



WORDS : FABRIZIO FIORENTIN
IMAGES : CUBOIMAGE!

These can be seen to good effect in the Val di Noto, an extensive area in the south-east of the island which contains eight important towns in the provinces of Catania and Syracuse: Caltagirone, Catania, Militello in Val di Catania, Modica, Palazzolo Acreide, Ragusa Ibla, Scicli and our centre of interest, Noto.

A BLESSING IN DISGUISE

Noto is one of Sicily's most beautiful cities, 32 kilometres from Syracuse and was reborn – yes, it is fair to say reborn – after the earthquake of 1693 which razed Noto to its foundations. It is also fair to say that this great tragedy resulted in the present jewel of a city, perched on a rocky plateau dominating the valley of the Asinaro. The new Noto developed a wholly European style of architecture, characterised by its curved lines and buildings which are quite showy but at the same time finely decorated. It is a sunny and florid style, making good use of the pink and golden stone used in the reconstruction. This style, breaking with the past, has become known as Sicilian Baroque, elegantly ostentatious but pleasing and unique of its type. Noto is without doubt the capital of Sicilian Baroque, seen in its churches, theatres, historic *palazzi* and many ordinary homes.

Many Sicilian artists, many of whom had studied in Rome, contributed to the reconstruction of the city, including Paolo Labili. But at that time the most eclectic and creative architects of Sicilian Baroque were undoubtedly Rosario Gagliardi and Vincenzo Sinatra, who designed Noto's finest buildings.

WHEN I HEARD that the city of Noto was nicknamed 'the stone garden' by Cesare Brandi, one of Italy's greatest art experts and historians, I asked myself how the words 'stone' and 'garden' could be uttered in the same breath. To find out, I decided to go there in person and have a look.

Let us start by saying that in Sicily the effects of colonisation have always been an integral part of the identity of that marvellous region and far and wide you notice that many places still preserve elegant traces of their Roman, Greek and Arab heritage.

During its history, Sicily was colonised by the Romans, the Greeks and the Byzantines, then conquered by the barbarians. Then it became an Arab emirate, a Norman dukedom, ruled by the Angevins, ceded to Spain, then to the Bourbons from Naples and finally, in 1860, became part of the Kingdom of Italy. As a result of this, the Sicilians have absorbed many cultures, which can be clearly seen in the great variety of architectural styles.

We take a walk through one of Sicily's most beautiful Baroque cities





Opposite, top:
Fine Baroque detail

Opposite, lower:
Noto cityscape with the piazza
Municipio and Cathedral of
St Nicholas to the left – both flanked
by the Bishop's Palace and the
palazzo Landolina di Sant'Alfano

This image:
The Basilica of St Donato
with the Hercules Fountain
in the foreground

TRIUMPHAL ENTRY

We enter the city through the Porta Reale and reach the centre. The gate, built in the 19th century, forms an imposing entrance in the form of a triumphal arch. It is surmounted by a pelican, the symbol of the city's rejection of King Ferdinand.

The new layout of the city is focused on a single main street, corso Vittorio Emanuele III, which divides Noto in two. It is lined with flights of steps, alleys and squares, each with at least one Baroque church. The first square we encounter is Piazza Immacolata with its Church of St. Francis by Vincenzo Sinatra (*above*). The church contains very ancient relics from the former Franciscan church, such as the wooden *Virgin and Child* (1564) and the stone tomb of a Franciscan friar, Giuseppe Bonasia (1575). Close by stands the Monastery of the Holy Saviour with its elegant tower.

A little further on is piazza Municipio with its Cathedral of St. Nicholas. Unfortunately, in 1996 the dome of the building partially collapsed and reconstruction work has taken years. The cathedral is flanked by the Bishop's Palace and the palazzo Landolina di Sant'Alfano which, unlike the sumptuous and solemn Baroque of the cathedral, is built in an altogether more sober and less exuberant style.

