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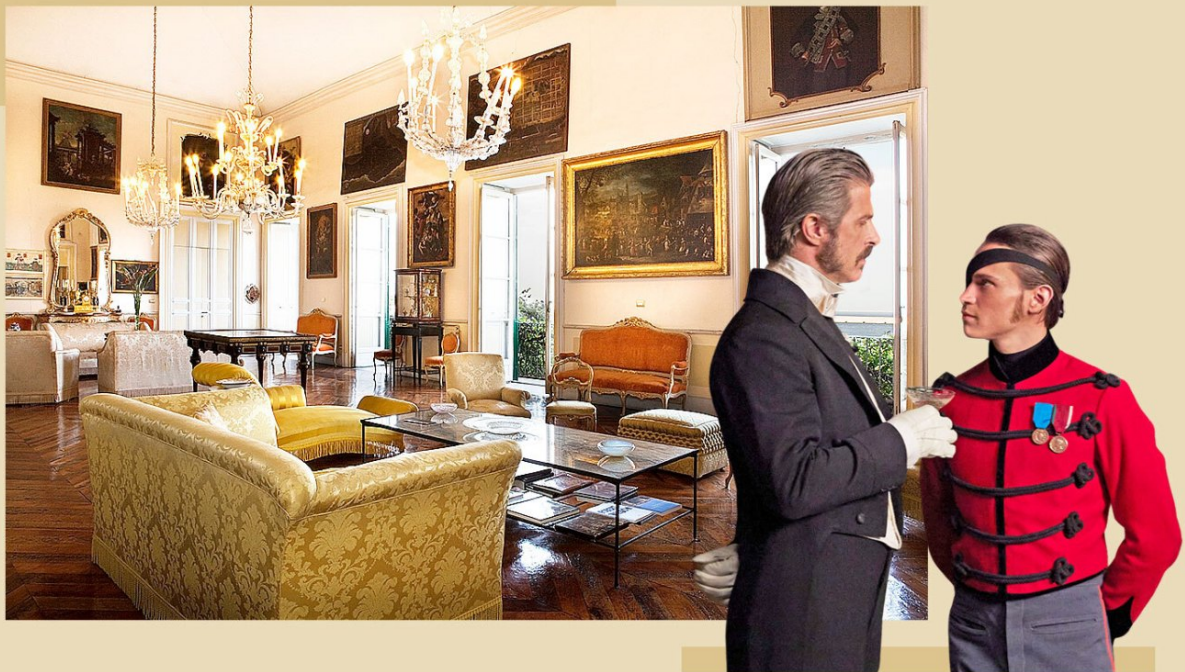
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I stayed in the Sicilian palace that inspired *The Leopard*. You can too

The grand former home of the author of the classic Italian novel — the basis of a new Netflix show — is now a rather swanky holiday apartment. Our writer checks in



The *Leopard*, based on Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa's novel, has been made into a Netflix series

Jonathan Lorie | Saturday March 01 2025, 12.00am GMT, The Times

But aren't you travelling with a tie?" The Duchess of Palma stares at my clothes, crumpled from the dawn flight to Palermo, while her maid serves us lunch — Sicilian specialties of chicken with oregano and artichokes in

olive oil. “Well,” she says, laughing, “when you visit the club, I will lend you one of my husband’s ties.”

We are sitting in the private dining room of her 18th-century Palazzo Lanza Tomasi, a low-beamed space lined with old paintings and tall windows overlooking the sea in the Kalsa district. Beyond them is a terrace which the duchess, Nicoletta Polo Lanza Tomasi, has filled with lemon trees, carnations and tiny turtles. As we finish eating she smiles. “Shall I show you around?”

This is the world of the Sicilian nobility, whose glory days will hit our TV screens on March 5 in *The Leopard*, a sumptuous new series on Netflix. Billed as a Sicilian version of *Downton Abbey*, it’s set among the grand aristocracy of the 1860s and based on the book of the same name, the best-selling novel in Italian history.



The Leopard is set in Palermo, Sicily, with a storyline centred around its aristocracy

ALAMY

And I have come here because that book was written by Nicoletta’s father-in-law, drafted when he lived right here in this palace, which is also open to overnight guests.

“My husband’s adoptive father, Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa, was the last Prince of Lampedusa,” Nicoletta says, walking me through a dazzling series of 18th-century drawing rooms, glittering with mirrors and chandeliers. “He had the idea of writing about his great-grandfather, inspired by a family journal.”

The novel was Lampedusa's first and last. He died shortly after completing it in 1957 and never saw it published. But its mix of high society, vivid romance and a mesmerising central character — the Leopard himself — made it an immediate hit. Within 20 months of publication in 1958 it was reprinted 57 times. It inspired an epic film by Luchino Visconti, starring Burt Lancaster, which won the Palme d'Or at Cannes in 1963.

"What makes the international, incredible success of this book?" Nicoletta muses. "It's a book loved by everybody — because it's not a historic novel, it's a book about death, life and love."

The life and death in the story are those of Fabrizio, a prince nicknamed "the Leopard" who faces revolution in 1860. The romance is supplied by his dashing nephew Tancredi, who joins the rebels and falls for a village girl. Both have to choose between resisting or accepting change. Tancredi concludes: "If we want things to stay as they are, things will have to change."

