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LIFE ON THE HEEL

The spiky heel of Italy's boot, the Puglia region is a land in a sumptuous time warp — where sleepy villages are silent except for birdsong; where roads wind through centuries-old olives groves; and where locals perform miracles with ingredients plucked from that famous *terra rossa*

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PREVIOUS PAGES, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Slow-cooked octopus at La Torretta del Pescatore, in Monopoli; alley in Monopoli's old town; local man, Nardò

CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: Bar, Borgo Egnazia; *orecchiette* pasta drying outdoors in the San Nicola district of Bari; *orecchiette* maker in Bari's old town

It doesn't look like a beach you'd stop for. Not at first glance; not at third, either. In fact, in the six years I've been visiting Puglia I haven't pulled over here once. Instead of sand, there's jagged limestone. Instead of lapping gently, the sea hammers on the rock. Then there are those walls on the other side — half fallen-down, and forbidding. I once lived further up the coast, you see, where the Adriatic sashays gracefully onto sands as manicured as an A-lister's fingers. So I've always come to Puglia not for the coastline but for the food, the conical *trullo* houses and the graceful white-stone hill towns of the Itria Valley, the best-known part of the region. But when Elena, my hotel concierge, had revealed the beach's secrets, I was forced to reassess my priorities. That basin where the sea swirls against the rock? It was a Roman harbour. Those rectangular holes in the tufa? Two-thousand-four-hundred-year-old Messapian tombs. The gargantuan wall is Byzantine; the red dots in every rockpool, shards of Roman pottery.

When I'd booked my stay at Borgo Egnazia, I'd envisioned a generic luxury break — a soft bed and swish views. But it turns out there's more to this five-star hotel than social cachet (this is where Justin Timberlake married Jessica Biel). For starters, everything's locally sourced and focused, from the food to the spa treatments — and the resort itself is a reimagining of a Pugliese *borgo* (walled town). But, as Elena had explained, Borgo Egnazia's real draw is what's hinted at in its name: Egnazia, the ancient city that put this area on the map, lying the other side of an adjacent golf course.

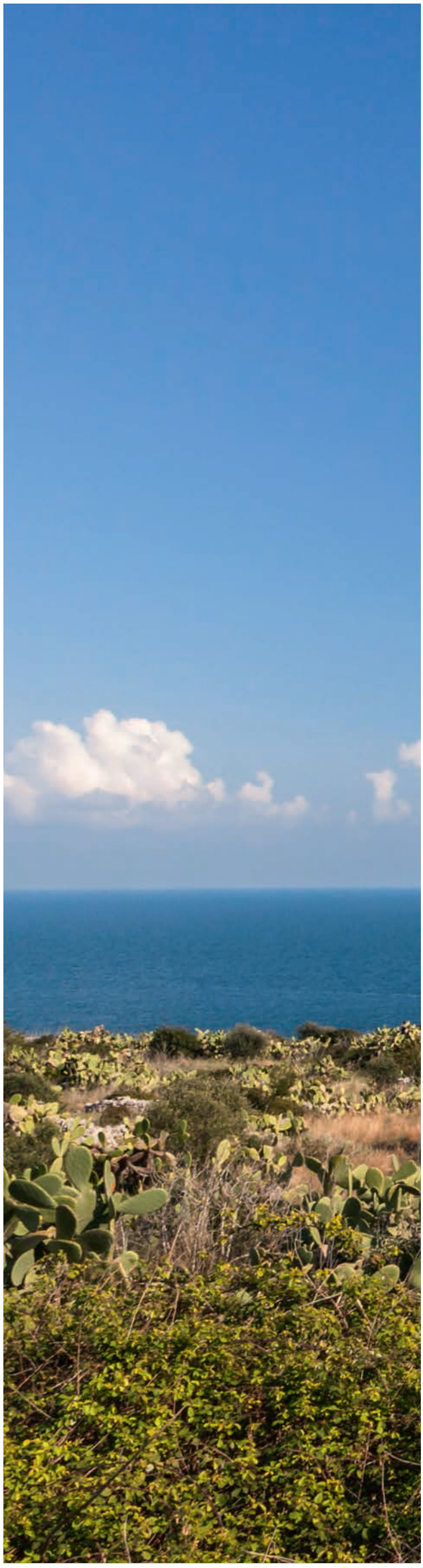
And this 'beach' — these rocks, rather, from which fishermen hunt sea urchins as prickly as the limestone — is Egnazia's old harbour, founded in the Bronze Age, then used by the Messapians, Romans, Goths, Lombards and Byzantines, before being abandoned in medieval times.

