

Sicily in six days

Jane Keighley learns how best to enjoy the Italian island of Sicily in less than a week, from Palermo to the charming town of Trapani and beyond...

In Palermo venture off the beaten track and wander towards the waterfront...

WHAT TO DO AND SEE

- **ORTO BOTANICO**
Via Abramo Lincoln, Palermo
☎ +39 0916 238 234
www.ortobotanico.palermo.unipa.it
info@ortobotanico.palermo
- **MUSEO INTERNAZIONALE DELLE MARIONETTE**
Piazzetta Antonio Pasqualino, Palermo
☎ +39 091 328 060
www.museomarionettepalermo.it
- **TEATRO MASSIMO**
Piazza Verde, Palermo
☎ 39 0916 053 515
www.teatromassimo.it
- **CONVENTO DEI CAPPUCCINI**
Piazza Capuccini 1, Palermo
☎ +39 091 212 117
- **CAPELLA PALATINA**
Piazza Indipendenza, Palermo
☎ +39 0916 238 241
- **PALERMO CATHEDRAL**
Vittorio Emanuele, Palermo
☎ + 39 091 334 373
www.cattedrale.palermo.it
- **SELINUNTE ARCHAEOLOGICAL PARK**
☎ +39 092 446 251
www.selinunte.net



Left to right from top: The mosaics at Monreale; the ruins of Selinunte; salt pans of Sicily; exploring the botanic gardens on foot; Panoramic view of Palermo

all well worth a visit and do make sure you take time to visit the Museo delle Marionette, too.

When you have had your fill of Palermo head towards Trapani. I had given myself six days to see as much as I could of Palermo and the west coast of Sicily, and I had decided that Trapani was the ideal base for the second half of my trip. As you approach you will not fail to notice the walled mountain town of Erice towering above Trapani, but leave the journey up by cable car until you have settled yourself down in the elegant historical centre of the town on its small peninsula. If you arrive on a Sunday afternoon, as I did, the only inhabitants seem to be sleeping dogs scratching the flies away.

However, just a few hours later the atmosphere is different again as the Sunday evening *passaggiata* takes place. Preening young girls, families out with young children and aged grandparents wander up and down the main street time and time again. It is the time to see and be seen; the time to exchange pleasantries with friends as wonderful

smells emanate from the restaurants onto the street. Aubergine seems to be the vegetable of choice in Sicily and *Pasta Trapanese* is to die for. Using the local pesto (made from almonds rather than pine nuts) it is hard not to eat it every night. However with so many other tasty dishes to try, it pays to be adventurous.

MAKING DECISIONS

Waking up to beautiful blue skies and a day to be filled with adventures the question is where to go first. Drive down the coast towards Marsala, a town famous for its dessert wine and its place in history as the location where Garibaldi kicked off his campaign. As you drive along the coast stop for a while to gaze at the salt pans, a reminder of an industry which has flourished for hundreds of years. Small windmills that used to grind the salt dot the landscape. Most of this area has been designated as a nature reserve as the brackish lagoons are home to many different birds. Drive on towards Marsala, an elegant and charming town full

DON'T MISS

- **ORTO BOTANICO**
Via Abramo Lincoln, Palermo
☎ +39 0916 238 234
www.ortobotanico.palermo.unipa.it
The botanical gardens are a haven of peace in the middle of noisy Palermo.
- **LA PASTICCERIA DI MARIA GRAMMATICO**
Via Vittorio Emanuele 14, Erice
☎ +39 0923 869 390
www.mariagrammatico.it
Maria was brought up in a local convent and taught by the nuns how to make the exquisite cakes and pastries that she now sells. Visit her shop to taste marzipan fruits and an array of other sweet delights to tempt you.

In the words of a Sicilian proverb "He who goes to Palermo without seeing Monreale leaves a donkey and comes back an ass". As I wandered around the cathedral there I had to agree. It was built by William II to try and outdo the efforts of his grandfather Roger II – he was determined that his efforts were going to be the biggest and the best. The shimmering mosaics show 42 bible stories, many with a humorous touch: a grumpy Eve sits on a rock watching Adam toiling away after being thrown out of Eden and Noah's Ark is full of faces peering anxiously out. As you work your way around the cathedral the stories are instantly recognisable, and you marvel at the amazing achievements of the Greek and Byzantine craftsmen who completed it in ten years. When you finally drag yourself away from the mosaics, the cloisters and the piazza await. Find yourself a restaurant or café overlooking Palermo, order yourself a plate of pasta and a glass of wine and soak up the view.