Nicoletta shows me her ballroom, where a glass case contains Lampedusa's manuscript, handwritten in an exercise book. Next door is his library, marble fireplace topped by candelabras, walls filled with leather-bound books. In a room beyond hangs a faded grant of nobility dated 1638 and a painting of his great-grandfather, a heavy-faced man with lambchop whiskers and hooded eyes: the original Leopard himself.



The city of Palermo is the perfect backdrop for this “Sicilian version of Downton Abbey”

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The model for Tancredi was Nicoletta’s late husband, Gioacchino Lanza Tomasi, a cousin the childless author adopted to continue the family name. In Nicoletta’s office there’s a photo of Gioacchino talking to Burt Lancaster on set. He is young and handsome, guardian of Lampedusa’s flame.

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I thank Nicoletta and check into my apartment on the top floor. It’s an elegant suite with tiled floors, old armoires and a sea view.

To support the upkeep of the palace, Nicoletta has created 12 holiday apartments in the same style, at different levels of luxury; one has a grand piano. Guests can request her tour of the palace and she also teaches Sicilian cookery classes in the palace kitchen. Most of the island’s nobility, she says, have taken similar steps.

The Netflix series opens with Fabrizio braving the siege of Palermo to rescue his daughter from her convent school. There is indeed a convent where aristocratic daughters were once sent — the Monastero di Santa Caterina d’Alessandria, which is apparently worth a visit — so I exit the palace’s cobbled courtyard to find it.

Palermo is not a simple place to navigate. Winding alleys of 16th-century houses whose windows are draped with washing lead to hidden squares and gothic mansions. Cats scavenge in Second World War bomb sites. One house carries a plaque to Garibaldi, the revolutionary who threatened Fabrizio's feudal world.

It's hard to tell how much has changed. This area, near the marina, is called Kalsa, from the Arabic *al-khalisa* meaning "the chosen one", a ghost of the era when Arabs ruled Sicily, before the Normans, French and Spanish. As Fabrizio says, "For over 25 centuries we've been bearing the weight of superb civilisations, none made by ourselves."

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Today that weight seems lighter: in the pretty restaurant Buatta Cucina Popolana, housed in a belle époque shop, the seafood is rich with Arab flavours — saffron, raisins, pine nuts (mains from £12; buattapalermo.it).



The modest interiors of Osteria dei Vespri belie its superb food

I reach the handsome Piazza Bellini, where Lampedusa liked to lunch at the simple Pizzeria Bellini (mains from £7; facebook.com/people/Bellini-Palermo/100092510674756/?sk). Next door is the convent. Its church is a fine example of Sicilian baroque, a riot of saints and cherubs and scrollwork. Faith would be flamboyant here. The cloister houses a bakery selling ricotta pastries, and the rooftop offers a sweeping view of this magnificent, mixed-up city.

As dusk settles, I stroll past the fish stalls of Ballaro market to the Palazzo Valguarnera Gangi, where Visconti shot his ballroom scene. Its stables are now a restaurant, Osteria dei Vespri, where the interior is modest but the food superb: quails in prosciutto with pomegranate jus, mackerel flecked with aniseed and oranges, meringues topped with peppercorns and fennel leaves (mains from £29; osteriadeivespri.it). These are complex distillations of this island and its history, heady with foreign influence. And then there are exquisite local wines. I will sleep well tonight.

Next morning I search out a palace where Netflix filmed the show. The Palazzo Comitini is open for free tours and its rococo rooms are a treat (turismo.cittametropolitana.pa.it). There are elegant paintings and grand bedrooms and a boudoir panelled in porcelain. The salon used as Fabrizio's dining room is a glorious confection of murals and mirrors, a local grandee's version of Versailles.



Visconti shot his ballroom scene at Palazzo Valguarnera Gangi

NETFLIX

To meet a living grandee I head for the club, clutching my borrowed tie. The Circolo Bellini dates from 1769 and membership is largely hereditary. Its clubhouse is a 16th-century bastion of the city walls. Doormen in livery usher me to the library, to meet the Barone Martinez Tagliavia di San Giacomo. He is utterly charming, a former ambassador who looks after the building and grounds. “I joke that I am the gardener,” he says, smiling.

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His ancestors, he says, fought at the Battle of Lepanto in 1571, Europe’s largest sea battle since Roman times. And he remembers, in the 1950s, workers on his family estates would doff their hats and call him “Excellencia”. He points to a desk with a worn leather top: “Lampedusa was a member here. That is where *The Leopard* was written.”

Then he takes me around the clubhouse — the card room hung with royal photos, the garden filled with orange trees. “We maintain the old traditions,” he murmurs, showing me out through a gothic door.

My last stop is a lovely restaurant that mixes old and new as vividly as this city. Located in the workshop of a Renaissance sculptor, Gagini has rough stone walls and sleek modern tables. Its food is a similar twist of traditional and contemporary: beef

slices in sweetened broth, squid strips around chicken livers, seared pork with aniseed. The contrasts are sublime (three courses £66; gaginirestaurant.com).



Graphic by The Times and Sunday Times

Then they bring dessert wine. It comes from Marsala on the coast, the place where Garibaldi landed his army in 1860 and changed everything — or perhaps nothing — on this fascinating island. It tastes fiery, sweet and very old.

I turn slowly home to the Palazzo Lanza Tomasi and give Nicoletta back her husband's tie.

Jonathan Lorie was a guest of the Sicilian Experience (thesicilianexperience.co.uk) and Palazzo Lanza Tomasi, which has a night's self-catering for two from £66 (palazzolanzatomasi.it). Fly to Palermo

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