

around every corner

Wherever you turn in
Palermo, the layered and
chaotic capital of Sicily,
secrets and stories await

By Stanley Stewart

Photographs by Alistair Taylor-Young



Gardens of oleander, palms, and cacti
at Villa Igiea, a Rocco Forte Hotel

Opposite page: A ballroom at the
Palazzo Valguarnera-Gangi, an urban
palace in the Kalsa neighborhood

The Palazzo Valguarnera-Gangi occupies two sides of a piazza, as well as several adjoining streets, deep in the heart of the Kalsa quarter of Palermo. When I rang the bell, a uniformed butler opened the colossal door and ushered me up a double staircase, past the stone bowls of water in which, had I been arriving at night sometime in the 18th century, I could have extinguished my torch. At the top, Principessa Carine Vanni Calvello Mantegna di Gangi was waiting to guide me around one of Italy's grandest palaces.

Palermo is a stage set, a theatrical concatenation of ornate façades and crumbling backstreets. The city could be the setting for a 1930s gangster thriller, a medieval fantasy with secret codes and evil monks, a bodice-ripping romance, or a contemporary film noir. But for all of its intricate cloisters, chaotic markets, and grand sea terraces, Palermo's narratives are about characters more than scenery. Around every corner you stumble into remarkable people. Visit Paris and you will meet no one, except possibly other tourists. Come to Palermo and your phone will immediately be full of your new Sicilian friends' numbers. The city makes you part of the story.

In the palazzo, the principessa, who seemed too young and chic for this antique place, led me through the Fencing Room, the Music Room, the Red Room, the Green Room, the Conversation Room, and the Suicide Room—named for a painting of Cleopatra clutching her asp. When I asked how many rooms there were, she shrugged: "If you know how many rooms there are, it is not really a palace."

We carried on to the famous Galleria degli Specchi, or Gallery of Mirrors. It is the setting for the ballroom scene, which lasted 44 cinematic minutes, in the 1960s film adaptation of the great Sicilian novel *The Leopard*. Here Alain Delon and Claudia Cardinale waltzed beneath a ceiling swarming with cherubs, with a growing sense that their old world was vanishing. The principessa felt the same. Out on the terrace she shared her anxieties about this building, with its challenging maintenance, mounting taxes, and government indifference. Suddenly she wasn't a privileged princess but an individual, worried, emotional, heroic in her determination to see things through. This is Palermo, I thought. I had come for a palace but had found a person.

Set around a glittering bay, framed by the mountain backdrop known as the Conca d'Oro—the Golden Conch—Palermo is the most adorable and underrated city in Italy. It is a place of great swagger and humble intimacy: charming, chaotic, irrepressible, and beautiful. It has none of the studied vibe that can make some



Italian cities seem like museums. It refuses to be gentrified. Palermo is as untidy as life and as temperamental as a Sicilian lover. It has a vulnerability with its past troubles, its shabby side streets, its lack of resources. I would rather spend a day here than a week in smug, well-ordered Florence.

But Palermo is no provincial backwater. For millennia the city has been central to a sprawling cosmopolitan world. If it feels old, if it sometimes carries an air of world-weariness, remember that it has had to put up with a long line of faithless suitors whose heads were turned by its plump lemons. The city's first colonizers, a thousand years before Christ, were the Phoenicians. They were followed by the Greeks, the Carthaginians, the Romans, the Vandals, the Goths, the Byzantines, the Arabs, the Hohenstaufens, the Angevins, the Aragonese, the Hapsburgs, the Bourbons. The most unlikely of Sicily's conquerors were the Normans: The island owes as much to them as much as England does. They came south in the 11th century, possibly hoping to escape

This page,
clockwise from
right: A mirrored
hall at the
Palazzo Alliata
di Villafranca;
a Palermo
backstreet;
a ceiling fresco
at the Palazzo
Valguarnera-Gangi

Opposite page:
A curtained
entryway at
the church of
Santa Caterina
d'Alessandria



another wet winter on the South Downs. I like to imagine them sending breathless postcards to their cousins in Britannia about the sun, the wine, the pleasure palaces, and the lemons, perhaps with a PS about a gorgeous Sicilian girl.

In a piazza around the corner from the Palazzo Gangi, I met Liborio, the burly proprietor of Bar Timi, sitting with his friends at the three tables outside on the cobbles. He was appalled by my order of an Aperol spritz. "No, ti prego," he cried, lifting his eyes to heaven. "This is a drink for tourists. Wait, I will bring you a white wine from the slopes of Mount Etna. It is made with fresh air, sun, and wind. And Carricante grapes, of course. This wine will change your life, make you a better person." And I think it probably did, at least for that sudden Sicilian moment, laughing and tasting with Liborio.

