

NAPLES TO PALERMO

THE BOAT TRAIN TO SICILY

★
2 ICONIC CITIES
★
1 EPIC JOURNEY
★
UNFORGETTABLE
ITALY
★



THE WHERE TO GO
— TRAVEL GUIDES —

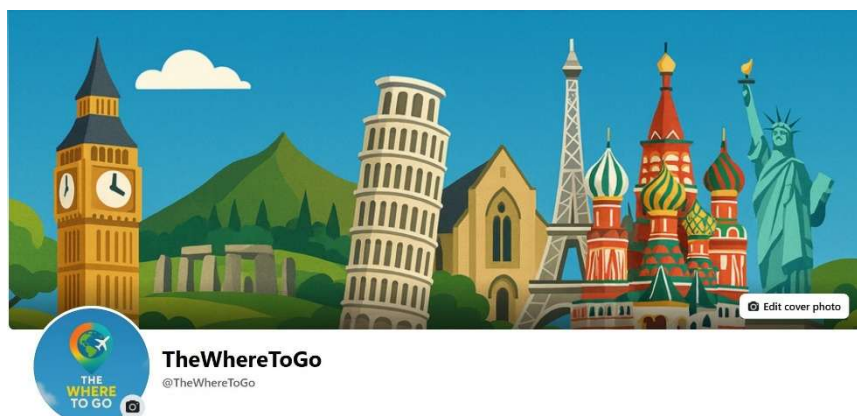
Welcome to The Where To Go



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Naples to Palermo – The Boat Train to Sicily

Introduction

I was scrolling through my social media, as you do when you have too much time on your hands, and came across an article about a proposed bridge across the Strait of Messina between mainland Italy and Sicily. Since Italy's unification, countless schemes have been proposed, abandoned and revived, each promising to create the first permanent link between Sicily and the Italian mainland. The current proposal is by far the most ambitious although significant technical and administrative hurdles remain before construction can proceed.

If completed, it would become the world's longest single-span suspension bridge, stretching more than 2 miles (3.3 kilometres) across the strait. Designed to carry both road traffic and high-capacity railway lines, it would dramatically reduce journey times and create an uninterrupted rail connection between Palermo and the rest of Europe.

Supporters believe it would transform Sicily's economy, but significant challenges remain. The Strait of Messina is one of Europe's most seismically active regions, where strong winds, deep water and powerful currents present formidable engineering obstacles. Environmental concerns, escalating construction costs and political disagreements have repeatedly delayed the project.

At present, the journey can be undertaken by train and to make things really exciting the train is broken up and rolled onto a ferry for the 30-minute crossing from Villa San Giovanni in mainland Italy to Messina, which is situated in the north-eastern part of Sicily. On the other side, the train is put together again for the remainder of the journey to Palermo which is the capital city of Sicily.

Although the Messina crossing feels unique today, railway ferries were once an important part of international rail travel. For this trip, I flew into Naples-Capodichino International Airport and returned from Palermo's Falcone-Borsellino Airport. This is the story of that journey as well as my visits to Naples and Palermo.....



Chapter 2: Naples

Introduction

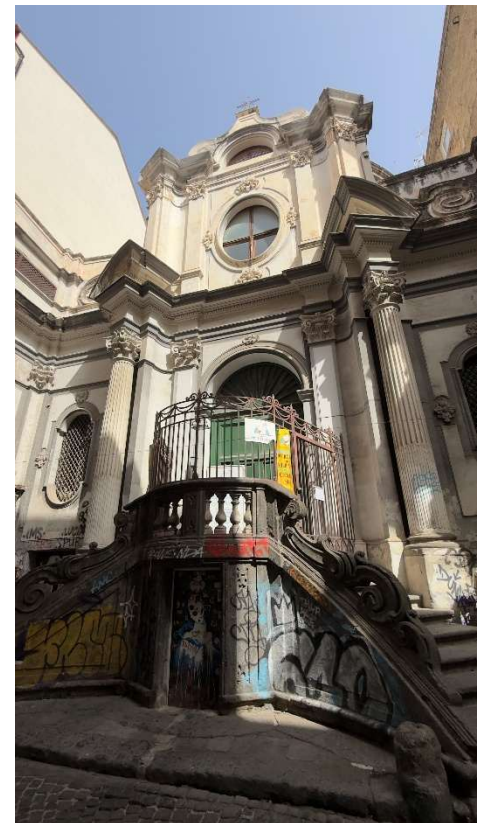
Few cities in Europe feel quite as immediate as Naples. Spread around one of the most beautiful bays in the Mediterranean and dominated by the unmistakable outline of Mount Vesuvius, the city combines spectacular scenery with an extraordinary concentration of history. Ancient Greek, Roman, Byzantine, Norman, Angevin, Aragonese, Spanish and Bourbon influences have all left their mark, producing a city whose streets, churches and palaces form a remarkable historical patchwork. The historic centre is a UNESCO World Heritage Site, and beneath the modern city are layers of its Greek and Roman past.

Yet Naples is far more than a collection of historic monuments. It is a city of noise, movement and personality. Scooters weave through impossibly narrow streets, laundry hangs above ancient lanes, market stalls spill into the pavements and conversations seem to take place at full volume. Around every corner there is another church, courtyard, palazzo or tiny workshop that appears to have been there for centuries. This is a city that rewards wandering rather than simply ticking attractions from a list.

The great landmarks are impressive: the vast Piazza del Plebiscito, the Royal Palace, Castel Nuovo and Castel dell'Ovo provide reminders of Naples as a powerful European capital, while the Cappella Sansevero and the churches of the historic centre reveal the extraordinary artistic wealth of the city. The National Archaeological Museum contains one of the world's finest collections of Roman antiquities, including treasures recovered from Pompeii and Herculaneum.

Food is inseparable from the Neapolitan experience. This is the birthplace of the modern pizza, while pasta, espresso and street food are all part of the city's everyday culture. Beyond Naples itself, the bay opens the door to Pompeii, Herculaneum, Vesuvius, Capri and the Amalfi Coast.

Naples can be chaotic, noisy and occasionally overwhelming. That is precisely what makes it memorable. It does not polish away its rough edges for visitors; instead, it invites you into the real life of southern Italy. Come for the history and scenery but stay for the atmosphere.



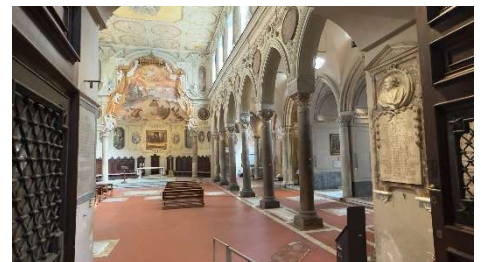
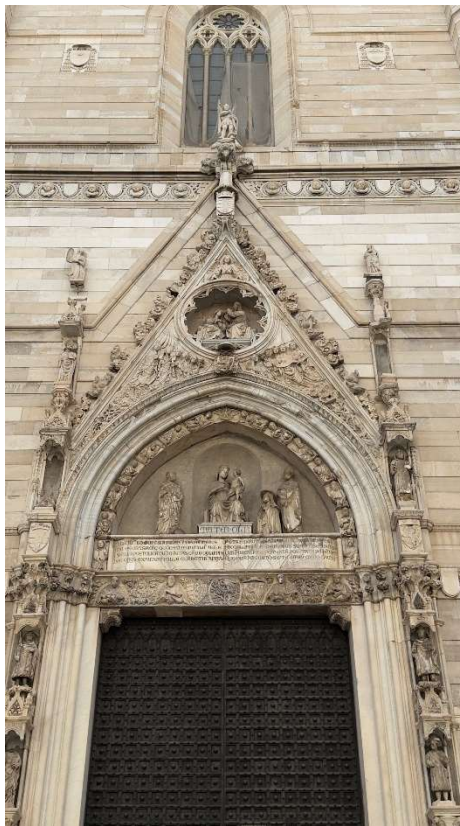
Naples Cathedral (Duomo di Napoli)

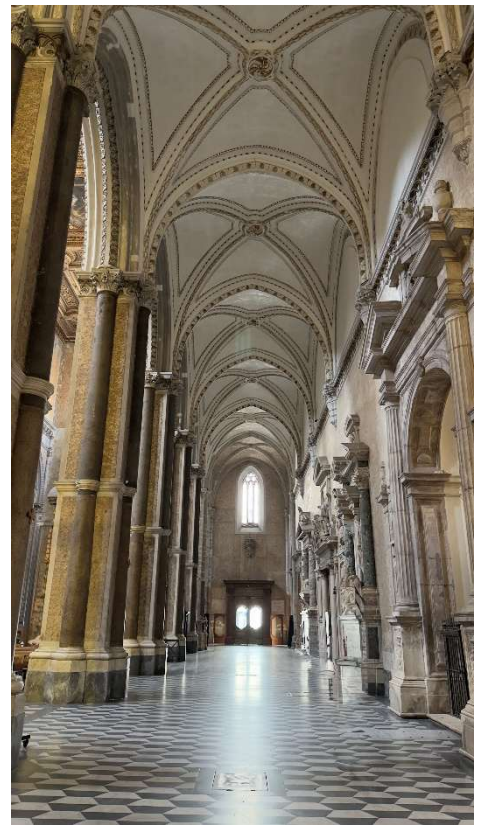


Naples Cathedral, officially the Cathedral of Santa Maria Assunta, is the city's primary and most important church as well as one of the city's oldest religious sites. Built between the 13th and 14th centuries on the remains of earlier churches, the cathedral showcases Gothic, Baroque and Neo-Gothic architecture, reflecting centuries of rebuilding after earthquakes and renovations.

The cathedral was begun under the Angevin rulers in the late 13th century on the site of earlier Christian buildings and ancient structures. Inside, the cathedral offers soaring vaulted ceilings, richly decorated chapels, elaborate frescoes and impressive marble floors. Beneath the main church lies an archaeological area where visitors can explore the remains of early Christian basilicas and sections of an ancient Greek temple.

