



48 HOURS IN...

# Conversano

Off the beaten track, and yet still within striking distance of Bari airport, Conversano's relaxed atmosphere offers a peaceful and easy break. **Jane Gifford** flies down to Puglia...



It's early evening in the *centro storico*, the historical centre of the ancient little walled town of Conversano in the Bari district of Puglia. The town is built on a gentle hill. At its summit, in the centre of a broad square, a gleaming white limestone fortress catches the last light of the sinking sun. Shadows slide over the surrounding buildings. The square is paved with limestone slabs that have been polished to a high shine by countless feet. There is a slightly disorientating slope upwards towards the old cathedral. Lights are coming on in cafés and bars. People stand chatting in groups. Floodlights turn on and the castle glows golden beneath a pink-flushed sky. It's a lovely scene and a perfect start to any short break in this part of Italy.

Taking a seat on the square outside Pashà restaurant and café, I watch the crowds gather to enjoy this beautiful evening and relish the moment over a spritz, Italy's favourite cocktail – a healthy shot of Aperol over ice in a large glass of Prosecco, served here in Conversano with carrot crudités and a large bowl of *taralli*, a local speciality: crunchy and delicious biscuit rings made with flour, oil and wine. I am a new face in town so friendly locals immediately engage me in conversation. "The weather's fine all weekend, you must see Polignano a Mare." "Don't miss our beautiful churches here in Conversano." "You have to try Pashà's ice cream." I order two scoops, one almond, one pistachio. Delicious. Most cafés and restaurants here pride themselves on making their own ice-cream. You will seldom be disappointed. "Try the *granite di limone* at Bar Torrione. It's the best in town," somebody adds. ➤

Photography © Jane Gifford



Clockwise from top left: Polignano a Mare, old town; the Piazza dell'Orologio at Polignano a Mare; Conversano's famous marching band; Hotel Corte Altavilla; San Mauro Monastery; a gate through the ancient city wall; Ferrovìa cherry orchards; spritz and taralli at Pashà

## WHAT TO SEE AND DO

## HANG OUT ON PIAZZA CASTELLO 1

The is the real centre of the action, and if you do nothing else on a weekend in Conversano, you will not have wasted your time. There is plenty to do in the area, but if you decide that what you want to do is very little at all, you are well within your rights! Just spend the weekend sampling all the bars and cafés on the square and watch the world go by.

## TAKE AN EARLY MORNING WALK AROUND THE CENTRO STORICO 2

The early morning light shows the town off at its best, and if the town is busy with tourists at the time of your visit, this is the time to do your sightseeing. Visit Conversano's many churches, the Castle Museum, and don't miss the Civic Museum in the Benedictine Monastery.

## TAKE A BIKE RIDE 3

Cycle out to the Chiesa di Santa Caterina d'Alessandria, an 8th century Byzantine rural church shaped like a four-leafed clove. The ancient watch tower and ruins of Castiglione date right back to the 14th century BC.

## VISIT CASTLE MARCHIONE 4

This was once the lodge of a hunting estate belonging to the counts of Conversano Acquaviva of Aragon. In its day it was surrounded by oak grove and shrubland that covered more than 1,000 hectares. According to legend, the castle is linked to the castle of Conversano by a secret passage.

## HAVE AN ICE CREAM AT MARIO CAMPANELLA'S SUPER MAGO DEL GELO 5

Piazza Garibaldi 22, Polignano a Mare  
☎ +39 080 424 0025

[www.mariocampanellaitsupermagodelgelo.it](http://www.mariocampanellaitsupermagodelgelo.it)

Take a ride down to Polignano a Mare, have a swim at Cala Paura Beach (unless it's the middle of winter!) then visit the old town, and finish off the excursion by having an ice cream at Mario Campanella's Super Mago del Gelo, established in 1935 and still serving the best in town.

## TAKE THE TRAIN TO CASTELLANA GROTTA 6

[www.grottedicastellana.it](http://www.grottedicastellana.it)

In Conversano you are within range of the Caves of Castellana, one of the most important visitor attractions in all Puglia. Since they opened, the caves have attracted more than 15 million visitors, but that's just in recent times. Given that they started forming about 90 million years ago, one can imagine that a few others have been here before us. Book the two-hour English tour.



Cala Paura Beach at Polignano a Mare

## DON'T MISS

## HANDBALL

Go and see the local handball team. The population of Conversano is only 25,000 or so, but their handball team plays in the top national league. They're not doing very well this season, to be fair, but they have been national champions four times in the past decade.

