

FINANCIAL TIMES

# How Spent

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**BACK TO GLAMOUR**



A villa at Borgo Egnazia, the new luxury resort near the seaside village of Savelletri di Fasano.





# PUGLIA REBOOTED

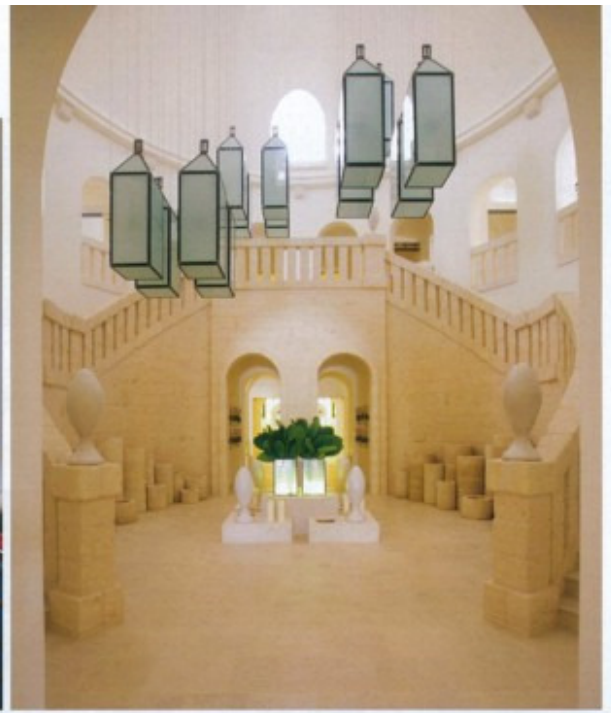
Puglia's authentic charm and unpolished beauty are reinforced by a new clutch of discreet boutique hotels, seductive villas and an exclusive resort. **Sophy Roberts reports on an increasingly luxurious destination that still has its heel firmly on the ground.**

**T**here is something about looking out from the very tip of the stiletto of Italy that is inherently compelling. Perhaps it is the notion of two seas meeting just beneath me, the Adriatic and Ionian, cobalt blending into gradations of turquoise. Maybe it is the sight of a white sail rounding the tip of the Salentine Peninsula, just as Virgil described Odysseus emerging "From the eastern sea/Curving in an arc/The thick foaming waves breaking/Against their opposing rocky masses." The yacht is leaving behind the cave-pocked cliffs of the

southern Adriatic coast as it heads north-west towards the long swathes of golden sand that thread up towards the boot's instep, to Gallipoli and thence Taranto, the headlands here and there concealing pea-green grottoes.

I wonder, however, if what I call compelling is more simply reaffirming, from the vantage point of my glamorous eyrie – Villa Blanca, possibly the best house in Puglia. I learn that Paolo Roversi, the great Italian fashion photographer, holidays here with his family.

In truth, though, it is neither the picturesque nor luxurious I ultimately find intriguing, but the fact that just a few miles up the coast, at Torre Mozza beach, local pensioners are standing up to their hips in the Ionian



water. There are around 100 of them, beholden to a tanned Italian beach boy in tight swimmers leading them through their morning aqua-aerobics. At the nearby harbour of Santa Maria di Leuca once stood a temple to Minerva, surely among the most interesting of the Roman Gods, born of the head of Jupiter. When I am reminded that she was also the inventor of music, I imagine her fury – the pensioners are exercising to crude 1980s house beats.

I smile at the incongruity, pleased to have stumbled over a scene so unselfconscious. But then Puglia is nothing if not true to itself, a place that has a rough, unpolished edge to its natural beauties. It's where regular Italians come for their holidays, not just those who have heard that Gallipoli is "the new Positano". Even in 2010, when all of Italy seems on sale to tourists, the country's heel holds its ground.

