

Festive Ways To Enjoy Southern Italy This Winter

Experts reveal what to do and see in Puglia, Basilicata, and Sicily, where the holidays are celebrated with gusto; many hotels have off-season rates; and menus include once-a-year specialties.

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Nov 21, 2024, 09:30am EST

Updated Nov 24, 2024, 05:17pm EST

Rome and Naples are among Italy's most popular holiday destinations, with thousands arriving in the Eternal City for seasonal events at the Vatican. Lively Christmas markets and Nativity displays are big draws for Naples. You can avoid some of the crowds and experience other rich, festive traditions if you head to various cities and towns in Italy's South, where Christmas is celebrated with decorative and culinary gusto; temperatures tend to be mild (with highs in the mid-50s °F); off-season rates at hotels are attractive; and menus abound with dishes and sweets often available only at this time of year.

Here, experts reveal what to see and do in Puglia, Basilicata, and Sicily during the holidays. (Note the Christmas season typically runs from December 8 through January 6.)

PUGLIA

LECCE



Piazza Sant'Oronzo in Lecce during the holidays last year. (Photo by Manuel Romano/NurPhoto via Getty Images) NURPHOTO VIA GETTY IMAGES

The Baroque palazzi and churches of **Lecce**, splendidly lit at night, provide a majestic backdrop for all the city's end-of-year happenings. "Lecce, the capital of the Salento, is the custodian of art, rituals, and traditions linked to the most wonderful time of the year," says Giovanni Colonna, an official with ArtWork Culture, a group dedicated to showcasing the area's cultural heritage.

"In many churches [among them the Chiesa del Rosario, the Duomo, the Basilica of Santa Croce), it is Christmas year-round with scenes and altars dedicated to the Nativity." ArtWork offers tours, titled, "Christmas in Lecce," from

December 21 to January 6, departing from the Palazzo Scarciglia.



An artisan decorates papier-mache figures for a Nativity scene in Lecce. DE AGOSTINI VIA GETTY IMAGES

Lecce hosts several markets, like the Mercato di Santa Lucia, dating from the 1500s, which is renowned not only for its longevity but also for its artisan crafts (December 1-23). “The Santa Lucia Fair is reserved for papier-mâché artists, nativity scene designers, and puppeteers,” says Colonna. This mercato is followed by another artisans’ fair (December 27-January 6).

Those with a fondness for sweets can head to the annual Festa del Cioccolato, a multi-day event coinciding with the religious holiday, Immaculate Conception, on December 8. “The more classic Christmas market [runs] until the Epiphany,” says Colonna. “In Piazza Mazzini, there will be a skating rink and a toy fair.”



The Baroque Basilica di Santa Croce houses "The Adoration of the Shepherds," says Giovanni Colonna of ArtWork Culture. DE AGOSTINI VIA GETTY IMAGES

A sleek holiday tree dominates the Piazza Sant'Oronzo throughout the season. Another high point is the "monumental nativity scene in the Piazza Duomo," says Colonna.



Artisanal panettone at Zephyr Restaurant at La Fiermontina Luxury Home. A portion of the proceeds from the sales of the panettones will be donated to charity. COURTESY OF LA FIERMONTINA FAMILY COLLECTION.

Dining: On December 24, it's typical to have a pasta with seafood or with *cime di rapa*, turnip greens; on Christmas Day it's often a lamb dish for the entrée. The local sweet to try is Pesce di Natale, a marzipan dessert shaped like a fish.



A suite at La Fiermontina Luxury Home. COURTESY OF LA FIORMENTINA FAMILY COLLECTION.

Lodging: For those seeking high-end options, there's the five-star [La Fiermontina Luxury Home](#), a restored masseria located in the *centro storico*. The intimate property has 16 rooms and three suites, with grounds that include an olive grove and the Fiermonte Museum, with art from the family collection (an ancestor, Antonia Fiermonte, was a prominent artist and muse to sculptors René Letourneur and Jacques Zwobada). Art lovers can even stay in one of the museum's four stylized suites. On New Year's Eve, the hotel's Zéphyr Restaurant will offer a special menu.

PALO DEL COLLE



Decorations in Palo del Colle. COURTESY OF SABRINA PICCININNI.

Small towns in Puglia also go all out with lights, decorations, and Nativity scenes during the holidays, according to Gianna Tursellino, who heads up the Proloco in **Palo del Colle**, a beautiful town nine miles from Bari. “The Christmas atmosphere is very much felt in Puglia, even with the sun,” she says. The most visited destinations at the end of the year are in the Itria Valley [e.g., Ostuni and Alberobello], she notes, although you can find a celebratory atmosphere in many places throughout Puglia.

Palo has a robust calendar of holiday events with the season kicking off December 6th (St. Nicholas Day) when Christmas lights are turned on in the town, says Sabrina Piccininni, a local tourism counselor

There’s a “Sotto gli Archi” (under the arches) festival that showcases Palo’s historic passageways and artistic landmarks, along with live Nativity scenes and concerts, she says.