➤ Overwhelmed with suggestions of what to see and do, I walk around the cathedral to Hotel Corte Altavilla, just moments away in the medieval backstreets in the heart of the old town. The hotel is itself a converted medieval court. The entrance is directly opposite the intricately carved main entrance to Conversano's Romanesque cathedral, which dates back to the 11th century. Damaged by fire in 1911, the cathedral has been restored inside and recently underwent a major cleaning outside. Now it is once more gleaming white. Almost everything in the old centre is built of white limestone, a distinguishing characteristic of

*Conversano is an ideal place to experience an authentic sample of Puglian life*

Puglian architecture. Generally the old town is closed to traffic. I have left my car in the pay-and-display car park nearby. "No," says the hotel receptionist. "No need to pay. Just park on the forecourt of any petrol station. There are two across

the road." I check with the garage attendant. "Ma certo, signora. It's what everybody does." He even moves a display stand right outside the kiosk so that I can fit in easily. And with that simple gesture all my parking problems are solved.

The railway station is only a short walk away from the old town so, even without a car, surrounding attractions, as well as Bari airport, are easily accessible. There is a decent bus service and most hotels have bicycles for guests to use. Since the immediate countryside is generally flat, this is a pleasant way to get about. Take a tour of the cherry orchards surrounding Conversano. Meander through olive

groves down to the sea or head off towards the Istrian Valley and amuse yourself by playing 'Spot the Trulli'.

Conversano is a little gem unspoiled by mass tourism and an ideal place to experience an authentic sample of Puglian life. The medieval

centre is remarkably unspoiled by modern development and one of Puglia's most beautiful beaches is only a few kilometres away. Up early, I join the dog-walkers and older residents for a turn around the old town before breakfast. You can see the

*Bright yellow and blue majolica tiles on the tower's domed roof gleam in the morning sun*

Adriatic from Piazza Castello. The air is bright and clear and there is a light breeze off the sea. By 7am the cafés are already filling with regulars. Students from the college across the road favour Della Corte on Piazza Conciliazione, which is a continuation of the main square around the back of the castle. It's the most inexpensive of the bars and always lively. Those who want the best view or to read a newspaper in peace choose Pashà.

After breakfast I head down via San Mauro towards the three-tiered tower of Conversano's Benedictine Monastery, which was founded on an ancient crypt dedicated to San Mauro in the 6th century. Bright

yellow and blue majolica tiles on the tower's domed roof, and on a much larger dome behind it, gleam in the morning sun. This was once the most important monastery in Puglia. In the 13th century it was given by the Pope to Cistercian nuns, who were

remarkable in being the only female order in western Europe allowed to wear male religious symbols. The Civic Museum is housed in the impressively restored rooms of the monastery. Nearby, below the castle walls, within a little courtyard sheltered by awnings, is Caffè 7000. It's a great spot for coffee, juices and a variety of excellent quality snacks. Being off the main drag it's even more reasonably priced than the other bars, none of which are expensive. Back on Piazza Castello the sound of music announces the approach of Conversano's famous band, who march across the square carrying Trade Union banners. (Well, it's ➤



The Della Corte is always lively



The Norman Castle



Votive offerings to Domenico Morea

## WHERE TO STAY

## HOTEL CORTE 7

Vico Goffredo Altavilla 8, Conversano  
☎ +39 080 495 9668

[www.cortealtavilla.it](http://www.cortealtavilla.it)

A 4-star 'Hotel de Charme' in a former medieval palace opposite the cathedral, right in the heart of the *centro storico* of Conversano. Secret yet sought after, tucked away as it is among the medieval *vicoli* of the old town. Friendly staff, and a little wellness centre. Great rooftop dining too, as well as complementary use of the beach club at Cozze. Rooms cost from €69 with breakfast included.

## PALAZZO D'ERCHIA 8

Via Acquaviva d'Aragona 116, Conversano  
☎ +39 080 495 0350

[www.palazzoderchia.it](http://www.palazzoderchia.it)

A charming and popular little 3-star hotel located in a palace on the outskirts of the old town. Built in the 17th century, when the town was expanded and the district of Casalnuovo was built. Restoration work in 2002 gave the building back its original beauty by enriching its ancient surroundings with modern facilities, transforming it into a 3-star hotel with every comfort. Rooms cost from €52 with breakfast included.