The original interior was largely Gothic, but a devastating earthquake in 1456 prompted major renovations that introduced Baroque elements. A further restoration in the 19th century gave the exterior its current Neo-Gothic facade. Although the exterior is impressive, the true beauty lies within, where centuries of faith, art and tradition combine to create one of Italy's most significant religious monuments.





Spaccanapoli



Spaccanapoli is the historic heart of Naples and arguably its most thoroughfare. Stretching for almost two kilometres through the UNESCO-listed old town, its name literally means "the street that splits Naples" because it appears to divide the historic centre into two halves. The bustling street offers an authentic experiences of the city alongside centuries-old churches, artisan workshops, numerous cafés and family-run restaurants.

The street follows the original grid layout established by the ancient Greeks over 2,000 years earlier and remains remarkably unchanged. Around every corner are hidden courtyards, ornate churches and lively piazzas filled with local residents. Street vendors sell traditional pastries, fresh pizza and handmade souvenirs while scooters compete for what little pavement space remains.

Spaccanapoli perfectly captures Naples' chaotic charm and offers visitors a vivid glimpse into a city where history and modern life exist side by side. Along the route there are plenty of landmarks and far too many churches and chapels competing for your attention. As a UNESCO World Heritage Site, it offers much to look at and enjoy.



The Sansevero Chapel (Cappella Sansevero)



The Sansevero Chapel is an unusual funerary chapel in Naples, transformed by the eccentric Prince Raimondo di Sangro in the 18th century. Originally built in 1590 after a miraculous healing, the prince remodelled it between 1749 and 1771, infusing it with a unique combination of Baroque artistry, complex Masonic symbolism, and his own passion for science and alchemy.



The chapel's crowning glory is Giuseppe Sanmartino's masterpiece, called the Veiled Christ, which is one of the world's most extraordinary marble sculptures. The sculpture depicts Christ's dead body which is so masterfully carved that the transparent shroud appears completely real, sparking rumours that it was created by the use of alchemy to make a real veil look like marble.



The chapel also contains other remarkable works symbolising virtue, faith and human knowledge including a statue of Modesty honouring his mother and Disillusion depicting a man freeing himself from a net.



Downstairs, in the underground chamber, you will find two 'Anatomical Machines' depicting the skeletons of a man and a woman, with their arterial and venous systems reproduced in extraordinary detail. Their remarkable appearance gave rise to the long-standing rumour that they were the murdered servants of the prince, although the circulatory systems were actually reconstructed using materials including beeswax and colourants.



San Lorenzo Maggiore



Standing on Piazza San Gaetano in the heart of Naples' historic centre, San Lorenzo Maggiore is one of the city's most fascinating historical landmarks. While its elegant Gothic basilica is impressive in its own right, the real highlight lies beneath the church, where visitors can explore one of the most remarkable archaeological sites in Italy.

The present church was built during the late thirteenth century on the orders of Charles I of Anjou, replacing earlier Christian buildings. Inside, the lofty nave, beautiful Gothic apse and peaceful cloister reflect the influence of French Gothic architecture, while centuries of restoration have revealed much of the building's original character.

Meanwhile, hidden below the modern streets are the remarkably preserved remains of the Roman city of Neapolis, itself constructed over the earlier Greek settlement. You can walk along the original Roman streets, complete with stone paving, drainage channels, market stalls and workshops which once formed part of the city's forum, where merchants traded goods and citizens gathered for everyday business.

The excavations provide an extraordinary insight into daily life in ancient Naples, revealing bakeries, shops, laundries and a bank that survived beneath the modern city for centuries. Informative displays and artefacts help bring this hidden world to life, illustrating how Naples evolved from a Greek colony into an important Roman city.



Castel Nuovo



Castel Nuovo, also known as Maschio Angioino, dominates Naples' waterfront with its imposing medieval towers and impressive defensive walls. Built in 1279 by Charles I of Anjou, the fortress became the royal residence and political centre of the Kingdom of Naples for many centuries.



Although visitors can explore parts of the interior, the castle's most spectacular feature is the magnificent white marble triumphal arch, added during the 15th century to celebrate the entry of King Alfonso V of Aragon into Naples.

The castle has witnessed many historic events including royal coronations, political conspiracies and diplomatic meetings. Today it remains one of Naples' most recognisable landmarks and provides an excellent backdrop for photographs, particularly from the harbour.

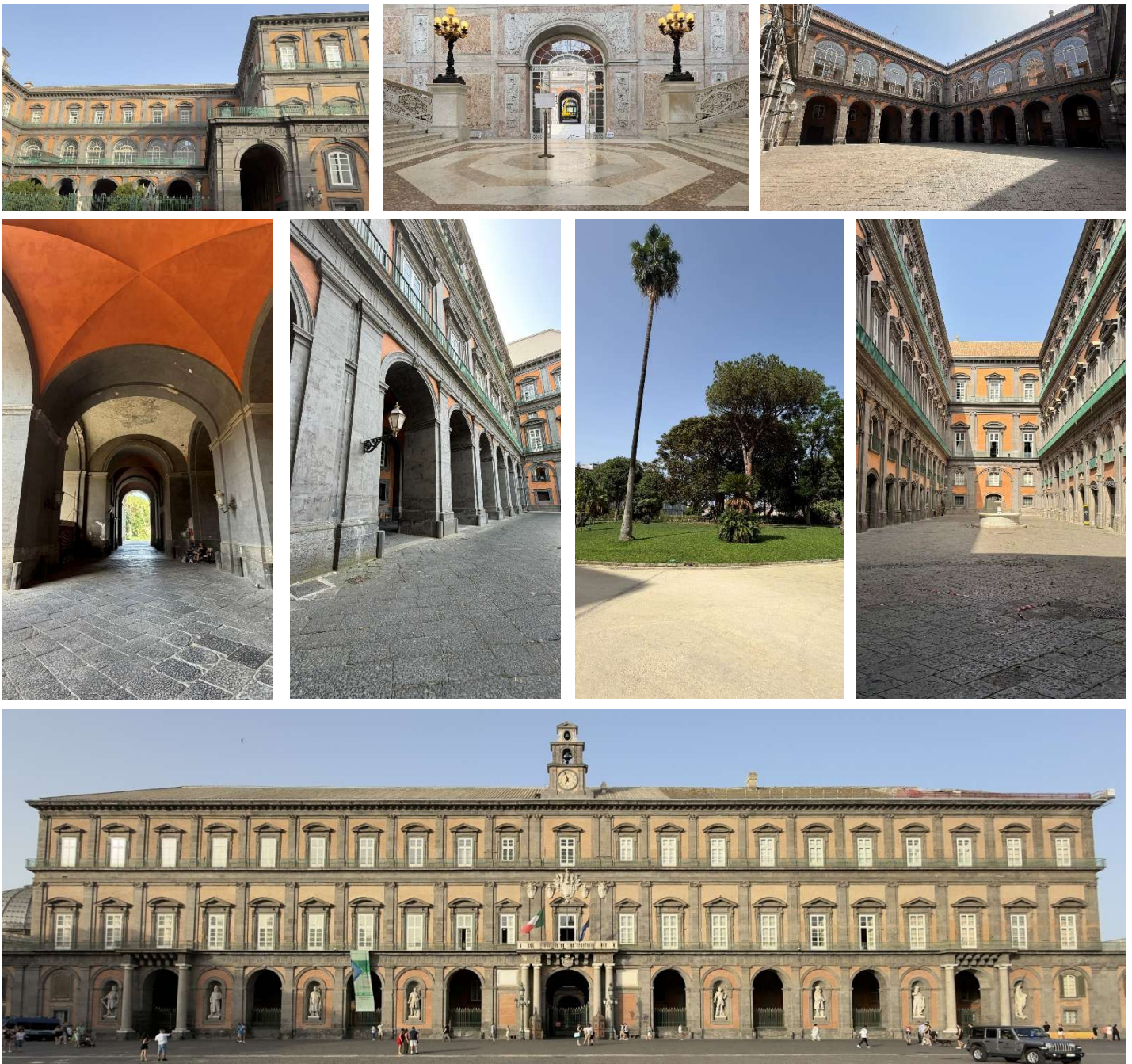


The Royal Palace (Palazzo Reale)

The Royal Palace of Naples (Palazzo Reale) is situated on the eastern side of Piazza del Plebiscito and is one of the city's most important historic landmarks. For more than three centuries it served as an important political and ceremonial centre of the Kingdom of Naples, housing Spanish viceroys, Bourbon kings, Napoleonic rulers and, later, members of the House of Savoy.

Construction of the palace began in 1600 under the direction of the architect Domenico Fontana. It was commissioned by the Spanish Viceroy Fernando Ruiz de Castro in anticipation of a visit by King Philip III of Spain. Ironically, the king never made the journey, yet the magnificent palace that was intended to receive him became the official residence of successive rulers for over 300 years.

The palace's elegant façade stretches for over 160 metres and overlooks both Piazza del Plebiscito and the Bay of Naples. During the twentieth century the palace suffered damage in the Second World War but was carefully restored. Since 1922 part of the building has housed the National Library of Naples, while the Royal Apartments remain open to the public....but not on my visit.



Basilica of San Francesco di Paola



Standing on the opposite side of the Piazza del Plebiscito, reputed to be one of the largest public squares in Italy, the Basilica of San Francesco di Paola is one of Naples' most recognisable landmarks. The building was commissioned by King Ferdinand I after the Bourbon monarchy was restored in 1815. The church was built as a gesture of thanksgiving for his return to the throne following the Napoleonic Wars. Construction began in 1816 and continued for more than 30 years before the basilica was finally completed in 1846. Its commanding position symbolises the close relationship that once existed between the monarchy and the Church.

The basilica is renowned for its magnificent Neoclassical architecture, inspired by the Pantheon in Rome. A sweeping semicircular colonnade extends on either side of the building, whose façade consists of six imposing Ionic columns supporting an elegant triangular roof. Behind the façade is a vast central dome with two smaller domes for the chapels to the left and right of the entrance. Inside, the circular nave is surrounded by marble columns and chapels containing paintings and sculptures by leading nineteenth-century Italian artists. Today, the Basilica of San Francesco di Paola serves both as an active place of worship and as one of Naples' most visited historical attractions.





