Puglia

FINIBUS TERRAE,
WHERE TWO SEAS MEET
A Portrait of Puglia
Produced by The Thinking Traveller Ltd

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The Thinking Traveller has been the leading provider of the most desirable rental villas in Puglia since 2010. A Portrait of Puglia is our guide to one of Italy’s most fascinating and unspoiled regions. It is written and produced entirely by members of our team to convey and share our passion for Puglia with clients staying at our villas.

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This guide is printed on paper certified by the Forest Stewardship Council®.
Welcome to the 2nd edition of our guide to Puglia. Following in the footsteps of its bigger sister, A Portrait of Sicily, now in its 4th edition, A Portrait of Puglia is a practical orientation tool to help Thinking Travellers staying at one of our villas get the very best out of one of Italy’s loveliest regions.

We consider Puglia’s stand-out features to be its many charming, historic towns, its gorgeous, hard-to-beat sandy beaches, its relaxing way of life, its fascinating east-facing history and its authentic gastronomic traditions and mouth-watering cuisine. All these aspects are covered in this guide and we hope that you will come to appreciate them with the same passion that we do.

A Portrait of Puglia is not a traditional guide, however, and you will not find a blow-by-blow account of the region’s history or in-depth descriptions of every church, statue and fresco. Rather, and as with A Portrait of Sicily, we wanted to recreate a kind of literary and photographic “aperitif”, something that will whet your appetite, give you a taste of things to come and help you choose when it’s time to order.

On some pages you will find a “Good Thinking” recommendation. These insider tips - four of our team are native Puglians and the rest of us visit and explore the region frequently - represent a few of our favourite things. They include, but are not limited to, off-the-beaten-track beaches, local delicacies, artisanal boutiques and craft shops and unmissable gelaterie.

We hope that A Portrait of Puglia will not only give you a head’s start for planning your holiday, but also make you want to come back again and again so as to discover Puglia in all its fascinating and myriad guises.
An Introduction to Puglia

Welcome to Puglia (poo-lia), Italy’s southeasternmost region, the heel of the boot we learn about in our earliest geography lessons.

In many respects, Puglia is the perfect holiday destination, offering not only some of Italy’s loveliest beaches but also a sublime climate, a series of fascinating towns, a number of important archaeological sites and, last but certainly not least, an excellent culinary tradition bristling with local specialities.

With over 800km of coastline, Puglia is well-loved by those with a penchant for beaches or life on the open sea. Whether you spend time on the Adriatic shores or the long stretches of sandy beaches on the Ionian Sea, you will never have to go far to find an ideal spot. All this with a climate as warm and sunny as anywhere in the Mediterranean.

Puglia’s history is inextricably linked with those of other Mediterranean countries and the invaders who came from afar: the ancient Greeks, the Romans, the Byzantines, the Normans, Emperor Fredrick II and the Spanish Bourbons. All left their imprint in some tangible way.

The main towns and cities include northern Foggia, Bari, the regional capital, Brindisi, a bustling port town, Taranto, one of Italy’s most important naval ports, and beautiful Lecce. Each has its own significant attractions and splendid baroque or mediaeval old town centres. Puglia is also home to some uniquely delightful smaller towns, such as all-white Ostuni, seafront Otranto, the fortified island town of Gallipoli and, on the southern tip, Santa Maria di Leuca, with its opulent Liberty-style seafront villas.

The central Puglian area of the Valle d’Itria has a collection of little gems, including Alberobello, Locorotondo, Cisternino and Martina Franca, famous for their delightful old town centres and their trulli, traditional circular stone houses with conical roofs. The centre of Alberobello is a UNESCO World Heritage Site, thanks to the high concentration of these distinctive constructions.

Local and international festivals add a little spice to life, especially in the summer, with events such as the Otranto Jazz Festival and La Notte della Taranta, where the area’s traditional dance, the Pizzica, is celebrated.

So much to explore, so much beauty to contemplate and so many things to do.
A Year in Puglia

January: one of the quietest months in Puglia, spent concentrating on work and study after the festive season’s celebrations. Rain is fairly frequent but there are still plenty of sunny days to be enjoyed and average daytime temperatures hover around 10˚C.

February: spirits are high, as the carnival season begins. Many towns have special celebrations and the one in Putignano goes on for several weeks. The weather remains similar to January, with the rain and sun helping the recently sown crops on their way.

March: after the partying of carnevale, it’s time for Lent. The temperature is slowly rising and rain becomes more infrequent.

April: Easter arrives and is celebrated with great passion throughout the region. Many towns organise religious processions during Holy Week, and those in Taranto, Gallipoli and Bari are particularly impressive. April also signals the spring and the region’s cooks turn with great joy to the new ingredients on offer.

May: the Festa di San Nicola in Bari takes place in the first ten days of May. The weather is generally gorgeous, with average daytime temperatures of around 20˚C and over 12 hours of sun per day. The beaches remain calm and peaceful, however, and you can find long stretches of sand just for yourself. May is a great month for golfers.

June: that’s it… summer has officially arrived and a relaxing but exuberant atmosphere takes over Puglia. With temperatures in the mid to high 20’s, eating al fresco in the evening becomes de rigueur, restaurants, cafés and bars spill onto the streets and the sea becomes the focus of most people’s attention now the schools have started breaking up.

July: with the arrival of July the region gets into party mood. All around the region there are festivals and celebrations, including the kaleidoscopically colourful Festa di Santa Domenica in Scorrano.

August: the party scene continues, with numerous festivals attracting both locals and visitors alike. Most towns and villages organise festive sagre where you can taste the amazing flavours of local gastronomic specialities. The temperature soars to 30˚C and over, the sun shines continuously and all is good with the world. The fragrant baked earth seems inactive, but it is now that the real magic starts taking place in the vineyards and olive groves.

September: as the summer crowds fade away and the locals head back to school and work, the countryside comes into its own. September is harvest time and one of the most precious is the vendemmia, or grape harvest. The weather continues to be hot and sunny, the beaches empty up and the sea remains wonderfully warm after the heat of July and August.

October: as the tourist season comes to an end, attention turns to the olive harvest. Many families have their own personal olive groves, so a significant portion of the population can be found picking, pressing and bottling the fruits of their labour during this period. October is a good month for discovering Puglia on two wheels.

November: with the tourist season over, olive harvest completed and the new wine fermenting and resting, the year’s work has been done. Peace descends on the region and it’s time to relax.

December: the build up to Christmas begins with the creation of superbly crafted papier-mâché nativity scenes. Lecce is particularly renowned for this. Temperatures continue to fall, but the warmth created by families all over Puglia as they come together to celebrate the festive season more than makes up for it.
Puglia for Children

While it might be difficult to tempt your children away from your villa's pool or from Puglia's long stretches of sandy beach, with their shallow, transparent waters, here are a few ideas that should convince them to leave their buckets and spades at home for a day or two.

ZOO SAFARI AND FASANOLANDIA AMUSEMENT PARK

From hippos to lions, from pelicans to penguins, the Zoo Safari at Fasano in the Valle d'Itria has over 200 different species of animals to see. Some areas are visitable in your own car, some are accessed on foot, while others require a trip on an electric train. There are special shows with parrots, dolphins, sea lions and penguins and once you've seen all that, you can head for the amusement park with rides for children of all ages. There are also lots of places to eat.

INDIANA PARK

Non-stop fun is to be had at the Indiana adventure playground in Castellana Grotte near Monopoli. Ropeladder-walking, tree-climbing, cable slides and many other activities will keep your children entertained. There are different levels for different ages so everyone should be happy. Safety equipment is provided and there is also a picnic and barbecue area, so bring along either a packed lunch or something to grill.

CARISSILAND ACQUAPARK

With over 2,000m² of swimming pools, plenty of water slides and tubes and a bar and picnic area, Carissiland Acquapark in Cellino San Marco, just north of Lecce, may well appeal to the younger members of your group. And when they've had enough sun and splashing you could spend some time in the Red Indian village or go for a walk in the surrounding wood, which has a mini zoo, a jungle play area and a dinosaur park.

Another waterpark, the Splash Acquapark, can be found a few kilometres north of Gallipoli at Rivabella.

TRULLI SPOTTING

We find that kids fall head over heels in love with trulli, Puglia’s characteristic little cylindrical houses with cone roofs that seem to come straight out of a fairy tale. The best place to see and explore these charming dwellings is Alberobello in the Valle d’Itria. And while you’re driving there, why not play spot the trullo and see who can count the most.

CALLING ALL APPRENTICE SPELEOLOGISTS

If exploring the underworld is your thing, then Puglia has a couple of great attractions: the Grotta Zinzulusa, on the southeast Adriatic coast near Castro (150m of easily accessible caves adorned by a large number of stalactites and stalagmites), or the Grotte di Castellana, just north of Alberobello, an amazing series caves both for their beauty and size (3km in length and more than 70 metres underground)... not to be missed.

AT ONE WITH NATURE... TORRE GUACETO

Just north of Brindisi on the Adriatic coast, the nature reserve and protected marine area of Torre Guaceto is a great family day out. With more than 6km of uncontaminated coastline, charming coves and paths leading through ancient olive groves and woodland, it is a great spot for nature lovers. For the smaller members of your party, a little train will take you to the beaches, some of which have lido facilities, while teenagers might like to hire a bike from the Info Point and go mountain biking.
Golf in Puglia

There’s a great range of courses for golf enthusiasts visiting Puglia. Here are a few of the best, strategically situated in some of the region’s most beautiful areas:

COCCARO GOLF CLUB
The 9-hole Torre Coccaro Golf Club (Par 27, 1,109m) is situated just inland from the Adriatic Sea near the seaside town of Savelletri. Complete with driving range, putting green, pitching green and bunker practice area, the course winds its way around olive groves and offers some great sea views. Tel. 080 4829310, www.masseriatorrecoccaro.com/en/services/coccaro-golf-club-044.html

SAN DOMENICO GOLF
Also in the Savelletri area is the 18-hole San Domenico links course (Par 72, 6,300m), home to the PGA European Challenge Tour Grand Final. The course features great sea views, lots of bunkers and some testing breezes coming off the Adriatic Sea. Tel. 080 4829200, www.golfpuglia.it

ACAYA GOLF AND COUNTRY CLUB
Situated near the Adriatic coast, east of Lecce, the Hurzdan and Fry designed 18-hole Acaya Golf course (Par 71, 6,192m) is characterised by its lakes and ponds and its beautiful natural setting. It is part of Hilton’s Double Tree resort and home to the Costantino Rocca Golf Academy. Tel. 0832 861385, www.jsh-hotels.com/acaya/en-GB/golf

RIVA DEI TESSALI RESORT
Heading west from Taranto along the coast of the Gulf of Taranto, the 18-hole Riva dei Tessali course (Par 71, 5,974m) winds its way through and round a fragrant pine forest. It has some challenging holes and so it’s no coincidence that it is part of the European Challenge Tour. There is also a driving range and a 3-hole short course. Tel. 099 8431844, www.rivadeitessali.com/golf

BARIALTO GOLF CLUB
Created in 1997 by the renowned golf course architects Giorgio Ferraris and William W. Amick, the Barialto course (Par 70, 6,000m) is situated inland, between Bari and the Valle d’Itria. Players must negotiate centuries-old olive trees, palm trees and several man-made lakes that have become the habitat of choice for a variety of birds, including herons and wild ducks. Tel. 080 6977105, www.barialtogolfclub.com

If not all your group want a round at the Coccaro or San Domenico courses, why not arrange for them to spend some time at the exclusive Masseria Coccaro Beach Club nearby and meet them there for lunch afterwards? Just call your Local Manager to arrange entry (fees apply).
Apulia or Puglia?

You say Apulia, I say Puglia, let’s call the whole thing off... Apulia by any other name would be an equally good holiday destination... Puglia the other one! (Apulia)

So, what is the difference between Apulia and Puglia, and which should you say?

