



Palermo sunset

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Shoppers at Palermo market

SPECIAL REPORT: PALERMO

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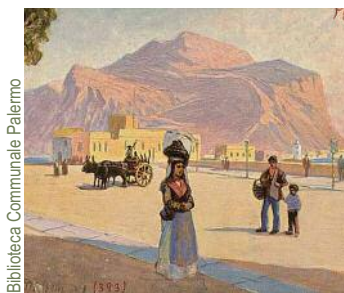
ENJOYING

Old and New Palermo

Palermo, the capital of Sicily, is one of the oldest and most complex cities in Italy. Sitting on the northwest coast of Italy's largest island, it has a history dating back to the 8th century BC. Unfortunately, for many it has become infamous in the past century as a rough and tumble center of crime.

The days of *Mafia* dominance are now in the past, and the city is currently undergoing a rebirth, reinventing itself as a cosmopolitan and energetic center of culture. Even if you've seen the city before, digging deeper will uncover a long, rich history. With new hotels and

renovated sights popping up every day, now is the perfect time to enjoy this vibrant and diverse city.



Biblioteca Comunale Palermo

Palermo, like Sicily itself, has a long and complicated history. It was originally founded as a port for the Carthaginians, who established trading posts all around the

Mediterranean before the rise of Rome. The city was positioned at the confluence of three rivers, which created a huge port that could be protected. As with the rest of the island, it became part of the Roman empire but was not an important city,

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FIVE FOODS to EAT in PALERMO

Food is more than just a way to survive in Sicily, it's more like a religion. Almost every conversation, no matter if it is politics or religion, eventually turns to the subject of food. Sicilians can debate at great length which recipe makes the best pasta sauce and which *nonna* or *mamma* is the best cook. Meals are eaten over hours with multiple courses, ample wine, and good conversation, and the topic at the meal is always debating what the next meal is going to be.

Sicily is truly the island of Demeter and Persephone, a fertile land with a climate that can produce just about anything the ground can grow. Not only does it have the right conditions for excellent produce, it also has many different species of plants and fruits brought to the island over the centuries by other cultures, creating a diverse foodscape that differs from the mainland.

Even as you find pasta and pizza as staples, Sicilian food can rightly be considered something apart from Italian food. Citrus, almonds, pistachios and a wide variety of seafood can be found on every menu. Eggplant is cooked in different ways and is found in pasta, salads, *caponata*, and even on pizza. Local sheep's milk *ricotta* cheese can be

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Palermo is Sicily's largest city.



prepared in more different ways than you could imagine: fresh or salted, raw or baked, grated on pasta or eaten in chunks paired with freshly harvested fava beans. It is also sweetened and used to fill up cannoli or baked into pastries.

Palermo has its own specialties, which differ from other parts of the island. Street food dominates in markets and piazzas late into the evening, and many restaurants now include this humble style of cuisine on their menus.

Humble food is a continuous theme, and many of the typical dishes were created by ingenious cooks trying to recycle stale ingredients or using the parts of animals that the upper classes wouldn't eat. For example, meatballs, or *polpette*, originate with poorer people scavenging for leftover meat in the market and piecing it together to make a meal. Meatballs today (never served with spaghetti!) will use a mixture of meats and usually have bits of fish in the middle.

Here is what to sample and where (keeping in mind the best food isn't at the fanciest places):

OCTOPUS

Octopus is a staple of the Sicilian diet. While fried *calamari* is common all over Italy, you'll find many different preparations on the island, and the meat itself is much fresher...even



Fresh boiled octopus in *Mondello*

seafood skeptics can be converted. At Ballarò Market, stalls sell small, fresh-boiled, whole octopus. Fine restaurants serve *insalata di polpo*; diced octopus mixed with sliced celery, carrots, and *prezzemolo*, and dressed with olive oil and lemon.

Where to try octopus: For a seaside treat, head out to Palermo's beach in the town of *Mondello*. *Da Calogero* boils up the largest octopi at their outdoor kitchen, then chops them into bite-sized bits while you watch, and serves them with a wedge of lemon. While one is a bit too much for one person, it's a fun communal snack (Via Torre di Mondello, 22; 39 091 6841333 www.trattoriadacalogero.it).

