A WEEK IN SICILY (2016)





CHARLES GANNON © 2023



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Cover photos: the view from Taormina, and Cathedral Square, Ortigia, Siracusa.

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1: PALERMO TO GIARDINI NAXOS

Tuesday, 11 October, 2016

It was boiling hot when I stepped out of the plane in Catania at 11 a.m. Inside the airport building I went through passport control, marched through the baggage collection area with my small suitcase, and found my way to the arrivals hall. I immediately found our guide, Francesco, who was holding a Travel Department sign aloft and chatting to three ladies. Two of them, Eibhlinn and Colette, were Irish, but the other lady, Janet, was English. When I asked her what part of England she came from, she answered Harrow, Middlesex. Astonished to hear this, I told her that my late mother, also English, had once lived in Harrow. I learned that Janet now lived in West Cork, in Ireland, and that she had previously lived and worked in Canada. We chatted while waiting for the rest of our group to arrive with their luggage and, when ready to leave, climbed aboard our coach outside. I sat beside her and accompanied her on our long journey to the island's capital, Palermo.

I had become interested in Sicily some time previously after watching Francesco da Mosto's *Francesco's Italy: Top to Toe* on BBC television, then Andrew Graham-Dixon and Giorgio Locatelli's three-part series *Sicily Unpacked*, which I had found quite fascinating. Although I had realized that the island was a potentially dangerous place because of the presence of the Mafia (friends of mine had had a lucky escape some years previously), I was relieved to discover that it was a much safer place now. So many cultures had flourished in Sicily over a long period of time: Phoenician, Greek, Roman, Vandal, Ostrogoth, Byzantine, Arabic, Norman, and Italian. I also learned that the island was named after the Sicels, who had inhabited the eastern part of the island during the Iron Age. Having read a little about Sicily and discovered that it had a rich and unique culture encompassing art, architecture, music, literature and cuisine, I decided that I would have to visit the island and therefore booked a week's tour with The Travel Department.

Once we had driven through the busy, noisy and congested streets of Catania (most of which were quite ugly), we headed north-eastwards towards Palermo. En route, Janet and I chatted, looked out the window at the rather pleasant though somewhat bland scenery, and dozed, for both of us had had an early start. I had struggled out of bed at four o'clock in the morning and had travelled to Dublin Airport by bus. Although I had breakfasted in the airport, I was glad when we now stopped at a busy wayside restaurant for lunch.

Our journey continued afterwards, passing various hills and mountains. The approach to Palermo was quite spectacular, with a view looking down over the city and out to the sea. Soon we were driving through the busy streets of the capital, which at first looked rather grim. However, as we neared the city centre, the buildings and general appearance of the place began to look a little more elegant. We finally arrived at the Hotel Politeama, in the elegant Piazza Ruggiero Settimo, at about three o'clock. We were quite impressed by the hotel and our bedrooms.



The Teatro Politeamo, near our hotel in Palermo

Having spruced myself up, I went down to the reception desk and asked for directions to two tiny, though extremely elegant chapels that I had seen on one of the *Sicily Unpacked* programmes: the Oratorio del Rosario di Santa Cita and the Oratorio del Rosario di San Domenico. The man gave me a map and showed me where to go, and I set off on foot along the Via Roma. Eventually I found the Via Valverde, which was a narrow alleyway on my left. Like Andrew Graham-Dixon and Giorgio Locatelli, I almost walked past the Oratorio di Santa Cita. Noticing some stone pillars on my left, I recognized them from the television programme, and so stopped, turned back and saw the entrance on my right.

Inside I found some young people seated behind a desk, and greeted them in halting Italian. I asked them for a ticket for this chapel and the other one that I wanted to visit, gave them €6, and received two tickets. The young people wanted to know where I was from; they were interested to discover that I came from *Irlanda*. They then pointed me in the direction of the entrance and off I went.