Well, Apulia is quite simply the Latin name for the region, which, according to some experts, derives from the Greek word Iapudes, signifying “those who live on the other side of the Adriatic”. Puglia is the modern Italian name, evidently derived from its Latin predecessor.

And which should you use? Either, is the simple answer... for now. Traditionally, English speakers have used Apulia as their exonym of choice, though it would appear that Puglia is preferred more and more frequently. It might be that in the future Apulia will gradually drift out of usage, much in the same way as Bombay, Calcutta and Peking are.

So, feel free to use either, unless, of course, you prefer using Le Puglie, the plural, rather formal topographical Italian version of the region’s name.

Hope that’s clear.
A Historical Overview

Puglia’s history, like that of so many parts of southern Italy, is a tangled web indeed. Its strategic position and fertile soil made it an attractive proposition for colonization and all the usual suspects, Mediterranean and not, invaded at one time or another. While exploitation was usually the name of the game, each conqueror bequeathed a cultural, architectonic and gastronomic patrimony whose fascinating eclecticism remains for all to see.

The following pages will give you an overview of some of Puglia’s most important historical events.
Hannibal’s famous crossing of the Alps in 218
c was a miraculous feat, but his finest hour came over two years later.

His arrival in Cisalpine Gaul sent shockwaves through the peninsula that grew in intensity the further he headed south. Everywhere he went, Hannibal triumphed. Each victory was greater and more glorious than the last until, at the Battle of Cannae, in 216
c, the Romans were dealt such a severe blow that European and Mediterranean history could easily have changed forever.

At the Battle of Trebia in 218
c and the Battle of Lake Trasimene in 217
c, Hannibal easily out-thought and out-maneuvered Rome’s legions and their impulsive generals, Tiberius Longus and Gaius Flaminius.

Each victory was greater and more glorious than the last.

The Battle of Lake Trasimene ranked as one of the Roman Empire’s greatest ever military disasters, with around 30,000 legionaries being killed or captured by the Carthaginian invaders. Rome itself was now at Hannibal’s mercy and drastic action was required. The decision taken was to bring back the role of Dictator, and Quintus Fabius Maximus was entrusted with the job of saving the patria.

Fabius was a man with a plan, though not a plan that the Romans liked. It was a plan that went against the very grain of Roman military thinking and against the whole essence of what being Roman stood for. Fabius’ plan was to delay, to avoid, to wear down but never to enter into a battle with the Carthaginians.

Hannibal tried to lure him into traps, to bait him and to inspire bellicose thoughts, but Fabius resisted temptation. The more he kept Hannibal at arm’s length, however, the more the Roman people derided him, not realising that his tactics, soon to go down in history as Fabian Strategy, were having the desired effect. The Senate, too, had had enough and at the beginning of 216
c, Fabius the Dictator was replaced by two Consuls, Gaius Terentius Varro and Lucius Aemelius Paullus.

The two new Consuls, spurred on by public sentiment, raised a fighting force of somewhere between 60,000 and 100,000 men (no one seems to be able to agree on the exact number). This massive army was soon marching towards Puglia, where Hannibal was waiting just outside the town of Cannae, about 70km north of modern-day Bari.

When the two Consuls arrived, however, they were unable to agree on the best tactics. Paulus reasoned that the flat surrounding land was ideal for Hannibal’s expert cavalry and that it would therefore be better to steer the battle to hillier ground where horses would be less effective. Varro, on the other hand, noting that the Roman army was nearly twice as large as Hannibal’s, was impatient to restore Rome’s pride immediately, there and then.
In the heat of the battle, however, Varro failed to realise that, whilst his men were pushing back the centre of the semi-circle, the wings, where the cavalry and the Libyan troops were, remained stationary. In effect, the semi-circle was being inverted and the Romans were soon surrounded on three sides. As reality dawned, Hannibal’s cavalry, who had made short work of their Roman counterparts, attacked from the rear. The slaughter began.

The Second Punic War was at a crossroads and Hannibal was directing the traffic.

At least 50,000 Roman and allied soldiers died, while Hannibal lost only around 6,000 men. Paullus, who had opposed such a battle, remained in the fray, preferring to die rather than live with the shame of surviving such a disaster. Varro had no such honour and fled back to Rome.

By inflicting such a humiliating defeat on the mighty Roman Empire, Hannibal had proved himself to be one of the greatest ever military strategists. The course of the Second Punic War was at a crossroads and Hannibal was directing the traffic. Why he didn’t march on Rome afterwards nobody knows. And whether he could have taken the capital had he tried is pure speculation.

What we do know, however, is that when the Second Punic War came to an end, some fourteen years later, Hannibal was defeated, Carthage was razed to the ground and its fertile fields ploughed through with salt. Rome’s greatest rivals were no more and the foundations were well and truly laid for nearly 700 more years of the Roman Empire.
King of Sicily, King of Jerusalem, King of the Romans, King of Italy, Holy Roman Emperor. Frederick II, Stupor Mundi, was a busy man indeed.

As a patron of the arts, poetry and science, he was not only one of the most important rulers of the middle ages, but also a learned, tolerant humanist whose passion for building provides us with a real cause for wonder today.

Frederick II bequeathed an enormous architectural patrimony to the world, much of which is scattered across southern Italy. Wherever he went, Frederick left a trail of castles, palaces and the occasional cathedral. Some of the best examples are to be found in Puglia.

Frederick’s passion for astronomy and geometry is evident.

His Puglian masterpiece is, without doubt, Castel del Monte, built between 1229 and 1249. Thanks to its ”formal perfection and its harmonious blending of cultural elements from northern Europe, the Muslim world, and classical antiquity”, Castel del Monte became a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1996.

Sitting on a wooded hill outside the town of Andria, about 50km north of Bari, Castel del Monte is an awe-inspiring sight to behold. Frederick’s passion for astronomy and geometry is evident: the castle is octagonal in shape with each angle protected by an octagonal tower. The internal courtyard is also octagonal in form and on each of the two floors, there are eight rooms. This geometric uniformity can also be seen in the windows, which have single openings on the lower floor and double ogival arches on the upper.

Castel del Monte is equally impressive inside, with its high vaulted ceilings, sumptuously sculpted columns and capitals and ornate windows. These features, along with the lack of moat, hint at the castle’s real function which was that of a private hunting lodge for the Emperor, rather than a true defensive bastion.
If, after visiting Castel del Monte, you would like to explore more of Frederick’s castles in Puglia, we would recommend the following:

**Trani** (on the coast just north of Bari) - built between 1233 and 1249, it is one of our favourites. Right on the sea, the castle once had a moat that filled up with sea water.

**Barletta** (just north of Trani on the coast) - originally a Norman fortress complete with moat, Frederick transformed it into a royal palace with more grand, sophisticated architectural features.

**Bari** - originally constructed by King Roger II of Sicily, Frederick rebuilt it virtually from scratch after it was destroyed in 1156.

**Lucera** (just north of Foggia) - built in 1233 on the foundations of a pre-existing cathedral. The Angevin King, Charles I, later made significant changes, but the two cylindrical towers of Frederick’s original design remain.

**Gravina in Puglia** (near Altamura) - built around 1231 as a lodge for Frederick’s favourite pastime of hunting with birds. Frederick particularly liked the area, defining it as a “garden of delights”. There is not a lot left to see now, however.

**Oria** (right in the centre of Puglia between Taranto and Brindisi) – Frederick enlarged the existing fortress between 1227 and 1233, accentuating its triangular form and making it fit for a Holy Roman Emperor’s wedding party.

**Brindisi** - built in 1227 and later modified and expanded by Ferdinand I of Aragon and Charles V. Brindisi was one of the main departure points for the Crusades, and so the castle had a special importance.

**Gioia del Colle** (in the centre of Puglia between Taranto and Bari) - built in about 1100 by Richard Seneschal, but later significantly modified by Frederick. It was here that he kept his mistress Bianca Lancia locked up... but that’s another story.

**Otranto** - although very little remains of Frederick’s reinforcements of these impressive fortifications, any excuse to go to Otranto is a good excuse.
The fall of Constantinople to the massed Ottoman armies of Sultan Mehmed II on 29th May 1453 was a cataclysmic event, signalling the beginning of a crisis in the western and Mediterranean world. A new superpower had been born and the shockwaves were felt for several centuries to come. For Otranto, a small sea port in southeast Puglia, the tremors would soon give rise to a furious tsunami.

Despite his enormous success in bringing the eastern Roman Empire to an end, the 21-year-old Mehmed did not rest on his laurels. First he pushed into the Balkans, carving out a significant chunk of territory, and then he turned to the west, eyes fixed on the greatest prize of all: Rome, symbol of European power and home to the Roman Catholic Church.

And so it was that the self-styled Kayser-i Rûm (Caesar of Rome) set about planning an invasion of Italy. The obvious first port of call, so to speak, was Brindisi on the Adriatic coast of Puglia. Bad weather intervened, however, and the route changed: on 29th July 1480 the enormous Ottoman fleet, carrying 18,000 troops under the command of Gedik Ahmed Pasha, was sighted approaching Otranto.

Despite being protected by a garrison of just 600 soldiers, the Otrantini refused to surrender. Their determined resilience is the stuff of legend, but after two weeks of fighting the Pasha and his men finally stormed the castle, laying waste to the town and its population. All males over fifteen were killed and the women and children were sold into slavery. The total number of deaths was in the thousands.

The worst was yet to come, however. 800 surviving Otrantini had barricaded themselves inside the cathedral with their Bishop, Stefano Agricoli. On gaining entrance, Gedik Ahmed Pasha demanded they convert to Islam or face certain death. To a man the 800 refused. Pour encourager les autres, the Pasha ordered his men to quarter and behead the Bishop. Yet still the 800 refused to renounce their faith, spurred on by a rousing speech from a simple tailor named Antonio Pezzula.

Now, faced with no alternative except that of losing face, the Pasha was obliged to carry out his threat. The 800 were marched up to the top of the Hill of Minerva where, one by one, they were beheaded. It was the eve of the Feast of the Assumption, 14th August, 1480.

By giving the various rulers in Italy, including the King of Naples, Ferdinand I, time to amass their forces, the long drawn-out siege of Otranto had arguably saved Rome. The Ottomans continued sacking other towns in Puglia but quickly realised that time was no longer on their side. Leaving a garrison in Otranto, they set sail for home with the intention of returning the next spring.

Kayser-I Rûm set about planning an invasion of Italy.

In May 1481, however, Sultan Mehmed II suddenly died, throwing the Ottoman Empire into temporary confusion. Back in Puglia the King of Naples’ troops laid siege to Otranto and, after several months, retook the town, killing the entire Ottoman garrison in the process. Gedik Ahmed Pasha lasted little longer: unwanted by the new Sultan, he was thrown into prison and executed on November 18th 1482.

And the Blessed Martyrs of Otranto? Their bodies were gathered up and taken back to the cathedral, where they still reside today, a constant reminder of the power of faith.
After decades of instability, the defeat of the Ottoman Empire in the Battle of Lepanto in 1571 led to a period of relative calm in Puglia. Having lain dormant for so many years, the region’s cultural and artistic flame sparked back into life and the construction of utilitarian fortifications was replaced by the building of magnificent churches and dazzling noble palaces. Nowhere was this more true than in Lecce.

Peacetime coincided happily with the advent of a group artists and benefactors who, in just over 100 years, transformed Lecce from a rather provincial garrison town into a sparkling baroque jewel.

Lecce was also blessed in its mineral resources and, in particular, by the presence of a malleable, golden type of limestone that has since taken the town’s name. Ideally suited for carving and sculpture it was fundamental to the creation of Lecce’s unique artistic style.

They transformed Lecce from a provincial garrison town into a sparkling baroque jewel.

Florid, exuberant and minutely detailed, Lecce’s baroque style is also compact and neat without any bombastic overtones that one often associates with architecture of this period. Some art historians link the detail of the carvings and sculptures to the Spanish plateresque tradition (Puglia was under Spanish rule at this time), that took its inspiration from the precision and intricacy of silversmiths’ plate work.

