

SECRET ITALY

Azure seas, characterful hotels, heavenly pizza and
endless olive trees – *Suzy Palmer* falls for Puglia

La dolce vita: Polignano
a Mare, a pretty seaside
town south of Bari, is
famous for its cliff-
diving competitions
and fabulous seafood

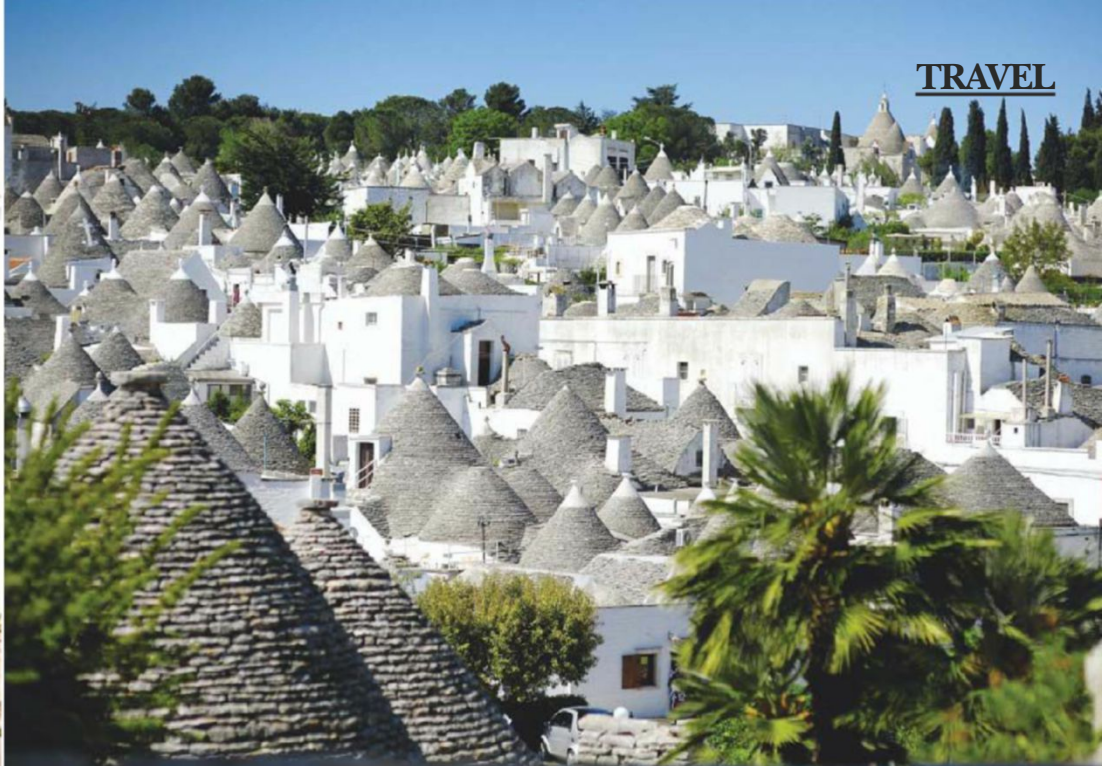




Is Puglia the new Tuscany? The southern peninsula – the stiletto in the Italian boot – has long been a favourite getaway for Italians, but we Brits tend to overlook this intriguing region. Now, with frequent direct flights to Bari and Brindisi via the budget airlines, plus a good choice of accommodation from luxury resorts and villas to *trulli* (ancient white, dry-stone conical houses) and boutique hotels in *masserias* (farmhouses), it's fast becoming the hip Italian destination.

Picking up a hire car in Bari, my husband, Andy, and I plan to spend the next seven days exploring its shimmering coastline, *trulli*-dotted hills and Baroque cities. For our first three nights we've booked into the five-star seaside resort of Borgo Egnazia in Savelletri di Fasano. About an hour's drive from both airports, this 155-room sanctuary is modelled on a traditional Puglian village with beautiful white town houses, individual villas, plus the main hotel. It's large, sprawling over 250 acres, but with three swimming pools, several restaurants, golf and beach clubs and a spa, it never feels overcrowded, even at the height of summer. The decor is incredibly chic, beds are super-comfy and the whole resort is landscaped with lemon trees, cacti, bougainvillea and an abundance of rosemary scenting the night air.

And then there are the olive trees... They're everywhere in Puglia, as I discover on an early morning bike ride organised by Antonello Losito – a former professional cyclist whose company, Southern Visions Travel, creates bespoke activities across the region, from touring in vintage cars to wine-tasting and cookery lessons. He guides us inland through vast olive groves and farms, and the good news is the terrain is fairly flat. The bad news is that by 9am the July sun is already pretty hot, so I'm very happy there's a support vehicle filled with cold drinks, watermelon and sun ►



cream following for any time we need a bit of breather.

Thankfully, Antonello has planned several stops along the way, where I learn that Puglia has more olive trees than the rest of Italy put together, some more than a 1,000 years old; it's also the only place in Italy that proper *burrata* can be made. We visit a family-run farm and, after an impressive demonstration, have a go at making this mozzarella and cream cheese ourselves. Plunging a handful of the stuff into a vat of hot water, then stretching and twisting it into shape is much easier to watch than do – we decide to leave that to the experts. Cycling the final stretch along the coast road, I realise that while this part of the Adriatic shoreline has few beaches, the Italians are more than happy to spend an entire day sitting on rocks or wading into the sea to stand around having a chat. Who needs sand anyway?