The Oratorio del Rosario di Santa Cita, Palermo

Just as I expected, I was quite flabbergasted by the exquisite beauty and fabulous stucco-work of this unique and little-known seventeenth-century chapel, for it was

absolutely stunning. As I almost had the place to myself, I stayed here for quite some time, gazing in silent amazement at everything around me. The remarkable stucco tableau scenes had been created by Giacomo Serpotta between 1687 and 1718, and the main altarpiece painting of the *Madonna of the Rosary and Child with Dominican Saints* was painted by Carlo Maratta in 1695. After I had gazed at all this splendour to my full, I made my way to a couple of anterooms at the back of the chapel, where I examined the portraits of former directors of the Confraternity (or *Compagnia del Rosario*) that were hanging on the walls.



An anteroom of the Oratorio del Rosario di Santa Cita, Palermo

Delighted to have seen all this, I left and made my way to the Oratorio del Rosario di San Domenico, founded in 1574, nearby. Although this chapel, which was smaller, did have some fine stucco-work and paintings, including a magnificent altarpiece by van Dyck, it was not as stunning as the previous one. However, it was very pleasing to behold. On the whole, the décor was much darker. Here the stucco-work dated from the early eighteenth century.





The Oratorio del Rosario di San Domenico, Palermo

I then footed it back to the hotel along the busy streets, and later joined my new companions in the foyer. Our guide appeared and brought us off to a nearby restaurant, where we sat down in a large and busy dining room to sample some of the local cuisine, which proved to be very tasty and wholesome. During the meal I told Janet and the other two ladies, Eibhlinn and Colette, about the chapels that I had visited, and suggested that they come with me on the following evening to see them.

I was glad to clamber into my comfortable bed later, for it had been a long day and by now I was feeling quite tired.

Wednesday, 12 October

I woke this morning at seven o'clock, ate a very good breakfast in the hotel, and was ready by 8.45 for today's tour of the city. We scrambled aboard our coach and set off for the nearby town of Monreale. We drove slowly through busy streets, where we could see plenty of cars double-parked. Our guide told us how the people here were inclined to take chances when no parking spaces were available, despite the fact that they could be caught and fined by the police.

We gradually made our way out of Palermo's suburbs and approached Monreale, which was situated on the slope of Monte Caputo, overlooking a fertile valley known as *La Conca d'Oro* (The Golden Shell). The main attraction here was the Norman-Byzantine cathedral, which we would have to approach by climbing steps up the mountain. Knowing that some members of our group were not in the first flush of youth, our guide set off at a moderate pace. As we toiled our way up the narrow streets of the town, we passed countless tourist shops.





Monreale Cathedral, near Perugia

At last we reached the square where the famous cathedral was. After our guide had given us a general introduction to the church, we went in and mingled with the crowds. I Immediately realized how unusual this very fine building was, for although Catholic, it had many Byzantine features. One of the greatest examples of Norman architecture, the building of this abbey church had begun in 1174, and in 1178 it was elevated to the rank of cathedral. Our guide pointed out that the nave had been constructed in the manner of a Latin basilica, though the triple-apsed choir, common

in Syria and the Middle East, was Byzantine in style. I was fascinated by the intricately decorated wooden roof and its stout cross-beams.





The cloisters beside Monreale Cathedral, near Palermo

After seeing around this wonderful cathedral, we were brought into the abbey's cloisters close by, which were quite beautiful to behold. We were told that they are counted among the finest extant examples of Italian cloisters.

After seeing the cathedral and cloisters, we were free to wander around the town for a short while. Janet and I found a vantage point that offered a wonderful view looking down towards Palermo and the sea. We took some photographs before we rejoined the group and made our way back to the coach.





Part of Monreale Cathedral, and a view of Palermo from Monreale

We then returned to Palermo and stopped to take a look at the *Capella Palatina* or Palatine Chapel, which was part of the city's Norman Palace. We approached this by walking into an intimate square surrounded by very beautiful three-storeyed cloisters, which we duly admired. On the inner walls of the cloisters were some fine frescoes. The magnificent chapel, like the cathedral that we had seen at Monreale, had been

built in the twelfth century. It featured a mixture of architectural styles: Byzantine, Norman and Fatimid, the latter of which had originated during the Fatimid Caliphate (AD 909–1167) in North Africa. The elegant Byzantine mosaics here were truly stunning, though some of the later ones, which had Latin inscriptions, were not so impressive. The ornamental ceiling over the nave was decorated in the Fatimid style, featuring wooden Islamic *muqarnas* (a distinctive feature often used in Moorish Spain).









