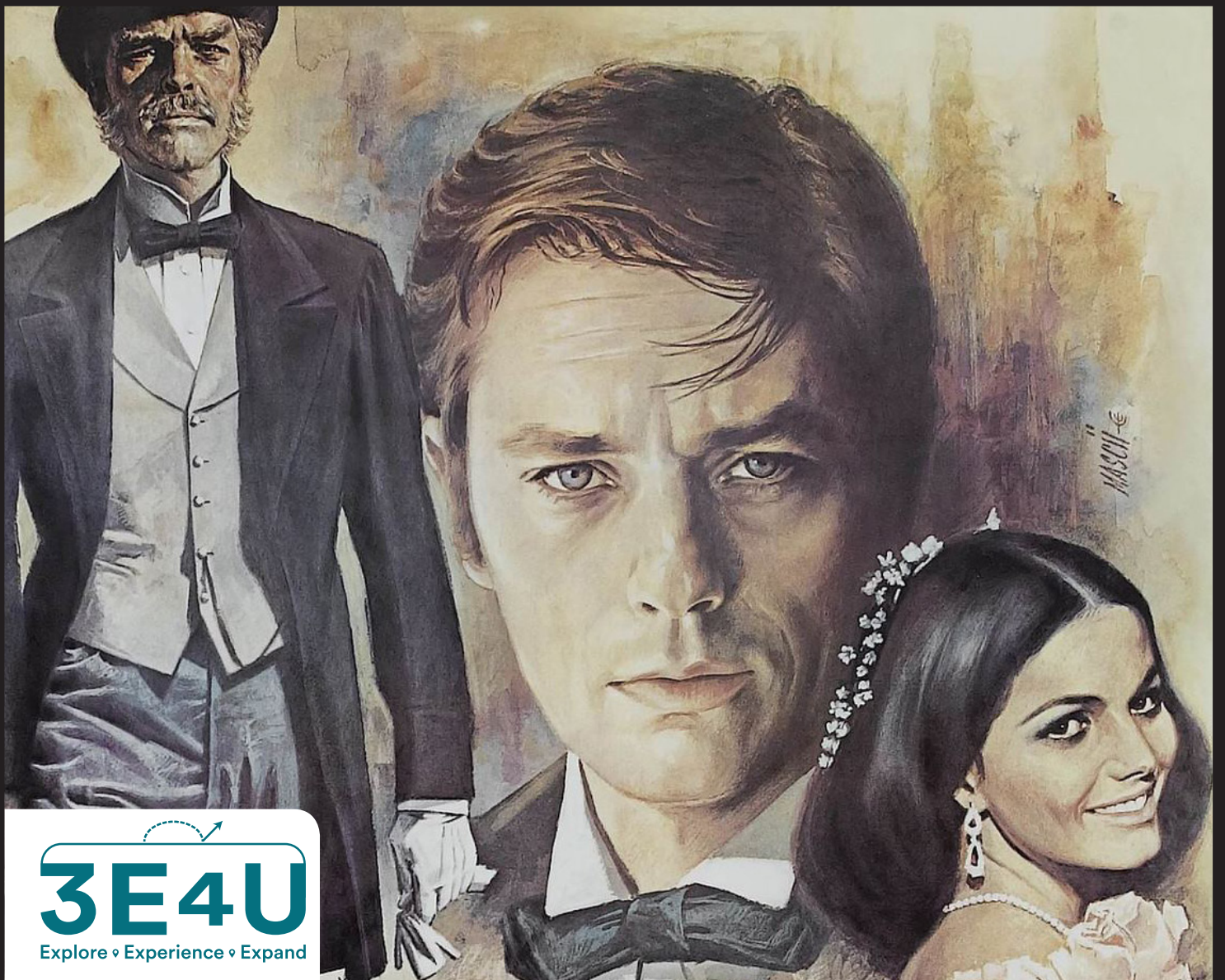


SICILIAN EXPERIENCE

NO. 4

5 days
4 nights

Following... *The Leopard*




Explore • Experience • Expand

The New York Times

Sicily, Through the Eyes of the Leopard

By Adam Begley
July 6, 2008

Ask a roomful of readers about Lampedusa's "Leopard" and more often than not you'll find a few who will put hand to heart and say it's their favorite book, and a few others who will simply shrug — never heard of it — or ask if it has anything to do with the Visconti movie starring Burt Lancaster (yes, it does). I suppose it's a coincidence that a roomful of travelers will poll in a similar fashion if you ask them about Sicily, the marvelous, maddening island disparaged and adored in "The Leopard": it's either a favorite place, or they haven't even thought of going there.

