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History and culture

Palermo’s origins date back to the period between the 8th and the 6th century B.C., when the Phoenicians colonized the area that was previously inhabited by Sicans, Cretans and the Elymis. After being contested for a long period between Rome and Carthage during the Punic Wars, the city of Paleopolis was placed under Roman rule (254 B.C.). After several attacks by various barbaric populations, the city then became a part of the Byzantine Empire, which governed it for about three centuries, until 831.

The Arabs took over from the Byzantines and under their rule, Palermo enjoyed a period of splendor and prosperity. Art and economics were developed immensely, the first thanks to the influence of Arab culture and the latter through intense trading with the main countries over the centuries. Palermo was once again the capital and the town’s buildings and monuments were renewed. Various religious orders, which were increasingly powerful, set up a large number of churches and convents. This was a period of pomp and opulence for the clergy and the aristocracy, but was also one of poverty and pestilence for the people, whose rebellions were often put down without the sparing of blood.

After a brief interval under the Sabaudo family Dynasty (1713 - 1718) and then under the Austrians (1718 - 1735), Palermo and Sicily were once again returned to the Spanish, and became the Autonomous State of the Kingdom of Naples. When the Bourbon family decreed that the autonomy granted should be repealed, the whole of Sicily rose up (1820 and 1848) and finally in 1860, when Garibaldi and the thousand landed at Marsala, Palermo won its freedom, and then annexed itself to the Kingdom of Italy in 1870.

Churches and Museums

A selection of the most representative religious buildings for Sicilian culture

Cappella Palatina
The famous French writer Guy de Maupassant defined it as "the most beautiful in the world, the most surprising religious jewel ever dreamt of by man". It is easy to share his opinion. The Cappella Palatina (Palatine Chapel) contains a harmonious blend of opposing cultures, Byzantine, Norman, Arabic, and Sicilian, creating a truly amazing architectural and artistic result. Located in the Palazzo dei Normanni, the Cappella Palatina is home to some of the most beautiful mosaics in the world that depict famous scenes from the bible. The wooden ceiling styled into Arab-style stalactites and alveoli dating back to 1143 and the marble floor are just as wonderful.

Cathedral
Built in 1184 by the Norman king William II in the place of a Muslim mosque, the cathedral has undergone several renovations over the centuries, which have resulted in its current Neo-Classical style. The fourteenth-century door and the Gothic-Catalan style portico are worthy of note. The treasures that are kept inside, including some precious objects and embroidery found in the tombs of the Kings and emperors must be seen.

Santa Maria degli Angeli
Dating back to the fifteenth century, this is one of the oldest churches in the city. The two wonderful Gothic entrances and the wooden sculptures, paintings and stuccoes inside the church must be admired.

Church of San Domenico
The church was built in Baroque style around 1640, but the façade was completed in 1726. The imposing interior of the Church of Domenico is designed around the nave and two-aisle style, and contains important works of art. The wonderful cloisters inside the church play host to the Risorgimento-period Museum.

Santa Maria dell’Ammiraglio
This church is named thus as it was built on the wishes of the Admiral Giorgio d’Antiochia in 1142, who then gave it to the convent of Eloisa Martorana. It is a Norman-style building, even though it is similar to the Byzantine churches, due to its square structure and the splendid mosaics kept inside, together with frescoes and Baroque marble pieces.

All the most interesting museums to visit to help us learn the traditions linked to this land.

International Marionettes Museum
This extraordinary museum was founded in 1975 by the Association for the Preservation of Folk Traditions, and is an integral part of Sicilian culture. The museum contains the most complete, important collection of "pupi" or puppets in the world, together with the stage equipment needed for the
traditional shows. The collection includes about 3500 examples of puppets, marionettes and hand puppets from all over the world, all made by hand according to the antique craftsmen’s traditional techniques.

Regional Archaeological Museum
This Museum is in the old city center of Palermo, in the ex-convent of the Philippine Monks and is home to a large number of artifacts from the whole of Sicily, including the islands, and also to archaeological finds from the Etruscan, Phoenician and Greek eras. These important collections are testimony of Sicilian art, from prehistoric times to the late Roman period.

Museum of Islam
This Museum, which is housed in the wonderful Castello della Zisa, holds the testimony of Arabic culture in Sicily.

