

# PUGLIA & BASILICATA

## Why go?

The heel of Italy has, until recently, been overlooked by most visitors to the country – but it's well worth considering as a more exotic and less gentrified alternative to Tuscany, Umbria or the Italian Lakes. You get the same wealth of history, spanning from the Romans (whose Via Egnazia ran down the Adriatic Coast to Brindisi) via the Saracens (whose labyrinthine whitewashed architecture is evident in the southerly hilltowns) and the Normans (who built splendid cathedrals in all the major cities) to wonderful Baroque and Renaissance gems (notably the exuberant town of Lecce). Sprinkled among them, and among endless groves of venerably chunky olive trees, are the distinctly Puglian trulli: simple dry-stone storage huts with conical roofs – a bit like miniature oast-houses or limestone igloos or oversized beehives, depending where you come from.

Puglia has the added bonus of some of Italy's finest beaches: the sandy horseshoe bays of the Torre Guaceto nature reserve, the rugged limestone cliffs of the Gargano peninsula and the azure shallows of the Salentine peninsula (at the southerly tip) stand out from the more crowded and trendy *lidi* (beach clubs with music, volleyball, watersports etc). Come in spring or autumn and you could get one of these secluded coves all to yourself – a true rarity in Italy. Come in July – August and you can hobnob with the Milanese jetset, who have made Puglia their new summer playground and tanning salon.

The cuisine ain't half bad either: refined but authentic farmers' recipes using tasty, local ingredients. Think fresh seafood (bream, mussels), organic veg (courgettes, onions, plump cherry tomatoes), aubergine *involtini* wrapped around molten *cacciocavallo* cheese, doughnuts stuffed with ricotta and flaked almonds, all manner of pasta (ear-shaped *orecchiette* and wire-thin *fricelli*) and – in spring – the smoothest chick-pea purée imaginable. Add fresh fruit or gelati, wash down with pugliese red or rosé wines or limoncello liqueur (not forgetting the superb olive oil), and you're in gastro-heaven.

For British visitors, there are cheap direct flights from Stansted to Bari and Brindisi with Ryanair, making it every bit as accessible as the north. You could even pop over for a (long) weekend of spring or autumn sunshine – though, as always in Italy, we'd recommend you avoid August, when everyone flecks to the seaside resorts.

## Towns

### Ostuni

Our favourite of the Puglian hilltowns has white-cube houses spilling down a trio of hills below a hulking great Aragonese cathedral; they also built a castle and monastery, whose walls you can make out. Life in the lower town revolves (quite literally) around the obelisked *Piazza della Libertà* with its stately town hall. Stay at **La Sommità** just below the cathedral.

### Alberobello and Fasano

Alberobello is 'trulli central', bristling with 1500 of the famous conical stone huts – and also with tourists visiting them, and tacky souvenir shops to serve them. Visit quickly, and then escape towards the coast. At Fasano you'll find handsome *masserie* (fortified farmhouses) standing among century-old olive groves, some of which have been converted to gorgeous hotels - including **Maizza**, **Alchimia** and **Borgo San Marco**. Near Fasano is Egnazia, a 2500-year-old Messapian port with over 2km of walls, still standing up to 7 metres high in places; plus ruins of later Roman amphitheatre, temples and halls.

### Locorotondo and Cisternino

Two pretty whitewashed towns with labyrinthine alleys reminiscent of north Africa, and pretty views from the perimeter walls over the olive-studded coastal strip. There are some lovely family villas in the olive groves near here, including **Cervarolo** and **Santoro**.

### Martina Franca

This inland gem has 14th-century town walls with views over neat, trulli-dotted fields; within are understated Baroque *palazzi*, a 1688 town hall (you can visit some of the richly-muralled rooms), trendy clothes boutiques and a lively weekend *passeggiata*

### Trani and Castel Del Monte

Often overlooked, Trani hides a colourful marina, an imposing courthouse, medieval customs buildings, a Jewish quarter with 3 synagogues, and a huge Norman cathedral right on the water's edge. All are built of the famously light-coloured limestone from the area. There are lively streetside cafés and excellent restaurants, notably the pricey *Corte in Fiore*. Sitting in a secluded valley 30km inland, Castel del Monte is an extraordinary 13th-century castellated hunting lodge based on the number eight: octagonal in shape, it has 8 towers and 8 trapezoidal rooms on each floor. Built by Frederick II, and one of the finest remaining examples of Swabian architecture, it has long fascinated historians, some of whom believe that the building is an enormous astrological calendar. Stay in the hills between the two, at **Lama di Luna**.

### Matera

The most dramatic of several cave-towns, and now Unesco-listed, Matera actually lies across the border in Basilicata. Simple dwellings have been carved directly into the soft *tufa* walls of the ravines and gullies which make up this town. You can explore winding alleys and frescoed cave-churches - if they look familiar, that's because they were used as the setting for Jerusalem in *The Passion of Christ*,

starring Mel Gibson. Nearby is the haunting ghost town of Craco. Stay at **LHotel in Pietra**.

### **Lecce**

The jewel of southern Puglia hides, within its ugly modern perimeter, such a treasure trove of Baroque buildings – churches, *palazzi*, civic halls – that it gave birth to its own architectural style, Lecce Baroque (very flowery!). There are also the remains of a huge Roman amphitheatre. An easy day trip from **Masseria Montelauro**.

## **Beaches**

### **Torre Guaceto Nature Reserve**

Northwest of Brindisi is a 7-km stretch of sandy shores and flowering maquis centred around a 16th-century watchtower. Walk to the horseshoe bays at its centre (no vehicles are allowed) and you can be alone with the lizards, kingfishers, tortoises and sea birds; carpets of pink and yellow stock, clover and campion fringe the blue waters.

### **The Salentine Peninsula**

The tip of the heel has some of the most idyllic yellow-sand-azure-sea combinations in Italy. On the Adriatic (northeast) side, Baia dei Turchi (north of Otranto) has secluded coves backed by enclosing cliffs; on the Ionian (southwest) side, follow the coast road from Gallipoli to Taranto and pick your favourite spot.

### **The Gargano peninsula**

The 'spur' above the heel of Puglia boasts dramatic limestone cliffs and pine-fringed seascapes, not to mention pilgrims churches, isolated monasteries, sedate resort towns and a profusions of orchids, iris and other wild flowers.