

July 27, 2008

36 Hours in Palermo

By ARIEL FOXMAN

IN its 2,700-year history, the port city of Palermo has undergone three golden ages: the Carthaginians, Arabs and Normans all found glory along its rugged shores. And now, after decades of post-War neglect and mafia corruption, the often overlooked Sicilian capital is poised for a fourth — or at least a well-deserved comeback. Crumbling roads are being repaved, landmarks scrubbed clean and a newfound pride can be felt. But the essential charms of this mysterious and intoxicating city thankfully remain intact. There are still seductive old neighborhoods, a delightful patchwork of architecture (what's the word for Arab-Norman-Spanish-Baroque?), and a belching chaotic mess known as Palermo traffic.

Friday

4 p.m.

1) BREAD AND CIRCUS

The ancient city is studded with vibrant and raucous outdoor markets. Mix with residents shopping for weekend essentials in the Ballarò, the city's oldest Arab-style open market in the decrepit yet atmospheric Albergheria quarter. Join the crowds at either end (enter through Piazza Ballarò or Piazza del Carmine) and browse stalls with all types of fish still twitching on trays of ice, alongside crates of squash as long as didgeridoos and capers the size of grapes. If the vendors who perform like carnival barkers aren't entertainment enough, grab a piping-hot panelle, a street-food fritter made of chickpeas (about 5 euros, or \$8 at \$1.62 to the euro).

5:30 p.m.

2) DIVINE ARCHITECTURE

It wouldn't be a trip to Italy without a dip into a magnificent church. Make a 10-or-so-minute walk north to Piazza Bellini in the old city's center and ascend the steps to a pair of famed houses of worship. The Church of San Cataldo (Piazza Bellini 2), a rather nondescript diminutive chapel, is best appreciated from the outside, where one can take in its three Saracen cardinal-red domes. But a few steps away is the Church of Santa Maria Dell'Ammiraglio, a k a La Mortarana, which offers a quintessential blend of Arab-Norman architecture, including an impressive campanile that dates back to 1143. Gorgeous, well-maintained mosaics and frescoes abound; no wonder the space is booked solid for weddings.

8 p.m.

3) MODERN CLASSIC

If you're hankering for a sophisticated take on classic Sicilian fare, head over to Bellotero (Via Castriota 3; 39-091-582-158), a 10-table restaurant in Palermo's new town that draws a nightly crowd of discerning and

lively locals. Settle into a delectable meal of spaghetti with stone bass, sea urchin and lemon zest (12 euros) or lamb with oven-roasted pistachios and a vegetable caponata (12 euros). Top it all off with a glass of regional Marsala (try the Donna Franca from the Florio vineyards; 5 euros).

11 p.m.

4) BAR CRAWL

For a city with such an audible heartbeat, Palermo is surprisingly lackluster when it comes to memorable night life. All of the young crowd seem to have received the same text message, as drones of them meet up regularly at the bars lining Via Ruggero Settimo, Via Principe Belmonte and Via Isidoro la Lumia. Wade through the revelry that spills out into the streets or make your way to the more grown-up Bar Malù (Via Enrico Albanese 21; 39-347-820-0870). This duplex lounge with outdoor seating attracts an upscale bunch that flirts to D.J.-spun tunes and sips special cocktails like the Robertino, a nightcap of gin, Angostura bitters and Aperol (5 euros).

Saturday

9:30 a.m.

5) MORNING MARKETING

Forget that espresso. Get a rush by diving into the city's most frenzied market, the souk-like La Vucciria (between Corso Vittorio Emanuele and Piazza San Domenico). A dizzying maze of narrow streets is filled with food stalls and illuminated with thousands of tiny lights. Slink into Bread Forreria (Via Bonacorso, 29), an adorable old-fashioned bakery, for homemade fettine zuccherate, its signature bread with sesame, raisin or anis toasted to perfection (10 euros a kilogram).

11 a.m.

6) RICH IN BAROQUE

Immerse yourself in Palermo's spectacular Baroque architecture and art in the historic Loggia district. A single pass (5 euros, at any of the sites) gets you into the area's five architectural treasures, including the Oratorio del Rosario del San Domenico (Via dei Bambiani), a 16th-century chapel with a Van Dyck altarpiece, a Novelli frescoed ceiling and many adorable cherubs. Grab a walking map (in front of any of the sites) and hit the other four, making sure to ponder the faces of the 15 statues representing the Virtues and the Mysteries in the resplendent rococo Oratorio del Rosario di Santa Citta (Via Valverde 3). They belonged to the socialites of the day.

1:30 p.m.