Castel dell'Ovo

Perched on the tiny island of Megaride, Castel dell'Ovo is the oldest castle in Naples and one of the city's most picturesque landmarks. Linked to the mainland by a short causeway, it occupies the site associated with the earliest Greek settlement of Parthenope more than 2,500 years ago.

The castle owes its unusual name, meaning "Castle of the Egg," to a medieval legend involving the Roman poet, Virgil. According to local folklore, Virgil concealed a magical egg within the castle's foundations, and as long as it remained intact, Naples would be protected from disaster. The legend has endured for centuries and remains part of the city's rich cultural identity.

The walk along the Lungomare waterfront to reach the castle is one of Naples' most enjoyable strolls, with sweeping views across the Bay of Naples towards Mount Vesuvius. Although the castle itself is relatively simple compared with others in Italy, its panoramic terraces offer spectacular views over the harbour and coastline although, at the time of my visit, the castle was closed for refurbishment.



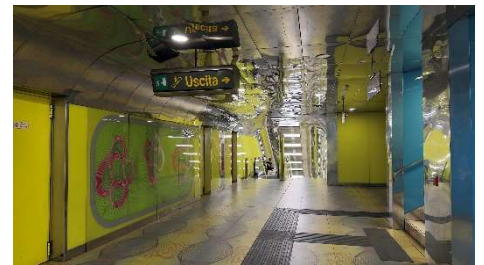
Naples Metro

Naples' Metro is far more than a convenient way of getting around the city. It has become one of Europe's most interesting urban transport systems, combining practical public transport with striking contemporary art and architecture. The system began operating in 1993, with later extensions creating a network linking the city centre with outlying districts and the railway stations.

Its most celebrated feature is the "Art Stations" (Stazioni dell'Arte), where architects, designers and artists were invited to transform otherwise functional underground spaces into works of art. The result is a series of stations that can feel more like galleries than transport hubs.

Toledo, on Line 1, is the star attraction, famous for its spectacular blue-and-gold escalator shaft, designed by Oscar Tusquets Blanca and inspired by the sea, light and volcanic landscape of Naples. It has frequently appeared in lists of Europe's most beautiful metro stations.

Other stations are equally distinctive. Università uses bold colours and futuristic forms, while Dante, Museo and Materdei incorporate sculptures, mosaics and contemporary installations. The stations form part of Naples' wider commitment to bringing art into everyday life.



For visitors, the Metro is worth using even when walking would be possible. It is fast, inexpensive and, in places, an attraction in its own right.

Via Toledo



Via Toledo is Naples' principal shopping boulevard and one of the city's busiest streets, connecting the historic centre with the waterfront. Lined with elegant shops, cafés, theatres and historic buildings, it has served as one of Naples' main thoroughfares since the 16th century when it was commissioned by the Spanish Viceroy, Pedro de Toledo.

Many visitors arrive via Toledo Metro Station, widely regarded as one of the most beautiful underground stations in the world. Designed by Spanish architect Oscar Tusquets Blanca, its spectacular blue mosaic installation known as the "Crater of Light" creates the illusion of descending beneath the sea. Frequently ranked among Europe's finest metro stations, it has become something of an attraction in its own right.

Above ground, Via Toledo offers an enjoyable mix of international brands, local boutiques and traditional cafés where you can pause for an espresso or sample Neapolitan pastries. The street also provides easy access to the Spanish Quarter and several important piazzas, making it an excellent starting point for exploring central Naples.

Whether shopping, people-watching or simply admiring the architecture, Via Toledo perfectly balances Naples' historic character with its vibrant modern energy.

Piazza del Plebiscito

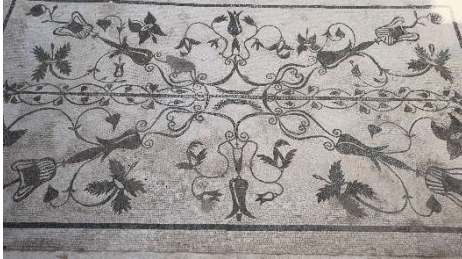


Piazza del Plebiscito is Naples' grand ceremonial square and one of Italy's largest public spaces. Surrounded by elegant architecture, it serves as the city's principal gathering place for celebrations, concerts and public events. At one end stands the imposing Basilica of San Francesco di Paola, with its sweeping colonnades inspired by Rome's Pantheon, while opposite sits the magnificent Royal Palace, once home to the Bourbon kings who ruled southern Italy.

The square takes its name from the 1860 plebiscite that led to Naples becoming part of the newly unified Kingdom of Italy. Today, its vast open space offers a welcome contrast to the city's narrow streets, allowing visitors to admire the surrounding architecture from every angle.

Local legend claims that anyone attempting to walk blindfolded between the two equestrian statues in front of the Royal Palace will inevitably fail, supposedly due to an old royal curse. Whether true or not, many visitors still enjoy attempting the challenge.

Pompeii Archaeological Park



Pompeii is one of the world's most remarkable archaeological sites and offers an unparalleled glimpse into everyday life during the Roman Empire. In AD 79, the catastrophic eruption of nearby Mount Vesuvius buried the thriving city beneath several metres of ash and other volcanic material. The disaster claimed thousands of lives, yet the same ash that destroyed Pompeii also preserved it with astonishing detail for almost 1,700 years until excavations began in the 18th century.

Today you can walk along original Roman streets, enter remarkably preserved homes, temples, baths, theatres and brothels, and see intricate mosaics and colourful frescoes that survived the eruption. Highlights include the Amphitheatre, the Villa of the Mysteries, the Forum Baths and, dare I say, the Brothel of Pompeii which was the best-known brothel in Pompeii, although evidence of prostitution has also been found elsewhere in the city. In addition, the haunting plaster casts of victims, created by pouring plaster into cavities left in the hardened ash, remain among the site's most powerful sights.



The scale of the site is extraordinary, covering around 170 acres, and it is impossible to see everything in a short visit. Getting there is not so easy unless you book an organised tour, although better (and cheaper) to get there under your own steam by train and a surprisingly short walk to the park's entrance. Make a list of where you want to go and what you want to see but remember that it is not likely you are going to see everything given the size of the area included.

Overall, the visit was unforgettable. Pompeii offers far more than a collection of ancient ruins..... it provides an intimate and deeply moving insight into Roman society, revealing homes, businesses, politics and entertainment frozen at a single tragic moment in history. As you wander its streets, it is impossible not to imagine the lives of the people who once lived, worked and laughed here, unaware of the catastrophe that was about to unfold.

Few places in the world create such a powerful connection with the distant past, and the haunting plaster casts serve as a poignant reminder of the human tragedy behind the archaeology. Whether you have a passion for history or simply enjoy exploring extraordinary places, Pompeii is an experience that stays with you long after you leave. It is, without question, one of Italy's greatest treasures and an essential destination for anyone visiting Naples.

Mount Vesuvius



Towering above the Bay of Naples, Mount Vesuvius is one of the world's most famous volcanoes and the only active volcano in continental Europe. Rising to around 4200 feet (1280 metres) it dominates the surrounding landscape and has shaped the history of southern Italy for thousands of years. Its eruption in AD 79 destroyed Pompeii, Herculaneum and several other smaller settlements, making it one of history's best-known natural disasters.

My guidebook suggested that 'visitors can travel by road to within a short distance of the summit before following a well-maintained trail to the crater rim' which made me foolishly believe that I might make it to the top. The information provided was entirely fictitious since the road trip left you a long way away from the not-so-well-maintained trail to the top which took over one hour to reach rather than the 20 to 30 suggested.....who are they kidding?

Along the, mainly steep and rugged, route which is covered with volcanic rock, ash and hardy vegetation you appreciate just how high you are and the views are breathtaking. Reaching the summit rewards visitors with panoramic views stretching across Naples, the Bay of Naples, Capri and the Sorrento Peninsula. Looking directly into the vast crater provides a powerful reminder that Vesuvius remains active, although it is continuously monitored by volcanologists.

Combining a visit to Pompeii with an ascent of Vesuvius creates one of Italy's most memorable day trips, linking the dramatic story of the ancient eruption with the magnificent landscape that continues to define the region today. Standing on the rim of the crater, gazing into the volcano that changed the course of history almost two thousand years ago, is both exhilarating and humbling. It is impossible not to reflect on the immense power of nature and the fragile existence of the communities that once flourished below.

The climb may be considerably more demanding than guidebooks would have you believe, but every step is rewarded by spectacular scenery and a profound sense of achievement. Whether you come for the geology, the history, the photography or simply the challenge of reaching the summit, Vesuvius delivers an experience that is as unforgettable as it is awe-inspiring. It is far more than just another viewpoint overlooking Naples; it is a place where history, science and nature combine to create a compelling and unforgettable experience.





The Pompeii and Vesuvius story

The eruption itself was not a single, sudden event but a two-phase catastrophe that unfolded over roughly 24 hours. The eruption began with a massive column of ash and lava that rained down on Pompeii for hours, burying the city under approximately 9 feet (2.8 metres) of lightweight volcanic rock. This phase lasted for a few hours and did give most of the inhabitants time to leave the city. Around two-fifths of the identified victims died during this phase, mainly as buildings collapsed under the weight of the accumulating pumice.

The following day the superheated avalanche of gas, rock and ash erupted and raced down the volcano's slopes at immense speeds and very high temperatures. These currents were the primary cause of death for the remaining population, with many victims dying almost instantly from the extreme heat and thermal shock. At this point, anyone still in the city was caught in an unsurvivable event.

The decision to stay or flee wasn't a simple matter of choosing to run. The eruption was unprecedented in living memory and Vesuvius had been dormant for centuries. The initial earthquakes were a familiar occurrence and did not signal the coming disaster to the residents. By the time the true danger became evident, many were trapped by the falling ash with the second phase offering no warning and no time to escape.

