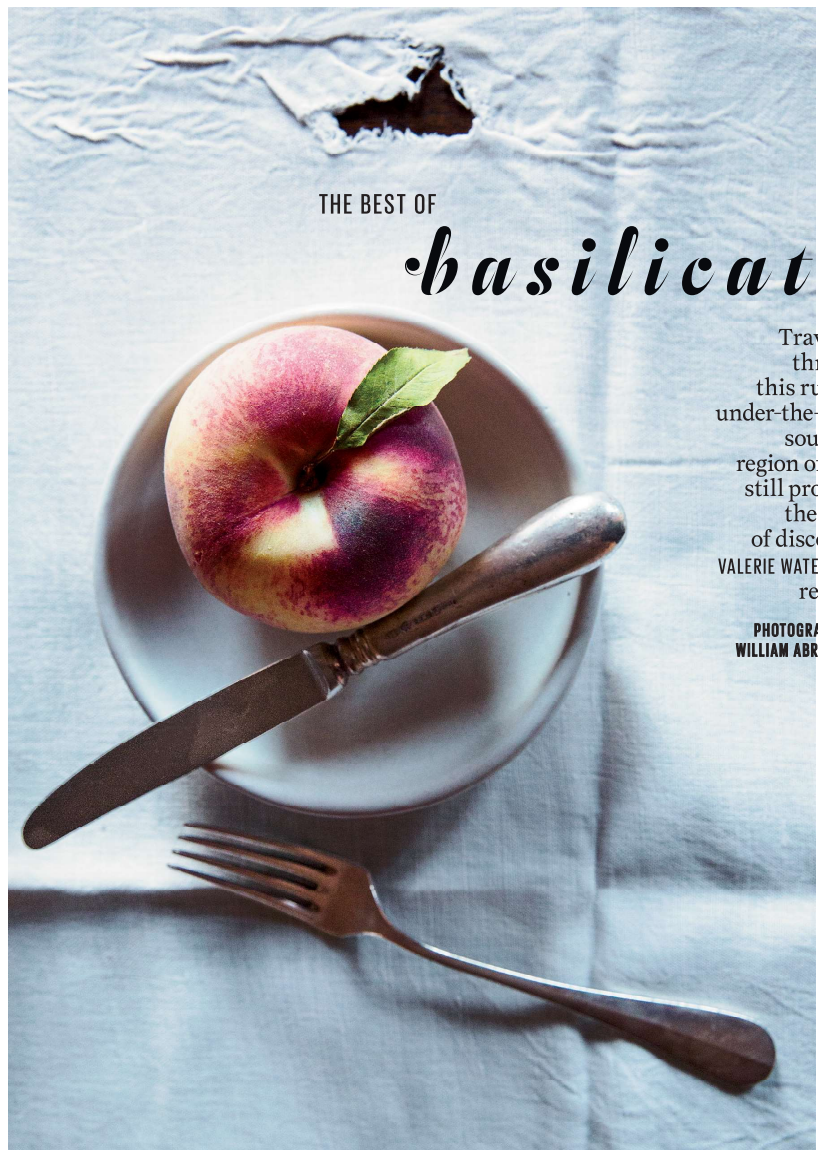


Suite No. 9 at Palazzo Margherita, Francis Ford Coppola's hotel in Bernalda, Italy. **Opposite:** A peach for breakfast at Sessantio Le Grotta della Civita, a boutique property in Sassi di Matera.



THE BEST OF

basilicata

Traveling through this rugged, under-the-radar southern region of Italy still provides the thrill of discovery. VALERIE WATERHOUSE reports.

PHOTOGRAPHED BY WILLIAM ABRANOWICZ

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ocated above the “arch” of Italy’s boot, Basilicata (known locally as Lucania) may not have the glamour of the Amalfi Coast or the polish of Tuscany. But it does have a wild beauty that can seem otherworldly, even biblical: ancient buildings hewed from honey-colored limestone; black-sand beaches fringing a verdant coast; and a simple yet rich culinary tradition. In recent years, the area has undergone a renaissance thanks to an influx of talented chefs and hoteliers—including Francis Ford Coppola, who opened the nine-room Palazzo Margherita in his grandfather’s hometown of Bernalda. Below, our insider’s guide.



