



Travel

Italy | The long-neglected city of Matera has stepped out of the shadows to be named European Capital of Culture. *Stanley Stewart* explores a remote region known for its extraordinary subterranean architecture



province's short stretch of Tyrrhenian coast, a beautiful and curiously underrated part of the Italian seaside. I could have driven in four-lane comfort by way of Metaponto and Policoro but I had decided, instead, to navigate across the spine of the province, to get in among the fearsome mountains that are the backbone of Basilicata.

It was a spectacular drive, cutting across the grain of the country, on the windiest, twistiest and most fun roads imaginable. I climbed the heights above Garaguso and then dropped into an older Basilicata where agriculture was a pitchfork and bullock cart business, where the olive trees were as old as frescoes, where grandmothers, dressed in black, still ruled and where hill villages, in dizzy positions, were not places of beauty but of austere drama. What should have been a three-hour journey took me all day.

Basilicata's Tyrrhenian coast might be short but is perfectly formed. Spectacular mountains press down on the sea and the coastal road sweeps between rearing headlands and hidden coves. Anyone who has suffered the traffic jams and the overpriced tourist industry of the Amalfi coast, just a few miles to the north, will find Basilicata a breath

'It was like living at the bottom of a deep well. We knew nothing of the rest of the world'

Earthly pleasures

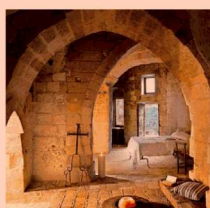
Christ stopped short of here," the locals used to say, as a way to explain the backwardness of Basilicata. "He stopped at Eboli," they said, referring to a town to the north, beyond the borders of the province.

And it wasn't just Christ, apparently. It seemed no one took much interest in the remote region that is the instep of the Italian boot, at least until the film-makers arrived. The Greeks skirted the coast, the Romans barely penetrated these mountains, the Normans rarely left their castles and, well into the 20th century, the influence of the Italian state was minimal. In Mussolini's time, Basilicata was distant and barbarous, a place of internal exile – Italy's very own gulag.

When the government did finally come to Basilicata, it was shocked by what it found. Visiting the ancient city of Matera in 1948, Italian prime minister Alcide De Gasperi declared it the shame of Italy. The poverty, disease and ignorance would have been a discredit to the developing world. "Christ never came this far," wrote the Italian author and activist Carlo Levi in 1945, "nor did time, nor the individual soul, nor hope... nor reason, nor history."

Fast forward 70 years and we find Matera enjoying a spectacular renaissance, crowned this past October when the city beat Siena, Ravenna and Perugia to be named, alongside Plowdiv in Bulgaria, European Capital of Culture for 2015. Its unique architectural heritage has already gained it a listing on Unesco's World Heritage list. In a place where, in Levi's graphic phrase, the inhabitants felt themselves "not thought of as men but simply as beasts", there are now elegant hotels and first-class restaurants, literary festivals and art galleries. Even Francis Ford Coppola, the film director, has got in on the act, opening a hotel three years ago in his grandfather's village of Bernalda, just up the road.

The irony of Matera is that the aspect of the city that was its curse is now the key to its fame and success. It is a city of caves, a troglodyte town, a showcase of subterranean architecture, a sprawling



From top: the city of Matera in the southern Italian province of Basilicata; the Grotte della Civita hotel; street life in the town of Maratea on the Tyrrhenian coast; Maratea's harbour – *Alamy*



DETAILS

Stanley Stewart was a guest of Kiker Holidays (kikerholidays.com), which offers a tailor-made four-night trip, with two nights in Le Grotte della Civita in Matera (Sestantio) (grotte-civita) and two at Palazzo Margherita in Bernalda (www.coppolaesorts.com/palazzo-margherita) from €830 per person, including car hire, accommodation, personalised maps and return flights from London to Bari. To download audio and text walking guides to Matera, go to materacivitanarrata.it



labyrinth of elaborate rabbit holes. When Levi came here in the 1930s, many of the city's 20,000 residents lived in cave houses known as sassi (stones in Italian). For as long as people have lived here – and Matera boasts one of the world's longest histories of habitation, dating back several millennia – people have hollowed their homes out of the soft tufa limestone like eager meerkats, forging a tradition of "negative architecture", as sophisticated and charming in its way as traditional building.

