



City life

PALERMO



The Romans, Arabs and Normans all left their mark on the picturesque Sicilian capital, where boisterous back streets and open-air markets collide to create a joyous sense of anarchy. **WORDS:** Laura Holt

“**T**here are no restaurants on this street food tour,” announces my guide Marco Romeo, as we stand at the mouth of one of Palermo’s notorious markets. “And no clean toilets. The toilets smell — and not of roses. The food will be fried, greasy and fatty. And if you leave Palermo without trying a spleen sandwich, you haven’t visited the city.”

Pep talk over, we plunge in to the bowels of Capo, one of three labyrinthine markets — along with Ballarò and Vucciria — that dominate Palermo’s heart. Akin to the souks of North Africa, these riotous, noisy mazes are the ideal place to acquaint yourself with the anarchic Sicilian capital. Aromas fill the air as we whip past stalls selling exotic spices and dried herbs.

Capo (meaning ‘head’ in Italian) has been operational since the ninth century and only closes for one day a year, 14 July, to mark the feast of Santa Rosalia, the city’s patron saint. “When the Normans first arrived from France in 1061 to conquer the city, with their white skin and blonde hair, Palermo was like a North African city, filled with exotic people with dark skin, hair and eyes,” Marco explains. “They named it Capo because it stands at the head of the city, looking down to the sea.”

By then, the locals had learned to keep one eye on the water, as Sicily — strategically positioned between

North Africa and Europe — had long been lapped by the waves of conquest. Phoenicians, Carthaginians, Romans, Byzantines and Saracens all tried to stamp their mark on the Mediterranean’s largest island, but none more so than the Normans, who ruled Palermo as the capital of the Kingdom of Sicily from 1072 to 1194.

The city today unfurls like a palimpsest, revealing centuries of cultural shifts in its atmospheric streets and food: from the baskets of *babbaluci* (snails) we pass, distant relatives of the French escargot, to giant *arancina* balls, brought to Sicily by the Arabs in the ninth century. Stuffed with minced veal, peas and onions, they’re a speciality at Antica Drogheria di Dainotti — a trio of neighbouring stalls run by the Dainotti family — which serves them up in their original form: without the tomato sauce filling.

Our feast continues with *cazzilli* (potato dumplings), *panelle* (chickpea fritters) and, yes, a reluctantly accepted spleen sandwich, before finishing with a delicious *broscia* (an ice cream sandwich in a brioche bun).

Like all things in this vibrant, chaotic city, the good and the bad seem to go hand in hand. Or, as Marco puts it, “One minute Palermo is the dirtiest, stinkiest city in the world; the next, it’s the most beautiful and romantic.”

After my morning in the markets, I’m beginning to see what he means.



SEE & DO

CATHEDRAL: Palermo Cathedral, a UNESCO World Heritage Site set in an exotic, palm-strewn square, is one of Italy's most striking yet least well-known cathedrals. Begun in the 12th century by Norman archbishop Walter Ophamil, its Islamic-inspired domes and mosaics pay tribute to the Arab craftsmen who helped create it. Relics of the Norman kings are on show and the views from the roof are incredible. Entry €7 (£6.25). cattedrale.palermo.it

NORMAN PALACE: Built in 1130 on the site of an Arab castle, the Palazzo dei Normanni ('Norman Palace') houses Sicily's parliament and the glitzy Cappella Palatina (Palatine Chapel), created by Norman monarch Roger II to impress visiting guests. Built using Arab artisans, the chapel features a spectacular wooden *muqarnas* ceiling, featuring ornate honeycomb-style carving; and Arabesque arches, although the mosaics were created by Greek craftsmen from Constantinople. Entry €8.50 (£7.60). cappellapalatinapalermo.it

CAPUCHIN CATACOMBS: From gilded heights to gory depths — head underground to Palermo's eerie catacombs. Home to 8,000 embalmed bodies, this macabre spectacle takes visitors along corridors paved with marble tombstones and lined with rows of mummified men, women and children, fully dressed and propped upright. The oldest dates back to 1599; the most recent, a two-year-old girl named Rosalia Lombardo, who died in 1920 and is eerily well-preserved. Entry €3 (£2.70). palermocatacombs.com

TEATRO MASSIMO: The Massimo Theatre is one of Sicily's most cherished opera houses. Behind-the-scenes tours, from €8 (£7.20), take in everything from the stage to the royal box and frescoed Coat of Arms Room. Performances from €16.50 (£14.80). teatromassimo.it

MARKETS: Nowhere is Palermo's chaotic spirit more palpable than in its trio of city-centre markets: Vucciria, Capo and Ballarò. The latter two are the most vibrant, with locals bellowing at each other and stacks of exotic

