



The heel of Italy's boot is pivotal to its culture. In fact the Puglia region is a stunning distillation of everything that admiring outsiders consider "quintessentially Italian". Words by **Matthew Priest**. Photography by **Giovanni Simeone/Solomango**

## THE PULL OF

# PUGLIA

Italy enjoys a reputation as the gastronomical paradise of Europe. So to have a reputation as the region with the best food *within* Italy is an honour indeed. There is such a region, and it is called Puglia. Its sunny climate creates the perfect conditions for cultivating the 50 million olive trees that produce over 80% of Italy's olive oil; there are legendary tomatoes and an abundance of the best fruit and vegetables you will ever taste, and with the Adriatic Sea lapping its shores, plentiful fresh seafood lands on plates from Bari to Brindisi and beyond every day.

No stomach is large enough to taste it all, so when eating out there are several things to remember and

certain dishes to look out for. Nearly all restaurants serve antipasti, which are often not listed on the menu. Just order them anyway, and you will be brought a huge array of small, starter-sized dishes that will include cheeses, vegetarian delicacies, cured meats and seafood specialities that differ from town to town.

Don't overlook the famous *orecchiette* (meaning "little ears"), a delicious, heavy pasta that is the signature shape of the area. Or try the mouth-watering burrata cheese, a mozzarella so fresh and delicate that it has to be eaten on the day it is made. For a taste of both, there's nowhere better than the Trattoria Antichi Sapori, >

## Seaside paradise

📍 The absolutely stunning  
waterside setting of the Grotta  
Palazese in Polignano a Mare





located about an hour's drive north from Bari in Montegrosso d'Andria and one of the best restaurants in Puglia. Reserving ahead is very much advised!

With so many kilometres of coastline, Puglia is not lacking in fantastic seafood, so head southwards from Montegrosso d'Andria and sea creatures will practically start jumping onto your plate for you. In Bari, Ristorante Il Sale (meaning "the salt") excels in seafood, especially shrimp and monkfish, while Hostaria Al Gambero, closer to the harbour, is so popular that if you live in Bari and haven't been here, you don't really live in Bari.

Southwards along the Adriatic, 40km from Bari, is the swooningly gorgeous town of Polignano a Mare. To enjoy possibly one of the most romantic settings Europe has to offer, Grotta Palazzese is your port of call. Or rather, cave of call, since this hotel and restaurant is hewn into the limestone rocks overlooking the sea. With the sea breathing so close, it's not surprising that it provides much of what's on the menu, including delicious lobster dishes.

On the other side of Polignano a Mare is Brindisi, a large city by Puglian standards, but by no means a giant. However, head to Trattoria Pantagruel just couple of blocks from the waterfront, and you can experience two sorts of giant. On the one hand it is named after one of the giants in Rabelais' *La Vie de Gargantua et de*

## HEADING SOUTH, SEA CREATURES WILL ALL BUT START JUMPING ONTO YOUR PLATE FOR YOU

### Perfectly framed

- The Masseria Maccarone, owned by the Colucci family
- Reflections of the past also at the Maccarone



*Pantagruel* novel series, while on the other, you are sure to have to loosen your belt buckle to accommodate some of the best food in town.

Of course, after loosening your belt, there's nothing nicer than a snooze or, after supper, a good night's sleep. Naturally, Bari and Brindisi have their fair share of excellent beds, such as the exceedingly cute Hotel Zodiakus in Bari, or the deceptively western Hotel Orientale in Brindisi, which strikes an effective balance between a leisure and business hotel.

But since the Pugliese show such skill in using the available materials to produce >



gorgeous food, committed visitors would do well to see how they apply that to accommodation too.

Far from the north's industrial triangle – Milan, Turin and Genoa – the Pugliese have long practised the art of using the raw materials available. During the 16th and 17th centuries it was common practice for landowners to construct large fortified farmhouses, or *masserie*, that would house both workers and harvested crops. Continuing the spirit of independent enterprise, more and more of these *masserie* in the small town of Fasano, equidistant between Bari and Brindisi, are being bought up and converted into luxury hotels, which augment themselves with the best of Puglian cuisine.