The Sicilian Regional Gallery
This Gallery that is inside Palazzo Abatellis, houses some paintings completed in Sicily between the 11th and the 17th centuries, Arab inlaid-wood objects, Moorish pottery and some marble sculptures.

Historical buildings and monuments

Fontana Pretoria
This wonderful sixteenth-century fountain can be found in the center of the square carrying the same name. It was built by the Florentine sculptor Francesco Camilliani, and originally decorated the garden of a villa in Tuscany. It was then purchased by the city of Palermo, dismantled and rebuilt in Piazza Pretoria. The fencing around the fountain, designed by Giovan Battista Basile, was built in 1858.

Castello della Zisa
In Europe, this is one of the best buildings built in Arabic style. Its name comes from the Arabic word “al-aziz” that means “the splendid one”. This indeed splendid, charming castle was built by Arabic architects on the wishes of the Norman king William II d’Altavilla and was completed in 1175. It was later transformed into a fortress and then into a residence for aristocratic families. It is now the home to the Museum of Islam.

La Cuba
There is not much information available about this mysterious Norman building, built by William II d’Altavilla in 1180. Its original purpose is unclear, although we know that it was used as a lazaretto – a leper’s hospital - and later as a barracks for the Spanish garrisons. Some old papers state that it was once surrounded by a luxuriant park and a large lake named Pescheria.

Santa Maria dello Spasimo
This “almost” church, that can be seen in the Kalsa area of the city, dates back to the beginning of the sixteenth century when, still unfinished, the building was allocated to another use. Due to the threat of a Turkish invasion, Santa Maria dello Spasimo was in fact transformed into a defense bulwark for the city. Later, during a plague epidemic in Palermo, the area was used as a lazaretto hospital and then as a warehouse. The building has now become the site of important cultural events.

Teatro Massimo
The Teatro Massimo is one of the largest opera
thearms in Europe and is one of Palermo’s most important buildings. The theater was designed by Gian Battista Basile around 1868 and was built by his son Ernesto, who supervised the works starting from 1891. This change of hands resulted in a classical style exterior (inherited from the original project) and Liberty style inside, following the work of Ernesto Basile. In 1997, the theater was renovated and reopened to the public, after twenty years of neglect and disuse.

Places and charm

The places to see to get to know the true essence of this city.

Quattro Canti
This is the heart of the old city center of Palermo and corresponds to Piazza Vigliena, which has been known as Quattro Canti for centuries, but also as “Teatro del Sole” as one can always see the sun from this spot, from dawn to dusk. The square is located at the crossroads between the city’s two main streets: Via Vittorio Emanuele and Via Maqueda that cut Palermo into four parts, known as “mandamenti”. In the four corners of the square there are four seventeenth-century palaces, whose façades have a convex shape facing onto the square, and four basins with statues that represent the four seasons.

Kalsa
This is Palermo’s Arabic quarter, built close to the sea in an era of people’s riots, in order to allow the Emir to escape in the event of revolt. In ancient times it was home to the Arabs’ entire military contingent when they ruled the city, their administrative and political offices, and also their prisons. It was named “al-halisa” that means “the elected one” in Arabic. Today it is a working-class area of the city, extremely picturesque, where it is still possible to capture a feel of the ancient Arabic-Sicilian culture and often smell the strong aromas of the food that is prepared in the several kiosks along the streets. The center of the Kalsa quarter is the square which carries the same name. The sixteenth-century gateway, Porta dei Greci, also known as Porta d’Africa, from where it is possible to glimpse the sea, is a sight worth visiting.

Real Tenuta della Favorita
This fantastic park, that lies immediately outside the city center, was the hunting grounds for the Bourbon court of Ferdinando III when, after the Parthenopean Republic was proclaimed in 1799, the King of Naples was forced to take refuge in Palermo. Ferdinando had a palace built and ordered the architects to design it in Oriental style. This was how the Casina Cinese (Chinese Lodge), that can still be seen unspoilt today, was built. All around the royal residence, this immense park was laid out, similar to the one that existed near Naples, where the exiled king would have been able to dedicate himself to his favorite pastimes: hunting and botany. Walking through this maze of small, tree-lined avenues in the Parco della Favorita, built to look like the royal park at the entrance to Naples, it is still possible to see the many exotic and official plants, small squares, statues, obelisks and fountains.

