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# 36 Hours in Lecce, Italy

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Thanks to dozens of mostly Baroque-era churches packing its maze of narrow streets, Lecce, the “Florence of the South,” dazzles with elaborately carved facades and interiors that erupt with symphonies of angels, cherubs, saints, saviors and Madonnas. But this small gem in Italy’s heel is far from a haven of monkish abstemiousness. A capital of southern Italian cooking, the city brims with rustic restaurants serving the hearty peasant cuisine and robust red wines of the Puglia (Apulia in English) region. Throw in a buzzing bar scene and nearby beaches of sun-bronzed bodies and you have a city fit for holy men and hedonists alike.

## **FRIDAY**

**5 p.m.**

### **1. History and Coffee**

During the Roman era, some 20,000 spectators would fill the stone seats of the arcaded amphitheater in what is now Piazza Sant’Oronzo. Today the locals tend to congregate on the lively outdoor terrace of Caffè Alvino on the Piazza Sant’Oronzo, which sits alongside the partly excavated ruins and other landmarks from Lecce’s past. Sit back, order a Lecce specialty called caffè in ghiaccio con latte di mandorla (espresso with ice and almond milk) and admire the majestic stone Sedile — a former town hall and armory built in the late 16th century — and the soaring stone pillar topped by a statue of the city’s patron saint, St. Oronzo, from the Baroque period.

**7 p.m.**

### **2. Champion Chiselers**

No, you’re not hallucinating. With the frenzied crowdedness of a Hieronymus Bosch painting and the intensity of a fever dream, the colonnaded, multitiered and ornately sculptured exterior of Basilica di Santa Croce on Via Umberto, just north of Piazza Sant’Oronzo, bursts exuberantly with hundreds of finely detailed forms. Pacing lions, howling dragons, cross-bearing angels, undersea creatures, turbaned Turks, topless women, urns, scrolls, shells, birds, horses, heralds, shells and flowers fill the facade of Lecce’s iconic church, completed in 1695 after work by three generations of architects and artisans.

**8 p.m.**

### **3. Salt of the Earth**

Trattoria di Nonna Tetti restaurant on the Piazzetta Regina Maria keeps things simple. The décor is a humble amalgam of rough stone, tiles and wood. The culinary components are equally rustic, as befits a restaurant specializing in cucina povera, the “poor people’s food” that has traditionally made up the local diet and is now gaining favor among foodies for its authentic salt-of-the-earth flavors and healthy Mediterranean ingredients. Representatives include fava beans in oil with chicory and a gooey, crunchy, starchy, garlicky gut-filler called ciceri e tria, which blends fried and boiled pasta and cooked chickpeas. Italian classics round out the menu, from caprese and mozzarella antipasti to a spongy tiramisù. A meal for two, without wine, costs around 50 euros, or \$65 at \$1.30 to the euro.

**10 p.m.**

### **4. Start Your Wining**

Wine bars have sprouted in bunches on Via Umberto I, north of the Basilica di Santa Croce. As night falls, grad student types and young professionals fill their stone-vaulted interiors and spill onto crowded sidewalk tables. Decorated with books, artworks and shelves of wine bottles, boho-cool Vineria Santa Cruz has a lengthy wine list that includes a regional primitivo (similar to zinfandel) from the Tenute di Eméra winery that’s deep, dark, dry and tannic (5 euros a glass). Nearby at Shui, the buttery-yellow paint job and suspended contemporary lighting create a medieval-modern ambience in the stone chapel-like interior. Salice from the Cantele winery (4 euros a glass), made from the negroamaro grape, is acidic and juicy.

