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Palermo, Sicily puts the accent on art, culture, food and much more

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Fountains center many historic squares across Palermo. (Photo Moira McCarthy)

Palermo. I like to say it the way Tom Hollander’s character Quentin did in Season Two of “The White Lotus:”

“Pahhhhh-lehrrrrrrrr-mohhhhhh!”

Sicily's capital city plays a big – yet somewhat dark – role in the famed HBO series. There, guests are promised, you'll find both the classic and the wild; beauty and danger. It's set up as an intoxicating escape.

In real life, Palermo is all that minus the dark mystery. It's a city of arts and culture, history and lore, food and more food and of course, wine and celebration. It's also its own place; Sicilian culture, food and even language often trumps classic Italian there.

I launched a recent tour of Sicily with a two-day stay in Palermo and found so much to experience, taste and take in, I can see why Quentin put such emphasis on the name.

My Palermo home base was the Wagner Grand Hotel (www.grandhotelwagner.it/en/) a five-star Art Nouveau spot with a charm and history that reads like a "White Lotus" back story. Built for an aristocratic family as the 20th century debuted, it has been – through the years – a WWII air raid shelter, a nearby theater's costume storage area, offices and now, a breathtaking hotel that captures the personality of Palermo itself.

I landed there – and took in my Palermo excursions – as part of the Perillo Tours (www.perillotours.com) "Custom Vacations," a program that booked me great spots for things like tours and dining but with my own small group rather than a larger tour, a kind of morph of your own special trip and a well-tailored group tour itinerary.

We started with a three-hour "tuk tuk" tour of some of the city's top spots. Whipping around in the motorized rickshaw-like vehicles was a hoot – and it got us to spots quickly while still allowing us to walk quite a bit.

We visited the Palermo Cathedral, built in the 10th century and the final resting place of more than a few Norman kings and Holy Roman Emperors. At the 14th century-built monastery of Saint Catherine of Alexandria we soaked in the opulence; from ceiling frescoes to intricate marble inlays.

The two real thrills of that visit came first on the rooftop where the views of the city are perhaps unmatched, and down in the famed bakery where we noshed on cannoli made with recipes created centuries ago by cloistered nuns.

In between we stopped off at all kinds of notable spots, from the Fontana Pretoria, also known as Piazza della Vergogna (The Square of Shame). Dating back to the 1500s and most recently renovated in the early 2000s, it's a fountain-centered square with backstories that make using a guide well worth the price. From how the fountain got there (transported in pieces) to the story of the cloistered nuns peering out at the naked statues, it's a stop well-worth making.

Palermo, like Sicily as a whole, has its own spin on food. With influences from the Spanish, North African and Arab cultures that flowed into the city over centuries, you'll find meals that focus on flavors like raisin, cinnamon and saffron rather than the garlic and tomato you may be accustomed to. For instance, arancini balls are on menus, but rather than tomato, you'll find rice and saffron inside.

Palermo is a walkable city day and night. We took a meandering stroll down to the new Palermo Marina area where there's waterfront dining, dancing fountains, lots of boats to see and a kind of bright, modern exclamation point to a centuries old city.

Artwork greets you just about every corner. Atop the Teatro Politeama Garibaldi, a classic theater, you'll find the famed bronze statue of the goddess Euterpe and the sun god Apollo riding a chariot pulled by four horses.

The Teatro Massimo Vittorio Emanuele is a famed opera house, and it's also the setting for one of film's most epic scenes: the shooting of Michael Corleone's daughter Mary in "The Godfather Part III."

And then there's the art of food and nature. Nowhere do you see it come to life more than at Ballarò Market, Palermo's city center market that's like an explosion of color, taste, scents, sounds and people. Head there and give yourself time to explore and settle in for a coffee or Aperol spritz – along with a snack or lunch.

Meandering through a busy city street late at night, we pass by more than a few musicians, each with a crowd. The music floats into the night, mingling with the scent of the food trucks still serving here and there.

Across the city, you'll find shops, open air cafes, gelato and more gelato and of course, that cool, urban cultural vibe that just makes you say it along with Quentin: Pahhhh-lehhrrrrr-mohhhh.



Palermo loves a party — you can grab a cocktail right on the street. (Photo Moira McCarthy)



Cannoli at Palermo's Monastery of Saint Catherine of Alexandria is made from a long-held recipe created by cloistered nuns. (Photo Moira McCarthy)



Art is everywhere you look in Palermo, as seen here in the Prima Circoscrizione area. (Photo Moira McCarthy)