

Catania is Sicily's second-largest city after Palermo. It has a population of 400,000, and with the suburbs can reach 800,000, and is situated on the slopes of the volcano Etna. Since 2002, it has been a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

The city dates back to 730 BC, when Greek settlers first arrived and founded Katania, marking the start of a long chain of invasions and conquests.

Catania has been a Greek, Roman, Byzantine, Arab, Norman, Bourbon, Swabian, Angevin, Aragonese, Spanish and, of course, Italian city: its history is therefore a fusion of all the civilisations that have left their mark on Sicily.

Catania (ancient Katania) was founded on a hilltop by the Greeks in 729. In 476 BC. The city was conquered by Geron, tyrant of Syracuse, who expelled the inhabitants and replaced them with the people of Syracuse. The Catanese regained possession of the city in 461 BC. However, Catania was reconquered by the Romans in 263 BC. Some of its finest monuments remain from this period, including the amphitheatre, the theatre, the remains of the pit, four Roman baths and the Odeon.

The early Christian era saw the birth of the myth and cult of Saint Agatha, as well as the martyrdom which, according to Christian tradition, was inflicted on her by the Romans.

After the barbarian invasions, Byzantium dominated the city, and today many traces of this period are clearly visible. Subsequently, the Arabs gave a boost to agricultural and commercial activities, transforming the town into a major economic centre on the island, over which the Emir would impose his political power. The Norman conquest marked the beginning of reforms that improved the island's cultural activities, as well as the construction of the cathedral and the distribution of land to religious orders.

Under Swabian rule the city was considered a centre of strategic importance, and Frederick II, who had dreams of moving his empire to the heart of the Mediterranean, had the Orsini Castle built.

During the reign of the Aragonese, King Alfonso founded the first University of Sicily in 1434, a point of reference for the culture of the time. Catania, the island's main city and seat of the King and Parliament, became the capital of the Kingdom of Sicily until the city's economic decline, due to the unproductive management of the Spanish viceroys.

The huge eruption of 1669 covered the lower parts of the city, then the earthquake of 1693 destroyed it. From an architectural point of view, Catania is a Baroque city, remodelled after 1693 by famous architects under the direction of the great Vaccarini, with a fervour for reconstruction that would bring it back to life in a few years' time, but the magnificence of the old Catania would never return.

After the earthquake, a vast reconstruction campaign began that continued even after the unification of Italy between 1860 and 1861. During the nineteenth century, Catania witnessed a cultural development in the social, literary, musical and theatrical spheres. Particularly noteworthy is the work of Vincenzo Bellini, the city's beloved son, author of the opera *Norma* and one of Italy's most admired composers.

Don't miss: Piazza Duomo, opposite which is the Town Hall, and Catania Cathedral, the Duomo, next to which is Vaccarini's famous Elephant Fountain. The picturesque fish market, the Roman theatre and amphitheatre, the Odeon, Via Crucifere (18th century) lined with beautiful Baroque churches, Bellini Park, the Teatro Massimo named after the famous composer Vincenzo Bellini of Catania, Via Etnea, the avenue of shopping, ice-cream parlours and promenades, the church of San Nicola and the San Benedetto monastery (now a university), not forgetting the many Baroque palaces and Castello Ursino.