



# HIDDEN PUGLIA



Think of Puglia and most people see *trulli*, but this is just the beginning of the story. **Jane Gifford** discovers that Puglia is like an oyster – to fully enjoy its charms, you have to go beyond the obvious...

Captions clockwise from top left: Masseria Il Frantoio; 16th-century castle and Porto Vecchio at Monopoli; Duomo Vecchio in Molfetta; unrestored trulli in the Istrian Valley; landscape of Gravina in Puglia; Masseria Il Frantoio; boat at Molfetta; the Baroque rebuild of Madonna della Madia at Monopoli



Photography © Jane Gifford



born here in 1928. His exuberant statue stands on the clifftop on the northern side of the bay. Arms spread wide he is singing his classic song 'Nel blu dipinto di blu', better known as 'Volare'. Dean Martin had worldwide success with an English version. Over lunch at Il Bastione,

play cards on tiny tree-shaded squares and children play football around the drinking fountain in Piazza Palmieri. Above three-storied buildings strung with washing, the tower of Madonna della Madia comes into view, Monopoli's old cathedral, founded 1107 and named after a

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the waiter, who is from Monopoli, insists we make Madonna della Madia our next stop.

Monopoli is 20 minutes down the coast and much larger than Polignano. We head for Porto Vecchio where there is a great view of the castle across the harbour and ample parking on the quayside. Walk around to the castle, passing men fishing for octopus, and you will arrive in the peaceful streets of the Città Vecchia, where locals

Byzantine icon which is housed here. The old Romanesque building has had a stunning Baroque makeover inside. The icon is said to have been discovered in a punt floating off shore. Only the Bishop was able to retrieve it. It blew out of reach of everybody else. The finding of the Madonna della Madia is celebrated here annually between 14-16 August.

Alberobello is roughly 25km inland from Monopoli. World famous as the site of hundreds of *trulli*, ➤

**WHERE TO STAY**

**CORTE ALTAVILLA HOTEL**  
Vico Goffredo Altavilla 8, Conversano  
☎ +39 0804 959 668, [www.cortealtavilla.it](http://www.cortealtavilla.it)  
Excellent hotel in the heart of the old town in a former monastery, opposite cathedral. **Double room from €65**

**MASSERIA IL FRANTOIO**  
Montalbano, Ostuni  
☎ +39 0831 330 276  
[www.masseriailfrantoio.it](http://www.masseriailfrantoio.it)

You can enjoy a gastronomic extravaganza hosted by Armando and Rosalba Balestrazzi, which consists of a two-night gourmet stay including wine tasting, breakfast and five-course dinner with wines and liqueurs. **Two nights €199 per person**

**ALBERGO LUCY**  
Piazza Plebiscito 11, Trani  
☎ +39 0883 481 022  
[www.albergolucy.com](http://www.albergolucy.com)  
An excellent central location in Trani with palm trees; two minutes from the marina. **Double room from €75**



Compared to the rest of Italy, Puglia is mostly flat. It's a region of exposed coastal plains with a relatively featureless limestone plateau in the middle, the Murge. Being wide open to the Adriatic on one side and to the Ionian Sea on the other, Puglia has often been invaded, so its people have closed in on themselves, sheltering behind high windowless walls and finding sanctuary in its many caves.

To best explore, fly to Bari, rather than the usual Brindisi, and begin by heading southwest to Conversano 40km away. Follow the smaller roads through a riot of wildflowers where *ferrovia* cherry orchards stretch off to the horizon. These red and juicy cherries are a local speciality, all originating from a single pit which took root near the railway at Sammichele di Bari in the 1930s.

Conversano, on the eastern edge of the Murge overlooking the Adriatic, is dominated by a spectacular Norman castle, home of the Acquaviva Counts of Conversano for seven centuries. Built of gleaming white limestone, the castle is

surrounded by a broad square, Piazza Castello, which is the focus of the town's social life and an excellent place to while away the hours. Conversano's medieval city walls still incorporate huge blocks of stone from the town's prehistoric past. In the maze of medieval streets you will find an impressive Benedictine monastery, once the most important in Puglia, with a three-tiered tower and cupola crowned with yellow and blue majolica tiles, and a thousand-year-old Romanesque cathedral with fine carvings around the lion-flanked doorway.

From Conversano the sea is only 9km away at Polignano a Mare, where the usually flat Adriatic coast is interrupted by a pleasant cliff-lined bay popular with bathers. Sheer defensive walls cover the cliffs on the bay's south side, protecting the white-washed old town above. Today the original tiny windows are being replaced by balconies and terraces.