Lecce’s baroque is also playful, mixing mythological creatures and fantastical figures with floral patterns, flamboyant motifs and, on the noble palaces, proud armorial bearings. It is a feast for the eyes and one needs to concentrate on the minutiae to enjoy the whole.

As with all artistic movements, it is impossible to establish a precise starting date for Lecce’s baroque movement, though it has been linked to 1639, when the amaranth red robes of Bishop Luigi Pappacoda rustled into town.

The bishop quickly forged a relationship with one of the brightest, most talented architects of the period, Giuseppe Zimbalo, grandson of another master builder who had already been active on the Basilica di Santa Croce. Zimbalo worked on many of the buildings that are most representative of Lecce’s baroque, including the restoration of the cathedral (commissioned by Pappacoda) between 1659 and 1670 and the wonderfully elegant 70 metre-high bell tower that stands like a beacon next door. He was also responsible for much of the decorative work on the façade and rose window of the Basilica di Santa Croce (continuing the good work of his grandfather), the Chiesa del Rosario, the Palazzo dei Celestini (1659-1695), now seat of the provincial government, and the Column of Sant’Oronzo in its eponymous piazza.

Other artists who contributed to the beautification of Lecce included Giuseppe Cino, Gabriele Riccardi, Cesare Penna and Mauro Manieri, all master craftsmen who bequeathed one of Italy’s most splendid town centres to future generations… of which you are one. Stroll, marvel and spare them a thought as you go.
Geography

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An Overview

Puglia provides the heel to Italy’s boot and the easternmost tip of the peninsular, almost on the same longitude as Budapest.

Covering some 19,300km², it is Italy’s 7th largest region (out of 20) and its splendid coastline, dotted with some of Italy’s finest sandy beaches and azure seas, runs for around 800km, less only than Sicily and Sardinia.

In the north lies the Gargano peninsula, which, apart from the foothills of the Appenines in the extreme northwest, is the only mountainous area of the region.

Long stretches of sandy beach extend all the way up to the Gulf of Taranto in the north.

From there, a large plain extends all the way down to the Valle d’Itria, whose delightful old towns, including Locorotondo, Alberobello and Martina Franca, sit amongst and on top of a series of gently rolling Arcadian hills carpeted with olive groves and vineyards. Hilltop Ostuni signals the end of the Valle d’Itria, and the beginning of the Salento plain, which continues all the way down to Santa Maria di Leuca, Puglia’s southernmost extremity.

Thanks to its relative flatness, Puglia has always been an agricultural region, producing, amongst others, olive oil, wine, tomatoes, artichokes, aubergines and wheat. In terms of livestock, sheep-farming reigns supreme, a trait that Puglia shares with its near neighbour, Greece.

Fishing, too, is an important part of the economy (and seafood, consequently, of the local diet), as one might imagine from a region with such an extensive coastline. To the east is the Adriatic Sea and the Straits of Otranto, across which, just over 70km away, lies Albania and, a little further still, northern Greece. Around the tip of the heel to the west is the Ionian coast, whose long stretches of sandy beach extend all the way up to the Gulf of Taranto in the north.

When in Puglia you are rarely far from the sea and it is no coincidence that the region’s inhabitants are great seafarers. Yachting and pleasure boating are popular pastimes, as are most watersports. Indeed, it is the sea, its beaches and its translucent waters that make Puglia such a popular holiday destination not only for Italians, but also a growing number of overseas visitors.

Puglia has a population of about four million, but less than a quarter of those live in the region’s largest towns, a statistic that confirms the locals’ love of country living.
Beaches and Coast

Starting in the north of Puglia’s Adriatic coast, the rocky, mountainous promontory of the Gargano offers some stunning coastal scenery: green wooded hills give way to white cliffs, sea stacks, azure crystalline seas, golden sands and paradisiacal pebbly coves. The beaches around Rodi Garganico, Peschici and Vieste are particularly popular, but if you get off the beaten track – ideally in a boat – you will come across some real hidden gems.

You may well come across a flock of flamingos.

Heading south, the coast between Manfredonia and the bustling historic capital, Bari, is formed by a series of sandy and pebble beaches, the salt pans of the Margherita di Savoia Nature Reserve and some lovely towns such as Trani with its fabulous seafront cathedral. From Bari, the mostly rocky coast is punctured by occasional spots of sandy beach, such as those at the lovely towns of Polignano a Mare and Monopoli, both well worth a visit.

Continuing south towards Brindisi, one of Puglia’s most important ports, of note are the sandy beaches of Marina di Ostuni and the Torre Guaceto Nature Reserve, a naturalist’s paradise combining unspoilt woods, Mediterranean maquis, several miles of sandy beach and a protected marine reserve. While there you may well come across a flock of flamingos, just one of the dozens of species of migratory birds who stop off here.

Lecce, Puglia’s baroque jewel, lies about 7km inland but is connected by a straight, “no-time-to-be-wasted” road to the Adriatic, which ends at the little town of San Cataldo with its lovely sandy beaches and seafront nature reserve.

From this point the coast becomes rather more dramatic and the magnificently sea-sculpted chalky white cliffs, transparent waters and sandy beaches of Torre dell’Orso are not to be missed... unless you opt to continue a few miles south to the Laghi Alimini, two lakes immersed in wonderful Mediterranean pine woods. The larger lake is connected to the sea by a small channel and the sandy beaches are of spectacular beauty.

Just a stone’s throw away to the south, is the delightful fortified port town of Otranto, another highlight of this stretch of the Adriatic coast. Apart from its historical and architectural interest, Otranto also boasts several lovely sandy beaches, one of which is right in the centre of town.

Around two miles south of Otranto, at Capo d’Otranto, one comes to the easternmost point of Italy and from here on, until the tip of the heel, where the Adriatic and the Ionian seas meet and mingle at Santa Maria di Leuca, the coastline is characterised by rocky cliffs, probing inlets, such as the one at Porto Badisco, which heads inland for nearly 400m, and towns such as Castro, perched above the sea in superb panoramic positions.
The historic fortified island town of Gallipoli is a must-see if you’re in the area, but we must keep going, as there is still over 100km of coastline to explore. A few kilometres up the coast is Rivabella, home to yet more Caribbeanesque sandy beaches. From this point on, right up to Taranto, small stretches of low-lying rocky coastline alternate with long, sensuous expanses of sandy beach, including those at San Caterina di Nardó. Also of interest is the lagoon-like, sandy seafront of Porto Cesareo, delimited by its own promontory and the offshore Isola dei Conigli, and the 20km of continuous beach that run along the south-facing stretch of coast below Manduria, between Punto Prosciutto and Acqua Dolce.

As the coast heads northwest towards the historic naval port of Taranto, there are lots of lovely little towns with their own sandy bays. On the other side of Taranto, the Puglian coastline continues westwards along the northern shores of the Gulf of Taranto for about 40km, until, after the Stornara Nature Reserve and its curvaceous, non-stop stretch of sand, it arrives at the border with Basilicata.

Continuing our tour around Puglia’s coast, heading westward from Santa Maria di Leuca, with its strategically positioned lighthouse and sumptuous Liberty-style villas, one soon arrives at one of the loveliest stretches of sandy beach in Italy: about 6 kilometres running along Marina di Salve, through Marina di Pescoluse and up to Torre Pali. A brief interruption of rocky coastline soon gives way to more spectacular sand and turquoise waters at Torre Mozza and Marina di Ugento.

Heading north for another 15km or so, one soon comes to the spiky Punto del Pizzo, which signals the start of the Gulf of Gallipoli, characterised by yet more lovely sandy beaches accessed through fragrant pine woods.
Salento

Take a map of Puglia (or Italy if you wish) and a pair of scissors. Begin your incision at Taranto and cut northeastward in a straight line through Ostuni and into the Adriatic Sea. What you’re left with, to the south, is the Salento peninsula.

The southernmost part of Italy’s heel, Salento begins (more or less, because differing opinions do exist) where the hills of the Valle d’Itria end. From there, the terrain becomes a long flat tongue of land that is lapped by two seas: the Adriatic to the east, the Ionian to the west.

Salento is home to some of Italy’s loveliest towns and cities: the seafront fortified gems of Gallipoli and Otranto, the creamy baroque sophistication of Lecce and the luxurious seaside Liberty pleasures of Leuca.

**Home to some of Italy’s loveliest beaches, Salento is a haven for sea lovers.**

But Salento is also full to brimming with small sleepy towns that are off the tourist trail but greatly worth visiting for their unspoilt historic centres and their unassuming genuineness. Examples include Specchia and the so-called Greek towns of Calimera, Carpinano Salentino, Castrignano dei Greci, Corigliano d’Otranto, Cutrofiano, Martano, Martignano, Melpignano, Soleto, Sternatia and Zollino.

These towns - around 20km south of Lecce - preserve Salento’s strong historic ties with Greece, dating back thousands of years. The local dialect, Grika, and many of the area’s gastronomic, cultural and religious traditions have evident Hellenic roots which are celebrated with frequent festivals, including the hugely popular and energetic Notte della Taranta, a tribute to the Pizzica Pizzica, the local dance that is imbued with a slowly accelerating Greek rhythmic pulse.

Salento’s hinterland plays a fundamental role in Italy’s agricultural economy, producing enormous quantities of excellent olive oil and full-bodied, robust wines, such as Primitivo di Manduria and Salice Salentino.

It is the long and varied coastline, however, that is the major attraction for the area’s tourist industry. Home to some of Italy’s loveliest beaches and most dramatic rocky coastline, Salento is a haven for sea lovers. From the southernmost tip near Leuca, running up the west coast to Gallipoli and beyond, is a vast almost non-stop strip of paradisiacal golden sand and transparent azure waters. To the east, the Adriatic coastline is more varied, offering sandy beaches, Karstic grottoes, chalk cliffs and salt-water lagoons.

So, if you’re looking for a holiday destination with a great climate, dreamy beaches, beautiful historic towns, delicious food and wine and fun for all the family, come to Salento.
The Valle d’Itria

Trulli, gently rolling countryside, olive oil, white wine, capocollo ham, easy access to the beaches of the Adriatic and the Ionian seas and half a dozen really super, picturesque towns, including Locorotondo, Martina Franca, Cisternino, Ostuni, Ceglie Messapica and the UNESCO World Heritage Site of Alberobello: welcome to the Valle d’Itria, one of Puglia’s most popular and attractive areas.

Set on a high fertile plain in the centre of Puglia, the Valle d’Itria stretches from Putignano in the north to Ostuni in the south, its wooded slopes, vineyards and endless olive groves punctuated by the coned roofs of trulli; those unique cylindrical constructions that are peculiar to the area.

Even if you’re in the centre of the Valle d’Itria you’re never far from the sea.

The valley in Valle d’Itria’s name is not a typical valley but rather a Karstic depression that runs between Locorotondo, Cisternino and Martina Franca. This geological phenomenon has also created the fascinatingly beautiful caves of Grotte di Castellana, which run for about 3km under the northeastern edge of the Valle d’Itria.

The caves of Grotte di Castellana offer an excellent, educational and fun day trip with children and there are many more diverting activities for children in the area, including the zoo safari and amusement park at Fasano and the magical old town centre of Alberobello, a trulli wonderland that charms and delights old and young alike.

Thanks to Puglia’s long slender shape, even if you are in the centre of the Valle d’Itria you are never far from the sea. An easy drive in either direction – your choice, east or west – will take you to the Adriatic or the Ionian Sea, where you can enjoy the long sandy beaches and turquoise waters that contribute to Puglia’s great popularity as a holiday destination.

Food lovers too will not be left wanting. Each town in the Valle d’Itria seems to have its own speciality, whether it is the capocollo ham of Martina Franca, the meat bombette of Cisternino (barbecued directly by the butcher for you), the DOC white wine of Locorotondo or the biscuits and renowned restaurants of Ceglie Messapica. Of course the olive oil is supreme and the cheeses, including the milky delights of burratina, are memorable.