This is despite the region's continuing rise to stardom among a fashionable cognoscenti counting a smattering of celebrity homeowners, from actors Helen Mirren to Mickey Rourke, and, of course, the gossiping Milanese, with their impeccable golf shoes and gloves perfectly pinched into the back pockets of Prada slacks on the courses around Fasano. There is a growing concentration of great hotels and new ventures from the likes of The Thinking Traveller, a high-end villa rental agency from Huw and Rossella Beaugié that started in Sicily and has, as of January, spread its interests to Puglia for the first time. Its Puglia properties include Villa Blanca (where I stayed in Leuca), and a sweet, peppermint pink-and-pistachio beach house nearby, Le Antiche Pajare, scented with roses and oleander.

The prettiest of towns – Lecce, Polignano a Mare, Monopoli – may be circled by breeze-block developments of run-down housing and tacky holiday apartments, but at their hearts lie historical centres as rich and picture-ready as anything in northern Italy. Unlike the great mercantile towns of Venice or Florence, this is a part of the country where the locals come first, where service in simple trattorias is unspoiled by big-tipping foreigners, and life goes on in spite of the summer influx and strings of pop-up beach clubs.

They say the Pugliese people are among the most hospitable of Italians. "Maybe it's because they're so used to foreigners washing up on their shores through history, from the Moors to the Spaniards to the Barbarians," says Aldo Melpignano, owner of the new Borgo Egnazia resort, a 50-minute drive north west of Brindisi. I'm not so sure. There's a waiter at Trattoria La Paranza in Gallipoli's fish market, whose initial gruffness almost makes me get up and leave, and an unsmiling chef of

Above: Casina Li Foggi near Gallipoli. Above right: Borgo Egnazia's interiors are by local designer Pino Brescia. Right: Masseria Torre Coccaro.



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Osteria di Chichibio in Polignano a Mare, who spends all night at the door of his wood oven as he scorches his forearms roasting scampi and red *scorfano* fish. "Like it or lump it" is the implication when the food at both establishments is slammed down in front of me. But then these are a confident people; few could find fault with this honest, flavourful cuisine. The prawn is juicy and sweet – at Trattoria La Puritate, another exceptional restaurant in Gallipoli, it is roasted on a thick bed of salt – while the octopus is soft and meaty, marinated with only a dash of lemon and peppery olive oil.

"The Pugliese know their own minds," says James Pembroke, publisher of *The Oldie* magazine who owns Il Trappeto, an exclusive villa close to Ostuni. "It's significant that a branch of McDonald's closed down in Puglia. The food here is as sensational as anything at Bocca di Lupo," he says, referring to London's white-hot Soho restaurant. "Puglia, comparatively, is poor. But it's not simple. It's just that aside from the Milanese and Romans, who've been holidaying here for years, Puglia is relatively undiscovered. No, that's the wrong word... Puglia is unwrecked."

It is a huge region, Italy's fourth largest with more than 500 miles of coastline. More than 50 per cent of the territory is flat; so flat, in fact, that there's no point in even standing on a soapbox to extend the view. The landscape, however, is anything but unattractive; olive

trees as old as those in Jerusalem show their silver leaves to the sun, the red earth beneath covered in scarlet poppies. Bari is the capital, an industrial port-city, with other big towns including Taranto, Foggia, the ravishingly baroque Lecce, Andria, Brindisi and Barletta.

Good hotels, large and small, have opened their doors over the past few years, and are scattered all over. These include two perfect town-house boites squirrelled away in the streets of old Gallipoli. They are Palazzo Mosco Inn, rated for its views over the harbour, and Relais Corte Palmieri, which has one of the most perfect hotel rooms imaginable – a standalone cottage suite on the hotel's white rooftop. Meanwhile, on the fringe of Gallipoli, within a kilometre of the sea, is the four-room Casina Li Foggi, which opened this spring.

