



marzamemi.com



English guide

ITINERARY · ORTIGIA

Syracuse in a day: from the catacombs to the Archaeological Park of Neapolis

Nine stops in **Syracuse** that is not Ortigia: from the basilica of **Santa Lucia** to the **catacombs**, from the **Greek Theatre** to the **Ear of Dionysius**, in the **Archaeological Park of Neapolis**. For each stop, find out what to see, how long to stay, and a practical tip.

DURATION

One day

6-7 hours with breaks

STOPS

9 stops

about 5.2 km

GETTING AROUND

**On foot, with some walks
between areas.**

Inside the archaeological park, you
will walk a lot.

ONLINE VERSION WITH MAP

www.marzamemi.com/itinerari/siracusa-in-un-giorno



STOP 1 OF 9

Santa Lucia al Sepolcro and Caravaggio

🕒 Recommended time: 40 minutes



The façade of the Basilica of Santa Lucia al Sepolcro in Piazza Santa Lucia in Siracusa

You start from the church most linked to the city's patron: the **basilica of Santa Lucia al Sepolcro**, also known as Santa Lucia Extra Moenia, meaning "outside the walls". It stands where, according to tradition, the saint was martyred in **304**. From the **12th century** construction, the façade, the portal, and the lower part of the bell tower are preserved; the rest belongs to later periods.

Inside, behind the altar, is the **Burial of Santa Lucia** by **Caravaggio**, painted in **1608**. It returned here on **6 December 2020**, after years spent at Santa Lucia alla Badia, in Ortigia.

Next to it is the **Tomb of Santa Lucia**, a semi-buried octagonal temple with the **reclining statue of the saint**, from **1634**. Below the basilica are also the **catacombs of Santa Lucia**.

A TIP

Visiting hours vary, and the **catacombs** have separate hours: **check before you go**. Shoulders and knees covered.

STOP 2 OF 9

The Sanctuary of the Madonna delle Lacrime

🕒 Recommended time: 30 minutes



The Basilica of the Madonna delle Lacrime in Siracusa, shaped like a large cone

Not far away is the **basilica sanctuary of the Madonna delle Lacrime**, a very modern building. It was built **between the Sixties and Nineties of the twentieth century** to commemorate an event that occurred in **1953**: according to the story, a small plaster statue of the Madonna in a house in Syracuse would have cried for several days, and the tears were analysed and found to be compatible with human ones.

The shape resembles a large **tear**: a conical structure of reinforced concrete, with a crypt (the lower temple) and a basilica (the upper temple) that can accommodate **up to 11,000 people**.

The **crypt** houses the statuette and is located above the remains of a pagan hypogeum.

A TIP

View the sanctuary **from afar and up close**: the shape changes a lot. The **crypt** is not always open: check.

STOP 3 OF 9

San Giovanni alle Catacombe and the crypt of San Marciano

🕒 Recommended time: 60 minutes



The roofless interior of the Church of San Giovanni alle Catacombe in Siracusa

Here you enter the underground Syracuse. The **church of San Giovanni**, also known as **San Giovanni alle Catacombe**, has paleochristian origins and its current appearance dates from the **13th-14th centuries**. Today it is **roofless** and hosts outdoor functions: the counter-façade with the large rose window and the columns that divided the naves remain.

Below the church is the **crypt of San Marciano**, carved from a quarry and **considered one of the oldest Christian churches in the West**: it houses the tomb of the saint, who according to tradition was the first bishop of Syracuse.

The **catacombs** of San Giovanni, built in the **4th century**, are among the most extensive after those in Rome. The main corridor, the decumano massimo, is nearly one hundred metres long and from there five areas open up; there are about **ten thousand** burials. Don't miss the **refrigerium**, an ark carved into the rock with three holes in the cover: they were used to pour wine, milk, and honey for the deceased.

A TIP

Visits are **only with a guide**, at fixed times, and the church closes at certain times of the year: **check beforehand**. It stays cool even in summer.

STOP 4 OF 9

Latomia del Paradiso and the Ear of Dionysius

🕒 Recommended time: 45 minutes



The entrance to the Ear of Dionysius in the Latomia del Paradiso in Siracusa

You enter the **Archaeological Park of Neapolis**, the heart of ancient Syracuse: the “new city” that grew mainly between the **5th and 3rd centuries BC**, when Syracuse was one of the most powerful cities in the Mediterranean.

