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How Sextantio Hotels Are Keeping History Alive In Italy

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I know the difference between expensive travel and the truly luxurious

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Le Grotte Della Civitta COURTESY OF SEXTANTIO

The Italian city of Matera is one of those places that makes you appreciate human resilience and creativity. For millennia—up until the 1950s!—families lived, with a few modern comforts by the end (at least according to a local museum), in houses that were more like cave dwellings, carved into the sides of the steep, chalky slopes of the Apennine Mountains rising beside a river in Basilicata, The Sassi, as they are known, are some of the oldest human settlements in what is now Italy, dating from the Paleolithic era.

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Of course, living in a cave—even if you’ve kitted it out with cookware and bedding and wooden furniture—along with your farm animals is going to bring up some public health issues. During a tour organized by the excellent travel designers at [Southern Visions Travel](#), I learned that by the middle of the 20th century, Matera was known as the “shame of Italy” for its poverty and poor sanitation, and residents were relocated to more modern housing. The place was virtually abandoned until the 1980s, and its marvelous architectural heritage was left to fall into further disrepair (understatement).

Now of course, if a place is historic and beautiful, there’s probably some smart entrepreneur who has figured out how to fit a tourism product inside of it. Now Matera is back to life as a place people want to visit, with the cave homes cleaned up and transformed into private accommodations, from simple Airbnbs to lavish hotels. It certainly helps that the city was recently given a sexy turn in the spotlight in the James Bond film *No Time to Die*; it also apparently makes a good cinematic stand-in for the ancient villages that feature in Bible stories, as another was being filmed during my visit.

Sextantio has been a reference for in-the-know travelers to Italy for more than a decade. The brand refined and promote the *albergo diffuso* concept, in which “diffused hotels” fit themselves into antique, possibly abandoned villages, demonstrating that respect for history should win out over creating new products with every modern comfort in mind. They’ve purchased nine preserved historic villages, which are threatened by new urban development, and are executing a plan to save their “historical soul” by turning them into tourism products. (There’s [quite a lot of this going on in Italy](#), but while it’s often palaces, Sextantio’s approach stands out for going further back in time, recognizing the humble rather than merely the aristocratic, and for making cave dwellings downright glamorous.)

The first hotel, in Santo Stefano di Sessano in Abruzzo, is a Middle Ages village, which they call a “suggestive expression of an historical patrimony but also a seductive ‘landscape’ endangered in its architectural heritage and agricultural landscape integrity.”