The cloisters and interior of the Capella Palatina, Palermo

We stood here, mesmerized, until it was time for us to leave and drive back to the city centre. The coach stopped in a square and our guide told us about some nearby restaurants where we could have lunch. Janet and I chose a small one nearby, where we sampled one of the local delicacies (rice cakes), and then ordered some ice cream.

We later clambered aboard the coach and were driven to the huge Palermo Cathedral, which looked quite impressive in the bright sunshine. We stood outside for some time while our guide told us about the history of the great building. It had originally been a Byzantine basilica, but it was later turned into a mosque by the Saracens following their conquest of the city in the ninth century. The present structure dated from 1185 when it was built by the Norman archbishop of Palermo,

Walter Ophamil. Various additions had been added at later periods, and the present neoclassical appearance dated from 1781 to 1801.





Palermo Cathedral, exterior and interior

I was rather disappointed with the rather stark interior when we entered it, though there were several interesting features to be seen, such as the tombs of emperors and royal figures, decorative side chapels, and a fine Gothic-Catalan wooden choir dating from 1466. There was also a shrine in recent memory of a priest who had devoted most of his life to looking after the poor people in the area, much to the chagrin of the local Mafiosi. The priest had eventually been shot dead by a young man who had been a close friend of his for many years. This disturbing story, told to us by our guide, highlighted the violence that had once existed – and probably still did exist – in this city.

When we had finished our tour of this large cathedral, we drove back to our hotel, where we rested. In the afternoon Janet and I wandered through a street not far from our hotel, stopping now and then to look at the produce on sale in the open-air food market that we had seen on one of the *Sicily Unpacked* television programmes.

Later we met Eibhlinn and Colette, and I brought the three ladies to the two wonderful oratories, which they all enjoyed seeing. The young people in the first one were surprised to see me once again! Afterwards we made our way to a restaurant that had been recommended to us by a member of the staff in our hotel, and enjoyed a very good dinner in it. We proved to be quite a merry bunch once we had drunk some wine with our meal. We were sorry to know that we would be leaving this fine city on the following morning in order to drive to the other side of the island.

Thursday, 13 October

This morning we were in our coach by a quarter to nine, when we left our hotel in Palermo for the south-west of the island. The journey, which was long, took us through some more pleasant countryside, where we could see hills, fields and farms. During the trip, some hilltop villages were pointed out to us, and we drove up to one of them to have a closer look. We spent a short time in the narrow streets looking around, then continued our journey.

At around midday we stopped at a *trattoria*, where, for just €15, we were able to sample many traditional dishes, all of which were delicious, and drink a glass (or two) of wine. Fed and happy by the end of the meal, we were then driven to the nearby ancient Villa Romana del Casale, a famous Roman palace near the town of Piazza Armerina, which I was very interested to see. Excavations had begun during the early nineteenth century, but the main work, which revealed the true size of the palace, had been carried out during the 1950s and 60s. Various theories have been formulated as to who might have lived in this luxurious palace, but nobody knows for sure.

We were not too surprised by the number of people who had come to visit this famous archaeological site, and we were quite amazed by the sheer size of it. As some of the walls had been destroyed during the fifth century by the Vandals, and most of the structure was gone by the twelfth, all that was left were the magnificent mosaics on the floors, a few low walls, and some columns. Modern temporary walls and roofs had been erected during the 1950s in order to protect the precious remains from the elements







