



Pagan heaven in Puglia

PUGLIA Brendan O'Connor

ABOUT once a week I try to recreate the simple pasta dish that Rocco taught me. I know it will never be like his was — but each week it is a different approximation of it. So I'm circling around it.

But then I don't have the sweet little Puglian tomatoes he had, the quality of fragrant fresh basil he had, and I don't have time either, to hand make my orecchiette, the way we did that day. What I do have is the oil. Until it ran out just before Christmas. I kept the few cans of oil I had smuggled home from Puglia specifically for that dish, so that every time we had it there was a little bit of that magical place in the food.

And it is magical. I actually felt from the moment we landed in Bari that this was the place. This was the Italy I had been searching for: No wonder they say all Pugliese come home eventually. Nowhere else could seem as nice. In ways it reminded me of Ireland in a bygone age but with sun.

Where we were, just down the coast a bit from Bari, which is a short enough and cheap Ryanair flight from Dublin, was largely agricultural land. But it was beautiful and dramatic. Rows of olive trees stretching into the flat distance, some of them are nearly 3,000 years old, and their gnarled, twisted crooked timber is like a visualisation of time itself.

I gather they used to send these trees

around Italy to order. So if you were building a posh house in Milan, you would get one of these trees uprooted from where it had grown since before Christ was born, and you would plant it in your posh garden as a sort of living sculpture, to add a bit of texture and the patina of time to your decor. Now apparently they are protected, microchipped, and not allowed to move.

Another common sight over the old stone walls were groups of people out carefully planting seedlings by hand. It almost looked as if it was put on for the tourists.

And everywhere there were things growing, from cavolo nero to artichokes. It really was like travelling back in time. Straightaway you felt attuned to a different speed and a different way of living. The famous Trulli — the conical stone houses — in the fields added to the idyllic, otherworldly atmosphere.

It helped that our three nights would be spent in a most beautiful property. Borgo Egnaia is totally new but is built in the manner of an old Puglian village.

It was September, and while the weather was still like the best summer day ever in Ireland, it was harvest time, so the main building, which is largely for adults only, was full of displays of mother nature's bounty.

As we walked through it, you got that first sense that while these people were ostensibly Catholic, they still had that pagan, pantheistic nature that we used to have in Ireland. It was earthy, and slightly unsettling.

It wasn't until later in our stay that the whole thing would go full *Wicker Man* — but



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we'll get to that.

As a family we were staying in one of the little houses in the village. While they were built and decorated to feel like old village houses, they had, cleverly built in, all the trappings of 21st Century tech and luxury. But all the time you felt surrounded by nature. If Puglia is heaven, this is the best address in heaven. Everything here works in sympathy with nature. There's a private beach for example, where they will drive you in a golf

buggy whenever you want to go — but it's not a manicured sandy beach. Instead you lie on the grass next to a rocky cove with several sets of steps in and out.

You never feel the sterile grip of bland international hotel culture. You feel you are staying in a real place, with real texture to it, but they have grafted on everything you could need.

So after you bounce around in the sea, you can go and eat fresh seafood and drink cold wine in their largely open-air restaurant right next to the cove.

There's a sandy beach with a playground too if that's more your speed, and they'll drive you down safari-style in an old Land Rover.

They encourage you to engage with nature and the local area as well. I'm not usually one for doing the excursions, but the drive on a golf cart up to a neighbouring farm to watch Omer making mozzarella and burrata before your eyes and then eating the very cheese he made, while sitting outside looking at the sheep and goats was a fantastic experience.

And while the farm was clearly a popular spot with tourists, it smelt like a real farm, and the locals who mooched in and out to buy their fresh cheese while we were there, were presumably real as well.

I think it's down to the warmth of the people that you never feel like a tourist in Puglia, but that you are a guest who has been invited into their home.

The cookery class wouldn't be something I'd always do either, but Rocco made it a jolly affair and there is a great satisfaction when you get the flick just right and make your first proper 'little ear' from dough you've kneaded yourself, and then the whole gang cooked together and ate together.

While we didn't have a huge amount of time to explore the region, I was keen to suss out two stunning nearby towns I'd been watching from afar for a while.

Monopoli is picture-postcard Italy, a stunning old town by the sea, with a beautiful little beach in a protected bay in front of it. It's mostly pedestrianised little medieval streets, and every time you turn a corner there's an-

other amazing sight. There's even a stunning cathedral hidden up one road (see Take Two Top Attractions). We wandered around and ate panzerotti and dreamt of coming back here, to live.

Polignano al Mare you might know from those stunning shots of the Red Bull cliff diving that happens here, or you may have seen a story recently about how they've started charging visitors €4 to get into the place. Trust me, it's worth that and more. It's another picture-postcard spot, but this time with stun-

ning cliff drops to perch on top of or to swim underneath.

