

All in good time

Welcome to the Italian seaside
haven of Monopoli, where modern
life moves at a gentle pace

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MARIO CIVETTA (left) has been fishing Monopoli's waters for over 45 years

In the sleepy Italian town of Monopoli, Mario Civetta is something of a celebrity.

“Do you know who I am?” he asks newcomers as he opens his harbour-side fish stall in the early hours of a Thursday morning. Known as the life and soul of the port, 74-year-old Civetta is a legend in this seaside town: as a young seaman back in 1971, he made national headlines when he saved the lives of dozens of people in a ferry tragedy. His friends regard him with reverence to this day. Such is Monopoli's pace of life.

Located in the southern region of Puglia, Monopoli is one of Italy's best kept secrets. From its picturesque harbour to its Baroque architecture and plentiful seafood and wine, it has all the assets of a perfect summer destination without the teeming crowds. And, while its name may conjure visions of the famous property-based board game, it is actually more accurately derived from the ancient Greek *monos polis*, meaning unique city. Monopoli certainly lives up to the title. Just 40km south of Bari on the Adriatic coast, it's a slow sipping, easy walking way to discover Puglia.



As the morning sun rises across the town's port, more local fishermen sail into its tiny harbour. The shimmering water looks like glass and there's plenty to celebrate: after a night in perfect conditions, their boats are overflowing with fresh fish, octopus, sea urchins and shrimp. With a couple of trays in his hands, the grey-haired Civetta displays his latest catch while he shares a joke with his pals. First-time customers are greeted like old friends, with a kiss on the cheek, while regulars line up to bargain over their fish, and elderly fishermen quietly repair their nets on the jetty or tend to their boats nearby. →

MONOPOLI



FRESH SEA URCHINS (left) are a local speciality served at Trattoria Il Brigante
MONOPOLI'S SEA WALL (right and below) brings opportunities for a quick swim, or a musical interlude
MADONNA SHRINES (far right) dot the town centre
GERARDO LACITIGNOLA (bottom right) crafts delicate models of the traditional *gozzi* boats



To one side, the *porto vecchio*, or old port, is flanked by the town's spectacular 16th century castle. On the other, rows of vibrant red and blue wooden boats known as *gozzi* bob in the water. It's like something out of *La Dolce Vita*. "Here, you can lead a good life, a life of tranquillity," says Civetta as he exchanges cod and red mullet for just a few euros. "It's simply the best."

Exploring the town, it's hard to disagree. Monopoli is a jewel by the sea and a gateway to some of the best stretches of golden, sandy beaches you will find anywhere in Italy. You can take an early morning dip at Porta Vecchia beach, just outside the town's sea wall, but there are also dozens of beaches just a few kilometres away like the crystal waters of Tre Buchi or Cala Verde, local favourites that the *Pugliesi* (people from Puglia) try and keep to themselves.

Life here hasn't always been quite so laid back: surrounded by the sea, it's hardly surprising that Monopoli has witnessed countless invasions.





Founded by the Greeks more than 2,500 years ago, the town flourished during the Roman Empire, and in the 1400s it was even part of the Venetian Empire – you can still find the remains of ancient roads merging with dramatic medieval architecture. The castle, an imposing landmark that dominates the port, was built in 1525 under the ruthless Holy Roman Emperor Charles V. From the top, it offers panoramic views of the Adriatic and leads to a promenade along Monopoli's fortified sea wall.

Beyond the port, you enter a labyrinth of winding alleys filled with whitewashed buildings, Baroque churches, grand palaces and elegant piazzas bursting with cafés, bars and restaurants. Women chat as they hang their washing across their balconies and the locals rarely lock their doors. There may be around 50,000 people spilling into the outskirts of modern Monopoli, but in the town centre traffic is restricted, meaning you can amble through the pedestrian-friendly streets as the church bells chime and the faithful gather to pray.

Strolling past Madonna shrines and ceramic nameplates embedded in the buildings you'll meet elderly locals chatting in Piazza Garibaldi, the town's beating heart. It looks like a laid-back affair, but the piazza comes alive later in the day when school children begin kicking a football around the square and the bars open for their evening *aperitivo*, their clients spilling outside.

In the streets off the square, artisans craft mementoes. Gerardo Lacitignola, known as Gerry, spends his days in a cluttered workshop painting delicate models of the blue *gozzi* fishing boats to sell to tourists. The 73-year-old says he's travelled the world but is always happy to come home. "We take care of each other here," he says.

A couple of blocks away Giambattista Giannoccaro and Anna Dibello create their own colourful ceramics that give a modern twist to Puglia's traditions in a workshop called *Giu' in Lab*, or 'down in the workshop'. →





GIAMBATTISTA AND ANNA

(centre) from Giu' in Lab craft ceramics inspired by Puglia

86-YEAR-OLD MARTA (below) makes the local *orecchiette* pasta by hand, served alongside plates of fresh octopus (right)



heaven. You may be surprised to discover a macabre display of eight mummies, the embalmed remains of the church's founding members still dressed in their traditional black and white robes.