Is the coincidence significant? I believe that if you love the novel (or the movie), you should start planning your trip right away, not because you'll find Lampedusa's Sicily waiting for you when you touch down (you won't, believe me), but because the bitter, resigned romantic nostalgia that pervades "The Leopard" is also the sensibility that savors the decaying grandeur of an island burdened with layer upon layer of tragic history — and blessed also with startling beauty, much of it perpetually waning.

The test comes when you're a little lost, nervously peering down a deserted backstreet in Palermo that's crooked and gloomy, with litter strewn on the dusty pavement and a narrow slice of blue sky overhead. Right in front of you is the smudged and crumbling facade of a derelict Baroque palazzo, unheralded, or perhaps marked with only a tiny plaque bearing a forgotten name and a date (late 17th century, usually, or early 18th). The sight of this noble structure is dizzying, even if the ornate balconies are wrapped in netting to keep chunks of masonry from raining down, and there's a scraggly shrub sprouting on the rooftop. You dream of what it once was and what it might be again, but mostly you like it just as it is, a glorious residence ravished by time and neglect, and probably still inhabited.

Just imagine its fabulously tattered apartments, still clinging to the memory of vanished splendor! (Sicily does this, it inspires wildly impractical reveries.)

Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa (1896-1957) inherited a palace in Palermo (he was an aristocrat — a prince, no less), and had it not been demolished by an Allied bomb on April 5, 1943, the Palazzo Lampedusa would probably be scrubbed clean today, assiduously restored in honor of an author whose only novel, published posthumously in 1958, is one of Italy's best-loved books.

"The Leopard" is about the decline of a noble Sicilian family. The patriarch, proud Fabrizio, Prince of Salina (based on Lampedusa's great-grandfather, Prince Giulio), is acutely aware of this decline and seems almost to embrace it. Set in Palermo and deep in the interior in the early 1860s, during the tumultuous years of Garibaldi's Risorgimento when Sicily was annexed to a united Italy, the novel could fuel a seminar's worth of meditations on political and social transformation. (The famous line, which becomes a mantra of sorts for Don Fabrizio, is this: "If we want things to stay as they are, things will have to change.") But though it has sparked heated debates about Sicilian history, most readers respond to the book's shimmering beauty, and to the towering figure of the Prince himself.

Wise and perplexed, stern and indulgent, loyal and essentially solitary, even in the midst of his crowded household, Don Fabrizio is the indispensable companion for traveling around Sicily. He's one of those unforgettable literary characters who seem more real than people you've actually met (and easily more important than the neighbor who moved away or the great-aunt you last laid eyes on a dozen years ago). The trait that defines the Prince is his dignity, which stems in part from