## **SATURDAY**

**10 a.m.**

### **5. Go for Baroque**

No street in Lecce oozes Baroque extravagance like Via Libertini. Enter the southwestern gate to the city’s historic core, the 18th-century Porta Rudiae, and pop into the Basilica di San Giovanni Battista. Completed in 1728, the church is a soaring, light-flooded expanse ringed by high windows and packed with stunningly detailed carvings of cherubs, wreaths and more. The richly decorated pulpit is flanked by twisting spiral columns and chiseled scenes of the Apocalypse. Farther up Via Libertini on the same side, the 17th-century Chiesa di Santa Teresa has a restrained neo-Classical facade and an interior containing macabre artworks, from an emaciated statue of Jesus writhing in a glass-box coffin to a painting of Salome with the head of St. John. The stunning finale appears in

Piazza del Duomo. Alongside a tall, tapering bell tower, the city's 17th-century cathedral ([cattedraledilecce.it](http://cattedraledilecce.it)) is another highly chiseled edifice that houses stained-glass windows, a coffered wood-and-gilt ceiling and a Greek marble altar decorated with lapis lazuli.

## **Noon**

### **6. Deli Cafe by the Duomo**

Tucked next to Piazza del Duomo, Doppiozero is a hip, modern, delicatessen-style restaurant amid the time-fissured buildings. Under a jazzy soundtrack, convivial groups fill long communal tables illuminated by abstract arty lamps made from half-melted glass bottles. One wall is stacked with pastas, olive oils and wines for takeout; the other is lined by a deli counter showcasing fresh cheeses (Gorgonzola, pecorino, scimudin) and cured meats (salami, speck and coppa) that get sliced into made-to-order combo platters. Also worthwhile are the bite-size meatballs in zesty tomato-onion sauce and the roast beef crostini with horseradish mayonnaise. Lunch for two is 30 to 40 euros.

## **2 p.m.**

### **7. The Big Sleep**

Lecce residents love their siesta, and from 2 to 5 p.m., shops close, squares empty and the great snooze ensues. Don't succumb. Across from the entrance to the 16th-century Castello di Carlo V, catch the No. 32 bus at 2 p.m. sharp (it runs infrequently; 39-0832-340-898) and get off in the seaside town of San Cataldo, about six miles away. South from the lighthouse, the palm-lined boardwalk overlooks craggy promontories and sandy beaches of bright green-blue water that make scenic spots for a stroll, picnic, tryst, tan or splash.

## **6 p.m.**

### **8. Retail Revival**

Footsteps and voices return to Lecce's streets and shops at the end of the afternoon. Boutiques for local goods beckon near Piazza del Duomo. From purple linen bathrobes (265 euros) to white linen shirts (190 euros), Society sells its own label of clothes, bedding and accessories, all made in Italy with natural fibers. Handmade Italian leather laptop bags (120 euros) and other Italian leather goods fill Cartoleria Pantheon Lecce. Epicures will enjoy Gustoliberrima, an emporium of cookbooks, guidebooks, local beers, regional wines and olive-oil-based beauty products.

## **8 p.m.**

### **9. Global Dining**

More books, bottles and local bounty await within the airy Scandinavian-minimalist interior of Corte dei Pandolfi, which takes its name from its location. Amid shelves of glossy photo tomes and wine guides, a crowd of businessmen, media-design types and ladies in riding boots dine on globally influenced dishes ranging from gazpacho to chicken curry. Closer to home, an appetizer of scamorza cheese is baked to gooeyness and wrapped in crisp pancetta strips. Among the mains, carnivores should consider the costata di vitello. Sliced from a thick veal chop, the chunks of pink meat are robust enough for a Viking, almost soft enough to slice with a spoon. A three-course meal for two: about 70 euros.

**10 p.m.**

### **10. Books, Beer and Beyond**

You can hardly hurl a cocktail olive in narrow Via Guglielmo Paladini without hitting a bar. Decorated with photos from Jim Jarmusch films, Coffee and Cigarettes is a sleek neo-industrial space with a stage for live music, serving dozens of European beers, including a smooth and dry Italian-made Menabrea lager (4 euros). Bookish types pack the stone-vaulted Caffè Letterario to sip Amarcord blond ale (3 euros), stock up on fine paper goods and watch comedy, spoken word and other live performances. And an excellent Americano cocktail (with lemon peel and a slice of blood orange; 5.50 euros) awaits in the sexy, sultry Cagliostro cocktail lounge.

