



## Monreale Cathedral: A Visitors Guide

### Description

“Anyone who comes to Palermo without seeing Monreale arrives on a donkey and leaves as an ass”

*Old Sicilian Saying*

Few places represent the merging of cultures more than the Monreale Cathedral, which resides in a hillside town about four miles south of Palermo in Northern Sicily, Italy overlooking groves of olive, orange, and almond trees.

The Cathedral is one of the most outstanding remaining examples of Norman Architecture. This massive church, a grand monument to faith, was built between 1170 and 1189. In 2015 it became a UNESCO Heritage Site as part of the Arab-Norman Palermo and the Cathedral Churches of Cefalú and Monreale.

### The History of Monreale Cathedral



The spectacular Monreale Cathedral is a 12th-century cultural fusion of Norman aspirations, Fatimid architecture, and stunning Byzantine mosaics. The Church was built under the Norman reign of William II and dedicated to the Virgin Mary. Monreale, at the time, was a sophisticated and prosperous city where diverse populations enjoyed ethnic and religious tolerance. Muslims, Christians, and Jews lived together peacefully and collectively, contributing to each other's heritage. They worked side-by-side to



create a monument dedicated to the Virgin Mary. The Monreale Cathedral is a living example of what merging cultures can create.

## The Merging of Cultures

The Church was built under the reign of William II, starting in 1172. Before the Normans arrived, Sicily was ruled by the Fatimids of North Africa during the IX and X centuries. The Normans appreciated their talents. Many of these people were artists, artisans, engineers, mathematicians, and intellectuals; as a result, their culture was absorbed and is deeply reflected in the Cathedral's architecture and its beautiful marble floors with geometric patterns. The Byzantine element is responsible for the mosaics that cover the entire walls. It is a Catholic cathedral, built during the Norman Kingdom but created by Fatimid and Byzantine artists, each contributing their own culture.



## The True Wonder: The Mosaics at Monreale Cathedral

The mosaics don't end there; they grace all the walls and ceiling of this immense structure. About 6,400 square meters of mosaics are made of gold, silver, enamels, glass, and marble. Historians believe there are almost 4,000 pounds of pure gold in the mosaics. In a brilliant tapestry of faith, the tiny mosaics meticulously portray the stories of the Old and New Testaments. They are a storybook,

each scene depicting a different chapter. The Monreale Cathedral is the most extensive collection of mosaics in Italy.

Look closely at the pictures; they appear to be paintings at times vs. millions upon millions of tiny tiles. It was mesmerizing to study these mosaics in person. It is also beyond comprehension how this was done in the 1100s without modern technology or equipment. The craftsmanship and artistry will have you spellbound from the moment you enter.

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## What to visit in the Cathedral

There are many beautiful elements to this remarkable Cathedral: the lovely cloister with 208 columns, the mystical nave, the beautiful Sanctuary, the intricate façade, roof, and exterior. But the wonder of the Monreale Cathedral is the Choir, the main Church. High above the main altar is Christ's image in an exquisite mosaic that rests just above the mosaic of his mother, Mary.

A brief description of each element to visit in the Monreale Cathedral

### The Cloister

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Monreale's cloister of the Benedictine monk features 208 columns, each decorated with smooth, carved, or enhanced geometric compositions. They built Monreale simultaneously with the Church and the rest of the monastery. The cloister is extraordinary. This was where the monks prayed, contemplated, wrote, and dedicated themselves to nature. There are aspects of the cloister that not only speak of Arab and Byzantine artisans but artists coming from elsewhere in Italy, as well as from Provence, France.

### The Central Nave

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The basilican nave is vast, with narrow aisles. On each side of the aisles are monolithic columns of grey oriental granite with one which is marble. Columns support eight pointed arches. The ceiling is open woodwork with a shallow pitch, richly decorated with color.

Magnificent mosaics in the main Cathedral are an explosion of hues in a massive tapestry of faith. The cycle of the mosaics depicts the story of the Bible, old and New Testament. Christ Pantocrator is the most prominent figure in the center, symbolizing the creator of everything, the all-powerful. Your eyes are drawn to it the moment you enter the room. At every angle, the eyes of Christ seem to follow you. The cycle of mosaics, one of the largest in Italy, portrays the story of Jesus, his death, and the stories of the apostles. Each scene has captions written in Latin. At the time very few people read, these images may have had a purpose to convey, or shall we say, re-educate the people and attempt to legitimize a new power.

There are several tombs within the Cathedral, including the Cathedral's founder, King William II, nicknamed The Good of Sicily, and many members of his family. Interestingly the King of France, Louis IX, rests here because his brother was King Charles of Naples.