Also in piazza Municipio is the magnificent Palazzo Ducezio (Sinatra - 1748 - *below*), now the Town Hall. It is notable for the harmony of its two colonnades and 18th-century portico. The interior is rich with gold and stucco, while the ceiling celebrates Ducezio, the King of the Siculi who founded Neas, the ancient Noto. The square also contains one of the city's most prestigious religious buildings, the Church of the Holy Saviour. Built in the 18th century, it stands out for its elaborate Baroque workmanship which culminates in the Belvedere Tower.



Continuing along the main street, we arrive at via Nicolaci, one of Noto's most famous streets. Facing it is another fine example of architectural beauty, the Church of St. Carlo Borromeo (1730).

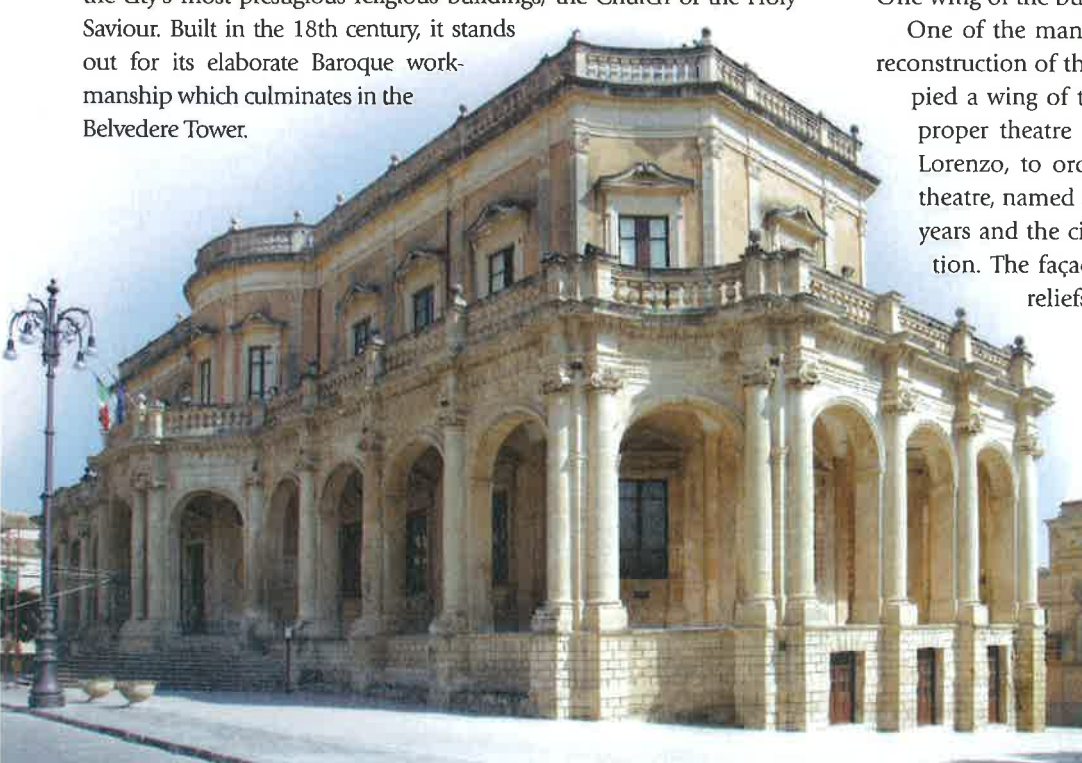
A NOBLE RESIDENCE

Via Nicolaci contains one of the most important, if not the most important, of Noto's noble *palazzi*: Palazzo Nicolaci del Principe Villadorata (*opposite, right*). The building was commissioned by the noble Don Giacomo Nicolaci entrusted its construction to Sir Giovanni Stanetti. Its main interest lies in the wealth of pure Baroque sculptures which grace the six main balconies, often cited as the most beautiful balconies in the world. Angels, winged knights, sirens, grotesque centaurs, griffins, sphinxes and other symbols amaze us for the painstaking skill with which they were carved. The *palazzo* contains 90 rooms, the most interesting being the three main salons - yellow, red and green, all beautifully frescoed. Of particular note is the reception hall, its ceiling decorated with mythological scenes and symbolic subjects depicting some of Giacomo Nicolaci's pastimes. One wing of the building now houses the Municipal Library.

