

Masseria Trapanà  
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# ITALIA!

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HOLIDAYS PROPERTY FOOD WINE CULTURE PEOPLE

## AUTUMN IN ITALY

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The island's most thrilling carnivals

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Melissa Forti's mellow autumn dolci

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Photography © Isaac

*Clockwise from top left: A typical Puglian vineyard; the distinctive negramaro grapes; modernised trulli rooms at Camorota; in Italy, Puglia is synonymous with olive production; modernised trulli make for a holiday home with a difference; orecchiette are typical of the region; urban trulli*



Photography © Isaac







48 HOURS IN...

# Puglia

**Adrian Mourby** travels to the land of the masserias, the fortified homesteads of Puglia now being revived and revamped to offer elegant hospitality in a rustic setting...

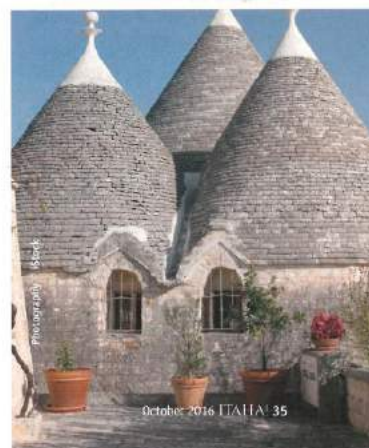
Photography by Kate Hudson-Mourby unless stated



**C**esare Fiori resisted coming to Ceglie Messapica and buying a *masseria*. As the former head of Formula One in Italy his friends told him he could certainly afford it, but as a Turinese he admits he thought Puglia would be dirty and the people untrustworthy. Eight years later, Cesare has revised that opinion and turned his 28 hectares at Masseria Camarda into an *agriturismo* paradise where he and his four dogs – plus a staff of six – live an enviable, sun-drenched life. As we settle down to lunch, Cesare explains that he takes running an *agriturismo* seriously. "It is not about bed and breakfast and producing a few pots of marmalade on the side. *Agriturismo* means that 50 per cent of your income comes from agriculture."

Cesare takes pleasure from the fact that his is the only olive oil used in Fornello da Ricci, one of Ceglie Messapica's Michelin-starred restaurants. His own pasta – made that morning – is some of the best I have ever tasted. "I do not deny any of the overwhelming passions that came from motor sports but nowadays I have other passions," he says. With his farm and his five *trulli* guest rooms, Cesare is definitely living the good life. "I enjoy sharing all this with people like me who dream of a life which respects old traditions and values."

It took two years to convert Masseria Camarda, and Cesare admits that if he hadn't lived on-site it would definitely have taken a lot longer. The old ➤



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## WHAT TO SEE AND DO

### PIAZZA DEL DUOMO, LECCE ①

Many people consider Lecce to be the most beautiful city in Puglia on account of its unbroken lines of baroque buildings. The third cathedral to have stood in Piazza del Duomo was built in 1659-70 by Giuseppe Zimbardo, who also designed the 70-metre *campanile*, and many other buildings else in baroque Lecce. The whole complex has a serene glow thanks to the local limestone employed on all its buildings.

### OTRANTO ②

The pretty port of Otranto has an Aragonese cathedral, a Norman castle, catacombs and was the setting of the first great Gothic novel, Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto*. It's a pleasant place to visit with two good beaches Alimini and Porto Badisco nearby.

### CASTELLO NORMANNO-SVEVO, BARI ③

The capital of Puglia was a simple port in its time under the Romans and Saracens but the Normans who conquered the city in 1071 made it an important city. It's appropriate then that the castle founded by Roger II is one of Bari's main attractions. It's a fierce, angular construction with a vaulted hall that contains casts of Norman sculptures found in Puglia.

### TRULLI OF ALBEROBELLO ④

*Trulli* and *masserie* occupy the middle of Puglia but the conical, hobbit-like houses die out as you move south towards Brindisi. A day trip to the UNESCO World Heritage site of Alberobello, where the upper town abounds with them, affords the opportunity to see how well these dry-stone houses (built on the orders of Count Giangirolamo II to avoid paying property taxes) were constructed.

### OSTUNI CITADEL ⑤

The Norman city of Ostuni is a dramatic sight, rising 229 metres above the surrounding low landscape of Puglia. Locally, it's referred to as *la Città Bianca* (the White Town) because all its walls and buildings have been painted white. The Cathedral and Bishop's Palace are well worth visiting, as are the 14 *palazzi* of Ostuni's aristocracy.