Head to White Beach (Via Eroi del Mare 1, Torre Canne, tel. 340 9154978) for a lunch, dinner, pizza or just drinks on the Adriatic Sea. There’s live music and DJ sets on some evenings, all in an atmosphere of pure summer magic. See www.whitebeach.it for more info.
The Gargano

Jutting out into the sea at the northern tip of Puglia, though very much a region unto itself, is the Gargano peninsula. Over 1,200km² hectares of the Gargano is given over to a national park that features a vast array of flora and fauna, mountains rising to over 1,000m, forests, towering cliffs that plunge into the sea, and sublime sandy beaches, hidden coves and seafront lakes, all of which make for a fascinating coastline.

1,200km² hectares of the Gargano is given over to a national park.

In the interior, the Gargano’s age-old towns and villages, such as Monte Sant’Angelo and San Giovanni Rotondo, are shrouded in an ancient, spiritual atmosphere and it is no coincidence that western Europe’s oldest shrine dedicated to the Archangel Michael and the monastery of the recently sanctified Padre Pio are located in these towns. The latter attracts tens of thousands of pilgrims each year.

Different types of worshippers, those devoted to sun, sea and sand, head for the coast and the popular holiday towns of Rodi Garganico, Peschici, Vieste and Mattinata Porto. The north coast is home to Lago di Lesina and Lago di Varano, two salt water lakes that are separated from the sea by a narrow strand and mile upon mile of sandy beach.

In many respects the Gargano has little in common with the rest of Puglia, but this difference merely highlights the variety that the region as a whole has to offer. If you really want to get to know Puglia well, you need to spend some time in the Gargano too.
Alberobello

Trulli, trulli everywhere... It must be Alberobello, Puglia’s picture-postcard town famous for its conical-roofed houses - trulli.

Alberobello’s not just a pretty picture, though, but also a UNESCO World Heritage Site, protected thanks to its “outstanding universal value... an exceptional example of a form of building construction deriving from prehistoric construction techniques that have survived intact and functioning into the modern world.”

Alberobello’s not just a pretty picture, though, but also a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

With its narrow pedestrianized streets, little shops selling local produce and a few nice cafés and trattorie offering al fresco dining, Alberobello is a great day out for families with young children, who, in our experience, love the trulli and remember them as one of the highlights of their holiday.

Arguably the best ice-cream in Alberobello is to be found at Bar Arte del Freddo in Largo Martellotta, 47.
While not always the first town visitors go to see in Puglia, Bari, the regional capital, has plenty to offer and is well worth spending time in. For millennia Bari has been a busy commercial centre and trading port. It first came to prominence under the Romans, who developed it into one of the most important towns on the Adriatic. This status was confirmed in 109 AD when Emperor Trajan diverted the existing Via Appia so that it would pass through the city, essentially provincializing Taranto and elevating Bari to its present status as Puglia’s capital.

The Levant has also suffused the city’s religious history. During Byzantine rule, which lasted on and off for around 500 years after the fall of Rome, Bari became inextricably linked to the eastern Mediterranean. The city’s port became a fulcrum of the slave trade, which saw thousands of Eastern Europeans being sent to Turkey and other countries in the Middle East, and then one of the major points of departure for the Crusades.

This connection with the near orient continues today with the Fiera del Levante, one of the Mediterranean’s most prestigious trade fairs, hosted in Bari since 1930. And, having moved on from exporting slavery and war, the port is now the busiest ferry-passenger terminal in the Adriatic, with regular links to the Balkans and Greece.

The Levant has also suffused the city’s religious history. Until 1025, when Byzantine rule ended, Bari had been under the episcopal jurisdiction of the Patriarch of Constantinople. Then, towards the end of the 11th century, came the city’s defining moment, also inextricably linked to the east Mediterranean. The site of San Nicola’s resting place, Myra, in Lycia (part of modern-day Turkey), had come under Muslim control, an event that inspired sailors from Bari and Venice set out on a daring mission to rescue the saint’s mortal remains. The Puglians arrived first and successfully brought back his relics to Bari on 9th May 1087. Needing a suitable depository for their newly acquired venerable objects, the townsfolk immediately began work on what would become the city’s most important building: the Basilica di San Nicola.

The Basilica we see today dates back to the end of the 12th century and is a fine example of Romanesque architecture. It is the focal point of Bari Vecchia (the old town centre) and attracts thousands of pilgrims from all over the world each year, including a great many Greek and Russian Orthodox visitors. Of particular note is the Festa di San Nicola, which runs from 7th-9th May each year in celebration of the arrival of the saint’s relics in Bari (not to be missed if you’re in the area).

Bari Vecchia is a fascinating weave of streets that, until around ten years ago, was considered a no-go area by the locals (note to football fans: this is where Antonio Cassano grew up). A radical clean-up operation, however, has transformed it into a wonderful place for strolling, full of cafés, bars and restaurants. Just a short walk from Piazza San Nicola are Bari’s other major architectural attractions: the Cattedrale di San Sabino, built in a late 12th century Romanesque style by the Normans, and the Castello Svevo, Emperor Frederick II’s mighty fortress.

If shopping’s your thing, head to the more modern area of town around Via Sparano and Via Argiro, where you will find a wealth of boutiques of the most prestigious fashion houses.
Bari boasts a long seafront promenade which leads from Bari Vecchia to the more modern shopping district, built on an octagonal plan in the early 19th century by Joachim Murat, Napoleon’s brother-in-law.

For opera lovers, a trip to Bari should include a night at the Teatro Petruzzelli, the fourth largest opera house in Italy, after the Teatro Massimo in Palermo, La Scala in Milan and the San Carlo in Naples. Originally built in the mid-19th century, it was almost completely destroyed in 1991 by a fire that broke out after a performance of Bellini’s Norma. After years of restoration it was reopened in 2009.
Brindisi

For most people visiting Puglia, Brindisi is merely a point of arrival and departure, thanks to its being home to one of Puglia’s two main airports. But if you’re staying in the area, or are looking for somewhere to spend a few hours before catching your flight home, Brindisi is worth a visit.

Like many of the other towns on Puglia’s Adriatic coast, Brindisi’s history is inextricably linked to the lands that lie across the sea to the east. With its large natural harbour, the city has always been, and continues to be, one of Italy’s most important ports. Today it is a major departure point for car ferries loaded with tourists heading to Greece and the Balkans, but in Greek and in particular Roman times and during the Middle Ages, it served other purposes.

Frederick II chose the town as his port of departure for the successful Sixth Crusade.

The Romans, who took the town from the Greeks in the middle of the 3rd century BC, set about maximising the town’s potential. Two columns (one of which still remains above the port) were erected to identify

Brundisium as the end of the Appian Way, a road which had been built to facilitate the movement of goods and troops between the centre of the empire and the east Mediterranean. With the constant comings and goings of legions, the navy and trade ships, Brindisi quickly grew in size and soon had a population of some 100,000.

With the fall of the Roman Empire, Brindisi passed into the hands of the Ostrogoths, the Byzantines, the Lombards, the Saracens and then the Normans, who arrived in 1070. It was during their rule that the Crusades began leaving from Brindisi, and in 1228 Emperor Frederick II Stupor Mundi chose the town as his port of departure for the successful Sixth Crusade, during which he reclaimed Jerusalem for the Christian world.

Badly bombed during the Second World War, Brindisi spent many years rebuilding, and, especially in the last decade, the city has undergone a significant makeover. The centre is home to wide, palm tree-lined boulevards, a revamped seafront promenade with restaurants and bars, a great many winding streets, some fine baroque churches (including the cathedral) and, last but not least, the impressive castle built by... yes, you guessed it... Emperor Frederick II.

So, if you have a few hours to spare, why not make a visit to Italy’s gateway to the east?
Cisternino

Three is the magic number, so they say, and nowhere is this truer than in the Valle d’Itria, with its trio of enchanting, historic towns: Alberobello, Locorotondo and Cisternino.

Like its sisters, Cisternino boasts a small, utterly charming old town centre that has remained virtually intact for centuries. Its whitewashed houses, narrow shady streets, historic churches and elegant central piazza open out onto a series of panoramic viewpoints from which visitors can take in the surrounding countryside, with its rolling hills, dry stone walls and white-tipped conical trulli roofs piercing the green fields.

The town is famous for its barbecuing butchers.

Cisternino is pleasant to visit at any time of day, though there is something particularly magical on a summer’s evening as the sun sets and the locals come out for their evening passeggiata (stroll). The restaurants, gelaterie and bars around the piazza fill up and the atmosphere becomes gently hedonistic.

You don’t need to go to a restaurant to eat in Cisternino, however, as the town is famous for its barbecuing butchers. All you have to do is choose your meat – maybe the local speciality, bombette, little meat parcels filled with mince, ham and cheese – and take a seat outside with a carafe of local wine. The butcher will then barbecue your chosen goodies and bring them out to you when ready. A truly local (and delicious) eating experience.
The streets of Cisternino are home to some buildings of considerable architectural interest, including the 13th century Norman-Swabian tower, topped with a little statue of San Nicola, the 14th century Chiesa di San Nicola with its 18th century façade and 6th century foundations, the curvaceous baroque Chiesa di San Cataldo and the tower-flanked Palazzo Amati.

In August, Cisternino celebrates the summer with a series of festivals, including the processions for the Festa di San Quirico, one of the town’s patron saints, and a couple of food festivals (sagre), one dedicated to orecchiette (Puglia’s signature ear-shaped pasta), the other to rabbit. Then, in September, the town turns its attention to the grape harvest, which is toasted with yet another party.

Galatina

Galatina is one of Puglia’s many hidden gems. Just 20km south of stunning Lecce, it has much in common with its more illustrious neighbour, not least its baroque town centre which has changed little over the centuries.

Founded in the 12th century, the town was originally called Sancti Petri in Galatina, recalling Saint Peter’s sojourn in the area during his trip from Antioch to Rome. It soon assumed a certain commercial importance and was passed from one noble family to another.

In the 14th century, Galatina came under the control of the Orsini family, and it was Count Raimondello who gave the town its first great church in 1390. Triumphantly returned from the Holy Land, and bearing a relic of Saint Catherine, Raimondello commissioned a church in her honour. The result is a fine example of late Romanesque Puglian architecture that features an elaborately carved doorway and an intricate rose window. The frescoes inside, by Francesco d’Arezzo, are also splendid.

Wandering around the old town centre, you will be struck by the uniformity of its architecture.

As the town grew, so did its need for defences and in the 16th century strong protective walls and a series of gates were erected. Of the five original gates three survive today: Porta Nuova (or San Pietro), Porta Luce and Porta Cappuccini. The impressive Castello Ducale also dates back to this period.

Galatina’s golden age, however, was in the 17th and 18th centuries, when numerous churches and aristocratic palaces were erected. Some elements of Lecce’s baroque style are evident in many of the buildings, but the Galatinese nobility seem to have had a peculiar predilection for imposing and intricately decorated doorways and balconies. A few fine examples of aristocratic palazzi include Palazzo del Concerto, with its airy loggia, Palazzo Scrimeri, with its sumptuously sculpted balcony supports and window decorations, and Palazzo Sanlorenzo-Bardoscia, with its elaborate façade.
Churches of this period include the Chiesa di Santa Maria della Grazia, 1743, the Chiesa del Carmine, completed in 1724, and the Chiesa di San Paolo, renowned all over Puglia for the curative qualities of its well’s water, which was said to restore to full health those bitten by the dreaded tarantula.

The Chiesa di San Pietro e San Paolo, or Chiesa Mattrice, built in 1633, is an impressive example of the kind of elegant sandy-coloured baroque architecture that became so popular in Salento.

Wandering round the old town centre of Galatina, you will be struck by the charming uniformity of its architecture, the laid-back tranquillity of its streets and the friendliness of its inhabitants. There are also some good restaurants, bars and boutiques if you’re planning on spending a few hours there... which we recommend you do.