Back down in Palermo venture off the beaten track and wander towards the waterfront. As you enter

the Piazza Marina you will be amazed by the weird and wonderful trees in front of you. Enclosed in the Giardino Garibaldi these enormous Banyan trees are extraordinary. Their aerial roots dangle down, root, solidify and the branches grow longer and longer. Apart from the Banyan trees the Piazza Marina is full of history. It was the home of the Inquisition and many executions took place here.

Wander onwards and you will reach the botanic gardens, a haven of peace in the noisy hurly burly that is Palermo. It is a real tropical paradise and it is hard to believe that the nearest traffic is only feet away. It is owned by the University of Palermo and research is done here into the medicinal properties of the plants.

EXPLORING THE ISLAND

To wander around on foot is the best way of getting around in this city of traffic jams and mad drivers, but be careful – the inhabitants of Palermo drive fast and stop for nothing that gets in their way. But it is possible to discover many more intriguing places by doing this. The Cathedral, the Teatro Massimo, the Capella Palatina and the Catacombs dei Cappuccini are





WHERE TO STAY

► **HOTEL AMBASCIATORI**
 Via Roma 111, Palermo
 ☎ +39 0916 166 881
www.ambasciatorihotelpalermo.com
booking@ambasciatorihotelpalermo.com
 A very friendly three-star hotel in the centre of Palermo. It has a wonderful rooftop terrace with amazing views all over Palermo where breakfasts and evening meals are served.
Double room from €90

AI LUMI
 Corso Vittorio Emanuele 75, Trapani
 ☎ +39 0923 540 922
www.ailumi.it
info@ailumi.it
 A friendly atmospheric bed and breakfast on the main street of the historical part of Trapani. It has a beautiful courtyard and a restaurant next door which serves delicious local dishes. You can get 15 per cent discount at the restaurant (located right next door) when booking a room.
Double room from €100



Left to right from top: Palermo cathedral; incredible Banyan trees; Teatro Massimo, Palermo; view out towards the hills; mosaics outside at Monreale; the orto botanic building and entrance; marzipan fruit

coast of Tunisia. Wandering around the back streets, it is often possible to catch a glimpse of a flower-filled courtyard. You will eventually find the 12th-century Castello di Venere which stands on the famed ancient temple of Aphrodite. Look out in shop windows for beautiful fruits made of marzipan.

GOING BACK FOR MORE
 When you can eventually tear yourself away from Erice and return down to Trapani, it's best to give yourself a chance to explore its lovely old quarter, which is full of baroque palazzi and beautiful churches. Wander down to the harbour with its mixture of yachts, fishing boats and ferries and then go and get yourself ready for a final evening of glorious Sicilian food and wine. Six days is only enough to give you a brief taste of this wonderful region of Sicily, but at least it gives you a very good reason to return. ■



