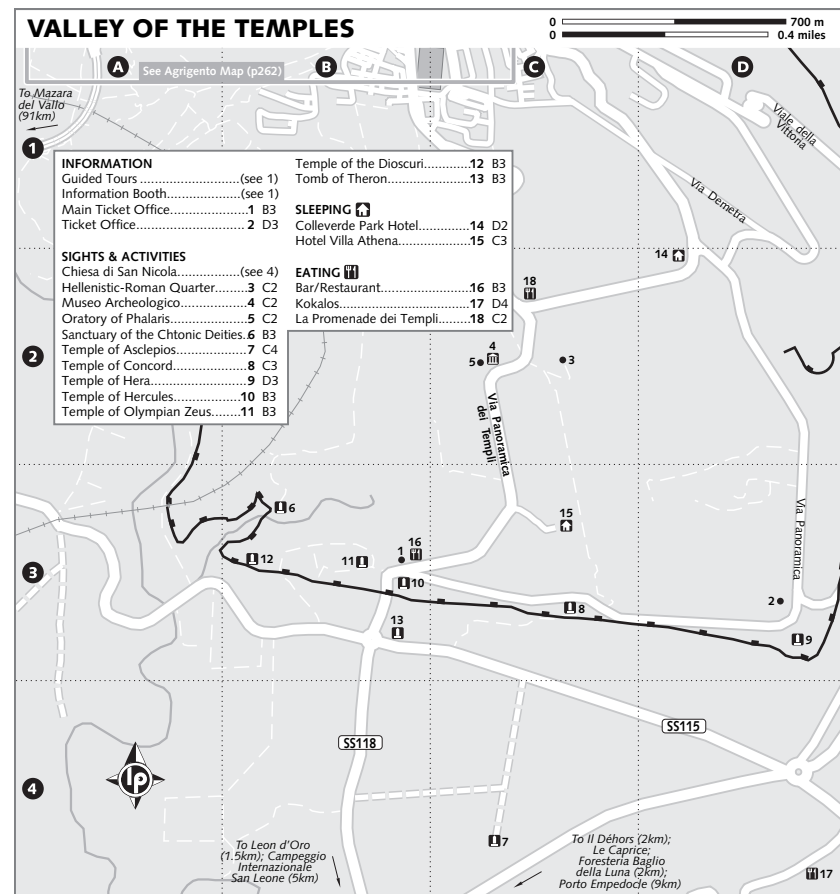
bar/restaurant (Piazzale dei Templi) amid the usual souvenir stands. Fittingly, this rugby-scrum of a piazza used to be the ancient agora. A better entrance is on Via Panoramica near the Temple of Hera where there is also a ticket office.

To get around all the temples you will need a whole day plus another half day to enjoy the Museo Archeologico (see p264). The site is perpetually busy, although the earlier you get there the better. Late evening is also a good time as the temples are bathed in a light of amber hue, which is a magnificent sight from any angle. The site is boiling hot in July and August, so stock up on water and wear a hat and plenty of sunscreen.

The Eastern Zone

The temples that stand unfettered and unenclosed in the eastern zone are the most spectacular of all. The first of these is the **Temple of Hercules** (Tempio di Ercole), immediately inside the entrance and to the right. Its origin is uncertain but it is believed to be the oldest of the lot, dating from the end of 6 BC. Eight of its 38 columns have been raised and you can wander around the remains of the rest.

Moving east past the remains of the ancient walls, the next temple along the path is the **Temple of Concord** (Tempio della Concordia), which is the only one to survive the unforgiving hands of time and history relatively intact. It was built around 430 BC



and was converted into a Christian basilica in the 6th century; thankfully, the new tenants reinforced the main structure, giving it a better chance of surviving an earthquake. In 1748 the temple was restored to its original form. The architect in charge of the restoration, Tommaso Fazello, gave the temple its name – it is traditionally visited by brides and grooms on their wedding day.

At the eastern end of the ridge, a further 400m on, is the **Temple of Hera** (Tempio di Hera), partially destroyed by an earthquake in the Middle Ages. Just behind the eastern end is a long altar originally used for sacrifices. The traces of red are the result of fire damage, most likely during the Carthaginian invasion of 406 BC.

Across the path from the ruins is a little temple set on a high base. It is known as the **Tomb of Theron** (Tomba di Therone), the Greek tyrant of Agrigento, but in fact the structure dates from around 75 BC, during the Roman occupation, nearly 500 years after the tyrant's death.

The Western Zone

Across Via dei Panoramica Templi is the entrance to the western zone, the main feature of which is the crumbled remains of the **Temple of Olympian Zeus** (Tempio di Zeus Olimpico; ☞ 9am–5pm). Covering an area measuring 112m x 56m, with columns 20m high, it would have been the largest Doric temple ever built had its construction not been interrupted by the

Carthaginian sack of Akragas. Ironically, the foundations for the temple had been laid by Carthaginian prisoners captured after the Battle of Himera nearly 100 years previously. The incomplete temple was later destroyed by an earthquake. Lying flat on his back amid the rubble is a telamon, a sculpted figure of a man with arms raised, intended to support the temple's weight. One of several planned for the temple, the figure is 8m long.

Further on is the smaller **Temple of the Dioscuri** (Tempio dei Dioscuri; ☞ 9am-5pm), also known as the Temple of Castor and Pollux. It was built towards the end of the 5th century but was destroyed by the Carthaginians, later restored in Hellenistic style and then destroyed again by an earthquake. What you see today dates from 1832, when it was rebuilt using materials from other temples.

Just behind the temple is a complex of altars and small buildings believed to be part of the Santuario di Demetra e Kore. The **Sanctuary of the Chthonic Deities** (Santuario delle Divine Chtoniche; ☞ 9am-5pm), as it is known, dates from the early 6th century BC.

Back at the crossroads just inside the entrance to the temples, the path south leads to the **Temple of Asclepius** (Tempio di Esculapio), off the second fork to the left. The smallest of all the temples, it is distinguished by having solid walls instead of a colonnade.

Hellenistic-Roman Quarter

To the east of the Museo Archeologico is the **Hellenistic-Roman Quarter** (Quartiere Ellenistico-Romano; admission free; ☞ 8.30am-7pm), featuring a well-preserved street layout which was part of urban Akragas (and later, under the Romans, Agrigentum). The regular grid is made up of *plateiai* (main streets) intersected at right angles by *stenopoi* (secondary streets), all of which were laid out towards the end of the 4th century BC. The Romans didn't alter the layout but added their own embellishments, including mosaic floors and stuccowork. They were also responsible for adding water and heating pipes, and introduced drainage facilities for rainwater and sewage.

MUSEO ARCHEOLOGICO

About halfway up the road from the archaeological park and towards town is the **Museo Archeologico** (Map p263; ☞ 0922 40 15 65; adult/concession €6/3; ☞ 9am-7pm), housing a large collection of well-explained (in Italian and English)

artefacts from the excavated site. Room (*sala*) 1 contains an archaeological plan of ancient Akragas – which is helpful if you want a sense of the scale of the old city. Room 3 features a rich collection of ceramics in both black and red dating from the 6th to the 3rd centuries BC. Of particular note is the *krater*, a red ceramic chalice from 490 BC. Room 6 has a telamon standing 7.75m tall (a definite highlight) and the heads of three others, plus an excellent small-scale reconstruction of their temple, giving the visitor a sense of how extraordinary this place would have been. Room 9 features a fine *ephebus* (a statue of a young boy), sculpted in 470 BC from white marble. The last rooms hold artefacts from around the province – be sure to check out the wonderful ceramic bowls and bronze helmets.

In the grounds of the museum is the 13th-century Cistercian **Chiesa di San Nicola**, (Map p263) which has a fine Gothic doorway. Inside, in the second chapel on the right, you'll find a Roman sarcophagus, which bears a wonderful relief of the myth of Phaedra. On the church's esplanade stands an ancient Odeon called the Ekklesiasterion, built in the 3rd century BC for public meetings. Alongside it is the **Oratory of Phalaris** (Oratorio di Falaride; Map p263), a temple dating from the 1st century BC that was converted into an oratory during the Middle Ages.