## CASALE DELLE VOLPI 9

Via Cellini 14, Conversano

Book through [www.booking.com](http://www.booking.com)

If you need your independence, Casale delle Volpi offers self-catering accommodation with exposed stonework and ethnic-style furnishings. A one-bedroom apartment for two adults in a 14th century building in the heart of the old town will cost you from €41 per night.

## HOTEL SAN TOMMASO 10

Casa da Bagiolaro, Polignano a Mare  
☎ +39 080 426 5573

[www.santommaso.net](http://www.santommaso.net)

An historic building full of old world charm and elegance on the road between Conversano and Polignano a Mare. All the elegance of 19th century hospitality combined with 21st century presentation. Prices range from £62 per night for a junior suite, with breakfast included.

## HOTEL COVO DEI SARACENI 11

Via Conversano 1a, Polignano a Mare  
☎ +39 080 424 1177

[www.covodeisaraceni.com](http://www.covodeisaraceni.com)

4-star elegance in a stunning location sheltered by the cliffs above Cala Paura Beach. Excellent food at il Bastione restaurant, and a wellness centre. The comfort and service of an international-level 4-star hotel but with an atmosphere typical of the Puglia region. Double rooms €91 with breakfast included.

**WHERE TO EAT**

There are a great many excellent and reasonably priced places to eat in Conversano. Just to keep it simple, I have selected those on Piazza Castello in the Centro Storico.

**PASHÀ 12**

Piazza Castello 6  
☎ +39 080 495 1079

A personal favourite. Chic and fancy food are offered in the restaurant, while drinks and simpler food are available in the bar, all with the best view of the castle on the square. A welcoming and unpretentious atmosphere, but the food is very good. And they do great *orecchiette*, the local ear-shaped pasta, which you simply have to try at least once while you are in Puglia. Here is the place to do that.

Price range € €

**GOFFREDO RISTORANTE 13**

Vico Altavilla 8  
☎ +39 080 495 9668

Dine on the roof of Hotel Corte Altavilla in the heart of the old town. Being on top of this former medieval court, you look out over the roof-tops of Conversano, with glimpses of the bell tower of the old cathedral in one direction and the shimmer of the Adriatic in the other. Try the local speciality menu. Reservations required.

Price range € €

**CLICHÉ 14**

Piazza Castello 15/16  
☎ +39 080 246 2749

Contemporary design and excellent food within the medieval walls of Conversano Castle. The name may be Cliché, but nothing else about the place is. Full of character and contrast, and serving the most fantastic Pugliese cuisine.

Price range € €

**MEDIEVAL PIZZERIA 15**

Via Cardinale Casimiro Gennari 10  
☎ +39 080 495 9093

Very small and not always open when you would expect it to be, but a really good place to stop and eat when it is. It's just off the Piazza Castello – simply head for the main entrance of the cathedral and you will find it. Dinner for two with wine can be from just €20.

