

WITH ITS CHARMING, RUSTIC APPROACH TO LIFE, ITALY'S SOUTHERN REGION OF PUGLIA IS ALL ABOUT INDULGING THE SENSES AND MAKING IDLENESS YOUR NEW IDEAL.

# disposition

# Sweet

**THIS IMAGE:** Near Ostuni you'll find farmhouses transformed into luxe accommodation, like Masseria Potenti.  
**OPPOSITE:** The quintessential Puglian seaside town of Polignano.



PHOTOGRAPHY JASON IERACE - STUDIOIERACE.COM.AU

Words PHIL HAWKES





**CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT:** *Hilltop Ostuni is known as the 'white city'; Golden hour at Masseria Potenti; No trip to Italy is complete without a lido session; Bagno Marino Archi on the Adriatic Sea.*



**L**a *Dolce Vita* (the sweet life): we've all heard of it, thanks to Federico Fellini's 1960 film portraying the hedonistic society of Rome in the '50s, when people rushed around frantically having a good time. Since then, that phrase has been associated with almost everything about the Italian lifestyle, even in Australia.

However in the province of Puglia, on the heel side of Italy's booted deep south, there's a saying that's far more appropriate for Aussies looking for a more relaxed, less frenetic Italian holiday experience: *Dolce far niente* (sweet idleness).

This is the phrase that comes to mind as my wife and I wander slowly down a cobbled country lane far from the madding crowds of cities like Rome, Florence and Venice. Sure, in summer it can be busy in Puglia too (mainly with Italian tourists), but in spring or autumn you'd find Shakespeare's words more relevant: "*Proud-pied April, dressed in all his trim, hath put a spirit of youth in every thing*".

Indeed, we're invigorated by the fresh morning air scented with herbs and flowers, buzzing bees going about their business, raw earth newly furrowed around the harvested artichokes, endless ancient olive groves and poppy-ended vine rows. It's just a kilometre or so to the nearest cafe with heart-pounding espressos and pastries awaiting, and maybe a gelato to round it off. Whoever heard of sugar deprivation in Italy where breakfast is all dolce? No smashed avo here, thank you.

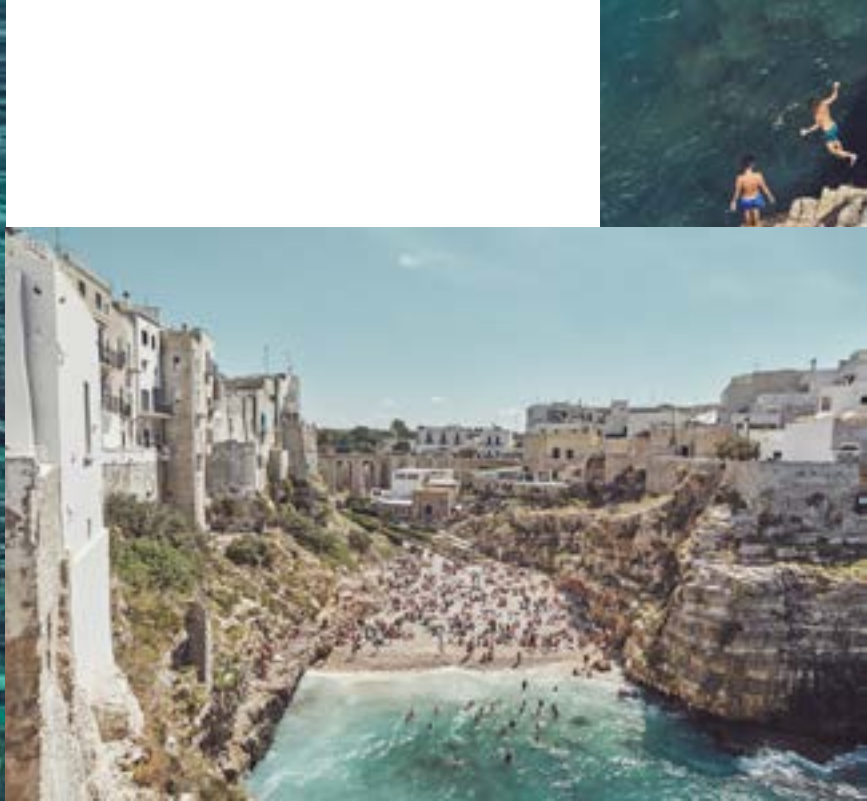
We're in a region known as the Valle d'Itria, not far from Puglia's capital Bari, where our chosen villa, Terrarossa, is hidden in the backblocks of thousands of olive trees and vegetable farms. Rustic, yes, but just five kilometres from the charming town of Fasano and 10 kilometres from the nearest Adriatic beach at Monopoli. It's a perfect example of so near, yet so far. >>

**We explore the coast and beaches, visiting historical cities like Gallipoli and Otranto with their castles, palazzi and Baroque churches. Every place has its own character.**

PHOTOGRAPHY JASON IERACE - STUDIOIERACE.COM.AU







**CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT:** Polignano a Mare is a gem on the coast of the Valle d'Itria; The beach is flanked by cliffs from which children and teenagers jump all day until sunset; Typically Italian: the Piaggio Ape. **OPPOSITE:** Enjoy days of sweet idleness in Puglia's deep south.



