

## A Puglian adventure

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TRAVEL



**Even though it has grown in popularity in recent years, Puglia is still one of Italy's best-kept secrets**



**Description :** Alberobello

Compared with Tuscany and the Amalfi Coast, the "breadbasket" of Italy is lesser visited yet remains the holiday destination of choice for the chic Italians of the north. But, what the area lacks in dramatic landscapes and natural beauty, it more than makes up for with its incredible food and produce, Baroque architecture and some of Europe's most beautiful beaches. A growing collection of luxuriously refurbished masseria (restored fortified farmsteads), amazing climate and frequent flights to Bari and Brindisi make Puglia an attractive holiday proposition year round. This hidden gem in the heel of Italy has some excellent surprises up its sleeve.

### What to see

Fly into Bari, and head south to Alberobello. This small town is home to the quintessentially Puglian trullo houses – small cottages with conical roofs built from local limestone that have been in Alberobello since the 14th century. Alberobello was once a town solely of trulli, so as you walk its narrow and winding streets among the diminutive dwellings, there is a sense of being in a Mediterranean Middle Earth. These quirky cottages have a typically Italian backstory; before Alberobello was given "town" status in 1797, it couldn't be seen as an inhabited settlement, so the drystone vaulted roof, held together with one keystone, could easily be dismantled in a hurry.

Just over into the neighbouring province of Basilicata, is Matera, the 2019 European Capital of Culture and home to the ancient Sassi, a Unesco world heritage site collection of prehistoric stone houses perilously carved straight out of the rock as far back as 7000 BC. As you approach Matera, which sits high either side of a ravine (the Gravina), it seems at first glance like a lot of European hilltop towns, but it hides the honeycomb of Sassi, which would have housed whole families and livestock in one room. Sitting under Matera's main square, Piazza Vittorio Veneto, is the "Palombaro Lungo", a cavernous spring- and rain-water cistern carved out of rock, which supplied water to the town and residents outside the Sassi up until the early 20th-century. A tour of this "cathedral of water" is not to be missed, and there are multilingual and knowledgeable guides.

### Where to go

Lecce ("the Florence of the South") is one of the jewels in the crown of Puglia, a city filled with exceptional Baroque architecture, and the 16th-century Basilica di Santa Croce on Via Umberto is no exception. The beautiful exterior of the church is awash with cherubs and animals, and is so ornate it's no surprise that it took until the 17th century to be completed. Take an evening walk through this enchanting city's winding streets and narrow alleyways, where restaurants, bars and shops are buzzing with life until late into the night. Stop at the illuminated Piazza del Duomo, the heart of the city and home to its 12th-century Cathedral. This beautiful square is flanked on all sides by masterpieces of the Baroque style.

Head to the Salento peninsula in the tip of Puglia's "heel" and to Gallipoli, a beautiful village on the Ionian sea, the old town of which sits on a fortified island connected to the mainland by a 16th-century bridge. Life in Gallipoli is focused around its busy fishing harbours, where the comings and goings can be witnessed while relaxing in a seafront cafe with a plate of fresh sea urchins. Cool off on the stunning beach or in the cool and narrow alleys that house local shops for trinkets and textiles.



**Description :** Gallipoli

### What to do

Spend a day in Santa Cesarea Terme, dramatically overlooking the Adriatic, and cited by those in the know as having some of the best beaches in Europe. One such cove is Porto Miggiano, a tiny bay set into the steep, striated rock, with white sand and turquoise water. While home to some of the best Baroque architecture in Italy, Santa Cesarea Terme's most distinctive feature is the Moorish dome of Villa Sticchi. This Moorish palace built in the 1800s, with its flamboyant dome of deep blues, yellows and reds, is just one of the town's spectacular clifftop residences, built so that the local aristocracy could enjoy the benefits of the town's thermal baths that give it its name.

### Where to eat

South of Matera, towards the coast, is the hilltop town of Bernalda, home to Palazzo Margherita. Bernalda is quiet and non-touristy, a place where you'll eat dinner surrounded by locals taking their evening turn, and it was here that Francis Ford Coppola's grandfather called home. Coppola bought the Palazzo – which sits behind large wooden doors that give away nothing of the palatial luxury, pool and stunning gardens inside – in 2004 to create a boutique hideaway hotel that his family (and paying guests) could enjoy. On Bernalda's main street sits the Palazzo's Cinecitta Bar, a traditional pizzeria and cafe with black and white photos of film stars adorning the walls. It's open to all and offers a delicious menu of local and traditional Italian dishes of cucina povera, Puglia's distinctive cuisine that makes the most of its abundance of fresh vegetables, fish and cheese, such as orrecciette pasta and lampascioni (deep fried hyacinth bulbs). The hotel's bread and pizza oven along with the attendant baker, who treats his sourdough starter like a member of his own family, is housed in the eat-in kitchen, where hotel guests can watch the chefs in action, or learn to cook pasta the Puglian way with just durum wheat flour and water.

