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ITS MOST PASSIONATE ADMIRERS

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*City Secrets Florence, Venice & the Towns of Italy* is the second volume in the acclaimed *City Secrets* series.

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Artists, writers, architects, curators,  
historians and gourmets  
reveal their favorite discoveries  
in the ultimate insider's guide

## SICILY/ SICILIA



## SARDINIA/ SARDEGNA



## SICILY / SICILIA

### GIBELLINA VECCHIA

71 km southwest of Palermo

#### Il Cretto di Burri

1981, Alberto Burri

The road to Gibellina Vecchia winds through thick, wild country. As the car negotiates the mountain switchbacks, you can sometimes glimpse a large, white mass on a distant hillside. Then the rhythm of the landscape is interrupted and suddenly, you're upon it: a huge slope of white concrete broken by narrow passages where ancient streets once defined the town.

Il Cretto covers the entire hillside. It was created by the artist Alberto Burri as a memorial and protest piece commemorating the 1968 earthquake that decimated the town. No bodies lie beneath the concrete unless a few were left buried by the earthquake. Still, the piece can be interpreted as a tomb commemorating lives lost and a way of life lost. (The protest is against the government, which chose to abandon the original town site and rebuild farther down the hillside, using new architects.)

Without the distractions of street life, your mind focuses on moving about the maze. The pitch of the original street stretches your legs and feet, and suddenly you wonder how old people stiffened by arthritis and age got about. At some points, looking across the concrete, you can see undulating waves that record the rises and falls of the hillside—and marvel at the artist's ability to create such movement out of such mass. Standing at the very bottom and looking up, you sense the weight of the concrete, a few moments ago light and reflective, now pulling towards you in a way that recalls an earthquake.

LANA BORTOLOTT  
*Journalist*

## PALERMO

**La Kalsa**

Northeast of Stazione Centrale

People who appreciate the romance of ruined buildings should visit the Kalsa district. Still shattered from World War II bombing, building roofs are torn open to the skies, exposing abandoned innards. But then, in the house next door, a lace curtain in a window, a pair of beaten shoes on the doorstep: a sign of life next to the uninhabitable.

Kalsa is abandoned cars, churches, animals. It's also laundry hanging from windows, people hanging from balconies, kids playing in the street, tiny storefront windows with sun-faded boxes of cereal selling bread and onions and Parmalat.

It's a place to wonder about past and current lives.

LANA BORTOLOTT  
*Journalist*

**San Giovanni degli Eremiti**

1132–1148, Roger II  
Via dei Benedettini

San Giovanni degli Eremiti (Saint John of the Hermits) is the most intimate space in Palermo. To get here, walk through the ravaged Kalsa district, cross a few hair-raising intersections and come upon this quiet ancient church, its architectural oddities evident through the twisted trees. The church is austere and astonishingly beautiful, but the cloister with its faded frescoes, tiny spiraled columns, fruit trees and tangled garden is both a sanctuary and a fairyland. In March, the kumquats are ripe; there is nothing so magical as picking a few from the trees and sitting on the low stone bench beneath a flowering almond tree to eat them.

LANA BORTOLOTT  
*Journalist*

**La Martorana**

Piazza Bellini

Tiny La Martorana best shows off Palermo's eccentric ancestry and architecture. Originally a Norman church, it has a baroque façade, and adjacent, a strange, red, three-domed, Arab-influenced chapel. But the real treasures are inside: 12th-century Byzantine mosaics on the apse, walls, and columns. If you can't make it to Monreale, come here in the morning when the light shines through the high windows and the crowds are thin.

LANA BORTOLOTT  
*Journalist*

**Vucciria Food Market**

Area south of San Domenico and north of San Antonio

☞ It's chaotic and crowded, and chances are you probably won't even come away with anything to eat. But it's where everyone in Palermo comes to poke the produce, sniff the fish, and bargain for the best price. Best of all is night time, when the market breaks down, and only a few vendors remain, strangely illuminated by bare bulbs hanging haphazardly, pirated from adjoining power lines. They pack up slowly, eating dinner made from what didn't sell that day, feeding their scraps to the lingering, hopeful street dogs. When the streets are nearly empty, kids set fires to the packing crates in small *piazze*, and a few at a time, people emerge from alleys and doorways to kindle the fires. Within minutes, the scene changes. Some straggling vendors will come, and shedding the weight of a day's commerce, melt into the crowd and become dark silhouettes against the impromptu fires.

LANA BORTOLOTT  
*Journalist*