“Beautiful city”: that’s what Gallipoli means, and the town certainly lives up to its name.

Situated on the west, Ionian coast of Puglia’s Salento peninsula, our Gallipoli may not be as famous as its Turkish namesake, site of the disastrous 1st World War battle, but its history is long and varied, its historic centre a delight and the beaches which flank it superb.

The old town centre sits on a tiny island connected to the mainland by a 17th century bridge. It is almost completely surrounded by defensive walls and on the eastern side is a robust fortress dating back to the 13th century, but largely rebuilt in the 1500s when the town fell under Angevin control.

Pyrrhus, following one too many disastrous victories, was defeated by the Romans.

These fortifications tell us a lot about Gallipoli’s history: thanks to its strategic position, it was frequently under siege. Founded, so legend tells us, by Idomeneo from ancient Crete, the town soon became part of Magna Graecia and remained so until Pyrrhus, presumably following one too many disastrous victories, was defeated by the Romans.
After being sacked by hordes of Vandals and Goths, the Byzantines arrived, rebuilding the town much in the form we recognise today. Normans, Angevins and the Bourbons then came in successive waves until the Unification of Italy in 1861.

The island heart of Gallipoli is home to numerous impressive baroque churches and aristocratic palazzi, testament to the town’s former wealth as a trading port. A labyrinthine weave of narrow streets all eventually lead to the broader seafront promenade with its wonderful views.

In the summer months cafés, bars and restaurants proliferate onto the pavements making for an extremely pleasant atmosphere, while the beach, La Spiaggia della Purità (or Puritate as the locals call it), is an attraction in its own right. An evening passeggiata (pre-prandial stroll) around the walls, looking out to sea, is a great way to prepare for a fresh fish dinner.

The coastline north and south of Gallipoli is formed by a series of long sandy beaches and transparent waters that have long been attracting sea lovers.

Built in the local soft creamy limestone and with dazzling architectural surprises around every corner, Lecce is a baroque masterpiece. Its spider’s web of streets offer a kaleidoscopic mix of long-range vistas, alluring glimpses and playful perspectives that have enchanted visitors for centuries.

Supported by a history going back at least 2,500 years, modern-day Lecce is the main town on Puglia’s Salento peninsula and a major draw for the area’s tourism industry. Its 95,000 inhabitants haven’t forgotten their roots, however, and the production and sale of olive oil, wine and ceramics continues to be the mainstay of the local economy.

A quintessentially southern Italian town, bursting with piazze and palazzi.

Legend tells us that a town existed near the site of Lecce right back at the time of the Trojan Wars, though this is hard to verify. What is sure, however, is that the town was taken over by the Romans in the 3rd century BC. Evidently not caring much for its position, they relocated it 3km north, began developing its potential and renamed it Licea.

The Emperor Hadrian spent considerable time and resources fortifying it (he loved building walls remember) and oversaw the

GOOD THINKING

Park near the fish market on the little island centre of Gallipoli. To get there, make sure you take the lane on the far right of the bridge (Lungomare Marconi), with the railway line on your left and the sea on your right.

SEAFRONT DINING

GALLIPOLI STYLE

Bursting with piazze and palazzi.

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The 17th century saw a new invasion, but this time of a cultural variety: the Baroque. Over the course of around a hundred years, the town changed face almost completely. Existing churches and buildings were given makeovers and many new ones were built by ambitious young architects whose fantasy knew no bounds. Baroque Lecce was born and most still survives.

**SIGHTS TO SEE IN LECCE**

Piazza del Duomo is a real treat, surrounded, as it is, by a series of delightful buildings. The Duomo itself was built originally in 1144 but with the arrival of the baroque zealots in the mid-17th century it was given a facelift and a 70m-high bell tower was added for good measure.

The Basilica di Santa Croce has one of the finest and most intricate baroque façades in Italy. The level of detail is quite stunning and the evident perfectionism of its creators most probably contributed to the building’s exceptionally long period of gestation: it took over 200 years to complete before finally being opened for worship in 1695.

La Chiesa dei Santi Niccolò e Cataldo is a fascinating Norman church built by King Tancredi of Sicily in 1180. The façade was significantly embellished with statues and other decorative art in the early 1700s, but the impressive original portal fortunately survived and the result is a fascinating mix of Norman austerity and Italianate baroque fussiness.

Sant’Oronzo is the beloved patron saint of Lecce and the column from which his statue surveys the old town centre of Lecce was originally one of two that signalled the end of the Roman Via Appia in Brindisi. It arrived in Lecce in the 17th century as a gift from the people of Brindisi, who believed that their neighbour’s patron saint had interceded on their behalf and saved their town from the plague.

Below Sant’Oronzo’s statue is Lecce’s Roman amphitheatre, built at the end of the 2nd century AD. A series of earthquakes, bombardments and unfortunate town-planning initiatives meant that it remained buned and forgotten until after the 2nd World War, when excavations

In Lecce you’ll find some wonderful independent artisanal craft shops selling ceramics, papier-mâché objets d’art and locally made leather sandals.
began. About two thirds of the arena were uncovered and archaeologists have calculated that it would have measured some 100m x 80m with a capacity of around 25,000 spectators.

Il Castello di Carlo V. Charles V, Holy Roman Emperor and King of Spain (just two of his many titles), inherited vast swathes of Europe, including the southeast of Italy. Plagued by attacks from the bothersome Ottomans, he ordered a series of towers and fortifications to be built along the coast of Puglia. One such work was the castle in Lecce, built between 1539 and 1549 on the site of an existing Norman fortress. Its muscular ramparts belies the beauty of the interiors, which feature a delightful central courtyard and a series of halls decorated to suit the tastes of a Holy Roman Emperor. Today the castle plays host to cultural and artistic events.

A quintessentially southern Italian town, bursting with piazze and palazzi, Lecce’s welcoming atmosphere and largely pedestrianised centre is wonderful for wandering around. Cafés, bars and restaurants flank the streets, offering refreshments and front row seats from which to observe the comings and goings of the locals as they go about their daily business.
Locorotondo

Locorotondo is one of Puglia’s prettiest towns with a proudly conserved, easily walkable centre and a calm, laid back atmosphere.

Its luminous white-washed walls and panoramic position recall Ostuni, the Città Bianca, but its location, in the middle of the Valle d’Itria, invites more comparisons with its UNESCO World Heritage Site neighbour, Alberobello.

Locorotondo’s charm lies in the collective whole rather than in its constituent parts.

This latter is famous for its delightful trulli-speckled centre and yet, despite being just 8km down the road, Locorotondo chose to follow a completely different building route. No cone-topped cylinders here, but plenty of cummerse, narrow rectangular town houses with pointed gable roofs, strangely evocative of north European Baltic architecture.

These simple angular buildings that populate the historic centre contrast somewhat with the town’s true shape, which, as its name implies, is rotund, both horizontally (thanks to its circular street plan) and vertically (it hugs the contours of the curvaceous hill on which it sits).

The old defensive walls are traced by a perimeter road offering wonderful views over the surrounding agricultural land, a quilt of vineyards, olive groves and trulli, bisected by dry-stone walls. It is no coincidence that Locorotondo is known as the “balcony of the Valle d’Itria”.

From the two original gates one enters a web of streets that wind indolently up to the central piazza. The whiteness of the cummerse is interrupted only by the occasional polychrome flash of a baroque palace or a vibrantly coloured flower box. The early 19th century Chiesa di San Giorgio and the fine Romanesque Chiesa della Madonna della Greca are worth a look, but monuments and churches are not the reason to visit Locorotondo: its charm lies in the collective whole rather than in its constituent parts.

When you’ve spent an hour or so wandering the streets and are ready for lunch, try some u tridde, Locorotondo’s speciality, a freshly made pasta incorporating pecorino cheese and finely-chopped parsley cut into small pieces and cooked in a wholesome turkey broth. Washed down with a glass or two of Locorotondo DOC wine from the Cantina Sociale and you’ll soon be ready to continue touring the wonderful Valle d’Itria.
Martina Franca

An exploration of the lovely Valle d’Itria (trulli country) would not be complete without a visit to Martina Franca, the largest town in the area.

More buzzing than its three illustrious neighbours, Alberobello, Locorotondo and Cisternino, it has long been the commercial centre of the area, ever since Philip of Anjou granted it tax free status and various other privileges in 1310.

With Franca now appended to its name, old Martina was soon attracting new residents, including noble families and businessmen. Elegant palaces (at least twenty of note) and churches (over fifteen) began springing up throughout the old centre, testimony to the newly found wealth that was flowing into the town.

With Franca now appended to its name, old Martina was soon attracting new residents.

Until the reunification of Italy in 1861, Martina Franca was fully walled, with twenty-four towers and four gates. As it evolved to cater for more modern requirements, some of these towers were removed and access roads punched into the walls. However, four renaissance and baroque gates still exist, effectively delineating the old centre from the more modern 19th century part of town, which also has some fine buildings and a shady park.

Opposite this park is the wide tree-lined expanse of Piazza XX Settembre, which leads through the Porta di Santo Stefano (one of the four gates) into Piazza Roma, home to the impressive 17th century Palazzo Ducale. From here it is a short walk through the narrow streets to Piazza Plebiscito, the true heart of the town and backdrop to its masterpiece, the delightful Basilica di San Martino. Its intricate, sandy-coloured, über-baroque façade is extremely fine, especially when illuminated by the evening sun.

From this splendid piazza, we recommend you just follow your nose and soak up the atmosphere, stopping off, perhaps, for refreshments in one of the many outdoor cafés.

The locals of Martina Franca are passionate about their capocollo, a delicious cured pork shoulder ham. To get the best, and lots of other goodies, head to the excellent Macelleria Romanelli delicatessen in Via Valle d’Itria 8.

With Franca now appended to its name, old Martina was soon attracting new residents.
would pass under the control of a succession of rulers including the Romans, Byzantines, Saracens and Lombards. During the Middle Ages, Matera witnessed the arrival of hermit monks and monastic communities who settled there for good. They chose to live and worship in the town’s sassi, and there began a long process of transformation, as numerous grottoes were extended and turned into dwellings, crypts and even churches.

This tradition of cave living continued right up until the end of the Second World War, when new national laws were introduced that forced the residents to evacuate to other, more modern parts of the town, where living conditions were not as extreme.

Today, the area of the sassi has been totally recovered and in 1993 it was recognized by UNESCO as a World Heritage Site, thanks to it being “the most outstanding, intact example of a troglodyte settlement in the Mediterranean region, perfectly adapted to its terrain and ecosystem... (and) illustrating a number of significant stages in human history.” Some people have since moved back in and several high-end hotels have transformed the caves into luxury rooms for guests visiting the town.

Mel Gibson chose Matera as the perfect spot to film The Passion of the Christ.
The area of the sassi extends along a small canyon called Gravina, which forms the oldest part of the city. They are divided into three main groups: the Civita, which was the first urban nucleus, the Sasso Caveoso and the Sasso Barisano.

The rupestrian churches, built into the tuff rock by the hundreds of monks over the ages, are extremely evocative and atmospheric, and feature many beautiful frescoes, considered to be some of the greatest expressions of rock art in the world. Particularly worth visiting are the Chiesa di Santa Maria della Valle and the Crypt of Original Sin.

The Case Cisterna (rainwater cisterns) offer visitors a fascinating glimpse of how the locals dealt with the problem of water scarcity by collecting rainwater in an extensive network of ducts that piped man’s most important resource into the cave dwellings.

Wandering around Matera, you will come across numerous lively street stalls displaying a rich array of colourful whistles, papier-mâché objects, and the traditional terracotta cuckoos, symbols of fertility. And if you’re in the area in the spring, we recommend you check out the programme for the annual jazz festival, Gezziamoci, which attracts international artists from all over the world.