### **The Roano Chapel**





The chapel is on the left, near the front of the church. You can easily miss it but don't as it is remarkable. It contains the most extensive evidence of Norman mosaic art and is extraordinary and stunning.

Royal tombs in this space include Margaret of Navarre, Mother of Good King William II, and her sons Henry and Roger, who died prematurely. The St. Louis IX King of France, who died in the crusade of Tunis in 1270, has his viscera and heart buried here. The Crucifix Chapel is quite a masterpiece within the chapel due to its vibrant intermixed marble polychromy and exceptional inlaid decorations on the walls and floor.

### **The Terrace of the Monreale Cathedral**



A staircase carved into the southern tower takes you to the top of the Cathedral. Along the way, you will come across exposed vestments and silvers of the Cathedral. The roof itself is beautiful, colorful, and fascinating. At the top, the walkway runs almost the entirety of the church. The views of the valley, town, and hillside are gorgeous. We were glad we took extra time to do this part of the visit.

### **The Diocesan Museum**



The space housing the Diocesan Museum of Monreale, a Museum of Christian Art that represents the faith and devotion of the Diocese at that time, is lovely. It is within the Archbishop's Palace.

The first floor has an access corridor that holds stone material from various parts of the Diocese and leads to the Benedictine cloister. The great hall has a magnificent tapestry depicting the famous theme of William's Dream. Showcases on the walls hold side altars and other altarpieces. One room faces the inside of the Cathedral, offering impressive views of the mosaics. The second room has works from the sixteenth century. It provides a close-up view of the exterior decoration of the Cathedral's apses.

The second floor has a hall displaying the wallpapers and furnishings commissioned by the Archbishops. The floor also overlooks the cloister, providing a different perspective from above. You will find a separate anthropological section that brings together some devotional works.

## **The Exterior**



Take the time to wander around the structures to examine the beautiful exterior facade.

## How to get to Monreale Cathedral

The location is just a few miles from Palermo. There are four options to get to the Cathedral. We had a car, so we can't speak to our personal experience for most options.

1. Taxis can be pricey, and they aren't the friendliest at times.
2. Organized Tours include pick-up/drop-off with the cost usually. The best part is a professional guide accompanies you.
3. Are you driving yourself? This is what we did, and it was quick. There are parking garages nearby and some street parking.
4. Public Transportation. Some buses reach the area, but there are many complications, and it is lengthy. They have limited hours as well. You can pick them up in the Piazza Indipendenza. The buses are the AST bus and the AMAT 389 bus. These can change, so verify before boarding.



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## Entry and Opening Hours



\*Plan for about two hours to visit if you take in all options.\*

Opening Hours (please verify as times may change)

Cathedral, Diocesan Museum, Roano Chapel and Terraces

Monday – Saturday

9 am – 1:00 pm, 2:30 pm – 5 pm

Sun and Religious Holidays:

2:30 pm – 4:45 pm (due to services)

Cloister Monday to Saturday

9.00 to 19.00

Sunday and Religious Holidays 9 am to 1:30 pm

We arrived just as they were closing for lunch and were not informed when buying our entry ticket. Luckily the town has many restaurants to try. They were closed from 12:45 to 2:30. On weekends; it is 10:00 am to 2:30 pm, or mass and lunch. Plan accordingly.

### **Cost**

**Cloister only € 6.00**

**Combo Ticket for Cloister, Cathedral, Museum, Terrace, and Chapel € 12.00**

There is limited access during Covid, so buying tickets online is suggested. [Click here](#)

### **The Town of Monreale**



Monreale is located on the slope of Monte Caputo, overlooking the fertile valley of the Golden Shell. The area is full of orange, olive, and almond trees; they export the produce in large quantities. The views are quite lovely. Monreale, which has a population of approximately 39,000, is primarily known for its delicious bread.



There is the fortified convent of Castellaccio built in the 12th century. The Abbey Church of SanMartino delle Scale, founded in the 6th century AD, is a nice stop with several other churches to pop into if you stroll the town.

## Where to eat



The town had many restaurants, especially in the square at the Cathedral's front. We found this funky fantastic little place we adored, **Osteria Pepers**. It is across from the museum entrance. Address is Via Cappuccini Palermo, 6, 90046 Monreale.

The food options are a mix of Italian, Mediterranean, Sicilian, Southern Italian, and Brew Pub fare. The presentation was beautiful, with a relaxed feel to the place.

It has a rock music theme, with some cool memorabilia from the rock era. Check out reviews on [Trip Advisor](#).

