



# The charming heel of Italy

Virtually unknown and unsung, the region of Puglia in south-eastern Italy—the heel of the boot-shaped Italian peninsula—is one of the country's best-kept secrets, and is as naturally Italian as they come.

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Nothing quite evokes the mysterious magic of Puglia as the 'Dance of the Tarantella'. Performed by women who slither on the ground like tarantula spiders and contort their bodies to convey stealth, the dance was, at one time, believed to be an antidote to the potentially fatal bite of the tarantula spider. Strangely, however, there are no tarantula spiders in Puglia! Frenzied tambourines and squealing violins raise the tempo to stratospheric heights and, in the old days, the dance would end only when the women collapsed in an exhausted heap—after hours and sometimes even days!

In modern times, the dance has been rationalised as a cathartic experience that helped repressed and oppressed women in the days of yore to exorcise their inner demons and frustrations. Unfortunately, we did not get to witness a modern-day performance, though young women at music and dance festivals held in Puglia in the summer still stomp in a trance-like state to tambourine beats, skirts swirling, into the wee hours. We were in Puglia in autumn, and so savoured some of the other blandishments of this region, which yields its secrets slowly.

Overlooking the Adriatic Sea, Otranto's fortified citadel—also called the Castle of Otranto—was a site of refuge for the city's garrison and citizens when an Ottoman fleet invaded the city in the 15th century.



▲ The trulli of Alberobello are conical-roofed buildings that were originally built and lived in by peasants. Many trulli have now been converted into souvenir shops (above) and fine-dining restaurants with delicious spreads on offer (below).



## A LAND LESS KNOWN

Puglia, as we discovered over a five-day sojourn, is an earthy paradise of 65 million olive trees, lush vineyards, groves of almond trees, hilltop castles, gold baroque cities, whitewashed towns and conical-shaped dwellings called *trulli*, located in the town of Alberobello and now a UNESCO World Heritage site. Restaurants, shops, boutiques and art galleries snuggled in the *trulli*, some with fluttering lace curtains, and everything around them seemed Lilliputian and more appropriate for gnomes than human beings. Despite the punitive pace of sightseeing, we sipped robust Puglian red wines and savoured its flavourful cuisine, tasting only a few of its 200 types of pasta and uniquely creamy artery-clogging cheeses!

Admittedly, Puglia does not have the wild rhythm of Rome or the seductive marketing of Venice. The region has been largely bypassed by international travellers because its charms are unsung. The peninsula is hugged by the bluest of blue seas—the Ionian and the Adriatic—with



A narrow cobblestoned street in front of the Lecce Cathedral. The streets of Lecce form a dynamic web across the city, lined as they are with restaurants and bars that bustle with energy at night. Lecce is a wonderful example of baroque architecture, and ornate facades adorn nearly every building.

Myth, legend, bewitching light and myriad colours from an artist's palette followed us everywhere in Puglia as we reached Otranto, the easternmost city in Italy and a seaside resort with a small fishing harbour.

sunny beaches and light-filled picturesque getaways where one gets to live life in the slow lane. Revelling in time-honoured traditions such as the afternoon siesta is taken seriously here. Homes and shops are shuttered and not even a leaf stirs till the evening stroll happens.

We flew into Naples and from there drove south to our first stop, Lecce: the most baroque city in southern Europe—the Florence of the south—where facades of churches, balconies and the Basilica of Santa Croce buzz with frenzied carvings chiselled into its warm, honey-coloured

tufa stone. Lecce was a delightful town of narrow alleys, steps and tiny piazzas studded with bars and cafes, and our pulses slowed down as we sipped chilled beer across from a Roman amphitheatre that had once held 20,000 spectators baying for the blood of muscled gladiators.

Puglia was at the crossroads of the migration of the Mediterranean people, and Galatina, 18 km south of Lecce, is stalked by its Greek past. It is whispered that here, old timers still believe in tarantism—that the bite of the tarantula spider sends young women into bouts of

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abandoned dancing. Indeed, the dance originated in Galatina and legend has it that outsiders looked askance at the town because of this strange ritual. So, to enhance Galatina's reputation and make it famous for something other than the controversial tarantism, a chef at the Pasticceria Ascalone invented the pasticciotto. We tasted this typical shortcrust pastry, oozing with cream, and almost went into a hypnotic trance ourselves!

