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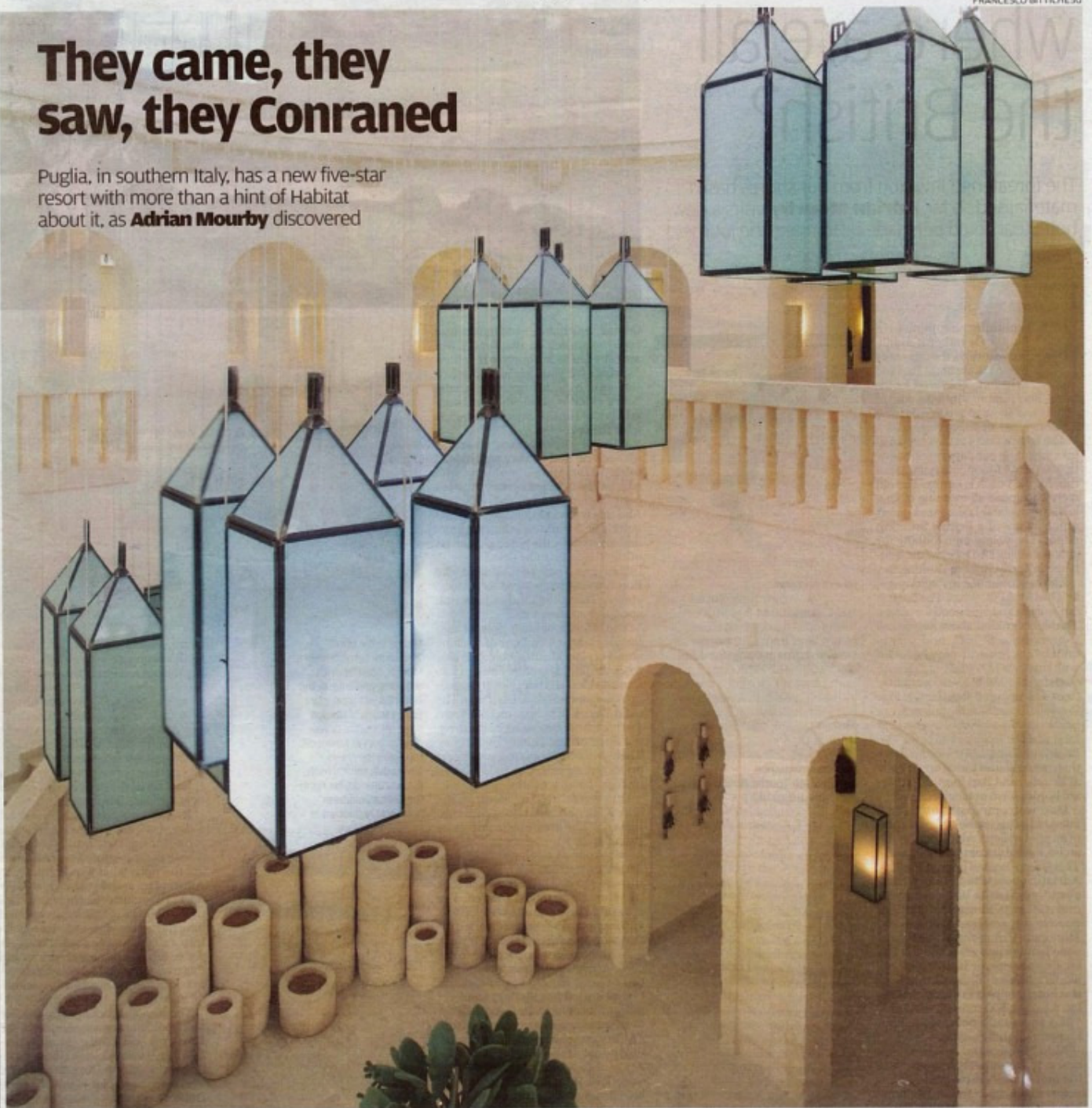
A WORLD OF INSPIRING HOLIDAY IDEAS

4 JULY 2010

FRANCESCO BITTICHESU

They came, they saw, they Conraned

Puglia, in southern Italy, has a new five-star resort with more than a hint of Habitat about it, as **Adrian Mourby** discovered



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If Puglia is the new Tuscany, where are all the British?