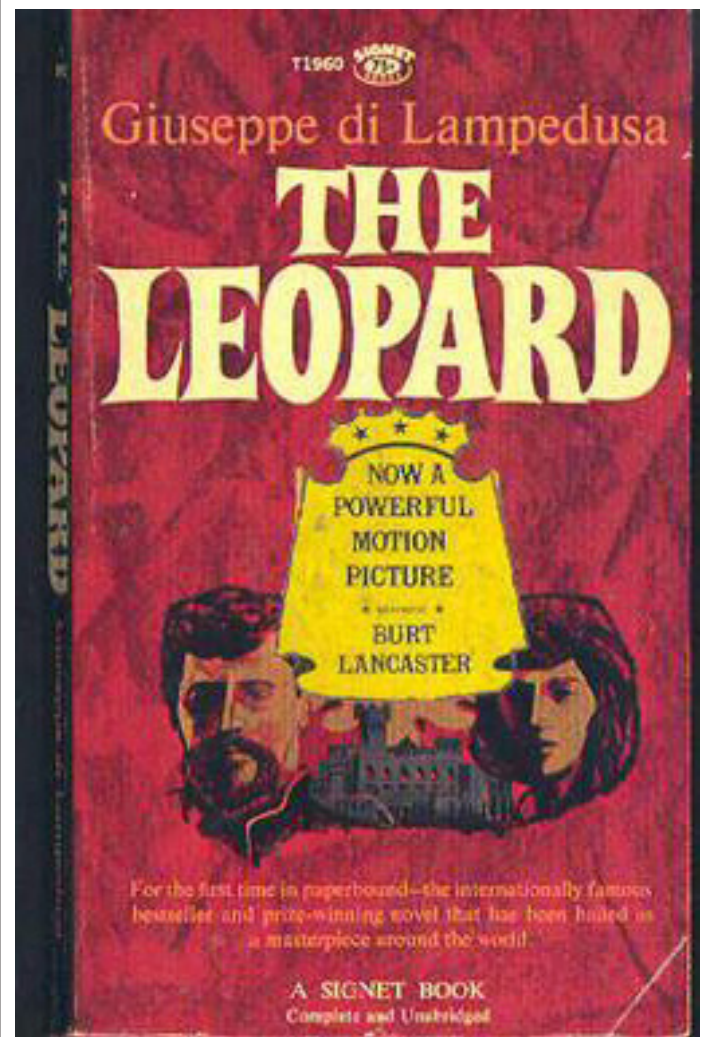
his clear-eyed sense of himself; he claims to be “without illusions” – he lacks, he says, “the faculty of self-deception.” He surveys himself, and Sicily, with unflinching honesty.

IT’S not in fact possible to maintain an unruffled dignity as a tourist in Sicily, not unless you’re willing to spend a small fortune and steer clear of all but the most manicured resorts. (You could fly into Catania, say, have a chauffeur pick you up at the airport, ride in luxury to a five-star hotel high up in gorgeous, swanky Taormina, lounge by the side of a dramatic infinity pool with views of Mount Etna and the bay of Naxos, wander in the ruins of the ancient theatre, then go home, again. But that’s bubble tourism.) The rest of us have to put up with haphazard service, accommodation that somehow just misses the mark, pungent urban odors and the horrors of Mafia-financed postwar construction. The island’s dependable delights – brash summer sunshine; seafood fresh off the boat, simply, sometimes exquisitely prepared; excellent, inexpensive wine; churches galore, in every shape and size; and the best Greek ruins anywhere – fit comfortably in any travel budget.

To see Sicily honestly, the way the Prince of Salina would have you see it, you must start with the chaos of Palermo (or “the sloth of Palermo,” as he would put it) – the lawless traffic, the grime, the overflowing garbage, the noise, the hint of menace. Don’t be put off: it’s a beautiful city, crammed with architectural and artistic monuments from every century, squeezed between dramatic mountains and the Tyrrhenian Sea. (Lampedusa writes of “the scorched slopes of Monte Pellegrino, scarred like the face of misery by eternal ravines.”) However chaotic, Palermo is manageably small. In the heart of the city, on the cacophonous Via Roma, you can look north and see at the end of the avenue the silent “scorched slopes” that mark the edge of town. Turn and look south and you’ll see more of the same.

When Luchino Visconti wanted to film the magnificent ball at the end of “The Leopard,” he chose the Baroque Palazzo Valguarnera-Gangi in the Piazza Croce dei Vespri, just two minutes’ walk from the Via Roma. Behind the monumental, almost sullen facade is the glittering ballroom where Burt Lancaster, magnificent as the Prince, waltzed with the radiant Claudia Cardinale while her fiancé, an impossibly young Alain Delon, looked on indulgently.

The Palazzo Valguarnera-Gangi is not open to the public, alas (it remains a private residence), but to get a good idea of how the 19th-century Palermitan aristocracy lived, stroll through the backstreets toward the port to the Palazzo Mirto, just off the Piazza Marina. If you stop a moment and stand before the gates, you’ll see around you all the charm and frustration of Palermo, starting with the crest of the Princes of Mirto, a bold double-headed eagle carved in honey-colored stone above massive doors: a tangle of weeds is growing out of cracks in the mortar. (Were it the Prince of Salina’s crest, you would see the leopard, il gattopardo, rampant.) To the left of the doors, a high-tech security camera scans the scene; next to it, a line is draped with laundry drying in the brilliant Sicilian sun (some things never change). To the right stretches a typical, balcony-lined, stone-paved Palermo street, unusually clean, brightly festooned with laundry, with a refreshing clump of trees at the far end. Behind you, in the Piazza Marina, a shambolic Sunday flea market offers every unwanted knickknack and oddment you ever yearned to throw away, plus, of course, a few priceless treasures.