Close to Otranto towards the south-east, where British collector Alistair McAlpine and his wife Athena have their B&B, Il Convento di Santa Maria di Costantinopoli, others have gathered. Among the best is Masseria Montelauro, a farmhouse converted into a 29-room hotel with a manicured green lawn and large aquamarine pool at its centre. It is the loving creation of Elisabetta Massaro and her two daughters, Mercedes and Caterina Turgi Prosperi. They vigilantly monitor every detail of aesthetics and hospitality, while bronzed children running about the courtyard add to the ambience. Families (who will love it here) would do well to take rooms 1 and 2 – spacious, interconnected and reasonable value at €190 a night.

But there's no getting away from the growing buzz around a small, seaside village called Savelltri di Fasano on the Adriatic coast, midway between Bari



Left: Borgo Egnazia's sister property, Masseria San Domenico.

relaxed sister hotel, Masseria Torre Coccaro, comes out on top. There are excellent cookery programmes, horses, bikes (with guides for trips to local mozzarella farms), a large pool and, for now, the best beach club on this stretch of coastline. Of Coccaro's rooms, the Orange Garden Suite, in a sunken 200sq m walled garden with a small heated pool of its own, is the obvious favourite. There is a comprehensive Aveda spa and endless terracing overlooking the organic garden's herbs, flowering courgettes, pinto beans and tomatoes.

While Maizza and Coccaro are charming (both orchestrated by Vittorio Muolo, who keeps a close eye on the easy-going spirit of the two hotels his family own and run), there is also something newer, over which the Milanese are going crazy. Savelletri is now home to one of the most impressive new full-scale resorts to have opened in Italy in a very long time.

Borgo Egnazia is luxury leisure destination-making on a massive scale: a €150m investment that took five years to build, occupying 40 acres within a 250-acre estate minutes from Savelletri. It comprises three parts: 28 three-bedroom pool villas, a 63-room hotel and a 93-room village complex (scheduled to open in early 2011) designed for families, with a children's club and children's pool. Masseria San Domenico, the sister property close by, provides Egnazia's guests with reduced-rate access to an adjacent 18-hole golf course. There are two beach clubs, a spa, two huge central pools, cuisine from a Michelin-starred chef and an impressive service ethic (smoothed out to within an inch of success by a canny American consulting firm, West Paces).

But more than anything, this is a tour de force in modern hotel design. It doesn't once defer to the globalised generics that can so easily murder the soul of a place before it has even welcomed its first guest.

and Brindisi. It appears a nothing sort of place, where shops selling cheap buckets and spades rub shoulders with modern holiday apartments that appear to be closed up for all but the high summer months. Yet Savelletri, resident population of 669, has to be one of the hottest fishing villages in all of Italy, a place where earlier this year Hugh Grant was hanging out almost daily on the tiny Piazza Amati, feasting on raw slivers of sea bass at Pescheria 2 Mari. This glass box on the harbour front is the creation of a savvy local who knows his sashimi, who understands what you can charge for top-quality raw fish and a glass of chilled prosecco if the styling is just right. For that is all he serves – raw fish and local wine. But his handful of alfresco tables are not the only draw to Savelletri. On the day I flew in from London, a large share of the plane had been

commandeered by a British entrepreneur throwing a three-day 40th birthday fête in the area, replete with beach club brunches and fancy-dress soirées. For within a five-mile radius there exist at least five top-class hotels hidden among the olive groves.

Masseria Torre Maizza, which has an exquisite gastronomic restaurant, is one such. Converted from a fortified 16th-century farmhouse, it has, hands down, the best service I found in the area, made memorable by the easy wit of Antonello, the waiter, and the impeccable management, who enthusiastically promote everything noteworthy about the wider Puglia, even if it means you won't be in for dinner. For something more lively – with a rustic aesthetic combining antiques with market-bought linen, lace and gypsy lights strung across the courtyard – Torre Maizza's

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Left: among the best rentals in Puglia, Villa Blanca near Santa Maria di Leuca.