Last, but certainly not least, don’t miss the wonderful local cuisine, with its delicious oven-baked bread, mouth-watering cheeses, and a huge variety of home-made pasta best eaten with a bottle or two of Matera’s local DOC wines.

Although Matera is situated in the region of Basilicata, just across the Puglian border, it is an easy and greatly rewarding day trip from many of our villas.

No board game jokes, please. The locals have heard them all before.

Sitting on Puglia’s Adriatic coast around 30km south of Bari, Monopoli is a lovely town for a day trip, possibly in combination with Polignano a Mare just up the coast, mixing a dip in the sea with a good lunch and a wander around the old town centre.

Like so many towns on the Adriatic, Monopoli’s history has been heavily influenced by its east-facing position, and its fortified seafront walls and castle tell many a story.

No board game jokes, please. The locals have heard them all before.

Parking in or around Piazza XX Settembre, location of a colourful street market, head east towards the cathedral. To find it just look upwards and you are sure to see its elegantly conceived bell tower thrusting into the sky. Built in 1693, the tower is over 60 metres high, completely dominating the town below.

Moving past the cathedral (or after a quick look in), continue heading east and you will soon come to the first part of the seafront, with its defensive walls and sandy bay, ideal for a refreshing dip.

No board game jokes, please. The locals have heard them all before.
From here, walk down the lovely Via Papacenere, which will take you behind the walls and onto the Lungomare seafront promenade, complete with some fine buildings, including the curvaceous Chiesa di Santa Maria della Zaffira, a cannon-mounted bastion and the impressively robust Charles V Castle, built in 1552.

Passing under an archway outside the castle, you will arrive in one of the little harbours that make up the town's port, busy with fishermen mending their nets or unloading the day's catch. Half-way round, a little street will take you back into town and along Via Cimino, back to your starting point at Piazza XX Settembre, just in time to do your grocery shopping at the market.

Rising high above the vast olive-carpeted plateau of the lower Murgia, Ostuni has long been an awe-inspiring sight for those travelling across Puglia. Strong defensive walls and tumbling clusters of white-washed houses wind around the hillside, at the top of which, proudly surveying the surrounding land, sits the magnificent Gothic cathedral.

The practice of lime-washing the town became a matter of life and death.

First founded by an indigenous tribe around 600bc, Ostuni's long and varied history has seen it pass from the Romans to the Ostrogoths, from the Lombards to the Saracens, from the Byzantines to the Normans, from the Hohenstaufen to the Angevins and from the Aragonese to the Bourbons. Traces remain from each domination but most of what visitors can see today dates from between the 1400s and the 1700s.

The most distinguishing characteristic of Ostuni, and the reason for its taking the epithet La Città Bianca, is its uniformly white buildings. Originally, the practice of lime-washing the town served as a means of illuminating the dark labyrinthine mediaeval streets, but in the 17th century it became a matter of life and death and was used to limit the depredations of the plague.

Wandering through the streets today, visitors are charmed by Ostuni's mediaeval layout. The narrow back streets, little passages and flights of steps make it delightfully easy to lose one's bearings. Suitably,
however, the climax of any visit arrives when you reach the highest part of town, home to the imposing Archbishop’s Palace and the 15th-century Concattedrale with its curvaceous, symmetrical façade and rose window.

The views from Ostuni are, by themselves, reason enough to make a trip there. Wonderful vistas abound from all angles, the best of which offer 360-degree panoramas of the surrounding countryside and the Adriatic Sea.

The coastline near Ostuni (just 8km away) boasts some of Puglia’s loveliest beaches, whose cleanliness and quality of amenities are testified to by the five Blue Flags won in recent years.

Pub quiz fans may wish to store away the following nugget of trivia: Otranto is Italy’s easternmost town.

But it is much more than just that: its mix of history, architecture, views, seafront restaurants and white sandy beach makes it one of Puglia’s most interesting, charming and picturesque towns.

Otranto sits right on the Adriatic Sea, gazing out across its eponymous straits towards the Balkans and Greece, a strategic position that has profoundly influenced its history. In Roman times, it became an important commercial port, home to a significant Jewish population of traders, but also a departure point for Roman military expeditions to the east, as testified to by two marble pillar bases recording the transient presence of Emperors Lucio Vero and Marco Aurelio. For a period Otranto even overshadowed Brindisi.

Otranto’s beach is lovely, but can get crowded in the high season. If you prefer something a little quieter, head to the exclusive Lido La Castellana, in Loc. La Punta, Otranto, tel. 335 8112520.

Porto Badisco was where Aeneas first set foot on Italian soil after deserting a weeping Dido.

Otranto’s east-facing seafront position, however, also made it susceptible to attacks from across the Adriatic. The most notorious took place on 28th July 1480, when a Turkish fleet of around 150 ships carrying 18,000 soldiers landed to lay siege to the town. The resistance and resilience of the townsfolk is stuff of legend but after two weeks of fighting Gedik Ahmed Pasha, the Turkish commander, and his men finally stormed the castle and laid waste to
The town and its population. All males over fifteen were murdered and the women and children were sold into slavery.

800 survivors barricaded themselves inside the cathedral with their bishop, Stefano Agricoli, to pray for deliverance. Divine intervention was not forthcoming, however, and they were soon captured. Gedik Ahmed Pasha demanded they renounce their Christian faith and convert to Islam but not one capitulated and their fate was sealed. The unfortunate bishop was cut to pieces and his head paraded round the town on a pike while the others were marched to the hill of Minerva and beheaded.

Otranto boasts some architectural marvels, including an imposing castle, whose thick perimeter walls and robust towers (built after the town was liberated from the Turks in the late 15th century) dominate much of the town. Down below is a tourist port, a series of seafront promenades with excellent fish restaurants and the town’s very own beautiful white sandy beach and cavernous grottoes. Legend has it that Porto Badisco was where Aeneas first set foot on Italian soil after deserting a weeping Dido in Carthage.

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Polignano a Mare

A shining gem on the coast of the Valle d’Itria, perched atop a 20 metre-high limestone cliff above the crystal clear waters of the Adriatic, Polignano a Mare truly lives up to its name and literally could not be any more ‘at sea’.

“Volare, oh, oh... Cantare, oh, oh, oh... Nel blu dipinto di blu... felice di stare lassù...”

The origins of this enchanting place date back to the 4th century BC when Greek settlers founded the city of Neapolis. It flourished under the Romans and was important enough for Emperor Trajan to direct his Via Traiana, built between 108-110 AD, through the town. Remains of this road include a bridge at Lama Monachile, just north of the historic centre.

Polignano offers all the right ingredients for a perfect day out. The tiny old town, reached through the Porta Vecchia gate, combines charming, white-washed streets with beautiful old churches such as the Chiesa Matrice. You may find yourself getting lost in the winding streets, but you won’t mind at all. Before you know it, you will have reached one of three panoramic terraces offering breathtaking views of the beautiful Adriatic Sea and coastline.

After a stroll through the town and a coffee in Piazza Vittorio Emanuele II, why not pop down to the Blue Flag beach, just a few minutes’ walk from the old centre? A firm favourite with the locals, the beach has crystal clear waters and is flanked on two sides by cliffs from which children and teenagers dive all through the day until sunset.

Polignano is famous throughout the world for three things. First of all, as mentioned above, cliff diving. In recent years the town has hosted the Red Bull diving competition, attracting crowds of up to 45,000. Second is its outstanding ice-cream, which you really cannot afford to miss on a hot summer’s evening. The third and possibly most famous export of Polignano a Mare, however, is the great Domenico Modugno, who wrote and sang numerous classic songs, including the massive international hit Volare (originally entitled Nel Blu Dipinto di Blu). The locals are incredibly proud of their favourite son and rightly so. As you wander through the streets that inspired such a wonderful song, you might well find yourself involuntarily singing or whistling “Volare, oh, oh... Cantare, oh, oh, oh, oh... Nel blu dipinto di blu... felice di stare lassù...”
“From the eastern sea,
Curving in an arc,
The thick foaming waves break
Against their opposing rocky masses.
Hidden from sight,
Sheltered behind its double seawalls,
Lies the internal port,
From where the hilly land rises
Towards the far-off temple.”

So wrote Virgil in the 3rd book of The Aeneid, describing the hero’s approach to the Japigo promontory, home to Leuca...

Legend has it that the temple crumbled to the ground as St. Peter passed through.

As Virgil intimates, Santa Maria di Leuca sits on the southernmost tip of the Salento peninsula where the waters of the Adriatic Sea mingle and merge with those of the Ionian. A popular resort for wealthy Puglians since the early 1900s, as is evident from the eye-catching Art Nouveau villas that line the seafront, Leuca has all the necessary attributes for a quintessential Mediterranean holiday.

Apart from Virgil’s description, Leuca has long been mentioned in the annals of history: Thucydides, Sallustius, Strabo and Horace all mentioned the town in historical and literary contexts, while documents attest to St. Peter sojourning there on his way to Rome.

The town’s name comes from the Greek Leukos, meaning light or luminous, while the appendage of Santa Maria refers specifically to the religious sanctuary built on a site high above the harbour, once home to a Temple of Minerva. Legend has it that the temple crumbled to the ground as St. Peter passed through.

The sanctuary, also known as the Basilica De Finibus Terrae (Leuca was where the land ended for the Romans), was consecrated by Pope Julius I on 1st August 343 AD. It has long been a place of pilgrimage and is particularly busy around the middle of August when the townsfolk celebrate their beloved protector. On 14th August, the statue of the Virgin is collected from the sanctuary and taken to the Chiesa di Cristo Re, where she remains for the night. On 15th August, the Catholic festival of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary, the statue is paraded through the streets and down to the port. Here it is placed on a specially festooned fishing boat which, accompanied by a flotilla of well-wishers, chugs across the sea to the port of San Gregorio and back. Once the statue is safely back in the sanctuary, it’s time for the fireworks and general partying to begin.

Not far from the sanctuary is the impressive lighthouse, built in 1864 on the site of a 16th century watchtower. Its octagonal form rises 47 metres into the sky (over 100m above sea level) and contains a winding staircase of 254 steps. Still in function, it is one of Leuca’s most impressive landmarks.

While on the theme of engineering feats, Leuca is also home to a monumental man-made waterfall, built to signal the end of the Puglia aqueduct. Started in the mid-19th century, the aqueduct took an age to complete and only arrived in Leuca, its final destination, in 1941. Mussolini was a great proponent of the project (the longest aqueduct in Europe) and ordered the construction of a suitably showy finale: the mouth of the aqueduct is built into a bridge at the top of the Japigo promontory and a waterway of rocks falls away below, flanked on either side by 300 steps. Standing proudly to attention at the bottom is a Roman column, transferred, on Mussolini’s orders, from the capital to Leuca. The cascade is opened only a few times a year, so is not to be missed if you’re lucky enough to be in the area at the right time.

But Santa Maria di Leuca is also, and perhaps principally, about the sea. The sandy beaches at nearby Felloniche, Posto Vecchio, Torre Vado and Pescoluse are excellent for families and well-equipped with lidos, bars, restaurants and other facilities, while the more dramatic stretches of coastline, as described by Virgil, feature rocky cliffs pierced with around thirty Karstic grottoes. The best way to see these fascinating geological formations is by boat and there is no shortage of local sailors ready to take you out to sea off the coast where the world ends.

**GOOD THINKING**
Ask your Local Manager to organise a boat trip from Leuca to Lo Scalo restaurant up the coast for lunch. After a morning at sea visiting the grottoes and swimming, you’ll dock right below the restaurant, which serves excellent fish and seafood dishes.
During the Roman Republic, Taranto retained its status as an important Mediterranean centre, but under the rule of the Roman Empire it fell into decline. Emperor Trajan redirected the Via Appia to Bari on the Adriatic coast and Taranto’s provincial fate was sealed.