Inside the Palazzo Mirto – bequeathed to the state in 1982 by the family’s last heir – is a succession of sumptuously decorated rooms, at once lovely and ever so faintly ridiculous, like the grand ballroom Lampedusa describes with such a tender eye in “The Leopard”:

“The ballroom was all golden; smoothed on cornices, stippled on door-frames, damascened pale, almost silvery, over darker gold on door panels and on the shutters which covered and annulled the windows, conferring on the room the look of some superb jewel-case shut off from an unworthy world. It was not the flashy gilding which decorators slap on nowadays, but a faded gold, pale as the hair of certain Nordic children, determinedly hiding its value under a muted use of precious material intended to let beauty be seen and cost forgotten. Here and there on the panels were knots of rococo flowers in a color so faint as to seem just an ephemeral pink reflected from the chandeliers.”

It’s easy to imagine that even 145 years ago, the apartments of the Palazzo Mirto reeked of the “slightly shabby grandeur” Lampedusa ascribes to the Prince of Salina’s household, and to Sicil-

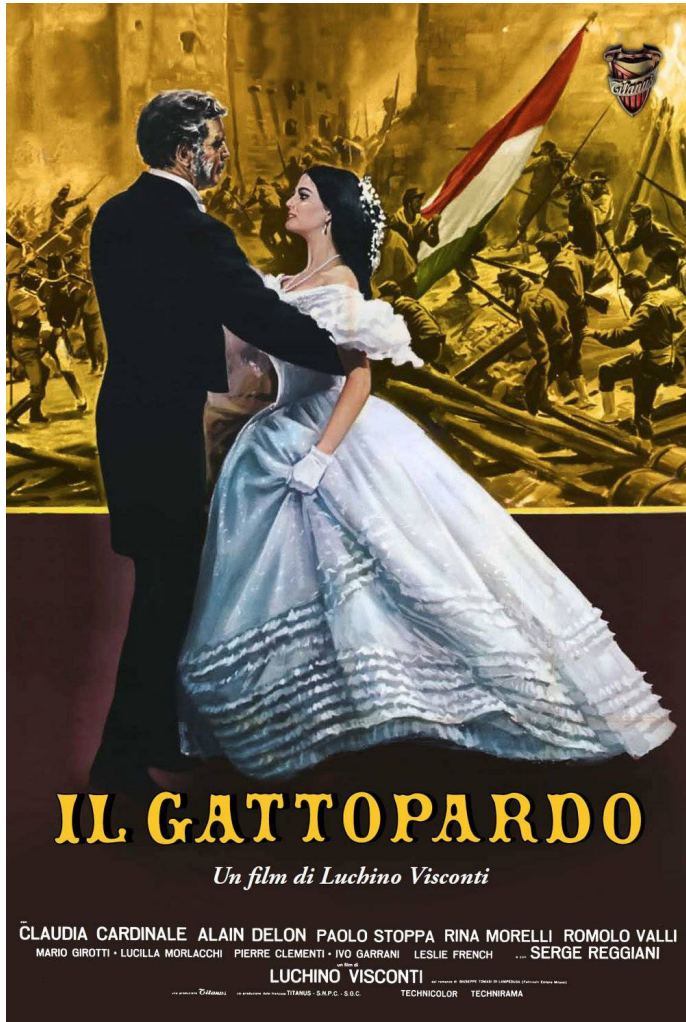
ian aristocracy in general, circa 1860. Today the rooms are preserved, yes, but dusty and dilapidated at the edges, unloved, as though the effort of caring for so much decorative fabulousness was too much for our modern age. I watched one museum guide helpfully point out to an Italian tourist the sepia photo of a whiskered gentleman: “l’ultimo Principe” – the last Prince.