Across town, in the catacombs of the Capuchin monastery, I called in on the dead. Steps lead down into a macabre mass grave of citizens who could afford a process of mummification that the monks invented in the 17th century. Suspended on the walls of long underground passageways are more than 9,000 of the city's former residents, dressed in their Sunday best, carefully divided by rank, gender, and occupation. After a couple of centuries, not all the residents are looking their best, although, in some cases, the mummification has been a remarkable success. I know living people who don't look this chipper. On the way out, the monk at the door called it "a carnival of the dead."

On a balcony in Piazza Giuseppe Verdi, I joined a group of new Sicilian friends: an architect, a designer, and a DJ. It was a jolly party. Everyone talked at once, drank prosecco, gossiped about friends' liaisons, and argued about where to go for dinner. "Embellishments," the architect said, as she held out her glass. "That is Palermo—opera houses, palaces, love affairs, lies, everything must be embellished."

The balcony overlooked the Teatro Massimo, Palermo's opera house, the third largest in Europe after Paris's and Vienna's. People like to say that opera flourished because of the mafia. Apparently mafia dons loved nothing more than an evening in a private box, dabbing their eyes through *Madama Butterfly*.

Miss Yaya, the DJ, was pure Palermo—stylish, passionate, edgy. As with the city, you never knew quite what to expect: bittersweet melancholy or vibrant energy. The next day I found her in Vucciria market, her decks set up among the zucchini and plum tomatoes, happily playing to the packed outdoor tables of Osteria Dadalia. Waiters hustled back and forth with foaming bottles of beer, diners abandoned their pasta con le sarde to jive in the narrow alley with passersby, and the greengrocer nodded with the beat while weighing out half a kilo of artichokes for an older gentleman.

After her set Miss Yaya and I went to find an artist

friend. A rattling lift took us up through the echoing stairwell of another crumbling palace to the top floor, where we found the studio of Edoardo Dionea Cicconi. A conceptual artist who works with light and sound, he came to Palermo from Rome. The city was a revelation, he said.

Cicconi threw open the windows of his studio to reveal the cathedral across the street. Built by the Normans in the 12th century, inspired by the Arabs, with embellishments from the Byzantines, it is architectural chaos: crenellated ziggurats, majolica cupolas, geometric patterns, Gothic arches, a Catalan portico, a neoclassical dome, columns carved with





where to stay

Butera 28 Apartments

Set in a waterfront palace once owned by Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa, author of the iconic Sicilian novel *The Leopard*, these charming and spacious apartments have a retro, 1950s vibe and come with kitchens, lounges, and shuttered windows that open onto the sea. *From \$105; butera28.it*

Villa Igiea, a Rocco Forte Hotel

This early-20th-century masterpiece was a statement of the wealth and good taste of the Florio dynasty, Sicily's 19th-century merchant princes. Hotelier Sir Rocco Forte bought it in 2019 and gave it an impressive refurbishment that restores its past glamour and honors its Belle Époque character. There are gardens of oleander, palms, and cacti, and a swimming pool beneath a folly of Greek columns. Its terrace bar is one of the Mediterranean's greatest balconies. *From \$592; roccofortehotels.com*

Grand Hotel et Des Palmes

Architect Ernesto Basile transformed this former palace for the Ingham-Whitakers, an English family of Marsala wine merchants, into a hotel in the late 19th century. Think extravagant columns, elegant mirrored spaces, and nude sculptures. Rooms are spacious, the staff is excellent, and the central location is ideal. *From \$323; grandhotel-et-des-palmes.com*