Just a 25-minute drive inland from Borgo Egnazia lies the hill town of Alberobello, famous for its streets lined with *trulli*. It's well worth a morning browsing the shops and cafes and getting up close to these unusual buildings. Another option is to book a class at Il Gelso Bianco, a *trullo* that's been converted into a luxury villa and cookery school. On the menu today is grilled aubergines, octopus, handmade pasta, courgette *spiralì*, sea water-grown tomatoes and straight-from-the-oven focaccia.

'It's the freshness that's key,' says our enthusiastic chef,

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT Puglia's whitewashed walls and *trulli*-lined streets are postcard-perfect; one of the 18 candle-lit cave bedrooms at Le Grotte della Civita in the historic city of Matera



Alma, explaining that this is the big difference between cooking in Puglia and the rest of Italy. Everything here is picked, caught or made in the region within days, if not hours, of being prepared. Sitting on the shaded limestone terrace by the pool, my taste buds happily confirm her theory as we polish off a dessert of lemon *gelato* with limoncello, white peaches and nut brittle. The combination of flavours is exquisite – heaven in an ice cream coupe.

Our culinary adventure continues the next day further up the coast in Polignano a Mare. We stop here because it's a beautiful town set on top of limestone cliffs with fabulous views over the azure sea (it often plays host to the Red Bull Cliff Diving World Series). Wandering the maze of streets and alleys, we find this is a good place to do a spot of shopping with brightly-coloured ceramics, sun-dried tomatoes and olive oil (naturally) high on my list.

Lunch at Bella 'Mbriana, just inside the old town walls, is a must because it serves the Best. Pizza. Ever. It's those fresh ingredients again: the tomato, basil and *stracciatella* (mozzarella in cream) is sensational, while a combination of aubergine, mint and breadcrumbs is genius (and at less than 10 euros each, a bargain too).

Pleasingly stuffed, it's back to the car for the 90-minute ►



FROM LEFT La Frasca – one of Borgo Egnazia's many culinary hotspots; boat-side chic on Puglia's charmingly rugged coastline

CLOCKWISE FROM RIGHT

Suzy Palmer takes shade in the cobbled streets of Gallipoli; 17th-century Lecce is characterised by its baroque buildings and upmarket boutiques; the beautifully lit restaurant at Masseria Montelauro near Otranto



drive north-west to the extraordinary city of Matera. Perched on a ridge between deep canyons, the caves in these walls have been used as dwellings since Neolithic times, and an entire settlement has been hewn out of the rocks. Andy and I only have one night here, so I'm glad a local guide, Sylvie, is on hand to walk and talk us through this remarkable place. Wandering up and down the steep steps and cobbled paths of the 'Sassi' (the two cave districts called Barisano and Caveoso), she explains that until the 50s, families lived in abject poverty inside the caves, along with any animals they owned. In 1952, the Italian president declared it 'the shame of Italy' and had the Sassi cleared, resettling all the inhabitants, until some 30 years later when people began moving back and restoring the caves into homes, bars and restaurants. Declared a World Heritage Site in 1993 it now has several hotels, including the remarkable Le Grotte della Civita with 18 cave rooms.

Staying in this rocky retreat is slightly spooky, but rather beautiful, with an iron bed (very comfortable), ancient wooden table (beautifully dressed with a ceramic water jug and a dish of fresh fruit, like a Caravaggio painting) and a Philippe Starck bath and toilet in a nook in the corner. The only light is from the many candles placed around the cave and in the morning the sun streams in through the lattice panel above the heavy wooden doors. A few caves along, breakfast is served in a former 13th-century church. Sipping cappuccinos and eating thin tortillas and fruit tarts at the large wooden tables in the cool, dark interior, while the sun beats down across the canyon outside, has to be one of the most enchanting ways to start a day.

The final part of our Puglia adventure is a two-hour drive south to Salento. With Baroque cities such as Lecce (often called the Florence of the south) and Gallipoli, plus wild, beautiful beaches on both the east and west coast, this region has a fascinating history, having been invaded

at various points by the Greeks, Romans, Byzantines, Normans and Spanish. Our last three nights are spent at Masseria Montelauro, a lovely former farmhouse with whitewashed walls and limestone floors – the epitome of Italian country chic. On the outskirts of Otranto, it's a great, mid-priced base for exploring this historic town with its cobbled streets winding up to the Castello. At night the place lights up, with restaurant tables spilling out onto the sea front and live music luring a happy and relaxed holiday crowd.

On our final day, we turn south and drive down the coast road, chancing our luck on what we might find. Stopping for some *gelati* in the pretty town of Terme di Santa Cesarea, I spot a sign for a 'Bagno' at the top of some steep steps. Exploring further, we find a beach club hewn from the side of the cliffs where Andy and I hire some sun-loungers. We relax on a concrete platform packed full with Italians, eating pizza and sipping cool drinks at the bar, then, later, jump off the rocks to swim to a pontoon and soak up the sun. This is how to holiday Puglia-style – and whichever way you turn, you're guaranteed an absolutely wonderful time. ■

BOOK NOW

■ British Airways (ba.com), easyJet (easyjet.com) and Ryanair (ryanair.com) fly direct from the UK to Bari; the last also serves Brindisi. For car-hire options see carrentals.com.

■ Southern Visions Travel (southernvisionstravel.com) offers tailor-made tours of Puglia, including guided sightseeing, cycling, cookery classes and wine tastings. In May, a seven-night tour staying at Borgo Egnazia (borgoegnazia.com), Le Grotte della Civita (sextantio.it) and Masseria Montelauro (masseriamontelauro.it) costs from £2,769 per person including breakfast, a cooking lesson, a day's cycling and guided tours of Matera and Lecce.

■ *Southern Italy* (£15.99, Lonely Planet) covers the region, and see viaggiareinpuglia.it for further information.