The next day, I set out from Borgo Egnazia's beguiling sister hotel, Masseria Cimino — accommodation wings wrapped round an 18th-century *masseria* farmhouse. Past the vegetable garden and down the olive-lined path, I skirt another gargantuan wall — the defensive perimeter of ancient Egnazia, it turns out, encircling the city 1.5 miles from its centre.

I follow it down a narrow track, past fields where lettuces and fennel plants are laid out like ribbons beneath centuries-old olive trees and around ancient stone structures. Birdsong is all that encroaches on the sound of the sea. Ten minutes later, I'm at Egnazia Archaelogical Park, where a grand museum is flanked by the ruins of a Messapian necropolis one side, Roman Egnazia the other: complete with forum, amphitheatre and — curling through ancient bathhouses — a section of the cobbled Appian Way, which ran from Rome to Brindisi. I cross the road to those Byzantine walls, a citadel on the headland. To my right is that harbour; in front lies Albania. Walking back, I realise the air is scented with fennel.

All Italians are proud of their region, of course, but the Pugliese are viscerally so. Meet one abroad, and they'll talk of the almost physical pain they feel in exile from their land. The famous *terra rossa* ('red earth') — coloured by limestone deposits — runs in their blood. Much of the intensity is down to their *contadino* heritage — the word means 'peasant' in Italian, but here it's used with pride, not pejoratively. And that pride shines through in the food.

"We have a *cucina povera* — a cuisine based on poverty," says Carlo Natale, the chef/owner of Trattoria L'Elfo, in Bari. On my first night, he'd offered me just two dinner options: *riso patate e cozze* — rice, potatoes and mussels sautéed together — or pasta with plain tomato sauce. My face had fallen — not even *spaghetti alle vongole*? — but the meal was incredible. "We're magicians," Carlo told me afterwards. "With a little, we create a lot. Our culinary heritage may be the poorest in Italy, but taste-wise it's the richest."



Salento appears stuck in a time warp — it's a place where towns fall silent at noon, where the air swells with birdsong

FROM LEFT: Masseria Cimino; east coast of the Salento Peninsula

Each area of Puglia — every town, even — has its own cuisine. Historically poor, Bari's is basic. At Monopoli, a medieval fishing port 25 miles south, I find an equally simple culinary tradition, scooped straight from the sea. Bream carpaccio, tuna tartare and slow-cooked octopus that falls apart on the fork: for me it's nirvana, at La Torretta del Pescatore, it's just lunch. The seafood was plucked from the sea that morning and jazzed up with little more than pureed capers, buffalo mozzarella cream and fried wild onions. There's no fancy fusion, here. "The only thing we mix is tradition with seasonality," says owner Piero Vitti.

Tradition and seasonality: adjectives that describe Puglia to a tee. Further south, at Torre Canne, Al Buco opened in the 1970s as a fishmonger's; today, the founders' grandson serves me in his restaurant cantilevered over the sea. He brings an antipasto — 15 plates of fish and shellfish cooked in every way imaginable, and they're only the starter.

Labour of love

Here on the heel, life follows Mother Nature's calendar. Last time I was at Pietro D'Amico's olive press, it was October and I'd popped in to say hi. Big mistake: it was packed with locals hauling in crates of olives they'd handpicked, and Pietro was nowhere to be seen.

But six weeks later, harvest is over and he has time to show me round. They produce nine oils here, including Lacrima ('Tear'), made from a secret blend of olives, hand-crushed and left for 30 minutes, until the pulp "weeps" oil, which pools on the surface and is bottled by hand.

It's a labour of love for Pietro; his family has done this since his great-great-grandfather's time. How amazing to be a fifth-generation business (daughter Vita is his deputy), I coo, dipping bread in oil so fresh it tastes spicy. "Yes, how amazing," he says gravely. "But what a responsibility." Puglia's struggling with an olive blight that's the talk of Italy (further down the heel, I'll drive past skeleton groves, branches twisted in horror at their leafless nakedness) and Pietro needs to keep his 6,000-odd trees — most of which are centuries-old — healthy.

"I do it for love," he says. "Obviously, it makes me money, but it also gives me joy to walk through my fields. I'm rooted to this *terra rossa*, to the green silver." Back home, opening my bottles of 'green silver', I can almost taste that pull of the land.

A stranger's love for Puglia is nothing new. Foreigners have been drawn here since time immemorial. Where other Italian regions have Roman ruins and Renaissance architecture, Puglia's landscape — its *macchia* (thickets of wild plants such as carob, pine, myrtle, mastic and rocket) interspersed with olive groves and vegetable fields — is dotted with prehistoric dolmens and menhirs. The coastline is speared with watchtowers — centuries-old defences against the outsiders who've always migrated here. Some came in peace, like the eighth-century Basilian monks fleeing Jerusalem, who dug underground churches. Others came to conquer, like the Lombards and Saracens.

