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Why You Should Book a Trip to Palermo Now, Before the Rest of the World Does

There's a new spirit of optimism in the Sicilian capital, where the hardships of past generations are fading into memory. Travelers can see enlivened city streets, new museums, and renovated palazzi to find a city ready to show a fresh face to the world.

Charlotte Higgins

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Early evening: the perfect time for a stroll through Palermo's *centro storico*. Eighteenth-century palazzi lined the streets, their windows framed by the ruffs and frills of Baroque stonework. Some were in a state of utter dilapidation, others alive with the sound of laborers bringing their stately façades back to life. From the dust-covered sidewalks, churches reared up in a profusion of carved decoration. My partner, Matthew, and I stepped inside the Oratorio del Rosario di Santa Cita and were greeted by a riot of Rococo stuccowork created by Giacomo Serpotta — a Palermitani artist who turned this interior into a theater of religious storytelling, rendering statues of the virtues and scenes from the Passion in plaster as crisp and white as royal icing.

The whole of Palermo, in fact, seemed to us a theater, the window of each store or artisan's studio offering a snapshot of drama: a tailor in his workshop strumming on a mandolin; a confectioner's store piled high with marzipan fruit; a shop lined with models of Padre Pio, a favorite cult figure of southern Italy identifiable by his mittens and brown cassock.

It was early September, a popular week to get married in Palermo, and the guests in all their finery were hanging around outside those spectacular Baroque churches, downing coffee at nearby bars before their various ceremonies. (No one hangs around quite so stylishly, it turns out, as a Sicilian wedding guest.)

As the light began to fade, it seemed like a good idea to stop for a pre-dinner negroni. We ducked through an archway on a narrow, darkening street to find Caffè Internazionale: a slender, vine-shaded courtyard filled with scattered tables, where we were met with a friendly greeting from the owners, Italian artist Stefania Galegati and her African-American husband, Darrell Shines. As well as serving an excellent cocktail, the couple hosts concerts and art workshops in the mazelike series of rooms out back. The place was quiet the night we visited, so we chatted with Galegati and Shines as their children scampered about the courtyard in the golden light of evening.

Later, feeling hungry (it's hard not to feel hungry in Palermo), we stopped at a hole-in-the-wall named Ke Palle, on Via Maqueda, where we ordered arancini the size of tennis balls, crisp and hot on the outside, their interiors collapsing into a delicious morass of eggplant, rice, and cheese. We ate them — along with some *panelle,* earthy-tasting golden squares of fried chickpea batter — sitting on a bench, watching a group of boys play an intensely serious game of soccer in a square, their goalposts a fountain and a set of church gates.

It has not always been like this in Palermo. The very fact that we were able to stroll through the city center is evidence of a sea change, a revival driven by steady but hard-won victories against organized crime and a refreshed urban

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landscape. What, a decade or so ago, would have been a hair-raising walk on a series of narrow, potholed footpaths amid roaring traffic and fumes is today a pleasant, pedestrianized amble, with many main streets now home to restored old buildings and intriguing new restaurants.

Inhospitable streets were just one symptom of neglect in the Sicilian capital, the center of which was left derelict by decades of poverty, local government inaction, and organized crime — the work of La Cosa Nostra, or the Sicilian mafia. Mary Taylor Simeti, an American who came to Sicily in the 1960s and stayed, wrote *On Persephone's Island: A Sicilian Journal* at the height of Palermo's troubles in the 1980s. In it, the author portrayed a city center plagued by collapsing ancient buildings, where the Teatro Massimo, its magnificent opera house, lay closed and silent and where, above all, the community was cursed with regular mafia killings. The most notorious moments of this violent period were the assassinations of magistrates Paolo Borsellino and Giovanni Falcone, both killed in 1992 while investigating La Cosa Nostra. Many other magistrates were murdered too — adding to a list of 527 "innocent," or non-mafioso, Sicilians killed since the first murder occurred back in 1871, with the vast majority of deaths taking place from the late 1970s to the mid 1990s.

The fight against the mafia has been long and arduous — and it is not yet over. The current mayor of Palermo, Leoluca Orlando, who also presided over the city in the late 1980s and again in the 90s, has been one of La Cosa Nostra's most vocal opponents. During his current stint in office, which began in 2012, he has been focused on transforming the image of the city from a hotbed of organized crime into an outward-looking community that welcomes both immigrants and tourists, honoring this island's historical position as a junction between cultures and continents.