## The old part of the city with its narrow cobblestone streets gives us some valuable exercise, although eventually we succumb to the lure of a tuk-tuk.

Having booked our villa through The Thinking Traveller, we arrive to find its rep Tamara awaiting with a treasure trove of goodies: baskets of fresh local produce including salads, vegies, burrata cheese, pasta, just-baked breads and, of course, a well-stocked wine rack. And a complete kitchen for the most demanding of cooks, not that we qualify for that. But true to form, the thoughtful Thinking people have arranged cooking lessons for us, great fun as well as educational, plus a chef's dinner on one night of our choice.

They can also organise excursions ranging from visits to the old city of Matera (an absolute must; an overnight stay there is highly recommended) and the seaside towns of Polignano a Mare and Monopoli, where the beaches and seafood restaurants are legendary. The cuisine at La Peschiera hotel's Saleblu Restaurant and Lounge is worth the trip to Italy alone. And for more award-winning Puglian fare, there's the classy Il Melograno resort restaurant Mùmmulo, where Italian tradition joins 21st-century creativity in happy union. Totally relaxed, we say farewell to our days of *far niente*, and hit the road to see more of the earthy but enchanting Puglia region.

### THE VILLAGES OF THE VALLE D'ITRIA

Picture postcards of the charming villages of Alberobello, Locorotondo, Martina Franca and Ostuni do not lie. The ancient trulli (conical stone buildings) are Puglia's most photographed sights, with many still used for residences and storage, and an increasing number renovated as tourist

accommodation with all mod cons. Each of these villages deserves a day trip, especially Alberobello for its photogenic main street and Martina Franca for its relatively calm, pleasant vibe and superb trattoria around the piazza opposite the church. In all these places, make sure to enjoy a leisurely lunch with all-inclusive menus and excellent local wines.

Ostuni is much bigger and is known as 'the white city', sitting on a hilltop and easily visible from the Adriatic coast. The old part of the city with its narrow cobblestone streets gives us some valuable exercise, although eventually we succumb to the lure of a tuk-tuk and the amusing commentary of Marco with his no-holds-barred restaurant reviews, which turned out to be very useful.

Equally important in Ostuni is the 'new' part of town outside the old walls where shopping is the main attraction, with boutiques offering interesting fashions at prices much more affordable than in the big Italian cities. Restaurant prices 'outside' are better too, where cheerful family-run trattorias like La Nuova Bruschetta serve great local food and jugs of vino rosso.

Around Ostuni there are many masserie, literally farmhouses that have been transformed into accommodation ranging from fairly basic to ultra-luxurious. Our choice was Masseria Salinola, a working farm producing the most delicious olive oil and fresh produce for its high-quality restaurant with its elaborate breakfasts and set course dinners. Lunch? Unless you want to outgrow all your clothes, buy some bread, cheese and fruit from the deli and find a quiet country lane. >>

PHOTOGRAPHY JASON IERACE - STUDIOIERACE.COM.AU





**CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT:** Explore the cobblestone streets of Ostuni; Everyday life in relaxed and friendly Lecce, the capital of the Salento in Puglia's true deep south; A beautiful Baroque city, Lecce is not a tourism-dominated destination (yet).



to spend a couple of days staying in each one if time were not such a luxury. In the surrounding countryside and small villages we find markets, family-run restaurants and invariably, great coffee!

Heading north from here will bring you to Brindisi, another historic city on the Adriatic Coast, where the Romans' Appian Way finished and the crusaders set sail for the Holy Land. Brindisi has the sort of earthy vibe that's common to port cities and is certainly worth exploring on foot for a day to soak up the atmosphere and some excellent seafood.

Finally, we reach the Salentine capital of Lecce, the true jewel in the region's crown; if you go to only one place in Puglia, this should be it.

A beautiful Baroque city, Lecce has been described by some writers as 'the Florence of the South', a pretty bold claim given Florence is arguably one of the world's best-loved cities. So how does the relatively unknown Lecce, deep in the heel of Italy's boot, compare to its cousin to the north?