Once this too was a Norman fortress and you still enter the old town through an archway flanked by palaces. Domenico Modugno is Polignano a Mare's most famous son,

*Captions clockwise from top left: Piazza Santa Croce in the commune of Palo del Colle; Conversano Castle which dates back to the 14th century; Cathedral Santa Maria Assunta in Altamura*



## WHERE TO EAT

## PASHÀ CAFFÈ

Piazza Castello 5-7, Conversano

☎ +39 0804 951 079

www.pashaconversano.it

A great spot for people watching, open everyday until late. Spritz and snacks for two €8; meal for two with wine and delicious *gelato* around €25.

## COVO DEI SARACENI

Via Conversano 1, Polignano a Mare

☎ +39 0804 241 177

www.covodeisaraceni.com

This hotel restaurant has an unbeatable view of the sea and old town. Treat yourself to a fabulous five-course lunch special for two with Prosecco and wine for €50.

## PASTICCERIA AL DUOMO

Via Banchina Seminario 10, Molfetta

☎ +39 0803 973 810

Open 6am-11.30pm from April to September. Closed Wednesdays. On the harbour next to the cathedral, Vito Farinato's bar is a local institution serving food, drinks and excellent ice cream.

► it's extraordinarily busy. *Trulli* can be seen all over the countryside here, so avoid the crowds and head instead through ancient olive groves for Masseria Il Frantoio. The *masseria*, the equivalent of a manor house, is as unique to Puglia as *trulli*, and like them they are rapidly being converted into holiday centres. Il Frantoio has remained true to its

to Altamura, amid the dry-stone walls of the high plateau. Up here, spring lines the lanes with orchids and wild fennel. Parts of Altamura's 2,500-year-old city walls are still standing but the place takes its name (*alta mura* means high wall) from its immense medieval walls, which have been absorbed in the city centre by bulky Palazzo del Balzo, named

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origins being run as an organic farm and *azienda agrituristica*. The food, exquisitely cooked and presented, comes from the estate. Il Frantoio also supplies local restaurants like Ristò Caffè Cavour in nearby Ostuni. Famous for its medieval streets and curvaceous cathedral, Ostuni is very busy with tourists.

Back towards Bari, head deeper inland via Cassana delle Murge

after the Roman Prince Raimondello Orsini del Balzo, who lived here until 1620. Arriving in blistering mid-afternoon heat, we are saved by the cool of Bar Corona on Piazza Zanardelli. It's a short walk to shady Corso Federico II where the old limestone paving has been polished to a high shine by so many feet.

Altamura's twin-towered cathedral gradually comes into view at the



Captions clockwise from top right: Restored trulli near Alberobello; the statue of Domenico Modugno in Polignano a Mare; the marina and cathedral in Trani

end of the street. Begun 1232 by Swabian Emperor Frederick, it has a fabulously decorated main entrance.

Nearby, Gravina in Puglia straddles a boulder-lined ravine, the *gravina*, cut deep into the plateau by a river still flowing above ground, a rarity here. When Gravina was sacked by Saracens, Normans and finally Romans, the town's inhabitants fled to caves in the ravine and stayed there. San Michele delle Grotte is a church cut into a cave said to date back to this time. The Roman Orsinis managed to hang on here for nearly 400 years exploiting the locals until 1807. Palazzo Orsini remains and the family insignia, the bear, supports the columns of 14th-century Santa Maria dei Morti, in place of the usual lions.

The coast above Bari is a gentle hour's drive from Gravina. Open rolling hills blend into olive groves as we near the shore at Molfetta, home to one of the largest fishing fleets on the Adriatic. We zigzag through streets of brightly painted houses with wrought iron balconies to the harbour and park right in front of the 12th-century cathedral on the

waterfront. After an excellent Spritz cocktail and ice cream, we enjoy a craft market organised by local art students. Madonna dei Martiri, the patron saint of sailors, is celebrated here at the Fést d'la Méddon with fireworks and a grand procession over land and sea which lasts for three days from 8 September.

Last stop is Trani, an important centre of the wine trade, 17km further up the coast. In contrast to Molfetta, which is laid back and unpretentious, Trani is chic and prosperous. It's a beautiful evening and there is a party atmosphere. The coast is looking its best along the waterfront on Lungomare Columbo. We follow the sound of a DJ from Piazza Plebiscito, with palm trees at its centre, to the marina and find the decks set up outside the first of many bars and restaurants along Via Statuti Maritimi. We enjoy the music, seated on the harbour wall, drink in hand, watching the sun set behind the thousand-year-old cathedral of San Nichola Pelegrino across the water. All of Trani's festivals are held here on the harbour. It's a lovely backdrop for a celebration. ■

