

Sightseeing Tips for Norman-Arab Palermo

Extracted from

The Time Traveler's Guide to Norman-Arab-Byzantine Palermo, Monreale and Cefalù

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The classification of several places as UNESCO “world heritage sites” means slightly better access than in the past, if only because that was one of the requirements for such status. The world heritage sites are the cathedrals of Palermo, Monreale and Cefalù, the Martorana and San Cataldo churches, the Palatine Chapel in the Norman Palace, Saint John of the Hermits, the Zisa palace and the Admiral's Bridge. Others constructed during the same era which are usually open to the public are the Magione, the Cuba palace and the Holy Spirit Church.

Hours

These various sites are not managed by a single agency but by several, and there is very little coordination among them. Therefore, there is no single office to contact for currently accurate information about open hours, and no single website that sells tickets in advance.

Speaking very generally, these sites may be visited from 9 to 1 and then from 4 to 6, from Monday through Saturday. They may occasionally have day-long “continuous” hours, without closing during the early afternoon. Unfortunately, their timetables are not by any means consistent, and what you find published on their websites (when you can find them) is rarely current.

Rather than attempting to indicate the precise times these various sites are open, presenting you with capricious schedules which can vary from month to month, we'll offer some practical advice.

Firstly, consider that the churches are usually closed to visitors when there are services such as weddings and Sunday mass. Some are closed Sunday afternoons, and weekday afternoons from 1 to 4. Certain churches, like the cathedral at Cefalù, close around 5 during winter months.

Secondly, many sites are closed on Italian holidays: 1 January, 6 January, 25 April, Easter and Easter Monday, 1 May, 2 June, 15 August, 1 November, 8 December, 25 December, 26 December. Some local holidays result in chaos; here we note, in particular, the Saint Rosalie celebrations in Palermo during the middle of July.

Then there is the week in the middle of August, when certain sites, and perhaps that restaurant so highly recommended on your favorite trip-planning website, are closed for *Ferragosto*.

Thirdly, there are frequent “unforeseen” reasons to close various sites, everything from the visit of a prominent politician to a special event to a labor strike.

At times, the cathedral of Monreale is open while its cloister is closed. The cathedral of Palermo may be open yet its crypt and museum may be closed. As a historical site, the Magione is administered by its own pastor, who can change the timetable at whim.

Do not expect the personnel at ticket offices to understand or speak much English. At minor sites, like the Magione, don't expect them to change anything larger than a twenty-euro note.

At some historical sites, there are discounts in the entry fees for European Union citizens above a certain age.

Certain sites, like Palermo's mikveh and Altofonte's Chapel of Saint Michael, are only rarely open to the public but can sometimes be visited by appointment.

Advice

Here a useful “insider’s tip” seems opportune. If your time in the Palermo area is limited, or if you’re in the city during the crowded “high” season (April–September), see the Palatine Chapel first, before anything else. Get there by 8:45 and immediately buy a ticket so that you can get in when it opens at 9. There may already be a line. An alternate strategy is to get there after three in the afternoon, when the cruise ship passengers have already visited.

This kind of strategy is far more necessary in June than in January.

How much time should you set aside to visit Palermo, Monreale and Cefalù? At least two full days.

Access

In central Palermo, parts of Via Maqueda and Via Vittorio Emanuele are usually closed to traffic from 10 in the morning until around midnight, making these streets pedestrian zones during those hours. This makes it easier to walk from the Martorana to the Norman Palace. There is no bus service in this area.

Parts of Cefalù and Monreale are closed to traffic.

If you wish to avoid crowds of tourists and cruise ship passengers, as well as the summer heat, we highly recommend visiting Sicily at some time from late October to early March.

Note that restaurants open for lunch at 1, and dinner at 8, although bars and stands offering “street food” may be open during longer hours.

A few of the major sites, like the Palatine Chapel (in the Norman Palace), offer facilities for physically-challenged visitors having mobility problems. Others, like San Cataldo and the Martorana (reached only by steps), do not.

