



BARI

Rock Legend

The honeycomb caves of Matera are one of Italy's most spectacular sights

To understand why remote Matera on the Italian heel is often called one of the country's most beautiful towns, you need to know a little about its history. Or should we say prehistory – for Matera dates back to the Palaeolithic era. This labyrinthine town just outside of Bari sits on a clay ridge surrounded by deep canyons of soft, sandy rock; within the honeycomb walls are thousands of caves and grottos stacked on top of each other. And 9,000 years ago, someone decided to live inside one. Matera's cave homes (*sassi*) are Italy's oldest continually inhabited dwellings. Locals lived here in one-room homes hewn out of rock without running water, electricity or sewage – and often with their livestock – right up until the 1950s. It was only then, when the cave dwellers' unhygienic living quarters caught the attention of national media, that they were forcibly removed.

Left abandoned for decades, Matera became a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1993. Today you can stay in a *sassi* hotel (Hotel Sassi; book via wizztours.com) or see what life was like in the caves in the 1950s at Casa Grotta di Vico Solitario (casagrotta.it), a beautifully restored cave-home with a bed, loom and space for the livestock.

BENEATH BARI: MORE PUGLIAN CAVES

Castellana Caves

This 3km-long network of caves was discovered in 1938 and is today one of the most famous cave attractions in Italy.

Grotta Palazese

This hotel/restaurant is built within limestone caves that open out onto a cliff, with stunning views of the sea.

Madonna de Idris

At one point, there were 155 cave churches in Matera. The Madonna de Idris is one of the best preserved.