THE palace that features most prominently in “The Leopard” is not in Palermo but 45 miles or so southwest, in a town Lampedusa calls Donnafugata. He based the town on Santa Margherita di Belice, where as a boy he spent his idyllic summer holidays in the Palazzo Filangeri-Cutò, a splendid 18th-century building that belonged to his mother’s family. The palazzo, a self-contained compound with three courtyards, seemed to him “a kind of Vatican,” and he remembered the garden as “a paradise of parched scents.”

In the first decade of the 20th century, when Lampedusa was a child, the journey from Palermo to Santa Margherita took 12 hours, half of it by train, the other half by horse-drawn carriage. In “The Leopard,” when the Prince and his family make the same trip in late August 1860, it’s an arduous three-day expedition in a convoy of five carriages over dismal roads no better than tracks. (The Prince travels in his top hat, of course.) “They had passed through crazed looking villages washed in palest blue; crossed dry beds of torrents over fantastic bridges; skirted sheer precipices which no sage and broom could temper. Never a tree, never a drop of water; just sun and dust.”

The Wild West of the interior is more comfortably contemplated through the window of an air-conditioned 21st-century automobile. An outing to Santa Margherita now takes no more than an hour; the roads are good, nearly empty, and the views spectacular: a daunting, jagged landscape, desiccated and profoundly lonely. When the Prince looks out at what he considers “the real Sicily” – the landscape around Donnafugata – he sees it “aridly undulating to the horizon in hillock after hillock, comfortless and irrational, with no lines that the mind could grasp, conceived apparently in a delirious moment of creation; a sea suddenly petrified at the instant when a change of wind had flung the waves into a frenzy.”

Lampedusa’s description is exaggerated for effect – poetic license – but it’s accurate in ways the





author would have been horrified to discover. In 1968, a decade after his death, that petrified sea convulsed again: Santa Margherita was flattened by an earthquake.

When Lampedusa's biographer, David Gilmour, visited the rebuilt town in the late 1980s – 20 years after the quake – the palace was still a scene of devastation: “Its wreckage remains undisturbed, the courtyards filled with beams and ruined masonry. ... The front slumps down one side of the town's piazza, displaying broken balustrades and twisted balconies.” Today, nearly 40 years on, the facade has been righted and restored, after a fashion. No longer a ruin, the palazzo is no longer lovely: the supremely elegant edifice we can admire in old photos is gone for good. The piazza is still under reconstruction, a bleached expanse of unfinished concrete.

Inside the restored portion of the palace is a small museum, the Parco del Gattopardo, devoted to Lampedusa, a room upstairs with manuscripts of “The Leopard” on display in tidy glass cases, along with foreign editions of the novel, family portraits, photographs of Santa Margherita before the cataclysm. Downstairs is a coffee shop – Il Caffé del Principe – perhaps the most drably ordinary coffee shop in all of Sicily, with freezers selling pre-pack-

aged ice-cream cones and napkin dispensers primly arranged on the half-dozen empty tables. Don Fabrizio might weep.

It's while walking through the streets of Donnafugata early in the morning, taking note of the squalid poverty of the town's residents, that the Prince, depressed, comes to a sour conclusion: “All this shouldn't last; but it will, always; the human ‘always’ of course, a century, two centuries ... and after that it will be different, but worse. We were the Leopards and Lions; those who'll take our place will be little jackals, hyenas; and the whole lot of us, Leopards, jackals and sheep, we'll all go on thinking ourselves the salt of the earth.”

You might think that standing in the dazzling late-morning sun, gazing at what's left of the Palazzo Filangeri-Cutò, would be a dispiriting experience. The “human ‘always’ ” has proved more fragile than even the pessimistic Prince dared imagine. But Santa Margherita, assisted by what Lampedusa calls “the languid meandering stream of Sicilian pragmatism,” is clearly on the mend, a hill town refreshed by a cooling breeze even in the brutal summer months, a town where the view from almost any street is of crisp blue sky. And beyond that, as the cherished novelist assures us, “the immemorial silence of pastoral Sicily.”

1st day

Morning

Arrival at “Falcone e Borsellino” airport. Transfer to Grand Hotel Villa Igiea Mgallery By Sofitel and check in.