Pedestrianizing the main arteries has been part of Orlando's mission in recent years; he is pleased, too, that Palermo's last Gay Pride march was said to have attracted a crowd of 200,000. I met him at the town hall in Piazza Pretorio, his suite of offices splendidly palatial with their Murano-glass chandeliers, antiques, and deep upholstered sofas. He told me that for much of the 20th century, "Palermo was the capital of the mafia. It was known across the world as the capital of the mafia. The words *mafia* and *Palermo* were almost interchangeable. There were people in this chair who were friends of mafia bosses. In fact, there was one mayor who was not just a friend of mafia bosses — he *was* a mafia boss."

Now, however — a quarter of a century after the killings of Borsellino and Falcone — Palermo has been named Italy's Capital of Culture for 2018, a reversal of its dark history and an achievement of which Orlando is immensely proud. The city's bid for the title emphasized its links to the African and Arab worlds — relationships that have been central to Palermo's identity since at least the 12th century, when its glorious Arab-Norman churches were built. (Most notable among these is the cathedral just outside Palermo in the town of Monreale, the interior of which is a golden haze of biblical stories picked out in exquisitely detailed Byzantine mosaics.)

In fact, the year 2018 may prove something of a watershed for the city: from June to November it will also host Manifesta 12, one of Europe's most important biennial art festivals, each edition of which takes place in a different city. Exhibitions and installations are scheduled in some of Palermo's most striking locations, including a war-damaged 17th-century church, a disused theater, and the city's glorious botanical gardens, where Matthew and I walked one afternoon among groves of bergamot, orange, lemon, and citron; through 19th-century greenhouses filled with giant cacti; and past giant ficus trees with trailing aerial roots.

There are some important openings in the city this year: the Palazzo Butera, for example, a lavish 18th-century building in the Kalsa district purchased in 2015 by the wealthy northern Italian Massimo Valsecchi and his wife, Francesca. It will open as a museum for their art collection, which contains works by names ranging from Annibale Carracci to Gerhard Richter. Francesco Pantaleone, the owner of one of the very few contemporary art galleries in the city, is working with the Valsecchis to stage a spectacular installation to coincide with Manifesta 12: the Norwegian artist Per Barclay will flood the palace's stables with a thin layer of oil, creating a mirrorlike surface that will reflect its processions of columns and fan vaulting in its dark sheen. (Pantaleone and Barclay have undertaken a similar project in the past, carefully flooding a Palermitan oratory with a layer of milk, so that its elaborate Serpotta stuccowork seemed to loom from a still, pale lake.)

This summer will also see the full reopening of the city's superb archaeological museum, known as Museo Archeologico Regionale Antonio Salinas. Housed in yet another glorious palazzo, with galleries opening out onto cool courtyards, it was only partially accessible when we visited. The museum will display, among other things, sculptures from the great Greek temple complex of Selinunte, on Sicily's southern coast. They include amazingly vivid fifth-century-B.C. reliefs, fragments

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of their original paint still clinging to them, that show graphic scenes from classical myth, such as Actaeon being ripped apart by his own hunting dogs.

To try to get a better grasp of the impact of La Cosa Nostra on the residents of Palermo, Matthew and I took an "antimafia" tour of the city with a group called Palermo NoMafia. It was led by an activist named Edoardo Zaffuto, who, in 2004, was one of a group of exasperated friends in their 20s who began a grassroots movement against the *pizzo,* the "protection" payment extorted from local businesses by the mafia. Back then, he said, the mafia "was like a parasite. They were asking for money and getting it from the entire town." It would always be relatively small, affordable amounts — the idea being that everyone would end up paying, conferring a kind of legitimacy on the practice.

In the beginning, he and his friends staged guerrilla actions — pasting posters around the city that proclaimed, "An entire people who pays the *pizzo* is a people without dignity." Over time they transformed themselves into a consumer movement. Now their organization, Addiopizzo ("good-bye extortion") has around 1,000 signed-up restaurants, shops, and other businesses that resolutely refuse to bend to the criminals. (An orange sticker in the window with the slogan "*Pago chi non paga,*" or "I pay those who do not pay," identifies these establishments.)

Zaffuto's tour began outside the elegant Teatro Massimo — now home to a flourishing opera company. The program has included a staging of the Italian classic *Rigoletto* by the Italian-American actor and director John Turturro, as well as more adventurous repertoire such as Bartók's *Bluebeard's Castle* and Schoenberg's infrequently performed *The Hand of Fate.* Looking up at the building's grand Neoclassical exterior, it was hard to imagine that from 1974 to 1997 the theater stood empty, supposedly under renovation, but really the victim of the city's mafia-induced sclerosis.

