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In Italy, Luxury Transforms Caves Into Hotels



Nadia Shira Cohen for The New York Times

In Matera, poor families once lived in caves [More Photos »](#)

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IT was early evening in Matera, a city in the southern Italian region of Basilicata, and swallows circled the sky, their melodious calls interrupted only by the clanking of bells worn by cows drinking from a stream deep within a canyon.

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Map
Basilicata, Italy

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On the other side of the canyon was old Matera, an area so ancient that it was used to portray Judea in [Mel Gibson's](#) "The Passion of the Christ." Often called the Sassi (which means stone), or the City of Stone, this part of Matera is a maze of caves, churches — some dating back to Roman times — zigzagging steps and stone facades carved from a massive slope of yellowed tufa.

Just after my family and I checked into a new hotel called Sextantio Albergo Diffuso Le Grotte Della Civita, we noticed an elderly couple climbing the hotel's worn stone stairs. The pair, dressed in their Sunday best, entered the hotel's stone terrace through a metal gate. In the lobby, we heard the man, Francesco Di Cecce, introduce himself to the manager and explain that he and his wife had come to visit his childhood home. Curious, we followed them as they found their way to Suite 10. "I was born here in 1939," Mr. Di Cecce said as he opened the thick wooden door to a cave that went back about 60 feet.

Like the dwellings that surround it, much of the hotel incorporates grottoes, with facades cut into the rock or constructed from limestone blocks. Suite 10 had been



Nadia Shira Cohen for The New York Times
Sextantio Albergo Diffuso Le Grotte
Della Civita has turned some into hotel
rooms. [More Photos »](#)

transformed into a magical version of Plato's Cave, glowing with golden artificial light that filtered in through small windows, and from recessed lighting in the walls. The minimal space was simply decorated, with an artfully worn wooden desk, a large bed with a white crocheted cover, arched ceilings and a floor of packed earth and patinaed stone tiles.

"I grew up here with my seven brothers and sisters," Mr. Di Cece said, and pointed to the luxurious bathroom with an egg-shaped [Philippe Starck](#) bathtub. "And the animals lived back there."

In 1945, when "Christ Stopped at Eboli" — Carlo Levi's account of the extreme poverty in Basilicata — was published, it brought attention and shame to this forgotten region, sandwiched between Puglia and Calabria. A decade later, Mr. Di Cece and about 15,000 other sassi dwellers were relocated to new low-income housing, and the ancient grotto homes were abandoned.

As I looked around the room that was once the home of a desperately poor family, I recalled something that the American humorist Finley Peter Dunne once said: "The past always looks better than it was because it isn't here."

Indeed, these days the caves look a lot better than the government housing. In 1993, in an attempt to protect the historically significant sassi, [Unesco](#) declared the Matera sassi a [World Heritage site](#), and gradually those condemned homes have been transformed into hotels and restaurants. Now that some of the caves are designed with Starck bathtubs and high-tech temperature and humidity control, some travelers spend more than \$400 a night to immerse themselves in an enchanted atmosphere of antiquity, even if it means doing without flat-screen television or Wi-Fi.

The filmmaker and dabbling hotelier [Francis Ford Coppola](#) is contributing to the Basilicata buzz. Next spring he is planning to open the intimate Palazzo Margherita in the remote town of Bernalda, about 25 miles south of Matera, and less than 10 miles from the Mediterranean coast.

Although it is his sixth property, it is his most personal. Mr. Coppola's grandfather Agostino Coppola was born and raised in a "tiny home in the lower part of Bernalda," Mr. Coppola wrote in an e-mail. He added that his grandfather, who spoke often of his ancestral village, never failed to call his hometown "Bella Bernalda."

Mr. Coppola went to see Bella Bernalda for himself in 1962 and "was embraced by the town and discovered that almost everyone was a cousin." In 2004 he bought Palazzo Margherita, a grand 19th-century villa. The new inn's interiors have been designed by the chic [Paris](#)-based designer [Jacques Grange](#), and it will feature nine suites, a restaurant and streetside bar. In his e-mail, Mr. Coppola described the charm of Basilicata: "It's hard to dig a hole in the ground anywhere, without discovering an ancient Greek vase or shard. The wine is great. The olive oil is great. The food is unique. There are things eaten that are unknown anywhere else in [Italy](#)."

It takes a passionate food explorer to get to Luna Rossa, a restaurant so off the map that one should almost bring along some spare fuel. Along the winding drive through the Pollino [National Park](#) to the blink-and-you'll-drive-by-it village of Terranova di Pollino, it becomes clear why some of Basilicata's recipes have never left the province.

"Some of the towns in Basilicata are so secluded that you can sometimes find dishes that haven't changed much since pagan times," said Federico Valicenti, Luna Rossa's chef and owner, a self-proclaimed culinary [anthropologist](#).

That particular day in May he served his guests a meal that included thinly sliced salami made from acorn-eating pigs raised in Pollino; tapparelle, a local ear-shaped pasta, served with hard ricotta [cheese](#) and lemon rind; a roasted goat dish that was inspired by a medieval recipe; and pork served with eggs and local caciocavallo cheese. On the Luna Rossa wine list were dozens of Aglianico del Vulture [wines](#), an ancient red grape variety originally from [Greece](#), grown on the slopes of an extinct volcano in northwest Basilicata.

Although Mr. Valicenti searches for inspiration in medieval and Renaissance texts, he said his recipes are his own interpretations of historic dishes. "I make them lighter and use modern cooking techniques," he said.

At the newly opened Hotel Torre Fiore, a 10-minute drive from the small hilltop city of Pisticci, the addictive ricotta cheese served at the breakfast buffet is made by a local cheese artisan whose family has been making ricotta for six generations. The hotel's chef, in turn, uses it to make a simple but memorable ricotta mousse.

The hotel, surrounded by wildflowers and fields of grain, was once a masseria (a farmhouse with fortified walls typical of southern Italy) built by a wealthy landowner. Now it is a dream realized by the current owner, John Giannone, who was born in Pisticci, but emigrated to [Toronto](#). It was originally planned as a vacation home for his family, but his middle-aged children became so enthusiastic about the area's potential that they decided to turn it into a boutique hotel with a pool and 13 suites.

The Torre Fiore's restaurant is popular with well-traveled locals like Roberto Martino and his companion, Angelo Bianco, who had driven 45 minutes from Matera to eat there. Originally from Basilicata, the two moved to [Florence](#) where they hosted contemporary [art](#) happenings. About four years ago they decided to return to Basilicata to run SoutHeritage, a contemporary art foundation that organizes pop-up modern art exhibitions in historic spaces throughout Basilicata.

Mr. Martino recalled that the first few shows seemed to attract locals who were looking more for free food and wine than art. "Modern ideas take time to be accepted here," he said. "We're at least 60 years behind northern Italy." Then, he added with a laugh, "Although sometimes it seems like centuries."

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