Orto botanico - Botanical Gardens
This wonderful, charming garden was laid out at the end of the eighteenth century and is still one of the largest, most important gardens in Europe today. The Orto Botanico in Palermo stands on about eleven hectares and it is possible to see plants from all over
the world, including some very rare, valuable ones. The gardens contain 12,000 vegetable species, including tropical, aquatic, fiber, medicinal and carnivorous plants, and many others too. The giant species of *ficus magnolioides* are not to be missed.

Vucciria
To truly see a cross-section of Palermo life, we suggest a walk round the Vucciria market, that spreads outs between Via Roma and Corso Vittorio Emanuele. This is one of the most characteristic places in Palermo, where there is a unique, strongly Sicilian atmosphere, that is made even more intense through the aromas of the typical local produce from the land and sea. This picturesque market was immortalized by Renato Guttuso, the famous artist who was born in Bagheria, in his painting entitled “La Vucciria”.

Food and drink

Intense aromas, unique tastes generated by unusual combinations. Ingredients that find their maximum expression in the cuisine of this island, such as wild fennel, mint and almonds.

The typical aromas of *Sicilian cooking* can be smelt all over Palermo, not just in the restaurants but in the city streets and squares, where the kiosks still prepare and serve *panelle* (fried chickpea pancakes) and *crocchette* (croquette potatoes) to passers-by. In every *restaurant* in Palermo you can try all the local dishes that are part of Sicilian cuisine, but Palermo is also famous for some characteristic dishes, that were invented in this city and then spread to the rest of Sicily. Once very tasty example is *pasta con le sarde*, a recipe made with simple ingredients but which is served in even the most luxurious restaurants in Palermo. This is a very tasty first course, made with wild fennel, fresh sardines, anchovies, saffron, sultanas and pine-nuts. *Panelle* are also a typical Palermo dish: rectangular snacks made with chickpea flour, salt, pepper and parsley, fried in vegetable oil and served in the open-air kiosks. Other typical “street” snacks are *sfincione*, a kind of pizza topped with tomato, anchovies and onion, and *pani c'a meusa*, a sandwich filled with spleen. Sicilian cooking also has some very traditional desserts: the famous *cassata*, which is complicated to make and delicious to eat, made with some of the main ingredients of the local patisserie art such as ricotta cheese, candied fruit and almonds. Another dessert that you must try is *frutta martorana*, colorful and impressive to see, and bursting with calories. In additions to trying this sweet in Palermo, it is also easy to transport and to take home as a souvenir.
The Palermo pupi are 80 cm high, they weigh about 15 kg (keep that in mind when you are buying one!) and wear sparkling armor on a wooden and clay body and their faces are painted with very strong expression, to emphasize their role in the shows.

Another typical product is the Sicilian cart, that was much used in the past by both travelers and by traveling salesmen, and which can now be bought in almost any size. In this case too, the influence of the "Chansons de Geste" is important: the carts are completely decorated with pictures that depict the heroic adventures of the French champions. A long, tiring work that requires technique and vocation: decorations can either be painted or sculpted and require several layers of painted background and the work of various craftsmen.

Palermo is also known for other crafts products, such as painted pottery (vases, large wall plates, and jugs of all sizes) and recipients in copper or tin, that can be purchased in the ancient Via Calderai. Market lovers can go on a tour of the four most famous, crowded (not by tourists) markets in Palermo, to get a true sense of the city’s atmosphere: Vucciria, that is held between Via Roma and Corso Vittorio Emanuele, Ballarò, near the central station, Capo, behind the Teatro Massimo, and Borgo Vecchio, that is held between Piazza Sturzo and Piazza Ucciardone and which is open until late.

If typical, local craftwork is not your style, and you prefer to shop for famous names, we recommend a walk along the elegant Via Libertà, the place where all the boutiques of the famous Made in Italy and Europe designers can be found, such as Tod’s, Dolce & Gabbana, Hermès, Luis Vuitton and Cartier.