All left their mark. The Normans, their architecture: simple buildings carved from the local stone — creamy, crumbly *pietra leccese* and hard white *carparo*. The Byzantines, their churches, with colourful frescoes of almond-eyed saints. The Greeks, their language — south of Lecce is Grecia Salentina, an area where the Griko dialect is spoken, a legacy of the Greeks who settled there in the eighth century. In Calimera (meaning 'good morning' in Greek), I walk along streets that feel vaguely Cycladic — low houses, pretty courtyards lurking behind dour walls — to the park, where an ancient Greek sculpture takes pride of place.

It was sent from Athens in 1960 as a symbol of ancestry. 'You're not a foreigner in Calimera', reads the plaque. And it's true. At Caffè Vittoria La Rina, on the main square, I ask about Griko and owner Tonia Conversano beckons me over for coffee. Only the elderly really speak it now, she says, as her daughter recites a

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Pruning an olive tree in Pietro D'Amico's groves; Pietro D'Amico's olive press; squid ink risotto with pea puree, Borgo Egnazia

traditional Griko song. But as the dialect fades, what remains in Grecìa Salentina is the atmosphere the Greeks must have encountered when they arrived as foreigners 1,300 years ago.

"You're at home, here, whoever you are," says Tonia, before inviting me to a "party" at 6pm. With two hours to while away, I go hunting for dolmens. I find two of the megalithic tombs outside nearby Melendugno, sitting quietly in adjacent olive groves. Further on, in Martano, a prehistoric menhir (standing stone) towers over the suburban street that's grown up around it.

At 6pm, I return to Calimera to find the entire town crowded within the piazza, watching a procession — headed by a life-size statue of the Madonna — snaking through the streets. "Did you like it?" asks Tonia eagerly when I say goodbye. Small-town life is far from insular here on the Salento Peninsula.

And it's the small-town life — deeply rooted in Puglia's *terra rossa* — that I'm most drawn to, here on the heel. Salento appears stuck in a Fellini-esque time warp — it's a place where towns fall silent at noon, where the air swells with birdsong, where roads wind through groves of centuries-old olives so gnarled that each seems caught in an eternal ballet pose, where every field seems to have a dolmen, hand-dug crypt or prehistoric cave lurking in its wildflower-carpeted midst.

Even in Lecce — stately Lecce with its frothy baroque facades — my hotel feels more like a home. La Fiermontina is dedicated to the sibling owners' beloved grandmother. Its walls are hung with the pair's art; dinners are served in the living room. Chef Simone Solido learned to cook by watching his *nonna*, he says, as he leads me past an olive-flanked pool to his herb garden: a row of pots on top of the ancient city walls. It's not your average five-star hotel, but then, Puglia does tourism differently. Perhaps it's the millennia-old culture of accommodating foreigners. Perhaps it's because tourism developed relatively late here and was woven into the existing fabric of the region, rather than catered to with a purpose-built infrastructure. For example, the *masseria* hotel trend began when Marisa Melpignano, Borgo Egnazia's owner, opened her farmhouse — first to friends, then to outsiders.

Meanwhile, Puglia is also big on *alberghi diffusi* ('scattered hotels') — where accommodation is spread across a number of disused buildings rather than being based in a single property. At Villaggio Vecchia Mottola, which hosts guests in former *contadino* housing in the medieval hill town of Mottola, I check in at the main square, sleep in a duplex studio two streets away, and breakfast at a nearby bar full of locals necking pre-work cappuccinos.

This is no ordinary B&B — it's your passport to becoming an honorary local. Owner Osvaldo Zazzara is prone to kissing guests who appear too reserved on arrival. "I didn't do it to you," he says, "because you didn't look like you needed it."

That's because I've spent the past week in Puglia, I tell him. It's been seven days of nonstop chatting: to priests who unlock closed chapels when I ask politely; to the *signora* from my Bari B&B who gave me a hand-stitched tablecloth as a parting gift; to Niccolò, the editor of a newsletter in Nardò, who met me for a coffee and ended up squiring me round the countryside, showing me hidden crypts and persuading a guy on his lunch break to open up his 17th-century underground olive press.

I had thought there'd be little more to Nardò than the baroque architecture that makes it a mini Lecce. But the next morning, Niccolò introduces me to archaeologist Dr Filomena Ranaldo. She tells me about Porto Selvaggio, a nearby natural park whose eight cliffside caves were once home to prehistoric man. Excavations are ongoing and there are plans to open a museum in Nardò showcasing the findings later this year and to run guided tours of one of the caves in 2018. What's been unearthed so far has been extraordinary. The 45,000-year-old teeth found here point to Porto Selvaggio being the earliest-known home of Homo sapiens in Europe. They weren't the first to dwell here, though.

