



3 PERFECT DAYS

♥ DAY 1 // TEMPLES IN AGRIGENTO

Sicily's most popular archaeological site, Agrigento's Valley of the Temples (p254) is well worth an entire day. Start in the eastern zone (p255) where you'll find the two most famous temples, the Tempio di Hera and the outstanding Tempio della Concordia, before crossing to the western side (p256) and a picnic lunch in the Giardino della Kolymbetra (p256). Afterwards, and if you have any strength left, head up to the Museo Archeologico (p257).

♥ DAY 2 // PAMPER YOURSELF IN SCIACCA

From Agrigento it's 60km to Sciacca (p263), a spa town famous for its Rio-like carnival celebrations (p266). Treat yourself to a massage and mudpack at the Nuovo Stabilimento Termale (p265) and a fish feast at the port (p265). After a lazy lunch, head out to the Castello Incantato (p265) to pore over its collection of weird sculpted heads. Spend the rest of the day strolling through the attractive historic centre (p263) and perusing the characteristic ceramic shops (p265).

♥ DAY 3 // SWIMMING, SUNBATHING & THE ODD ANCIENT RUIN

The coastal stretch between Agrigento and Sciacca offers great swimming and pockets of unspoilt nature. Join the local sunseekers at the Scala dei Turchi (p261), a celebrated beauty spot near Realmonte, or push on to the lovely sandy beach at the Riserva Naturale Torre Salsa (p261), where there's also some fine coastal walking. Further west, you can explore the ruins of Eraclea Minoa (p262) before heading down to the beach, one of the best on this stretch of the coast.

AGRIGENTO

pop 59,135

At one time the fourth-largest city in the known world, Agrigento, or Akragas as it was then known, is home to Sicily's most impressive Greek ruins. Situated about 3km below the ugly modern city, the Unesco-listed Valley of the Temples is one of the most mesmerising sites in the Mediterranean, boasting the best-preserved Doric temples outside Greece. On the travel radar since Goethe sang their praises in the 18th century, they are now Sicily's single biggest tourist site, with more than 600,000 visitors a year.

Up the hill, modern Agrigento is not an immediately appealing prospect. Huge motorway elevations converge on a ragged hilltop centre scarred by brutish tower blocks and riddled with choking traffic. However, hidden behind this depressing outer ring is an attractive medieval kernel with some fine accommodation and a lively evening buzz.

Ancient Akragas was founded by settlers from Gela and Rhodes in 581 BC. The presence of a ready water supply ensured its rapid growth and by the 5th century BC it had become one of the Mediterranean's great cities, with a population of 200,000 and a reputation as a party hot spot. The Greek poet Pindar described it as 'the most beautiful (city) of those inhabited by mortals' and wrote that its citizens 'feasted as if there were no tomorrow'.

Its good fortunes began to waver in the 4th and 3rd centuries BC as it passed successively between Greek, Carthaginian and Roman hands. The Romans, who took the city in 210 BC, renamed it Agrigentum and encouraged farming and trade, thus laying the foundations for its future as an important Byzantine commercial centre.

In the 7th century the bulk of the city's inhabitants moved up the hill to the site of the present-day city, virtually abandoning the old town. Experts still don't know exactly why, but the most credible theories suggest it was to escape the threat of the North African Saracens. As a defence policy it worked well for close on 200 years until the city fell to the Saracens at the start of the 9th century.

Agrigento didn't change much until the 19th century, when the western half of the city was built. Allied bombing in WWII forced a second wave of development in the post-war years, culminating in a bout of construction in the '60s and '70s. Many of the tower blocks that overshadow the Valley of the Temples date to this period.

ESSENTIAL INFORMATION

EMERGENCIES // Ospedale Civile San

Giovanni di Dio (Map p254; ☎ 0922 40 13 44; Contrada da Consolida) **Police Station** (Map p254; ☎ 0922 48 31 11; Piazza Vittorio Emanuele 2)

TOURIST INFORMATION // Main Tourist

Office (Map p254; ☎ 800 236837; www.comune.agrigento.it; Piazzale Aldo Moro 1; 🕒 8am-2pm Mon-Fri, 8am-1pm Sat) Inside the Provincia building, offers information on the city and province. **Tourist Information Point** (Map p254; train station; 🕒 8am-8pm Mon-Fri, 8am-2pm Sat)

ORIENTATION

There are two centres of interest in Agrigento: the historic centre and the Valley of the Temples. The historic centre's main street is Via Atenea, which runs westwards from Piazzale Aldo Moro to Piazza Pirandello. The intercity bus station is on Piazza Rosselli, just north of Piazzale Aldo Moro, while the train station is to the south, on Piazza Marconi.

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