Four hundred years ago, everyone in Matera – rich and poor, peasants and aristocrats – lived in caves. Grand façades, swanky porticos, ornate doorways led into cavernous rooms hollowed out of the cliffs behind. By the 18th century, the middle classes were moving out to build a new "upper" town of elegant palaces and piazzas. The sassi became Matera's slums. Levi likened the cave districts to Dante's *Inferno*. Child mortality reached 44 per cent. Visiting anthropologists pointed out that the inhabitants knew few facilities or tools beyond those familiar to Neolithic man, the first to have burrowed into the soft rock in these regions.

"Ten of us lived in this cave," Eustachio Rizzi told me. "But the donkey had the best place, at the back here. Her name was Bruna, and she was one of the family. Without a donkey, we would have been poor."

A sprightly fellow in his late seventies, Rizzi has made a small museum of his own past, recreating the cave that was his home for the first 20 years of his life. With its furnishings and implements, its dressed mannequins and stuffed animals, it is a sanitised recreation of a desperate world that left deep scars. "It was like living at the bottom of a deep well," he said. "We knew nothing of the rest of the world, and imagined it must all be like the sassi. We tilted our men's lands and tended other men's livestock for a pittance. We were like slaves."

From the upper town – the square in front of the cathedral is a great vantage point – the sassi are a picturesque architectural jumble tumbling down one side



of the gorge and rising up the other. Bleached by the sun, all is a monochrome paleness, from the terracotta roof tiles to the weathered doors. Wandering in the cobbled lanes, you find a snakes-and-ladders world of long slow steps and sudden precipitous alleys.

Matera is proof that nowhere is beyond the grasp of gentrification. The sassi were empty and derelict for 20 years after the government cleared them in the 1950s, moving the inhabitants to new houses in the upper town's suburbs. Then the film-makers arrived. Pier Paolo Pasolini filmed *The Gospel According to St. Matthew* (1964) in its ancient alleys and scores of others were drawn to the antique location, uncommodated by the modern world. By the late 1980s, life was filtering back into the sassi as residents and businesses began to realise the district's charm.

Today there are numerous bed and breakfasts, as well as shops, galleries and museums, cafés and stylish private houses. There are even luxury hotels. Le grotte della civita occupies several former cave houses and an abandoned chapel. There are four-poster beds with linen sheets, refectory tables that could seat 20 monks, and freestanding baths surrounded by candles and fancy toiletries. Breakfast is served in the chapel; you will find fresh ricotta by the altar and the local honeys in what might have once been a confessional grotto.

But there's more to Basilicata than the sassi of Matera. I headed west to the

of fresh air. Arriving in the old town of Maratea, I found a civilised scene: café tables spilling across the central square, a family restaurant serving home-cooked food and a hotel, La Locanda delle Donne Monache, with views over rooftops, gardens and the sea.

The Locanda, a converted 18th-century convent, is a charming, family-run place to stay. Alternatively, on the edge of town, overlooking the sea is the Santa Venera, the grand dame of this coast, which has welcomed film stars and heads of state to its private beach and nine acres of gardens. Visitors shouldn't miss by Maratea's port, with a menu built round the morning's catch, tables overlooking the harbour, and service that makes you feel like a local.

I returned to Matera by way of Bernalda, half an hour's drive from the sassi. It was the town of Francis Ford Coppola's grandfather and the director has returned to renovate one of the largest palaces in town, Palazzo Margherita. He has created a cross between a boutique hotel and a rambling family home. Inevitably, there is a film theme and the fabulous lounge on the first floor can be transformed into a screening room. (It is Coppola's credit that the classics of Italian cinema feature rather than his own films.)

Back in Matera, I set off to explore some of the 150 early cave churches that honeycomb the gorges beyond the town. A guide took me to the best of these. Le Cripta del Peccato Originale, (the Crypt of the Original Sin). It is the Sistine Chapel of cave churches.

Discovered in 1963 in a remote gorge, the cave is decorated with frescoes painted in the first half of the ninth century, 500 years before Giotto. The monks abandoned the place at the time of the Arab invasion around 851AD and, for the next thousand years, it was used only by shepherds to stable their flocks at night. The frescoes, which in flickering candlelight would have appeared to move, are exquisite biblical scenes executed in a style that is a mix of Byzantine and Latin traditions. Young and beardless, God creates the world, a sorry-looking Adam and Eve clutch fig leaves to their genitals while St Peter holds the keys of heaven.

And there, among the archangels and the apostles, in the arms of a regal Virgin, floating like a ghost on these old walls, is the infant Jesus. Christ, it seems, did get to Basilicata after all.