



# None fairer than Matera

*James Pembroke* delves into the hidden history behind the medieval caves and rock-hewn churches of the world's third-oldest city

**E**boli is where, in 1935, the exiled writer Carlo Levi (1902-75) took the branch line from the fertile coast of Campania into the badlands of Basilicata.

After the sophistication of Turin, he was appalled by this timeless lawless region, which even Christ had abandoned to malaria (the disease lingered until 1969) and *la Vecchia Religione* of witchcraft.

Although Levi lived in the village of Grassano for two years, Francesco Rosi's 1979 film of Levi's book *Cristo si è fermato a Eboli* was filmed 25 miles away, in ancient Matera. Images of Christ adorned the walls of Matera's numerous medieval cave churches, as well as the duomo and the church of St John the Baptist, built in 1215.

Matera can boast of being the world's third-oldest city after Aleppo and Jericho. Neolithic pottery dating to 7500 BC has been found in the centre. The city thrived in the 15th and 16th centuries, and the centre (the *civita*) was enriched with churches and palaces. The city was divided into two areas: Sasso Caveoso and Sasso Barisano, perhaps



**Matera (above) and James Bond (Daniel Craig) in *No Time to Die***

named because it faces the Puglian port of Bari, with the *civita* in the middle.

The publication of Levi's book in 1945 highlighted the almost genocidal nature of the

'southern problem' which Mussolini had allowed to fester, viewing everyone south of Rome as '*Africanesi*'. It was said that shepherds communed with wolves.

Levi singled out the Sassi, the caves in which 15,000 people lived, for their 'tragic beauty' and hallucinogenic aura of decay, 'like a schoolboy's idea of Dante's *Inferno*'. The Sassi had by then become 'dark holes' riddled with filth and disease, where barnyard animals were kept in dank corners, chickens ran across the dining-room tables, and infant mortality rates were horrendous,



**Left: James Pembroke in the Church of the Madonna delle Virtù, Matera. Below: Matera cave dwelling**

Like other cisterns in the town, it collected rainwater that was filtered and flowed in a controlled way to the Sassi. They have been described as a Swiss cheese, riddled with tunnels and caverns, only 30 per cent of which we can see.

After his visit in July 1950, the Prime Minister set about cleaning up an area where child mortality rates stood at 50 per cent. The headline 'La Vergogna Nazionale' (national disgrace) bellowed from the front page of

*La Gazzetta del Mezzogiorno*, the newspaper of the south.

Only 35 per cent of the cave dwellings were ever declared dangerous, but the whole lot were evacuated, and the 15,000 inhabitants were forcibly rehoused from 1953 to 1968 by government decree.

American experts including Friedrich Friedmann, a philosophy professor at the University of Arkansas, arrived with Italian academics who had studied the mass rural relocation programmes of the Tennessee Valley Authority in the 1930s. The design and building of the La Martella suburb was entrusted to a group of well-intentioned Northern Italian architects. In common with the claustrophobic tower blocks of English cities, it created a sense of isolation.

Realising the evacuation of the Sassi would wipe away their history for good, Levi revised his opinion and proposed an anthropological museum to study and preserve these sophisticated settlements. The abandoned architectural treasures included many rupestrian, or rock-hewn, churches, covered with priceless Byzantine frescoes.

Over the years, the group identified more than 150 cave churches, some of which had been turned by shepherds into shelters for their flocks. They included one majestic Byzantine-era cavern, now known as the Crypt of Original Sin – dubbed the Sistine Chapel of Rupestrian Art.

In 1986, another decree allowed for the preservation and recovery of the

Sassi. Caves were turned into homes, hotels and restaurants. In 1993, they were declared a UNESCO World Heritage Site, and the city was made European Capital of Culture in 2019.

Two years later came Bond.

Most film producers like a lot of space for a car chase – such as the broad boulevards of San Francisco (*Bullitt*) or even the colonnades of Turin (*The Italian Job*). To choose the tiny, cobbled walkways of Matera around which James Bond could spin his Aston Martin DB5 in *No Time to Die* (2021) must have troubled the insurance company a little. They used a pair of originals and eight replicas of the *Goldfinger* car, complete with machine-guns.

In one of the troglodyte caves, there was a crib when I visited on Christmas Eve. At Easter, three crosses were placed on the same site. Little wonder that Mel Gibson chose Matera as the location for his 2004 film *The Passion of Jesus Christ*.

We stayed in the cave hotel, Le Grotte della Civita, which has 18 candle-lit cave rooms, the only modern touch being a



bath – undoubtedly the most romantic hotel I have ever known.

The hotel is part of the Sextantio group, who have bought nine of Italy's 2,000 semi-abandoned villages 'to preserve their architectural and cultural integrity', rather than modernise them. A further 1,500 Italian villages are almost totally abandoned. Houses are being offered for just one euro to anyone willing to restore them.

Sextantio is the brainchild of Daniele Elow Kihlgren, who grew up in Milan. His other hotel, designed by David Chipperfield, is in the village of Santo Stefano di Sessanio, in the mountainous part of the Abruzzi.

Again, the theme is 'back to the medieval peasant past', without the knights and also without the Black Death. Exactly the sort of place a Bond villain could hide a nuclear warhead. 📍

*Matera is a 45-minute drive from Bari airport*

thanks to rampant malaria, trachoma and dysentery.

The Sassi grew out of a settlement by Palaeolithic troglodytes. They developed an advanced system of storing rainwater in cisterns dug out of the soft limestone (*tufo*). After the slow decline of the Roman Empire, the Sassi were the perfect refuge from attack. In the medieval period, they attracted exiles from the Eastern Orthodox Church, from Cappadocia, Armenia and Syria. These people carved and decorated cave churches out of the rock, not just in Matera but throughout the Murgian plain, especially in Massafra and Castellaneta, birthplace of Rudolph Valentino.

Life was diabolically hard. The average family of around 11 lived together in a cave of 650 square feet, sleeping next to their pig and donkey.

Nothing was thrown out. Even manure was mixed with straw – it fermented and created heat. There are remains of *neviere*, for storing snow and ice throughout the year. But life was lived outside in the courtyard – the *vicinato* – surrounded by a group of caves where families forged deep loyalties to one another.

The Prime Minister from 1945 to 1953, Alcide De Gasperi, visited Matera in July 1950. Affronted by this embarrassing wart on the new Italy, he ignored its history and concentrated on sterilising the city instead of recognising that the real problem was poverty – not hygiene.

Even in the early 1950s, Matera had much to be proud of. The largest cistern, the Palombaro Lungo, containing five million litres of water, was commissioned in 1846 – hardly a sign of a despairing city with no future. With its solid pillars carved from the rock and a vault height of over 50 feet, it is dubbed 'the Water Cathedral' and is navigable by boat.

**The largest cistern, 'the Water Cathedral', is navigable by boat**