BREADCRUMBS

Sicily has been Italy's breadbasket since Greek times. Wheat was said to grow wild three millennia ago and has been a staple crop ever since. You'll



Bucatini with sardines and breadcrumbs

find a wide variety of breads all over the island. As opposed to the saltless (and tasteless) bread of northern Italy that is used mostly as a conveyance for sauce, the bread in Palermo is salted, often with sesame seeds on top, and is a treat in its own right.

Palermitan cuisine has roots in *cucina povera*, frugal cooking that reuses everything. Stale bread is never tossed out, but rather ground into fine breadcrumbs and reused. Dishes alla Palermitana feature breadcrumbs

mixed into the sauce or used as a crust. For example, a typical dish is *agnelli alla Palermitana*, rings of pasta with a tomato sauce combined with breadcrumbs. Another dish is *pasta alla palermitana*, usually penne with tomato sauce, wild fennel, raisins, pine nuts, fresh anchovies and, of course, breadcrumbs. And while grated parmigiano sits on the table in most of Italy, a bowl of seasoned breadcrumbs is the condiment of choice in Palermo.

Where to try Pasta alla Palermitana: *Buatta* takes basic home cooking up a notch in their trendy bistro. Along with breadcrumb topped dishes, they also serve elegant versions of street food classics (Via Vittorio Emanuele, 176; www.buattapalermo.it; 39 091 322378).

CANNOLI

Holy *cannoli*, Sicily's signature dessert is a rich and creamy treat, and there are plenty of great spots to try it in Palermo. In the typical *cannolo*, fresh ricotta is mixed with sugar and chocolate chips, plus a dash of vanilla. The creamy mixture is piped into crispy, deep-fried pastry tubes, and the ends are dipped in more chocolate chips, candied orange peel or cherries. A veil of superfine sugar is sprinkled on top.



Cannoli

Life is too short in Sicily for soggy-crusted cannoli, and locals consider it a culinary offense. Any shop selling them pre-filled is a good shop to pass

Palermo was Europe's 2015

by. To find the right sort of pastry shop, look for a pile of empty shells sitting on the counter, waiting to be filled at the moment they are ordered. Many shops also sell different sizes to suit your sweet tooth. If in doubt, order the baby cannoli.

Where to try cannoli: *Antica Caffè Spinnato* is a classic, historic bar with outdoor seating in a pedestrian zone. Pair your cannolo with a coffee for a morning treat or with a glass of Sicilian wine for dessert. Open daily 7 a.m. to midnight (Via Principe di Belmonte, 107).

PANE CON MILZA

Palermo may have grand palaces, but it has often had a large population of the poor. Frugal cooks tend to use all of the animal parts, and practically every part is still available in the



Making Pane con Milza

markets—hoof to snout and everything in between. From this tradition comes the popular spleen sandwich. It goes by two names, *pane ca' meusa* or *pane con milza*. The spleen is boiled up in a big pot, with a wonderful, beefy aroma. It is served on bread and can be *maritata*, topped with cheese.

Some market stalls reheat slices in a frying pan before tossing it in a bun. While the flavor is reminiscent of Christmas roast, the texture may not be for everyone. But even so, it's worth picking up a sandwich and sharing

bites of this authentic dish with travel companions.

Where to try Pane con Milza: *Franco u Vastiddaru* slings out hot spleen sandwiches all day and late into the night. Sit in plastic chairs on the piazza or grab a sandwich at the take-away window (Via Vittorio Emanuele, 102).

ARANCINE



Arancine

Sicily's favorite fast food is the deep-fried rice ball. The most typical kind has saffron-scented rice stuffed with *ragu'*, peas, chunks of boiled eggs, and cheese. The name comes from the Sicilian word for little oranges because the rice balls are the same shape and almost the same color as oranges. But be aware not to call them *arancine* if your travels bring you to the other side of the island.

On the east coast, the *arancina* becomes *arancino* (masculine rather than feminine gender of the word) and the shape mutates as well, from spherical to conical.

The typical rice ball has had a modern update recently. The fillings have become more creative, using unusual ingredients. Look for brie and walnut, ham and cheese, even Indian Tikka Masala.

Where to try arancine: *Passami U Coppu* specializes in all that can be

fried and eaten while walking. Its position on the corner of *Via Roma* and *Via Vittorio Emanuele* means you'll pass it for sure, just follow the smell. It is almost always open (Via Roma, 195).

Can't make up your mind about how to start eating in Palermo? A food tour is a great way to get the local flavor, and will also push you to try things you may not select on your own.

