

# Back to the Future in Palermo

*A writer returns to Palermo, Sicily and finds a lot has changed for the better the second time around.*



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The last time I was in Palermo was more than a quarter century ago. The airport where I landed this time literally did not exist back then. The Aeroporto Internazionale Falcone e Borsellino was inaugurated in 1995, a year after my visit to the Sicilian capital.

Back then the city—and the island of Sicily—were still reeling from the deaths of Giovanni Falcone and Paolo Borsellino in 1992. Both men, Palermo-born and friends from childhood, had fought the Mafia as lawyers and magistrates. Falcone died on May 23, 1992, blown up by a



bomb on the A 29 motorway leading from the then-Palermo International Airport to the city. Paolo Borsellino was also been killed by a car bomb in the center of Palermo on July 19, 1992, less than two months later. Supposedly the Mafia deliberately killed both men *in* Palermo to show how powerful they were.

My taxi driver on this trip pointed out the exact spot on the A 29 where Falcone's car had been destroyed. For good measure, he pointed out the hill above the highway where a Mafioso had detonated the bomb. That kind of explanation didn't happen last time I was in this city. People had been edgy, nervous, unwilling to talk about such things. The fact that I and some other journalists from the north had been invited to Palermo was tacit acknowledgement that these events had happened, but nobody wanted to admit anything...



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## **Dangerous Time and Mummies**

The streets of the city had seemed grey and claustrophobic. The



population then was roughly 850,000, about the same as it is now, but people seemed to skittle about, eyes darting furtively, women hanging onto their handbags (we were advised to do the same). Men with hands punched into their coats (guarding their cash or fingering their guns—we didn't want to speculate). The residents we saw may not have been old, but they *felt* old. The only things I remember about that trip, other than the gloomy atmosphere, were visits to the *Teatro Politeama Garibaldi*, the *Catacombe dei Cappuccini* (Catacombs of the Capuchin Monastery), and the Charleston restaurant, summarizing the city at the time.

The theater's interior was glitzy and gold, a shimmering baroque beauty, but it wasn't Palermo's largest. That honor belongs to Teatro Massimo, the largest opera house not only in Palermo but in Italy, and the third largest in Europe. It had been closed for renovation in 1974 and was not to open again till 1997, a 23-year hiatus due to corruption and mismanagement. So we didn't get to see it back then.



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Instead, we had seen the *Catacombs dei Cappuccini*, sort of a 16th century dance macabre with mummies on racks instead of frescoes on walls. The monks of this monastery began to mummify the bodies of their

deceased brethren in 1599 and continued to do so through succeeding centuries. Gradually the bourgeoisie decided it was more fashionable to be preserved for display than buried in the ground, and paid the monks handsomely to be embalmed this way. We had been told there were a total of 8,000 corpses and 1,252 mummies here. After the first few, I wasn't counting, and I definitely made it a point *not* to look at one of the last bodies on display, that of a two-year-old girl who died in the 1920s. None of these deaths had anything to do with the territorial wars of organized crime, but somehow they reminded me of Mafia victims, and I had been glad to leave and did not want to come back again.

## **From One Fancy Restaurant to an Explosion of Them**

The Charleston restaurant opened in 1967, a newcomer by historic standards, but by 1994 it had earned Michelin stars and national and international awards. The restaurant began in the center of town but eventually moved to a seaside location in Mondello, an upscale resort area north of Palermo proper. The subliminal message seemed to be: if you want to do something chic and refined, get out of town. My colleagues and I had no objections: the place was ritzy then, and is even more so today. It is unabashedly elite, but the best things on the menu have humble origins, like eggplant. Sicilians do eggplant like nobody else on earth.





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It's hard to improve on Sicilian food, but oh what a difference 25 years has made in the life of the city! These days Palermo is booming, bustling, and beautiful. I found the streets and byways packed with people, young and old, smiling and stylishly dressed. Floral accents hung from wrought-iron balconies. I passed sparkling new storefront shops and cafés, as modern as any in Stockholm or Stuttgart. Admittedly the sidewalks are not as clean as in those northern cities, but not bad by Italian standards. When I crossed the street, I didn't feel that I was risking my life. When I lifted my camera to take a picture, I didn't fear that it would be summarily removed from my hands.

## **Palermo Gleams Again**

The Teatro Massimo is open for business, and offers an incredibly rich program of cultural activities. Community involvement seems to be a key component in many of them, judging from the posters and billboards flanking the entrance. We weren't allowed into the theater for a look-see because we hadn't booked a tour in advance. My companion Gioia, a



Sicilian journalist colleague who was acting as my informal guide, tried her best to convince the gatekeepers to let us in but to no avail. In spite of my disappointment, I was pleased by the thought that "organization" has made inroads here.