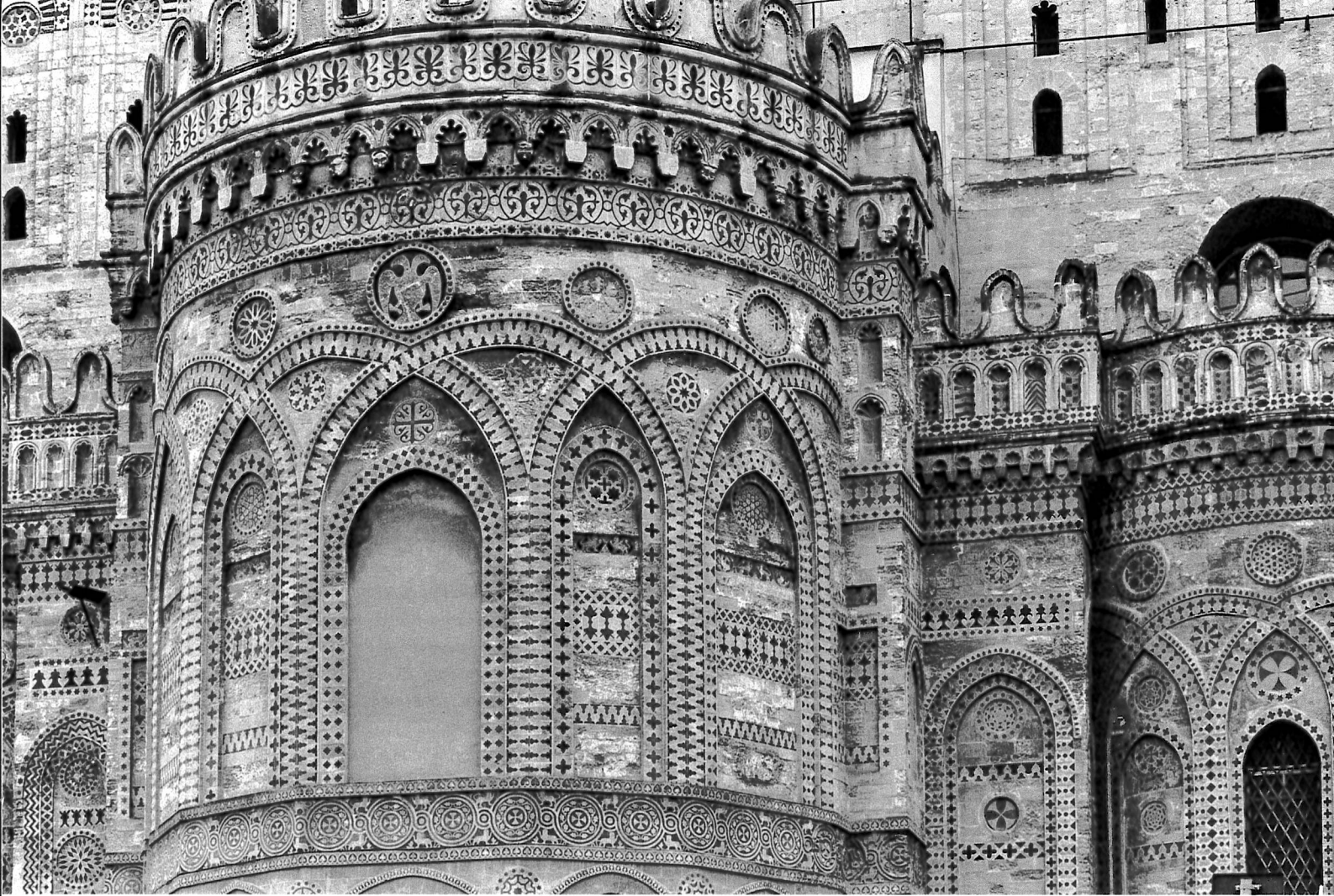
Villa Tasca

Framed by formal gardens, this grand villa, featured in the second season of *The White Lotus*, has the kind of 18th-century elegance that would have impressed Sicily's Bourbon royalty. Wagner stayed here after being thrown out of the Grand Hotel for unpaid bills and was so inspired by the place that he wrote *Parsifal*, his final composition, on its grand piano. Frescoes swarm the walls in the vast bedrooms, some of which are grouped around a grand drawing room. Breakfast is served on the terrace overlooking the gardens. *From \$1,065; villatasca.com*

This page, from top: An angel figurine by ceramicist Angela Tripi; floor tiles depicting a leopard in the ballroom of Palazzo Valguarnera-Gangi

Opposite page: Grocery shopping at the Mercato del Capo, in the Monte di Pietà neighborhood





passages of the Quran. It is an artwork, Cicconi said with a smile, on the theme of time—all the centuries of Palermo, bundled together in stone. Among the royal tombs is that of Henry VI, a German king who by 1194 was also the king of Sicily. When they opened his tomb, they found him, blonde-haired, wearing his crown, dressed in Arab clothes.

Another day in the Piazza Bellini, where boys were thumping a football against a bit of ancient Roman wall, I stepped into the church of Santa Caterina d'Alessandria, whose interior is such a swirling tumult of baroque details a visitor can become seasick. From a side door I climbed long staircases to the roof, where nuns from the adjoining convent watched the mass from behind metal screens. They knelt, their faces in shadow, high among plaster angels. In a corner sat an elderly woman, her fingers coiled into the metal mesh. "My grandmother was a nun here," she said, without explanation. Not all nuns were devout brides of Christ. A couple of centuries ago, the populations of many convents included "fallen women." With their reputations besmirched, their families despaired of finding them a suitor. Some people said the screens enclosing the high gallery were to stop young nuns, incarcerated against their will, from throwing themselves to their death. "You must have a pastry," the woman said suddenly. "They are the taste of my childhood. My grandmother knew all the convent recipes. She used to say it was the happiest moment of her day, when they were allowed a *torte di ricotta* in the courtyard."

