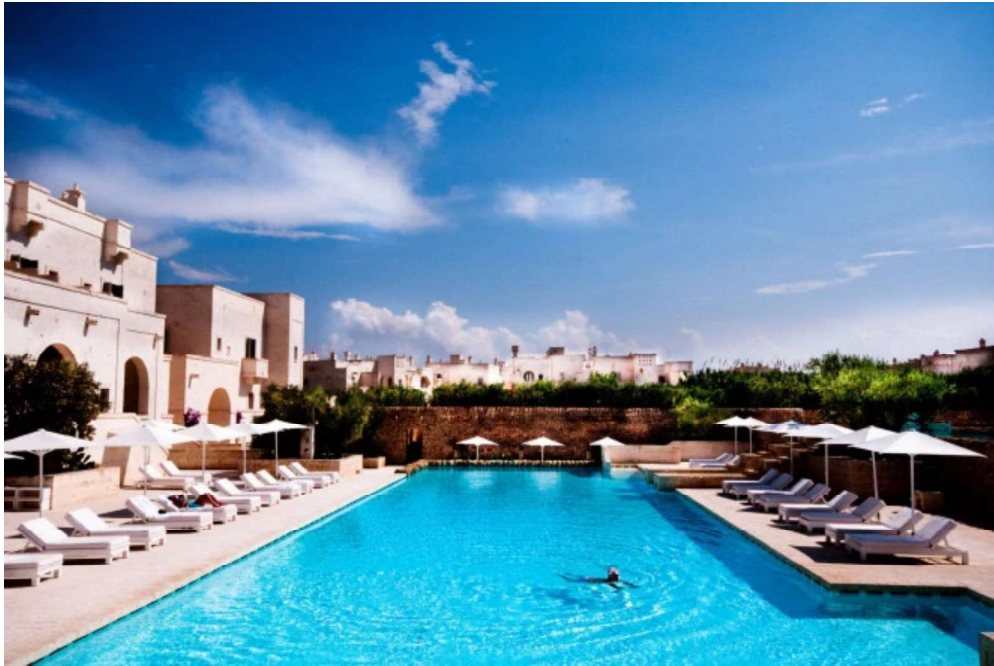


LIVING TRAVEL

Puglia and Matera: History meets cinema in Italy's heavenly heel

By Jackie Cooperman

August 22, 2016 | 8:39pm



Take a dip in Borgo Egnazia's pool.

Photo: Courtesy of Borgo Egnazia

Long overlooked by tourists, the Italian cave town of Matera is having a moment, spurred by its selection as the 2019 European Capital of Culture, its recent designation as a UNESCO World Heritage site and a timely dose of Hollywood: The just-released remake of “Ben-Hur” was shot here.

Matera's nascent popularity is justified. Carved out of limestone and inhabited since the Paleolithic era, the city of 62,000 in the region of Basilicata has a storybook look — with lower-level homes carved directly into the rocks and its upper town capped by Baroque churches.

Dozens of stone staircases join the two sections, which are flanked by small gardens called *vicinati*.

Matera's a town where visitors can sleep in luxury caves (tricked out with heated floors and Wi-Fi), hike in a nature preserve, eat hyperlocal *burrata*, admire modern art and Byzantine frescoes and participate in the vaunted tradition of *la passeggiata* — strolling with the locals on the Via Ridola and Via del Corso and eating gelato, accompanied by strains of concert-level piano from the local conservatory.

“I've seen a massive increase in tourism,” says **Michele Zasa**, an archeologist who's been giving private guided tours since 2002, when Mel Gibson filmed “The Passion of the Christ” here.

“More and more tourists are visiting Matera, not only for its beauty, but for its history.”

<http://nypost.com/2016/08/22/puglia-and-matera-history-meets-cinema-in-italys-heavenly-heel/>

Puglia and Matera: History meets cinema in Italy's heavenly heel | New York Post



And what a history it is. Until 1952, thousands of families lived in caves — called *sassi* — without running water or electricity, while in the upper part of the town, wealthier residents lived on pretty streets dotted with Baroque palaces.

The writer Carlo Levi, exiled to the province of Matera by the Mussolini government, likened the area to Dante's "Inferno."

"Matera was considered the shame of Italy," Zasa says. "Our story is one of desperation and poverty, but also of faith and courage."

"Ben-Hur" was filmed in Matera.

Photo: 2016 Paramount Pictures and Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer Pictures Inc. All Rights Reserved.



Inside the Sextantio hotel, you'll find cavernous rooms — literally.

Photo: Courtesy of Sextantio



The no-joke gnocchi is just one of the colorful and sultry dishes at Sextantio.

Photo: Courtesy of Sextantio

And some canny private-public investments. In 2009, sustainable real estate developer Daniele Elow Kihlgren spent just \$2 million to restore and renovate the 20 caves that make up **Sextantio Le Grotte Della Civita** hotel (from \$170). UNESCO and Matera's municipality, which own the caves, waived the property's rent for 30 years.

The gorgeous retreat features 18 completely modernized, candle-lit caves (caveat emptor: the electricity doesn't always work during heavy rain storms, but the hotel does provide flash lights), a lounge and a dining room.

Staying here is like sleeping in a cocoon, but one with terrific water pressure, deep Agape Spoon bathtubs, verdant views, organic toiletries and optional private massages.

Breakfast, served in a cave that was once a church, includes several kinds of artisanal, local cheese, homemade cakes, fresh squeezed juices, fruit and really excellent tomato bruschetta.

For foodie souvenirs and another example of Matera's progressive approach to tourism, stop in at **Panecotto**, a restaurant and gourmet shop that's part of a business consortium dedicated to promoting local culture. Run by a very friendly staff, and named for the traditional peasant soup made with stale bread, Panecotto's stocked with products that have humble origins but would be right at home at Dean & DeLuca: artichoke cream with lemon juice, extra virgin olive oil, balsamic vinegar, horseradish, zucchini, mint puree, fig jam and eucalyptus honey. End your visit with a glass of local red Aglianico and the addictive red pepper chips called *cruschi*.

<http://nypost.com/2016/08/22/puglia-and-matera-history-meets-cinema-in-italys-heavenly-heel/>