Streaty Food Tours offers daily excursions to the markets and back alley eateries of the city, with guides that weave in the city history along the way. Find out more at www.streaty.com

Also read more about Palermo street food in our April 2017 issue of *Dream of Italy*.

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and has virtually no Roman remains.

Things changed when the Arabs conquered the island in the 9th century. The Arabs made the city their capital, expanding it and sending the rivers underground. Their influence can be seen in the architecture, notably in the decoration of the cathedral, and in the markets they established, which still function today.

The Normans arrived in the 11th century and continued expanding the city, enjoying a golden age while using it as the capital of their kingdom of Southern Italy. The German Swabians and the French had control of the city for brief periods, but the long dominance of the Spanish—almost 300 years—affected Palermo's culture and customs as well as the architecture.

While the 19th century saw Palermo rise as an elegant capital of culture in Europe, the 20th century and World War II were not kind to the city. Much of the historic center was bombed, including the *Kalsa* quarter, which had previously been full of palaces. Bombed out blocks were not all repaired, as the money for the city's repair was diverted into ugly suburban housing projects.

From the time of the war through the 1980s, Palermo languished under poor management and the influence of the Mafia. The once-elegant city became synonymous with crime and decay. But the tide turned in the early 1990s when two anti-mafia judges, *Falcone* and *Borsellino*, were murdered by the *Cosa Nostra*. Public opinion turned hard against the Mafia and its influence has diminished significantly.

Since then, Palermo has started to attract investment. A renovation of long-abandoned buildings, scrubbing away the layers of decay and neglect, has revealed a city of elegance. A new, youthful energy fills the streets. Festivals, special events, and concerts are on continuous offer in recent years.



Room with a view

Though it has been a tumultuous history, the many years of occupation by other cultures has left Palermo with a unique style and a multicultural vibe. A patchwork quilt of architectural styles and mysterious city planning can make the city seem a

bit hard to understand, but also lends to its intrigue. Medieval tower houses lean on Spanish Gothic palaces, and nearby churches could be mistaken for mosques. In some streets you'd swear you were in Morocco, but others feel like Paris.

Unraveling a city like Palermo can take time, but a good approach is to choose a thread. Look at the city through the eyes of a certain time period or topic and it will change for you like a chameleon.

Arab Palermo

After the fall of Rome, the arrival of the Arabs insulated the island from the Dark Ages, and in fact was a time of prosperity. They made Palermo one of the most innovative places in Europe one thousand years ago, bringing architecture, engineering and farming techniques previously unknown. The city was filled with breezy gardens and palaces surrounded by orange trees, which they brought to the island along with sugar, almonds and dates.

The best place to feel the Arab past is at Zisa Palace, just outside of the city center. The palace itself is a simple, blocky structure, but the garden layout with a large pond will give you the idea of how Arabian planning combined water, vegetation, and architecture (*Castello della Zisa, Piazza Guglielmo il Buono*; open Monday through Saturday, 9 a.m. to 7 p.m. and Sunday 9 a.m. to 1:30 p.m.)

Norman Palermo

The Normans may have taken Sicily from the Arabs, but they allowed them to stay and work in their kingdom, creating a blended society that made use of the best each culture had to offer.



Norman Palace

The Palatine Chapel (*Capella Palantina*) in the *Palazzo dei Normanni* is a testament to the tolerant ways of the Normans. Inside, you'll find exquisite mosaics made by Byzantine craftsmen, patterns and woodwork made by Arab designers, and Norman architectural details. Even

Christ is portrayed with features that could appear western or eastern, depending on who is looking at it (*Palazzo dei Normanni, Piazza Indipendenza*; open Monday to Saturday, 8:15 a.m. to 5:45 p.m. and Sunday, 8:15 a.m. to 1 p.m.)

Spanish Palermo

The Spanish held the island for almost three centuries, and left their mark in Palermo by constructing the famous "Four Corners," made by slicing through the center of the city with a new boulevard, *Via Maqueda*. While they were initially invited to the island, they held it with an iron fist and brought the inquisition with them.

