

Chatting with a Mayor in Love with His City

Letizia Airos (March 15, 2013)



Leoluca Orlando was recently re-elected mayor after leaving national politics. We sat down to discuss Palermo, a city he has loved for all his life

His discussion of [Palermo](#) [2] is intense, heartfelt, agitated, and at times he does not hide his frustration. His speech exudes love for his city as well as the need to rationalize this love and to plan concrete initiatives to stimulate growth. "My Palermo - he says - must become a bridge between the Palermo of the haves and the have nots, between the real Palermo and Palermo's global reputation. There was a great Austrian musician who was blind from birth. One day a reporter asked him: 'Maestro, how have you been able to overcome your visual handicap to achieve such musical proficiency and artistic success.' The musician responded: 'My father and mother gave me the gift of life and they've given me the two most important things: roots and wings.' I believe that Palermo has beautiful roots, but the time has come for Palermo to spread its wings. With roots alone you risk being suffocated by the very things that keep you grounded. But if you only have wings you risk being a kite that's susceptible to every gust of wind. So you need each of them, both roots and



wings.” And then he quotes from a song by [Jovanotti](#) [3]: “The underlying theme is that Palermo is the belly button of the world. It’s not enough. If I say that Palermo is the navel of the world, I only say it out of love. Here in Palermo we must realize that we have a history, a culture, and a tradition that we can launch and have it take off. We need to give wings to our roots....”

Palermo is a city that’s full of contradictions. Beautiful but challenging....

“It’s a mosaic – not a painting, but a mosaic – where each tile, each piece, even the broken or faded ones, contribute to its overall beauty. So the city of Palermo has decided to display this beautiful mosaic of Palermo in 2019. I’m referring to the candidacy of

Palermo as the [European Capital of Culture](#) [4]. Mind you, if candidacy were only to depend on its monuments there would be no competition with other cities such as [Matera](#) [5], [Trieste](#) [6], [Ravenna](#) [7], etc., which are also candidates for the title. It would only take 10 photographs of the thousands of historical monuments in Palermo for it to be considered the capital of culture. We must demonstrate that we are capable of doing something more

When is the best time to visit Palermo?

Anytime. Recently, for example, there were several events that made Christmas and New Year’s Eve in Palermo an unforgettable experience for both residents and visitors. It cost a ridiculous amount of money, but we can say that it was an absolute success with over 60,000 people in Piazza Politeama and a concert given by local musicians. To do this, we had to remove 160 tons of trash and we reopened many sites throughout the city. We also organized a concert at dawn in the city of Mondello, featuring teachers and students of the Bellini Conservatory. We focused on creating notable accommodations for tourists, with [Palazzo Raffadali](#) [8], [Palazzo Lanza Tomasi](#) [9], Palazzo Castelnuovo, and [Palazzo Alliata di Pietratagliata](#) [10] opening their private historic homes and offering lunch and dinner. These are just a few of the initiatives. We’re focusing on Made in Palermo as well as the decentralization of culture and entertainment to revitalize the city. We’ve given it a new life. I invite everyone to come to Palermo to see what a wonderful city it is, especially now before 2019. We expect our projects to gain momentum over time. Palermo is in the race long term, even beyond its candidacy for European Capital of Culture 2019.

So Palermo is a city that has no seasons. We have extraordinary weather. On January 1 at 7:00 a.m., after the concert at dawn, there were several folks who had no problem going for a swim at the beach in Mondello!

What advice would you give to an American who only had two days to visit Palermo?

I would say go to [Teatro Massimo](#) [11] and the church of [Santa Maria dello Spasimo](#) [12] in the [Kalsa](#) [13] district, one of the oldest parts of Palermo. Those are two places I’d suggest. But I would especially recommend talking a walk without a specific destination and wandering through the narrow streets of the historic center, pausing to take in some particular detail, to breathe the air of



Palermo. Then stop for a sandwich and a glass of wine. Visit the local markets. If you have time, you could visit any one of the 30 museums throughout the city. And definitely don't forget to visit Palermo's seaside.

When you say Palermo, unfortunately, it still means mafia. You are known for your efforts against the mafia. How is it today?

The Mafia still exists, but today's mafia wears a suit and tie. Citizens have greater awareness and there are many organizations that publically denounce the pizzo (extortion money merchants must pay the mafia) and illegal activities. I also want to point out that the Sicilian Mafia today is different than the Neapolitan Camorra. The camorra kills children. The mafia is not a band of serial killers; it is an organization based on power that would rather avoid murder. But today the real mafia corrupts freedom and transforms it into abuse, competition into monopoly, development into hoarding resources. It is certainly more interested in the financial markets than preying on tourists who come to Palermo.

Why did you return to Palermo? Why did you choose to lead the city after being involved in national politics? You are someone who has traveled extensively and studied abroad. You know several languages and cultures.

I made a choice that was a labor of love. My plans didn't include returning to Palermo. I had a different path, doing other things, and then I found myself faced with the choice of focusing on Palermo or abandoning it to illiterate barbarians. My foolishness in running for mayor stems from the cultural need of a people who came from desperation. I decided to come back, and the fact that I am considered one of the most popular mayors in Italy somewhat illustrates the reason for my choice. In the end, politics cannot be another career within the caste system. If I wanted to be rich, I would have done it 40 years ago. Now it's too late.

And what is the mayor of Palermo's favorite dish?

Pasta with sardines. Every city, every culture has its signature dish. Ours is pasta with sardines. It was born as a poor man's dish. It was made with leftover pasta to which sardines were added. There was a time when it didn't cost a cent to make. When you bought other fish from the fishmonger, these little fish were given away. The sardines were then combined with fennel which grew wild in the mountains. Pasta with sardines was a very humble dish, but it was also a sign of nobility for those who were poor but dignified



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