



## Chapter Five

# *Blooming Streets: The Art of the Infiorata of Noto*

### **T**he Infiorata of Noto

Where: Noto, in Val di Noto, on the Via Corrado Nicolaci

When: Celebrated the 3rd weekend in May. Open to the public on Sunday and Monday.

Festival Website: <https://www.infioratadinoto.it/>

Average Festival Temperatures: High: 24°C (75°F). Low: 18°C (64°F).

### **Discovering Noto: The Baroque Jewel of Sicily**

Perched on a plateau overlooking the Asinaro valley in southeastern Sicily, Noto is a masterpiece of Baroque architecture and a testament to human resilience. This “stone garden,” as it’s often called, is home to approximately 24,000 residents and stands as one of the finest examples of Sicilian Baroque urbanism, earning it UNESCO World Heritage status.

Noto lies 32 kilometers southwest of Syracuse and 50 kilometers north of

Italy's southern tip. Spanning 551 square kilometers, it's among Italy's largest municipalities. Despite its size, Noto's population density is low. Most residents live in the historic center and nearby areas.

Noto's modern story starts with a disaster. On January 11, 1693, an earthquake devastated eastern Sicily, destroying Noto Antica. However, this tragedy paved the way for a new beginning. The city was rebuilt about 10 kilometers away, beside the River Asinaro. The Duke of Camastra, the Spanish Viceroy's top aide, led the effort.

The reconstruction of Noto became a grand urban project, attracting the finest architects, artists, and artisans of the time. They envisioned and created a city that would be a harmonious blend of urban planning and architectural beauty, adhering to the late Baroque style that was then in vogue.

## **The Infiorata Festival**

The Infiorata is a festival of art demonstrated by a carpeted street artwork "painted" with flower petals. Each year, the event organizers hold the Infiorata along the Via Corrado Nicolaci, which is a narrow street on an uphill slant from the city center. They are on display only briefly because the flower petal scenes are vulnerable to wind and rain.

Art, religion, mythology, or Italian culture inspire the theme of the festival, which changes annually. Themes in the past have included Dante's Inferno, Italian Cinema, The Prince of Noto, and the last trip we made was a Tribute to Sicily that included a section of White Lotus and Montelbano images from the popular TV show and book series.

The idea of the Infiorata was first organized in 1625 in Rome by Benedetto Drei, the Vatican's head florist, and his son, Peter. They began using flower petals to create mosaics on the floors of churches during religious festivals, particularly on the feast of Corpus Domini. This idea later spread to other parts of Italy.

In Noto, the art festival was introduced in the early 1980s as a way to combine the town's Baroque artistic traditions with religious celebrations. Noto, renowned for its Baroque architecture, saw the Infiorata as a natural way to showcase its rich

artistic and cultural heritage.

The locals pick and store the flower petals for months, organizing them by color in hundreds of barrels used in the designs and creations. They also collect other types of plants, like rosemary branches, basil leaves, as well as seeds, piles of sand, and grass.



*The Infiorata*

In the days leading up to the Infiorata, locals dedicate two full days to sketching intricate designs and filling them with flower petals. This cherished tradition has made Noto famous worldwide. The result is a stunning work of art covering 7,500 square feet of pavement, crafted from 400,000 flower petals gathered from the local countryside.

You will need a ticket to enter the Infiorata on Via Corrado Nicolaci. I recommend purchasing your tickets in advance because the entries are timed, and when I purchased ours, the only available entry times were early in the morning.

The art exhibit begins at the bottom of the hill. The exit is at the top of the street.

Also, at the top of the street, is the Chiesa di Montevergine. We entered the church, paid a small fee, and climbed the circular staircase to the top of the church

tower. This spot offers a stunning view of the Infiorata along the alley and the historic center. We found the aerial view of the images to be just as vivid and interesting as walking next to the artworks in the alleyway.

But wait, this festival has more to offer! Everyone in the community is involved. There is a Baroque Parade with locals in period dress, local bands, and the tamburi (drummer groups) my favorite fill the street with the heartbeat of Sicily! Other events on Sunday include a market, flag throwing throughout the streets, bands, and other celebrations. I recommend 3 days in Noto for the event, with some time to visit nearby sites.

