

Palermo holiday guide: what to see plus the best bars, hotels and restaurants

The capital of Sicily is a crumbling film set of a city with unmissable architecture, vivid street life, and a great choice of alfresco restaurants and bars

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Less than 200km from Tunis, Palermo is like nowhere else in Europe. Defying the mafia in a maze of crumbling grandeur, it is at the crossroads of the Mediterranean. Every neighbouring power has occupied Sicily at some time, which has created a sizzling mix of Arabic food, Spanish streets, Norman towers and Italian neglect.

The old town is full of baroque palaces, their facades rich with statues, above alleys strewn with litter. Families live on their doorsteps like a scene from a 1950s film. Some streets are still being rebuilt after being bombed by the allies in the second world war. This is Italy in the raw.

And among all this, the traditional evening promenade, the *passeggiata*, is still very much alive here. There are aristocrats struggling to maintain historic palaces, and vibrant street life on every rococo corner. So this is a very old Italy, too. The closest parallel is probably Havana, another decaying former Spanish colony filled with ghosts and stories and heroes. Catch this one before it changes - and with being warm long into autumn, it's not too late to visit this year.

WHAT TO DO AND SEE

The Norman conquest

The unmissable sites in this city are the astonishing buildings of the Norman kings who conquered Sicily in 1072. For a century they ran Europe's most sophisticated royal court, a centre for science, art and commerce based on tolerance of all faiths and nationalities. They left behind a fabulous blend of Romanesque architecture, Byzantine mosaics and Arabic domes.

First stop is the royal palace, the Palazzo dei Normanni on Piazza Indipendenza, whose highlight is the Palatine Chapel, covered in golden mosaics of scenes from the Bible. If it sounds dull, it feels bling. More intimate is the church of La Martorana in Piazza Bellini, with mosaic figures across its Romanesque arches. But the top sightseeing spot is out of town: the cathedral at Monreale, five miles south of Palermo, has gorgeous ceilings and walls decorated by master mosaicists who were brought here all the way from Byzantium. They offer a real sense of the power and mystery of medieval faith.

Street life

The centre of Palermo feels like a stage set - its streets all baroque facades run to ruin, its people open to communal living. There are outdoor dances in old squares and crowds at the sunset *passeggiata*. Street markets - boisterous affairs with the energy and edge of an African bazaar - are held on weekday mornings in Piazza Ballarò, Via Sant'Agostino and Piazza San Domenico.

Cook with a duchess

The delightful Duchess of Lampedusa, Nicoletta Polo, holds food-shopping and cookery days, starting in the noisy street market of Capo and ending with a five-course Sicilian meal in her elegant palace. She is the daughter-in-law of the author of Italy's bestselling novel ever, *The Leopard*, which told the story of Sicilian aristocrats facing change. Her palace was owned by the real-life central character of the novel, Fabrizio, and is where the author died. For a taste of history, as well as local food, it doesn't get more real than this.

. *A full-day course costs €150pp, cookingwiththeduchess.com*

Anti-mafia tour

Despite major triumphs by the justice system in the 1990s, an ongoing reality of everyday life here is the mafia. Born out of resistance to centuries of oppression by foreign overlords, this secret network of alliances has dominated the economy of the island and, to a lesser extent, the entire nation for at least a century. Since the shocking assassination of crusading anti-mafia judges Giovanni Falcone and Paolo Borsellino in 1992 (after whom Palermo airport is named), a grassroots movement against paying mafia protection money, or *pizzo*, has emerged - and now there is a No Mafia tour of the town. This guided half-day includes the courthouse where mafiosi have been tried, and various sites and businesses associated with the anti-pizzo campaign.

. *€30pp, every Saturday though other tours available, addiopizzotravel.it*

A night at the opera

In a fit of nationalistic ambition during the unification of Italy (1861-71), Palermo opened the Teatro Massimo, Europe's third-largest opera house. Built like a gigantic Roman temple, it looms over Piazza Verdi and the strolling crowds at sunset. Acclaimed tenor Caruso sang here in his twenties and it still attracts major stars. Tickets are available for opera and ballet in the season (non-summer months), and to tour the building at other times - including a rooftop climb for panoramic views.

. *Tours €8, teatromassimo.it*

Modern art crawl

Catch the modern response to Sicily's complex situation at two elegant contemporary art museums. The Museo d'Arte Contemporanea della Sicilia (€6, palazzoriso.it) is a 17th-century palace stripped back to its bare stones, with startling paintings and installations among the broken plaster and empty fireplaces. Meanwhile GAM - the Galleria d'Arte Moderna a Palermo (€7) - shows Sicilian works of the modernist period in a pretty converted palace.