One of the many necessary works to be carried out during the reconstruction of the city was for a new theatre, which at first occupied a wing of the Palazzo Ducezio. But in 1851, the lack of a proper theatre persuaded the mayor of the time, Cavaliere Lorenzo, to order the construction of the present municipal theatre, named after Vittorio Emanuele III. The work took 17 years and the citizens of Noto also contributed to its construction. The façade is decorated with symbolic statues and reliefs on a musical theme. The theatre was first inaugurated on 4th December 1870 in an appropriately solemn ceremony.

THE JEWEL
IN NOTO'S CROWN

Next we come to piazza XVI Maggio containing Noto's *pièce de résistance*, the spectacular, possibly unique, Basilica of St. Dominic (Rosario Gagliardi, 1737). The architectural masterpiece has a sober, classical façade and is without doubt the highest expression of Sicilian Baroque. If you are lucky enough to see it in the early evening when the sun has lost some of its power



The 'netini' (citizens of Noto) are deeply attached to their city, to its beauty and traditions and it is no coincidence that in 2002 Noto became a UNESCO World Heritage Site


wonderful plays of light generated by the golden reflections and *chiaroscuro* effects will take your breath away. Inside, the high altar is embellished with red and white marble and an 18th-century ciborium in gilded wood, enclosing a *Virgin and Child*.

Also in piazza XVI Maggio, in a small park facing the church, is the Fountain of Hercules, an imposing 18th-century marble structure portraying the mythical hero. I have to say that the Basilica of St. Dominic is one of the most beautiful buildings I have ever seen in my life.

The Baroque mood of Noto has given rise to many popular events, such as the *infiorata*, celebrated on the third Sunday in May each year in via Nicolaci to celebrate the Baroque Spring. Artists lay out a spectacular carpet of flower petals, covering the whole street. Each year there are different themes: religious, mythological, culture and popular tradition, accompanied by musical and folklore events which take place in the city's churches and streets.

Another popular event is the Baroque Parade, a fascinating representation of Noto society in the 18th century. A costume parade through the whole city evokes the atmosphere of the time, with wonderfully-choreographed flagthrowers, drummers, the banners of the nobility and Noto's coat of arms

The 'netini' (citizens of Noto) are deeply attached to their city, to its beauty and traditions and it is no coincidence that in 2002 Noto became a UNESCO World Heritage site, recognising its cultural and artistic heritage.


At the end of my visit, I realised that Cesare Brandi's definition of 'the stone garden' was absolutely correct. Such a blend of elegance, skill and architectural masterpieces is difficult to imagine. But there it is, for you to find in the heart of Sicily. 


details


Information

Municipality: www.comune.noto.sr.it/english/index.asp
 Baroque walks: www.sentieridelbarocco.it/ENG/Index.htm
 Val di Noto: www.valdinoto.com/english
 Sicily Tourist Guide: www.italyheaven.co.uk/sicily/noto.html

getting there

 BY AIR: Catania (Fontanarossa) airport is 80 km from Noto. Transfer to and from the airport by regular bus service:
 A.S.T. Tel. (+39) 0931464820 or
 INTERBUS Tel. (+39) 093166710

 BY TRAIN: At Siracusa, change trains for Noto.
 Trenitalia Information - freephone (in Italy) 848888088

 BY CAR: Autostrada A18 Messina-Catania-Siracusa or A19 Palermo-Catania-Siracusa. Leave at the Bivio Cassibile exit and follow S.S. 115 fino to Noto.

where to stay

 Hotel La Corte del Sole: www.lacortedelsole.it
 Hotel Villa Giulia: www.villagiulianoto.it
 Hotel Villa Favorita: www.villafavoritanoto.it