## Where to stay in the area



We stayed in Palermo, and it was a quick drive. Our suggestion is to stay there. Here are two links to research hotels in the area; click on the site's name. We recommend both.

It is important to price out properties on various sites. [Expedia](#) is a US-based company, whereas [Booking.com](#) is Europe based. Not all properties appear on both. If the establishment has a website, check the price there as well.

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## Final thoughts

Our visit to the Monreale Cathedral was a stop before Segesta. It was meant to be a shortstop, but we were there for hours. It deserves that much time. There is something unique and dramatic about this Cathedral. It is a work of art, as many are, but this was extraordinary. The mosaics are powerful and beautiful. The story behind the church is fascinating and a testament to what can build when several cultures work together. It is a place you do not want to miss. As the introduction quote noted, and we agree, don't leave an ass by missing this wonder.

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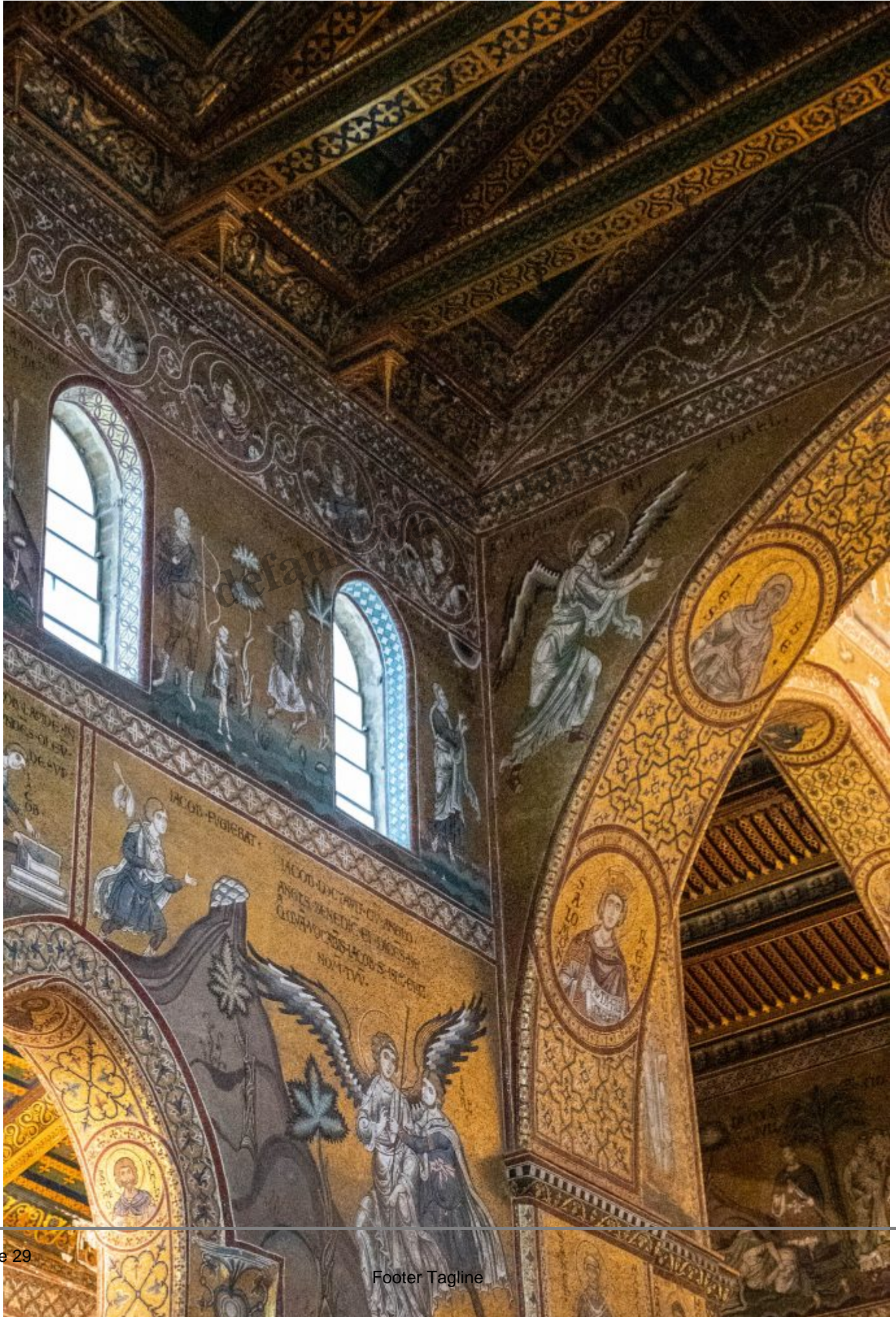