Dining: The Palo holiday table has changed a lot in recent years, although it remains an

especially flavorful one, according to Tursellino and Piccininni. On Christmas, pranzo usually consists of homemade orecchiette with a classic ragù, followed by a lamb entrée, although menus vary in the area according to local tradition and available produce.



Cartellate. GETTY

Dessert options are plentiful, with sweets including cartellate, a fried pastry dipped in a wine-based syrup; the almond-based cookies, amaretti, and calzoncelli; or tartlets like bocconotti, finished off with artisanal limoncello and rosoli liqueurs.

BASILICATA

MATERA



Matera, a UNESCO World Heritage site. GETTY

Italy's oldest continuously inhabited settlement, **Matera**, offers one of the most memorable landscapes in Italy—and that's saying a lot. A rocky sprawl of cave dwellings, churches, and monasteries spill over limestone cliffs in two districts of the city, referred to as Sassi (the Italian word for stones), parts of which were settled in the Paleolithic era. Their Biblical-like setting, with tiers of ochre-stone structures clinging to the craggy terrain, has long prompted filmmakers (Pier Paolo Pasolini, Bruce Beresford, and Mel Gibson) to use the location as a stand-in for ancient locales. It also provides an unusually evocative setting for Christmas festivities.

“Matera is especially magical during the holiday season,” says Julie Durso, a private travel manager with [Scott Dunn](#), the international luxury tour firm. “While many think of the well-known Christmas markets of northern Italy, Matera is a hidden gem with its own splendor and festive markets, as well as a Presepe Vivente [live Nativity scene] event.”



Matera at Christmas. GETTY

The Presepe Vivente, held on select dates in December and January, involves a dramatic Nativity re-enactment with some 200 participants. It takes place along a 1.5-kilometer route starting in Matera's historic center and winds through one of the Sassi districts (Caveoso).



Ferratelle waffle cookies. Photo by DeAgostini/Getty Images. DE AGOSTINI VIA GETTY IMAGES

Dining: The end-of-year markets offer a good way to sample Basilicata specialties in one easy stroll, with stalls featuring local products like artisanal cheeses, cured meats, and sweets, according to Durso. For a seasonal approach to cooking classes, she says her company can arrange lessons with a focus on holiday foods, including struffoli (honey-glazed treats) and ferratelle, a traditional waffle-like cookie, typically eaten on St. Stephen's Day, December 26.

Other desserts to try include such sweets as cartellate (also popular in Puglia), here drizzled in honey with cinnamon and orange flavorings, and calzoncelli.



A Cave Room at Sextantio. COURTESY OF SEXTANTIO.

Lodging: For a stay in an atmospheric property, Durso suggests [Sextantio Le Grotte Della Civita](#), an albergo diffuso, where, she says, you can choose among “meticulously restored cave suites within a UNESCO-listed labyrinth.” She cites the authentic and spacious rooms that offer “a unique glimpse into the past, wrapped in modern comfort.”



The five-star Palazzo Gattini is a celebrity favorite. COURTESY OF PALAZZO GATTINI.

The five-star [Palazzo Gattini](#), where stars of the James Bond movie, *No Time To Die*, stayed when filming in Matera, is another option. The Palazzo has an extensive spa, and if you're returning here in summer when the temperatures soar, you can book a suite with its own swimming pool.

SICILY

PALERMO



Festive lights in Palermo. GETTY

Sicily's exuberant spirit is on full display during the holiday season. In Palermo, the *centro storico* gets decked out in lights and seasonal flowers, and Christmas mercati are staged in different parts of the city. There are performances of *The Nutcracker* (*Lo Schiaccianoci*), a celebratory New Year's Day concert at the grand and beautifully illuminated Teatro Massimo opera house, and holiday masses at Palermo's Duomo.