Again, while both these towns have maintained authenticity, they have unobtrusively put in chi chi bars and shops. Trust me. You will swoon at these places.

Back at Borgo Egnazia everyone kept talking about the Festa dell'Uva and how lucky we were to be here for it. I wasn't getting too excited because I've been let down by Italians and their parties before — a bit too posey and cool and not enough boozing and crack for me. Even when they started laying out the village square at the property for the party, I was still thinking, "Typical. They put all this effort into preparing it, and then nobody will actually kick back and enjoy it."

Boy was I wrong. First off we had possibly the best meal I've ever had, with various stalls set up around the square doing every kind of amazing Italian food you could imagine, from cheeses and meats to barbecued boar to fine desserts. It was literally a feast, one which they call "inebriating".

And then there was the wine. This was, after all a celebration of the grape.

'These are people who live in a heaven on earth and they know it'

As we all celebrated the grape the gypsy music seemed to get louder and louder and the dancing more wild and intense as the evening went on. It was a true Bacchanalia. There were even women trampling the grapes.

As the music swirled louder and my wife got swept up in giant conga line around the square by a couple we had met just an hour earlier, I half wondered if everyone would end up stripping off and going skinny dipping, or sacrificing chickens.

The next day, before we go there is another amazing meal at the [San Domenico Golf](#) part of the property. We are told we are very lucky

because we will be fed by Mimina — the original massaia for the Melpignano family who built Borgo Egnazia family.

A massaia was traditionally a local mamma and cook, who in the past looked after all the families living in the masseria, the large farmhouses. Mimina kept bringing more and more exquisite food out to us, all of it hearty and earthy but incredibly sophisticated too. With barely any meat. It was probably the closest thing a non Italian could get to being fed by an old-style nonna.

Earthy and sophisticated probably sums up Borgo Egnazia and Puglia. These are people

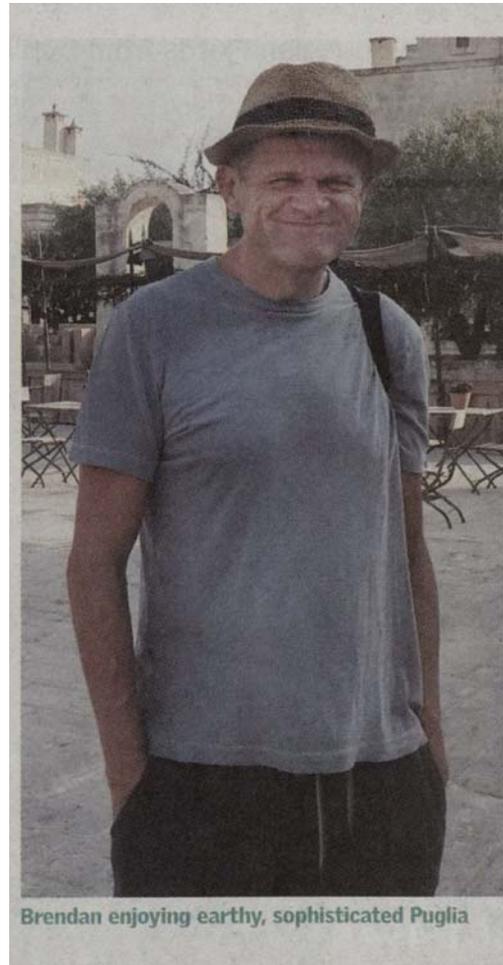
who live in a heaven on earth and they know it, and they enjoy the earthy pleasures to be found here, including almost year-round good weather.

They immerse themselves in the sea, the wine, the food and the sun. And they want visitors to do the same. And they want you to enjoy the life of luxury they do in this earthly paradise, where luxury doesn't mean posh and stilted, but it means putting a bit of soul into everything, from food, to experiences, so that everything becomes unique.

In a world of bland luxury Borgo Egnazia is something unique and life affirming.

I could have taken another week of it, lying by the pool sipping Menabrea beer while the kids spent time cooking and whatnot at what was the best kids club they'd ever encountered. But we will be back.

Preferably when they are celebrating the grape again.



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GETTING THERE



- Borgo Egnazia near Savelletri, Puglia, offers rooms from €269 per night on a B&B basis, based on two people sharing a 'Corte Bella' room, excluding city tax. Borgo Egnazia offers rooms from €539 per night staying in a Family Casetta in Il Borgo, sleeping up to four people (cots free up to two years old). For bookings call +39 080 225 5850 or visit www.borgoegnazia.com
- Ryanair flies from Dublin to Bari — and from there it's less than an hour's drive to Borgo Egnazia (www.ryanair.com)