Transportation

To get from Palermo to Monreale, do *not* take the orange public buses down Corso Calatafimi unless you have time to spare and enjoy crowded quarters. Instead, take the hourly AST bus from Corso Calatafimi near Piazza Indipendenza (you’ll have to buy a ticket beforehand at one of the bars or cigarette shops in the area), or from Palermo’s main train station; the AST bus does not operate on Sundays or holidays. Otherwise, take a taxi from Piazza Indipendenza or elsewhere in Palermo. If you take a taxi, establish the fare *before* you get in; twenty-five euros is a fair price for a one-way trip to Monreale for two or three passengers, but forty is not at all unreasonable.

There are trains from Palermo to Cefalù (on the line that runs to Messina) that depart about every two hours. The *regionale* train from Palermo’s *stazione centrale* (at the end of Via Roma) is usually the best choice. Travel time is about an hour, and timetables are posted on the internet. Note that a (paper) train ticket is valid only for a specific day and trip, and must be stamped by one of the machines in the station before you board.

Sightseeing

The best time to visit Sicily? If you’re interested in seeing the sights described in this book and avoiding the unbearably torrid, crowded summer, we suggest visiting between early November and late March, the “low” tourist season.

If you plan your trip efficiently, sightseeing on your own can be a rewarding experience. Here are a few details to keep in mind.

In considering a sightseeing bus in Palermo, it is important to think carefully about

the route it takes around the city and whether it passes the sights you want to see. The routes and travel times are not always convenient.

Another service available in Palermo is “sightseeing” in the three-wheel vehicle, the auto-rickshaw or tuk-tuk, which locals call the *lapa* or *apé*. We have seen these vehicles roll over, spilling their passengers onto the street. Therefore, we strongly advise *against* boarding one of these contraptions, whose drivers are rather reckless. A taxi is a better choice, and it’s easy enough to get one to take you from the port, train station or Teatro Massimo to the Norman Palace (establish the fare with the driver *before* boarding).

There are other possibilities for the less adventurous among us. For a small group of four or six, sharing the cost of a personalized walking tour is a good investment, but this has to be set up before you arrive, and here a few guidelines are in order.

If you hire a tour guide, competence is key. Only *licensed* tour guides are ever recommended, and they are well-informed on details such as current schedules because that’s part of their job. This is a *guida abilitata*. By law, these are the *only* guides authorized to lecture visitors inside the cathedrals, palaces, museums and other sites; the other “guides” are not even authorized to lecture in the streets and squares immediately outside these edifices. The unlicensed guides are part of Italy’s unchecked, illegal “underground” economy. Certain trip-planning websites fail to distinguish between legitimate guides and illegal ones. (Licensed guides wearing the distinctive badge do not pay entry fees.) In Italy, getting a tour guide license requires earning a university degree in a relevant area of study, achieving proficiency in a foreign language, and then passing a rigorous exam. It is best to contact your personal guide (via the internet) at least a month before your planned arrival.

Some companies offer excellent group tours of Sicily. Review the itinerary carefully. If, for example, a certain place in Palermo is not included, is there enough free time (perhaps an afternoon at leisure) in the tour’s schedule for you to visit what you want to see?

There is a European trend of young people offering two-hour “free” tours around a historical district of a large city, expecting little more than a gratuity in return. Because these self-styled “guides” are not authorized to lecture *inside* such sites as the Palatine Chapel or the cloister of Monreale Abbey, their services are all but useless for most of the visitors curious enough to read these pages.

Excursions

If you’ve already seen Palermo, Monreale and Cefalù, and you’re thinking about an excursion (day trip) to someplace equally interesting in northwestern Sicily, we suggest Segesta and Erice. Segesta (the ancient Egesta) has what some consider the world’s best-preserved Greek temple, along with a splendid theatre, and Erice (anciently Eryx) has a beautiful castle, along with charming medieval streets built upon Phoenician walls. The best approach is to spend the morning at Segesta, then lunch and the afternoon at Erice. Driving is the only way to get there, but some tour companies, such as *Sicily Concierge* (sicily-concierge.com), offer this service.