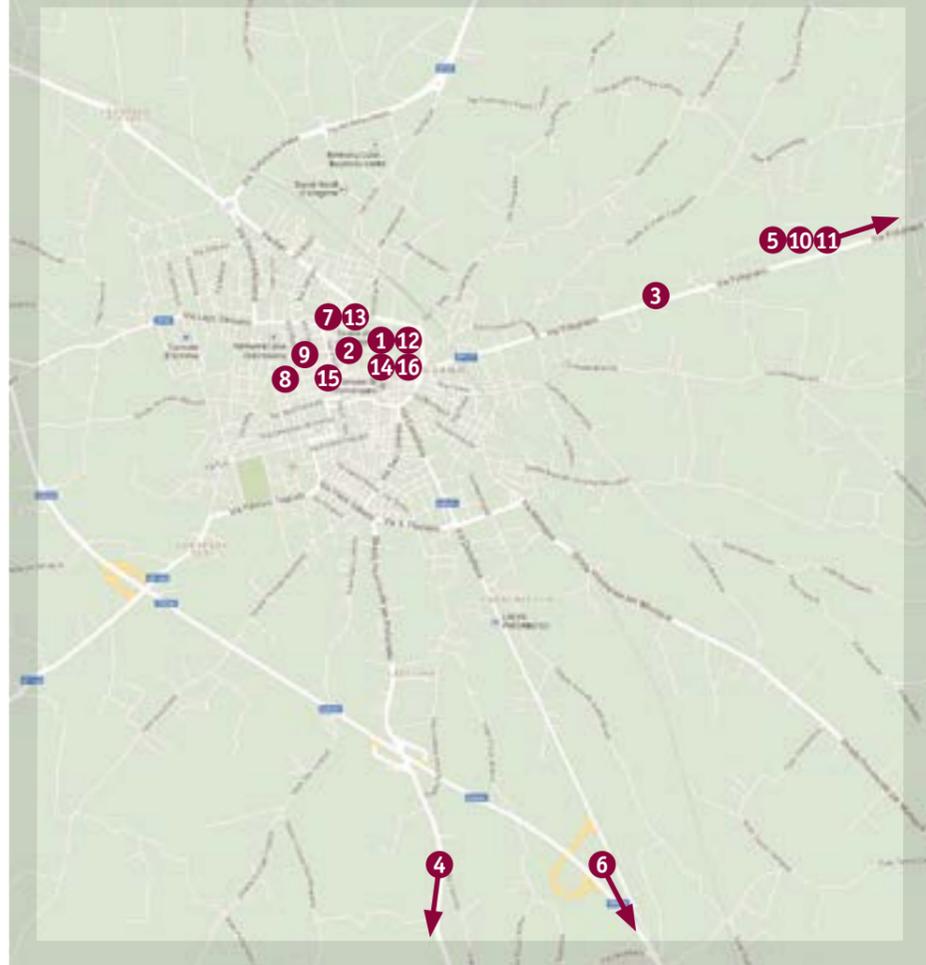
Price range € €

**PIZZERIA TERRAROSSA 16**

Corso Domenico Morea 14  
☎ +39 080 495 7208

A really good value pizzeria with a nice lively atmosphere, inside the castle, with more than 70 pizzas to choose from. It is located at the front of the castle, on the seaward side.

Price range €



**DON'T MISS**

**HOLY WEEK**  
The celebration of Easter remains an important event on the calendar in this deeply religious region. Good Friday sees the rite of the Kiss of the Black Christ. On Thursday night the faithful go to the church of Santa Maria dell'Isola, where the cross is kept, and at 3am the procession begins its march towards Conversano.

more of a casual swagger than a march. This is southern Italy!) The tradition dates back to 1832. Conversano Castle was built by the Normans. The town, then known as Norba, was the capital of a large county under the rule of Altavilla. The castle was inherited 1456 by Caterina Orsini Del Balzo. She and her husband, Giulio Antonio, started the long line of the Counts

*The little road to Polignano a Mare runs between villas and olive groves to the coast*

of Acquaviva who resided here until 1806 when the decree of Giuseppe Bonaparte led to the abolition of feudal power in Puglia. Giangirolamo II (1626-1665) known as the 'Squint-Eyed' Count, was an important patron of the arts. He sponsored Paolo Finoglio, whose cycle of paintings 'Jerusalem Delivered' can be seen in the castle museum. Finoglio also painted the frescoes in the Church of Saints Cosma and Damiano on the opposite side of the old town from the castle. They are prized amongst

the finest examples of Neapolitan baroque in Puglia. Count Squint-Eye is mainly remembered for his cruelty: he had 12 priests from nearby Narbo executed simply for criticising his rule. He was also a stickler for strict adherence to the 'droit de seigneur', which obliged every bride to spend her wedding night with him. Conversanesi have been known as the 'Sons of the Count' ever since.

The little road to Polignano a Mare runs straight as a die between villas and olive groves down to the coast. Polignano is remarkable for its cliffs and caves. The coast-line here is relatively flat, distinguished only by the extraordinary colour of the water. First stop is the life-size bronze of singer Domenico Modugno on the cliff-top esplanade to the north of the pretty pebble beach. There is an excellent view from here of the bright white buildings of the old town clustered along the headland to



Piazza Castello and the cathedral



Olive groves on the road to Polignano



The Piazza XX Settembre



A wedding at the cathedral

**GETTING THERE**

► **BY PLANE**

Bari airport is only about 40km from Conversano.

► **BY TRAIN**

From the airport, take the shuttle train to Bari Central, then take a train towards Martina Franca (Ferrovie del Sud-Est) and get out at Conversano.

► **BY CAR**

From the airport, take the SS16 towards Brindisi, and leave the motorway at the Cozze/Conversano exit. Then take the SP121 to Conversano.

► **KEY TO RESTAURANT PRICES**

(full meal per person, not including wine)

€ Up to €25

€ € € €26-€50

€ € € € More than €50

**DON'T MISS**

**THE MADONNA DELLA FONTE**  
If you are in Conversano on the third Sunday of May you will see the procession of the Madonna della Fonte, a Byzantine icon that is considered to be the protector of the town. The procession is combined with a spectacular festival of music and fireworks.

The Piazza Conciliazione