## **Arriving in Noto**

The first piazza you will find when you enter from the Porta Reale gate (built in 1838 for the occasion of the arrival of King Ferdinand II of Bourbon) is the Piazza dell'Immacolata, and the Church of Saint Francis built between 1704 and 1745. When you continue straight, you will find the Piazza del Duomo. This is the central, most important square of the city, with the Cathedral, constructed between 1700 and 1776, and the Palazzo Ducezio, city hall. Palazzo Landolina serves as both the bishop's palace and the Cathedral Museum.

During the festival, reenactments take place here. This is also where the bands and drum groups will begin their parade. There will most likely be a bandstand setup and bleachers for seating. The locals will mill around in period dress, waiting for their time to shine in the reenactment. From here, if you glance at Noto Cathedral, you'll spot a terrace beside the facade. A delightful spot for watching people and events as they unfold at Palazzo Ducezio, where parades gather and begin.

## **Walking Tour of Noto – Day 1**

### **#1. Basilica Cattedrale di San Nicolo**

The Basilica Cattedrale di San Nicolo (Cathedral Basilica of St. Nicholas) is one of the most striking landmarks in Noto, a beautiful baroque town in southeastern Sicily. Built in the early 18th century, the cathedral is a prime example of Sicilian Baroque architecture.

The cathedral is prominently at the top of a wide, grand staircase on Corso Vittorio Emanuele, Noto's main street. This elevated position adds to its imposing presence and creates a dramatic visual effect as you approach.

### **Exterior Features:**

- **Façade:** The façade is made of local yellow limestone, which gives the building a warm, golden hue, especially during sunset or when illuminated at night. This color is characteristic of many buildings in Noto, earning it the nickname “the golden city.”
- **Towers:** The cathedral features two symmetrical, short towers flanking the central façade. The left tower houses the church bells, while the right tower contains the town clock. This balanced design is typical of Sicilian Baroque architecture.
- **Staircase:** The wide, sweeping staircase leading up to the cathedral enhances its grandeur and serves as a gathering place for locals and tourists alike.

The current cathedral was built following the devastating 1693 earthquake that destroyed much of southeastern Sicily. It was part of the massive rebuilding effort that gave birth to the distinctive Sicilian Baroque style seen throughout the Val di Noto region.

The cathedral exemplifies the Sicilian Baroque style, characterized by ornate decorations, curved façades, and dramatic use of light and shadow. This style often incorporated sculpted figures, intricate stonework, and imposing staircases, all of which are present in the Basilica Cattedrale di San Nicolo.

As the mother church of the Diocese of Noto, the cathedral plays a central role in the religious and cultural life of the city. It hosts important ceremonies and festivals throughout the year, including the feast day of Saint Corrado in February.

The cathedral has undergone several restorations over the centuries. A significant renovation took place after the dome collapsed in 1996, leading to a careful reconstruction that was completed in 2007.

## Interior Highlights:

- **Nave and Aisles:** The interior follows a Latin cross plan with a central nave and two side aisles separated by columns.
- **Dome:** An enormous dome sits over the crossing, allowing natural light to flood the interior.
- **Artwork:** The cathedral contains many paintings, frescoes, and sculptures, including works by notable Sicilian artists.
- **Reliquary:** One of the most significant features is the silver urn containing the relics of Saint Corrado Confalonieri (1290-1351), the patron saint of Noto. This reliquary is an important focus of devotion for local worshippers.

The Basilica Cattedrale di San Nicolo is not just a religious building, but also a testament to Noto's rich history, artistic heritage, and the resilience of its people in the face of natural disasters. Its stunning architecture and prominent position make it a must-see attraction for visitors to this beautiful Sicilian town.

## #2. Seminario Vescovile

The Seminario Vescovile, or Bishop's Seminary, is a significant religious building in the same piazza as the Noto Cathedral. This arrangement is common in many Italian cities, where important religious structures are often clustered together in the town center. As a seminary, it serves as an educational institution for training priests and other religious leaders in the Catholic Church.

The Seminario Vescovile's location in the main square of Noto places it at the heart of the town's historic center, alongside the famous cathedral. This positioning reflects its importance in the religious and cultural life of Noto. Given that Noto is renowned for its Baroque architecture, having been rebuilt in this style after a devastating earthquake in 1693, it's likely that the Seminario Vescovile also showcases Baroque architectural elements, fitting in with the overall aesthetic of the town.