Villa Blanca, which sleeps 10, from €8,000 per week, and Le Antiche Pajare, which sleeps six, from €2,930 per week. Borgo Egnazia, Contrada Masciola, Savelletri (+3908-0225 5000; www.borgoegnazia.com), from €310. Casina Li Foggi, Contrada Li Foggi, Gallipoli (+3908-3327 7217; www.kalekora.it), from €95. Il Convento di Santa Maria di Costantinopoli, Via Convento, Marittima di Diso (07736-362 328), from €350. Il Trappeto, Contrada Le Case sn, Ostuni (020-7436 8801; www.olivemil.co.uk), sleeps 12, from €1,450 per week. Masseria Cimino, Contrada Masciola, Savelletri (+3908-0482 7886; www.masseriaticimino.com), from €220. Masseria San Domenico, Strada Litoranea 379, Savelletri (+3908-0482 7769; www.masseriasandomenico.com). Masseria Torre Coccaro, Calle da Coccaro 8, Savelletri (+3908-0482 9310; www.masseriatorrecoccaro.com), from €270. Masseria Torre Maizza, Calle da Coccaro sn, Savelletri (+3908-0482 7838; www.masseriatorremaizza.com), from €275. Masseria Montelauro, Uggiano Località Montelauro, Otranto (+3908-3680 6203; www.masseriamontelauro.it), from €165. Palazzo Mosco Inn, Via Micetti 26, Gallipoli (+3908-3326 4040; www.hotelgallipoliotranto.it), from €130. Relais Corte Palmieri, Corte Palmieri 3, Gallipoli (+3908-3326 4040; www.hotelgallipoliotranto.it), from €130. RESTAURANTS La Cantina, Vico Lippolis 8, Alberobello (+3908-0432 3473). Osteria di Chichibio, Largo Gelso 12, Polignano a Mare (+3908-0424 0488; www.osteriadichichibio.it). Osteria Perricci, 1 Via Orazio Comes, Monopoli (+3908-0937 2208). Pescheria 2 Mari, Piazza Amati 8, Savelletri (+3908-0482 9161). Trattoria La Puritate, Via San Elia 18, Gallipoli (+3908-3326 4205). Trattoria La Paranza, Largo Dogana, Gallipoli (+3908-3326 6639). Ryanair (0871-246 0000; www.ryanair.com) flies from London Stansted to Brindisi three times a week, from €34. British Airways (0844-493 0787; www.britishairways.com) flies from London Gatwick to Bari six times a week, from €150. Bellini Travel (020-7602 7602; www.bellinitravel.com) is a tour operator recommended for its knowledge of Puglia.

Like the region it calls home, Borgo Egnazia has endeavoured successfully to respect the ground on which it sits. It is built entirely in the region's creamy, porous tufa stone. Key staff, from chef to maître d', belong to Puglia; restaurant recommendations are forthcoming and impeccable, from the simple Osteria Perricci in nearby Monopoli to the tiny La Cantina in Alberobello. Even the interior designer, whose work can stand up alongside industry greats, is from the town of Fasano, a 10-minute drive away. His name is Pino Brescia, a one-time waiter brought to the owner's attention when he created a centrepiece for an 18th-birthday party. "It was amazing," remembers Melpignano. "Everyone was talking about it. By 2004, Pino and my mother had created Masseria Cimino"

— one of the most delicious rustic-chic hotels I've yet found in Italy, a few hundred yards down the road. With Borgo Egnazia, Brescia has pulled off something that speaks to the sun, the sea and contemporary taste. Most of all, the resort headlines a place that for now, at least, is treading the fine line between the deeply fashionable and still unwrecked, where aqua-aerobics is as much a part of the story as Prada and Odysseus. †

**REINVENTING THE HEEL**

The best time to visit Puglia is in either late May, when the poppies are still in bloom, or September, when the rush of summer visitors has passed but the sea remains warm. Sophy Roberts travelled as a guest of Think Puglia (020-7377 8518; www.thinkpuglia.com), whose high-end villa rentals include

ADRIANO BACCHIELLA © THE THINKERS TRAVELLER

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