

# The Duchess Guide

In his quest for the ultimate Sicily itinerary, **James Miller** decided to consult one of the island's noble ambassadors, Nicoletta Polo, the Duchess of Palma



Nicoletta Polo Lanza Tomasi, Duchess of Palma di Montechiaro

Visiting somewhere as special as Sicily can present a dilemma as there are so many guide books and television programmes covering the Mediterranean's most majestic island. You can either find yourself spoilt for choice or totally bewildered when considering what to see and do. And no trip to Sicily should be squandered by not having prepared an amazing itinerary of activities to enjoy. An enviable problem I'll confess, but one I intended to solve nevertheless, so I met with one of the island's most prominent and cultured ambassadors; a lady who can offer the 'discerning' visitor an insight into the true Sicily and its captivating appeal, the Duchess of Palma, Nicoletta Polo.

Nicoletta and I are old friends from my previous adventures in Sicily and whenever I return to see her I'm welcomed with such warmth it's like visiting a kind and benevolent aunt, although I don't boast such lofty connections with my own family as Nicoletta is an Italian noblewoman. Her husband is the heir of Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa, the author of one of the most important works in Italian literary culture, *Il Gattopardo* (*The Leopard*). This famous work of fiction tells the story of a noble family during the cultural change and political unrest Sicily experienced in the era of Italian unification. Unsurprisingly, Nicoletta is an extremely cultured lady with boundless energy and enthusiasm for enjoying the many beautiful aspects of Sicily and all of its exquisite treasures. I arrived at Palazzo Lanza Tomasi and, after us both catching up on each other's news, Nicoletta began conveying her Sicilian recommendations for *Italia!* readers.



## 1. Ortigia

First on the list was Ortigia. "I adore Ortigia," Nicoletta warmly expressed her sentiments about this small and charming island that is the beating heart of ancient Syracuse. Ortigia is composed of narrow and quaint streets overlooked by unique decorative balconies that are always blooming with flowers. "The air you breathe when you're there, the atmosphere, the antiquities. It reminds me of Venice, particularly the Giudecca area." Listening to Nicoletta reminisce about Ortigia brought back my own memories of strolling through Ortigia's streets at night time. It was such a beautiful place that even a drizzle of rain didn't dampen my mood, rather it just added to the entrancing ambience that characterises this special town.



Lush vegetation on Ortigia

Images by James Miller, Amanda Robinson, Chris Allsop, Jane Keightley and Jon Bickley





Ortigia's  
cathedral square



Ortigia is Syracuse's  
old town



Fountain in  
Ortigia



Distant view of  
the town of Gangi

## 2. Sicily's Madonie Regional Park

Sicily boasts a breathtaking natural park bursting with wildlife such as foxes, eagles, boar and wildcats. The spectacular Madonie mountain range is home to the park. This is an area of outstanding natural beauty that majestically dominates the Palermo skyline, adding to the drama and fascination of Palermo and its environs, some of which Nicoletta was quick to mention, such as the towns of Polizzi Generosa, Castelbuono and Gangi, which all have a number of beautiful churches and *palazzi*.



The wild nature park  
of Madonie



Spring flowers bloom in  
the Madonie park



### 3. Sicilian island hopping

Nicoletta also pointed out that to really enjoy the breadth and variety that the Sicilian experience can offer, the visitor must clap on all sail and head for the islands. Nicoletta was as animated as ever when describing the paradise that can be found in the Sicilian archipelago. Each island has something unique to offer. The island of Pantelleria, south of Sicily, is a veritable paradise, and the Aeolian Islands off Milazzo's coast are also utterly beautiful, such as Salina with its natural freshwater springs and coastal cliffs.

Nicoletta pointed out that some of the most random places can be the most interesting, such as Mozia and its archaeological site, possessing fascinating ancient Phoenician history. Nicoletta and her husband were friends with the chief archaeologist on the island. She recounted an enthralling story of particular interest: when the discovery was made of an elegant and powerful statue of a chariot driver from antiquity.



Panarea, in the  
Aeolian Islands



The archeological site at Mozia



Gadir on  
Pantelleria



Sea view from Panarea





*Etna from  
Taormina*

#### *4. Sicily – a land of fire*

"Aah, of course there is Etna," Nicoletta exclaimed with an excited intensity that surely captured recollections of visits to the brooding giant that is Europe's tallest active volcano. Sicily is a land of passions, beauty and, of course, fire. My own visit to Mount Etna years ago will always be burnt into my memory: the ascent, the strange lunar-like quality of the landscape alongside the excitement and sense of being utterly humbled by the (thankfully merciful) temper of this elemental power burning and churning beneath the surface.