It is a common misconception that everyone in Pompeii perished. It is clear that the majority of Pompeii's population survived, although the exact number of inhabitants and victims remains uncertain. The estimated population at the time was roughly 20,000, and archaeological excavations have only found around 1,150 to 1,300 victims. Thousands successfully fled the city early in the eruption and many moved into new communities such as Naples. Recent archaeological evidence has shown that some people even returned to Pompeii after the eruption.



Reflection on Naples

Naples is one of those cities that is difficult to judge from a distance. On paper, it has everything a visitor could want..... an extraordinary history, magnificent churches and palaces, castles, museums, ancient ruins, a spectacular bay and Mount Vesuvius providing an almost theatrical backdrop. Yet what seems to have stayed with me most is not any single monument but the character of the city itself.

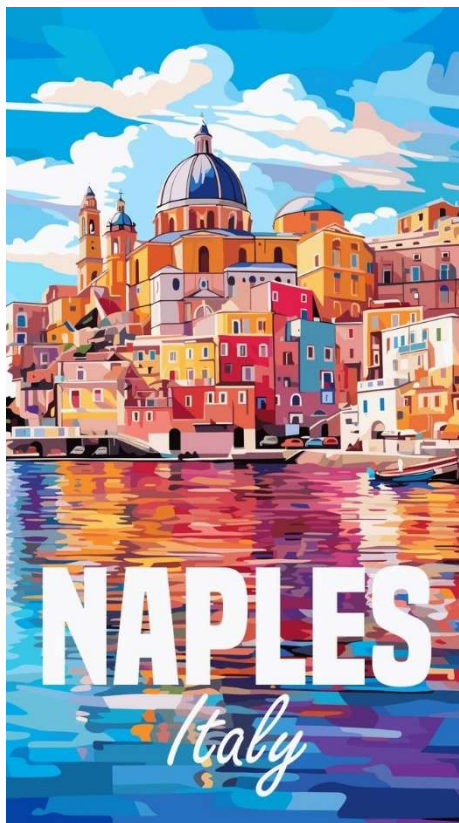
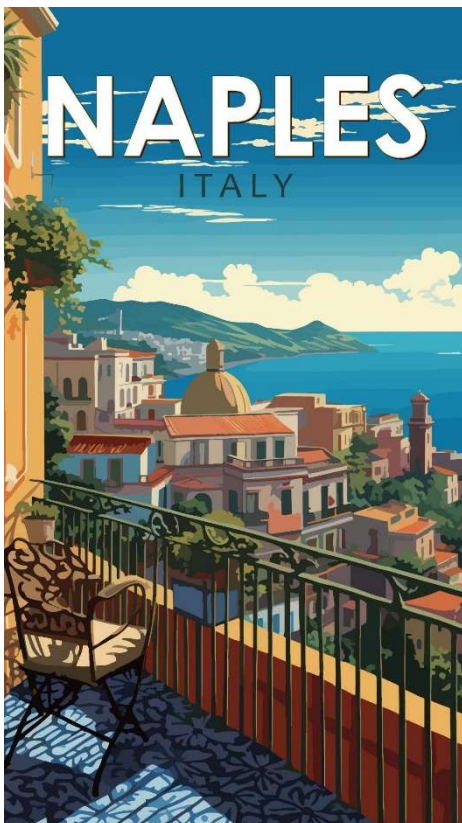
Walking through the historic centre, particularly around Spaccanapoli, there is an extraordinary sense of history being lived rather than preserved. Ancient churches sit alongside battered buildings, scooters squeeze through streets barely wide enough for pedestrians, laundry hangs above the pavements and contemporary graffiti competes with centuries-old architecture.

It can be noisy, untidy and at times overwhelming, but that is precisely why Naples feels different from many of Italy's more polished destinations. The city has not been tidied up for the benefit of tourists. It simply carries on being Naples. The remarkable thing is how much exists beneath the surface. At San Lorenzo Maggiore I could literally walk through the remains of the Greek and Roman city beneath the modern streets.

There were, inevitably, disappointments. The Royal Palace was closed to visitors during my visit and Castel dell'Ovo was undergoing refurbishment, reminding me that guidebooks can create expectations that reality does not always fulfil. My experience at Vesuvius was even more revealing. The guidebook's description of the climb bore little resemblance to what I actually encountered. The trail was considerably tougher and longer than suggested, but reaching the crater made the effort worthwhile.

Pompeii was perhaps the most powerful experience of all. It is easy to regard it simply as another collection of ancient ruins, but walking through the streets, houses and businesses makes the people who lived there seem remarkably close. The plaster casts are a particularly uncomfortable reminder that this is not simply archaeology but the remains of a human catastrophe.

Looking back, I think that is what makes Naples so memorable. It is a city of contrasts: magnificent but scruffy, historic but thoroughly alive, frustrating but endlessly rewarding. Even the Metro becomes part of the experience, with extraordinary contemporary art stations sitting beneath a city whose roots stretch back more than two thousand years.



Chapter 2: The Ferry



The Boat Train to Sicily

Although the ferry train starts in Rome, I thought this was a good opportunity to see another Italian city so started my trip in Naples. Not untypically, the train arrived late but after a quick turnaround in Naples, we were on our way. Unfortunately, the 12-coach train had been reduced to 8 coaches so our assigned seats in coach 11 were not existent.

Eventually, an officious-looking guard announced that coach number 8 is now designated as coach number 11 much to the surprise of everyone with seat reservations for coach 8. He then proceeded to move everyone around in a game similar to musical chairs but without the music. We were eventually assigned our seats on the left-hand side which was disappointing as I had reserved the right-hand side which offers the best views.

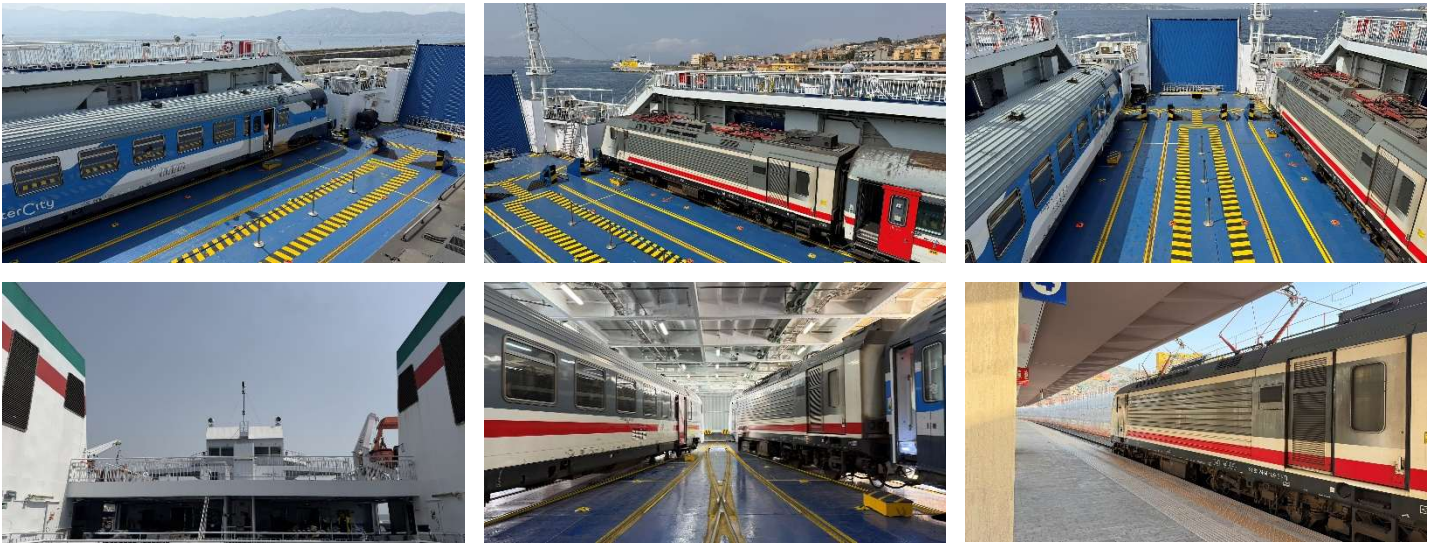
As the train leaves Naples, it hugs the coast, offering fleeting, cinematic glimpses of turquoise water through tunnels carved into the cliffside. As you race south through the agricultural heartland of Calabria, the landscape shifts. Lemon groves and olive terraces blur past, the sun baking the dry earth until it is the colour of terracotta. This nine-hour train ride is underway.

The train clatters through small, sun-bleached stations where the heat shimmers on the platforms, and for a few hours, it feels like a conventional, if picturesque, Italian rail journey. All too soon the train slows as it approaches the port of Villa San Giovanni. On arrival at the southern tip of Italy, the train is split into sections before it rolls seamlessly onto the ferry.

Passengers are encouraged to leave the train during the voyage, transforming what might have been a routine transfer into one of the highlights of the journey. Stepping onto the open deck reveals sweeping views across the Strait of Messina and looking at the train, it is impossible not to smile at the surreal sight of an Intercity train quietly parked on the deck of a ship.

The ferry manoeuvres into the port of Messina, and with a heavy clang, the bow lowers. You hurry back down to the carriage, reclaimed from the hold. With a final lurch, the train rolls off the ship and onto Sicilian soil. Now came the final leg, as the tracks curved inland, leaving the coast for the island's rugged, untamed interior. Finally, I pulled into Palermo Central station and was released into the fragrant, humid night air of the Sicilian capital.





The history of the Boat Train

The origins of the service date back to the nineteenth century, when Sicily's expanding railway network needed a reliable connection with mainland Italy. Passenger ferries had long crossed the Strait of Messina, but transferring travellers and freight was slow and inconvenient so engineers developed specialised railway ferries capable of carrying complete railway carriages directly across the water.

Regular train ferry operations began in 1899 and soon became an indispensable link between Sicily and the rest of Italy. Over the decades the vessels have evolved considerably, becoming larger, safer and more efficient, but the essential principle has remained unchanged. More than 125 years later, trains still roll aboard ferries in much the same way as they did at the beginning of the twentieth century.

For the future, the proposed road and rail bridge across the Strait of Messina is likely to make this service obsolete. A fixed crossing would undoubtedly make journeys faster and more efficient, but it would also bring to an end one of Europe's most distinctive railway traditions. The sight of a long-distance train quietly sailing across the Mediterranean is something that future generations may never know.