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To make amends, Gioia squeezed us in for the last tour of the nearby Bellini Theater. This sandstone building is far less imposing than the marbled grandeur of the Massimo, and its capacity of 700 is less than half the size of the latter. Not to mention that the Bellini was hosting an art installation when I visited, rather than being used as a real theater. But its history encapsulates Palermo: opened informally in 1675, the then-Teatro Tavaglino first hosted operas. Finished in wood, it was inaugurated in 1726 and re-christened Teatro Santa Lucia. An earthquake in the 1740s destroyed most of the structure so it was rebuilt again, incorporating in part a bridge between two buildings. When the French arrived in the early 19th century, the interior took on more or less its current architecture and the theater was given the name of the French king's wife, Real Teatro Carolino. Composer Vincenzo Bellini of Sicily died in 1835 and the theater took on his name 13 years later.



The public entry isn't grand by any standard, but the stage and seating justified this having been the most important theater in Palermo in the 19th century. A suspicious fire destroyed much of the structure in 1964 and the process of renewal began again.

As its fortunes—and those of Palermo—have waxed and waned over the years, the theater was used as a broadcast center for the fascists and later a headquarters for Americans in World War II, a concert hall, a cinema, a cultural center, and a school. "Ours is a long story of corruption and neglect," explained our erudite guide, but he was optimistic about its future. In fact, the current owners plan to return Bellini to its original function as a proper theater before long.

In 2015, seven Arab-Norman churches and structures in the city center were recognized by UNESCO as a World Heritage site (along with two churches in nearby areas), and this designation has increased the tourist flow to Palermo. A growing number of mega-cruise ship arrivals have also contributed to the tourism influx.

Most spectacular among the UNESCO structures is the *Cattedrale della Santa Vergine Maria Assunta*, dating back to 1185. Successively expanded and rebuilt over the next six centuries, the cathedral is a mélange of Anglo-Norman, Arabesque, gothic, gothic-Catalan, renaissance, baroque, and neoclassic styles. The exterior is as beautiful as it is imposing, set on a large piazza with marble statues and waving palm trees as counterpoint to that ornate sandstone façade. I am no student of architecture, but even I could see half a millennium's worth of architectural styles on display.



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The interior is lavish, with mosaics, statuary, saintly relics, Roman crypts, gilt frescoes, and more. The prevailing style is supposedly neoclassic but, as our guide quipped, "Even our neoclassic style is ornate because everything in Sicily is a little bit baroque."

I hadn't remembered the sundial from my previous visit. A small pinhole in the church's domed ceiling allows the sun to project along the floor precisely at noon and define the hour and the winter and summer solstices. Signs of the zodiac can also be seen on the floor and the sun passes each at the appropriate month. Zodiac signs are very unusual in a Catholic church but not because of their pagan origins; this sundial was actually a scientific instrument useful for astrological research.

## **The Sicilian Priest Who Fought the Mob**

Another change from my previous visit was a modern-looking tomb with a sheaf of wheat laid over the casket. Next to it was a framed picture of a priest who seemed to be smiling at us. This was Pino Puglisi, born in a tough neighborhood of Palermo in 1937 and killed there by the Mafia in 1993, a year after Falcone and Borsellino. Puglisi had been working with children, encouraging them to stay in school and out of trouble. He had refused Mafia donations to the church. He had encouraged local businesses to refuse paying the *pizzo*, extortion money. He had been shot down in daylight in front of his own home on his birthday. "I've been expecting you" were supposedly his last words, according to one of his assassins.





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When Falcone and Borsellino were killed, the Palermitani cried, rocked, and wailed in anguish, our guide told us. When the priest was shot, people finally began to organize. They mobilized for a change in the laws to make pizzo more difficult. Shopkeepers posted signs outside their businesses, "No pizzo here." Students held anti-Mafia rallies. "The Mafia as it once was does not exist in Palermo anymore," our guide insisted, a little teary-eyed. She touched the sheaf of wheat. "This symbolizes growth, resurrection, and hope."

Story by Claudia Flisi, images by the photographers indicated.

***[Claudia Flisi](#)*** is a dual citizen writer based in Milan, Italy. Her stories have appeared in the International New York Times, Newsweek, Fortune, Variety, and many others. She has visited more than 100 countries, fallen off horses on six continents, and trained dogs in three languages. Her book about an Italian dog, ***[Crystal and Jade](#)***, was published in 2016.

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