The threatened invasion from our shores hasn't materialised so far. **Adrian Mourby** visits a new hotel that could persuade us to make the journey

Something happened in Puglia. Or rather it didn't. Six years ago, the advent of cheap UK flights to Bari and Brindisi generated headlines. This remote southern corner of Italy was about to become the new Chiantishire - or so we were told.

The large woman in the very small bikini reading her paperback below the castle of Monopoli is unaware of this, for the beach is empty. The old men who spend all morning talking in the park outside Locorotondo aren't much aware of a British invasion either. The young men looking for girls and selling DVDs below the lighthouse in Torre Canne are waiting, too.

Life has continued in Puglia much as it has for 2,000 years. The coast is hot and flat and only good for olives. The higher ground, above Fasano and Conversano, is lush and gently undulating, its escarpments dotted with small walled cities bulging with oversized basilicas. Everyone with a fleet has invaded Puglia. Greeks, Romans, Byzantines, Normans, Spanish, Venetians, even the Knights of St John and the Dukes of Athens. The British invasion has proved quieter than most. Planes touch down daily at Brindisi and Bari but the barbarian hordes have not materialised.

One welcome reaction to this intended influx has been the creation of an upmarket gated resort near the archaeological remains of old Egnazia. This Greco-Roman port on Puglia's Adriatic coast was destroyed and abandoned in the 10th century as everyone withdrew to the one adequately fortified local settlement, Monopoli. Last month, the Melpignano family - owners of some of the local *masserias*, or fortified block-like farmhouses - opened a new five-star hotel complex in Egnazia catering for up to 500 tourists in rooms, villas and a self-contained village known as Borgo Egnazia.

Aldo Melpignano designed this new gated community himself using the *masseria* style to create a chic resort that echoes the sturdy, hunkered-down architecture of the coastal plain. This is a hotel that could withstand a siege of Goths or Ottomans. Exterior walls are surmounted by medieval *boccos*, traditional vents

COMPACT FACTS



HOW TO GET THERE

Adrian Mourby travelled to Bari with Rail Europe (0844 848 4070; raileurope.co.uk), which offers return fares from £210 per person. Double rooms at Borgo Egnazia (00 39 080 482 7907; borgoegnazia.com) start at €210 (£173) per night, including breakfast. A week's car hire from Holiday Autos in Bari (0871 472 5229; holidayautos.co.uk) starts at £258.

FURTHER INFORMATION

Italian State Tourist Board (italian.touristboard.co.uk).



through which stones and molten lead could be poured on attackers. There are roped bells in courtyards, tethering rings for your horse, and arrow slits cut into the main gateway. A number of exterior windows have been built bricked up as if awaiting the raiders from the sea.

If the whole project sounds ersatz, it's been carried off very well indeed using the same limestone blocks with which the nearby *masserias* have been constructed for hundreds of years. And this is a stone that ages well and quickly. Only four years since the foundations went in, the pitted roughness of the limestone has filled up with lichen. Even before it opened, the Borgo was being booked for fashion shoots. It has the kind of look that speaks to art directors.

The interior by Pino Brescia uses the old Habitat technique of stacking scores of plain identical objects in neat rows, turning clear empty bottles into room dividers and tidy piles of trussed-up newspapers into *objets d'arts*. The entire place is lit by huge metal lanterns that hang from the ceiling, rise up from the floor or just cluster in corners. There are so many around, you expect price tags and barcodes and a Conran cashier standing nearby.

On a warm, overcast morning my wife Kate and I drive out of Borgo Egnazia. The grey electronic gates swing open after we've beeped the horn to the tall, benign custodian in his grey waistcoat. We head out past massive gnarled olive trees that look like something out of Tolkien. The coastal plain abounds with olives, *masserias* and a few half-hearted attempts at Spanish-style beach resorts.

At Monopoli, we park close to the castle to take on supplies: several bottles of local wine, a bag of tarallini (small curled breadsticks) and yet more olives. The castle is empty apart from some people sweeping up from a gallery opening last night. It's a small, polygonal structure built by the Aragonese who, like the Normans, Venetians, Swabians and Angevines, held this tiny city in the past.

The Baroque cathedral is more impressive, its interior a dazzling patchwork of polychrome marble. Worshipers are kissing the hems of life-size statues of the twin doctor



Mainly in the plain:

The Borgo Egnazia resort, top left, seen from its adjoining golf course; the chic interiors have more than a touch of Habitat style, above; the Greco-Roman port at Monopoli, top right; the area's trademark conical roofs at Locorotondo, far right; the Grotta Palazese hotel and restaurant in Polignano a Mare

SANDRO BEDESSI/
FOTOTECA/ENIT

saints, Cosmas and Damien. My wife finds a sequence of paintings depicting the miraculous arrival of a raft of huge timbers on the coast just as Monopoli was ready to raise the roof of its first cathedral, one of those very practical miracles that the early Church went in for. The detail of medieval construction is fascinating. Never before have I seen how you winched rafters up in the days before cranes or reliable scaffolding.