Perched on a shallow cliff in Sicily overlooking the Sea of Palermo is Villa Igiea, a world-class hotel reminiscent of a small castle. The villa, restored

by renowned Art Nouveau architect Ernesto Basile at the end of the 19th century for the Florio family, still has its original frescoes, decoration and furniture and is sure to charm anyone who visits. The rooms and the suites are beautifully appointed and offer large, modern bathrooms, direct-dial phones, mini-bars and Individually controlled air conditioning.



PALERMO – Grand Hotel Villa Igiea Mgallery By Sofitel

13:00

Welcome Drink and buffet lunch at Grand Hotel Villa Igiea

15:00

Departure by bus for an orientation tour including Palermo Cathedral

The Cathedral is characterized by the presence of different styles, due to a long history of additions, alterations and restorations, the last of which occurred in the 18th century. It is located in Corso Vittorio Emanuele. The church was

erected in 1185 by Walter Ophamil (or Walter of the Mill), the Anglo-Norman archbishop of Palermo and King William II’s minister, on the area of an earlier Byzantine basilica.

16:00

Visit of Teatro Massimo (opera house).

The largest theatre in Italy and the third largest opera house in Europe was built between 1874 and 1897. The Architect Giovanni Battista

Basile was inspired by ancient and classical Sicilian architecture and, thus, the exterior was designed in the high neoclassical style incorporating elements of the Greek temples. Realized in the late-Renaissance style, the auditorium was planned for 3.000 people, but, in its current format, has 1.350 seats.

17:00

Departure by bus the Kalsa district.

This is Palermo's Arabic quarter, built close to the sea in an era of people's riots, in order to allow the Emir to escape in event of revolt. In ancient times it was home to the Arabs' entire military contingent when they ruled the city, their administrative and political offices, and also their prisons. It was named "al-halisah" that means "the elected one" in Arabic.

Today it is a working-class area of the city, extremely picturesque, where it is still possible to capture a feel of the ancient Arabic-Sicilian culture and often smell the strong aromas of the food that is prepared in the several kiosks along the streets.

17:30

Visit of Lo Spasimo

A former Olivetan monastery, the name Santa Maria dello Spasimo comes from Raphael's homonym painting commissioned by a benefactor devoted to the "Virgin Dolorosa".

The monumental structure dates back to 1509. It changes identity continuously in its five centuries long life: at first church then theatre, from lazaret to warehouse and again hospital and, in recent time open theatre, to become, since 1997, artistic centre where talents of the "Brass Group", the "European Orchestra Jazz School", flourish, mature and perform. Moreover, many famous international artists choose the Spasimo as perfect natural scenography for their show.

18:00

Welcome drink and visit of Museo delle Marionette, with live show of Sicilian Puppets

Founded in 1975, the International Puppets Museum Antonio Pasqualino was constantly inspired by the principles of modern museum and modern theatre. The museum hosts a collection of 3.500 pieces from all around the world. On the occasion a master of puppets, Mr Enzo Mancuso, will perform a brief show of Sicilian Puppets.

19:30

Buffet Dinner at the Ditirammu Theatre with a Sicilian ethno-performance

Ditirammu theatre is a classical example of "popular theatre" based on the old Sicilian folkloristic traditions.

21:30

Back to the hotel

09:00

Departure by bus to the colorful Mercato del Capo. It is also an ideal site for team building and cooking lessons. Short visit of the beautiful Immacolata Concezione Church.

The market is one of the oldest in Europe, with a varied cultural history, melding both Romanesque, Norman and Saracen historical influences into a market that remarkably stands to this day. A tribute to Sicily's Arabian past, this narrow, tent lined street, resembles those one might find in North Africa or the Middle East.

10:00

Transfer by bus to Monreale

10:30

Visit of Monreale Cathedral and Cloister - exclusive organ performance. Short visit to the nearby Palazzo Guglielmo

Monreale Cathedral. The amazing, harmonious mix of architectural styles, Byzantine, Arabic and Romanesque, that are combined in the Monreale Cathedral is one of the greatest works from the Sicilian Middle Ages. The cathedral is one of the most charming expressions of this mix of styles and cultures that is characteristic of the whole of Sicily. The construction of the Duomo in Monreale, located on the top of a hill about 10 km from Palermo, began in 1174 according to the wishes of the Norman king William



PALERMO – Monreale Cathedral Cloister

II who, so the story goes, had been visited in a dream by the Virgin Mary. The Cloister. Except for some foundations and external walls, the cloister court is the only part of the monastery standing today. Its plan is a perfect square, measuring forty-seven metres on each side, enclosing a covered walkway. There are 228 columns; carved into the capitals of the columns are all manner of Biblical figures, mythological scenes, heraldic elements, Arab warriors and Norman knights, as well as floral motifs and fauna.