THE MEDIEVAL TOWN

Roaming around Agrigento's narrow, winding streets is relaxing after a day among the temples. On Via Santo Spirito, at the top of a set of winding steps north off Via Atenea, is the Cistercian **Monastero di Santo Spirito** (Monastery of the Holy Spirit; Map p262), founded around 1290. A handsome Gothic portal leads inside, where you can see some fine stuccowork by Giacomo Serpotta plus a statue of the *Madonna incoronata* (Virgin Enthroned) by Domenico Gagini. Upstairs, the small **Museo Civico** (Map p262; ☞ 0922 40 14 50; admission free; ☞ 9am-1.30pm & 4.30-6.30pm Mon-Sat), contains a poorly labelled miscellany of objects. The church is usually open the same hours as the museum but if it isn't ring the bell next door (No 2), where you can also buy cakes and pastries baked on the premises by the resident nuns (see p267).

To the east of Via Duomo is the small **Chiesa di Santa Maria dei Greci** (Map p262; admission free; ☞ 8am-noon & 3pm-dusk Mon-Sat), accessed through a lovely garden with palm trees and

SHH! WE'RE IN A CHURCH!

By virtue of a remarkable acoustic phenomenon known as *il portavoce* (the carrying voice), even the faintest sound carries in Agrigento's cathedral, but the system only seems to work in the favour of the priest standing in the apse. Should any parishioner have been whispering in the back row near the cathedral door, the priest would have been able to hear their every word even though he stood some 85m away! Try it and see.

cypresses. It was built in the 11th century on the site of a 5th-century Doric temple dedicated to Athena. Inside are some badly damaged Byzantine frescoes and the remains of the original Norman ceiling. Opening hours are not strictly adhered to. If you find it closed, check with the custodian at Salita Santa Maria dei Greci 1 (to the right as you face the church). You might need to give a tip to the custodian for this.

About 300m northwest of the church is Agrigento's magnificent **cathedral** (Map p262; admission free; ☞ erratic), built in the year 1000. It is dedicated to the town's first archbishop, the Norman San Gerlando (St Gerland). It has been radically restructured over the centuries, and has an adjoining unfinished 15th-century bell tower. Inside is the saint's tomb, set in the right wing of the transept. Keep your eyes up for the wonderful Norman ceiling. The cathedral also contains a letter from the Devil, who is reputed to have used all his wiles to engineer the downfall of the Virgin of Agrigento. He wrote to her promising her all the treasure in the world, but steadfast in her purity the Virgin dobed him in to the priest, who still holds this mysterious missive.

Tours

A guide can make a tour of the temples or the town of Agrigento much more interesting and easier to understand. All of the tourist offices in Agrigento can provide you with a list of multilingual guides. Alternatively, you can arrange guides at the main entrance to the archaeological park. The official rate is €84 for half a day.

An excellent English-speaking guide, **Michele Gallo** (Map p262; ☞ 0922 40 22 57, 0360 39 79 30; www.sicilytravel.net; Via Dante 49; half day €90, temples &

museum €120) can organise individual and group itineraries according to travellers' interests. Itineraries can also be arranged to areas of interest around Agrigento and include literary tours, such as tracing the life and work of Luigi Pirandello, Agrigento's most famous writer.

Festivals & Events

Check with the tourist office for more information on the two festivals below.

Sagra del Mandorlo in Fiore (Festival of the Almond Blossom) The city's big annual shindig is a folk festival, celebrated on the first Sunday of February, when the Valley of the Temples is cloaked in almond blossoms.

Festa di San Calogero (Feast of St Calogero) A week-long festival during which the statue of St Calogero, who saved Agrigento from the plague, is carried through the town while spectators throw loaves of spiced bread at the saint. Begins on the first Sunday in July.

Sleeping

AGRIGENTO

Accommodation in Agrigento tends to be overpriced and poor value for money, a result of the deluge of people who visit the Valley of the Temples. High season is between April and October and you will need to book in advance during this period. Here are some of the better and cheaper options.

Hotel Amici (Map p262; ☞ 0922 40 28 31; www.hotelamici.com; Via Acrone 5; s €35-45, d €60-80; ☞) This is a good budget option in Agrigento, especially if you want to stay close to town. The rooms are plain but spotlessly clean, the beds are comfortable and breakfast is included in the price.

Hotel Bella Napoli (Map p262; ☞ /fax 0922 2 04 35; www.hotelbellanapoli.com in Italian; Piazza Lena 6; s/d €35/65; ☞) This is an affordable, affable and atmospheric option run by the same people as the neighbouring Antica Foresteria Catalana. Breakfast is an extra €3.

our pick **Camere a Sud** (Map p262; ☞ 349 638 44 24; www.camereausud.it; Via Vicani 6; s €40-45, d €60-70; ☞) A lovely, recently refurbished B&B in the centre of Agrigento, Camere a Sud has modern rooms that are simply and stylishly decorated – a play between traditional décor and contemporary textiles, with splashes of bright colour to liven things up. The communal kitchen is well-equipped and the sumptuous breakfast is served on the terrace in the warmer months.

Atenea 191 (Map p262; ☞ 0922 59 55 94; www.atenea191.com in Italian; Via Atenea 191; s €40-50, d €60-80; ☞) Atenea 191 is a wonderful modern B&B

with tasteful rooms that feature flower-pot stencils across the walls, pretty floral linen, and in some, frescoed ceilings and traditional floor tiles. Many rooms have fantastic views of the valley, there's a great roof terrace, a huge communal kitchen and disabled access.

Antica Foresteria Catalana (Map p262; ☎ /fax 0922 2 04 35; www.albergoanticaforesteriacatalana.com in Italian; Piazza Lena 5; s €45, d €75-85; 🍷) This decent and well-priced option tries for the 'authentic' antique look. It has exposed brickwork, wrought-iron beds, quaint bits of furniture and pastel-coloured walls, making the rooms a notch above average. Breakfast is an extra €3.

VALLEY OF THE TEMPLES

Most of Agrigento's plusher hotels are out of town, around the Valley of the Temples or near the sea. You'll need your own transport to get around if you're staying here.

Hotel Kaos (off Map p263; ☎ 0922 59 86 22; Contrada Luigi Pirandello; s/d from €100/150; 🍷 🍷 🍷) A large hotel in a restored villa set in beautiful, mature gardens, situated by the sea about 2km from the temples. The rooms are slightly dilapidated, but with reconstruction work underway perhaps there are brighter times ahead. There is, however, a huge swimming pool that compensates for some of the sad décor.

Hotel Villa Athena (Map p263; ☎ 0922 2 69 66; www.athenahotels.com; Via Ugo La Malfa 3; s €105-130, d €160-210; 🍷 🍷 🍷) Agrigento's most famous hotel and the only one situated inside the archaeological park. Once the home of Alexander Hardcastle (1920s), who devoted his life to the excavations, it has a peerless position overlooking the temples. The rooms are perhaps past their best, but the location makes this place extra special.

Colleverde Park Hotel (Map p263; ☎ 0922 2 95 55; www.colleverdehotel.it; Via Panoramica dei Templi 21; d from €120-170; 🍷 🍷) Set in lush gardens, this is a good family option, with wonderful views of the temples. The location is better for those who have a car, since the hotel is situated halfway between the town and the valley. The rooms are comfortably modern.

Foresteria Baglio della Luna (off Map p263; ☎ 0922 51 10 61; www.bagliodellaluna.com; Contrada Maddalusa; s/d from €150/200; 🍷 🍷) This handsome converted *baglio* (manor house) is Agrigento's best hotel. Full of character and comfort, the interior is tastefully decorated with antiques and chintz, and the restaurant, Il Déhors

(opposite), is rated as one of the best in Sicily. It is a little tricky to find, but check the website for exact directions.

SAN LEONE

The nearest camp sites are in the small coastal town of San Leone, 3km south of Agrigento.

Campaggio Internazionale San Leone (off Map p263; ☎ 0922 41 61 21; www.campingvalledetempli.com; per person €5-7, tent €5-7; 🚫 closed Nov-Feb; 🚰 🚰) A well-equipped camp site, with a swimming pool, pizzeria, internet point, and bus shuttle to the Valley of the Temples and nearby beaches. It's situated on a magnificent stretch of golden sand, within cycling distance (5km) of the Valley of the Temples. To get there, take bus 2 (€0.85) from in front of Agrigento's train station; you'll then have to walk about 1km east along the beach at San Leone.

