



Palermo at Christmas

Art, archaeology and architecture in Palermo and its vicinity

20–27 December 2025 (ML 860)

8 days • £ 4,630

Lecturer: Christopher Newall

Seven nights in Palermo, one of the most fascinating cities in Italy, richly stocked with a variety of outstanding art and architecture.

Excursions to the most interesting places in the vicinity: Cefalù, Monreale, Segesta.

Unique heritage of Norman-Byzantine-Saracenic buildings and mosaics.

Several ancient Greek temples survive in countryside locations; exceptionally lavish Baroque interiors are another striking feature.

Includes access to private palaces and to places outside public opening hours.

Palermo's status as the largest city on Sicily, and the one with by far the richest heritage of material culture, has its origins in the ninth-century AD invasion by Muslims from North Africa and the termination of Byzantine rule. Palermo soon gained fame for the beauty of its hillside position, the quality of its craftsmanship and its enlightened administration.

But in the 11th century, Arab rule – but not all their culture – was swept aside by conquering Normans. By succumbing to the luxuriant sophistication of their predecessors they distanced themselves as far as is imaginable from their rugged northern roots. From a Palermo-based cosmopolitan court they ruled an affluent and cultured nation with efficiency and tolerance.

The unique artistic blend of this golden age survives in the Romanesque churches with details of Norman, Saracenic, Levantine and Classical origin. Byzantine mosaicists were extensively employed, and more wall and vault mosaics survive here than in all of Byzantium. The tour visits not only the Norman buildings in Palermo but also the cathedrals at Cefalù and Monreale.

Further excursions outside the city reveal another major theme of the tour: the extraordinary heritage of Hellenic civilisation. The Greeks first came to Sicily in the eighth century BC and the island became for a while the most prosperous part of the Ancient World. Numerous well-preserved Doric temples constitute their greatest monument.



Palermo, cathedral, steel engraving c. 1850

Lurching forward in time, a final artistic flourish was reached in the Age of Baroque with the construction of churches and palaces which are as exuberant as anywhere in Europe.

Always a seething, vibrant city, in recent years enlightened local government has made Palermo cleaner, safer and altogether more enjoyable than even a few years ago. The tour includes a number of special arrangements to gain access to private palaces or to visit buildings outside of opening hours.

Itinerary

Day 1. Fly at c. 9.30am (Lufthansa) from London Heathrow to Palermo, via Frankfurt. First night in Palermo, where all seven nights are spent.

Day 2: Palermo. A morning walk includes two adjacent Norman churches, La Martorana and San Cataldo, which reveal the extraordinary melting pot of cultures in 12th-century Sicily, with Arabic and Byzantine features as well as Italian and North European. The Palazzo dei Normanni, of ninth-century Arab origin but extended in nearly every subsequent century, the secular mosaics (c. 1170) in the Hall of King Roger being the highlight. Also visited today are San Giovanni degli Eremiti, a church with five cupolas and a garden, the largely medieval cathedral with its royal and imperial tombs, and the Chiesa del Gesù, an outstanding

example of Palermitan Baroque with a profusion of marble inlay, stucco and sculpture.

Day 3: Cefalù. Cefalù is charming small coastal town dominated by a massive Norman cathedral on the slopes behind, which contains outstanding mosaics. The art gallery of the Museo Mandralisca has a painting by the enigmatic 15th-century Antonello da Messina. In the evening there is a private out-of-hours visit to the 12th-century chapel in the Palace of the Normans. The interior is entirely encrusted with mosaics, the finest assembly of Byzantine art to survive anywhere.

Day 4: Palermo. A day of palaces. The morning is dedicated to the Galleria Regionale in the 15th-century Palazzo Abatellis, the most important art gallery on the island. Continue to meet the Duchess of Palma in her 18th-century *palazzo* facing the Bay of Palermo. The palace is the former residence of Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa, author of *The Leopard*, now the home of his adoptive son. Enjoy a cooking class with the Duchess herself, before lunch in the grand dining room and a tour with the Duke and Duchess.

Day 5: Segesta, Palermo. Set in an unspoilt hilly landscape, the almost complete but fascinatingly unfinished fifth-century temple at Segesta was built by indigenous, if thoroughly Hellenised, Sicilians. On an adjacent hill is a spectacularly sited theatre with views to the

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continued

sea. Back in Palermo, an afternoon stroll encompasses several oratories.

Day 6 (Christmas Day): Mondello. Travel to Mondello, a charming seaside town to the northwest of Palermo, for a special lunch in a fine dining restaurant.

Day 7: Monreale. Drive out to Monreale, a small town which dominates a verdant valley southwest of Palermo. Its cathedral is one of the finest Norman churches on the island and possesses the largest scheme of mosaic decoration to survive from the Middle Ages. Back in Palermo, visit one of the richest collections of Punic and Ancient Greek art in Italy in the Archaeological Museum. Evening reception in a private *palazzo*, with astonishing Rococo interiors and original furnishings (used as a set in Visconti's film of *The Leopard*).

Day 8: Palermo. Fly from Palermo to London Heathrow, via Munich, arriving c. 5.00pm.

Several of the visits outlined above are dependent on the kindness of individuals and organisations, some of whom are reluctant to make arrangements far in advance, so the order of visits outlined above may change and there may be substitutions for some palaces mentioned.

Lecturer

Christopher Newall. Art historian, lecturer and writer. A specialist in 19th-century British art he also has a deep interest in southern Italy, its architecture, politics and social history. He studied at the Courtauld and has curated various exhibitions including *John Ruskin: Artist & Observer* at the National Gallery of Canada and Scottish National Portrait Gallery.

Practicalities

Price. Two sharing: £ 4,630 or £4,410 without flights. **Single occupancy:** £ 5,480 or £5,260 without flights.

Included: flights (economy class, Airbus 321) with Lufthansa; travel by private coach; hotel accommodation as described below; breakfasts; 1 lunch and 4 dinners with wine, water, coffee; admission charges, tips, taxes; the services of the lecturer and tour manager.

Accommodation. Grand Hotel Et Des Palmes, Palermo (March) (grandhotel-et-des-palmes.com): elegant 5-star hotel within walking distance of the city centre. *Single occupancy rooms are doubles for sole use.*

How strenuous? The tour involves a lot of walking in town centres, where coach access is restricted, and a lot of standing in museums and churches. Uneven ground and irregular paving are standard. A good level of fitness is necessary. It should not be attempted by anyone who has difficulty with everyday walking and stair-climbing. Average distance by coach per day: 48 miles.

Indirect flights. We opt to travel to and from Sicily with Lufthansa because there are currently no direct flights to Palermo in this period, and other indirect options are at unsuitable times. You may wish to choose our 'no flights' option and to book your own flights.

Group size: between 10 and 22 participants.