*Etna from Taormina's  
amphitheatre*



*Etna seen above Catania*



#### *5. Sicily's stunning beaches*

As the largest island in the Mediterranean, you would expect Sicily to have its fair share of stunning beaches, and Nicoletta recommends you head towards the south of the island for seaside pleasure-seeking. Calamosche and the nature reserve of Vendicari are both near Noto and have unique qualities. Elsewhere, head northwest to San Vito lo Capo, and the Scala dei Turchi (Turkish Steps) on the southwestern coast with its dramatic smooth white rocky cliffs.

[www.sanvitolocapoweb.co.uk](http://www.sanvitolocapoweb.co.uk)  
[www.vendicari.net](http://www.vendicari.net)

*San Vito lo Capo*



*The nature reserve  
of Vendicari*



*One of the best  
beaches in Italy*





## 6. Sicily's religious heritage

Nicoletta is passionate about historical beauty, and it comes as no surprise that the delightful town Monreale in Palermo province makes her list. High above the gloriously chaotic capital, Monreale offers a sense of serenity and history. Nicoletta expressed her appreciation for the wonder of Monreale cathedral, where a glitteringly extravagant mosaic interior and a peaceful walk around the tranquil cloisters are a memorable experience indeed. Nicoletta also described her love for the works of Giacomo Serpotta, a Sicilian master in the art of stucco. It was in Monreale that Giacomo received his first commission in the Church of the Madonna dell'Itria, however Nicoletta's main recommendation to witness the genius of Giacomo's work is in Palermo's Oratories of Santa Cita, Rosario and San Lorenzo, where the greatest stucco sculptures of the 18th century can be admired.



Monreale cathedral



Monreale cloisters



Exterior decorations of Monreale cathedral

## 7. The art of the Roman Empire

The Romans left an artistic legacy on Sicily that still resonates today. Nicoletta described the historic town of Piazza Armerina, renowned for its amazing Roman Villa del Casale with mosaics that depict the life of the Roman Empire and its citizens at business and play. Interestingly, there are mosaics of young women frolicking in what appear to be bikinis. However, Nicoletta pointed out that the works conveying beautiful imagery of animals is where the real artistry of the time is to be found.

Nicoletta emotively recounted a time when she saw a Greek sculpture called the Dancing Satyr in Mazara del Vallo. This exceptional sculpture depicts one of the mythological beings that was human in form but with animal characteristics, prevalent in Ancient Greek myth and legend. The contours of this bronze sculpture's form and attention to the illusion of movement are entrancing.

Also on the topic of Ancient Greece, Nicoletta described the magical experience of visiting the Valley of the Temples in Agrigento. If it is not enough to witness the majestic and god-like proportions of the excellently preserved temples, there is a stunning sculpture by Igor Mitoraj of the fallen Icarus lying at the foot of the temple of Concordia, commonly known as the Fallen Angel.

There are other incredible Greek ruins to experience in Selinunte and for those with a particular interest in ancient history the Cave di Cusa is the site where the stone for these sacred temples was quarried. This is an ever-popular location for tourists and is a natural beauty spot.

[www.valleyofthetemples.com](http://www.valleyofthetemples.com)



The Greek ruins of Agrigento



Mosaic at the Villa Romana del Casale





Statue of the fallen Icarus



The temple at Selinunte



Ruins of the Greek city of Selinunte

## *S. Orto Botanico di Palermo*

Closer to Nicoletta's home in Palermo is the bucolic and stimulating Palermo Botanical Gardens. With ten hectares of exotic beautiful gardens to enjoy in a neo-classical setting, it is still one of the finest centres for botanical interest in the Mediterranean.

[www.ortobotanico.unipa.it](http://www.ortobotanico.unipa.it)



Bucolic retreat at the Palermo Botanical Gardens



The Garden was instrumental in the introduction of many species to Europe

I've visited Sicily many times over the last 10 years and have had many adventures. However, after my session with Nicoletta I was struck by just how much more there is to see and do on this spellbinding island. Some places I'd already heard of but after having them described with the verve and passion that only Nicoletta can deliver, I may have solved my original problem of not having a focused itinerary for my future trips to Sicily. ■

### INFORMATION

► Nicoletta is also renowned for her classes in Sicilian cookery and offers the discerning gastronome a unique culinary experience in her home, Palazzo Lanza Tomasi. Her fame is such that TV Chef Rick Stein visited Nicoletta whilst shooting an episode of *Long Weekend* in Palermo, during which time they cooked together the famous Sicilian street food *panelle*. More information about Nicoletta's cookery classes can be found at [www.butera28.it](http://www.butera28.it)