

FROM BELOW LEFT
Baroque square Quattro
Canti (Four Corners).
Recently restored
Palazzo Butera



GILDED GLORIES

ONCE THE CROSSROADS OF THE ANCIENT WORLD, PALERMO IS BUZZING AGAIN. VICTORIA MATHER EXPERIENCES THE CULTURAL AND CULINARY TREASURES OF A CITY ENJOYING A RENAISSANCE

Palermo is simply delightful because it is delightfully simple in its complex way. Palermo is where the Byzantine, the Arabesque and the Norman crisscross; it was a centre of the ancient world. 'The Times Square of the Mediterranean', says my Italian friend Alessandro. 'Everyone came here.' And now they will come again because Palermo is on the cusp of cool: among the beautiful churches and crumbling palazzos are hip restaurants with delicious local food (Sicily has a constellation of Michelin stars), a pulchritudinous amount of art and, at last, a charming hotel. The hotels were previously pretty gritty, a disincentive to visit along with the Mafia who have mostly now debunked to the less messy joys of internet-banking fraud.

Palazzo Natoli is just nine large, well-appointed rooms in a converted palace just off the Corso Vittorio Emanuele. Location, location, location: the simple delight of being able to walk everywhere from here. To Ballarò market, a cornucopia of produce like still lifes: rosy red tuna, snails in garlic, sweet baby tomatoes for a euro a kilo. On to the glittering gold Norman mosaics of the Cappella Palatina, to the twelfth-century church of La Martorana and its Byzantine mosaics, to the Quattro Canti, the centre of old Palermo and perhaps Europe's most beautiful road intersection, where something is always happening: a saint's procession (silver effigy, jingling bones) with a chanting priest and martial band, followed by a handsome man on a moped blaring

music supporting Palermo football club and balancing a beer bottle on his head.

Visit the Teatro Massimo, the largest opera house in Italy, where the frescos open in the roof for a bit of Renaissance air-con. Then have lunch at Corona Trattoria on the Via Guglielmo Marconi. Modern, whitewashed, family-run; choose the marinated shrimps or pasta with sea urchins. Or go to Le Cattive, wine bar, coffee bar and organic food café, opened last year by the wine-making family Tasca d'Almerita, in the Palazzo Butera, a museum and art gallery restored by the philanthropists and art collectors Francesca and Massimo Valsecchi. Skibble back up the Corso Vittorio Emanuele and there are reassuring numbers of bookshops and nuns eating *gelati* by the cathedral. Stop perhaps for a *granita* in the little café of the Palazzo Natoli. Cocktails on Via del Cassari at Bocum - a young, chic crowd. Then dinner at Osteria dei Vespri in Piazza Croce dei Vespri, where *The Leopard* was filmed.

Travellers to Palermo are comfortingly cultured, no crowds as in Venice, Florence or Rome. Here is kindness from your taxi driver: 'I am at the gym. I'll send my father to collect you.' And the basket seller: 'Come back and pay in the morning.' The morning must bring a trip to beautiful Monreale cathedral, with the finest, most elaborate cloisters in the land.

Palermo is the nearest most exotic destination in Europe. Chaotically gorgeous, it fulfils the verdict of *The Leopard's* writer Giuseppe di Lampedusa: 'if we want things to stay as they are, things will have to change.'

WAYS AND MEANS

Victoria Mather stayed at Palazzo Natoli, where doubles cost from €120, B&B (00-39-3755992421; palazzonatoli.com). BA (ba.com) has direct flights to Palermo twice a week year-round. For the best bespoke experiences in Palermo, book through Bellini Travel (020-7602 7602; bellinitravel.com) □