## **SUNDAY**

**10 a.m.**

### **11. Puglia's Past**

Temistocle de Vitis and Carlo Barbieri might not be household names, but the moody, modernist early-20th-century paintings by the two local artists are well worth seeking out. They hide on the top level of the Museo Provinciale, one of the few places open on a Sunday. The former's gauzy, empty cityscapes make him a kindred spirit of Edward Hopper, while the latter's portraits of sad-faced women have a stirring power. Downstairs, the museum contains centuries-old religious artworks, elaborately painted Baroque ceramics, and numerous cases of black-glazed Classical vases adorned with gods, goddesses, centaurs, musicians, warriors and wild beasts. Nearly all of the collection comes from Lecce and the region. Free admission.

**Noon**

### **12. A Sweet Finale**

It might lack an exquisitely sculptured facade and pulpit, but Natale on Via Trinchese

certainly doesn't lack worshipers. As the region's premier gelato parlor, the shop draws local cognoscenti and distant pilgrims to taste flavors ranging from the conventional (chocolate, coffee, pistachio) to the creative (panacotta, mille-feuille) to the kooky (a fiery mix of chocolate and red chile pepper). To go native, try the ice cream version of pasticciotto — a Lecce pastry filled with custard cream — and savor the flavor of Puglia for your final moments. A cup with two flavors: 2.50 euros.

## THE DETAILS

1. **Caffè Alvino**, Piazza Sant'Oronzo 30; [caffevalvino.it](http://caffevalvino.it).
2. **Basilica di Santa Croce**, Via Umberto I; [basilicasantacroce.eu](http://basilicasantacroce.eu).
3. **Trattoria di Nonna Tetti**, Piazzetta Regina Maria 17; (39-0832) 246-036.
4. **Vineria Santa Cruz**, Via Umberto I 25; (39-0348) 771-3559. **Shui**, Via Umberto I 21.
5. **Basilica di San Giovanni Battista**, Via Libertini. **Chiesa di Santa Teresa**, Via Libertini. **Piazza del Duomo. Lecce Cathedral**, [cattedraledilecce.it](http://cattedraledilecce.it).
6. **Doppiozero**, Via Guglielmo Paladini 239-0832-521-052.
7. **Town of San Cataldo**.
8. **Society**, Via Degli Ammirati 6, Palazzo Andretta; [epiphany society.com](http://epiphany society.com). **Cartoleria Pantheon Lecce**, Via Libertini 69; (39-0832) 521-312. **Gustoliberrima**, Corso Vittorio Emanuele 43; [gustodipuglia.liberrima.it](http://gustodipuglia.liberrima.it).
9. **Corte dei Pandolfi**, Corte dei Pandolfi 3; [cortedeipandolfi.com](http://cortedeipandolfi.com).
10. **Coffee and Cigarettes**, 23 Via Guglielmo Paladini; [coffeeandcigarettes.info](http://coffeeandcigarettes.info). **Caffè Letterario**, Via Guglielmo Paladini 46; [caffeleterario.org](http://caffeleterario.org). **Cagliostro**, Via Benedetto Cairoli 25; (39-0832) 301-881.
11. **Museo Provinciale**, Viale Gallipoli 28.
12. **Natale**, Via Trinchesse 7, (39-0832) 256-060.

## LODGING

**Suite Hotel Santa Chiara** (Via Degli Ammirati 24; 39-0832-304-998; [santachiaralecce.it](http://santachiaralecce.it)) sits in the heart of Lecce, across from the picturesque Santa Chiara church and alongside a square lined with watering holes. The 24 rooms are decorated in

plush neo-Baroque style. Low-season doubles from 130 euros (\$170).

Opened in January, the 83-room **8 Piu Hotel** (Viale del Risorgimento; 39-0832-306-686; [8piuhotel.com](http://8piuhotel.com)) is a high-design and high-tech crash pad about two-thirds of a mile outside of Lecce's historical center. Doubles from 69 to 104 euros depending on the season.