

Dark horse

Palermo is city of heady contradictions, writes **Deirdre McQuillan**, who explored the old and the grand, along with the seamy side and vibrant new areas, and found herself in the company of a Duchess

Eat there

Gadir, near the restored cloister of Santa Maria dello Spasimo and a symbol of Palermo's regeneration, is one of the city's upscale restaurants, comfortable, adventurous, if expensive.

Trattoria da Salvo, Piazza Kalsa, Palermo: street food at its best; there's a tourist menu for €20 and the freshest grilled fish you can find with bread, wine, salads and dessert included.

La Cambusa, Piazza Marina 16. Situated in a lovely square (look out for the great banyan trees), this is a popular family-run restaurant with a laidback air and great food.

Fratelli La Bufala, Via Gabriele d'Annunzio 42. The best pizzas in Palermo and loved by locals. Good service and inexpensive.

Ai Maccheronai, Via Discesa Maccheronai 47, a tourist haunt, but with excellent pasta and salads; try a salad of green beans, almonds, garlic and tomatoes.

Sant'Andrea, Piazza Sant'Andrea 4. Tucked down a side street near San Domenico, this corner restaurant is famous for its pasta. Peter Robb was a regular when writing *Midnight in Sicily*. Only open in the evenings and closed Tuesdays.

Trattoria da Maurizio, Piazza

Vucciria. Don't be put off by the slightly dodgy feeling to this square at night; this fast moving, no frills restaurant run with brio by Vera, with handwritten menus, is inexpensive, lively and fun. Try *orate* (gilt head bream) for €10.

Antica Focacceria di San Francesco, Via Alessandro Paternostro 58. On the tourist trail, but definitely worth a visit if only for its historic 1834 interior, fast food and fascinating photographs. Owner Vincenzo Conticello became a hero in 2008 when he stood up to the Mafia and refused to pay *pizzo* (protection money).

FOR ANYONE going to Palermo for the first time, required reading is Giuseppe di Lampedusa's masterpiece *The Leopard* describing a vanishing Sicilian culture, later immortalised on screen by Visconti in his 1963 movie with Claudia Cardinale and Burt Lancaster. In Peter Robb's compelling *Midnight in Sicily*, the Australian writer describes it as less of a novel than "a great Baroque meditation on death". Little did I realise that within hours of arriving in Palermo I would end up in the great writer's 18th century palazzo meeting his adopted son Gioacchino Lanza

Tomasi and his wife Nicoletta Polo, the Duchess of Palma.

Their address on Via Butera, where the old aristocracy had their vast mansions overlooking the bay of Palermo, is one of the best in the old city. Lampedusa spent his last years here after the family estate (on which *Donnafugata* in the novel is based) had been bombed by the Americans. Gioacchino, who served as the model for Tancredi, the dashing young hero of the book, had a successful career managing opera houses and was director of the Italian Cultural Institute in New York for five years. Now retired, he and his wife have restored the whole palazzo, part of which houses a dozen apartments which can be rented.

The duchess, a lively and dynamic Venetian, is an accomplished cook and runs private classes, (cookingwiththeduchess.com). Having insisted that I try her *gelo di melone* (a delicious jelly made from watermelon and decorated with jasmine flowers and chocolate chips), she showed me around the vast rooms of the palazzo whose furnishings, pictures and extensive library were rescued from the destroyed Lampedusa palace. As an introduction to Palermo, such an encounter could hardly have been bettered.

Ringed by mountains that encircle it like fangs, Palermo is a city of heady contradictions: terribly old, terribly grand and terribly disorderly.

"Nothing is normal here. Normality is an





BUON APPETITO (main) The streets of Palermo with the Church of Santa Catarina; (above) enjoying the sun and the views (left) exploring La Vucciria market (left) to see what Italians choose for dinner PHOTOGRAPHS: GETTY IMAGES/THINKSTOCK

garden, a place of art and sea views, popular by day and night.

Walking around the city (driving is a challenge), rundown streets and dark alleys that look threatening turn out to be safer than some Dublin areas. In the steamy darkness of the famous 700-year-old Vucciria market (pronounced butcheria) lamplit at night by naked bulbs, customers jostle around open braziers where stocky, bare-chested men grill fish, meat and

plaited entrails and dodgy looking youths hang around the bars (a notice on one establishment advertised “snacks, drinks and sexy gadgets”), but go weak at the knees when babies are presented. Families populate the square with their comings and goings. Peter Robb called it the belly and the heart of Palermo.