Eating

AGRIGENTO

Agrigentans are often referred to as *né carne né pesce* (neither fowl nor fish), and this pretty much reflects their eating habits. You are just as likely to get rabbit, pasta with fennel, broad beans and artichokes as you are to get stuffed swordfish or pilchards. Agrigento itself is famous for the unctuous Arab sweet *cuscusu* (looks like semolina couscous but is made of almonds and pistachio) and they sure do love their ice-cream brioches!

La Forchetta (Map p262; ☎ 0922 59 45 87; Via San Francesco 9; meals €15; 🚫 closed Sun) A budget eatery, the Fork serves the cheapest grub in town, with simple pastas and meat fillets to follow. The cramped dining room is often packed with locals who come for the ever-changing daily specials and the relaxed atmosphere.

L'Ambasciata di Sicilia (Map p262; ☎ 0922 2 05 26; Via Giambertoni 2; meals €20; 🚫 closed Sun) The Ambasciata offers typical Sicilian fare, although the prepackaged desserts are a disappointment. If you can, get a table on the small outdoor terrace, which has splendid views of the town and the temples below.

Kalos (Map p262; ☎ 0922 2 63 89; Piazzale San Calogero; meals €25; 🚫 closed Sun) This is a top-end restaurant serving quality cuisine close to the centre of town. The whopping service charge of 20% is a bit steep, especially when the place can feel a little funereal early in the evening.

Da Giovanni (Map p262; ☎ 0922 2 11 10; Piazzetta Vadalà 2; meals €25; 🚫 closed Sun) A reliable option with piazza seating, smooth service, classic

Sicilian dishes and mind-blowing *cassata* (sponge cake with ricotta and fruit). It gets quite busy on Saturday evenings, when bookings are a must.

VALLEY OF THE TEMPLES

There are some great upmarket spots near the temples, especially if you can nab a table with a view of the ruins illuminated at night.

Kokalos (Map p263; ☎ 0922 60 64 27; Viale Magazzeni 3; pizza €6-8) If you have a car, head for this trattoria/pizzeria, on the road to San Leone, where the area's best pizza is dished up. It also serves the local *cavatelli* (a type of homemade pasta). The views of the Temple of Concord are impressive too.

La Promenade dei Templi (Map p263; ☎ 0922 2 37 15; Via dei Panoramica Templi; tourist menu €15-20) This is a good café/restaurant popular with locals for a morning coffee, and the best eatery near the temples away from the madding crowds. There is also a pleasant rooftop terrace.

Le Caprice (off Map p263; ☎ 0922 41 13 64; Via Cavaleri Magazzeni; meals €30; 🚫 closed Fri) Le Caprice, long one of Agrigento's better restaurants, has a garden location complete with pool and swans. It is renowned for its seafood and the mixed seafood grill is certainly worth its reputation. A glass of the local white is perfect on a hot summer evening.

Il Déhors (off Map p263; ☎ 0922 51 13 35; Contrada Maddalusa; meals €35; 🚫 closed Mon) The restaurant of the Foresteria Baglio della Luna takes its lead from the *monsù* cooking of the 1800s, when French influences began to reach the Sicilian dinner table. The menu includes sole, lobster and meats such as pheasant, lamb and kid. There are delicious pâtés and plenty of buttery sauces. Excellent.

Leon d'Oro (off Map p263; ☎ 0922 41 44 00; Viale Emporium 102; mains €35-40; 🚫 closed Mon) A truly excellent restaurant that deserves its high prices, perfectly mixing the fish and fowl that typify Agrigento's cuisine. Try the *coniglio in agrodolce* (rabbit in a sweet-and-sour sauce) or the *triglia e macco di fave* (mullet with broad beans).

Drinking

Café Girasole (Map p262; Via Atenea 68-70; 🚫 closed Sun) A popular café-cum-wine-bar in the heart of the medieval town serving late breakfasts, light lunches and, in the evenings, cocktails

and table snacks. Has a good atmosphere and outdoor seating.

Tempio di Vino (Map p262; ☎ 0922 59 67 86; Via San Francesco 11/13; 🚫 closed Sun) A sweet *enoteca* in a pretty piazza. Enjoy a cool white Inzolia, and munch on olives and spicy salami as you listen to laid-back jazz.

Entertainment

Teatro Pirandello (Map p262; ☎ 0922 2 03 91; Piazza Pirandello) This theatre is mostly given over to the work of the town's great playwright, Pirandello. The main theatre season is during the winter months of October to March. Ask at any of the tourist offices for details.

Shopping

ourpick **Monastero del Santo Spirito** (Map p262; Via Santo Spirito) The monastery is home to nuns who bake heavenly pastries, including *dolci di mandorla* (almond pastries), *pistachio cuscusu* and *bucellati* (rolled sweet dough with figs). These treats are expensive but worth it for the taste and the experience. Press the doorbell, say 'Vorrei comprare qualche dolci' (I'd like to buy a few cakes) and see how you go.

Getting There & Away

BUS

For most destinations, the bus is the easiest way to get to and from Agrigento. The intercity bus station (Map p262) is on Piazza Rosselli, just off Piazza Vittorio Emanuele, as is the ticket booth (Map p262). **Cuffaro** (☎ 0922 41 82 31) runs daily buses to Palermo (€7, two hours, seven daily Monday to Saturday, two Sunday). **Lumia** (☎ 0922 2 04 14) has departures to Trapani (€10, four hours, three daily Monday to Saturday, one Sunday).

SALS Trasporti (☎ 0922 59 52 60) runs buses to Catania (€11, three hours, 14 Monday to Friday, seven Saturday and Sunday), Caltanissetta (€5, 1¼ hours, five Monday to Saturday, one Sunday). There are also buses to Palermo's Falcone-Borsellino airport (€9, two hours and 25 minutes, three Monday to Friday).

CAR & MOTORCYCLE

Agrigento is easily accessible by road from all of Sicily's main towns. The SS189 (the SS121 from Palermo) links the town with Palermo, while the SS115 runs along the coast and eventually to Syracuse. For Enna, take the SS640 via Caltanissetta.

Driving in the medieval town is nearly impossible. The main street is pedestrianised from 9am to 8pm and traffic is rerouted around Via Gioeni. There is metered parking at the train station (Piazza Marconi) and Piazza Rosselli.

TRAIN

There are plenty of trains daily to and from Palermo (€7, 2½ hours, 11 daily) and Catania (€12, 3½ to 4½ hours, five daily), although you are better off taking the bus which is faster. Train services to Gela (€6.50, three hours, 10 daily) are frequent and convenient. The train station has left-luggage lockers (€2.50 per 12 hours).

Getting Around

City buses run to the Valley of the Temples from in front of the train station. Take bus 1, 2, or 3 (€0.85, valid for 1½ hours, every 30 minutes) and get off at either the museum or further downhill at the Piazzale dei Templi. Bus 1 continues to Caos and then Porto Empedocle (€1.70). Bus 2 continues to San Leone. There are also regular buses running from the train station to the cathedral, for those who prefer not to walk up the hill.

CASA NATALE DI PIRANDELLO

Southwest of Agrigento in the suburb of Caos, about 2km along the busy road to Porto Empedocle, is the birthplace of one of the heavyweights of Sicilian (and world) literature, Luigi Pirandello (1867–1936). His

early career was taken up with the writing of short stories and novels, but he concentrated on writing for the theatre after WWI. His works include such masterpieces as *Sei personaggi in ricerca di un autore* (Six Characters in Search of an Author) and *Enrico IV* (Henry IV), which are considered some of the most important plays written in the Italian language. In 1934 he was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature.

Casa Natale di Pirandello (☎ 0922 51 11 02; admission €2; ☎ 9am–1pm & 2–7pm) is the villa in which Pirandello was born and spent most of his summers, now converted into a museum containing a lot of memorabilia. It also hosts occasional exhibitions of his manuscripts and letters, and every year there is a **Settimana Pirandellana** (Pirandellana Week) in early August when his plays are performed in a theatre near the villa (in Piazzale Caos). For information on theatrical events ask at any tourist office in Agrigento.

The ashes of Pirandello are kept in an urn buried at the foot of a pine tree, which lost its top half in a violent storm a few years ago.