### LECCE AMPHITHEATRE ⑥

In the 1930s, Benito Mussolini wanted to dig out Lecce's entire amphitheatre, which was built in the 2nd century AD and could seat more than 25,000 people. Unfortunately, this would have meant demolishing the Church of Santa Maria delle Grazie. The local priest successfully resisted *il Duce* and so only a third of the ancient site is exposed in Piazza Sant'Oronzo. It is worth seeing nonetheless.



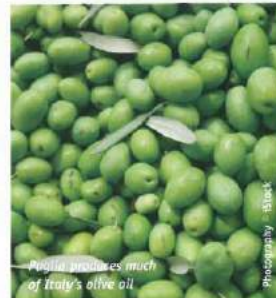
The owner of Masseria Camarda in his traditional farm shop



The olive is well-suited to this dry climate



Ostuni, the White City



Puglia produces much of Italy's olive oil

## DON'T MISS

### PIZZICA

Pizzica is a local traditional dance in Puglia that originates in the Salento peninsula and has spread as far as eastern Basilicata. It is a form of tarantella danced with a partner. Sometimes two women will dance together but it is rare for two men to dance pizzica together, except in the town of Ostuni. Some masserias – including Masseria Camarda – arrange pizzica displays and lessons.

manor house had last been occupied by a mayor of Ceglie Messapica in the early part of the 20th century. Thereafter it had stood empty for decades. A lot of money and even more perseverance was required to turn it into the idyll that I'm enjoying today.

### ARMIES AND PIRATES

The word *masseria* probably translates best into English as manor house. Most masserias were fortified because the long coastline of Puglia was easy pickings for invading armies and pirates. Masserias were

20th century Puglia's masserias had served their original purpose. Farms no longer needed to be fortified against aggressors. Most were abandoned and fell apart. It wasn't until their potential as hotels was recognised in the 1990s that these spacious, dramatic ruins began to regain their former beauty.

Eight years ago, once he had said goodbye to his builders, Cesare began combing the markets of Ostuni and Martina Franca for antiques, which he personally refurbished to give Camarda that familiar masseria look of antiques

*You'll find the odd farm tool or bundle of herbs around to enhance the sense of heritage*

built for the land-owning gentry, who would come and stay once a year on their own floor, the well-appointed *piano nobile*, to check on the olive harvest or to escape the summer heat of the city. Meanwhile, downstairs, the animals and the *massari*, husbandmen who tended the olive groves, grapes and fruit trees, would live and work. Fortunately, by the beginning of the

and agricultural implements. The mellow cream-coloured limestone of Puglia shows off carved headboards and polished sideboards to good effect. Chandeliers glitter against such a background but, as with many masserias, you'll find the odd farm tool or bundle of herbs around the place to enhance the sense of heritage. This popular mix acknowledges the masseria's origins





Masseria Trapanà at dusk

as both a home of the gentry and a working farm.

After lunch we inspect the swimming pool – even traditional masserias have pools these days – and the trulli. The conical, dry-stone trulli (originally farm workers' cottages) were here when Cesare arrived but he constructed the pool by simply digging into the rock and then lining it. Puglia's limestone is an ideal building medium, plenty strong enough to support arched roofs yet pliable enough to create elaborate decoration.

Unlike most masserias, Camarda remains open during the winter. "A farm never stops working," says Cesare as he inspects his 20 varieties of fruit trees. Clandestino, one of

his more active rescue dogs, chases a lizard. For Cesare, his organic crops are all-important. He still commentates on Formula 1 racing for RAI (Italian TV) and he is a generous host to his guests at the masseria, but the land is clearly his first love now.

#### ANOTHER LABOUR OF LOVE

After saying our goodbyes, I drive south towards Lecce, where a new five-star masseria has just opened, for this is where I'll be staying now. Masseria Trapanà was another labour of love but I get the impression that Rob Potter-Saunders, who transformed his formidable fortress-cum-farm, found dealing with Italian bureaucracy harder than did Cesare. When the heavy, wooden gate opens, and my host welcomes me with a glass of prosecco, I find him full of stories.

Rob worked for many years as a hotel industry troubleshooter, going into failing hotels and turning them round, but nothing prepared him for the challenges of doing business in Puglia. Trapanà was a big undertaking. While Masseria Camarda looks like someone's home, this masseria looks like one of the

#### DON'T MISS

**WINE TASTING**  
The rich soil, hot, dry climate and cooling sea breezes of Puglia produce two very good red wines, Salice Salentino and Primitivo. The lighter Salice Salentino wines are made from the Negroamaro (literally "black and bitter") grape, while Primitivos are fuller-bodied reds made from the same grape as California's Zinfandel. If you get the chance to try either, jump at it.