The Phoenicians called the

Palazzo Chiaramonte Steri has a grim history of cruelty. The Spanish used the palazzo and its grounds as a base for the Inquisition. Suspects were held in cells in the former stables while awaiting trial. During their incarceration, they drew on the walls to keep occupied, using blood or other fluids as paint. The drawings tell stories of religious devotion, hope for the future, or, for foreign prisoners, memories of home (*Palazzo Chiaramonte Steri, Piazza Marina; open Tuesday through Sunday, 10 a.m. to 7 p.m.*)

Belle Epoch Palermo

The Palermo of the 19th century was elegant. It was a prosperous time, with booming industries such as tuna, sulfur and wine, and attracted famous visitors like Richard Wagner. *Teatro Massimo* was built at this time, becoming the largest opera house in Italy and the centerpiece of the city. The interior showcases the “Liberty” style, an Italian version of Art Nouveau. (*Teatro Massimo, Piazza Verdi; open daily 9:30 a.m to 6 p.m.*)



ALAB shop

Palermo from Above

The first impression of Palermo from an airplane is a stunning one—a city set on the water in between high, pointed mountains. Getting up above the city center rewards with expansive views in every direction, dotted with church domes. Recently, several view terraces have opened up for visits and vistas.

Teatro Massimo offers an expanded tour that takes you into the rafters and up to the top of the roof. Its position in the center of the city gives the best

panorama. The cathedral also opens its roof on many days, and while not as high up as the theater, the climb lets you explore the richly patterned façade up close. For a free view over a slice of the city, the food court at the fancy department store *La Rinascente* (Via Roma, 289) has a cozy terrace for lunch with a view.

Artsy Palermo

The Kalsa district was synonymous for many years with breeding ground for Mafia recruits. Bombed-out and impoverished, it sat neglected for decades. In the past 10 years, the district has been renovated and is now an artsy zone filled with hipster restaurants and artisan boutiques.

An art association, *ALAB*, has created an alliance of small shops that sell handmade goods, such as clothing, jewelry, and artwork—often made with recycled goods.

Most items are reasonably priced and the shops are typically run by the artists themselves. Some shops have a workspace set aside where they demonstrate their craft. To find participating shops, look for the orange ALAB logo on the doors and visit www.alabpalermo.it

Youthful Palermo

Palermo has a large student population and has also become a center for young Sicilians seeking careers. The nightlife scene throbs with youthful energy almost every night of the week, even in cooler months. Young *Palermitani* gather at cocktail bars for

drinks, snacks, and lots of *chiacchiere* (chit-chat).



Apericena

A pre-dinner drink is an *aperitivo*, but many bars offer *apericena*, a combination of a drink with snacks included. The snacks can be simple, with chips and peanuts, or an elaborate buffet of antipasti. Festive *Piazza Rivoluzione* is a great place to start an *apericena* crawl, choose from any of the bars clustered around the fountain.

Multicultural Palermo

Sicily is, by definition, multicultural after three thousand years of invasions by outsiders. The markets of Palermo let you catch a glimpse of today’s fusion of cultures. *Ballarò* market is the beating heart of the city, throbbing every day with shoppers looking for the best seasonal produce, fish, and meat. It sprawls through the streets to the west of the cathedral, winding its way to the train station.

Started as a souk by the Arabs a thousand years ago, it still feels like an exotic slice of North Africa. The neighborhood around the market has a large immigrant population, mostly from Africa, and a local restaurant aims to unite their culture with the people of Palermo. *Moltivolti* not only serves up authentic couscous and African stews but also provides a community space for events and dialogue with other cultures. (*Via Giuseppe Mario Puglia, 21; www.moltivolti.org; 39 091 2710285*)

Even if you’ve seen the city in the past, the new Palermo is changing every day and will always have something new to delight the visitor.

city “Ziz” meaning “flower.”

Perfect Places to Stay

Only a few years ago, the options for accommodations in Palermo were limited, but now there are new hotels, B&Bs and hostels opening every day. The city can be noisy and a bit intimidating on a first visit, so it's a fine idea to spend a little more money and choose a comfortable hotel room.

The neighborhood you pick will affect the mood of your visit, so it's a good idea to understand the layout of the city before you begin to narrow down your options. The main axis of the city runs roughly north-south along *Via Roma* from *Teatro Politeama* to *Stazione Centrale*. The large pedestrian shopping street, *Via Maqueda*, runs parallel to *Via Roma* and intersects with the main east-west axis, *Via Vittorio Emanuele*. This intersection is the *Quattro Canti* or "Four Corners" that divides the city into its four historical neighborhoods. It is considered to be the center of the city, and staying near to it is the most convenient spot for sightseeing. While the train station area is usually a good bet in many Italian cities, Palermo's station is inconveniently located relative to other areas.