There is an undeniable romance to the present arrangement. Modern rail travel often focuses on speed, efficiency and arriving as quickly as possible. The boat train reminds us that the journey itself can still be part of the adventure. It offers passengers the rare opportunity to step out onto the deck of a ship breathe the sea air and watch their own train making the crossing alongside them.

Perhaps that is why the boat train occupies such a special place in the imagination. If you fancy the opportunity to experience this for yourself, then I suggest you get yourself booked. The train journey was quite cheap although Italy's railway service is certainly not the best in the world and catering services are a bit hit and miss, so bring your own picnic.

Famous train ferries once operated between England and France, Germany and Denmark, Germany and Sweden as well as several of North America's Great Lakes. Today, only a very small number of railway services anywhere in the world routinely carry scheduled passenger trains on ferries, including this one and the Yuehai Railway Ferry between mainland China and Hainan Island.

Chapter 3 Palermo

Introduction

Palermo is a city shaped by successive civilisations. Set on the north coast of Sicily and backed by mountains, it has been influenced by the Phoenicians, Greeks, Romans, Arabs, Normans, Swabians, Angevins, Aragonese and Spanish, each leaving traces in its streets, buildings and traditions. The result is one of Italy's most distinctive urban landscapes, where Norman churches stand alongside Arab-influenced architecture, Baroque palaces and grand nineteenth-century boulevards. Few cities provide such a concentrated illustration of Sicily's complicated history.

The historic centre contains many of Palermo's most important sights, from the magnificent Cathedral and the Norman Palace to the extraordinary Palatine Chapel, whose Byzantine-style mosaics are among the finest in Europe. The Martorana and San Cataldo add further evidence of the city's Norman-Arab heritage, while the Teatro Massimo, one of Europe's largest opera houses, represents a very different period in Palermo's development. Markets such as Ballarò, Vucciria and Capo provide another side of the city, with food, commerce and everyday life continuing in streets that have served much the same purpose for generations.

Palermo is also a city of squares and public spaces. Piazza Pretoria, with its elaborate fountain, leads towards the Quattro Canti, the striking Baroque crossroads at the heart of the old city. Alongside these grand landmarks are narrow lanes, courtyards, ageing palazzi and churches that range from richly decorated interiors to buildings showing the effects of decades of neglect. The contrast between splendour and decay is a recurring feature of Palermo and an important part of its visual character.

Palermo is therefore best approached as a city of layers..... ancient, medieval, Arab, Norman, Baroque and modern, often existing within a few streets of one another. Its major monuments are reason enough to visit, but the markets, churches, squares and less polished corners reveal just as much about the character and history of Sicily's capital. Palermo has always felt like a city that does not care much for first impressions. It is not trying to charm you, at least not straight away. You have to spend a little time here before it begins to reveal itself.



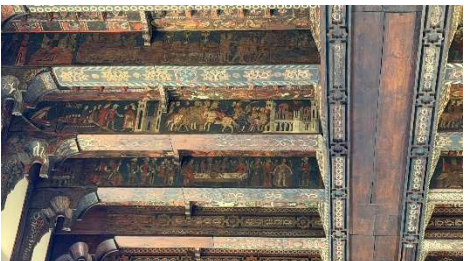
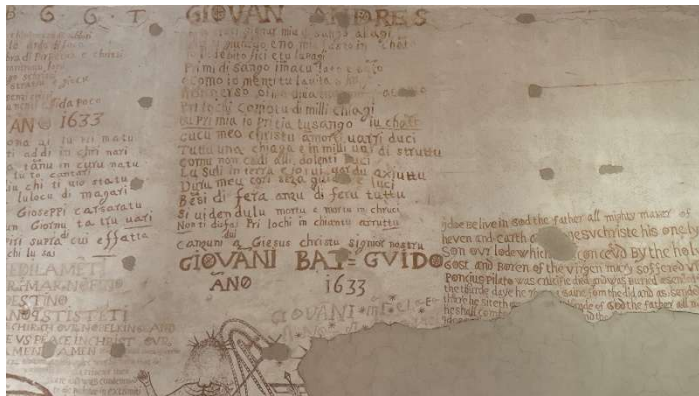
Palazzo Chiaramonte-Steri



Dominating Piazza Marina, the imposing Palazzo Chiaramonte-Steri is one of Palermo's most fascinating medieval buildings, combining the appearance of a fortified residence with some remarkably elegant Gothic detailing. Construction began around 1307 for the powerful Chiaramonte family, one of the most influential noble dynasties in medieval Sicily. The building gave its name to the distinctive Chiaramontan Gothic style, which blends Gothic forms with Arab and Norman influences.

The palace's history became considerably darker after the Chiaramonte family fell from power. Andrea Chiaramonte was executed in 1392, and the family's possessions were confiscated. The building subsequently served as a royal residence and, between 1468 and 1517, as the home of the Aragonese rulers and Spanish viceroys. Later it housed the customs authorities before becoming the headquarters of the Spanish Inquisition in Sicily from 1601 to 1782.

The Inquisition left a particularly haunting legacy. Prisoners were held in cells within the palace, many covering the walls with drawings, inscriptions and graffiti. These remarkable surviving marks provide an unusually personal record of people imprisoned there and can still be seen. Today the Steri forms part of the University of Palermo and houses its Rectorate and museum spaces. It is therefore not simply a beautiful medieval palace, but a building that encapsulates Palermo's political, religious and social history.



Church of the Gesù (Casa Professa)

The Church of the Gesù, commonly known as Casa Professa, is one of Palermo's finest examples of Sicilian Baroque architecture. The Jesuits, who arrived in Palermo in 1549, began constructing this church adjacent to their professed house in 1590, with the structure finally completed in 1636.

The original single-nave design by Jesuit architect Giovanni Tristano underwent significant transformation in the early 17th century by removing dividing walls between chapels to create two additional side naves which is a layout typical of grand Jesuit churches.

The interior is a breathtaking display of coloured marble, intricate stucco decoration, elaborate carvings and magnificent frescoes that cover almost every surface. The work was begun in 1658 and continued well into the next century. Every chapel reveals new artistic treasures, while the soaring dome and richly decorated ceilings create an overwhelming sense of grandeur.

The church suffered catastrophic damage during World War II in 1943, when a bomb collapsed its dome and destroyed most of the wall paintings in the chancel and transepts. After extensive restoration work spanning over two years, the church reopened on 24 February 2009.

Today, the Church of the Gesù remains a testament to both the artistic ambition of the Jesuit order and the resilience of Palermo's cultural heritage with its richly decorated interior and fascinating history drawing visitors from around the world.



Palermo Cathedral



Palermo Cathedral, dedicated to the Assumption of the Virgin Mary, is one of Sicily's most important landmarks and reflects the remarkable blend of cultures that have shaped the island over the centuries. Originally constructed in 1185 on the site of earlier Roman, Byzantine and Arab places of worship, the cathedral has evolved through successive periods of Norman, Gothic, Renaissance and Baroque architecture, creating a unique and fascinating building.



Its impressive exterior features elegant towers, decorative battlements and graceful arches influenced by both Norman and Islamic design. Inside, the atmosphere is more restrained, allowing visitors to focus on the cathedral's historical significance. The interior houses the royal tombs of some of history's most significant figures, including Henry VI and Roger II as well as Emperor Frederick II who was one of medieval Europe's most influential rulers.



The highlights of the cathedral are suitably signposted including an opportunity to visit the rooftop for those foolish enough to climb the steps to the top of the building (like me). The reward is some of the finest panoramic views over Palermo's rooftops, surrounding mountains and the distant Tyrrhenian Sea. The cathedral also houses a treasury containing religious artefacts and precious objects that illustrate Sicily's rich ecclesiastical history.

Combining architectural beauty, royal history and spectacular views, Palermo Cathedral is an essential stop on any visit to the city. The cathedral is designated as a UNESCO World Heritage site combining architectural beauty, royal history and spectacular views, Palermo Cathedral is an essential stop on any visit to the city.





Royal Palace (Palazzo dei Normanni)



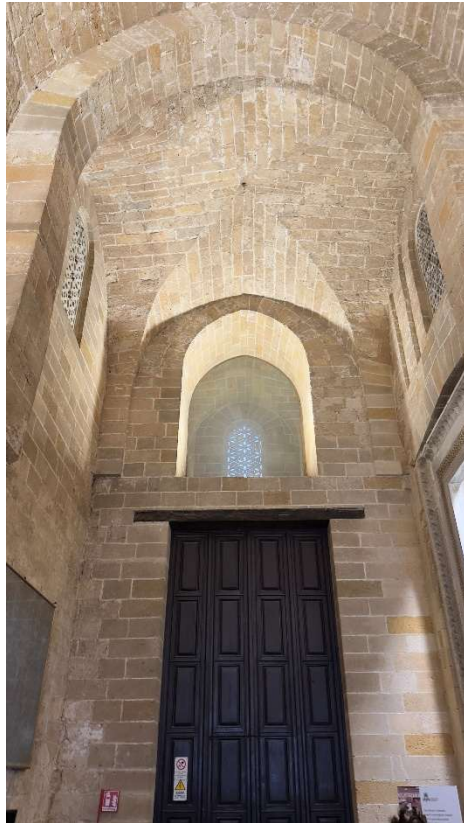
The Royal Palace of Palermo, also known as the Palazzo dei Normanni or Norman Palace, is one of Sicily's most fascinating monuments with a history reflecting the island's rich cultural tapestry from Phoenician settlements to the modern day.

Originally built by Arab rulers during the ninth century, it was transformed into a magnificent royal palace following the Norman conquest of Sicily in 1072. During the 12th century, the palace complex was developed into a series of interconnected towers and royal apartments, including the famous Room of the Winds and Roger's Room, decorated with remarkable medieval mosaics.