You're never far from coastal resorts like Polignano a Mare

#### WHERE TO STAY

##### MASSERIA TRAPANÀ ⑦

Surbo, Lecce

☎ +39 0832 183 2101

[www.trapanam.com](http://www.trapanam.com)

One of Puglia's most recent conversions of an abandoned masseria into a five-star luxury hotel, with a decorative style that is international rather than regional. 10 suites and rooms in a country house set in 60 hectares of olive groves.

##### MASSERIA CAMARDA ⑥

Via Tuco Camarda 31, Ceglie Messapica

☎ +39 0831 177 8004

[www.masseriacamarda.it](http://www.masseriacamarda.it)

A more traditional masseria in its décor but these days run as a modern *agriturismo* with a strong emphasis on organic farming. The farm produces everything from premium quality extra-virgin olive oil to *primitivo* wine, corn, vegetables, cheese, fruit and eggs from their own hens. Prices per night, €125-€160 off-peak.

##### MASSERIA & SPA LUCIAGIOVANNI ⑤

Calò, Torre Venere, Lecce

☎ +39 0832 179 1831

[www.masserialuciagiovanni.it](http://www.masserialuciagiovanni.it)

A recent, highly imaginative conversion of a masseria on the outskirts of Lecce, seven kilometres from the sea, into a Moroccan kasbah-style spa hotel. Medical spa, offering wellness rituals inspired by the Orient and hi-tech beauty procedures including Botox and laser therapy. B&B prices per night, €160-€250 off-peak.

##### TORREVECCHIA AGRITURISMO ⑩

Via per Avetrana, San Pancrazio Salentino

☎ +39 338 828 7360

[www.torrevecchia.com](http://www.torrevecchia.com)

A 14th-century masseria where in 1985 a 7th-century underground chapel was unearthed in its grounds, complete with Byzantine-style frescos. These days Torrevecchia offers not only history and locally-produced food but also good budget accommodation.

##### MASSERIA SALAMINA ⑪

Pezze di Greco, Fasano

☎ +39 080 489 6191

[www.masseriasalamina.it](http://www.masseriasalamina.it)

A 400-year-old masseria with elaborate wall paintings that is now a family-run organic farm and *agriturismo* just a few kilometres from the beach.

##### HOTEL AL PATRIA PALACE ⑧

Piazzetta Riccardi 13, Lecce

☎ +39 0832 245111

[www.patriapalace.com](http://www.patriapalace.com)

The hotel alternative to masseria: a traditional, marble-lobbied Italian hotel in Lecce opposite the Basilica of Santa Croce. The rooftop bar offers great city views.

## WHERE TO EAT

## MASSERIA MELCARNE 15

Surbo, Lecce

☎ +39 368 958324

info@masseriamelcarne.it

www.masseriamelcarne.it

A very popular destination restaurant, nine kilometres inland from the resort of Casabate, set around a 16th-century fortified tower and surrounded by 70 hectares of olive groves.

€-€€

## MASSERIA BARON NOVI 16

Strada Provinciale, 44

☎ +39 0831 555762

info@masseriabaronnuovi.it

www.masseriabaronnuovi.it

Jasmine is the restaurant in this isolated 19th-century manor house serving local wine and olives.

€-€

## HOTEL RISTORANTE GROTTA PALAZZESE 15

Via Narciso 59, Polignano a Mare

☎ +39 080 424 0677

grottapalazese@grottapalazese.it

www.grottapalazese.it

One of the most remarkable restaurants in Italy is to be found in a dramatic sea cave beneath this otherwise unremarkable hotel to the south of Bari.

€-€€

## BORGO EGNAZIA 15

Savellatoli di Fasano

☎ +39 080 225 5000

www.borgoegnazia.com

There are six restaurants inside Borgo Egnazia, the masseria-style resort built in 2010 by Aldo Melpignano, a former investment banker.

€-€€

## CORTE DEI PANDOLFI 15

Corte Dei Pandolfi 3, Lecce

☎ +39 0832 332309

www.cortedepandolfi.com

Innovative local cooking in a small courtyard just behind the Duomo in Lecce. Try whatever fresh fish is on offer that day.

