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Italy's Next Great Destination



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Puglia at Its Best

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Every once in a while, even my well-traveled friends surprise me by not knowing where a place I'm going is located. That was the case with my favorite region of Italy.

The southern “heel” of Italy’s “boot,” Puglia—Apulia in the Queen’s English—is everything that the top-of-mind Italian destinations, like Tuscany and the Amalfi Coast, are not. There’s an austere beauty to it: The landscape is rugged and wild, the terrain is flat and windswept, and the buildings are stark white, blazing against the blue of the sky and the sea—except for the tiny ones, called *trulli*, with domed roofs that bring to mind hobbit houses and fill the mellifluously named (and UNESCO recognized) town of Alberobello.



Magnificent, craggy olive trees that have been here for 1,000 years, their gnarled trunks like soulful works of art, dominate the landscape. In spring, fields of red poppies blaze underneath. (Those trees are another UNESCO treasure, and so protected that a Middle Eastern prince's attempts to buy some for his palace failed, no matter how much money he offered.) Best of all, the crowds are relatively thin.

“What makes Puglia so extraordinarily intense is the absence of that elegant patina that can permeate well-traveled regions; it permits the most genuine hospitality,” says Antonello Losito, a Puglia-born former professional cyclist who started the bespoke travel company [Southern Visions](#) nearly ten years ago to bring American visitors deep into this peninsula. “In other parts of Italy this has somehow been lost; the purity of a smile, the banquet of meals together, the warm hugs and handshakes. This part of the world has been endowed with talent to spare and vivid colors that imprint themselves on the memory: the absolute blue of the clear sky and the two seas, the vibrant green dance of ancient olive trees, the blinding white lime wash on the buildings. I came close once to running away and heading off, but I realized I would have not made my way without all this magic and beauty.”

He didn't mention the tastes. But as is this case throughout Italy, there are many lovely things to eat and drink in Puglia. (And the flat, picturesque roads are perfect for cycling it off.) Those magnificent olive trees produce some very fine oil, little of which is exported, even domestically. There are some 120 indigenous wine grapes, including the deep, robust Negroamaro and the softer

Susamaniello—“every day I discover a new grape,” says Giuseppe Cupertino, the wine experience manager at the luxurious [Borgo Egnazia](#) resort and president of a local sommelier association. Flanked by the Adriatic and the Mediterranean Sea, the boot heel is rich in seafood, and *ricci*, as sea urchin is known here, is plentiful, served at seaside cafes where diners scrape the umami-rich uni out of spiky shells and spread it onto soft bread. And Puglia is the birthplace of burrata, which is possibly all I need to say.



Masseria le Carrube , whose farmhouse architecture is typical of Puglia

The area had obvious historical appeal for trading and defense, and the settlement of Egnazia was an important crossroads of the Roman Empire—a global meeting place. Borgo Egnazia, a 184-key resort built six years ago with the idea of re-creating the feeling of medieval villages, aims to be a new crossroads, a meeting place for sophisticated people from around the world—the hotel’s PR representative told me Justin Timberlake and Jessica Biel got married there. There was a savvy international mix when I visited (as a guest of the hotel), and I heard a half dozen languages at every meal (though Europeans dominate, enticed by cheap easyJet flights to Bari).

Borgo Egnazia is now the largest and most lavish of the family-owned San Domenico Hotels group. Twenty years ago, the Melpignano family birthed luxury tourism in Puglia when they turned their own 13th-century *masseria*

(farmhouse) midway between Bari and Brindisi into a high-end hotel. That 47-room hotel, [Masseria San Domenico](#), with its resolutely old-world aesthetic, massive swimming pool, private beach club, championship golf course—where the family’s own longtime cook makes rustic, satisfying lunches—and extensive thalassotherapy spa are still standard bearers for what Puglian hospitality is all about. The surrounding olive groves still produce the delicious olive oil served in all their hotels.

In the years since then, the group, now helmed by the founder’s forward-thinking, 39-year-old son Aldo Melpignano, has made “Nowhere Else” the cornerstone of its philosophy. It opened the intimate, rustic [Masseria Cimino](#) in an 18th-century farmhouse with just 15 simple but comfortable and romantic rooms and a homey dining area where meals are served family-style, and an urban bolt hole in London. The big news is the opening of a fourth hotel in Puglia last month, the slightly less rusticated [Masseria le Carrube](#), just outside the picturesque white city of Ostuni. Its 19 rooms fill buildings that date in part from the 12th century and where the restaurant serves ambitious vegetarian food—it’s one of only three serious vegetarian restaurants in a region that supplies produce to much of Italy. The Sunday brunch dispels any notions that herbivorism is incompatible with hedonism; I’d go back for the artichokes and fava beans alone.