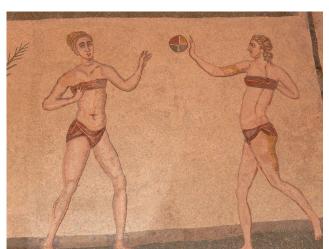


The Villa Romana del Casale, Piazza Armerina

Once tickets had been purchased and issued to us, we were brought into the villa by our guide, who showed us around and explained everything. Janet and I were fascinated by the place, and recognized some of the mosaics, several of which we had seen on television. As well as some intricate geometric abstract designs, there were depictions of animals, people, armies, battles, carts, boats, ships, and people enjoying themselves. We saw women athletes dressed in the Roman equivalent of bikinis, and we chuckled at a mosaic of a young woman displaying her shapely posterior, which I nicknamed 'the bum shot'.







Mosaics in the Villa Romana del Casale, Piazza Armerina

After a very enjoyable hour spent in the archaeological site, we left, climbed aboard our coach, and drove off to the resort town of Giardini Naxos on the coast. We eventually arrived at a huge modern hotel, the Naxos Beach Hotel, which was situated in a large enclosure that included swimming pools, a tennis court, a gym, an amphitheatre, a beauty centre, various other sports centres, and 'villettes' or garden houses, which Janet and I had elected to stay in. I was delighted that I had chosen one of these little houses, which contained a large bedroom and bathroom, for the main hotel building was enormous, noisy, and full of huge groups of people coming and going – not my style at all. As my suite of rooms was on the ground level, I had access to a little garden that was almost private.

Once I had organized my things in the room, I went outside and strolled around the extensive grounds, where I found people splashing about in the various swimming pools. It was a welcome change to be out in the fresh sea air.

In the evening, at dinner time, Janet and I went into the main building, presented admission cards to a young person at the entrance of the huge restaurant, and wandered inside, where we found tables groaning with food. Just about everything was available: traditional Sicilian dishes, hamburgers, pizzas and chips for the young people, meat, potatoes and two veg dishes for unadventurous diners, fish dishes, soups, salads, vegetarian food, fried food, Eastern dishes... and a separate room containing a very large and sinful selection of desserts.

A sign directed us to a side room that had been reserved for us, and inside we found a couple of long tables that had been set with cutlery, glasses, bottles of red and white wine, and jugs of water. Once we had chosen what we wanted to eat, Janet and I sat near the end of one the tables, where we chatted to our companions and enjoyed some excellent food. As the wine was consumed, the volume of conversation and laughter increased. I was encouraged to tell a couple of jokes, which made a certain amount of fun of country Irish people, much to the amusement of those around me, including a man from County Kerry, who sat at the head of the table beside me.

After the main course, we went out to get some dessert, but found that most of the best dishes had already been taken. We realized that many people had gone to this room first in order to grab whatever they fancied, had put their helpings of dessert on their tables, and then had gone off to take their starters and main courses.

When our meal eventually ended, Janet and I left, found our way in the dark back to our villettes, and prepared for a night's sleep.

Friday, 14 October

As nothing had been scheduled today, Janet and I decided to relax. After a good breakfast, we left the hotel and ambled off to have a look at some Greek archaeological excavations that were situated in a nearby park. As there was little of interest to be seen, they were rather disappointing. However, it was an excellent opportunity for the pair of us to have a decent conversation. At one point we sat on a park bench and Janet asked me about the various instruments to be seen and heard in a typical orchestra. After a while we ambled on and came to a small museum, where we were able to see some of the ancient Greek artefacts found during the excavations. Here we learned, for example, that the old city that had once been here, Naxos, was originally founded by colonists from the Greek island of Naxos in about 734 BC. Most of the artefacts on view were small, such as drinking vessels and statuettes.

From here we walked back to our accommodation, where I had lunch in my room. Afterwards I treated myself to a siesta. Later I made my way down to the beach. This proved to be rather tatty, for a thick line of cigarette butts marked where the sea water had reached when the tide had been in. The beach itself was stony and untidy, deck chairs were to be seen everywhere, and crude boundaries had been erected at various points. The sea, I noticed, was quite rough.

In the evening I joined my companions in the restaurant where, once again, I enjoyed a very good and filling dinner.