But the mafia, Zaffuto cautioned, is far from wiped out. We followed him through narrow alleyways between the tumbledown buildings that frame the Mercato del Capo, Matthew and I eyeing hard *ricotta salata,* tiny ferocious chiles called *denti di diaboli,* and salted Pantelleria capers to take home. As we entered the market proper, Zaffuto pointed out a stall owner —his table a glut of green basil, Romanesca cauliflower, and comically long, pale-green *cucuzze,* or Italian zucchini — who had affixed a crude cardboard sign to his table announcing the murder, the previous week, of his brother, a victim of an ongoing internecine struggle between criminal factions.

The tour ended, as all Sicilian walks should, with the promise of hearty food — this time at the Antica Focacceria San Francesco, where it was easy to forget Sicily's troubled history amid plates of sharp-sweet caponata made with eggplant, tomato, and plenty of celery. For meat lovers, there were *pani ca'meusa,* or rolls stuffed with fried veal spleen and sprinkled with ricotta.

The cultural rebirth that Palermo has enjoyed in recent years has begun to spread to Sicily's far west, traditionally the wildest, poorest, most mafia-dominated part of the island — and, as a result, less of a tourist destination. But today, amid the undeniable hardship that characterizes life in Italy's extreme south in the long wake of the European debt crisis, there are signs of revival here, too. We began a tour of the region by driving to the Belice Valley, where, in 1968, the village of Gibellina was destroyed by an earthquake. It was afterward rebuilt as Gibellina Nuova on a new site, with the help of an array of prominent artists and architects. One artist, the Umbrian Alberto Burri, turned his attention to the ruins of the old town, intending to transform it into Cretto di Burri, a vast piece of land art. In the 1980s funding for the project ran out, and the work lay unfinished until 2015, when, to commemorate Burri's centenary, his vision for the place was finally completed.

Burri's idea was to encase the ruins of Gibellina's buildings in blocks of hard, gray concrete, leaving its roads and alleyways clear, so that the whole place is, in effect, a maze. Seeing it from afar, as we approached on roads that snaked through fields and vineyards, it resembled a rhomboid handkerchief draped over the hillside. Walking inside, we quickly lost ourselves among its winding paths. Everything was silent but for the *thwunk-thwunk* of a nearby wind turbine. Tendrils of caper plants forced their way through the concrete, a reminder that one day nature will reclaim this modern ruin, a strangely solemn monument to a lost town.

To explore Sicily's far west, we stayed in the Baglio Sorìa, an 11-room hotel — or perhaps more accurately a restaurant with rooms — owned by a local winegrower. The building is converted from a 17th-century *baglio*: the typical walled, gated farmhouse where landowners once lived with their servants, its rooms laid out around a central courtyard. Surrounded by groves of mulberry and pistachio trees, Baglio Sorìa is a pleasant refuge, with simply furnished rooms, a peaceful pool, and a courtyard bar.

We dined on the terrace, feasting on local dishes refined to perfection. The carpaccio of shrimp with candied melon and eggplant caviar, followed by linguine

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with sea urchins harvested that morning, was particularly memorable — especially with an accompaniment of a minerally, almost salty white wine from the hotel's vineyards on the nearby island of Favignana.

From the Baglio, we took many pleasant outings: to the town of Mazara del Vallo, for example, home to one of Italy's biggest fishing fleets, which has dozens of fish restaurants lining its seaward edge. The town's churches are built in a warm golden tufa, its little parks are dotted with palm trees, and its Kasbah district is a warren of alleyways reflecting the footprint of the town established here by Arabs in the ninth century. Mazara del Vallo is just one of several picturesque coastal towns in this part of the island; there is also Marsala, home of the famous wine. And there is Trapani, a delightful, sleepy town built on a spit of land narrowing into a point, like a comma, as it stretches out into the sea.

We wandered toward this waterbound tip along the *centro storico*'s main street, the elegant, arrow-straight Corso Vittorio Emanuele, passing Baroque and Art Nouveau façades on either side and glimpsing slices of twinkling blue sea through the side streets. Turning down one of these, we couldn't resist the mountains of pastries and cakes piled in the window of a traditional *pasticceria.* We tried a *paradiso* — a rum-soaked sponge covered with a layer of latticed golden marzipan, which lived up to its name.