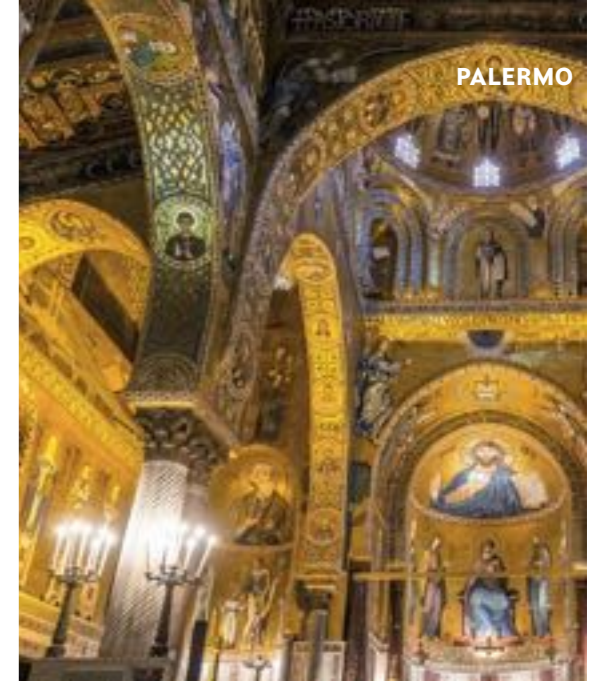
produce piled high at every twist and turn of the tangled streets. Explore it with Marco Romeo, from Streaty, on a three-hour street-food tour. Rick Stein and Jamie Oliver have both been guests. From €30 (£27). streaty.com

STREET SCENES: To feel Palermo's pulse, head into its narrow, graffiti-strewn backstreets, where kids play football, families trade local gossip, and washing lines cut through the air. Take a snapshot with professional photographer Domenico Aronica, who leads three-hour photography tours, from €30 (£27). palermowalkingtour.com

DAY TRIPS: Popular excursions include the town of Monreale, on the slope of Monte Caputo, and the coastal enclave of Cefalù, both of which have a UNESCO-listed cathedral. The nearest beach is Mondello (just outside the city), although it gets crowded in summer. Instead, head to the town of Isola delle Femmine — which boasts a quieter, equally picturesque beach, with views of nearby 'Island of Women', from which the town takes its name.

IMAGES: GETTY; ALAMY

PREVIOUS PAGE: Capo Market and the Chiesa di San Ippolito Maggiore
CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE: Ballarò Market; Capella Palatina; tomatoes at Ballarò Market; traditional hand-painted *carretto* carts on Salita Artale



LIKE A LOCAL

PASSEGGIATA: The traditional evening pre-dinner stroll — particularly popular on Friday, Saturday and Sunday nights — sees everyone from octogenarian *nonnas* to well-dressed prima donnas turn out to see and be seen: simultaneously absorbed in their own activities while keeping an eye on passersby. Grab a seat at Antico Caffè Spinnato to watch the fascinating spectacle unfold. spinnato.it

APERITIVO: For another lesson in la dolce vita, partake in an evening *aperitivo*. It seems Aperol Spritz is the current cocktail of choice in Palermo, although La Galleria restaurant, behind the cathedral, has one of the city's best wine lists. Its street-side tables on Salita Artale stand beside Palermo's last *carretto* (horse-drawn cart) workshop, with its traditional hand-painted carriages stacked up in the street. [facebook.com/lagalleria2014](https://www.facebook.com/lagalleria2014)

ADDIOPIZZO: Look out for 'Addiopizzo' stickers in the windows of shops and restaurants that have joined together to help create a Mafia-free economy by refusing to pay *pizzo* (protection money).

Divide & conquer // 'Sicily has suffered 13 foreign dominations from which she has taken both the best and the worst', so wrote Italian writer Andrea Camilleri

EAT

COMPARUCCI: This Borgo Vecchio joint is renowned for its pizzas and calzone. Despite the informal vibe, the regulars are invariably dressed like they've stepped out of a Dolce and Gabbana ad. Pizzas €6-10 (£5.40-9). 36e Via Messina, 90141. T: 00 39 091 609 0467.

ALL'OLIVELLA WINE 'N' DINE: Set in a quiet city-centre square, this romantic restaurant faces the Church of Saint Ignatius. English-speaking waiters guide you through a menu that spans *fettuccine al pistacchio* to *spaghetti alle vongole*. Mains €12-14 (£10.80-12.60). Piazza Olivella, 9, 90133. T: 00 39 0917852487.