ARAGONA & THE VULCANELLI DI MACALUBE

Head north from Agrigento along the SS189 towards the small farming town of Aragona, a typical Sicilian town of tiny alleys and secluded piazzas with a lovely **Chiesa Madre** full of stuccowork. However, the real interest here lies 3km to the south of town – the bizarre **Vulcanelli di Macalube** are fascinating

DETOUR: ERACLEA MINOA

Despite the scant 6th-century-BC ruins a trip to Eraclea Minoa makes a wonderful detour, taking you through some gorgeous rural countryside, down to Sicily's most photogenic beach and one of the island's best camp sites.

Take the signposted exit on the SS115, which will bring you to a T-junction. Turn left and wend your way uphill through acres of vineyards until you reach another junction at the top of the promontory. The road ahead will take you down to the beach, while a right turn will take you to the **archaeological park** (admission €2; ☎ 9am–1hr before sunset) along the headland. There are great views of the beach from this road. The ruins are relatively scarce – the crumbling remains of the soft sandstone theatre are covered with protective plastic – but the views and singing scrub full of the intense chirrups of cicadas are gorgeous.

To reach the beach return to the junction and head downhill (2km). At the bottom of the hill you will have to turn right along a one-way road, then take a left turn at the big sign for **Lido Garibaldi**, which will bring you out on the golden sand, next to a beachfront café (with toilets) and the wonderful, eucalyptus-shaded camp site, **Eraclea Minoa Village** (☎ in summer 0922 84 60 23, in winter 0922 2 91 01; www.eracleaminoavillage.it; per person €8–14.50, d in a bungalow €55–95). Backed by a deep green band of cypress trees and the white marl cliffs of Capo Bianco to the west, it is a heavenly spot and very quiet outside July and August. There's a natural mud rock at the western end of the beach, where you can scrape the mud off the rock (with the aid of a bit of sea water) and rub it onto your skin – you'll see all the locals doing the same. Dry off in the sun then rinse in the sea, and have at least ten years removed in ten minutes. It's great refreshment for the skin and it'll save you the euros that spas charge for this very treatment. But do beware – you'll look like a green monster while the mud's drying.

minivolcanoes about half a metre high and chock-full of bubbling mud. To walk to the site, take the last left south out of Aragona (signposted) and follow the road for about 1km. At the first fork, take a left down a dirt road. When the road forks again, take a right and keep going until you reach a sign saying '*Proprietà Privata*' (Private Property). Walk 300m or so up the path and then you'll see a fenced-off field on your right. As you approach it, you will notice that the field is actually a greyish expanse of clay that looks eerily like the surface of the moon. This is caused by a rare geographical phenomenon known as sedimentary vulcanism. It is possible to walk around the **vulcanelli**, but watch your step.

Although this is private property, visitors are welcome if they stick to the path and the **vulcanelli**. If you see someone on the property, ask for permission: '*Lei dispiace se visito i vulcanelli?*' (Do you mind if I visit the **vulcanelli**?).

SANT'ANGELO MUXARO

This tiny town is famous for the prehistoric **rock tombs** (*tholos*) that litter the hillside on its southern side. They date from the 11th to the 5th century BC and resemble stone beehives. The largest one is known as the **Tomba del Principe** (Tomb of the Prince). Whatever

treasures they once contained have long since disappeared into the display cases of Europe's museums or into private hands. The tombs are always accessible.

From Agrigento, take the SS118 out of Agrigento and follow the signs for the turn-off near Raffadali. To get here from the north, take the SS188 west from Lercara Friddi and turn south (towards Agrigento): Sant'Angelo Muxaro is about 50km down the road.

THE PELAGIC ISLANDS

pop 5950

The Pelagic Islands (Isole Pelagie) earned their name from the Greek *pelagos*, meaning 'sea', and they are surrounded by a fabulous sea of luminous aqua depths (the cleanest in Italy) that shimmers in the endless sunshine. The islands lie on the very edge of the continental shelf separating Africa from Europe. While Linosa balances on the European shelf, the last peak in Etna's volcanic chain, Lampedusa lies on the African shelf and is known as 'a gift from Africa to Europe'. It isn't the only gift heading from Africa to Europe these days, and the island has of late been caught in a political maelstrom of illegal immigration as desperate refugees try to reach the European shores.

THE MARVELOUS SCALA DEI TURCHI

It's incredible how many visit Agrigento and wander around the temples, but leave without seeing one of the most spectacular sights in the area: the Scala dei Turchi.

The curving, blindingly-white rock is made out of limestone and clay, and it contrasts against the blue sky and indigo sea quite spectacularly; you'll be awe-struck by its sheer scale and deliciousness. You'll see people running up the smooth stone; some lying and sunbathing on the whiteness; and others walking around exploring its coves and curves, running their hands along the smooth chalky surface. The sunsets are particularly incredible.

The story behind the name comes from a legend that this was the hiding place for Turkish and Arab pirates during strong winds and bad weather. They are also meant to have used the rock as their landing area during the island's battles with the Saracens.

There are two sandy beaches surrounding the Scala, and the one behind the rock is the better of the two. Take a picnic to make a full day out of it. There's a restaurant just by the steps that take you down to the beach from the road.

To get here from Agrigento, you'll need your own transport. Drive towards Porto Empedocle then follow the signs for Realmonte. You should see signs for the 'Lido Majarata' and 'Scala dei Turchi'.

The archipelago's most popular island, Lampedusa, is overrun with visitors in July and August. To escape the crowds, you might consider skipping across the water to the small volcanic island of Linosa, where the black beaches are quieter and the swimming is great. Tiny Lampione is little more than an uninhabited pimple and isn't on the ferry route.

History

The islands have a somewhat chequered history, made famous by their one-time princes, the Tomasi family, who were given Lampedusa in 1661 (hence the name Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa, of *Il gattopardo* fame). In 1839 they tried to sell it to the British but King Ferdinand II of Naples jumped in and forked out 12 million ducats to stop the British gaining yet another strategic foothold in the Mediterranean. The islands were bombed in 1943 by the Allies and the Americans later set up a military base here, which itself was the target of a bomb attack in 1986, when Libya's Colonel Gaddafi launched a couple of wobbly missiles that landed out to sea.

Getting There & Away

AIR

You can fly direct to Lampedusa from Palermo. **Meridiana** (☎ inside Italy 199 11 13 33, from outside Italy 0789 5 26 82; www.meridiana.it), **Air One** (☎ 091 702 01 11; www.flyairone.it) and **Alitalia** (☎ 848 86 56 41; www.alitalia.com) fly twice daily to Lampedusa from Palermo (from €40 one way, one hour). You can buy tickets at Falcone-Borsellino airport (31km west of Palermo) or contact a travel agency, who might scout around for a good deal.

BOAT

You can get to the islands by ferry from Porto Empedocle, 10km from the Valley of the Temples archaeological park. SAL Buses (€1.70) leave Agrigento's train station for Porto Empedocle every 30 minutes or so from 6.25am to 8.30pm, which is inconvenient given the later ferry departures. You can buy bus tickets on the bus. The 20-minute bus journey brings you to Piazza Italia on Via Roma. This is about 100m north of the ferry dock, which runs along Via Quattro Novembre. Alternatively you can get a taxi from Piazzale Aldo Moro in Agrigento for about €6. Call ☎ 0922 2 18 99 or ☎ 0922 2 66 70 for a taxi. Both Siremar and Ustica Lines

run ferries to Lampedusa and Linosa. Both ticket offices are on the quayside.

Siremar (☎ 0922 63 66 83; Lungomare Rizzo; ☎ 9am-1pm & 4.30pm-midnight Mon-Thu & Sat, 9am-1pm & 4.30-8pm Fri, 8pm-midnight Sun) has one-way fares to Lampedusa costing €42.30 and to Linosa €35.30. Although you can take your car (from €49 one way), it's best to leave it on the mainland at a parking station near the port (see below). The ferry leaves Porto Empedocle at 11.59pm, arriving in Linosa at 5.45am and Lampedusa at 8.15am. From June to September there are daily departures in both directions but the rest of the year there is no ferry out to the islands on Friday and no return ferry on Saturday. For the outward, night-time journey consider reserving a cabin with toilet for €20.50.

