

THE PERFECT 10 PALERMO, ITALY

01 Home of the mafia, birthplace of cannoli and gelato, and setting for some of Italy's most ambitious architectural creations, the Sicilian capital of Palermo shines brightly this year as the country's Capital of Culture. But first, a history lesson. The Norman conquest of southern Italy left an enduring mark on Sicily, and you can glimpse this legacy at the extraordinary Cappella Palatina. Designed by Roger II in 1130, the royal chapel of the Norman kings is a breathtaking union of inlaid marble flooring, gilded Byzantine mosaics studded with precious stones, and a wooden muqarnas ceiling that is a dramatic example of Arab-style honeycomb carving. You'll need half a day to take it all in, with time reserved to explore the Palazzo dei Normanni it calls home. The oldest royal residence in Europe and the current seat of Sicily's regional parliament, the Palazzo stands on the highest part of Palermo's old town and contains impressive Punic remains in its basement; cappellapalatinapalermo.it.

02 Palermo has plenty of produce markets, but none compares to Mercato di Ballaro for diversity and history. Snaking for a number of blocks southeast of Palazzo dei Normanni, alfresco stalls are thought to have first appeared here 1000 years ago. Given Sicily's unique confluence of cultures — a blend of Arab, African and Norman from the north — the island developed an intriguing culinary scene that persists today through treats such as panelle (a fritter made from chickpea flour) and arancini (rice balls with mince and cheese). Try these fresh from the fryer at Ballaro, alongside briny olives, wedges of cheese and wafer-thin cured meats; visitsicily.info.

03 There are other Italian cities with louder voices, but when it comes to making noise Palermo has the biggest lungs, or at least the country's biggest opera house to hold said lungs. Teatro Massimo Vittorio Emanuele on Piazza Verdi is renowned for its golden stuccoes and perfect acoustics, attracting blow-the-roof-off performances of Verdi's *Aida* and Strauss's *Feuersnot*, alongside modern dance, ballet, theatrical performances and symphony orchestras. The final scenes of *The Godfather Part III* were also filmed here. If you can't make a show, guided tours are available throughout the day; teatromassimo.it.

04 For sightseeing with a side of the macabre, the attractions at Catacombe dei Cappuccini are bone chilling (pun intended). Housing the mummified bodies and skeletons of about 8000 Palermitans who died between the 17th and 20th centuries, the catacombs were originally intended only for dead friars, although that remit expanded as it became seen as a status symbol to be on display among other dearly deceased in the underground crypt. Some bodies are well preserved, while others are little more than a few bones held together by wire; some are in coffins, others posed and hanging from walls. It's a fascinating, if morbid, glimpse into Sicilian society; palermocatacombs.com.

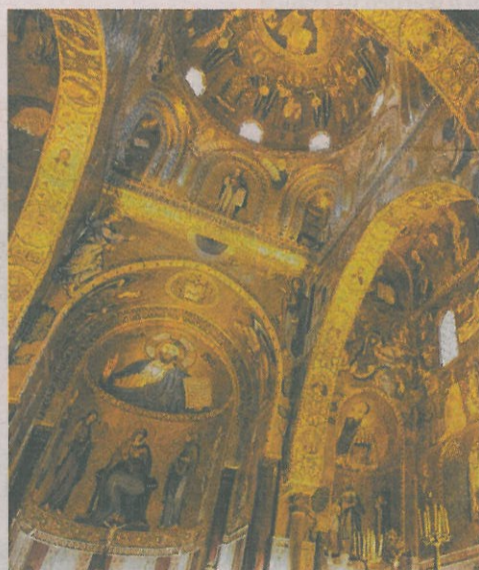
05 You can't visit the birthplace of cannoli and not savour at least one of these tube-shaped shells of fried pastry dough, stuffed with creamy ricotta and dusted with icing sugar. The best place to sample the sweet



Palaces and pastries

Island capital with a deep cultural and culinary heritage

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From top: view above Teatro Massimo Vittorio Emanuele; Capella Palatina chapel; Domenico Trentacoste's *Caino*; Galleria d'Arte Moderna di Palermo; Mercato di Ballaro



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treat is highly contested. Some swear by Pasticceria Da Jose, where fillings change daily and may be flecked with pistachio crumble or candied orange; others make a beeline for third-generation-owned Pasticceria Fratelli Magri, where the tube is thin and crisp as they come. Many believe gelato was also invented in Sicily. Head to Brioscia for a scoop of gelato flavoured with mandorla (bitter almond liqueur) and drizzled with melted chocolate or Gelateria Ilardo Giovanni for traditional ice cream-stuffed brioche buns; pasticceriaamagri.com; facebook.com/briosciagelati/.