The **Latomia del Paradiso** is a large stone quarry, up to **45 metres** deep, used in Greek times also as a prison. Today it is a garden with lemons, oranges, olives, palms, and pomegranates. Inside it is the **Ear of Dionysius**, an artificial cave **23 metres** high and about **65** deep, shaped like an S and with exceptional acoustics.

It is said that the name was given by the painter **Caravaggio** in **1608**; the legend of the tyrant Dionysius listening to prisoners from outside has never been proven.

A TIP

Enter the cave and go all the way to the end: in the dark, the sound feels different. Check hours and access: certain parts of the caves may be closed.

STOP 5 OF 9

The Greek Theatre

🕒 Recommended time: 30 minutes



The cavea of the Greek Theatre of Siracusa carved into the rock

The **Greek Theatre** is one of the largest in the Greek world. The current theatre is the result of an expansion in the **3rd century BC**, commissioned by **Hieronimus II**, of an older theatre from the **5th century BC**. The **cavea**, carved into the rock, has a diameter of about **138 metres** and originally had **67 rows of seats**.

Little remains of the upper part and the scenic building: the stones were reused in the fortifications of **Charles V** in Ortigia, in the sixteenth century.

Every year, **between May and June**, the theatre returns to its ancient function, with the **classical performances of the INDA**, which have been held here since **1914**.

A TIP

In the months of performances, the theatre may be **largely covered by the set-ups**: if you want to see the seats, **check beforehand** or choose another time.

STOP 6 OF 9

The Via dei Sepolcri and the Grotta del Ninfeo

🕒 Recommended time: 20 minutes



The Way of the Sepulchres with the ruts of the carts, in the Archaeological Park of Neapolis

Above the theatre lies **Via dei Sepolcri**, a road carved into the rock, approximately **150 metres** long and lined with Byzantine tombs. The ground is marked by the **ruts of carts** that passed through here to reach the water mills of the Spanish era.

Along the way, you will encounter the **Grotta del Ninfeo**, at the highest part of the park: a fountain inspired by the Greek cult of nymphs, carved into an artificial cave. It was once adorned with statues dedicated to the muses of the **2nd century BC** and was the meeting point for actors before descending to perform in the theatre.

A TIP

This is one of the **quietest** parts of the park: stop to look at the ruts of the carts in the pavement.

STOP 7 OF 9

The Altar of Hiero II

🕒 Recommended time: 20 minutes



The long base of the Altar of Hiero II carved into the rock in Siracusa

The **Altar of Hiero II**, built in the **3rd century BC**, is the **largest known altar of the Greek world**. Only the base remains, carved into the rock, measuring **198 metres** long and about **23** wide: it was used for sacrifices in honour of Zeus Eleutherios, and during festivals, it is said that up to **450 bulls** were sacrificed at once.

Imagine a large platform with two decorated access ramps: today, you can see the rock emerging from the vegetation, but the dimensions are well understood by walking along the edge.

A TIP

Walk along the entire base: it's the only way to realise how long it is.

STOP 8 OF 9

The Roman Amphitheatre

🕒 Recommended time: 30 minutes



The terraces and the elliptical arena of the Roman Amphitheatre of Siracusa

Just beyond the Altar is the **Roman Amphitheatre**, from the Roman era and one of the largest in Sicily. It was built using a **rock outcrop**, where the ambulatory and the tiers were excavated. Unlike the Greek theatre, here you can **walk all around**.

The arena is **elliptical** and was accessed from eight openings. In the centre, there is a **control room**, once covered, probably used for water games and to operate stage machinery. The tiers still show the reserved seats for the Syracusan nobles.

A TIP

Climb to the highest tiers: **the view of the arena** is the best, especially in the evening.

STOP 9 OF 9

The Latomia of Santa Venera, the Necropolis Grotticelle and the «Tomb of Archimedes»

🕒 Recommended time: 30 minutes



The triangular façade of the so-called Tomb of Archimedes in the Grotticelle Necropolis in Siracusa

At the upper part of the park is the **Latomia di Santa Venera**, a subtropical garden from the 18th century, mostly visitable from outside for much of the year. Among the trees stands a huge **Ficus macrophylla** (the «pagoda fig»), a specimen several centuries old.

A little further on, the **Necropoli Grotticelle** is a true city of the dead, with burials dating back to the **Bronze Age**. It reached its maximum expansion in the **3rd century BC** and the Romans used it as a **columbarium**, with two tiers of niches for urns.

In the easternmost part, you can see the so-called **Tomb of Archimedes**: a large chamber carved into the rock, with a pediment and relief Doric half-columns. **It is not the mathematician's true tomb**, but a tribute to him.