BISSO BISTROT: Originally a street-food venue in Vucciria Market, Bisso Bistrot has since moved to a site on the architecturally stunning Quattro Canti ('Four Corners') crossroads. The lively atmosphere remains the same and the pasta is still handmade. Don't miss specials like tuna and shrimp tartare. Dishes from €8 (£7.20). 172A Via Maqueda, 90134. T: 00 39 328 131 4595



Mafia men // *The final scene of The Godfather Part III, featuring Al Pacino's 'silent scream', was filmed on Teatro Massimo's steps*

**SLEEP**

VINTAGE: A short stroll from the main attractions, this boutique B&B features industrial design and eye-catching artworks. Pendant lights and polished metal surfaces give it a hip yet homely feel. A communal library and lounge provide great spaces in which to relax. Doubles from €77 (£69). vintagepalermo.it

HOTEL PRINCIPE DI VILLAFRANCA: This smart four-star stands in a quiet residential enclave near the upmarket shops of Via Libertà. Contemporary art lines the walls and helpful staff are on hand to offer advice. Doubles from €120 (£108), B&B. principedivillafranca.it

VILLA IGIEA: A serene restaurant and pool look out to sea at this historic, old-world hotel. The original villa was restored in the late 19th century by art nouveau architect Ernesto Basile and many original frescoes and items of furniture remain. Doubles from €130, B&B. villa-igiea.com

FROM LEFT: Teatro Massimo; an atmospheric side street
FOLLOWING PAGE, FROM TOP: Street food, Vucciria Market; cipollate con pancetta (spring onions wrapped in pancetta) on the grill



PALERMO



BUY

PLAZA MARINA: Traders at this weekend flea market near the sea set out simple stalls selling everything from bric-a-brac to antiques, books, bags, belts and vinyl. Restaurants line the fringes; try Pelle D'oca for the roasted chicken. 32 *Piazza Marina*, 90133. T: 00 39 091 588426.

LA RINASCENTE: Overlooking the Piazza San Domenico and its lovely church, you'll find this smart shopping mall, with big-name Italian brands such as Max Mara and Missoni. Upstairs, rooftop bar Obicà offers fine views and post-retail refreshments. rinascente.it obicà.com

GELATO: It wouldn't be Italy without ice cream and Sicilians take their gelato very seriously. Bar Gelateria Lucchese, on Piazza San Domenico, serves classics such as almond and pistachio, alongside the more curious-sounding zuppa Inglese ('English soup'), flavoured with Italian Alchermes liqueur to taste like English trifle. 11 *Piazza San Domenico*, 90133. T: 00 39 327 453 3838.



AFTER HOURS

ANTICA DROGHERIA DI DAINOTTI: On weekend evenings, tables spill onto the street outside this string of three family-run stalls inside Capo Market. Street-food barbecue and cocktails are served until 2am. Enter by Via Porta Carini. T: 00 39 340 870 3497.

TAVERNA AZZURRA: This riotous bar in the belly of Vucciria Market is a Palermo institution. Well-oiled locals banter with barman Toto, who's been running the place for 40 years, and the speciality is *sangue* — a blood-red fortified wine that Sicilians drink as an aperitif (€1/90p a glass). Until midnight. T: 00 39 091 304107

PIAZZA GARRAFFELLO: Continue the party at this crumbling, graffiti-strewn square, which once formed the heart of Vucciria Market, but is now an open-air, late-night venue where DJs play until 3am at weekends.



ESSENTIALS

Getting there & around

Palermo is served by EasyJet from Gatwick, British Airways from Heathrow and Ryanair from Stansted. easyjet.com ba.com ryanair.com

AVERAGE FLIGHT TIME: 3h.

Compact Palermo is best tackled on foot, although motorised tuk-tuks offer the chance to navigate the narrow streets on three wheels. Tours from €70 (£63) for four people. Social Bike Palermo also offers bicycle hire and themed two-wheel tours of Palermo and Mondello. Hourly rental from €3 (£2.70). Tours from €40 (£36) per person. apetourpalermo.it socialbikepalermo.com

When to go

One of Europe's warmest cities, Palermo is mild year-round, apart from summer, which is hot and dry

(averaging 27C in August). June and September are good times to visit; warm enough to enjoy the beaches but without the peak-season crowds.

More info

Sicilia Convention & Visitors Bureau. siciliaconvention.com
Wallpaper Guide Palermo*. RRP: £6.95. phaidon.com
Lonely Planet Sicily. RRP: £13.99. lonelyplanet.com

How to do it

PRESTIGE HOLIDAYS has three nights in Palermo, staying at Hotel Principe di Villafranca on a B&B basis, including EasyJet flights from Gatwick and private transfers, from £519 per person. prestigeholidays.co.uk