Earthy pleasures aside, Galatina is also famed for its Basilica of Santa Caterina d'Alessandria, whose interior is smothered with rich frescoes. Commissioned by Raimondello Orsini del Balzo (the Orsini family owned Galatina), the basilica has enshrined a holy relic—the finger of Saint Catherine—which Raimondello had bitten off in an ecstasy of reverence when he visited the monastery of Saint Catherine at Mount Sinai!

## A BURST OF COLOURS

Myth, legend, bewitching light and myriad colours from an artist's palette followed us



everywhere in Puglia as we reached Otranto, the easternmost city in Italy and a seaside resort with a small fishing harbour and a tree-lined promenade outside its 15th-century walls. Otranto has some of the best beaches in sun-stunned Puglia, and one of them, Porto Badisco, is a cove with jaw-dropping views. Here, one can snorkel and swim or picnic on an outcrop while taking in the gorgeous vistas and inhaling the salt-laden air.

Despite its dreamy good looks, Otranto has a bloody past—800 Christians were martyred here by the Turks in 1480. They had to pay with their lives as they refused to abandon their faith, and their skulls and bones adorn three glass-panelled vaults next to the main altar of the cathedral in Otranto. The rather grisly sight is offset by the exquisite mosaics



▲ Clockwise from above: A lady making handmade pasta on the streets of Bari; Taking a stroll at night along the fort walls at Bari; Sleepy moments after sundown outside an art and artefacts shop in Ostuni.



etched on the floor of the cathedral that relate stories from the scriptures in graphic detail.

Puglia continued to hold us in its photogenic embrace when we drove down to the southernmost tip of the region—Santa Maria di Leuca—and drove north once again, to the Itria Valley, weaving down narrow country roads. We arrived at the Masseria Il Frantoio, a 16th-century farmhouse-hotel embedded in what is called the Park of Secular Olive Trees—a tranquil expanse of land where knotted, thick-trunked olive trees spiral upwards like fierce patriarchs protecting an ancient land. Armando Balestrazzi, its owner, later told us that the wisteria-draped *masseria* (local farmhouse) was built over an underground cave where, not too long ago, olives were pressed. After a spot of tasting different olive oils drizzled on crusty squares of bread in the tree-lined courtyard fragrant with the scent of orange blossoms, we moved on to yet another treasure—Ostuni, the White City.

Every Puglian town was a study in contrast. Ostuni impudently cascaded down three hills, glistening white in the Puglian sunlight that God has gifted to the region in abundance. Walking its narrow streets, we felt like the town was suspended in a different realm, a cross between a Greek island village and an Arab souk.

In the seafront town of Bari, with its air of Italian exuberance, was where we visited a basilica dedicated to Saint Nicholas.



Past the basilica, we ducked into a tangle of secret alleys and were faced with an extremely pleasing sight: plump Italian mamas dextrously kneading and slapping dough into shape in the courtyards of their homes as they made orecchiette (ear-shaped pasta). These friendly, aproned Italian ladies told us that Bari is supposed to be the holy of holies of Italian pasta, and that the making of pasta on the streets is part of an ancient tradition of the town. Later, we walked along Bari's seafront promenade lit with ornate lamps that shed pools of golden light. Beyond, the Adriatic was like an inky-blue slash of silk. It struck us then that Puglia is not like its manicured northern Italy counterparts but remains intact and uncorrupted by tourism... maybe a playground the Italians have kept for themselves.

## Fact file

**Getting there**  
Jet Airways has direct daily flights to Brussels from several major cities. Onward flights to Naples are available through our codeshare partner Brussels Airlines. From Naples, you can choose to take a quick flight to Bari, the capital of Puglia, about 265 km away.

**Accommodation**  
There is accommodation aplenty in Puglia, and a stay at a *masseria* is a must. Self-driving is an excellent way to get around the region.

**For more information**  
Log on to [www.viaggiareinpuglia.it](http://www.viaggiareinpuglia.it) / [en.andwww.enit.it](http://en.andwww.enit.it)



▲ Above: The marina at Otranto, located beyond the walls of its citadel, is one of the finest in the world. Top: Excavated ruins of a Roman amphitheatre at Lecce's main town square, Piazza Sant'Oronzo.