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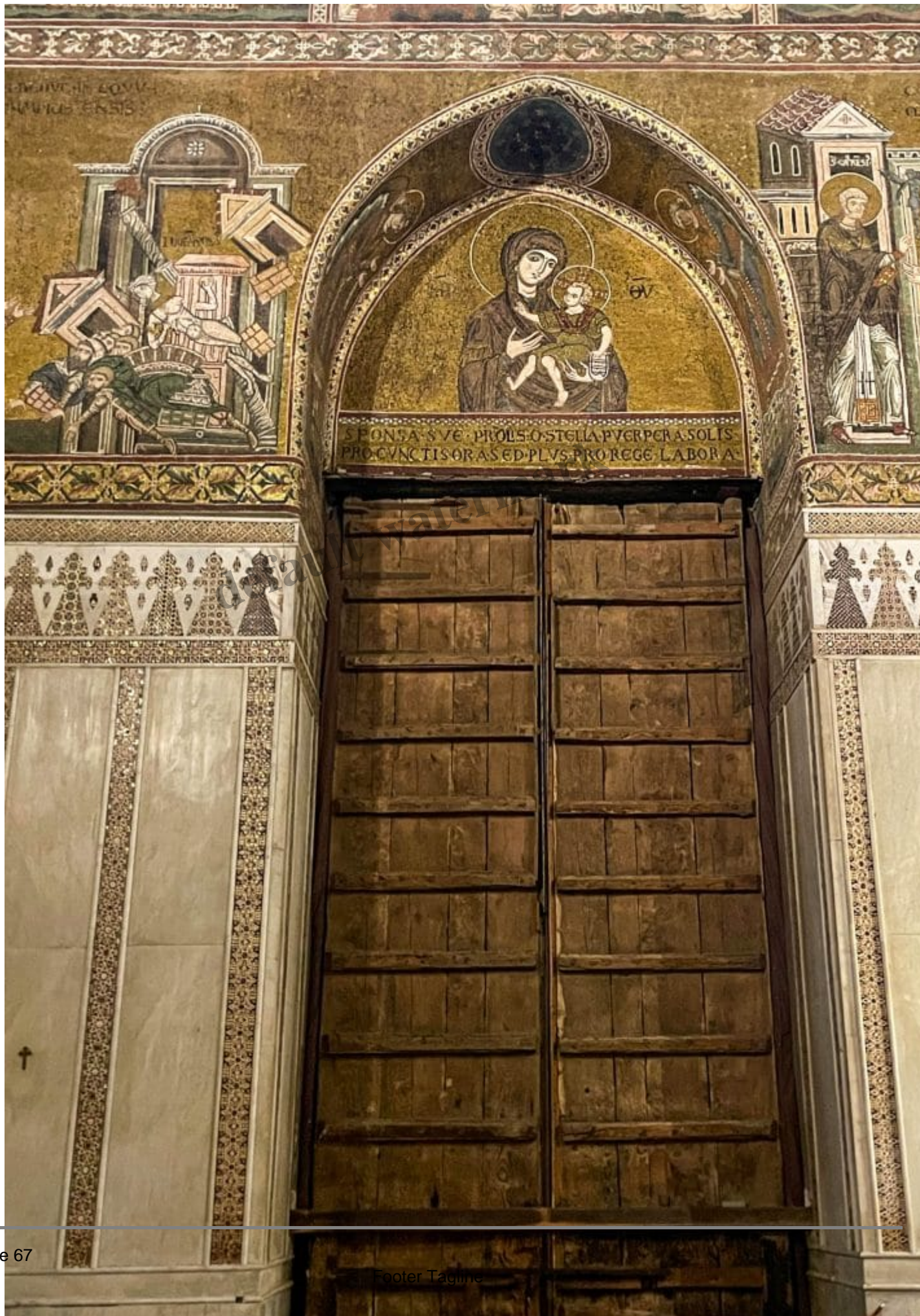


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We always check Expedia and Booking.com to verify prices. At times, one is sold out of rooms while another at the same place has rooms. We also often find some European hotels, especially smaller



ones, on Booking.com but not on Expedia. It could be they are a Europe-based company. Try both before booking accommodations.

### [Vacation Rental By Owner \(VRBO\)](#)

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[VRBO](#) is now under the Expedia group's ownership, which many were worried about, but it hasn't panned out to be a concern. It is a massive network with access to all lodging forms should issues arise. Joelle has used VRBO for many years with her family and has had no problems with it.

### [Viator](#)

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