In the build up to and during the 1st World War, Taranto reassumed some of its former importance as it became home to the Italian naval fleet. This role continued into the 2nd World War and the city became a target for the Allied forces. On the night of 10th November 1940, the Regina Marina fleet, anchored in the Mar Grande and the Mar Piccolo, was severely damaged by British naval forces in the so-called Battle of Taranto. Three years later, on 9th September, British forces landed near Taranto as part of the Allied invasion that would slowly push north through the Italian peninsula.

A swing bridge opens to allow the passage of the navy’s fleet.

Wandering around Taranto is a very pleasant experience and there is lots of interest to see. The Cattedrale di San Cataldo, right in the heart of old Taranto, dates back to the 11th century and houses the relics of the city’s patron saint. The façade of the cathedral is baroque though
The cupola shows clear Byzantine influence. Inside is a wonderful mosaic floor, similar to the one in Otranto’s cathedral, while the chapel of San Cataldo, where the saint’s relics are preserved, is adorned with a superb series of frescoes by Paolo de Matteis dating from 1713.

Taranto’s other great monument is the Aragonese Castle, built by King Ferdinand of Aragon in the 15th century. During the 18th century the castle became a prison before eventually passing to the Italian Navy. Today it is open to visitors and is one of the town’s most popular tourist attractions.

Nearby is the beautiful canal with its ponte girevole, a swing bridge that opens to allow the passage of the navy’s fleet. You might be lucky and see the locals watching, waving and cheering the sailors as they return home.

Right opposite the castle are two well-preserved Doric columns, remains of a Greek temple and the only visible testimony to Taranto’s past as a Greek colony.

The old town centre is a fascinating maze of narrow alleyways, many of which only allow access in single file. Echoing with the voices of fishermen returning from their arduous days at sea, these streets provide a charming and unusual setting for visitors. Fish markets rub shoulders with hidden architectural gems, and cafés, bars and restaurants spill out onto the pavements serving up delicious local specialities such as tubettini con le cozze (pasta with mussels). We suggest you try some. Buon appetito!
Trani

An instantly recognisable landmark for sailors navigating the Adriatic Sea over the centuries, Trani’s iconic seafront cathedral is one of the finest anywhere in Italy. But, as anyone spending a little time in Trani will quickly come to realise, the cathedral is just the icing on a particularly tasty cake.

Trani was also home to southern Italy’s largest Jewish community.

Although its history goes back somewhat further, Trani, which lies just north of Bari, became the lovely town it is today between the 11th and 13th centuries. Its strategic position on the Adriatic coast made it an important point of departure for the Crusades as well as a flourishing commercial centre, attracting many families from Italy’s great Maritime Republics, with whom it maintained close diplomatic relations. In the same period, Trani was also home to southern Italy’s largest Jewish community, testament to whose presence is the impressive Scolanova synagogue.

The old town centre, a charming mediaeval network of streets with plenty of fine architecture, is arranged around the picturesque fishing port, which is itself flanked by numerous bars, cafés and fish restaurants. From here, heading to the north end of the port, one comes to the cathedral, a fabulous example of Romanesque architecture whose creamy white limestone and lofty proportions emphasise its stunning location beside the deep blue of the Adriatic Sea. Completed in 1143 and dedicated to Saint Nicholas the Pilgrim, the cathedral has a basilica plan, with three apses, and a large crypt. Its angular roofs are supported by mighty walls punctuated by high windows, giving a fortified feel. The west end features a rose window and a finely sculpted portal whose original bronze doors, the work of Barisano di Trani (also responsible for the doors at Monreale cathedral in Sicily), are now conserved inside. On the south side is an imposing 60m-high tower, added in 1239.

Heading about 100m west of the cathedral, following the sea wall, one comes to Trani’s other architectural marvel: Emperor Frederick II’s castle, built in 1233. Rising directly from the sea, whose waves crash against its walls, the castle has a classic quadrangular form, with robust square towers at each corner. Various parts were added over the years, and the sea water moat was filled in, but essentially Frederick’s original structure remains. In the early 1800s it became a prison and only in 1974 were the last inmates moved to a newer establishment. It has recently been restored, is now open to the public and hosts frequent concerts, art exhibitions and other cultural events.

If, after a morning’s wandering around Trani and a good alfresco lunch on the harbour front, you are still in the mood for exploration, why not head inland (a 40-minute drive) to another of Frederick II’s great constructions, Castel del Monte?
Festivals, Culture and Traditions

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Festivals and Events

Like most regions in Italy, Puglia has a full calendar of cultural, religious and gastronomic festivals and events. No matter when you come, or where you go, you will always find something going on. Here are a few:

**IL CARNEVALE DI PUTIGNANO**

The longest and some say oldest carnival in the world. Four parades with allegorical floats and masked merrymakers and lots more besides. *When: January/February - Where: Putignano*

**LA SETTIMANA SANTA**

A series of robed Easter processions following the statues of the Madonna and Jesus through the streets. *When: Maundy Thursday, Good Friday and Easter Saturday - Where: Taranto*

**I FALÒ DI SAN GIUSEPPE**

In Italy, Father’s Day is on 19th March to coincide with the Festa di San Giuseppe. In an act of purification and hope for a bountiful year, bonfires are lit in towns all around Puglia. *When: 19th March - Where: Locorotondo, Conversano and other towns*

**LA FESTA DI SAN NICOLA**

Celebrating the arrival of San Nicola’s relics in Bari, La Festa di San Nicola attracts thousands of pilgrims from all over the world to join in three days of homage to Bari’s Patron Saint. *When: 7th - 9th May - Where: Bari*

**LOCUS FESTIVAL**

An outdoor jazz festival featuring international artists. *When: usually mid-July to mid-August - Where: Locorotondo*

**THE FESTIVAL DELLA VALLE D’ITRIA**

A classical music and opera festival, running since 1975. *When: from the middle of July to the beginning of August - Where: Martina Franca*

**OTRANTO JAZZ FESTIVAL**

A series of concerts by top Italian and international jazzers. *When: usually last week of July / beginning of August - Where: Otranto and nearby towns*

**LA FESTA DI SANTA CRISTINA**

A rowing regatta and other events to celebrate the town’s patron saint. *When: 24th July - Where: Gallipoli*

**CEGLIE FOOD FESTIVAL**

Ceglie is famous for its gastronomic heritage and its excellent restaurants, which are celebrated with the Ceglie Food Festival. *When: usually second weekend of August - Where: Ceglie Messapica*

**LA FESTA DEI MARTIRI IDRUNTINI**

A commemoration of the 800 martyrs who died at the hands of the Turks in 1480 for refusing to convert to Islam. Two days of solemn processions are followed by partying and fireworks. *When: 13th - 15th August - Where: Otranto*
The Festa di San Nicola

When sailors from Bari saved the relics of Saint Nicholas from his resting place in Muslim-controlled Myra in 1087, they began a tradition which is still going strong over 925 years later: the Festa di San Nicola.

Each year, thousands of pilgrims come to Bari from all over the world to give thanks and worship at the tomb of San Nicola. The busiest time of the year, however, are the first 10 days of May, when the Festa di San Nicola takes place. The old town centre around the Basilica di San Nicola is decked out in colourful lights and a palpable sense of excitement courses through the streets.

The saint is taken out to sea, accompanied by a flotilla of colourfully festooned boats.

The Festa begins in earnest on 7th May (though many of the locals have already been partying for some days) with a stirring historical procession of an icon of the saint through the streets of Bari Vecchia, accompanied by around 500 specially costumed attendants. Once the icon has been safely returned to the Basilica for the night, bells ring out and the celebrations really burst into life.

The following day, a large statue of the saint is taken out to sea, accompanied by a flotilla of colourfully festooned boats. Crowds of well-wishers wait on dry land for his return in the evening, an event that symbolises the arrival of his relics in Bari over 925 years ago. After a solemn welcome from the city’s religious and civic dignitaries, the statue is paraded through the streets and taken back to the Basilica.

9th May, the final day of the core festivities, is given over to religious services celebrating the anniversary of San Nicola’s arrival in Bari. After the last mass has been said, thousands of revellers take to the streets and the skies above become a blank canvas for the polychromatic splendour and thunderous rumble of a thousand and one fireworks.

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The Festival della Valle d’Itria

An annual summer appointment for music lovers since 1975, the Festival della Valle d’Itria in Martina Franca is one of Italy’s premier classical music and opera festivals.

Performers and audiences come from all over the world, but the atmosphere remains local.

Each year, between the middle of July and the beginning of August, the festival showcases a series of operas (totalling over 100 since its inception) and other pieces, ranging from the famous to the less well known, and from 16th century works to world premieres and commissions. Performers and audiences come from all over the world, but the atmosphere remains intimate and local.

The operas are generally staged in the delightful surroundings of the Palazzo Ducale, while orchestral, chamber music and choral concerts take place in a variety of venues around Martina Franca and in neighbouring towns. Recent operas have included Bellini’s Zaira, Verdi’s Joan of Arc, Richard Strauss’s Salomé and Korngold’s Der Ring des Polykrates.

To see what’s on and when, head to www.festivaldellavalleditria.it (also in English).

La Pizzica

If you come across a group of people dancing frenetically in the Salento area of Puglia, odds on it won’t be a rave, but a pizzica pizzica, a kind of tarantella peculiar to the province of Lecce.

Shrouded in myth and legend and dating back many hundreds if not thousands of years, this dance was thought to have been the only cure for a tarantula bite, or, metaphorically, for someone possessed by the devil.

The dancer’s aim was to expel the poison through sheer force of motion and perspiration.

When the alarm was sounded that someone had been bitten, usually while working in the fields, the local band would pick up their instruments (traditionally violins, mandolins, guitar, flute, accordion and large tamburine) and rush to the house of the afflicted.

Once there they would begin to play, slowly at first, while the patient, usually in a high fever by this time, began the dance. As the music got faster, so too did the steps of the dancer, whose aim was to expel the poison (or malignant spirit) through sheer force of motion and perspiration. Often family and other villagers would join in, in a show of solidarity.

The dance would continue prestissimo until the main protagonist reached a trance-like state and collapsed to the floor, utterly exhausted, but hopefully cured.

Other versions of the dance exist, including more romantic ones requiring a partner, but the real excitement comes when purification or exorcism is called for.

This important folk tradition is celebrated each year in August in a festival called La Notte della Taranta. The towns and villages of Grecìa Salentina, the area south of Lecce and west of Otranto, all come together, hosting concerts, dancing and all-out parties.

Musicians and bands from around the world are invited to take part, and recent editions have seen the likes of Stewart Copeland, Joe Zawinul and the Buena Vista Social Club.
Architectural Traditions

TRULLI

There is probably nothing that signals your arrival in Puglia more than the iconic sight of a trullo, the unique conical constructions found in the southern Murgia area of the peninsula.

Trulli have been around for many hundreds of years, though the oldest surviving ones date back only to the 16th century. The probable reason for this is that they were generally built as temporary dry-stone accommodation that could be dismantled whenever necessary, usually when the property tax collectors came to town. Imagine their surprise when they arrived at Locorotondo, Alberobello or Fasano to find mounds of rubble and virtually no houses. As soon as the inspectors went away, the trulli would spring up again and the locals would move back in.

A typical trullo has a cylindrical base with a conical limestone-tiled roof. Though built without cement, their thick white-painted stone walls ensured coolness in the summer and warmth in the winter. The roof was often painted with an evil eye, a cross or an astronomical symbol and topped by an ornamental flourish.

The large cluster of trulli in Alberobello, thanks to their unique characteristics and historical significance, constitute one of Puglia’s two UNESCO World Heritage Sites and is certainly worth a visit.

The only other place in Europe to have trulli is the Rhineland in Germany, thanks to the migrant workers from Puglia who went to work in the vineyards there, building their own accommodation as a real home away from home.
The Puglian countryside is scattered with masserie, imposing constructions that were once the beating hearts of the local agricultural estates.

They served many purposes, providing not only accommodation for the local lord or massaro (landlord or farm manager), who would live on the upper floor, but also storerooms, workrooms, stables and living quarters for the farmhands on the lower level.