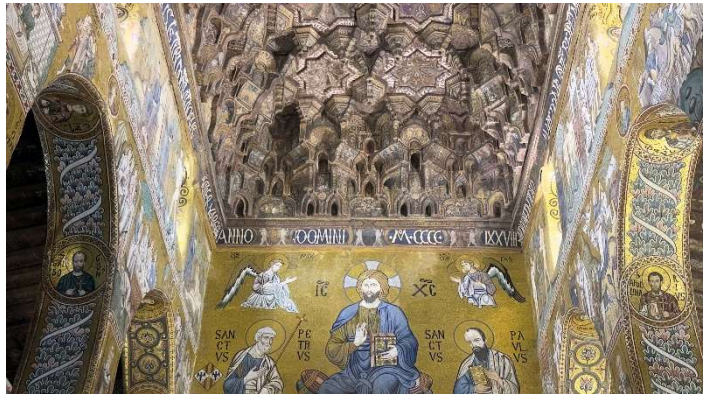
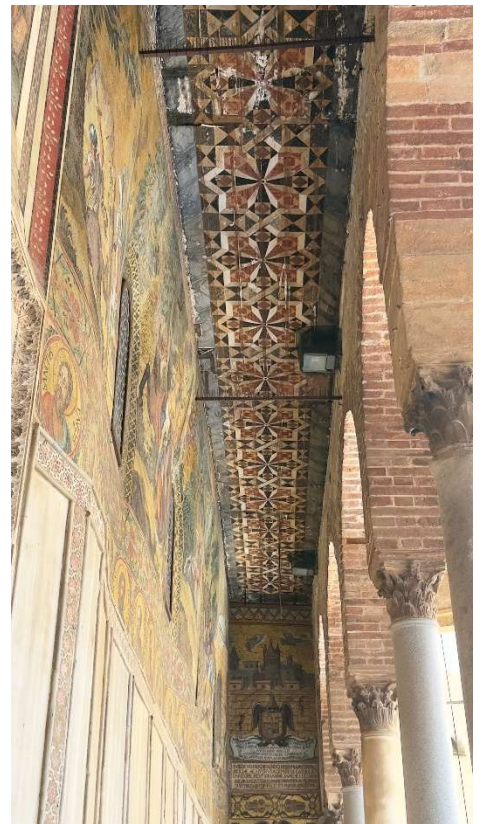
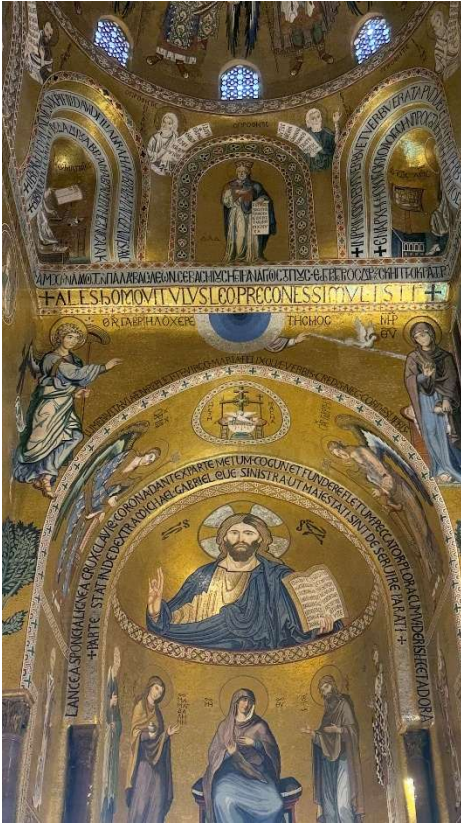
The centrepiece of the palace is the Palatine Chapel, built in 1132 by Roger II as the royal family's private chapel. The chapel harmoniously blends Byzantine mosaics, Islamic-influenced paintings and Western architectural elements. For example, the dome features the iconic image of Christ Pantocrator surrounded by archangels, while the marble floors combine Byzantine techniques with Islamic geometric patterns.

Visitors can also explore elegant courtyards, the royal gardens, grand reception rooms and beautifully restored and richly decorated royal apartments that illustrate centuries of political power and artistic achievement. Today it is the oldest royal residence in Europe still used by a parliament and serves as the seat of the Regional Assembly.

A visit to the Palazzo dei Normanni offers far more than simply viewing an ancient palace..... it provides an insight into the remarkable civilisation that made medieval Palermo one of Europe's greatest cultural centres.



Palatine Chapel





Fontana Pretoria

Just a few steps from Quattro Canti stands the magnificent Fontana Pretoria, one of Palermo's most celebrated Renaissance monuments. Designed by the Florentine sculptor Francesco Camilliani in the sixteenth century, the fountain was originally created for a private Florentine villa before being dismantled and transported piece by piece to Palermo in 1574 to showcase the city's advanced waterworks system.

The enormous circular fountain is adorned with an impressive collection of marble statues depicting gods, mythological figures, animals and allegorical characters. The abundance of nude sculptures shocked many local residents at the time, earning it the nickname of 'The Fountain of Shame'.

Despite its controversial beginnings, the fountain gradually became an accepted and beloved landmark, its floodlit nighttime appearance making it particularly striking after dark. The fountain's setting in Piazza Pretoria is particularly theatrical, as it overlooks the facades of two churches, Santa Caterina and San Giuseppe dei Teatini, creating a dramatic dialogue between sacred architecture and profane sculpture.

Today, the Fontana Pretoria stands as a testament to the boldness of Renaissance art and the complex relationship between public morality and artistic expression in 16th-century Palermo. The combination of flowing water, intricate sculpture and beautiful architecture creates one of the city's most photogenic locations.



Quattro Canti

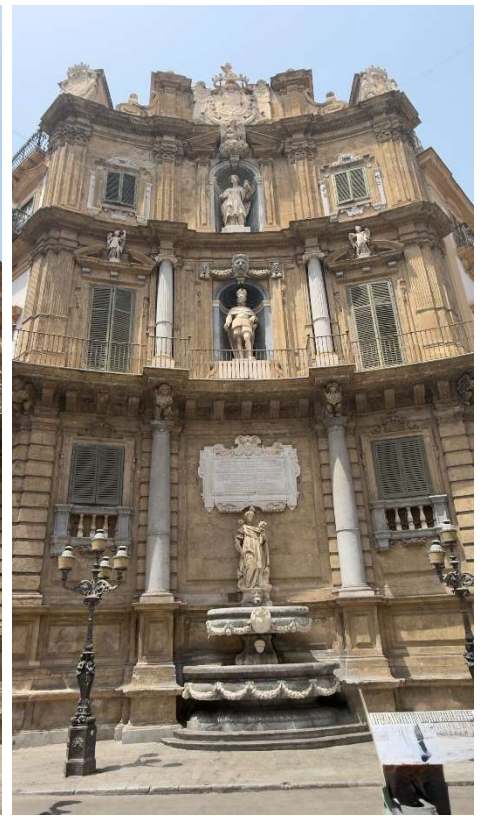
The Quattro Canti, officially known as Piazza Vigliena, represents an important achievement in Baroque urban planning and is the symbolic heart of Palermo's historic centre. Completed in the early seventeenth century, this elegant octagonal square marks the intersection of the city's two principal streets, Via Maqueda and Corso Vittorio Emanuele.



The plan was conceived by Spanish Viceroy between 1608 and 1620 and designed by architects Giulio Lasso and Mariano Smiriglio. The square's genius lies in its symmetrical design, with four concave Baroque facades marking the corners of Palermo's four ancient quarters: the Kalsa, Seralcadi, Albergaria, and Castellammare quarters.

Each of the four identical Baroque façades is beautifully decorated with fountains, statues and architectural details arranged across several levels. The lower sections represent the four seasons, above them stand statues of the four Spanish kings of Sicily, while the upper niches contain Palermo's four female patron saints. Together they create one of Italy's most harmonious examples of urban Baroque design.

Despite its relatively small size, Quattro Canti is one of Palermo's busiest meeting places, with traffic and pedestrians constantly passing through its centre. Looking in any direction reveals beautiful streets lined with historic palaces, churches and cafés.



Church of Santa Maria dell'Ammiraglio (La Martorana)

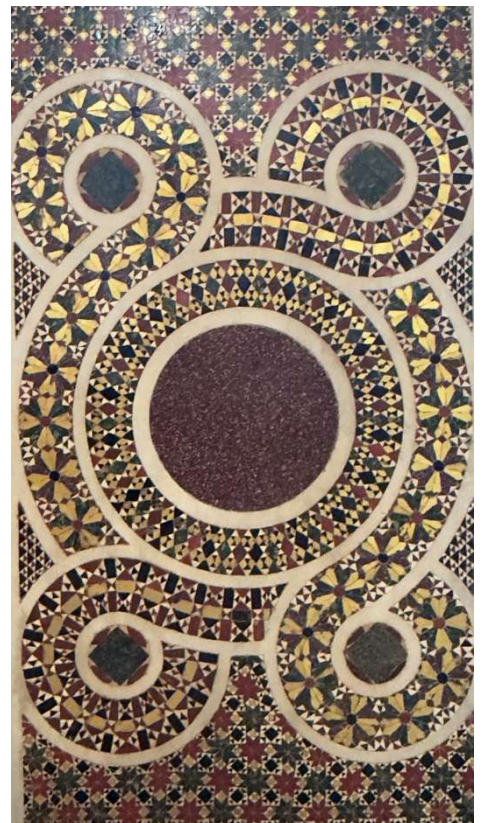
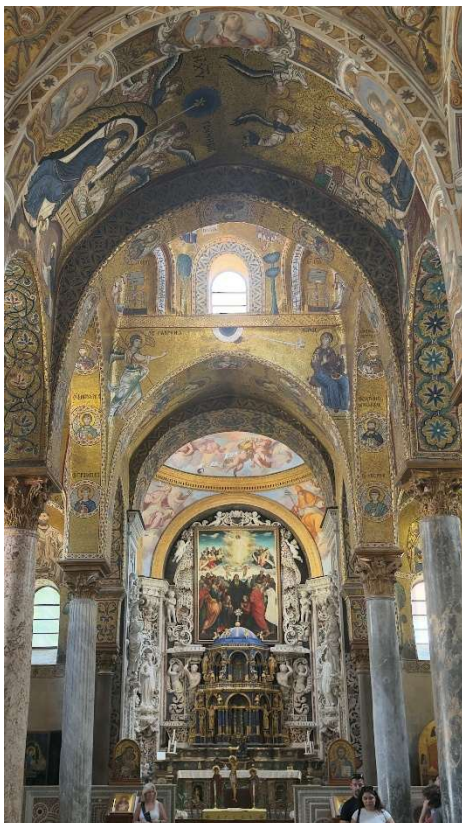


The Church of Santa Maria dell'Ammiraglio, commonly known as La Martorana, is one of Palermo's greatest artistic treasures and forms part of the UNESCO-listed Arab-Norman monuments of Sicily. Founded in 1143 by George of Antioch, the admiral of King Roger II, it has remained one of the island's most remarkable churches for nearly nine centuries.