But it’s [Borgo Egnazia](#) that the Melpignano family regards as their jewel. Marketing director Stefano Tredici—himself a convert to the pleasures of Puglia

after a long career in fashion in Milan—tells me about the Italian concept of *buon retiro*, periodically retreating to a good place in order to charge your batteries. All the San Domenico hotels aim to embody that, but their character is different. “Masseria San Domenico is for couples who want to be left alone because they don’t have to prove anything,” he says. While the more lively Borgo Egnazia is geared more toward young families and couples who want to prove themselves in the world and are visiting Puglia because it’s the cool new destination.

Whatever the motivation, a week in Puglia is a great pleasure. Built in 2010, Borgo Egnazia fools everyone into thinking it’s a historic, whitewashed, cobblestoned village. Some rooms are in a main building, while freestanding one- and two-bedroom villas occupy a *borgo* (village) area, and some larger villas are more remote. There are three restaurants, two pools, a fleet of bicycles for day-trips (highly recommended), a team of local advisers who serve as great tour guides, and one of the most creative, ambitious spas in Europe, complete with a staff shaman and dance therapy.

Nothing is linear. The architect, from a nearby village, sought getting lost as an ideal. And the hotel doesn’t provide property maps. “It’s a magic puzzle where you get lost but then put yourself together again” as you wander in search of your room, says PR manager Lisa Nitti, who six months into her position, still sometimes gets lost herself.

The funny thing about Puglia is that once you’re there, getting lost doesn’t matter at all. How better to feel like you’re in a singular place—one that few of your friends have even heard of—than to be lost in its rambling passageways? It doesn’t always matter where the GPS says you are. Your surroundings make it clear that you are absolutely nowhere else.