Corte dei Pandolfi in Lecce sits on the town's Piazzetta Orsini. There are several restaurants side by side, but head to this one, tucked away in a corner where tables wrap around to the adjacent narrow side street. The welcoming family of owners take pride in presenting simple dishes with their modern take on local specialties, fresh fish and inventive desserts. Highlights of the reasonably priced menu include rolls of octopus and potato, fava bean croquettes with cheese sauce and fresh pasta dishes such as spelt linguine with leeks and sage.



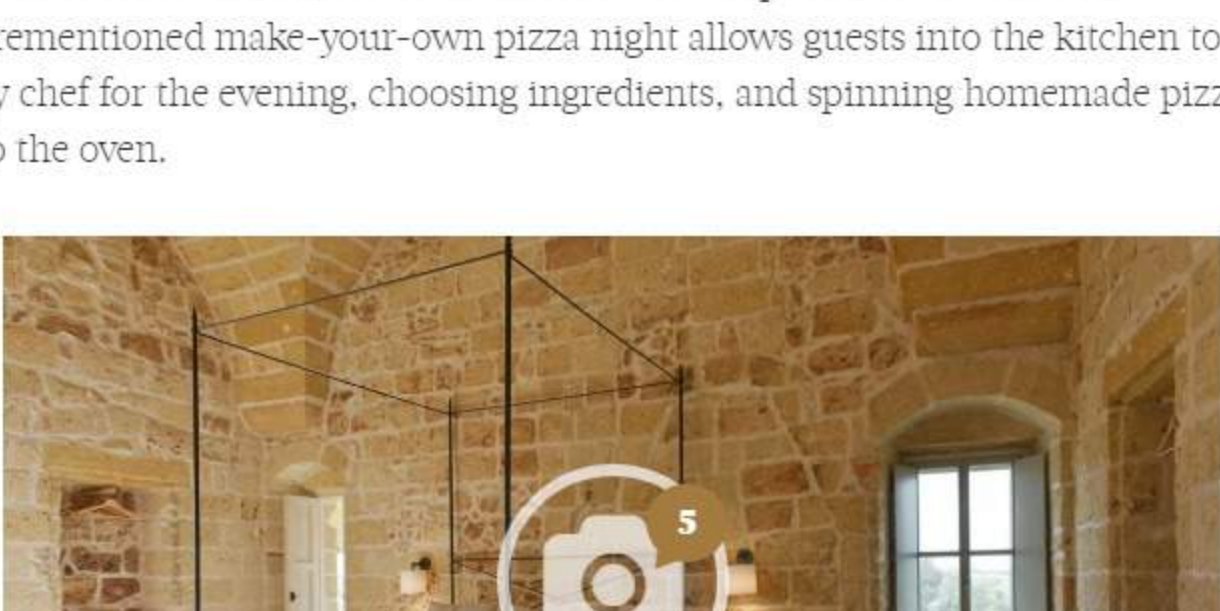
**Description :** Masseria Trapana

### Where to stay

As you approach the high wooden doors and fortress-like walls of Masseria Trapana, a converted 16th-century olive oil plantation just outside Lecce that opened in 2015, it's hard to know what to expect of this nine-room boutique hotel. What greets you on the other side of those doors is a tiny slice of paradise. Australian owner Rob Potter-Sanders has, through a real labour of love, turned what was a collection of 200-year-old farm buildings, olive groves and citrus trees on 60 hectares, into an aesthetically stunning, world-class boutique hotel. "What we try and do at this hotel is touch as many of the senses as we can in the first five minutes of a guest's arrival," says Potter-Sanders.

Mission accomplished. From stepping through the doors into the golden stone courtyard, to being greeted with a glass of champagne and the sounds of opera or acid jazz wafting through from the terrace before being taken on a tour of the grounds, a stay at Masseria Trapana offers total relaxation, where the only decision required will be what toppings to choose on make-your-own pizza night. Delightful features abound: there's the fire pit, where guests chat over evening drinks while nestled on deep Moroccan cushions, the croquet and yoga gardens, the hammocks dotted in secluded corners and the deep green pool surrounded by capacious day beds. Nothing is too much trouble for the hotel's 14 staff, all locals; the service is exceptional.

The food at Trapana is excellent, with all meals taken on the terrace under a canopy of citrus fruit trees. The buffet breakfast of fruit, pastries, meats and cheeses is served late into the day, there's an a la carte lunch of simple sandwiches and salads, and a set menu of cucina povera for dinner. The aforementioned make-your-own pizza night allows guests into the kitchen to play chef for the evening, choosing ingredients, and spinning homemade pizzas into the oven.



**Description :** Masseria Trapana

All beautifully designed and simply decorated, rooms have expansive custom-made four-poster beds and mattresses, under-floor heating and Aesop products in the bathroom. The highlights are the unique touches such as the elegant locally made linens, a private courtyard, outdoor bath on the terrace, or private roof terrace.

The overall atmosphere at Masseria Trapana is one of total calm and tranquility, achieved through light-filled lounges punctuated with bursts of colour from Moroccan textiles, sumptuously upholstered fireside furniture and a home from home informality. For 2018, the hotel plans to update with five additional rooms, a spa and a cinema in the former underground olive press.

Courtyard room starts from £215 (€250) per night; [trapana.com](https://www.trapana.com)

Masseria Trapana is closed between 1 November 2017 and 27 March 2018