

A palazzo of one's own

Staying in this 16th-century Sicilian mansion, you can even get cooking lessons from the resident duchess, discovers **Anastasia Miari**

“Unfortunately, modern duchesses don't have time to polish their nails,” shrugs the Duchess of Palma, Nicoletta Polo Lanza Tomasi. She is dashing between showing a tray of rosemary-seasoned potatoes in the oven, brewing tea and ordering her husband – Duke Gioacchino Lanza Tomasi, adopted son of Italy's most celebrated author; Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa – to “just please wait for the dishwasher to finish its cycle”.

It would be the ultimate scene of everyday domesticity, were it not being played out in a 16th-century Sicilian palace.

Standing stately and neat behind what once was Palermo's city walls, Palazzo Lanza Tomasi is the home in which Tomasi di Lampedusa wrote what would be one of Sicily's most defining novels, *The Leopard*.

Perhaps the success of the novel had a lot to do with the fact that the author was a Sicilian aristocrat writing about the reunification of Italy and the demise of Sicily's own aristocracy as the family palace crumbled around him.

“It was in a horrible condition while he was writing the book – water would practically leak through the ceiling when it rained,”

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says the Duchess (*inset*), who calls me “Piccola” and insists on my calling her Nicoletta.

“Ten years ago, Palermo wasn't a tourist destination. It was a bunch of rubble and no one would think to invest here. The historic centre still looked as if the Second World War had ended the previous day. It wasn't a tourist destination; it was tough,” she says.

Together with her husband (who's currently setting the table for dinner at her request), Nicoletta – a former interpreter – is responsible for breathing life into the palace

that was partly collapsed, following the shockwaves of bombs dropped by the Americans during the war.

The restoration of the building started in the 1970s but it was Nicoletta's involvement a decade ago that saw part of the palazzo finally open to the public as 12 rental apartments for those visiting the increasingly popular city.

“I started this new adventure with no experience in the field at all – I just knew we had to make the palazzo earn money in order to keep it on,” says Nicoletta. “The estate agent we had was so stupid – I knew I could do a better job myself.”

She was right. Tastefully furnished with 18th-century antiques and artworks rescued from the bombed-out Palazzo di



Travel essentials

GETTING THERE

easyJet flies to Palermo from Liverpool, Luton and Gatwick. Ryanair flies from Stansted and British Airways flies from Heathrow.

STAYING THERE

Doubles at Butera 28 start from €150, B&B. Cooking classes cost €130 and run from 8am to around 3pm, including lunch. butera28.it



Lampedusa, Butera 28 Apartments are a nod to the Sicily in the era of *Il Gattopardo*.

In my room, a wrought-iron staircase winds up to a mezzanine level where a grand headboard finished in gold leaf hangs above a bed that is guaranteed to make anyone waking up there feel like royalty. Bombed out and tired this is not.

The building may have retained the charm of Sicily's aristocratic past but Nicoletta is very aware of the need to keep up with the times.

“Aristocrats nowadays are starving to death. My mother-in-law – who was absolutely adorable – thought that money came out of dresser drawers and couldn't believe I cooked dinners single-handed or shopped at the market.”

Today, she runs cooking classes from the palace kitchen in order to cover the cost of maintaining the listed property. They receive no help from the Italian state.

Between checking on her husband setting the table (“he didn't wait for the dishwasher to finish before taking out the cutlery”) and making dinner for tonight, she's also WhatsApping the boiler engineer to come and fix a problem with the heating. It's not what you might expect from a duchess living in a palace.

“If we want things to stay as they are, things will have to change,” says the character of Tancredi in Tomasi di Lampedusa's *The Leopard*. Poignant, then, that the author's memory should be preserved by an entrepreneurial, cooking duchess, insistent on moving forward.

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