Palermo craftwork offers a lot of choices to satisfy the yearning to own some local souvenirs: traditional craft techniques passed on through the generations still allow you to buy some high quality craftsmen’s products. Unique, original items that are the total express of Palermo’s culture and tradition. One of the most typical objects of all are the famous “pupi”; puppets which UNESCO has declared to be “masterpieces of the oral and intangible heritage of humanity”. The “pupi” are the characteristic Sicilian marionettes that the “pupari”, the master puppet show experts, use to put on shows of the medieval knights actions, inspired by the French “Chansons de Geste” and “Orlando Furioso”. The historical “pupari” families in Palermo have been passing on this art to each new generation. If you walk along Corso Vittorio Emanuele, you will see the Cuticchio, Mancuso and Greco family craftsmen’s workshops and if you are lucky, you may see a marionette being created by true artists, who are part carpenters, part blacksmiths, part painters but, most importantly, actors.
Events

Festino di Santa Rosalia - from July 9th to 15th
For four centuries in the month of July, Palermo has celebrated Santa Rosalia, who saved the city from a terrible plague in 1600 and thus became the city’s patron saint. The festival lasts for a week, a period in which the city is invaded by traveling theatrical and musical shows, all linked to the life of the saint. The height of the celebrations is the charming procession of the monumental cart that crosses the Cassaro as far as the Marina. At the end of the religious procession, there is an amazing fireworks display.

Teatro Massimo - from October to May
The Teatro Massimo season in Palermo opens in October and includes ballet, opera and concerts with appearances by international artists.

Festival di Morgana - November
Each year in Palermo since 1985, the Festival di Morgana has been organized, a celebration of the art of the puppet that is organized by the Association for the Preservation of Folk Traditions at the International Puppet Museum Antonio Pasqualino. The Festival is made up of a run of shows in which the historical Sicilian “Pupari” families appear, theatrical companies that continue the tradition that UNESCO has proclaimed a “masterpiece of the oral and intangible heritage of humanity”.

Merit Cup Windsurf World Festival - May
Every year, all the world famous windsurfing champions come to Sicily to take part in the prestigious Merit Cup Windsurf World Festival. In the month of May, the wonderful beach at Mondello becomes the setting for these top-level exhibitions.

Palermo is a lively, sunny city, full of events that are intended to enhance the city’s culture, history and traditions. Travelplan.it has chosen a few of the most important ones: if you are planning a vacation in Palermo in a period that coincides with one of these events, make sure you book your hotel in Palermo well in advance.

Palermo Estate - from June to September
During the summer season, which lasts from the beginning of June to the end of September, Palermo livens up and opens its squares and streets to musical shows of all kinds, traveling theater shows, folklore events and lots of other events too.

Teatro di Verdura - from June to September
In the summer, the Teatro Massimo closes and transfers to the open-air to continue its program of musical shows in the “Teatro di Verdura” in Viale del Fante that has 2,200 seats.

La Dolce Vita

Palermo is one of the most lively, frenetic cities in Sicily, and provides lots of opportunities for night-time fun in dreamlike, exotic and eastern-style settings.

One of the most popular meeting places is the market area, Borgo Vecchio that lies between Piazza Sturzo and Piazza Ucciardone. This market is the only one that stays open until late, attracting a lot of young people who meet here to organize their evenings. Other meeting places are Piazza Olivella, that is full of people and the aroma of kebabs and spices, and the lanes that spread out behind the Teatro Massimo.

Chill-out music at the Moro in Piazza Pottino, on the Arnella Sea Front: an extremely relaxing, intimate atmosphere, where you can sit on rugs and cushions in candlelight.
A special day

Just 24 hours for visiting and getting to know the city. Not an easy task, but if you follow our tourists’ guide to Palermo you will use your time as well as possible, putting aside that sense of hurry and anxiety that you won’t be able to see everything you want to. For those of you with just one free day, we have created a personalized tour, tiring but that can be done even by those who aren’t exactly used to heavy exertion.

Morning
Our itinerary starts in the heart of the old city center, at Quattro Canti, a square that has four magnificent eighteenth-century palaces with convex façades looking down onto it. From there you can walk to Piazza Pretoria where you can see the fountain of the same name and the Municipal building. From Piazza Pretoria go on to Via Vittorio Emanuele and Marionette that is nearby, near Piazza Santo Spirito, that you can walk to from Palazzo Abatellis.