Ustica Lines (☎ 0922 63 61 10; www.usticalines.it; Lungomare Rizzo) runs a faster, four-hour hydrofoil service to the islands, which departs at more humane times. In high season (1 May to 31 October) hydrofoils depart daily for Lampedusa (€49) at 4pm and Linosa (€31). Services are reduced to twice weekly (Wednesday and Saturday) in April, November and December, and depart at 8am.

Parking at the Port

Alfonso Stagno (☎ 0922 63 60 29) has two garages near the port where parking costs €15 per day. Phone a couple of days beforehand to book a space. You can rent vehicles pretty cheaply on Lampedusa should you need to.

Getting Around

Ustica Lines runs a hydrofoil between Lampedusa and Linosa from 1 May to 31 October (€18, one hour, twice daily). The hydrofoil departs Lampedusa at 9.30am and 5.30pm and departs Linosa at 10.45am and 6.45pm. You can buy your ticket at the **Agenzia Marittima Strazera** (☎ 0922 97 00 03; Via F Riso 1) on Lampedusa. On Linosa, tickets are available from **Agenzia Cavallaro** (☎ 0922 97 20 62; Via Re Umberto 46).

LAMPEDUSA

Lampedusa is a rocky, sparsely covered and, in winter, wind-whipped place that was wonderfully captured in Emanuele Crialesè's 2002 film, *Respiro*. Not so long ago, in the 19th century, the island was covered with farmland, but years of mismanagement have destroyed the local ecology, leaving only baking rock and

STORMY WATERS

It is not only moneyed tourists who have their sights set on the crystal-clear waters of Lampedusa, but also thousands of people escaping the poverty and political turmoil of Africa's failed states. In 2004 a record number of 10,000 asylum seekers landed on the island during the summer months, trebling the island's population and sending the Italian government into a tailspin. These numbers are more or less steady every year, as confirmed by the fact that 2007 saw about 7000 people rescued by Italian coastguards. Ten immigrants died in a crossing in August 2007 and more than 2500 people were rescued in July alone.

During his days in power, Silvio Berlusconi made a deal with one-time renegade Colonel Gaddafi to return illegal immigrants to holding camps in Libya, much to the dismay of the UN Refugee Agency – Libya has a long record of human-rights abuses. Images of handcuffed refugees being loaded on to cargo planes sent the UN envoy Juergen Humburg hotfoot to Lampedusa, but he was denied access to the island's high-security detention centre, which is ringed by spirals of razor wire. The situation got so bad, and the planeloads of returning immigrants so many, that even Libya had trouble coping with the numbers and flights had to be temporarily suspended.

Lampedusa is undoubtedly the frontline in the continuing European immigration crisis. Many of the refugees who are locked up in Lampedusa's dour detention centre are simply escaping some of the worst poverty in the world, but it doesn't look like there is a different solution on the horizon.

scrub bush. There is no sight of any particular interest in the town itself and most people come here for the wonderful sea and sand.

Orientation

Whether arriving by ferry or by plane, all visitors disembark on Lampedusa, in the town of the same name. If you arrive by ferry, it's a 10-minute walk up to the old town or a 15-minute walk west to the harbour at Porto Nuovo, where you'll find many of the hotels. The airport is not much further away on the southeastern edge of town. The bus station, handy if you want to visit beaches around the island, is on Piazza Brignone in the centre of town.

Information

Banco di Sicilia (Via Roma 129) Has an ATM.

Ente Turismo (☎ 0922 97 11 71; www.enteturismo.lampedusa.it; Via Anfossi 3) Try this travel agency if the tourist office is closed. Ente can book hotels, arrange excursions, and help hire boats and scooters. Excellent website.

First Aid (☎ 0922 97 06 04)

Pharmacy (☎ 0922 97 01 95; Via Vittorio Emanuele 35; ☎ 9.30am-12.45pm, 5-7.30pm & 10-11pm)

Police (questura; ☎ 0922 97 00 01; Via Roma 37)

Post Office (Piazza Piave; ☎ 8.30am-1pm & 4-7pm Mon-Sat) Doubles as a Telecom office.

Tourist Office (☎ 0922 97 13 90; Via Vittorio Emanuele 89; ☎ Apr-Oct) Keeps erratic hours but otherwise supplies good information on the island. Linked to Ente Turismo.

Sights & Activities

The main area of activity on the island is the busy, picturesque port surrounded by a kasbahlike warren of streets. Beyond this you have your pick of beaches, such as **Cala Croce**, the first bay west of the town, or **Isola dei Conigli** (Rabbit Island), one of several beaches on the southern side of the 11km-long island. It's an easy swim away (you can even walk it if the tide is out), otherwise a scooter is a good idea. Isola dei Conigli is also part of a dedicated nature reserve, unique in Italy in that it is the only place where *Caretta caretta* (loggerhead sea turtles) lay their eggs (between July and August). You will be lucky to see one, though, as these timid creatures generally only come in when no-one's about.

The only other excursion is to the centre of the island and the **Santuario di Porto Salvo**, a small church nestled in a lush garden. It houses the Madonna of Porto Salvo, which is carried out in procession every year on 22 September to commemorate the first settlement on the island (1843).

The waters of Lampedusa are crystal clear and brimming with different kinds of fish. Consequently, diving is very popular. **Lo Verde Diving** (☎ 0922 97 19 86; Via Sbarcatoio) and **Mediterraneo Immersion Club** (☎ 0922 97 15 26; Via A Volta 8), both on the harbour front, organise gear rental and diving trips around the island. Expect to pay around €55 per day for a complete set of equipment.

Sleeping

Cheap accommodation can be hard to find and you will usually be expected to stay for a minimum of three nights in July and August. The small guesthouses are often full in summer and closed in winter. The tourist office has lists of all hotels and room rentals and many can be viewed on the website www.lampedusa.to (in Italian).

La Roccia (☎ 0922 97 09 64; www.laroccia.net; camp site per person €8, d in bungalow €37) An excellent camp site with very high standards and dozens of on-site facilities, including diving in the transparent waters. It is located at Cala Greca, which is 3km west of town past Guitgia beach. There are also cabins, chalets and caravans available here.

Hotel La Perla (☎ 0922 97 19 32; www.laperlahotel.net; Lungomare L Rizzo 1/3/5; per person incl half board €58-122; 🍷) A comfortable hotel with spacious rooms and balconies overlooking the sea, La Perla is central and open year-round. The décor is predominantly blue-and-white marine style, with wicker sofas and tasteful knick-knacks. There's also a decent restaurant that overlooks the sea.

Hotel Sirio (☎ 0922 97 04 01; Via Antonello da Messina; per person incl half board €86; 🍷) Friendly and family-run, the Sirio is situated between Guitgia Bay and the harbour. It has sunny rooms and a warm atmosphere, but it is the cooking that makes this place a real find, with delicacies prepared by Nonna Caterina. You can sample roasted sea urchins, stuffed calamari, pasta with mullet, and ricotta tart, and the hotel can even organise a culinary tour of the island. Good value for this expensive island.

U Piddu (☎ 0922 97 09 01; fax 0922 97 10 50; Via Madonna 10; d per person per week incl half board €680-1060; 🍷; closed Oct-Apr; 🍷) Good value for longer stays (during the low season), this low-slung, Mexican-style adobe complex is dreamy, with elegant terraced rooms and a patio surrounded by dramatic cacti. The hotel also has its own scooters and private boat, and boat excursions are included in the price of the room.

Hotel Cupola Bianca (☎/fax 0922 97 12 74; www.italiaabc.it/az/cupolabianca; Contrada Madonna; per person incl half board €120-150; 🍷) Lovely location in a fresh green garden dotted with palm trees. The garden sets the atmosphere for the *Arabian Nights* décor of the small cottages, complete with pointy Eastern-style arches and wrought-iron four-poster beds. Catamaran excursions and diving are also possible.

Eating

There are plenty of places to eat, but prices are higher here than anywhere else in Sicily. At night during summer, Via Roma's cafés and restaurants are chock-a-block with tourists tucking into all manner of fish dishes and the ubiquitous couscous. Most places are open during summer but are closed November to March.