Borgo Egnazia

The Piazza at Borgo Egnazia, a gathering place on summer nights



Puglia

The whitewashed, hillside town of Ostuni



Puglia

Trulli in Alberobello



Borgo Egnazia

The main pool



Masseria Le Carrube

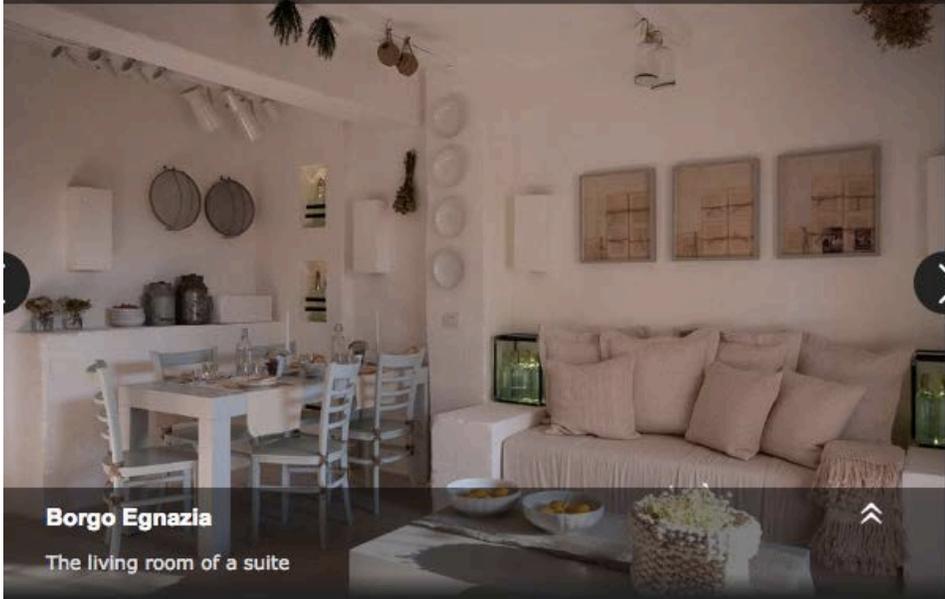
The hotel facade



Borgo Egnazia

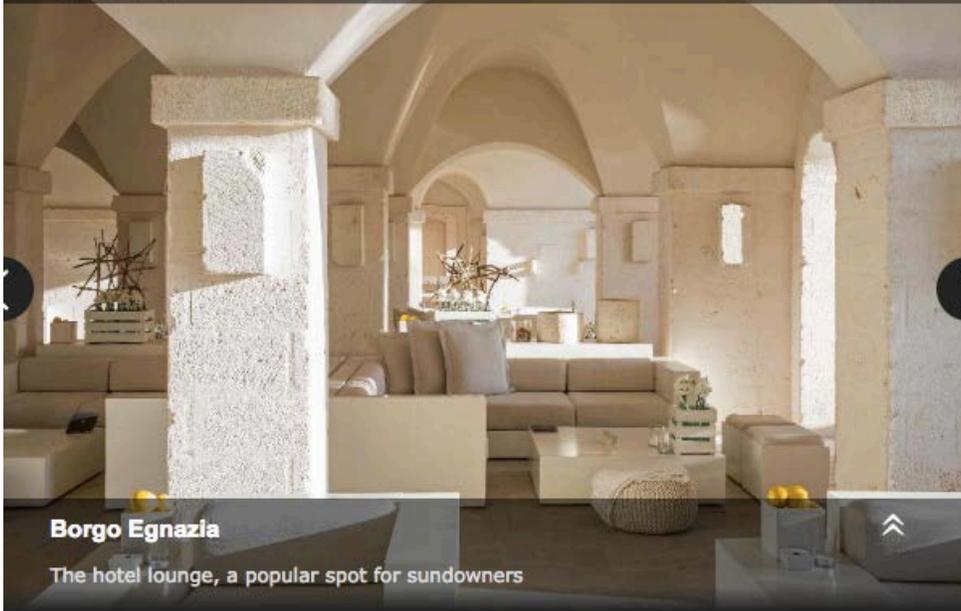
A guest room





Borgo Egnazia

The living room of a suite



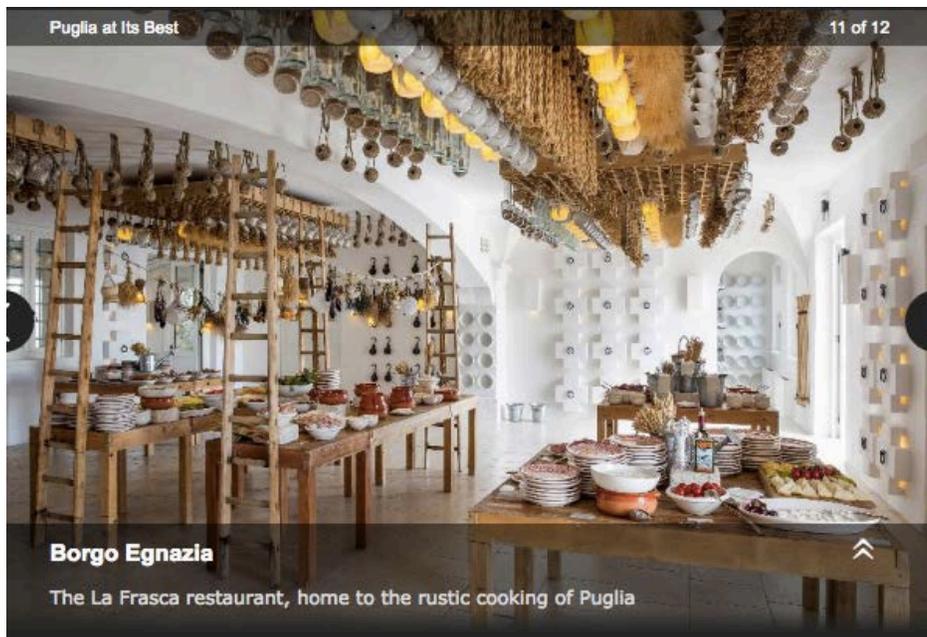
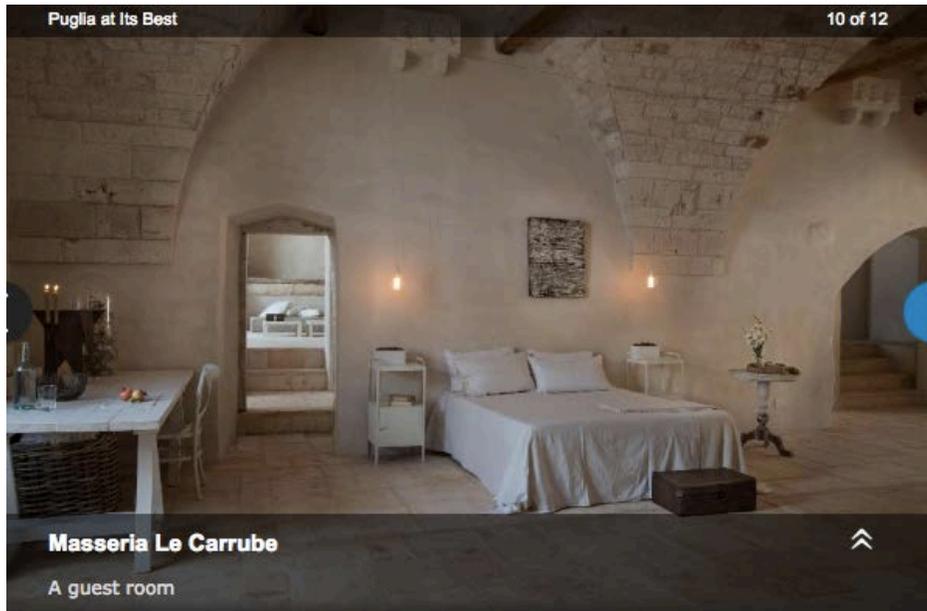
Borgo Egnazia

The hotel lounge, a popular spot for sundowners



Masseria Cimino

The homey restaurants, where guests share dinners



<http://www.forbes.com/sites/annabel/2016/05/16/italys-next-great-destination/#2958f5e52c07>