A day trip to the ancient world

Six miles west of the city is a headland above the sea with sweeping views and stunning Roman ruins. Solunto is the most-excavated site on the island, and it is possible to wander an entire town - there are courtyard villas with painted walls and mosaic floors, a marketplace with columns and shops, the old baths still holding water, and an amphitheatre overgrown with weeds. Generations of Phoenicians, Carthaginians, Greeks and Romans have walked these cobbled streets. It's hugely atmospheric and rarely gets crowded: you're as likely to see herds of goats as hordes of tourists.

WHERE TO EAT

Trattoria Piccolo Napoli

The secret to this much-loved seafood specialist is the owners' two fishing boats that supply a daily catch - try the *casarecce* pasta with swordfish and mint. This unpretentious neighbourhood place has been around since 1951, and it's easy to see why.

. *Around €15 for a fish dish, Piazzetta Mulino a Vento 4, +39 091 320 431, trattoriapiccolonapoli.it*

Antica Focacceria San Francesco

This famous old cafe in a cobbled backstreet specialises in fast food Sicilian-style, like *arancini* (fried rice balls with various gloopy fillings) or *vistedde* (boiled spleen in a brioche roll). The faint-hearted might settle for focaccia or just a coffee while watching the crowds.

. *Mains from €15, Via Alessandro Paternostro 58, +39 091 320 264, anticafocacceria.it*

I Cucci

Among crumbling Renaissance palaces next to a statue of a Bourbon king, this delightful outdoor restaurant is in atmospheric Piazza Bologni. Tables are hard to get but it's worth booking for the setting alone. Choose simple fare such as panini or club sandwiches, or fancier dishes like beef carpaccio.

. *Mains from €12, Piazza Bologni 3, +39 091 7477151, icuccibistorante.it*

Osteria dei Vespri

This tiny place in the old stables of the grand Palazzo Gangi is one of the top restaurants in town, yet surprisingly affordable. Run by the Rizzo brothers, it serves traditional Sicilian food with an exquisite contemporary twist. Expect gourmet standards and views on to a fine medieval square.

. *Around €65 for three courses and wine, Piazza Croce dei Vespri 6, +39 091 6171 631, osteriadeivespri.it*

Antica Pizzeria Bellini

This modestly priced trattoria offers outdoor tables on the city's loveliest square, Piazza Bellini, between the baroque church of Santa Caterina and the Norman chapel of San Cataldo with its Arab-influenced domes. The ravioli with prawns is a steal at €12 and entitles diners to linger in the sun for hours.

. *Piazza Bellini 6, +39 091 616 5691, anticapizzeriabellini-palermo.it*

WHERE TO DRINK

Bar Duomo

With possibly the best view in town, this unpretentious modern bar overlooks the outrageous Norman towers of the cathedral square.

. *Via Simone di Bologna 9, on Facebook*

Kursaal Kalhesa

This hip hangout is built inside the old arches of the city wall. It has lively club nights or, for calmer moments, a bookshop, art gallery, rooftop bar and chic minimalist restaurant.

. *Foro Umberto I N. 21/A, kursaalkalhesa.com*

Bar Bocum

Down by the marina, this dark bar for yachties specialises in mixology. Set up by two local restaurateurs, it also serves Sicilian-Asian food by a Japanese chef.

. *Via dei Cassari 6, bocum.it*

Qvivi

Popular with a younger crowd, this buzzy place in the old town is great for sitting outside on a summer evening and has music at weekends.

. *Piazza della Rivoluzione 5, on Facebook*

Close

Seating just 15, this cocktail bar serves finely crafted mixes to the sound of French jazz from the 1920s. The barman-owner worked in five-star hotels in London before setting up here and takes his work seriously.

. *Via Ricasoli 26, on Facebook*

WHERE TO STAY

Palazzo Conte Federico

In a Norman watchtower turned palace owned by the same family since the Renaissance, this ancient place near the cathedral has simple holiday apartments off its cobbled courtyard. The charming Nicolo Federico gives tours of his home, with its frescos, suits of armour and pretty ballroom.

. *Doubles from €120, contefederico.com*

Hotel Porta Felice

This groovy boutique hotel near the marina is built around a high atrium and has a glamorous rooftop bar.

. *Doubles from €121, hotelportafelice.it*

Butera28

The top floor of the elegant seafront Palazzo Butera has been converted into holiday lets, with lovely views over the water. The titled owners (this is the same set-up that organises the cooking with the duchess days, listed above) live below and can tell fascinating tales of the history of the island.

. *Doubles from €60 a night or €400 a week, butera28.it*

Al Giardino dell'Alloro

A cute B&B in the old town, this place serves breakfast in with a central courtyard and has simple modern rooms, decorated throughout with modern Sicilian art.

. *Doubles from €70 B&B, giardinodellalloro.it*

Alla Kala

Chic but cheap B&B on the main boulevard, with rooms in designer minimalist style.

. *Doubles from €90 B&B, allakala.it*

The trip was provided by The Thinking Traveller (020-7377 8518) thethinkingtraveller.com), villa specialists in Italy and Greece. Accommodation was provided by Palazzo Conte Federico (details above)

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