The presence of the seminary in such a prominent location underscores its historical significance. As part of the religious complex in the town center, it

has likely played a crucial role in shaping the spiritual and educational landscape of Noto for generations. Its proximity to the cathedral also suggests a close relationship between these two important religious institutions.

### **#3. Chiesa di Santa Chiara**

The Chiesa di Santa Chiara, or Church of Saint Clare, is a stunning example of Sicilian Baroque architecture in Noto. Situated just down from the cathedral on the left along Corso Vittorio Emanuele. Construction of the church began in 1730 and was completed around 1758, rising from the ruins of the devastating 1693 earthquake that reshaped much of southeastern Sicily.

The church's exterior is a testament to the grandeur of Baroque design, featuring an ornate façade adorned with Corinthian columns and intricate stonework. Upon entering, visitors are greeted by an equally impressive interior, lavishly decorated with stucco, frescoes, and marble. The church houses many artworks from the 18th and 19th centuries, including a notable altarpiece by Vito D'Anna depicting the "Glory of Saint Clare."

Vito D'Anna was born in Palermo in 1718 and died there in 1769. He was one of the most important painters of the Sicilian Baroque period. While Palermo, in the northwestern part of Sicily, was his primary base of operations, D'Anna's work can be found in various churches and palaces across the island.

During his career, D'Anna received commissions for works in several Sicilian cities, including Noto, which was being rebuilt in the Baroque style following the 1693 earthquake. His presence in Noto and other parts of southeastern Sicily demonstrates the interconnectedness of the Sicilian artistic community during this period of extensive reconstruction and artistic flourishing.

### **#4. Chiesa di San Francesco d'Assisi all'Immacolata**

This magnificent church, constructed between 1704 and 1745, is a prime example of Sicilian Baroque architecture. It stands as one of the most significant religious buildings in Noto, a city renowned for its Baroque urban planning and architecture. The church's facade features elegant curves and intricate decorations typical of the period.

The interior is equally impressive, richly adorned with artworks, including

paintings, frescoes, and sculptures. Of particular note are the funerary monuments of Noto's noble families, which offer insight into the city's social history and artistic patronage.

Visitors can admire the harmonious blend of architecture and decorative arts, from the ornate altars to the detailed stucco work. The church also houses a valuable library containing historical texts and documents.

### **#5. Church of San Domenico**

The Church of San Domenico stands as one of the most complete expressions of Noto Baroque style. Designed by prominent Sicilian Baroque architect Rosario Gagliardi, this masterpiece exemplifies the ornate decorations, theatrical facades, and elaborate balconies characteristic of the period. Construction began in 1727 and was completed in 1743. The church features a distinctive concave facade and an elliptical interior, showcasing the dramatic and dynamic qualities of Baroque architecture.

### **#6. Church of Santissima Annunziata**

The Church of Santissima Annunziata is another notable Baroque structure in Noto. This church, dedicated to the Annunciation of the Blessed Virgin Mary, also plays a significant role in Noto's rich architectural landscape. While perhaps not as widely recognized as San Domenico, Santissima Annunziata remains an important piece of Noto's architectural heritage, further demonstrating the city's commitment to Baroque style in its post-earthquake rebirth.

### **#7. Palazzo Ducezio.**

The final must-see building in the center is Palazzo Ducezio. Architects designed this municipal building in 1746, completed it in 1830, and added the second floor in the first half of the last century.

The second, and vital task, is to climb an interior set of stairs and to step onto the second-floor balcony. The balcony faces the Cathedral of Noto. It is a great opportunity to admire the town from this angle. It is a glorious spot for a photo op. We found it tranquil to be on the terrace, looking down at the groups preparing for the festival parade in the piazza.

## Walking Tour of Noto – Day 2

### #1. Palazzo Nicolaci di Villadorata

Located at Via Corrado Nicolaci, where the Infiorata takes place annually. On the facade, you'll see six balconies supported by intricately carved corbels featuring lions, children, and mythological creatures. Inside, explore ninety rooms, including the lavish "Salone delle feste" with painted ceilings and Sicilian tile floors. It's a must-visit for a glimpse into aristocratic life.