It's too windy to stay on the coast today, so we drive up through Fasano to the landscape where trulli are found. These conical-roofed stone houses are to Puglia what windmills are to Amsterdam and skyscrapers to New York. They cluster like hobbit houses in the hollows of this landscape and have turned the village of Alberobello into a slightly twee tourist trap. As we've already done a circuit round this trullopolis and sampled its overpriced coffee, we head for Locorotondo instead.

This is another tiny fortified city, like Monopoli, and a recent member of the *Borghi più belli d'Italia* (Most Beautiful Villages in Italy). In 1307, it came into the possession of the Knights of St John, who then spent a lot of time fighting Duke Gualtieri VI of Athens. We notice a plaque to Aldo Moro, Italy's 61st premier, who was born in Puglia and killed in Rome by the Red Brigade. There's another to Fra Giuseppe Andrea Rodio, the hermit monk who



was born in Puglia in 1743 and is still waiting to be canonised.

The streets of Locorotondo are circular, as its name suggests. Everywhere we go, we keep coming back to the Palazzo Morelli, a very low but ornate Rococo structure that in 1780 was given its over-the-top makeover by the local mayor. Its walls are overwhelmed by elaborate "goose-breast" balconies, classical gargoyles, a coat of arms displaying the elephant and castle and a lot of washing hung out to dry. Puglia may be making inroads into mass tourism but its streets are still closed off by lines of outsized underpants strung window to window.

We'd thought of picnicking in the memorial park outside the city gate. This is a fine belvedere with a statue

'The streets are still closed off by lines of outsized underpants'

'The hedgerows are wild with poppies, incandescent red'

to the dead of both world wars and a great view east to Cisternino and south to Martina Franca, but the weather isn't on our side. The old men who have smoked here since they were boys, and Mussolini built the town hall, are turning up their collars and blaming Berlusconi.

Two historic cities in one morning is probably enough. We cut our losses and drive back towards Fasano. The hedgerows are wild with poppies, incandescent red against the lush green vines. Following a sign for Selva di Fasano, we descend to the coast down a series of hairpin bends so steep that local drivers are actually putting down their mobile phones to negotiate them.

Back at the Borgo we wait for the amiable gatekeeper to realise we're

outside. The wine is put on ice, the olives are put in a dish and we get another packet of prosciutto out of the fridge. There's a sheltered limestone balcony outside our room which would be an ideal place for lunch if it weren't so cold. Maybe the wind will drop and we can go for a swim in one of the complex's large empty pools.

By 6pm, we put down our books and decide it's just not going to happen. There's nothing between Borgo Egnazia and the chill Adriatic, apart from a new golf course. Dinner tonight is in Polignano a Mare, so we head out there early. I've no idea what to expect. The town was once Greek and then traded successfully under the Venetians. The map shows it as located on a line of limestone cliffs and our restaurant, Grotta Palazzese, comes highly recommended. Driving into Polignano isn't encouraging. It's grown suddenly dark and the entire population of the town seems to have decided to leave. They are streaming in the opposite direction, clogging up the narrow streets. We turn down a side road almost solid with parked vehicles and end up outside Hotel Grotta

Palazzese, the wind from the sea blasting at us now.

The building is unremarkable and its reception desk recalls everything that was unlovely about the Seventies. However, what makes Grotta Palazzese special is what happens downstairs. The hotel is built over a great sea-washed cave which was converted into a festive hall by the Dukes of Leto in the 18th century.

Several flights down, a wide platform, 30 feet above the churning sea, is set out with tables and sofas and standard lamps that rock in the wind. Presiding over this most unusual restaurant is Sgr Mimmo, who exudes the authority of someone who knows his premises are much in demand. We are escorted to the back of the cave-restaurant out of the wind. The waves in the grotto below crash dramatically while, out to sea, a storm is gathering. We order wine from Locorotondo and a lot of seafood. I no longer mind about the weather. In fact, I'm enjoying it.

As for Puglia it seems this undiscovered region is still keeping its best attractions well hidden.