7) SWEET STOP

In a city where gelato in a sliced brioche is a legitimate meal option, get the real deal at Pasticceria Alba (Piazza Don Bosco 7/c-d, off Via della Libertà; 39-091-309-016; www.baralba.it), a half-century-old institution with an endless takeout menu and ancient staff. Order a scoop of pistachio bronte (2 euros), take your ice-cream burger outside and watch residents of all ages swing by for their midday delight.

4 p.m.

8) DEAD MAN WALK

File under “It Has to Be Seen to Be Believed.” Take the No. 327 bus to the city’s western outskirts for the exceedingly popular but no less creepy Catacombe dei Cappuccini (Piazza Cappuccini, 1; 39-091-212-117). The chilly passageways of this underground tomb are filled with more than 8,000 corpses — fully dressed men, women and children with frozen facial expressions — that were preserved through all sorts of science from the 16th century until 1920. More surreal than scary, this is a momento mori on a tremendous scale.

6:30 p.m.

9) SUNSET DRINKS

Pull up a chair on the terrace bar at the Villa Igiea (Salita Balmonte 43; 39-091-631-2111; www.hotelvillaiגיעapalermo.com), a luxury hotel on the slopes of the charming Monte Pellegrino. This Art Nouveau grande dame is nestled among gardens and courtyards that offer indelible 180-degree views of the Bay of Palermo. Sip a glass of crisp and fruity Donnafugata white (10 euros) while sampling the wide range of tempting snacks at the Bar des Arcades.

8:30 p.m.

10) SEASIDE SUPPER

For a nice break from all the seafood in the city, try Bye Bye Blues (Via del Garofalo 23; 39-091-684-1415; www.byeblyblues.it), an award-winning restaurant in the beachy Mondello neighborhood. Incredibly fresh ingredients conspire to create delicious plates like an appetizer of country cheeses served with walnuts and marmalade (13 euros). Follow it up with a delicious serving of pasta alla Norma, an island classic of rigatoni, tomato, ricotta and fried eggplant (12 euros). Pair it with a yummy 2004 Cerasuolo di Vittoria (22 euros), one of the 350 wines on hand.

10:30 p.m.

11) A DIGESTIVE STROLL

For dessert, grab a pezzo duro — frozen candylike gelato cones (2.5 euros) — at the sleek Caflisch cafe (Viale di Regina Margherita di Savoia, 2/b; 39-091-684-0444). From there, head to the nearby waterfront and enjoy a leisurely stroll, or passeggiata, along the crystal-clear Tyrrhenian. Take in legions of cabanas on white sand before fleeing the honky-tonk mix of bars, arcades and souvenir stands at the other end.

Sunday

11 a.m.

12) JESUS ON THE MOUNT

There’s a saying in Palermo that goes something like: “He who visits Palermo without visiting Monreale arrives as a donkey and leaves an ass.” O.K., so it’s not going on a T-shirt anytime soon, but that cramped and bustling hill town a few miles west of the city center is well worth a bus ride (No. 389). Beat a path to the 12th-century Duomo (Piazza Guglielmo il Buono) for what might be the most jaw-dropping display of Greek

and Byzantine mosaic work anywhere. There are 200 intricately carved columns in the adjoining cloisters, and the 65-foot-high mosaic of Jesus glows like the sun over the central apse. The golden age of Palermo, it seems, never really ended.

THE BASICS

From July through October, Eurofly (www.euroflyusa.com) flies direct to [Palermo](#) from J.F.K. in New York twice a week. A recent online search found very limited availability in August, with fares from \$1,447. Other carriers offered connecting service through [Milan](#) or Rome, with fares for early August starting at \$1,604 on Delta and Alitalia.

The 30-minute taxi to downtown Palermo runs about 40 euros, about \$65 at \$1.62 to the euro. But for 5.30 euros, buses run every half hour (www.prestiaecomande.it).

Palermo's many majestic hotels include the Excelsior Palace (Via Marchese Ugo, 3; 39-091- 790-9001; www.excelsiorpalermo.it). Just renovated, the lovely 19th-century building has 122 elegant rooms, a new restaurant and a diligent concierge. Standard double rates begin at 216 euros, but look for specials online.

For a more contemporary spin, check out the cosmopolitan Plaza Opera Hotel (Via Nicolò Gallo 2; 39-091-381-9026; www.hotelplazaopera.com/it) or the boutique Hotel Ucciardhome (Via Enrico Albanese 34/36; 39-348-426; www.hotelucciardhome.com). Their modern doubles start at 230 and 170 euros respectively.

Prefer something older? Check into the Palazza Conte Federico (Via dei Biscottari 4; 39-091-651-1881; www.confederico.com), a torch-lit, antiques-laden castle from the 1100s that is still owned, run and inhabited by aristocracy. In fact, the Count and Countess Federico will toast and assist you upon arrival. Rates range from 150 to 400 euros.

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