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THE DISCERNING TRAVELLER

BUILDING ON THE PAST

## Pastoral Puglia

Drenched in Mediterranean sun and the kind of charisma that's impossible to manufacture, Italy's easternmost region is quietly transforming itself into a world-class destination. By Laurie Werner

If you ask people who have gravitated to Puglia to buy houses or open hotels, the reason they usually give is that it's unspoiled, authentic. There's a rustic ease, a stop-and-smell-the-roses slowness, a lack of pretence – an earthiness that extends from the amiable residents to the agriculture-based cuisine. The actress Helen Mirren, who owns a house and bar in the village of Tricase, has described herself as a Salento farmer, even once serving drinks to customers at a village festival. It's hard to imagine that seeming natural anywhere else. >



The lovingly restored grounds of Masseria Trapanà, once a 16th-century fortress

PHOTO STUDIO FF



BlackBook Building on the Past



From left: the whitewashed façade of Palazzi Maritati e Muci; the muralled ceilings – and hidden bar – at Palazzo Daniele; below: Paragon 700's intimate restaurant, housed in a centuries-old vaulted stone space

Obviously, the physical beauty of the region also counts as a major draw, offering everything from sprawling vineyards, olive groves and citrus trees to the sandy beaches and turquoise waters of Salento, which straddles the Ionian and Adriatic Seas. Salento's main city, Lecce, is a Baroque architectural gem complemented by a smattering of whitewashed hill towns with meandering alleyways, such as Cisternino, Locorotondo and Ostuni. Adding to the striking visuals are the fairytale-like *trulli*. Dating back to the 14th century, these Unesco-listed, cone-shaped stone huts – found nowhere else in the world – are clustered in the town of Alberobello and sprinkled throughout the Itria Valley.

Lately, several ancient stone farmhouses known as *masserie* have been converted into hot-ticket hotels, particularly in the last two years on the heels of earlier successes



such as *Masseria Trapanà (trapana.com)*, nestled among olive groves outside Lecce, and *La Fiermontina (lafiermontina.com)*, within the city. Last year, Rocco Forte Hotels expanded and redesigned the 16th-century *Masseria Torre Maizza (roccofoorthotels.com)*, offering 40 heritage-chic rooms and an ivy-trimmed pool bar serving classic tipples and wood-fired pizette alongside striking Adriatic views. The brother-and-sister team Giacomo Fiermonte and Antonia Filali, who own *La Fiermontina*, upscaled their collection last year as well, with a sensitive restoration of the 18th-century *Palazzo Bozzi Corso (palazzo-bozzi-corso.com)* in Lecce, featuring ten distinctive suites, each inspired by the artistic Fiermonte family's historic connections to figures as diverse as French sculptor Jacques Zvobada to John Lennon, whose Central Park memorial garden was designed by Filali's mother, Anne.

PHOTOS CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: © PALAZZI MARITATI E MUCI, COSMO LAERA, GREGORY VENERE



(IMAGE 4 OF 4)

The newest hotel on the scene, **Paragon 700** ([paragon700.com](http://paragon700.com)), has found a in home in Palazzo Rosso, a rare red building within the White City of Ostuni. Owners Pascale Lauber and Ulrike Bauschke, designers and entrepreneurs who also own the boutique hotel Lion's View in Cape Town, had already renovated a Salento *masseria* as a holiday home when they were shown this 18th-century palazzo by local friends. The result is a careful restoration of the French parquet floors and period frescoes accented by colourful – almost flamboyant – bespoke furnishings and antique-market finds from around the world spread across the 11 suites.

Last year, another boutique hotelier, Gabriele Salini, who owns the art-filled G-Rough in Rome, joined forces with philanthropist Francesco Petrucci to open the nine-suite **Palazzo Daniele** ([palazzodaniele.com](http://palazzodaniele.com)) in the Petrucci family's 19th-century palace in the Salento village of Gagliano del Capo. They, too, have fused the classic with the contemporary: the palace's mosaic floors, vaulted ceilings and frescoes pair surprisingly well with avant-garde furniture and bold contemporary art. But, as Salini explains, the palace is about more than just design; he has made a point of arranging experiences > for guests such as angling sessions under the tutelage of local fishermen, or tours of nearby farms followed by a communal dinner of regional dishes made from the day's bounty under the instruction of on-site chef Donata. "Key to our vision are hyper-localism and sense of community, creating environments that fully immerse guests in local Italian life," says Salini. "Even more so during these uncertain times, my mission is for Palazzo Daniele to be a gateway to experience the real Puglian lifestyle."

A personal connection to the region was the prod for Massimo d'Amore, the 22nd descendant, to acquire all shares in his family's castle, the 17th-century **Castello di Ugento** ([castellodiugento.com](http://castellodiugento.com)) in that Salento town where he'd spent summers as a child. Along with partner Diana Bianchi, they restored and transformed it, mixing contemporary Italian furnishings with antiques, opening as a nine-suite hotel in 2018 along with the simpler, 12-room farmhouse *Masseria Le Mandorle* a year before. Buttressing the estate's über-local allure is a cooking school, the Puglia Culinary Centre, run by chef Odette Fadà with special appearances by local nonnas who drop in to demonstrate family recipes passed down for generations.

PHOTO: JANCOS GRAPPOW

Given his stature in the culinary arena, one would expect a world-class restaurant in **Palazzi Maritati e Muci** ([maritatiemuci.com](http://maritatiemuci.com)), the guest house opened by three-starred Michelin chef Guy Martin, of Paris's *Le Grand Vêfour*, and his wife Katherina Marx, a French TV personality, in the Salento village of Nardo last year. But the couple – who first fell for Puglia when they rented villas on holiday in Salento – were eager to

channel the region's countrified charisma. Guests staying in the two refurbished 18th-century mansions, outfitted by Marx herself, can have breakfast in-house, but for other meals are encouraged to sample the offerings at stundry village trattorie that have been given Martin's golden stamp of approval. The food is excellent, giving guests a real taste of Puglian flavours, but the people-watching is even better. ♦

### When in Puglia

#### LECCE

Roman amphitheatres are not uncommon in this part of the world, but it's rare to find one right in the middle of town. In the city's historical centre, surrounded by restaurants, shops and Baroque architecture in golden sandstone – including the intricate façade of the Basilica of Santa Croce – is a nearly intact amphitheatre unearthed just a century ago. The structure dates from the 2nd century AD and originally stood two storeys tall and seated some 15,000 spectators. Only the lower portion remains, placing it below street level; today, it's still used occasionally for events.

#### OTRANTO

It's worth strolling through the seaside town of Otranto for the views of the crystalline water and a stop at an outdoor cafe for a *caffè leccese* (iced coffee with almond milk) near the fortress Castello Aragonese. (The castle – and this town – have seen a lot of action: as a Greek port, then a Roman one, it was ruled by the Byzantines, Normans and Aragonese, and in the 15th century, was invaded by the Turks.) But a larger spectacle may be inside the Cathedral of Santa Maria Annunziata: a panorama of 12th century, perfectly preserved mosaics depicting tableaux from the Old and New Testaments, pagan references and zodiac and mythological figures spread throughout the floor.



Poolside at the Masseria Torre Maizza