€-€

## FARMACIA BALBOA 15

Via G. Pisanelli, 24 - Tiggiano

☎ +39 0833 772585

Cocktail bar owned by the American film director Taylor Hackforth just outside Tricase and about as south as you can get in Puglia before hitting the sea.

€

## ► KEY TO RESTAURANT PRICES

(full meal per person, not including wine)

€ Up to €25

€€ €26-€50

€€€ More than €50



## DON'T MISS

## CARTAPESTA

In Lecce there are a number of small workshops creating papier-mâché (cartapesta) figures that were originally religious in intention but that have since evolved into depictions of Pugliese rural life. La Cartapesta di Claudio Riso is a small studio and shop run by three brothers who divide up creating the figures, the ceramic hands and faces, and the clothes between them. Via Vittorio Emanuele II, 27 - Lecce ☎ +39 0832 243410 www.cartapestariso.it

castles the Normans left behind – and it's about the same size.

There's a very impressive, keep-like main block and an underground olive press, lots of stables and outhouses and a frescoed chapel all facing onto a courtyard big enough to drill a company of soldiers. But when Rob arrived three years ago, this courtyard was choked with weeds and the masseria's 520 fruit lemon and orange trees had taken over the estate. Rob worked around the trees as best he could but took a scythe and JCB to the

contrast with Camarda but it also shows how flexible these historic structures are. In the dining area old feeding troughs have been boarded over to create four tabletops on which breakfast is laid. A gold head of the Buddha presides in a niche above them. The furniture – including a gigantic dining table – is white and there are large books on design scattered everywhere (some of them about masseria style). Easy-listening music plays all day across the courtyard, a professionally curated mix of soft rock classics, and

*There's a very impressive, keep-like main block and an underground olive press*

rest. The stable block became suites, each with an al fresco bath in the courtyard outside. Interior walls disappeared and archways were glassed in to give more light, a croquet lawn appeared and the masseria's cistern became a huge circular fire pit where some of the most enormous cushions I have ever seen provide the seating. This is a thoroughly modern masseria.

"I was living in a baroque apartment in Lecce while the work was being done," says Rob. "When it was over I guess I went a bit mad with the style of this place. I felt I'd seen enough antiques." Masseria Trapania represents a complete

in the evening the staff will rustle you up a martini or negroni if you've had enough prosecco. Rob's new kitchen is huge and shiny but the menu is *cucina povera*, local Pugliese dishes made with whatever comes to hand that day. In this sense you might call Trapania a good example of Italian-international style, mixing local and foreign cultures.

## DEFENSIVE TOWER

Part of the beauty of Puglia's masserias lie in their flexibility. While staying with Rob I visited Masseria Melcarne nearby. It was created in the 17th century around an old defensive tower, from the



top of which you can see all the way across the Adriatic to Albania. It's now a well-respected restaurant run by husband and wife team Francesco and Betty Leo. I also visited Masseria Lucigiovanni, which has been completely revamped, inside and out, to resemble a Moroccan kasbah and operates as both hotel and spa.

If you have the money, the vision and an uncommon amount of patience when dealing with Italian bureaucracy, it seems you can do almost anything with these fabulous ruins – and by the evidence of what I have seen that is exactly what people are doing at the moment. ■

#### GETTING THERE

##### ► BY TRAIN

Voyages SNCF ([www.voyages-sncf.com](http://www.voyages-sncf.com)) offers return train fares from London St Pancras to Brindisi via Paris, Milan and Rome from £377 standard class return.

##### ► BY PLANE

EasyJet ([www.easyjet.com](http://www.easyjet.com)) flies from London Gatwick to Brindisi twice a week (Wednesdays and Saturdays) over the summer with return fares prices starting at £117.68 per person (including taxes and based on two people travelling on the same booking).

##### ► BY CAR

Rhino ([www.rhinocarhire.com](http://www.rhinocarhire.com)) offers car hire in Brindisi from £18/€23 per day.



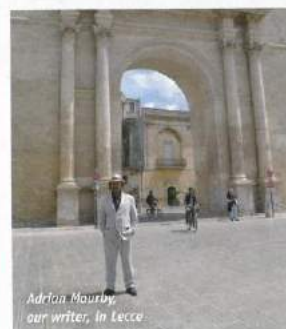
Masseria Melcarne is now a popular restaurant.



Rob, owner of Masseria Trepiana



The Amphitheatre at Lecce



Adrian Maury, our writer, in Lecce



The rustic style of Torrevecchio



The restful kasbah-inspired décor of Masseria Lucigiovanni