Stepping outside the church, the intoxicating aroma of freshly cooked seafood wafts through the empty streets as everyone disappears for lunch and a welcome respite from the summer heat with a quick dip in the sea.

As is the way in Italy, the cuisine is simple, local and exquisite. Succulent anchovies, mackerel or sardines, once known as *pesce povero* or 'the fish of the poor' are tossed in a pan with a little garlic, chilli and Puglia's celebrated virgin olive oil. On a Sunday, family meals can often roll on for hours and usually include home-made *orecchiette*, the local pasta shaped like little ears and served with a type of sprouting broccoli known as *cima di rapa*. Eighty-six-year-old Marta Marasciullo has been making pasta by hand for more than 70 years and scoffs at those with no time to do it today. "They don't understand anything about tradition," says Marasciullo as she shapes the *orecchiette* with her fingertips.

Likewise, Antonio Biasi grew up in a house with a balcony overlooking the port and knows a thing or two about seafood. Every day he rises early and selects fresh fish, octopus, shrimp and scampi from his →



The former architects use the colours of the sea and the vibrant earthy tones of Puglia's dry hinterland in their contemporary plates, bowls, cups and vases.

From Piazza Garibaldi it's a short walk to the cathedral, also known as the Basilica della Madonna della Madia (cattedralemonopoli.net). Dedicated to the Virgin Mary, this imposing Baroque gem was built on the remains of a Roman temple and its dramatic interior is decorated in rich tones of red, yellow and green marble. Next door is the *Chiesa del Purgatorio* or Purgatory Church, a peculiar reminder of Catholic superstition when the faithful prayed for the souls of the dead to be released from purgatory and sent to



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favourite providers to serve at his restaurant, Trattoria Il Brigante (17 Via Cavaliere). “The fish has to be fresh, it has to be still breathing,” he says. “I’m not kidding!”

Forty-year-old Biasi and his wife, Mara Leschiutta, followed a dream and opened Il Brigante less than a year ago. They want their customers to feel *coccolato* – pampered – but they also want them to understand what makes Monopoli tick. “Here, we work to live. We don’t live to work,” says Biasi. Despite their careful work-life balance, the dishes they serve are lovingly crafted, including tender shrimp in a fava bean sauce, succulent octopus and cuttlefish and a delicious carpaccio of marinated swordfish.

Nearby, Patrizio Di Bello is keeping a family tradition alive at Osteria Perricci (1 Via Orazio Comes). Di Bello is the third generation to run this restaurant and he works in the kitchen stirring huge pots filled with fragrant tomatoes and preparing fresh seafood before most people have made it out of bed. His philosophy is simple. “An osteria is like a church,” he says. “Everyone comes here – old, young, locals and visitors. The atmosphere here is like it always was.”

Time, in other words, stands still. Days can easily be whiled away exploring Monopoli’s cuisine and chatting to locals, punctuated with dips in the sea and long walks, but if you want to go further afield, there’s also plenty to see beyond the town’s limits. The Grotte di Castellana caves (grottedicastellana.it) are some of the most popular attractions in Puglia and are less than 20km away. Easily reached by bus or car, they were formed an incredible 90 million years ago and shelter thousands of ancient stalactites and stalagmites. They’re the perfect summer attraction, since the caves are a cool 18°C year-round. →





ANTONIO BIASI (far left) is passionate about serving only the freshest fish landed in Monopoli's harbour (left) **AT OSTERIA PERRICCI** (below) Patrizio Di Bello and his wife Maria cook up bowls of *orecchiette* pasta with *cime di rapa* (middle right) and *linguine agli scampi* (bottom right) using fresh local fruit and vegetables (right)





ANNA CAMMISA (below) bakes traditional pastries (right) at Gran Forno Santa Caterina
THE GROTTA DI CASTELLANA (left) are a popular local attraction just outside town
ALBEROBELLO'S TRULLI HOUSES (bottom left) tell visitors the story of Puglia's past



A little further south is Alberobello, famous for its cone-shaped *trulli* houses, which are a must-see for history buffs. A UNESCO World Heritage site since 1996, every building recalls tales of poverty and feudal serfdom, happily now a world away from the comfortable lives of locals.

If you're feeling peckish on your return to Monopoli, stop by the Gran Forno Santa Caterina (4 Via Santa Caterina). Time it right and you'll find *bocconotti* or *panzerottini*, mouthwatering pastries filled with cherries, emerging from the oven. The bakery also makes fresh pizza, bread and savoury pies from early in the morning until late in the evening. "We love eating in Puglia," says owner Anna Cammisa. "When we sit down at the table, we love the flavours and the aromas of everything we eat. They're a gift from the land we love."

Sated and satisfied, there's little more you'll ever need in Puglia, aside one more gentle stroll to watch the sunset before your evening aperitivo. What you didn't do today will still be there tomorrow. In Monopoli, time is always on your side.



 Wizz Air flies to Bari