13:00

Buffet lunch at Grand Hotel et Des Palmes

Built in 1856, the hotel was founded in 1874. It was originally the home of the aristocratic Ingham-Withaker family and was linked by an underground passage to a nearby Anglican chapel. Richard Wagner and his wife Cosima Liszt were guests since the 5th of November 1881, and the armchair where the great composer sat while he wrote his opera “Parsifal” is still conserved in the hotel.

15:00

Departure for the tour “Villas and Palaces of Palermo” including:

15:15

Visit to Palazzo dei Normanni and Cappella Palatina

The Norman Palace was the seat of the Kings of Sicily. It was started in the 9th century by the Emir of Palermo and extended in the 12th century by Roger II and other Norman kings. It contains the Cappella Palatina, by far the best example of the so-called Arab-Norman-Byzantine style that prevailed



PALERMO – Norman Palace, view from St. John of the Hermits

in the 12th-century Sicily. The wonderful mosaics, the wooden roof, elaborately fretted and painted, and the marble incrustation of the lower part of the walls and the floor are very fine. Of the palace itself the greater part was rebuilt and added in Spanish times, but there are some other parts of Roger’s work left, specially the hall called Sala Normanna. Since 1946 the palace hosted the Sicilian Regional Assembly.

16:30

Visit to Sant’Anna Monumental Complex, now hosting the Modern Art-Gallery, a possible venue for special events.

Located in the heart of the old city centre, the Sant’Anna alla Misericordia complex is made up of the former Franciscan convent of the Chiesa di Sant’Anna, one of Palermo’s most spectacular baroque churches. The Museum is distributed on 3 floors, with an overall internal and external floor area of some 4700 m².

17:30

Visit to Palazzo Butera

Palazzo Butera was erected by Don Giuseppe Branciforte, count of Raccujua in 1658. The palace however was expanded and transformed in 1769 by Salvatore Branciforte, prince of Butera. He is credited with the project and realization of the road Palermo-Messina. This palace has been heavily restored. Its main entrance is in Via Butera, although its main front overlooks the sea.

18:00

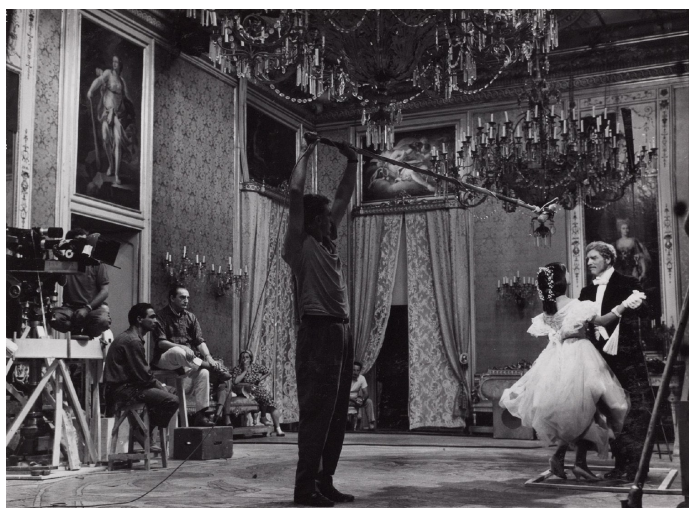
Return to the hotel

19:00

Departure to Palazzo Gangi where the movie "The Leopard" was shot by Luchino Visconti in 1963

In the mid-18th century, the prince and princess of Gangi, Pietro and Marianna Valguarnera (ancestors of the present owners), commissioned the most famous artists in Sicily to transform their 15th century home into a showpiece of splendour and elegance.