The Teatro Massimo. Photo by Tullio Puglia/Getty Images. GETTY IMAGES

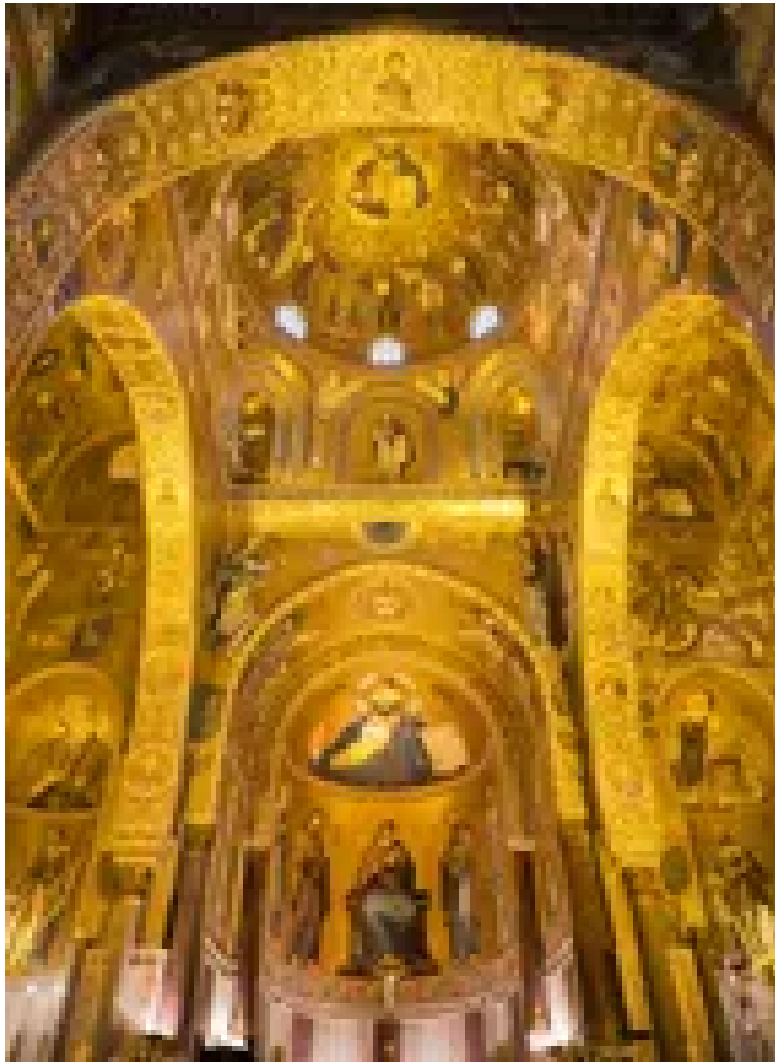
Alberto Ciarallo, founder of [Cognoscenti Travel](#), specializing in luxury tours in Sicily, says as experiential travel becomes more popular, his

clients, who typically visit in spring and fall, are responding to the idea of “spending the festive season immersed in a new culture.”

His firm has created an in-depth itinerary focusing on holiday traditions and experiences. The trip includes a stay at an aristocratic palazzo in Palermo, excursions to the medieval town of Erice for the Christmas market, and to Costinaci for the Presepe Vivente (live Nativity). Participants can also learn how to make classic Sicilian sweets and seasonal decorations.

In Palermo, he recommends excursions that combine both public and private aspects of the city, like a curated visit to the famous Capo and Ballarò food markets to choose ingredients for a typical Christmas Eve meal. The market outing is followed by an interactive cooking class at a private palazzo, then dinner with dessert (Pandoro) and Passito di Pantelleria served by a Christmas tree. For a memorable cultural excursion, he suggests a behind-the-scenes tour of the Teatro Massimo, and dinner at a historic palazzo, hosted by the owner.

Barbara Iaccarino of [Sicilian Journeys](#), a boutique travel firm, says that with Palermo’s popularity as a tourist destination, “just seeing it off-season allows for a more exclusive experience.” To understand Palermo, you need to visit a private palazzo,” she says, since the city tends to hide its beauty “behind the curtains.”



The Cappella Palatina, or Palatine Chapel. Photo by: Planet One Images/Universal Images Group via Getty Images PLANET ONE IMAGES/UNIVERSAL IMAGES GROUP VIA GETTY IMAGES

For a special palace visit, she recommends the Palazzo Gangi, “the most sumptuous private residence in Sicily” (where scenes from Luchino Visconti’s iconic movie, *Il Gattopardo*, were filmed). Her firm offers other unique excursions, for example, private tours of the Cappella Palatina, the ornate chapel in the city’s Royal Palace; visits to the Duomo di Monreale, a Unesco site; and the Palazzo Butera for its wide-ranging art collection. Palazzo Butera is located in the Kalsa district of the city, “one of the oldest and most authentic neighborhoods of Palermo,” she says.



Cassatas on display. GETTY

Dining: The Sicilian holiday table is famously lavish with such specialties as zucca in agrodolce (red pumpkin in sweet-and-sour sauce); anelletti alla palmeritana, a ring-shape pasta baked with meat and cheese; various swordfish dishes; and falsomagro, a stuffed meat roll. Sweets, always a Sicilian mainstay, become more plentiful with cassatas, crispelle with honey, and buccellati, a cake filled with fruit, chocolate, and nuts.



The Villa Igiea, a Rocco Forte hotel. Photo by Riccardo Lombardo/REDA&CO/Universal Images Group via Getty Images UNIVERSAL IMAGES GROUP VIA GETTY IMAGES

Lodging: This historic [Villa Igiea](#), a Rocco Forte Hotel, will now be open year-round. There's a full calendar of holiday dining with special menus on Christmas Eve, Christmas Day, New Year's Eve, and New Year's Day, and even a brunch for the Epiphany (January 6) to wrap up the season. The hotel can arrange insider tours of the Duomo di Monreale, the UNESCO site with magnificent mosaics and an extraordinary blend of architectural styles; the chance to attend performances at the Teatro Massimo with seats in the Royal Box; and behind-the-scenes tours to meet those involved with the Teatro's operas and ballets.



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