Few hotels in Palermo offer parking, so it's best to rent a car before or after your stay and avoid driving in the center. If you do have a car, it is best to stay in the *Politeama* area where you'll find parking garages.

Ballarò

This neighborhood, to the south of the cathedral, throbs with market action all day. Scooters dart in and out of the lanes and shoppers bustle about



Palazzo Brunaccini

with their vegetable-laden bags. There is a multicultural character here, and the residents are a mix of immigrants and Sicilian families. For visitors, the narrow, winding streets can be a little confusing, but if you're looking for an authentic slice of old Palermo (and if you can deal with the edgy feeling of the market area) stay here.

B&B Il Giardino di Ballarò is a peaceful oasis, just steps from the market, the Cathedral, and the Norman Palace. Rather than a hotel, it feels more like a friend's home, with breakfast served in a cozy dining room at a big communal table. As the name suggests, they have a shady garden and a side bonus, a breezy roof terrace.

Via Porta di Castro, 75
(39) 091 212215

www.ilgiardinodiballaro.it

Rates: Double rooms starts at 100€ with breakfast.



B&B Il Giardino di Ballarò

Near the Four Corners

The *Quattro Canti* is the place to be if you want to be in the thick of the action in Palermo. Both streets at this intersection, *Via Maqueda* and *Via Vittorio Emanuele*, are mostly pedestrian-only and form the epicenter of the *passaggiata*, or the evening stroll. From here, it's a short walk to the cathedral and the Norman Palace beyond, or down to the *Kalsa* district and the harbor.

Eurostars Centrale Palace is the most centrally located hotel for sightseeing, a few doors up from the Four Corners and *Via Maqueda*. This old, rambling palace has been converted into a

grand hotel, with business-class rooms and a roof-top terrace restaurant. The breakfast buffet is worth waking up for, with a generous assortment of Sicilian and international treats

Via Vittorio Emanuele, 327
(39) 091 8539

www.eurostarshotels.it

Rates: Double rooms starts at 150€ with breakfast.



B&B La Terrazza Sul Centro

B&B La Terrazza Sul Centro is an affordable pick in a very central location, a few steps away from *Piazza Pretoria* and the "Fountain of Shame" in the university area. The rooms are simple and modern, but the best

Santa Rosalia, the patron saint of

in Palermo

reason to stay is the small roof-top terrace with a picturesque view over the city. You'll feel a world away floating above Palermo with your morning *cappuccino*.

Via dell'Universita, 20
(39) 392 3106267

www.laterrazzasulcentro.it

Rates: Double room starts at 75€ with breakfast

In the Kalsa District

A few years ago, *Kalsa* was not the best neighborhood of the city, thanks to bombings in WWII and crime. But these days, this area has become a trendy hotbed of interesting restaurants and hipster boutiques. Choose to stay here if you like the nightlife, as many piazzas that are sleepy in the day turn into outdoor parties at night.

Hotel Piazza Borsa is a sprawling hotel that was originally a bank. The stately public spaces are a silent refuge from the city, and the upscale rooms are



Hotel Piazza Borsa

full of top-end amenities, just right for a splurge. While it does attract large tour groups and conferences, and you could get lost in the hallways, the location is perfect.

Via Cartari, 18
(39) 091 320075
www.piazzaborsa.it

Rates: Double room starts at 200€ with breakfast.

Near Teatro Politeama

The neighborhood around the west end of the city is lacking in character but is more modern and elegant. It is defined by the other grand concert hall in Palermo, *Teatro Politeama*, and its large piazza. The surrounding streets have upscale shops and business-class hotels, some with parking garages, making this a good place to stay for visitors with cars. The downside to the area is its location at the edge of the historic center. To get to the main sightseeing areas will take a minimum of 10 to 15 minutes on foot.

Grand Hotel et des Palmes is the place to stay if you'd like to relive the elegance of the 19th century. This historic hotel was built in 1874 and was the place to be seen in a top hat and tails. These days, the rooms have been modernized but the public spaces retain the atmosphere of bygone times. Look around the lobby and restaurant for photos of the hotel from the past, when it was surrounded by orange groves.

Via Roma, 398
(39) 091 6028111
www.grandhotel-et-des-palmes.com

Rates: Double room starts at 150€ with breakfast.