Al Gallo d'Oro (Via Vittorio Emanuele 45; meals €20) A cheap and cheerful place, with a good tourist menu, the Golden Cockerel is popular for a simple dinner or lunch.

Da Nicola (☎ 0922 97 12 39; Via Ponente, on the road to the Isola dei Conigli; meals €25) The only thing you can eat here is the most delicious and freshest fish, served home-style in a simple and down-to-earth environment. No nonsense or frills.

Trattoria Pugliese (☎ 0922 97 05 31; Via Cala Pisana 3; meals €25-30) If you fancy a change from all that fish, this is a good alternative, serving up tasty pasta dishes with a north-Italian twist. The chef is from Puglia so you're guaranteed something different.

Le Mille e Una Notte (☎ 0922 97 15 55; Lungomare L Rizzo 133; meals €35) Specialising in Arabic and North African-style couscous, the 'A Thousand and One Nights' is a favourite for lovers of the semolina dish. It is served with meat and fish or even sweet – as a salad with kiwi or pomegranate.

Gemmelli (☎ 0922 97 06 99; Via Cala Pisana 2; meals €40; 🍷; closed Oct-Jun) A top-class restaurant offering a plethora of fish dishes including bouillabaisse, paella and couscous. Excellent food and good ambience.

Getting Around

Getting around Lampedusa is easy; the island is only 11km long. You can walk into town from the airport. Most hotels and camp sites, however, arrange courtesy buses that transport guests from the airport to their accommodation. You can also get a taxi, which costs €3 to €6.

From June to September, orange minibuses (€1.75) run regularly from Piazza Brignone to the different beaches around the island. Alternatively, you can rent a bicycle, scooter or even a car from one of the many rental outlets around town. **Licciardi Autonoleggi** (☎ 0922 97 07 68; Via Siracusa) is a few steps from the docks at Porto Vecchio. It rents scooters for €15 a day and cars from €30. You can also rent bicycles from there for €5 per day.

LINOSA

Linosa is essentially the summit of a dormant volcano that has been extinct for nearly 2000 years. Its black beaches and rocky coves don't attract nearly as many as visitors as Lampedusa, but they are worth checking out if you fancy getting away from the crowds that flock to the larger island. Linosa is slowly building up its own tourist trade and is a popular day trip from Lampedusa.

Linosa Club (☎ 0922 97 20 66; Contrada Calcarella; d per person incl half board from €80; 🍷; closed Oct-May) is a good hotel, the only one on the island, and has lots of sporting facilities and a restaurant. Prices decrease outside August.

Trattoria da Anna (☎ 0922 97 20 48; Via Vittorio Veneto; meals €25-30) is a pleasant little trattoria run by the eponymous Anna herself, whose cooking is highly regarded. She can also help you find accommodation in studio apartments, which are available to rent year-round.

EAST OF AGRIGENTO

GELA

pop 72,500

Once the engine room of the great Greek colony that eventually pushed westwards to found Akragas, Eraclea Minoa and Selinunte, Gela was renowned during its colonial days for its artistic excellence and entrepreneurial spirit, which still makes it an unsentimental modern city today. Gela was settled by colonists from Rhodes and Crete in 689 BC, and Greek know-how mixed with the local Sicilian culture helped the city prosper, producing wines, olive oil and ceramics. However the city was sacked by Carthage (405 BC) and then completely destroyed by the tyrant Finzia of Agrigento (282 BC), who relocated the entire population of Gela to Agrigento. Far from that being the end of its woes, the city was destroyed again by WWII bombing, as it was chosen for the Allied landings of July 1943.

Since then, Gela has spearheaded Sicily's ill-fated oil industry. Gulf Oil strikes in the 1950s saw the rapid and ill-thought-out establishment of huge refineries at Syracuse, Augusta, Gela and Agrigento. Although Gela's plant provides employment for the majority of the city, it has not brought about the dreamt-of riches but has rather transformed the town into a mess of tangled

steel and industrial mayhem. In recent years Gela has stood out as one of Sicily's more progressive cities, twice electing its mayor Rosario Crocetta, an openly gay, left-wing politician, who has vowed to improve Gela's reputation and carry on his work against the Mafia.

Orientation & Information

The ancient city or acropolis occupies the western slopes of the city near the Capo Soprano fortifications. Four kilometres east of this, down Corso Vittorio Emanuele, the main thoroughfare of the historic town, you will find the archaeological museum. A nicer walk is along the seafront.

Should you need it, there is a **tourist office** (☎ 0933 91 15 09; Via Palazzi).

Sights

There is really only one reason for coming to Gela and that's to visit the **Museo Regionale Archeologico** (☎ 0933 91 26 26; Corso Vittorio Emanuele; adult/concession €6/3; 🍷; 9am-1pm & 3-7pm, closed last Mon of the month). The museum contains artefacts from the city's ancient acropolis but is rightly famed for its unique collection of red-and-black *kraters*, Gela's speciality between the 7th and 4th centuries BC. Gela's terracotta was famed throughout the Greek world for the delicacy of its designs and superb figurative work. This museum's collection, the largest in the world, is simply staggering. Other treasures of the museum include the Navarra collection of ancient vases from the 8th to the 6th century, the most important of its kind in Italy, and some 600 silver coins minted in Agrigento, Gela, Syracuse, Messina and Athens. At one time the collection numbered over 1000 coins, but it was stolen in 1976 and only about half of it was recovered. More recently, the city has acquired three unusual terracotta altars. These were found in 2003 in a 5th-century-BC warehouse, which had been buried under 6m of sand. The quality and state of preservation is amazing.

Right at the other end of Corso Vittorio Emanuele (turn left on Via Manzoni and follow the road to the sea for about 4km), you will find the remains of the ancient **Greek fortifications** (admission €3; 🍷; 9am-1hr before sunset) at Capo Soprano. Built by the tyrant of Syracuse, Timoleon, in 333 BC, they are in a remarkable state of preservation, most likely

the result of being covered by sand dunes for thousands of years until they were discovered in 1948. The 8m-high walls were built in antiquity to prevent huge amounts of sand being blown into the city by the blustery sea wind. Today many of the walls are in ruins and the authorities have planted trees to act as a buffer against the encroaching sand. It makes for a pretty site planted with mimosa and eucalyptus trees, perfect for a picnic. Some 500m from the walls, next to the hospital, are Sicily's only surviving **Greek baths** (Via Europa; ☎ always open), which date from the 4th century BC.

Sleeping & Eating

If you wish to stay in Gela, try **Hotel Sole** (☎ 0933 92 52 92; Via Mare 32; s €20-35, d €30-50; 🏠), one of the few accommodation options in town. The rooms are decent enough, though by no means charming.

There are pizzerie and restaurants along the main street, but the best place to eat and sleep is 20km from Gela on the SS117 to Caltagirone, at the **Vecchia Masseria** (☎ 0935 68 40 03; SS117, Cutuminello Rd; s €55-85, d €40-70; 🍷 🍴 🏠). It's a charming place, in the middle of the countryside. Rustic and tasteful, it's quite large-scale. The rooms are elegant, soothing and spacious, and the reputed restaurant specialises in traditional Sicilian cooking. Bizarrely, you can do archery here too, or if you don't fancy that, just chill out at the lovely pool.

Getting There & Away

Gela is easily reached by train and bus from every town on the Mediterranean coast. There are dozens of trains from Agrigento to Gela (€6.25, three hours, 10 daily). All buses in Gela run from Piazza Stazione, in front of the train station (ask at the Autolinee office across the street for a timetable). SAL services run to Agrigento (€3.25, 1½ hours, four daily) while SAIS Autolinee goes to Palermo via Enna and Piazza Armerina (€11.65, 2½ to three hours, four Monday to Saturday, three Sunday).

AROUND GELA

As the first Italian town to be liberated in WWII, the coast around Gela is dotted with pillbox defences. The best beaches are to the west of the town beyond the so-called Gela Riviera, and are wild and unspoilt.