From Otranto, the road cleaves to the *Macchia*-rippled coastline winding through tiny fishing villages. It's Puglia at its finest; unspoiled, unassuming, utterly spectacular

Beach on the coastal drive from Otranto to Santa Maria di Leuca

The Rupestrian church of San Nicola, part of the Grotte di Dio, Mottola

The excavations have confirmed that Neanderthals probably lived here as far back as 120,000 years ago. What's also clear is that this land of canyons and ravines has been inhabited ever since. At Massafra, near Mottola, people still live in cave homes carved out of the limestone.

Near Egnazia, I visit Lama d'Antico, a tiny canyon hollowed out by the stream running through it. Stray cats wind round my legs, purring, as archaeologist Roberto Rotondo and Marisa Melpignano (who's financed restoration work here) lead me into caves that were inhabited from AD 900-1300. There are ceilings blackened from fire smoke, 'cupboards' carved into the walls, and two churches; their fragile columns sculpted from the canyon walls.

At Mottola, I visit the Grotte di Dio ('Caves of God'): four churches chiselled into the walls of a ravine, covered wall to wall with Byzantine frescoes still as bright as the day they were painted; the saints' gaze following me as I walk around, my eyes watering in astonishment.

And on the day I finally make it to the tip of Italy's heel, I stop at the Zinzulusa Cave, on the eastern coast. The guide weaves me past stalactites and stalagmites to a guano-spattered cave, set 150 metres into the cliffside where, 10,000 years ago, Paleolithic man set up home, overlooking the turquoise Adriatic.

I'd driven here from Lecce, hitting the sea at Otranto. From there, the road cleaves to the *macchia*-rippled coastline, winding through tiny fishing villages. The drive is Puglia at its finest; unspoiled, unassuming, utterly spectacular — Amalfi without the attitude. One minute, the Adriatic is sparkling 200ft beneath me; the next, it's twinkling through the car window.

Puglia finishes at Santa Maria di Leuca, Italy's most southeasterly point. This is where, legend has it, Saint Peter landed on his way to Rome; the temple that once stood here was converted into a church. From my vantage point on a prickly pear-studded cliff, I turn towards the sea and watch it blush as the sun sets. De Finibus Terrae, the Romans called this place ('the end of the land') — the last of that living red earth; and the point at which the Adriatic and Ionian come together.

I look closer — at lines shimmering in the pink water, streaks of tension where two currents collide. Pint-size boats hover between them — it's a prime site for fishing, this spot where two seas and multiple cultures have been shuffling together for millennia, the mystical landscape drawing them in like iron filings.

"Did you feel it?" Niccolò will say later, when I tell him about Leuca. "Did you really feel the land?" And I tell him I'll never forget.

ESSENTIALS

Getting there & around

Ryanair flies year-round to Bari and Brindisi from Stansted. Airlines running summer services to Bari include EasyJet and British Airways from Gatwick and Ryanair from Liverpool. Summer services to Brindisi include Ryanair from Manchester and British Airways from Heathrow. *ryanair.com easyjet.com ba.com trenitalia.com*

AVERAGE FLIGHT TIME: 3h.

Public transport is limited — unless you're sticking to the cities, hiring a car with GPS is essential.

When to go

Puglia has a typically Southern European climate: summer is often baking, winter mild, spring and autumn warm. Avoid August, when Italians holiday en masse and traffic is a nightmare.

Places mentioned

La Torretta del Pescatore. *latorrettadelpescatore.com*
Al Buco. *ristorantealbuco.it*
Il Frantolio D'Amico Pietro. *ilfrantolio.it*
Egnazia. *egnaziaonline.it*
Lama d'Antico. *lamadantico.it*
Grotte di Dio. *mottolaturismo.it*
Grotta Zinzulusa. *www.grottazinzulusa.it*

Where to stay

Borgo Egnazia. *borgoegnazia.com*
Masseria Cimino. *masseriacimino.com*
La Fiermontina. *lafiermontina.com*
Villaggio Vecchia Mottola. *vecchiamottola.com*
Angelo Custode. *nardosalento.com*
B&B Corte Zeuli. *cortezeuli.it*

More info

viaggiareinpuglia.it

How to do it

CLASSIC COLLECTION HOLIDAYS offers seven nights in Puglia, including three nights at Borgo Egnazia, British Airways flights and seven days' car hire from £1,189 per person.
classic-collection.co.uk

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