Afternoon
This part of the day will be dedicated to discovering Arabic Palermo, mostly concentrated in the Kalsa quarter of the city, formerly known by the Arabic name of “al-halisah”, that means the elected one. The true heart of the Kalsa is the square that carries the same name, surrounded by splendid buildings such as Palazzo Abatellis and Santa Maria dello Spasimo and by an intricate network of alleys. If you are not too inebriated by the smell of spices and kebabs after walking through this picturesques area, you can visit the wonderful Museo delle Marionette that is nearby, near Piazza Santo Spirito, that you can walk to from Palazzo Abatellis.

Evening
An exotic cocktail in an Arabic-style wine bar, a fresh fish-based dinner washed down with good Sicilian wine, a romantic walk along the seafront and then a well-earned rest in the hotel in Palermo that you have chosen, to recover your tired legs.

Trip outside the city

The Duomo of Monreale, the beach at Mondello and Monte Pellegrino Reserve
If you are planning a stay in Palermo try to stay a few days longer in the hotel in Palermo that you have chosen, and visit some of the places just outside the city.

The Monreale "Duomo"
One of the most charming expressions of this mix of styles and cultures that is characteristic of the whole of Sicily. Building on the Duomo in Monreale, located on the top of a hill about 10 km from Palermo, began in 1174 according to the wishes of the Norman king William II who, so the story goes, had been visited in a dream by the Virgin Mary. The result of this mystic night-time vision was a majestic complex that, in addition to the cathedral, also included the abbey, the royal palace and the bishop’s palace. As proof of the royal homage paid to the Virgin Mary, the "Capitello della donazione" in the cloisters was created: a sculpture that depicts William II offering the Church to the Holy Virgin. The amazing, harmonious mix of architectural styles, Byzantine, Arabic and Romanesque, that are combined in the Monreale Cathedral is one of the greatest works from the Sicilian Middle Ages. The interior is dazzling: wherever you look, golden, sparkling mosaics spread out beyond your view, covering the entire central nave, for a total of 6000 square meters. These works of art, that are the work of famous Byzantine and Venetian mosaic artists, tell the stories of the Old and New Testaments through wonderful images.

Mondello
This is commonly known as the Palermo people’s beach, famous for its elegant Liberty-style villas, its white sand and its crystal-clear water. However, Mondello, about 10 km from Palermo, has not always looked like this: once upon a time, this basin, enclosed between Monte Gallo and Monte Pellegrino, was an unhealthy swamp with a small fishermen’s village nearby, that was built around the old tuna fishing nets site. Towards the end of the nineteenth century, after the land was reclaimed, elegant Liberty-style bathing establishments were built that immediately attracted the elitist European holidaymakers. Today the beach at Mondello attracts lots of visitors, especially windsurfing enthusiasts.
who find just what they are looking for, and wind to swell their sails in this stretch of sea.

Not to be missed:
A walk through the picturesque village of Mondello.
A look at the remains of the tower of the old tuna-fishing site.
A fish-based gluttonous meal in one of the local restaurants.
An afternoon of sunbathing to top up your tan.
A swim in the crystal-clear water to refresh your spirit.
A snorkeling session (or scuba diving for the more expert) among the luxuriant sea bed vegetation.

Monte Pellegrino Nature Reserve
The particular geological conformation of Monte Pellegrino, not far from Palermo, with sheer rock walls that surround the area, has allowed the local vegetations and fauna to be preserved perfectly, protected from man’s interference and environmental changes as if they were inside a fortress. Set up in 1996 to protect the rich biodiversity of the area, the Monte Pellegrino Nature Reserve stands on about 1000 hectares and is home to about a thousand species of plants, including 25 splendid types of orchids, and half the species of mammals that live in Sicily, together with reptiles and birds. The Reserve is also extremely important from a paleontological point of view: there are various fossils and ancient cave drawings inside the Reserve, as signs of ancient life.

Not to be missed:
The marine caves, which were the site of ancient human settlements, as shown by the amazing cave drawings there.
The splendid garden at the Real Tenuta della Favorita, a part of the Reserve that was built by Ferdinando II of Bourbon, to look like his estate near Naples.
The Grotta dell’Addura, where it is said that Santa Rosalia retreated to be a hermit and where you can see the Church built on top of the cave.
A look at the amazing view that you can enjoy from the top of the Mountain: the long white beach, the Caribbean-like sea, and the rock cliffs.
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