The best of these are in **Falconara**, 20km west of Gela, along the SS115. It has two superb beaches, Manfria and Roccazzelle, overlooked by the impressive 14th-century Castello di Falconara, still owned by the aristocratic Falconara family and available to rent through **Think Sicily** (☎ in UK 020-7377 8518; www.thinksicily.co.uk). Another easy detour is 8km inland along the SS117b. The road takes you through the wonderfully fertile **Campo Gelo** (Gela Plains), which first attracted the Greeks to this side of the island. The plains are broken up by the dramatically tumbledown keep, **Il Castelluccio** (☎ 9am-1pm & 3-7pm, closed last Mon of month), which was built by Frederick II. It is said to be haunted. It's accessible with the same ticket as Museo Archeologico in Gela.

To the northwest (12km along the SS191) lies the lovely hill village of **Butera**, with its hill-top position crowned by a powerful Norman castle. Prosperous and content under the Spanish rule of the Branciforte family, Butera lacks the down-at-heel atmosphere of many rural towns in the south. It has a lovely town church, the Chiesa Madre, with some modest treasures, a Renaissance triptych and a painting of the Madonna by Filippino Paladino. Built on a steep hill it has good views over the Gela plains to the coast.

The Branciforte residence still stands in nearby **Mazzarino**, and the town has a clutch of churches sheltering more works of art by Paladino and the ostentatious funerary monuments of the Branciforte princes. In the 1960s, the town hit the headlines for its Mafia activity, all the more shocking for the involvement of local friars who were accused of extortion, intimidation and even murder. Imprisoned for acting as Mafia messengers, the friars admitted to delivering threats via the confessional.

WEST TO AGRIGENTO

Along the SS115 between Agrigento and Gela are the towns of **Licata** and **Palma di Montechiaro**, black spots in the Agrigentan hinterland. Palma is famous as the home of the princes of Lampedusa, made famous by writer Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa in *Il gattopardo* (The Leopard). The family's 17th-century ancestral palace has not been occupied for some time, although the Chiesa Matrice still stands and can be visited.

WEST OF AGRIGENTO

SCIACCA

pop 40,600

Sciacca is one of the oldest spa towns in Italy. The spas were enjoyed by the Phoenicians, Greeks and Romans before the Arabs arrived and named it Xacca (meaning 'Water'). Like spa towns around the world, Sciacca has a gentle air and is popular with aging Italians who come to cure their rheumatism in the mineral-rich mud. A belvedere overlooks the harbour – home of Sciacca's working fishing port – and there's a pleasant day's strolling to be had through the weaving streets of the town.

Orientation

Sciacca still retains much of its medieval layout, which divided the town into quarters, each laid out on a strip of rock descending towards the sea. To the north of Via G Licata is Terravecchia, a maze of streets and alleyways. Between Via G Licata and the town's central artery, Corso Vittorio Emanuele, is a narrow strip containing most of the town's fine buildings and churches. Below the terrace of Piazza Scandaliato (halfway along Corso Vittorio Emanuele) is the traditional quarter of fishermen, ceramists and potters, which descends right down to the jetty.

Information

Banca Commerciale Italiana (Corso Vittorio Emanuele 106) Has an ATM.

Hospital (☎ 0922 9 43 76; Viale della Vittoria) Near to the public gardens.

Police (questura; ☎ 0925 96 50 11; Piazza Luigi Sturzi 2) Just outside the eastern gate to the old city.

Post Office (Corso Vittorio Emanuele 104)

Tourist Office (☎ 0925 2 27 44; Corso Vittorio Emanuele 84) This office supplies a map of the town and very limited tourist information.

Sights

The main street of Sciacca, Corso Vittorio Emanuele, is lined with impressive palazzi. The most imposing is the **Palazzo Steripinto**, recognisable by its diamond-point rustication and twin-mullioned windows. It was built in the Catalanian-Sicilian style at the beginning of the 16th century. Right in the heart of town, Vittorio Emanuele runs past the terraced **Piazza Scandaliato**, a central meeting place for locals, with splendid views of the sea below.

At the square's western end stands the **Chiesa di San Domenico**, an 18th-century reconstruction of a church built in the 16th century, while to the northeast of Piazza Scandaliato is the town's **cathedral** (admission free; ☎ 7.30am-noon & 4.30-7.30pm), first erected in 1108 and rebuilt in 1656. Only the three apses survive from the original Norman structure. The unfinished baroque façade features a set of marble statues by Gagini.

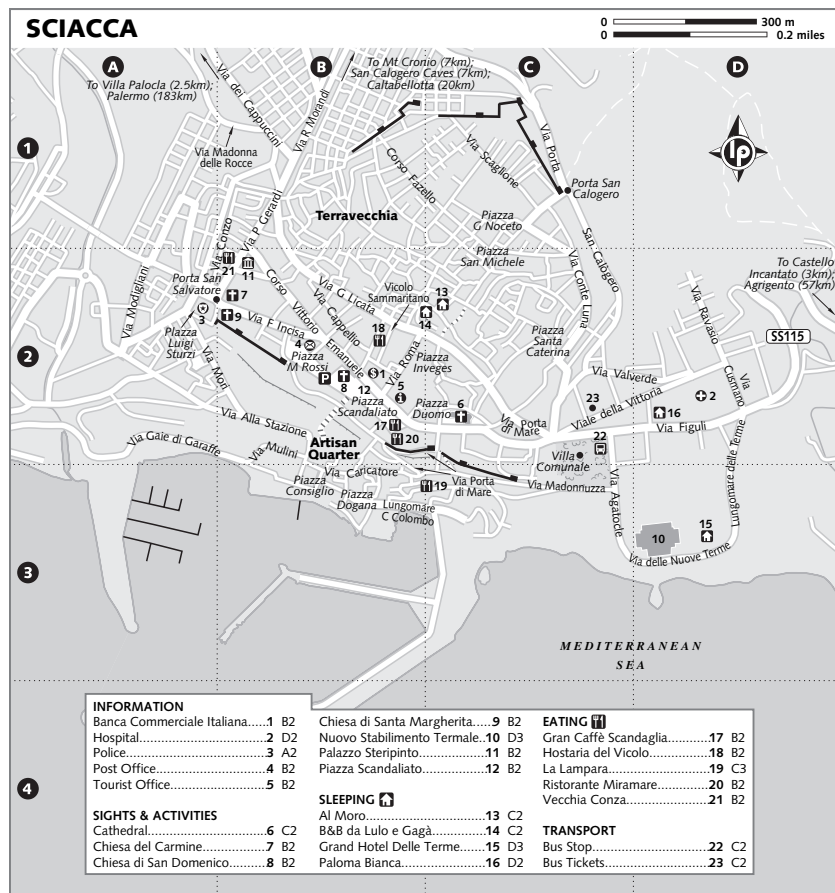
Other attractive churches here include the small, 14th-century **Chiesa di Santa Margherita**, of which the superb Gothic portal is the only surviving original feature, and the **Chiesa del Carmine**, an interesting building with an odd-looking rose window from the 13th century and a fine dome of green majolica tiles that was added in the early 19th century.

Below the town is the **artisan quarter**, rather down-at-heel, though much of the old town is slowly being renovated. Sciacca's ceramists are some of the best on the island and the risers on the steps leading down to the port are adorned with locally produced ceramic tiles. There is nothing specific to see here, but the dock is a lively place cluttered with fishing vessels and little bars. There are also numerous ceramics shops around the Piazza Scandaliato area, should you want to get down to some shopping.

About 3km east of the city (take bus 1 or 4 from the Villa Comunale) is the **Castello Incantato** (Enchanted Castle; ☎ 0925 9 93 04; admission free; ☎ 10am-noon & 4-8pm Tue-Sat), actually a large park with thousands of heads sculpted in wood and stone. The mind behind this bizarre collection was a local farmer and sculptor called Filippo Bentivegna, whose story is beset by woe. While living in America, he was ditched by his fiancée and later beaten up so badly that he was thought dead. He returned to his hometown of Sciacca in 1917 and devoted the rest of his life (he died in 1967) to exorcising the memories of his American experiences through sculpture, each head supposedly representing one of his enemies. He was certainly an eccentric, and liked to be treated as a king, going so far as to demand that people address him as 'Eccellenza' (Your Excellency).

Activities

The main thing to do in Sciacca is take to the waters at the **Nuovo Stabilimento Termale** (☎ 0925 96 11 11; Via delle Nuove Terme; ☎ 9am-1pm Jun-Oct), where you can undergo a vast range of treatments – from hydrotherapy in a 32°C pool to



mud packs and sweating it out in the natural hot caves of San Calogero on Monte Cronio.