Luchino Visconti decided to film the magnificent ballroom scene of *Il Gattopardo* here, in the Hall of Mirrors, described by Louis Bertrand, "a vast room ... Rococo style: a masterpiece of Baroque design with golden fittings and doors entirely



painted ... with fresh flowers ...

The ceiling is hung, like a forest of stalactites, with splendid Murano chandeliers, the like of that I have never seen before".

20:00

Drinks, Gala Dinner and live show at*

Menù "The Leopard"

- Cocktail di benvenuto
- Sardine a beccafico e insalatina di arance
- Timballo con falde di melanzane e anelletti del Gattopardo
- Falso magro con contorno di caponata di melanzane all'antica
- Gelo di melone bianco
- Ova a Murina
- Minni di Virgini con Rosolio di Don Onofrio

* you choose to have the original Leopard's Dinner in Palazzo Gangi. In this case you should add about € 3,500 for renting the building for exclusive use.



3rd day

“DONNAFUGATA”

9:00

Departure from hotel to
“Donnafugata”

Donnafugata is a fictional town that includes existing and easily recognizable places. According to the information contained in a letter Lampedusa wrote to his friend Baron Enrico di Merlo Tagliavia “The palace at Donnafugata is one and the same as the one at Santa Margherita, while for the town as a whole, the reference is to Palma Montechiaro” Santa Margherita Belice is the place where Lampedusa spent the happiest moments of his childhood and is linked to the figure of his mother and the Tasca di Filangeri Cutò family.

13.00

Typical Sicilian Lunch

Santa Margherita di Belice, founded by Antonio Corbera on the ruins of an Arab castle and hit by the earthquake of 1968, is the place where the writer spent the summer as a child. The tour begins at the Palazzo Filangeri Cutò which is the setting of some of the most memorable scenes of “The Leopard”. The building belonged to the family of his mother and hosted for a few months, the “woman in flight or Donnafugata” – the Queen Carolina Lorena, wife of Ferdinand IV, confined there by Lord Bentick, British military



SANTA MARGHERITA DI BELICE – Palazzo Filangeri di Cutò

governor of Sicily. Among the restored rooms of the palace, a room upstairs with manuscripts of “The Leopard”, family portraits, photographs of Santa Margherita before the earthquake and the “Wax museum”, where shapes of wax figures representing the main characters of the Leopard help you re-live the atmosphere of the novel. Adjacent to the palace, the garden with trees, admirably described in the book. Short Walk to the city centre to admire the remains of the Mother Church and the ruins of the old Santa Margherita destroyed by the earthquake of 1968.

17:00

Departure to Agrigento and accommodation in a 4* hotel

Free time

19:30

Dinner in Hotel

4th day

VALLEY OF THE TEMPLES, AGRIGENTO



AGRIGENTO - Temple Of Concordia in The Valley Of The Temples

The Valley of the Temples in Agrigento, Sicily, is one of the most important archeological sites in the world and a Unesco world heritage site since 1998. Along a rocky scarp, chosen as the southern limit of the town, are still sited the great temples of ancient Akragas. Further down, on the bank of the Akragas river stood the Temple dedicated to Asklepius (Eusculapius). At the mouth of the river there was the harbour and emporion (trading-post) of the ancient city

We will start our tour with the Archaeological Museum of San Nicola, a fine introduction to the

spendours of ancient Akragas, to get an insight into the life of the ancient settlers. See the collection of Attic pottery found in the area, ex-votoes, figurines, statues and the giant Telamon from the Temple of Zeus. Then, drive on to the eastern entrance of the archaeological area and walk (about one mile but downhill!) along the main path. We will admire the Temple of Hera, the Temple of Concordia, the Temple of Herakles, the Temple of Zeus and the Sanctuary of Chthonian Deities (Temple of Castor and Pollux) and discover the secrets behind their construction



AGRIGENTO - Temple Of Dioscuri - Castor And Pollux - in The Valley Of The Temples

13:00

Lunch in a typical restaurant

15:00

Departure to Palermo

In the afternoon free time for shopping

19:30

Dinner in Hotel

5th day

PALERMO

Departure to Palermo airport according to your flight schedules

If you have a late flight we can arrange optional visits



PALERMO - Cathedral of the Assumption of Virgin Mary



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