They were generally very large in size and built of thickly-carved blocks of tuff stone. The main building was often connected to a chapel and surrounded by courtyards, large fertile gardens and, finally, strong protective perimeter walls designed to keep out unwanted visitors. Beyond those lay the fields and farmland.

Thanks to their size and impressive architectural design, over recent decades a great many of Puglia’s masserie have been transformed into luxury hotels and glorious private residences. Several of the latter, such as Villa Elia, Masseria Curti Vecchi, Masseria Cisterna Rossa and Masseria Scippi have decided to open their doors exclusively to clients of The Thinking Traveller.
Food in Puglia

For millennia, Puglia has predominantly been an agricultural region, producing around 40% of Italy’s olive oil and a large proportion of its wine. Vast tracts of the region’s territory are given over to farming, whether it be crops or livestock, and many inhabitants continue to grow their own produce.

This essentially agricultural nature means that the region’s cuisine is home-country inspired, principally using the abundant local produce such as durum wheat, tomatoes, artichokes, fava beans, rocket, courgettes, beans, fennel, peppers, onions, beef and lamb.

In terms of pasta, Puglians pride themselves on their orecchiette, little ear-shaped shells that are still produced by hand on a daily basis by many signore. It is usually served with tasty sauces such as meat ragù, broccoli and lard, mushrooms or turnip tops. The pasta itself is made rigorously from durum wheat flour, water and salt. Eggs, once considered a luxury, are not used in traditional Puglian pasta-making.

Another pasta speciality is maccheroni al forno. The maccheroni is mixed with meatballs, hard-boiled eggs and all manner of other ingredients, before being topped with a pie crust and cooked in the oven. A sensationally rich and tasty treat.

Orecchiette are still produced by hand on a daily basis by many signore.

As with pasta, local durum wheat is also used in Puglia’s delicious bread, which comes in all shapes and sizes and is a constant companion to meals. In more remote villages, communal wood-burning ovens still exist, where local housewives can bake their own bread. Altamura, a small town in the northwest of Puglia was the first town in Europe to receive a DOP classification (Denomination of Origin of Production) for its bread. When McDonald’s came to town, the locals gave it short shrift, continuing to prefer only sandwiches made with their own bread. Less than two years after opening, the great Ms were taken down and the global hamburger circus left town. A victory for food lovers everywhere.

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Puglia’s rocky interior is ideal for sheep-farming and lamb is very popular. Feast days are characterised by the fragrances of roasting lamb wafting through the streets and most restaurant menus will feature at least a couple of lamb dishes. Pork is also popular, while beef, traditionally a minor player in the region’s cuisine, is more and more available. One thing to look out for in the Valle d’Itria area, and especially in Cisternino, are the rosticceria butchers where you can choose your meat and have it cooked there and then on a hot charcoal grill or in a wood-burning oven. While waiting, just take a seat at one of the tables and get stuck into a glass of local wine.

The presence of so many sheep also means that cheese is generally of ovine extraction. Puglia’s pecorinos and ricottas are excellent and ubiquitous. Visitors should also try to find some burrata from Andria, a fresh, soft cheese that has to be eaten within 24 hours of production - absolutely delicious.

Puglia’s long coastline and fishing traditions bring large quantities of seafood to the table. Red mullet, anchovies, gilt-head bream, mussels, sea bass and cuttlefish are featured in many recipes and the myriad seafront restaurants in towns like Gallipoli, Otranto, Brindisi and Taranto serve up feasts of just-caught fish.

If you still have room after the main courses, Puglia’s desserts will certainly tempt you. Many are almond based (the region produces vast quantities of almonds), often combined with honey or vin cotto di fichi (a kind of fig concentrate), while sweetened ricotta cheese sweets are also a local favourite. Sweets are also on the menu at breakfast and you must try a pasticciotto, little custard filled pies.

Puglia’s comforting country cuisine may not be as famous as that of some other Italian regions, but it is full of goodness and genuineness and thoroughly local, a pure expression of popular traditions and the natural bounty of the land.

**TAIEDDA**
**(Potato, vegetable and mussel bake)**

**Ingredients** (serves 5-6)

- 250g potatoes
- 250g courgettes
- 250g aubergines
- 500g mussels
- 50g grated pecorino cheese
- 2-3 ripe tomatoes, chopped
- 1 small onion, chopped
- parsley
- 50g breadcrumbs
- 100g rice
- 2 tbsp capers
- salt and pepper
- extra virgin olive oil
- oregano

**Procedure**

Peel the potatoes, wash and slice thinly. Do the same with the courgettes and the aubergines. Put some oil in an oven dish and add the chopped onion, tomato and parsley. On top of this place a layer of potatoes, sprinkle with breadcrumbs and cheese, and then add a layer of aubergines and courgettes and a few capers. Add a layer of rice (uncooked) and then the mussels (debearded and scrubbed previously). Finally, add another layer of potatoes. Season, sprinkle with oregano, add a final touch of tomato and some breadcrumbs. Drizzle with olive oil and add enough water to cook the potatoes and rice. Place in a hot oven and leave to cook until you can easily slice through the layers with a knife. By this time the top should be golden brown.
10 Dishes to Try in Puglia

1. **Melanzane e zucchine riempite** (stuffed aubergines and courgettes)
2. **Alici arraganate** (anchovies au gratin)
3. **Tubettini con le cozze** (short pasta tubes with mussels)
4. **Orecchiette con sugo alla ricotta forte** (orecchiette pasta with tomato sauce and strong ricotta cheese)
5. **Minestrone di fave con cicoria** (fava bean soup with chicory)
6. **Ciceri e tria** (tagliatelle with chick peas)
7. **Orecchiette con cime di rapa** (pasta with turnip tops - Puglia's signature dish)
8. **Bombette di maiale** (thin-cut slices of pork filled with cheese and other goodies, typical of Cisternino)
9. **Zuppa di pesce alla Gallipolina** (Gallipoli style fish soup)
10. **Pasticciotto** (mini custard pies, perfect for breakfast)

A Carpet of Olive Trees

As you come in to land at Bari or Brindisi airports, take a good look out of the window. It is unlikely that you will ever see as many olives trees in one place ever again.

Puglia is famous for many things: trulli, orecchiette pasta, glorious sandy beaches and the pizzica to name a few, but nothing is quite as Puglia-defining as the 50 to 60 million olive trees (no one seems to know for sure how many) that carpet the region, from the north to the south.

The sheer number of trees is amazing, but so, in many cases, are their size and age. Called *ulivi secolari* (literally centuries-old olive trees), you will come across large numbers of ancient trees with knotted, gnarled, robust trunks that have been twisted into grotesque shapes by a mix of time, wind, sun and man’s hand. They give an impression of wizened sagacity, seen-it-all tiredness and a patient acceptance of the immutability of time.

Wealthy northern Italians paid large sums of money to shady olive tree rustlers.

A few years ago these monumental olive trees were the object of an illicit trade whereby wealthy northern Italians, in a quest to add age and prestige to their gardens, paid large sums of money to shady olive tree rustlers. Local Puglian farmers would wake up to find their prized trees had been dug up and taken away during the night in what the local press termed the olive tree emigration.
If there weren’t already enough reasons to choose a holiday in Puglia, here’s another: the cheese. With dozens of varieties, ranging from the hard, mature and tangy to the soft, spreadable and buttery, Puglia is a little slice of paradise for cheese lovers. Here are a few we recommend you try:

**BURRATA**

The number one spot must go to Burrata, a real Puglian invention we strongly recommend. Produced in Andria and Martina Franca, it is basically a cow’s milk mozzarella with a surprise inside: a delicately oozing liquid cream filling. Ideally it should be eaten the same day of production, but in the unlikely event that you don’t eat it all in one go, it can last a couple of days in the fridge.

**CACIOCAVALLO PODOLICO**

The Barbarian invasions of the 5th century AD brought devastation to many parts of Italy. It was not all bad, however, as the very same pillaging hordes also bought their favourite long-horned species of cattle from the Ukraine. Hundreds of their descendants (the cattle...
FOOD AND WINE – PUGLIAN CHEESE

CHEESE IS EATEN AT MOST MEALS IN PUGLIA

still chew the cud in the Gargano area of Puglia. The aromatic, herby milk of these Podolic cows is used for making an excellent spicy, strong cheese, which is left to ripen for around 3 years.

CANESTRATO PUGLIESE

The only DOP cheese made exclusively in Puglia (Caciocavallo Silano, also a DOP, is made in Basilicata, Calabria and Campania too), Canestrato Pugliese is a hard cheese made from sheep’s milk. Its name derives from the little baskets (canestrì) in which it is left to age. It is produced between December and May when the flocks have come down from the mountains of Abruzzo to graze on the green, green grass of the Tavoliere Pugliese, in the provinces of Foggia and Bari. The locals love to grate it on their pasta.

FALLONE DI GRAVINA

Fallone is another of those “eat today” cheeses that Puglia loves to produce. Made with a mix of sheep’s and goat’s milk, it has a good flavour and is possibly at its best when spread on a chunk of bread from Altamura, where, along with Gravina, it is also made.

MANTECA

Manteca is another Puglian cheese invention, which is to say, not just a cheese. Pear-shaped, made with cow’s milk and not matured, it boasts two layers, the inner one being a soft, deliciously creamy butter.

MARZOTICA

Made with a mix of cow’s and sheep’s milk in the Lecce area, Marzotica, as the name might imply, is traditionally produced in March (marzo in Italian) after the sheep have been grazing on the succulent green spring grass. It is left to mature and dry for around two weeks before being wrapped in grass. This relatively short aging process gives it a delicately tangy flavour and, as a consequence, Marzotica is often grated on pasta dishes to add an extra layer of taste.

PAMPANELLA

Pampanella, another cheese meant to be eaten the same day it is made, has a long history going back at least a couple of centuries. It is produced in Grottaglie using a mix of milks and takes some of its distinct flavour from the fig leaf in which it is wrapped.

RICOTTA FORTE

Ricotta Forte, or Ricotta Scanta, is made all over Puglia (and neighbouring Basilicata) and is often used in cooking, thanks to its pungent, gum-tingling qualities. This flavour comes from a three-month resting process in terracotta containers. Every three or so days it is stirred and then left once more to intensify its flavours. You will surely come across it on many restaurant menus, possibly in the form of orecchiette con la ricotta forte, and in shops, where it is sold in distinctive glass jars.

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Wine in Puglia

If Italy is the largest producer of wine in the world, it is largely thanks to Puglia, which produces more than any other Italian region, about 17% of the total.

Viticulture is deeply rooted in local traditions but until 20 or so years ago, a large proportion of Puglia’s grapes were used to add “substance” to wines produced in the rest of Italy and France. Thankfully this is no longer the case and Puglia now boasts 25 different DOC areas and some excellent vintages of its own.

The most widely grown grape variety is Negroamaro (literally ‘black bitter’). Almost exclusively cultivated in Puglia, Negroamaro is used to produce some of the region’s best wines, including Salice Salentino. The epithet of most famous grape, however, goes to Primitivo, whose wines, including the Primitivo di Manduria, are generally high in alcohol content and full in body. Curiously, the Primitivo grape shares its genetic make-up with California’s Zinfandel varietal.

White wines in Puglia count for less than 20% of the overall production but are gradually growing in importance. Local grapes such as Bombino Bianco, Bianco d’Alessano and Verdeca rub shoulders with international varieties including Chardonnay and Sauvignon to produce some excellent results.

We recommend you taste some of Puglia’s best wines in the comfort of your own villa by taking advantage of our in-villa wine delivery service.
The Thinking Traveller

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In so many ways, Puglia is a perfect holiday destination. It offers a something-for-everyone mix of gorgeous beaches, dazzling baroque towns, sleepy white-washed villages, intriguing history, unique architectural genres in the form of trulli and masserie, two seas from which to choose, a carpet of olive trees, and gastronomic traditions to rival any in Italy.

Exceptional villas, local knowledge, personal service.

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