06 Given Palermo's cultural credentials for 2018, it would be remiss not to visit a gallery or two. Start at GAM (Galleria d'Arte Moderna di Palermo), mixing 19th and 20th-century Italian masters with high-profile contemporary artists, then head to Museale Regionale d'Arte Moderna e Contemporanea di Palermo for startling paintings and installations by the likes of Richard Long and Francesco Simeti, scattered through the stark galleries of a stripped-back palace. Until November, Palermo will host Manifesta 12, one of Europe's most important biennial art festivals, with exhibitions and installations at striking locations, including a war-damaged church, disused theatre and the botanic gardens; palermocapitalecultura.it; gampalermo.it; poloartecontemporanea.it; m12.manifesta.org.

07 While hiking is usually not a popular Sicilian pastime, it is all the rage in September when pilgrims head to the summit of Mount Pellegrino to pay homage to Santa Rosalia, patron saint of the city. It's a thrill to walk with so many devotees but the climb can be made at any time, ascending using an ancient cobbled road that zigzags up the precipice for more than 5km. At the top, visit a sanctuary dedicated to Rosalia, built above the cave where she once lived and prayed, and take in panoramic views over Palermo.

08 After an eight-year renovation, Palermo's Museo Archeologico Regionale is set to re-open in its entirety later this year. Housed in a glorious palazzo, the space will display archaeological materials and artefacts from across the island, explaining Sicily's history from prehistoric times. Even if the relaunch is delayed (and already two years overdue), it is still worth visiting for the small but stellar showcase across the ground floor, where galleries open out on to cool courtyards. Be sure to check the sculptures and a reconstructed Doric frieze from the great Greek temple complex of Selinunte, on Sicily's southern coast; regione.sicilia.it/beniculturali/salinas/.

09 There are dozens of excellent trattorias across Palermo, including the restaurant and bar-cum-bookshop Kursaal Kalhesa, set in the vaulted chamber of a ruined palazzo in the city's seawall fortifications. But it's hard to go past a hands-on culinary experience with royalty. The Duchess of Lampedusa, Nicoletta Polo, will guide you through the noisy Il Capo street market to pick up in-season produce before hosting a cooking class in her 18th-century palazzo, which doubles as a private museum. The last home of Prince Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa, author of Italy's most famous novel, *The Leopard*, the property is brimming with priceless artefacts, not least the original handwritten manuscript of Lampedusa's masterpiece. While white-gloved waiters serve lunch, Polo will regale you with stories of life as the prince's daughter-in-law. The duchess and her husband also offer rental apartments in standard, superior and deluxe categories under the Butera 28 banner; kursaalkalhesa.it; butera28.it.



BEST BEDS

10 An art nouveau gem, Grand Hotel Villa Ignea occupies an exceptionally pretty perch in Acquisanta, about 4km from the city centre on a bay overlooking the Tyrrhenian Sea. Rooms are palatial in size and some feature Juliet balconies and billowing curtains revealing glimpses of Mount Pellegrino, while others come with broad patios for lounging in the Sicilian sun, gazing over lemon groves and tall palms planted around the pool and marbled porticos. A highlight is Salon Basil, where the walls are covered in nymphs painted by Ettore De Maria Von Bergler; and you'll want to linger under the frescoed vaults of Bar Des Arcades (pictured), aperitivo in hand, of course; villa-ignea.com.

Natasha Dragun was a guest of Silversea Cruises.

■ silversea.com
■ italia.it
■ visitsicily.info