SASSI DI MATERA

This unique neighborhood in the town of Matera is a great introduction to the region. Famous for its centuries-old cave dwellings, the Sassi was once one of Italy’s poorest communities. But in 1993, the district was designated a UNESCO World Heritage site, encouraging a flurry of economic interest. Today, the steep, winding streets are brimming with energy, as many of the habitations are now authentic inns and artisanal workshops run by young craftspeople.

WHERE TO STAY

Swedish-Italian hotelier and preservationist Daniele Kihlgren was one of the first to give the Sassi’s spare aesthetic a luxe spin when he opened **Sextantio Le Grotte**

della Civita (*sextantio.it*; \$\$\$) five years ago. The 18 candlelit rooms, spread out over a network of caverns, are simple but stylish, mixing unadorned walls with contemporary touches such as freestanding Agape bathtubs. Breakfast is a lavish buffet (*burrata*; focaccia with potatoes and tomatoes; house-made plum cakes) served in a dramatic deconsecrated grotto-church.

If you prefer something even more intimate, check in to **Corte San Pietro** (*cortesanpietro.it*; \$), a series of 15th-century cave houses restored over the course of four years by owner Fernando Ponte. The five rooms have modern Cinova beds offset by wooden

tables made of antique chestnut. On the horizon: a sleek subterranean spa.

WHERE TO EAT + DRINK

For a casual sit-down lunch, **La Latteria di Emanuele Rizzi** (*39-0835/312-058*; \$\$) dishes out cheeses and charcuterie in the back of a grocery store. We devoured tangy *caciocavallo podolico*—made with milk from Basilicata’s gray-coated free-ranging cattle—served with caramelized figs and wild blackberries.

Dinner favorites include **L’Abbondanza Lucana** (*39-0835/334-574*; \$\$), in an elegant whitewashed grotto. The small-plate appetizers are the draw, a feast of Lucanian specialties such as *carpaccio di melanzane*, slices of red eggplant

from Rotonda soaked in oil with garlic, mint, and chili pepper; and *cialledda*, a salad made with chunks of Matera’s crusty, durum-wheat loaves, tomatoes, cucumber, and onion. Chef Francesca Tambona puts her own twist on regional classics at the upscale **Ristorante Francesca** (*39-0835/310-443*; \$\$). Order the crêpes with chicken and apples in a brandy sauce, followed by cassata gelato, which comes with generous dollops of chocolate.

WHAT TO DO

Visit the Sassi’s three main rupestrian churches—**Santa Lucia delle Malve**, **Santa Maria de Idris**, and **San Pietro Barisano** (*sassweb.com/home*)—all of which have frescoes dating from the 11th to the 17th centuries, and the **Crypt of Original Sin** (*cryptooriginalsin.it*; call 39-320/535-0910 to book a tour), six miles south of Matera. Discovered in 1963, and hailed as a

ninth-century Sistine Chapel, it has impressive depictions of haloed saints and angels, surrounded by vibrant red poppies. For something more modern, stop by **Museo della Scultura Contemporanea** (*musma.it*), which highlights international and Italian artists, including Marino Marini and Giò Pomodoro.

WHERE TO SHOP

Woodworker **Massimo Casiello** (*massimo casiello.it*) stocks his namesake shop with smoothly polished vases, pens, and lamps, but we’re partial to his bread stamps depicting bulls and towers. They were once used to mark loaves baked in Matera’s communal ovens. On the Piazza del Sedile, jewelry designers **Elisa & Janna** (*elisa janna.com*) create gorgeous sculptural pieces from semiprecious stones and recycled materials. Two doors down at **Geppetto** (*39-0835/331-857*), ceramicist Marco Brunetti crafts traditional whistles shaped like chickens—they make ideal souvenirs for kids.



Clockwise from top left: Basilicata's Sassi di Matera; fresh ricotta ravioli with arugula at Ristorante Francesca, in the Sassi; one of Sextantio Grotte della Civita's 18 rooms, built in caves; jewelry designers Johanna Curti and Elisa Tummillo outside their boutique, Elisa & Janna, on the Sassi's Piazza del Sedile.