The convent is closed now—you can look through the melancholic single bedrooms and the prayer chapel—but the pastries have survived. In a corner of the courtyard, I Segreti del Chiostro (the Secrets of the Cloister) sells baked goods still made with the nuns' secret recipes. Sitting under an orange tree, I had a *torte*

di ricotta of my own and thought of the young woman who sat here more than a century ago.

These days there is a spirited renaissance in Palermo that the Normans would have admired, an entrepreneurial buzz as the city reinvents itself. Sicilians, as well as other Italians, are discovering Palermo. Its advantages—lower rents, unrestored buildings, a plethora of tempting palaces, the sense of authenticity—have made it a magnet for start-ups. Young chefs have opened cool restaurants utilizing Sicily's rich palette of ingredients. Contemporary galleries showcase artists from the island. Bookshops, trendy bars, and designer boutiques are all now part of its commercial landscape. This is not gentrification, just new ideas finding their way into Palermo's chaos.

Opposite the Palazzo Gangi is the sprawling complex of Sant'Anna la Misericordia. Throughout much of the 20th century, its 15th-century palazzo was in collapse, its exquisite courtyard used as a parking lot. But now it has been reborn in the 21st century as GAM, the Gallery of Modern Art. On the Via Vittorio Emanuele, I visited the 18th-century Palazzo Riso, bombed in World War II, abandoned for decades, and brought back to life as the Contemporary Art Museum of Sicily. When Goethe came to



Sicily, he believed it was the key to understanding Italy. But he was wrong. When Garibaldi landed, more than 70 years after, to make the island part of the new, unified Italy, he was just another conqueror. Crowds turned out to appease the new ruler. Some historians claim they shouted “Viva Talia,” rather than “Italia,” believing Talia to be some queen whom they should now revere. It indicated their separateness from what Sicilians sometimes still call “the continent.”

I had dinner in a backstreet trattoria. Cats were patrolling the darkness between pools of street light. Nearby a woman was shouting something from a window. A friend was pouring the Etna wine that I was now recommending to everyone. “I don’t know who we are really: Middle Eastern, North African, some hybrid race,” he said. “But really, we are only pretending to be Italians.”

A statue of the Virgin Mary in a shop window at Lo Dico Arredi Sacri, a religious-goods store

Opposite page: The original Arab-Norman façade of the Palermo Cathedral, which was completed in 1185 and embellished over the centuries

where to eat

Florio

The tables on Villa Igiea’s wonderful terrace overlook the bay, where at night illuminated ferries glide through the darkness. There is a feeling of a lost world here, an elegance rooted in a slower, more thoughtful era. Old-fashioned service, that stunning view, and chef Fulvio Pierangelini’s classic menu add up to one of the great meals in Sicily. Don’t miss the exquisitely delicate salted baked sea bass. roccofortehotels.com

Gagini

In one of Palermo’s only Michelin-starred restaurants, Italian Brazilian chef Mauricio Zillo conjures contemporary dishes that shine a light on local ingredients—yellow Monreale plums, Palermo sumac, Ispica sesame, caper flowers from Salina, crab from the Mediterranean. The setting is the atmospheric atelier of 16th-century sculptor Antonello Gagini, where the photography of Norwegian Per Barclay now hangs on the stone walls. Book ahead for the eight-course tasting menu paired with Sicilian wines. gaginirestaurant.com

Osteria Ballarò

Inspired by Italy’s Slow Food movement, Ballarò’s menu is crowded with signature Sicilian ingredients—tuna, pistachio, lemon, panelle, arancini, and eggplant, among others—and paired with a list of great Sicilian wines. Bare brick walls, stone columns, and vaulted ceilings give the place a kind of antique intimacy. Don’t leave without trying the cannolo artigianale con ricotta e canditi (homemade cannoli with sweet ricotta and candied fruit). osteriaballaro.it

Ristorante La Terrazza

High above the coastline an hour west of Palermo is the village of Scopello, where several charming trattorias offer splendid views of the sea and the Sicilian mountains. Among the best is La Terrazza. Start with a glass of white wine and a plate of seafood crudités. Via Marco Polo 5, Scopello