

HD guided tour to Monreale.

(incl. entrance fees, English speaking guide, lunch)

Monreale

With a splendid position high above the **Conca d'Oro**, the Monte Reale in Norman times was a royal hunting lodge and residence. It was not until William II decided to build the famous cathedral with a royal palace and monastery attached, that a town developed in its own right



in the area. The city's heart and soul is still represented by the area radiating from the cathedral. On the north side lies Piazza Vittorio Emanuele with its fine Fontana del Tritone. The main front, however, overlooks the smaller Piazza Guglielmo, that gives access both to the cloister and a small public garden (last doorway on the right facing the cloister entrance). Beyond a large courtyard is a fine garden with a magnificent view over the Conca

d'Oro. The warren of streets around are all lined with charming cafés, restaurants and souvenir shops.

The Duomo

The Duomo is part of a magnificent complex that also comprises a Benedictine abbey and the



royal palace, the latter converted into the Archbishop's Seminary in the late-1500s. The construction was initiated by William II, Roger II's grandson, around 1172. According to legend, the Virgin appeared to him in a dream to suggest that he build a church with money concealed by his father in a hiding place that she would reveal. The building had to be so grandiose as to rival the greatest cathedrals of most important cities in Europe and even outshine the beauty of the Palatin Chapel in Palermo built by Roger. The most high-skilled craftsmen came to be employed to work on the project, with no

expense spared. To the north, the church was flanked by the royal palace and, to the south, by the Benedictine convent whose magnificent cloister can still be admired today.

The church contains the tombs of William I and William II, and enclosed within an altar, the heart of Louis IX, King of France who died in Tunis in 1270, when his brother Charles I ruled Sicily.



The Cloister

The huge cloister, one of the finest examples of a building inspired by Islamic architecture, is surrounded by a series of pointed arches supported by sets of splendid small paired columns, many decorated with polychrome mosaic that is Eastern in inspiration. The columns marking each corner of the cloister, together with those at the corner of the tiny square cloister surrounding the fountain (southwest corner), are sculpted with animals and human figures interwoven among fronds of luxuriant vegetation. The true jewels in the crown, however, are the fabulous Romanesque capitals, each distinctively different and imaginatively carved. The subject-matter is drawn from both the Medieval and Classical iconography. Without following any particular order – implying that the capitals were intended as merely decorative – scenes from the Gospels alternate with stories from the Old Testament, symbolic and purely ornamental images. The classical subjects also betray a certain inventiveness; the acanthus leaves of the Corinthian capitals, for example, although surprisingly natural-looking, appear to be being ruffled by the wind. To these are added a variety of other subjects; birds stretching down to peck the plant volutes of the capital, Atlas figures reaching up to support the weight of the arch, cherubs feeding animals, exotic characters wearing turbans with snakes. Perhaps the most remarkable capital is the one in which William II offers the church up to the Madonna: note the detail with which the south side of the church has been carved. One capital

depicts a man killing a bull, the sacred symbol of the cult of Mithras. Another features acrobat: his position, his weight supported by his arms, his back arched so that his feet rest on the back of his head (his head in the centre), recalls the Trinacria, the ancient symbol of Sicily. The tiny cloister, nestling in the southwest corner, is graced with a lovely fountain. The column in the centre of the circular bowl is sculpted with banding and rested with a cluster of animals.

