

Puglia – The land of the “Mezzogiorno”

Have you ever wondered where the Italians disappear to when the inevitable hordes of foreign visitors descend on their country's tourist hot spots? The answer is a well-kept secret among the glitterati of Milan and Rome; they head south to the extraordinary peninsula of land that forms “Italy's heel”.

This region, known as Puglia, offers anyone inquisitive enough to explore beyond “Chianti-shire” a real slice of authentic Italy. You won't find the fast sports cars and stiletto-clad women of the north here – neither would be able to negotiate the impossibly narrow lanes of the white-washed towns. What you will discover, however, is a glorious mix of age-old cultures, regional cuisine, unique architecture and a very welcoming people who are fiercely proud of their home. The thing that usually strikes first time visitors to Puglia is its array of intense colours; the turquoise of its waters, the burning white of its medieval walled towns, the rich red of its soil and its carpet of silvery green olive groves and vineyards. It is no wonder that these earthy hues are so prevalent because Puglia is Italy's garden, producing the vast majority of the country's pasta, olive oils, tomatoes, soft cheeses, fruits and very potent wines ... the shopping list is endless. Almost every family owns an olive grove, so there are as many varieties of oil here as there are dynasties. You can even while away an afternoon at an olive oil tasting session at one of the many oil presses and olive museums in the region. The long finger of land that forms Puglia is blessed with many hundreds of miles of diverse coastline, both to the north where it meets the Adriatic and to the south where it is bathed by the warm waters of the Ionian Sea. Many of the beaches are noted as some of the cleanest in the Mediterranean area and they are usually warm enough for swimming even into October. To the north are the golden sands of the Adriatic. The low grassy dunes that extend from the inland olive groves are interspersed with flat, white, calciferous rock formations that jut out into the clear cobalt water. Although some of this stretch is taken up with private lidos, it is still possible to meander down to the sea front away from the crowds.

Towards the southernmost part of the peninsula, the coastline changes dramatically. The rugged Salento plain has a spectacular rocky shoreline, dotted with defensive towers and fortresses. From the coastal road you can pick your way down to the many small sandy bays. The water is truly turquoise and so clear that you can peer many metres into its depths and the adventurous can even scuba dive into the looming underwater caves. But there is more to Puglia than just its sun-ripened food and unspoilt beaches. Over the centuries, this sleepy community of farmers has produced a magnificent display of ornate architecture – that is, after all, the “bella figura” of the Italians. Almost every balcony and portal is festooned with the flamboyant swirls of the “baroque” style, all moulded from the creamy, honey-coloured stone of the region. Nowhere are these unique facades better exhibited than in the town of Lecce, known as the “Florence of the South”, whose central piazza is a riot of over-embellishment. Other, older, towns are more sedate. Ostuni, christened “the White Town” by the locals is an excellent example. Set on three hills, which rise from the Adriatic coastline, the burning white of its buildings makes a startling contrast to the surrounding verdant valley. The old town rises up in the centre through a labyrinth of lanes and steep passageways with overhanging balconies bright with flowers.

At its pinnacle is a gothic cathedral which stands out all the more because its pink-gold stone is one of the few facades left unpainted in the almost completely whitewashed town. Also peppering the landscape is another Pugliese hallmark – the “trulli”. These are funny little peasant dwellings with characteristic conical roofs. Many are daubed with ancient symbols said to ward off evil. Together, they lend Puglia a fairytales quality – so much so that one would hardly be surprised to see a hobbit emerge from one of them. Puglia is still a poor region, but its recent discovery as a tourist destination has already started to stimulate investment. Property prices are rising rapidly in the area due to the influx of northern investment as the likes of Giorgio Armani snap up holiday homes in the region.

Much of the investment has gone into the restoration of the region's “masserie” or stately manor houses. These were once the elegant homes of the land-owning gentry, but some have now been converted into charming small hotels, which still use the fresh produce from their surrounding agricultural estates to supply their gourmet restaurants.

Sitting in a masseria's picture-perfect flagged courtyard, sipping a glass of Puglia's potent wine, basking in the southerly sun and watching the world go by, you could be forgiven for thinking that you were in Tuscany after all ... that is, until you hear the guests next to you speaking in Italian instead of English.

Getting There

Fly direct from the UK to Bari or Brindisi with Ryanair or BA.

Combine With

Abruzzo to the north, or the Amalfi Coast to the west.

For more images & hotel details see www.c-boutiquehotels.com

To book call **08717 500070**

Puglia (or Apulia) is above all a land of colour - white craggy rocks and golden sands edging intense turquoise waters; rich red soil carpeted with silver green olive groves and vineyards; burning white medieval towns rising out of lush valleys and creamy gold stone from which a profusion of baroque manors, palaces and castles have been moulded. Still an undiscovered region, Puglia is a blend of ancient influences and traditions, of folklore and religion. Puglia is known as the “mezzogiorno”, the land of the eternal midday where time slows and nothing changes – the perfect destination for authentic Italian holidays.

Our Recommended Hotels in Puglia

North & Central

Tower
Puglia Manor
Grove
Lemon Tree
Puglia Keep
Casa 32
Trulli Farmhouse
Olive Mill
Post House
Bishop's Palace

South

Whitestone Ranch
Seaview Manor
Lightcatcher Spa
Puglia Beach Hotel
Bishop's Palace