In my opinion it's nothing like Florence. Sure, there's an abundance of Baroque churches, piazzas, public buildings and lovely residences in the compact, walled old city, a charming microcosm of everything Italy is known for, but that's where the similarity ends. For one thing, Lecce has not become over-loved by tourists, so is not having to cope with overcrowding, parking issues, pesky hawkers, expensive restaurants and rising prices. You can get a giant serve of gelati in a cone here for just €1.50. You won't find that in Florence.

But that's just a mini-detail. The reality is that Lecce has a distinctly different vibe, much more relaxed and friendly, possibly due to the fact that it's a liveable city both inside and outside the walls. Stop and look lost (as you will probably become) and inevitably someone will ask if you need help. It's not primarily a tourism-dominated destination... yet.

A guided walking tour takes only an hour or two, depending on your interests and the number of stops along the way to enjoy small treats from shops specialising in taralli, the biscuit-like snack so beloved of people in the Puglia region, or the many mouth-watering pasticcerias that require an iron will to bypass. You'll also find some >>

### SEEING THE SALENTO

This is truly Puglia's 'deep south' containing many historical sites from successive waves of invaders over the centuries. The Greeks, Romans, Byzantines, Normans and Spaniards have all left their mark here as they found the land ideal for food production. The countryside is littered with churches, castles, palaces, villas and even amphitheatres built with the lovely tufa stone, favoured by sculptors for its malleability.

Salve, for example, is a small village close to the southern tip of Puglia at Santa Maria di Leuca, where the Adriatic and Ionian seas meet.

It's a good base for exploring the region, with several B&Bs and some congenial trattorias frequented by friendly Salveans who love to practise their English while recommending what's good to eat and drink; the regional Negroamaro, Salice and Primitivo reds are lip-smackingly good.

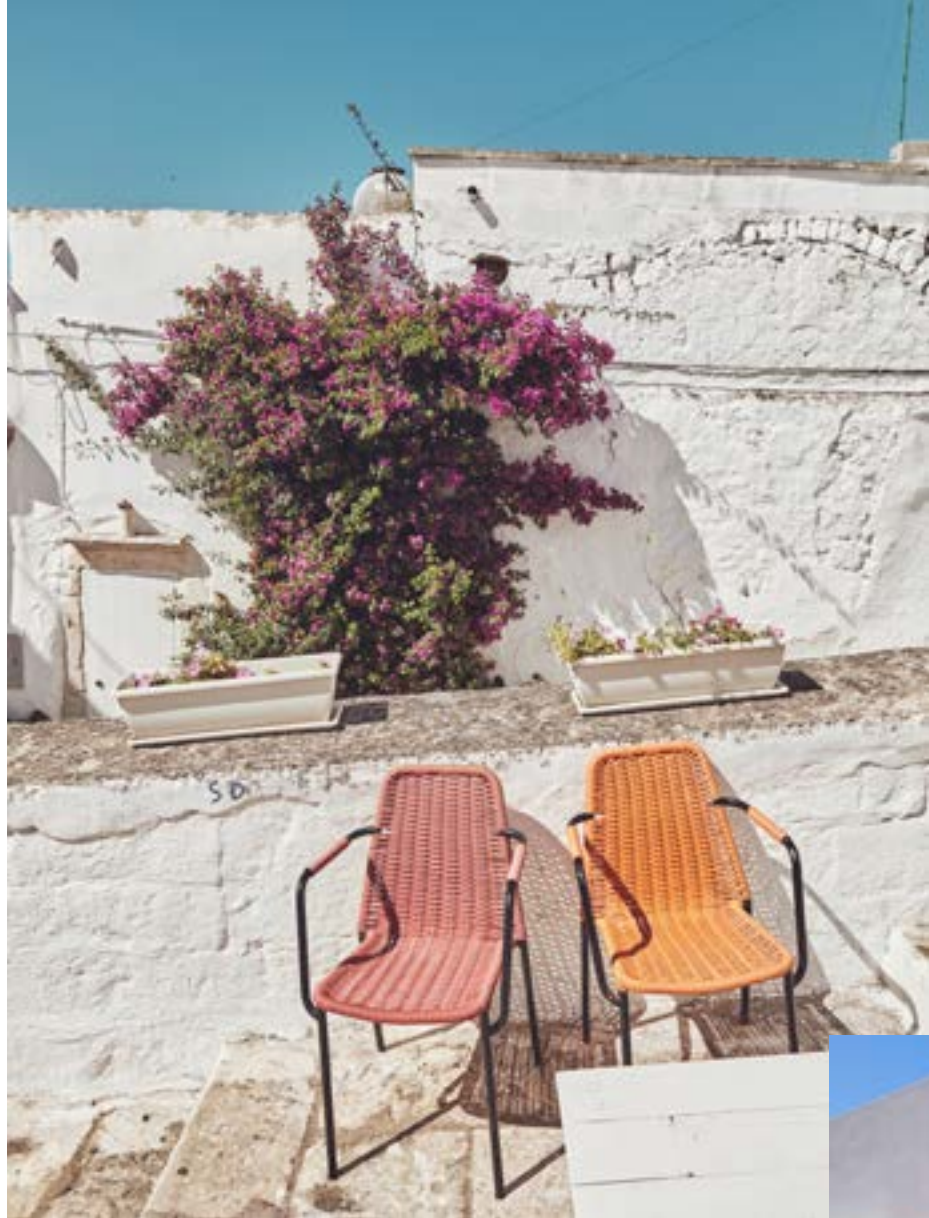
Our B&B is called Palazzo Cardone-Andrioli, a true example of the love and care that goes into renovating a 17th-century house into luxury accommodation, with just four rooms surrounding a courtyard.