In several *masserie* such as Borgo San Marco the true live-off-the-land mentality of the south goes even further offering menus with “zero food miles”. Taking advantage of the vast olive groves, both olives and olive oil are not only sourced locally, but proudly produced on the farm. The nearby *Masseria Torre Coccaro* simply oozes historical charm, and with its plentiful vegetable garden, freshly baked bread and view over the Mediterranean,

## THE PUGLIESE HAVE LONG PRACTISED USING THE RAW MATERIALS AVAILABLE



it offers a truly different Italian holiday experience, yet with all the classic Italian touches that you would expect thrown in.

If being pampered isn't your bag then places such as the *Masseria Maccarone* offer a more subtle, rustic charm. The self-catered apartments fit up to seven people, placing you not only at the heart of the rural south but also an olive pip's throw from the seaside.

In the other direction, 10km inland from Fasano, lies the village of Locorotondo, officially listed as one of Italy's most beautiful villages, and just a little further lies the equally intoxicating Martina Franca, whose baroque old town is particularly renowned for its charm. From here you can sweep through the Valley of Itria's roads to find some of Puglia's

exclusive historical treasures, the *trulli*. These conical-roofed dwellings were built around the same time as the *masserie*, and even then the building of the *trulli* from dry stone instead of mortar and cement was a wonderfully crafty Puglian answer to avoid having to pay tax on the materials.

In today's crazy-paced world, it is remarkable to still encounter somewhere that refuses to compromise its core principles. While a growing tourist industry will dictate the shape of the visitors, one thing will forever remain fixed, as long as there is Mediterranean blood pumping through their veins: the people of the Puglia region will continue to do things their own way – and don't you even think about trying to stop them. ♡

### Trulli lovely

- 📍 *Masseria Torre Coccaro*
- 📍 The distinctive conical roofs of the *trulli*
- 📍 Bedroom in the *Masseria Borgo San Marco*

## PUGLIA RESOURCES

### Restaurants

#### > TRATTORIA

##### ANTICHI SAPORI

7-12 Piazza Sant'Isidoro, Montegrosso d'Andria, tel: +39 0883 569529

#### > RISTORANTE IL SALE

50/52 Via Marchese di Montrone, Bari, tel: +39 080 522 8959, [www.ilsaleristorante.it](http://www.ilsaleristorante.it)

#### > HOSTARIA AL

GAMBERO 8 Corso de Tullio, Bari, tel: +39 080 521 6018, [www.hostaria-gambero.com](http://www.hostaria-gambero.com)

#### > GROTTA PALAZZESE

59 Via Narciso, Polignano a Mare, tel: +39 080 424 0677, [www.grottapalazze.se.it](http://www.grottapalazze.se.it)

#### > TRATTORIA

PANTAGRUELE 1-5 Salita di Ripalta, Brindisi, tel: +39 0831 560605

### Hotels

#### > HOTEL ZODIAKUS 101

Via Roberto da Bari, Bari, tel: +39 080 524 6654

#### > HOTEL ORIENTALE 40

Corso Garibaldi, Brindisi, tel: +39 0831 568451, [www.hotelorientale.it](http://www.hotelorientale.it)

### Masserie

#### > BORGO SAN MARCO

33 Contrada Sant'Angelo, Fasano, tel: +39 080 439 5757, [www.borgosanmarco.it](http://www.borgosanmarco.it)

#### > MASSERIA TORRE

COCCARO 8 Contrada da Coccaro, Savelletri di Fasano, tel: +39 080 482 9310, [www.masseriatorrecoccaro.com](http://www.masseriatorrecoccaro.com)

#### > MASSERIA

##### MACCARONE

29 Contrada Carbonelli, Fasano, tel: +39 080 482 9300, [www.masseriamaccarone.it](http://www.masseriamaccarone.it)