On a small island nearby is the town of Mozia, successive home to Phoenicians, Carthaginians, and Greeks. Its most recent full-time inhabitants were the Whitakers, an Anglo-Sicilian family who produced the Marsala wine the British liked so much in the 19th century. The little island is a 10-minute boat ride from the mainland, and as you look back to the shore, you can see old salt pans spread behind you and white pyramids that, from a distance, resemble giant gazebos but are in fact hillocks of sea salt. The whole island, which is partially covered in vines and scrub, is an archaeological park, and the Whitakers' villa, charming and somewhat old-fashioned, is its museum. The standout object is the Motya Charioteer, a gorgeous fragment of fifth-century Greek sculpture found by workmen during an excavation in 1979: it's an extraordinarily sensuous object, with stony fabric clinging to the figure's hips and thighs.

The soil and sea of Sicily seem endlessly to produce such treasures: another, even more impressive ancient Greek sculpture is the bronze *Dancing Satyr,* literally fished from the Strait of Sicily in 1998. After years of study and conservation — not to mention trips to exhibitions in Rome, Paris, and Tokyo — it finally has its own excellent, brand-new museum, the Museo de Satiro, in a converted 16th-century church in Mazara del Vallo. Though it is missing its arms and one of its legs, it is still a compelling object, the figure seeming to whirl in a frenzy of ecstatic dance, his head thrown back and hair streaming behind, his body twisting, his eyes staring. The sculpture is beautifully displayed, while a film explains the fascinating process of its discovery and the painstaking work of conserving it. (A former mafia boss, now collaborating with the authorities, recently admitted that he was ordered by his superiors to steal it and sell it through Switzerland, according to the Sicilian press. Happily, the order was never carried out.) There in the cool of the gallery, it struck me that the sculpture is an apt metaphor of Sicily itself: ancient, battered, subject to the reversals, near misses, and catastrophes of history — and also spellbinding in its power and beauty.

Experiencing Western Sicily

Divide a weeklong trip between Palermo and the west of the island, and you'll have plenty of time to take in the following highlights.

Getting There

Fly in to Palermo Airport (PMO) by connecting through Rome or another major European hub. Central Palermo is walkable, but driving is the best way to reach the western part of the island; you'll find plenty of car-rental options near the airport.

Palermo

Stay

Grand Hotel Villa Igiea: This 19th-century hotel is an icon of Italian Art Nouveau overlooking the Bay of Palermo. *doubles from $291.*

Eat & Drink

Antica Focacceria San Francesco: This historic spot has been baking traditional flatbreads since 1834 — making it older than the nation of Italy itself.

Caffè Internazionale: A courtyard bar, café, and community space with frequent gallery shows and art events.

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Ke Palle: A favorite Sicilian arancini chain offering more than a dozen versions of the fried rice-ball snack.

Osteria dei Vespri: This old-school restaurant is a Palermo institution—as is the wine list, which features around 350 bottles. *prix fixe from $35.*

Arts & Culture

Palazzo Butera Museum: This lavish residence, which houses a large contemporary art collection, will be a venue for the Manifesta 12 art biennial when it comes to Palermo in June. *8 Via Butera; 39-91-611-0162.*

Palermo NoMafia: Profits from these "antimafia" city tours go to an organization working to end protection payments.

Salinas Archaeological Museum: An expansive collection of ancient artifacts — including treasures salvaged from Phoenician shipwrecks — slated to reopen in June.

Teatro Massimo: Long dormant during the height of Palermo's mafia troubles, the city's grand opera house now hosts a variety of innovative productions in its famously Baroque (and acoustically perfect) space.

ZAC—Zisa Arte Contemporanee: Art-world icons like Ai Weiwei have exhibited at this space in the colorful Zisa cultural quarter.

Trapani & the West

Stay

Baglio Sorìa: Make this boutique farmhouse hotel outside Trapani your base for exploring western Sicily. *doubles from $168.*

Eat & Drink

Saragó: This restaurant on the tip of Trapani's harbor peninsula serves seafood-focused dishes like roasted sea bream and red peppers.

Art & Culture

Cretto di Burri: This striking land-art project in Gibellina, an hour south of Palermo, is well worth the detour.

Museo de Satiro: Sicily's most famous Greek bronze has a new home: a small museum inside the Church of Sant'Egidio, in the village of Mazara del Vallo, south of Marsala. *Piazza Plebiscito; 39-923-933-917.*

Whitaker Museum: Take a ferry from Marsala to this museum on the island of Mozia to view treasures from the Phoenician colony that lived here in the fifth century B.C. *Isola di San Pantaleo; 39-923-712-598.*