### #2. Palazzo Castellucci

An exquisite example of an 18th-century noble palace, it dazzles with its warm golden stone exterior, painted ceilings, and period furnishings. The interiors are adorned with Sicilian tile floors and beautifully crafted décor. A reservation is recommended for both guided and non-guided tours to fully appreciate its splendor.

### #3. Church of Santa Maria dell'Arco

Tucked behind Palazzo Ducezio on Via Viceré Speciale, this church was built between 1730 and 1749. Inside, you'll find the relics of the blessed Nicolò Morengia. Its location offers a serene stop to explore its Baroque architecture and religious history.

### #4. Teatro Communale Tina Di Lorenzo

Known as a miniature version of Milan's Scala theater, it features a stunning neoclassical façade built in the 19th century. Enter with a combo ticket or purchase separately and enjoy the elegant design that continues to host performances.

### #5. Belvedere Guastella

A scenic lookout point just a five-minute walk uphill from the Noto Cathedral. It offers breathtaking panoramic views of the town and the surrounding countryside. It's a perfect spot to pause and take in the area's beauty.

### #6. Church of Santa Maria del Carmelo

With its beautiful concave façade, the church creates a dramatic backdrop to Via Ducezio. Inside, you'll find a precious statue of the Madonna del Carmelo attributed to the sculptor Antonio da Monachello, making it worth a visit for art lovers.

### **#7. Painted Staircase at Via Dante Alighieri**

A modern art piece that adds a surprising pop of color and creativity to the historic center. Near the Infiorata, it's a fun and unexpected stop during your walk through Noto's vibrant streets.

### **#8. Noto Antica**

Noto Antica is the ruin of the old town located 9 kilometers (5 miles) north of the current town center, on a heart-shaped rocky mountain, Mount Alveria. The terrible earthquake of 1693 razed ancient Noto to the ground, but it is still possible to visit. If time permits, consider a trip to explore this historical ruin.

## **Noto Festivals and Sagre Throughout the Year**

### **Festa di San Corrado Confalonieri (Feast of Saint Conrad of Piacenza)**

February 19th

In the Pizzoni Valley near Noto, San Corrado, a 14th-century hermit, passed away in 1351 in the cave he called home for many years. Today, the "Chiesa dell'Eremo fuori le mura" (Church of the Hermitage outside the walls) stands here, incorporating the saint's cave. On February 19th, the anniversary of his death, Noto celebrates its patron saint with great devotion.

The day begins with a solemn Mass at Noto Cathedral, followed by a grand procession through the city streets. The silver urn containing the saint's relics is carried on the shoulders of the faithful, accompanied by traditional music and prayers. Reaching the Church of the Hermitage, the procession allows pilgrims to visit San Corrado's cave.

The celebration also features food stalls offering local specialties, craft markets, and often concerts or theatrical performances depicting the life of San Corrado. This feast day not only honors the patron saint but also serves as a reminder of

Noto's deep religious roots and the enduring connection between the city and its surrounding landscape.

### **Fiera del Crocifisso (Pentecost Fair)**

50 days after Easter (date varies annually).

The historic Pentecost Fair, first held in Noto in 1427, takes place in the upper part of the city. This longstanding tradition celebrates local products, antiques, and crafts, offering a vibrant showcase of Noto's cultural and economic heritage. The fair features:

- Stalls selling traditional Sicilian food products, including local cheeses, olive oil, wine, and sweets
- Artisans showing and selling their crafts, from ceramics to lace-making
- Antique dealers offering a range of collectibles and historical items
- Cultural events such as folk music performances and traditional dance exhibitions
- Agricultural displays showcasing the region's farming traditions

The Pentecost Fair not only provides a bustling marketplace but also serves as a living museum of Noto's traditions, allowing visitors to experience the city's rich cultural tapestry.

### **Festa della Madonna del Carmine (Feast of Our Lady of Mount Carmel)**

July 16th

Every year, Noto celebrates the Feast of Our Lady of Mount Carmel with a solemn procession. The venerated image of the Blessed Virgin of Mount Carmel is carried from her church through the city streets, accompanied by the faithful, clergy, and often a marching band.