The church is particularly well known for the magnificent Byzantine mosaics that decorate the interior. Rich golden backgrounds illuminate scenes from the life of Christ, while portraits of King Roger II receiving his crown directly from Christ symbolise the unique relationship between church and monarchy during Norman rule.

The church follows the traditional cross-in-square Byzantine plan with its apse oriented to the east, as worshippers were required to pray towards the rising sun. This orientation reflects the church's deep connection to Byzantine ritual, a connection that endures to this day as the church belongs the Italo-Albanian Catholic Eparchy of Piana degli Albanesi and visitors can attend celebrations in Albanian or Greek.

Over the centuries the church acquired elegant Baroque additions, creating a fascinating blend of artistic styles that somehow complement one another beautifully. The richly decorated ceilings, marble floors and exquisite craftsmanship reward careful observation. Despite its relatively modest size, La Martorana is widely regarded as one of the finest Byzantine churches in Europe.





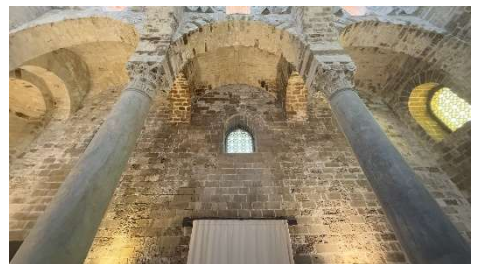
Church of San Cataldo

Standing next door to La Martorana, the Church of San Cataldo is one of the most iconic examples of Arab-Norman architecture in Sicily. Founded around 1160 by Admiral Majone di Bari, the church exemplifies the restrained forms characteristic of Norman architecture while incorporating Islamic and Byzantine influences.

The building's rectangular plan incorporates Islamic and Byzantine features, including cubic forms, blind arches, Arab-style battlements along its exterior and the three iconic red domes that reflect Eastern architectural traditions and have become a defining feature of Palermo's skyline. The interior is equally fascinating, with naked walls supporting Byzantine-style arcades, and the original mosaic-decorated pavement and main altar still in place.

The church suffered an unfortunate period in the 18th century when it was used as a post office, but the 19th century saw a sensitive restoration that returned the building to something closer to its original medieval form. In 2015, San Cataldo received UNESCO World Heritage status offering an unrivalled glimpse into the architectural genius of Norman Sicily.

Unlike the richly decorated churches nearby, San Cataldo is notable for its remarkable simplicity. The plain stone interior, elegant arches and restrained decoration create a peaceful atmosphere that reflects the architectural ideals of the medieval period. This simplicity allows visitors to appreciate the harmony and influence of Islamic design on Norman Sicily.



Castello a Mare



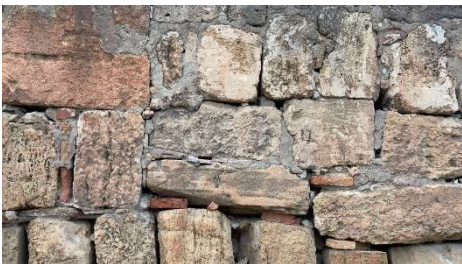
Standing beside the entrance to Palermo's historic harbour, the Castello a Mare was for centuries one of the city's most important defensive strongholds. Despite its name, meaning "Castle by the Sea", it was considerably more than a single castle: it developed into a large fortified complex protecting the entrance to the Cala, Palermo's ancient natural harbour. Its origins are medieval, with the site developing into a major fortified complex under successive Arab, Norman and later rulers..



The fortress reached its greatest importance during the Spanish period. In 1496, under Ferdinand of Aragon, the entrance was substantially remodelled, while in 1535 the Viceroy Don Ferrante Gonzaga ordered major new bastions and defensive works. Following a visit to Palermo by the Emperor Charles V, the fortifications were strengthened still further, reflecting fears of attack by the Ottoman Turks and other Mediterranean powers. By this time, Castello a Mare had become the principal defensive point of Palermo's harbour.



The fortress was also associated with a darker episode in Palermo's history. During the period of the Spanish Inquisition, the Inquisition temporarily used the castle, and a disastrous explosion in its powder magazine killed many prisoners and injured the inquisitor Ludovico Páramo. The incident contributed to the decision to move the tribunal elsewhere, eventually to Palazzo Chiaramonte-Steri in 1601.



Much of the fortress was demolished in the early twentieth century, particularly during the redevelopment of Palermo's waterfront in 1923. What survives today includes part of the Mastra Tower, the cylindrical tower and the monumental entrance, together with archaeological remains of the much larger complex. The ruins provide a fascinating reminder that Palermo's harbour was a place that had to be defended.

The Catacombe dei Cappuccini

A short bus ride from the historic centre brings you to one of Palermo's most unsettling and thought-provoking attractions called the Catacombe dei Cappuccini. Established by Capuchin monks in the late sixteenth century, the catacombs became an extraordinary burial place where thousands of bodies were naturally preserved using natural desiccation, embalming methods or chemical treatments.



Although the guidebook suggests 8000 bodies, the most recent count confirms 1252 mummified bodies (I didn't count but I did do my research) which line the extensive underground corridors. The catacombs are arranged in categories such as monks, priests, men, women, virgins, children and professionals.....although I didn't find the virgin's section.

The catacombs were an exclusive burial site, accessible only to those who could afford the privilege, ensuring that the mummies represent a particular stratum of society rather than the general population. Each body is identified by a small plaque bearing the name and date of death, making each presence a tangible fragment of history.

Many of the bodies are well preserved and still dressed in their original clothing providing a fascinating insight into Sicilian society between the 17th and 19th centuries with some of the most recent additions dating back to the 1920s. The catacombs were officially closed for use as a burial site in 1880 although further burials took place in the early 20th century.

Although the catacombs may appear unsettling, they were created not to frighten but to remind visitors of the fleeting nature of life. For centuries, families would visit deceased relatives, maintaining a close connection with loved ones after death. No photographs are allowed inside the catacombs, so I have taken the liberty of including some content which I believe to be copyright free.



Teatro Massimo

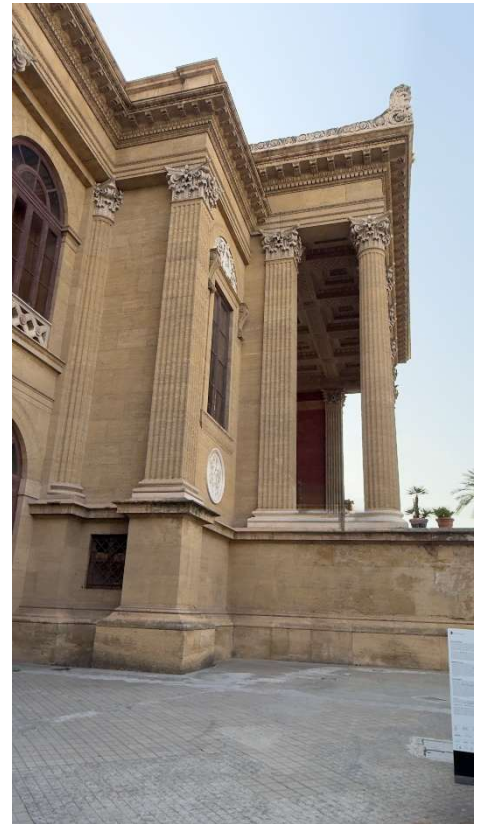


Standing as a testament to ambition and architectural grandeur, the Teatro Massimo Vittorio Emanuele in Palermo is not just an opera house; but Italy's largest opera house and, at the time of its opening, the third-largest in Europe by area. Its story began in 1864 when the Palermo Council announced an international competition to build a theatre worthy of Sicily's capital, a project intended to solidify the city's prestige following the unification of Italy.

Construction began with the laying of the foundation stone on 12 January 1875. The building was designed by Giovanni Battista Filippo Basile, who worked tirelessly on the project until his death in 1891, when his son Ernesto took over and completed the work. Work was suspended in 1878 and did not resume until 1890, but eventually, on 16 May 1897, the theatre was inaugurated with a performance of Verdi's *Falstaff*.

The Teatro Massimo's long and often difficult history continued into the 20th century, when the theatre closed in 1974 for what were supposed to be minor repairs. However, it remained closed for over two decades, not reopening until 12 May 1997, just four days before its centenary.

The theatre is a powerful embodiment of its classical inspirations. Basile's design drew upon the ancient Greek temples at Selinunte and Agrigento, resulting in a monumental neoclassical exterior. The grand entrance features a soaring colonnade and sweeping staircase flanked by two imposing bronze lions, one created by Benedetto Civiletti and the other by Mario Rutelli.



Inside, the architectural prowess continues with the auditorium, renowned for its exceptional acoustics and designed in a traditional horseshoe shape. It is a space of lavish decoration, featuring intricate golden stuccoes, rich wood, and five tiers of boxes, all crowned by a beautiful painted ceiling by artists like Ettore De Maria Bergler and Rocco Lentini.

Today, the Teatro Massimo stands as a symbol of resilience and cultural renewal. Having celebrated its reopening, it has once again taken its place on the world stage although tours of the inside confirm that further work is needed to raise the status of this place. The building is in desperate need of a lick of paint and some of the furniture is decidedly grubby.