Festivals & Events

Held the week before Lent, **Carnevale** is Sciacca's big festival. The highlight is a parade of huge papier-mâché figures mounted on floats, famous throughout Italy for their gaudy expressions. See opposite for more.

Sleeping

Sciacca does not have a great selection of hotels and most of them tend to be fairly dated.

Paloma Bianca (☎ 0925 2 51 30; fax 0925 2 56 67; Via Figuli 5; s/d €38/65; 🚗) A bizarre tower-block hotel on the eastern side of town, with a loud and cheerful landlady and a dilapidated 1970s

interior that gives you the feeling of being an extra on the set of *The Shining*. It's pretty much an emergency sleep-over place that'll do for one night. The rooms are aged and faded, with tiny bathrooms that offer the unique opportunity of sitting on the toilet and showering at the same time (as a space-saving device). The dining area – a large, chandeliered hall – must have been lavish once.

our pick **B&B da Lulo e Gagà** (☎ 0925 8 66 64; Vico Muscamera 9; d €60; 🚗) This is a true find and a delight for any traveller. The wonderful Lulo and Gagà run this place that consists mainly of one apartment inside a little house that's completely decorated with Lulo's original and quirky works of art (think owls made of varicoloured pebbles, mosaic-framed mirrors

SCIACCA CARNIVAL

Sciacca's carnival is famed throughout Sicily for its flamboyance and fabulous party atmosphere. It's a carnival that requires a lot of preparation from the town's inhabitants – the grotesque papier-mâché figures are made by hand for months in advance, using traditional methods from generations ago.

There are several different theories about the carnival's origins and traditions. Some say that the celebration stems from Monte Cronio – named after the Greek god of time – where the ancient Romans used to celebrate the Saturnalia. The Romans are said to have burnt the king of the Saturnalia on the last day of the festival – a tradition that survives today, when the King of the Carnival, represented by the mask of Peppi Nappa, gets torched, after which everyone tucks into spicy local sausages. Others claim that the eating of sausages points to the carnival being an act of defiance against the ecclesiastical rule forbidding the consumption of meat on Shrove Tuesday.

The festival opens with carnival king Peppi Nappa receiving the city's keys. The technicolour floats are then released into the streets – they have new decorations added to them every year, though the main characters always represent current-day political and social personalities, making the carnival a sort of political satire. You'll have to be either pretty clued-up on Sicilian and Italian politics or have a good local interpreter with you to get the benefit of this. The floats go around the winding streets of the old town, while masked men and women run around them and dance to locally composed music. Satirical poetry is read aloud, and the fact that it's all in Sciacca's dialect means that you'll (again) need a strong local connection to understand the humour.

Don't miss out on this spectacle if you're in town during the carnival season – it's a unique opportunity to dance about, drink some wine, eat sausages and witness Sciacca's pride in its local history.

etc). There's a kitchen upstairs, where breakfast is prepared and served on the lovely terrace. Lulo is thinking of letting two of his wonderful self-contained cave apartments from summer 2008. These are 10 minutes' walk away from the B&B, and have more of the colourful Mediterranean-inspired works of art. Book well in advance and enjoy this unique place.

our pick **Al Moro** (☎ 0925 8 67 56; www.almoro.com; Via Liguori 44; s €55-65, d €80-95; 🚗) An excellent new addition to Sciacca's fledgling accommodation scene, Al Moro is stylish and good-looking. It sits inside an old palazzo, and the owners have kept some of the original features, such as wooden-beam ceilings, which give it a lovely feeling. The 10 rooms are in baptism-white, with neat little bathrooms and a complimentary bottle of Sicilian red to greet you. The breakfast is quite sumptuous and there's a wine bar too, where you can taste an array of Sicilian offerings.

Grand Hotel delle Terme (☎ 0925 2 31 33; www.grandhoteldelleterme.com in Italian; Via delle Nuove Terme; s €59-79, d €100-143; 🚗) Set on a cliff just east of the public gardens, the Grand Hotel is a decent choice that offers free admission to the thermal spa next door. The hotel itself is

an uninspiring modern building left behind in the 1970s, but there are plenty of comforts to be had here.

Villa Paloca (☎ 0925 90 28 12; www.villapaloca.it in Italian; Contrada Raganella; s €70-80, d €115-135; 🚗) The nicest hotel in the environs of Sciacca, this 18th-century villa is surrounded by orange groves and retains its baronial feel with a cobbled courtyard and wrought-iron balconies. The interior is pure country house with lots of floral fabrics, ceramic floor tiles and dark wood.

Eating

The best places to eat are in and around the port, where relatively inexpensive trattorie serve up abundant menus of (mostly) seafood dishes.

Gran Caffè Scandaglia (☎ 0925 2 10 82; Piazza Scandaliato 5-6; breakfast €3.50) This is the perfect place for a breakfast in the shade, overlooking the harbour. Soft pastry, caffè latte in tall glasses and fresh orange juice are delicious, as are all the ice creams. You'll have the local seniors for company, who congregate here in the mornings to discuss politics and their physical ailments of the day.

Vecchia Conza (☎ 0925 2 53 85; Via Conzo 37; meals €15-20; ☹ closed Mon) Near the entrance to the old town, this is an attractive trattoria that is popular with lunching locals. It serves up the typical pasta dishes, though you should go for something with seafood and mains of fish – this is a fishing port after all. A relaxed place that's perfect for a satisfying lunch.

La Lampara (☎ 0925 8 50 85; Vicolo Caricatore 33; meals €20; ☹ closed Mon) If you're dying to try some of that fresh fish caught by the locals on a daily basis, go for La Lampara, one of a clutch of superfresh fish restaurants down at the port. It's a good place in a perfect location just opposite the docks and serves lovely pasta as well as seafood.

Ristorante Miramare (☎ 0925 2 60 50; Piazza Scandaliato 6; meals €20, pizza €5.15-6.20) Popular with local elderly folk, this restaurant and pizzeria sits on the corner of Sciacca's lovely belvedere. It's a place with simple traditional dishes, such as pasta with tomatoes and seafood, good fresh fish and decent pizza. The harbour views are lovely and it's best to get here for an early-evening supper to watch the sun go down.

Hostaria del Vicolo (☎ 0925 2 30 71; www.hostaria-delvicolo.com in Italian; Vicolo Sammaritano 10; meals €35; ☹ closed Sun evening & Mon) Tucked away in a tiny alley in Sciacca's old town is this formal restaurant that offers a culinary *tour de force*: heavy tablecloths, noiseless service and an ample wine list. The menu is Sicilian traditional with modern twists, and the fresh pasta is great as *primo* – try the *taglioni* (long, flat pasta) with clams and *gamberoni* (king prawns). For mains, try the *merluzzo ai fichi secchi* (cod with dried figs), exquisitely moist

and sweet. The desserts are less pleasing, such as pricey (€5) watermelon ice cream sprinkled with chocolate chips – a not particularly good combination.

Getting There & Away

Lumia (☎ 0922 2 04 14) buses run between Sciacca and Agrigento (€5.25, two hours, nine Monday to Saturday, two Sunday). There are also daily buses to Trapani (€7.50, two hours, two daily). All buses arrive at the Villa Comunale on Via Figuli and leave from Via Agatocle. You can buy your tickets at the small bar at Viale della Vittoria 22. Sciacca is not served by trains.

AROUND SCIACCA

Nineteen kilometres northeast of Sciacca is the beautiful village of **Caltabellotta** (850m). The highest point in the town is the ruin of the Norman castle where the peace treaty that ended the Sicilian Vespers was signed in 1302. Viewed from this lofty perch the terracotta roofs of the town cling to the cliffside like a perfect mosaic. It is quite spectacular. Below the bulk of the Norman castle is the restored Chiesa Madre with its original Gothic portal and pointed arches, and below that stands the Chiesa di San Salvatore. All around are lofty views over often mist-shrouded valleys, covered by flowers in springtime. On the edge of the village lies the derelict monastery of San Pellegrino, from where you can view the necropolises that stud the mountainside.

Lumia buses serve Caltabellotta from Sciacca (€2.45, 50 minutes, five Monday to Friday) and Agrigento (€5.75, 3½ hours, three Monday to Friday).

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