The streets along the procession route are decorated with lights and flowers, and many residents place candles in their windows as a sign of devotion. This feast day is not only a religious observance but also a community event that brings together

residents and visitors in a shared expression of faith and tradition.

### **Festa dell'Immacolata (Feast of the Immaculate Conception)**

December 8th

Noto celebrates the Feast of the Immaculate Conception with a procession carrying the image of the Immaculate Virgin throughout the town. The route alternates each year between the lower and upper parts of the city, ensuring that all neighborhoods take part in this important celebration.

This feast day, which marks the beginning of the Christmas season in many parts of Italy, takes on a special significance in Noto. The city's Baroque architecture provides a stunning backdrop for the religious procession, creating a harmonious blend of spiritual devotion and artistic beauty.

Each of these festivals showcases a different aspect of Noto's rich cultural and religious heritage, offering visitors a chance to experience the city's traditions throughout the year.

### **Day Trip Options: Nearby Sites, Cities, and Towns**

**Modica:** 35 kilometers (21 miles) southwest. Famous for its Baroque architecture and handcrafted chocolate, Modica is a UNESCO World Heritage site as part of the Val di Noto. The town is split into Modica Alta (Upper Modica) and Modica Bassa (Lower Modica), both of which offer stunning views, winding streets, and beautifully preserved historical structures. Highlights include:

- **Cathedral of San Giorgio:** A masterpiece of Sicilian Baroque architecture, this grand cathedral dominates the skyline of Modica with its imposing façade and dramatic staircase.
- **Cathedral of San Pietro:** Located in Modica Bassa, this beautiful church is equally notable for its Baroque style and statues of the apostles.
- **Antica Dolceria Bonajuto:** One of the oldest chocolate makers in Sicily, offering visitors the chance to try the town's famous Modican chocolate, made using ancient Aztec techniques.

- Historical city center: Wander through the town's winding streets, lined with local shops, artisan boutiques, and charming cafes.

**Vendicari Nature Reserve.** 15 kilometers (9 miles) southeast. A stunning nature reserve known for its pristine sandy beaches, wetlands, and rich wildlife, especially migratory birds. Vendicari is a peaceful haven for nature lovers and an ideal spot for outdoor activities. Highlights include:

**Tonnara of Vendicari:** The ruins of an ancient tuna fishery that sit on the edge of the beach, providing a glimpse into Sicily's fishing past.

- Birdwatching: Home to a wide variety of birds, including flamingos, storks, and herons, thanks to its wetlands, making it a popular spot for birdwatchers.
- Hiking trails: The reserve offers several walking paths that take you through unique ecosystems, from coastal dunes to forests, making it perfect for hikers of all levels.
- Beaches: The reserve is also known for its beautiful beaches, including Calamosche, one of the most pristine and tranquil beaches in Sicily.

**Ispica.** 20 kilometers (12 miles) south of Noto. A town offering a blend of Baroque and ancient heritage, Ispica is known for its Romanesque churches and proximity to the archaeological site of Cava d'Ispica. Highlights include:

- Cava d'Ispica: A scenic gorge 22 kilometers (17.5 miles) from Noto with ancient cave dwellings and rock-cut tombs, dating back thousands of years. The site includes remnants from both the prehistoric and Byzantine eras, offering a rich blend of history and nature.
- Basilica di Santa Maria Maggiore: An impressive Baroque church known for its grand colonnade and beautiful frescoes.
- Parco Forza: A well-preserved archaeological park within the Cava d'Ispica, showcasing ruins of ancient fortifications, a necropolis, and stunning rock formations.

## Logistics

**Train:** Located just outside the town center, Noto's train station offers regional train services operated by Trenitalia. Trains connect Noto with other major cities in Sicily, including Siracusa, Ragusa, and Modica.

**Bus:** AST (Azienda Siciliana Trasporti) operates local bus services connecting Noto with nearby towns and cities, including Siracusa and Ragusa.

**Intercity Buses:** Several bus companies provide services to larger cities and towns across Sicily. The bus station in Noto is centrally located, making it convenient for travelers.

**Car:** To arrive in Noto by car, you would typically take the A18 motorway if you're coming from the nearest major city, which is Syracuse (about 32 kilometers away or 20 miles).