Nonetheless, the theatre remains a magnificent cultural landmark, its enormous stage and superb acoustics making it one of the world's great opera venues and a source of pride for the city of Palermo.



Monreale Cathedral and its Cloister



A short distance outside Palermo, the golden mosaics of Monreale Cathedral are among the greatest artistic treasures in Sicily and rank alongside those of Constantinople, Venice and Ravenna as some of the finest examples of Byzantine art in Europe. Standing high on the hillside overlooking Palermo, the cathedral was commissioned in 1174 by the Norman king William II.

The result is one of the supreme masterpieces of Norman Sicily, a remarkable fusion of Norman architecture, Byzantine craftsmanship and Arab artistic influences that reflects the island's unique cultural heritage. Designated a UNESCO World Heritage Site, Monreale Cathedral continues to astonish visitors more than eight centuries after its completion.

Although the cathedral's exterior is impressive, it is the breathtaking interior that leaves the most lasting impression. More than 6,000 square metres of shimmering gold mosaics cover the walls, arches and ceilings. Created by Byzantine craftsmen using millions of tiny individual pieces of coloured glass, the mosaics illustrate stories from both the Old and New Testaments in extraordinary detail.



Beginning with the Creation of the World and continuing through the lives of the Patriarchs, Moses and Christ, they form one of the most complete biblical picture cycles of the medieval period. Towering above the high altar is the magnificent image of Christ Pantocrator, his immense outstretched figure dominating the apse with a calm yet commanding presence.

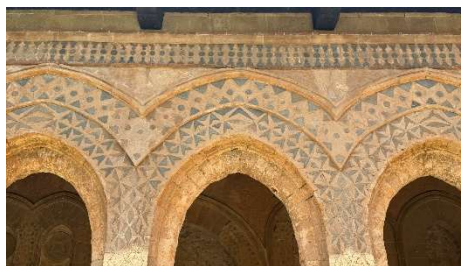
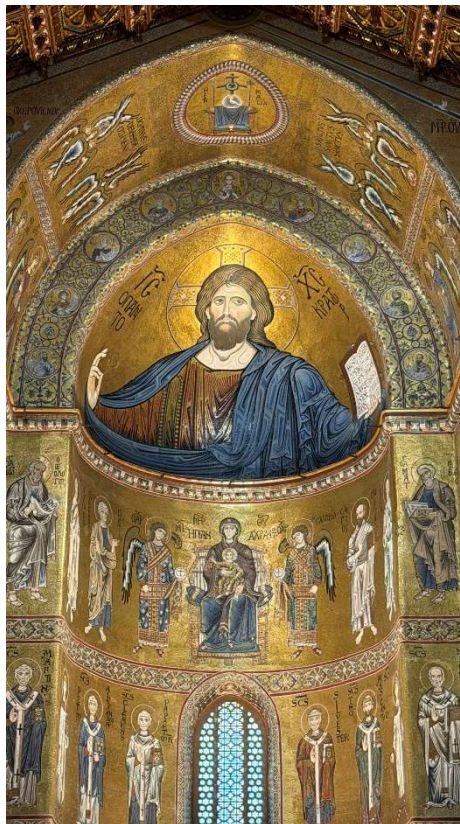
Beyond its artistic splendour, the cathedral also reveals the remarkable political and religious ambitions of Norman Sicily. The Norman rulers governed a population made up of Latin Christians, Greek Orthodox believers, Muslims and Jews, and the cathedral reflects this multicultural society in both its architecture and decoration.

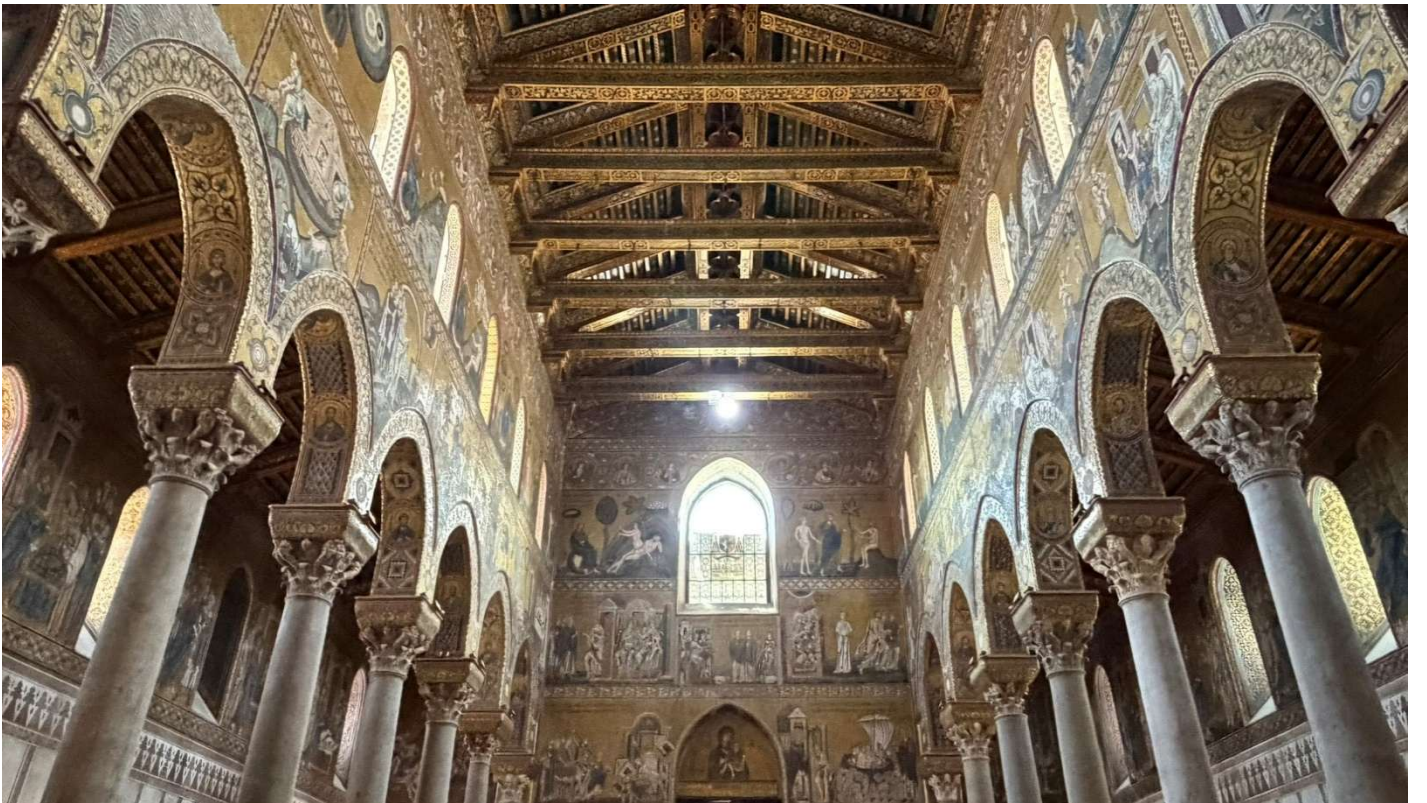
The building combines the solid proportions of Norman Romanesque design with pointed arches and intricate geometric decoration inspired by Islamic craftsmen, while the glittering mosaics follow the artistic traditions of Byzantium. This harmonious blending of cultures is one of the defining characteristics of Sicily's medieval 'Golden Age' and makes Monreale one of the most significant monuments of cultural coexistence in Europe.



Next door to the cathedral lies the equally celebrated Cloister of Monreale, one of the finest surviving medieval cloisters anywhere in Europe. Built at the same time as the cathedral, it formed part of the adjoining Benedictine monastery and provides a peaceful contrast to the glittering grandeur of the church. The square cloister is surrounded by elegant arcades supported by 228 slender columns arranged in individually distinctive pairs.

This magnificent UNESCO World Heritage site remains one of the greatest artistic achievements of the Middle Ages and an unparalleled testament to Sicily's unique cultural heritage. Together, the cathedral and its cloisters provide an essential insight into the artistic brilliance and cultural diversity that made Norman Sicily one of Europe's most extraordinary kingdoms.





Reflections on Palermo

Palermo is not a city that necessarily makes an immediate impression. Arriving after the extraordinary boat-train journey from Naples, I found a city that seemed to demand a little more patience. Its history is everywhere, but it is not presented neatly. Instead, Phoenician, Greek, Roman, Arab, Norman, Spanish and Italian influences are layered one upon another, sometimes within the same building.

The more I explored, the more I realised that Palermo's greatest attraction is not simply the number of impressive monuments but the extraordinary cultural mixture they represent. The Palazzo dei Normanni and Palatine Chapel are perhaps the clearest examples. Here, Norman power, Byzantine artistry and Islamic design come together in a way that feels uniquely Sicilian.

The golden mosaics are spectacular, but what makes them particularly remarkable is the civilisation behind them – a medieval Sicily in which different cultures and religions existed alongside one another. The same story appears in smaller and, in some ways, more revealing buildings. La Martorana combines Byzantine mosaics with later Baroque additions, while San Cataldo demonstrates Islamic architectural influences.

There is another, much darker side to the city. At Palazzo Chiaramonte-Steri, the graffiti and drawings left by prisoners of the Spanish Inquisition provide an unusually personal connection with the past. These are not grand monuments created by kings or architects but marks left by ordinary people in captivity. Similarly, the Catacombe dei Cappuccini confronts the visitor with death in a fascinating and uncomfortable way.

Perhaps the most rewarding experience was Monreale. The extraordinary concentration of gold mosaic and more than 6,000 square metres of shimmering mosaics, dominated by the vast image of Christ Pantocrator, provide a spectacular culmination to the story of Norman Sicily. Yet even here, the real fascination is cultural with Norman architecture, Byzantine craftsmanship and Arab artistic traditions.

Looking back over the trip, I think Palermo gradually changed from somewhere I was visiting to somewhere I was trying to understand. Naples grabs your attention but Palermo makes you work a little harder for its rewards. But once you begin to understand its layers, the city becomes increasingly compelling. It is a place where the past has not been tidied away or separated from everyday life.



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