Artemisia Palace Hotel, just down the street from Hotel et des Palmes, is a convenient mid-range hotel with all the comforts. The rooms are comfortable and modern with peaceful gray tones, and well-priced for the location on Via Roma.

Via Roma, 499
(39) 091 7790874
www.artemisiapalacehotel.it

Rates: Double room starts at 120€ with breakfast.



Artemisia Palace Hotel

Outside the City

If Palermo feels too big and too intimidating, staying outside of the city in the countryside near *Piano degli Albanese* may fit the bill. With a car and a half hour drive, you can be in a different, peaceful world amongst the rolling hills dotted with vineyards.



Baglio di Pianetto

Baglio di Pianetto in *Santa Cristina Gela* feels like a piece of the Napa Valley dropped into the Sicilian countryside. The property has expansive vineyards and an excellent restaurant to sample their wines along with dinner. The rooms are spacious and have the homey elegance of a country estate.

Via Francia 90030
Santa Cristina Gela
(39) 091 8570148
www.bagliodipianetto.it

Rates: Double rooms starts at 120€ with breakfast.

1€ = \$1.13 at press time

Palermo, is celebrated July 14th.

A Moment with The Contessa



Palermo was ruled for centuries by a noble class. A stroll around the city reveals palace after palace, as wealthy landowners built elaborate city homes here for generations. The unification of Italy in the 19th century began the slow decline of the aristocracy, which was documented in the famous Sicilian novel, *The Leopard* by Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa. The abolition of the monarchy after WWII was the final blow, and over time many families were forced to abandon their homes, which they could no longer afford.



Today, however, one of the most historic families still remains, living in their 800-year-old palace built on the ancient Carthaginian walls of the city. The *Conte* and *Contessa Federico* maintain their rambling old home in the center of the *Ballarò* neighborhood, filled with family heirlooms and a lived-in warmth.

Conte Alessandro is a race car driver and a descendent of the Holy Roman Emperor Frederick II, one of the most colorful personalities from Sicilian history. His wife is the energetic and vivacious *Alvine Federico*, an Austrian opera singer, champion swimmer and teacher, whom the conte met at a ball in Rome in the early 1980s.

"In the beginning (people in Palermo) were quite suspicious and watched me constantly: How is it that the count didn't find a nice Sicilian girl? It took them a while to accept me. Now I'm notorious not as the countess, but as

the 'long, skinny one who rides the bicycle' and this is a good sign," the countess says.



The biggest change the countess has seen in her years in Palermo is security for women. "When I first arrived in 1983 it was



impossible to move around in the evening by yourself, or even with a group of friends ...sometimes even during the day. Now the city has improved very much because we have more lights in the streets, more people in the streets (pedestrian areas!) and also the mentality has changed." *Le donne possono uscire*, she notes, meaning "women can go out."

The Contessa and her sons, *Nicolo* and *Andreas*, offer tours of their historic home. Her down-to-earth approach to her position is refreshing and honest, giving a fascinating glimpse into life in a palace. She might share with you what she likes *least* about life in a palazzo: Lack of heating in the winter. "Our palazzo is a national

monument, so you can't change anything," she laments.

You will hear stories of famous visitors, climb their ancient tower, and get a glimpse of the Count's "mancave" where he displays his racecar driving trophies.

Palazzo Conte Federico

Piazza Conte Federico, 2
contefederico.com

(39) 091 6511881

Tours lasting 45 minutes are held Tuesday to Thursday, 11 a.m. to 4 p.m.

No need to reserve ahead.

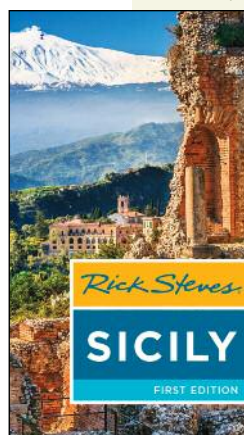
Admission: with a guided tour is €10.



Guest Editor

Sarah Murdoch, who wrote and edited this special report, is a tour guide, travel writer, artist, former architect and packing expert. She has worked for Rick Steves for 19 years as a tour guide and guidebook researcher, recently co-authoring *Rick Steves' Sicily* along with colleague *Alfio Di Mauro* (who helped with these articles). Her website, adventureswithsarah.net,

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Palermo's residents are known as *Palermitani*.