**Parking:** Noto has various parking options, but it's best to park near the historic center in designated lots, such as Parcheggio Via Napoli or Parcheggio Porta Reale. These parking areas allow easy access to the main sights and are just a short walk from the center of town. Note that some streets in the historic center may be limited to pedestrian access, so parking nearby is ideal.

## Dining Recommendations

**Caffè Sicilia.** Address: Corso Vittorio Emanuele, 125

A world-famous pastry shop, known for its incredible granita, cannoli, and other desserts. A must-visit for those with a sweet tooth and perfect for a light bite while strolling through the historic center.

Caffè Sicilia has the best gelato, almond granita, and brioche in the world. Caffè Sicilia in Noto was prominently featured on the Netflix show Chef's Table in 2018. The episode highlighted the work of Corrado Assenza, the renowned pastry chef behind the café. His artistry with traditional Sicilian pastries and gelato, especially the famous granita, earned Caffè Sicilia global attention through the series and this is how we heard about it.

Granita is a type of frozen, slushy drink, a specialty in Sicily, made from fresh, local ingredients and a bit of sugar. Granitas come in many fruity flavors like strawberry, lemon, peach (when in season), coffee, almond, and so on. You eat a fresh, soft, sweet brioche along with the granita, dipping it in. Sicilians enjoy it for breakfast, but it's delicious anytime. Worth stopping by at any hour. Actually, we might have visited Cafe Sicilia twice in a single day while in Noto for the festival. No judgment!

**Cafe Costanzo.** Address: Via Silvio Spaventa, 7/9.

A charming local café in the heart of Noto. Known for: Traditional Sicilian coffee, pastries, and a welcoming atmosphere.

Looking for a cannolo? Head to Café Costanzo, located one block behind Caffé Sicilia. The cannolo is a Sicilian pastry comprising a tube-shaped shell of fried pastry dough, filled with a creamy fresh ricotta cheese filling. Often, in this area, they use local sheep's milk ricotta to make it. Cafe Costanza is an unassuming café that has the best cannoli in Sicily, according to my husband. Either way, Noto wins the prize for best coffee and fresh Sicilian breakfast.

**Dammuso Noto - Ristorante, Baglieri.** Address: Via Rocco Pirri, 10

Offers an intimate atmosphere and delicious traditional Sicilian dishes like pasta alla Norma and local seafood. This cozy restaurant has a perfect blend of elegance and local flavor.

## Accommodation

If coming for the Infiorata, I recommend three nights in town that will give you time for the sites and the events.

**\*Hotel Q92.**

Address: V3R9+JR Noto

4-star hotel offering modern comforts. It enjoys splendid views of Noto Cathedral, and it is a member of the prestigious international collection Small Luxury Hotels of the World™. Trendy, private, and unique, it is a luxury hotel

that showcases the best combination of Italian and Sicilian design throughout its 9 lounges, guest rooms, and suites.

### **\*San Carlo Suites**

Address: Corso Vittorio Emanuele, 127

5-star hotel providing luxury accommodations.

### **Il San Corrado di Noto**

Address: Contrada Belludia SP51

The 5-star resort features a variety of amenities, including a seasonal outdoor swimming pool, a fitness center, a spa center, and a restaurant offering gourmet cuisine.

The rooms are elegantly designed with modern comforts like air conditioning, flat-screen TVs, and private bathrooms. Some rooms even offer pool views and patios.

### **Gagliardi Boutique Hotel**

Address: Via Silvio Spaventa, 41

Gagliardi Boutique Hotel is a charming and elegant hotel located in the heart of Noto, Sicily. Situated at Via Silvio Spaventa 45, this boutique hotel is housed in a late 19th-century historic building, offering a perfect blend of classic elegance and modern comfort.

The hotel features non-smoking rooms, a garden, free WiFi, and a terrace with views of the historic center. Guests can enjoy refreshments in the secret garden, relax on the terrace, or explore the vibrant streets of Noto.

Each room is equipped with a private bathroom, free toiletries, and a hairdryer. The hotel also offers concierge services, room service, and a paid airport shuttle service.

\* For the Infiorata, these hotels will be closest to Via Nicolaci (street of the Infiorata) and Piazza Duomo (procession departure point).