A TIP

Arrive **while there is still light**: the higher areas of the park are less frequented and the late afternoon light is very beautiful.

Frequently asked questions

How much time is needed to see Syracuse?

For the **Archaeological Park of Neapolis**, you need **two or three hours**. With the churches and catacombs, you need **a whole day**. Ortigia has its own itinerary.

Where is Caravaggio's work in Syracuse?

The **Burial of Saint Lucia** is in the basilica of **Santa Lucia al Sepolcro**, in Piazza Santa Lucia, since 6 December 2020. It was previously at Santa Lucia alla Badia, in Ortigia.

Can I visit the Greek Theatre in May and June?

During those months, the theatre hosts the **classical performances of INDIA** and may be **largely covered** by the setups. Check in advance if the visit is possible.

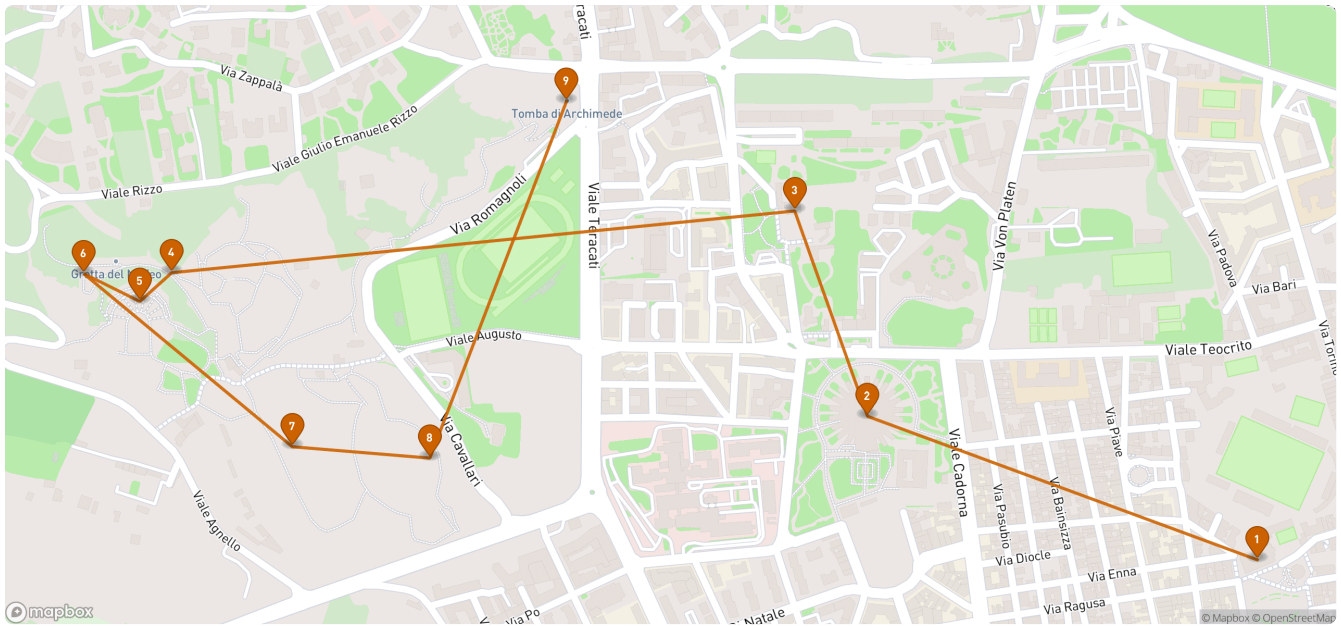
Why is it called the «Ear of Dionysius»?

Because of the **S-shaped** entrance, which resembles an ear. According to tradition, it was **Caravaggio**, in 1608, who gave it this name; the legend of the tyrant listening to prisoners is not proven.

What else can I see with more time available?

You can add the **Paolo Orsi Archaeological Museum**, the **Eurialo Castle**, the **Latomia dei Cappuccini**, the **Syracusan Forum**, and the **Roman Gymnasium**.

Route map



The numbers follow the order of the stops. The map shows no commercial businesses.

Practical information

DURATION

One day (6-7 hours with breaks)

BEST TIME

Spring and autumn. In summer, it's best to visit the park early in the morning or late in the afternoon. In May and June, the Greek Theatre hosts classical performances.

GETTING AROUND

On foot, with some walks between areas. Inside the archaeological park, you will walk a lot.

TOTAL WALKING

about 5.2 km

More itineraries in South-East Sicily

Discover all the itineraries and audio guides on marzamemi.com