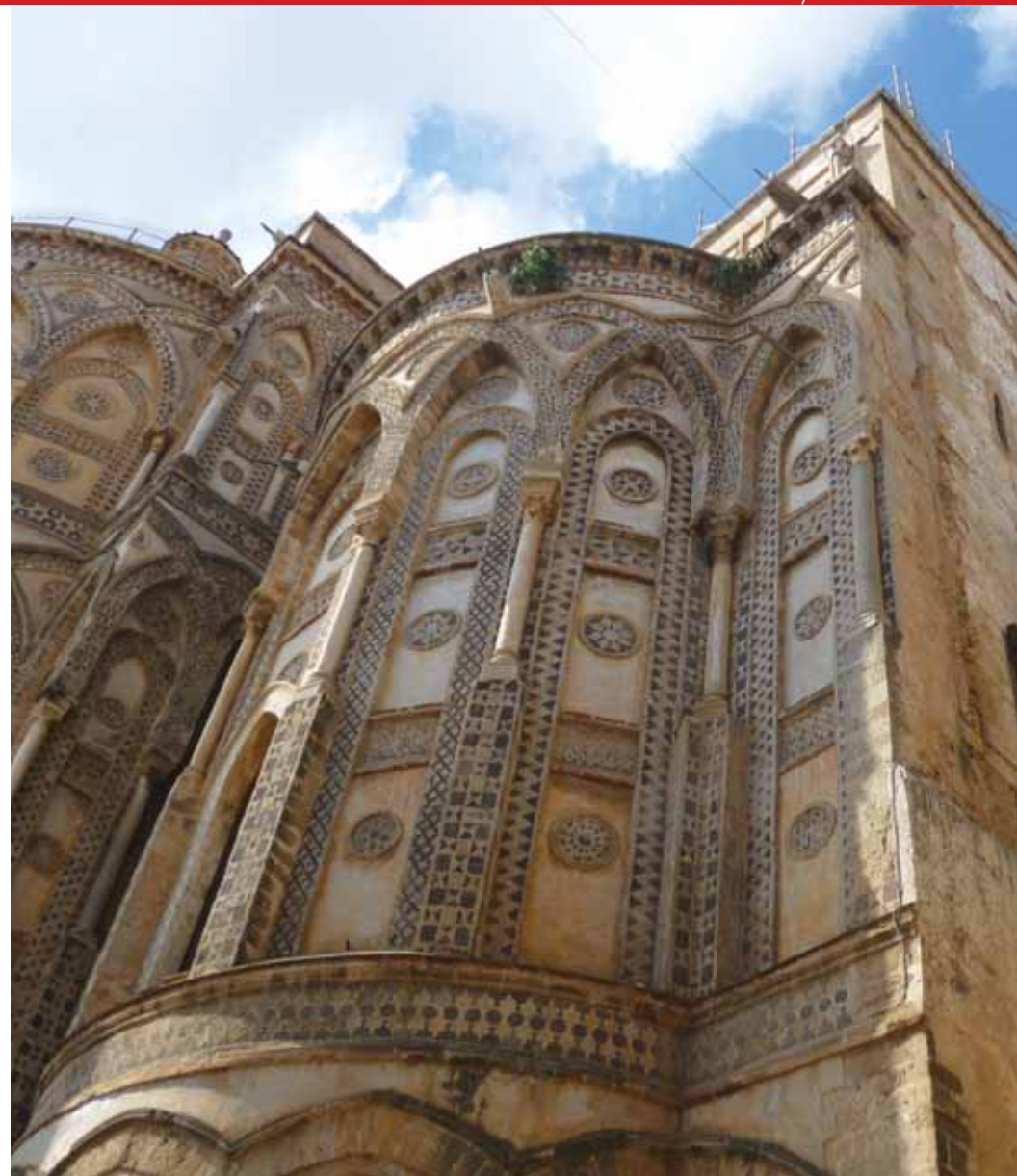
Visit Erice with its atmospheric streets and historic buildings, and views taking in Trapani...

► of baroque buildings. Spend a couple of hours exploring and then either treat yourself to a tasty lunch in one of the cafés, or do as I did. Find a *supermercato* on the road out towards Selinunte, shop as the locals do and get yourself a picnic of panini and fresh fruit. Drive to Marinella di Selinunte and eat your picnic gazing out over the beach and the shimmering blue sea. When replete with the food and the view, set off to explore the ancient ruins at Selinunte. The ruins at Selinunte are some of the most impressive of the ancient Greek world. In its heyday

the city had over 100,000 inhabitants and was one of the most powerful cities in the world. One word of advice: the site is huge and there are electric carts to hire. Do not dismiss them, thinking they are for the old and infirm. To get the most out of this magnificent site on a very hot day do make use of them to explore. As you make your way around you can see that most of the temples lie in great heaps where they were felled by earthquakes. After a dusty but thoroughly rewarding ride around the site, go and treat yourself to a cool *gelato* at the nearby café.

The next day explore somewhere nearer home. Why not visit the medieval town of Erice perched 750m above sea level. The best and most exciting way of reaching it is by the Funicular. I travelled up with a man and his mountain bike who was looking forward to an exhilarating ride down. I would advise to make sure you choose a time to visit when the town is not enveloped in cloud. This is what happened to me and it was most bizarre travelling up from a baking hot Trapani to a misty Erice.

Misty or not, Erice is well worth a visit with its atmospheric streets and historic buildings. The views are amazing, taking in Trapani, the Egadi Islands and (on a good day) the distant



WHERE TO EAT

► **IL GIARDINO DEGLI ARANCI**
 Via Ludovico Torres 38, Monreale
 ☎ +39 0916 402 573
www.ilgiardinodegliarancimonreale.com
giardinomonreale@libero.it
 A restaurant in Monreale with tasty food, friendly staff and an amazing view overlooking Palermo. You can get a meal for two between €20-25.

► **TRATTORIA LA CAMBUSA**
 Piazza Marina 17, Palermo
 ☎ +39 091 584 574
 A busy restaurant in the historic Piazza Marina which specialises in fish dishes. Meal for two around €25-30.

► **TRATTORIA AL SOLITO POSTO**
 Via Orlandini 30A, Trapani
 ☎ +39 092 324 545
www.trattoria-alsolitoposto.com
alsolitoposto30@tiscali.it
 A really popular restaurant well known for its fish dishes such as spaghetti with sea urchin and tuna steak covered with caramelised onions. You can get a good meal for between €25-30.