Contrasts can be sensational in a country where excess is taken for granted. Walking one morning through the busy Il Capo market – its origins go back to 8th-century Arab rule – I watched a number of old men kiss the image of a recently deceased stallholder pasted up on his shop door and then cross themselves. A few minutes later, as we stepped through a nondescript entrance, the lavish and breathtaking interior of the church of the Immacolata Concezione was an unexpected revelation. A supreme example of Sicilian Baroque, its interior had taken a century to complete.

It's easy enough to get around the city, but an organised walking tour is worth doing. Ours was led by an impassioned Gascon besotted with Sicily called Jean Paul Barreaud, who has made documentaries on various aspects of Sicilian life and

Stay there

The NH hotel on the Kalsa is central, inexpensive and functional even if beginning to show signs of age. Ask for a room facing the sea. The pool is a plus. nh-hotels.com

BB22 is up a side street behind Piazza San Domenico and right beside the famous Vucciria market. This chic little bed and breakfast owned by Milanese ski instructor Maximo Palloni and Patrizia Marchetti justly deserves its many praises. Front of house star is Emanuela Drago who dispenses useful tips and advice. bb22.it

Butera 28 Apartments are in an 18th-century palazzo overlooking the seafront on the Via Butera; it's the former home of Giuseppe di Lampedusa, author of *The Leopard*. Apartments start at €70 per day up to €1,000 a week. butera28.it

Grand Hotel et des Palmes, Palermo's first luxury hotel built in 1874, still retains some of its former grandeur if a little down at heel. It has 180 rooms, a mirrored salon, Il Gattopardo (the leopard) bar and a splendid entrance hall. hotel-despalmes.it

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history and who has been a guide for more than 20 years. A big fan of Rory Gallagher, he came to Ireland to hear him play and was a friend of the singer until his death. Barreaud's tour through some of the main sights of the city was fascinating and informative.

Encouraged by some locals, we took a trip to Cefalu on the coast. The pleasant train journey to this popular seaside resort took just under an hour. Framed by the massive Rocca peak and with a long sandy beach, it's a lively place with hawkers selling everything from jewellery and beach paraphernalia to tattoos and Thai massage. One guy paraded up and down all day with a tray of coconuts crying “Coco bella, coco bella” while kids on pedalos with slides splashed around in the sea.

Not much happens on Sunday in Palermo and in summer families decamp to the seaside. We were advised by the B&B to chill out in Plait Mare in Lungomare Cristoforo Colombo, which is a 20-minute taxi ride from the city. It's a little cliffside retreat with a bar and a small restaurant, which opened last year, and provides deck chairs, umbrellas and access to rock bathing. Not yet discovered by tourists, it has quickly become a popular local haunt.

The week ended with *The Leopard* again in the news when fashion designers Dolce & Gabbana (Dolce is Sicilian) made their haute couture debut with a 73-piece collection inspired by Visconti's movie in the palatial San Domenico Hotel in Taormina. The two-day event complete with fireworks, celebrity guests and clothes costing thousands was the most excessive display imaginable. In true Sicilian style, it could be described as another kind of Baroque study, only this time one on fashion rather than on death.

exception,” a local businessman told me. Squalor and magnificence exist side by side. There is rubbish everywhere, piled high, seeping and stinking, alongside some of the most astonishing and beautiful buildings imaginable.

There is a kind of unpredictability to this city, formerly one of the greatest in Europe, which was racked by Mafia wars and assassinations in the 1990s, but is now undergoing something of a renaissance, largely due to the heroic efforts of Leoluca Orlando, mayor of the city in 2009 and re-elected in July.

If political achievement can be expressed visually, one of the city's proudest renovations and a symbol of the fight back, is that of Lo Spasimo in former Mafia run territory near the port. Built as a church in 1506 by the Olivetan monks, it became in turn a theatre, a poorhouse, and was eventually left to rack and ruin. Work on its restoration began in 1988 and was completed in 1995. It is now a vibrant arts centre.

The Foro Italico, an area along the sea front, is another success story. Once rife with prostitution and drug dealing, it has been cleared and landscaped, and is now a lovely promenade and