Our room has a structure along one wall containing art objects, flowers and the like; congenial owners Rosa and Cosimo tell us that this was the animals' drinking trough in the early days. The entire property pays tribute to the original building, which even includes a chapel.

From Salve, we explore the coast and beaches, visiting historical cities like Gallipoli and Otranto with their castles, palazzi and Baroque churches. Every place has its own character and it would be interesting







of Italy's best coffee in cafes like Cittadino where Marco blends and roasts daily. He could give Melbourne a run for its money.

Our local guide Anna was a highly articulate English speaker who brought life to the city's history dating back to Neolithic, Greek and Roman times and everything after that – including no less than 35 mainly Baroque churches. We opt out of visiting them all.

The city also abounds in B&Bs, which offer excellent value and a chance to engage with gregarious local hosts like Roberto and his British wife Stephanie, young entrepreneurs building a future in the tourism business.

Then, there's Silvestro's unique cooking school, the Awaiting Table. This would be hard to emulate anywhere else, even in Italy, housed as it is in his 17th-century city-centre villa restored and purpose-built for cooking classes of eight lucky people. A day there is spent making the orecchiette (little ears) pasta unique to Puglia, preparing artichokes (our favourite), creating a flavourful fresh tomato pasta sauce, a special herb-basted chicken dish and enjoying a wine tasting featuring the region's speciality, rosé. We easily demolish the lot.

In the process of cooking we're treated to a comprehensive history lesson about Southern Italy and the role that Puglia's main products – olive oil and wine – have played in the region's outstanding cuisine. Silvestro's passion for Puglia is infectious, and we leave Lecce, and Puglia itself, as converts to the honest, rustic lifestyle of Italy's sensuous deep south. Maybe it is *la dolce vita* after all. **IT**



**CLOCKWISE FROM FAR LEFT:** A restful spot in Ostuni; Polignano lies atop a limestone cliff; Your villa Terrarossa awaits; Visit the old city of Matera; Puglia's ancient trulli; Equal parts rustic and modern, you'll find Terrarossa in the Valle d'Itria.



PHOTOGRAPHY NICOLE TUJAGUE (TRULLI, MATERA); JASON IERACE - STUDIOIERACE.COM.AU (POLIGNANO, OSTUNI)

We're invigorated by the fresh morning air scented with herbs and flowers, buzzing bees going about their business, raw earth newly furrowed around the harvested artichokes, endless ancient olive groves and poppy-ended vine rows.



**DETAILS**

**GETTING THERE**

The easiest way is to fly into the capital, Bari, and rent a car from there ([economycarrentals.com](http://economycarrentals.com)). Alternatively, it's more interesting to fly to Milan or Rome and enjoy the scenery on the express train from there to Bari or Brindisi ([railplus.com.au](http://railplus.com.au)).

**STAYING THERE**

**THE THINKING TRAVELLER** ([thethinkingtraveller.com](http://thethinkingtraveller.com)) has a roster of charming villas for rent throughout Puglia. In Lecce, stay at the lovely **LA BELLE LECCE** ([labellalecce.it](http://labellalecce.it)), run by husband-and-wife team Roberto and Stephanie.

**PLAYING THERE**

Eat, drink and be merry with a cooking course at **THE AWAITING TABLE**, where Silvestro's knowledge of local cuisine and history will leave you full of food and knowledge. [awaitingtable.it](http://awaitingtable.it)

**TALKING THERE**

- Buongiorno* – Good morning
- Buonasera* – Good evening
- Ciao* – Hello
- Addio* – Good bye
- Grazie* – Thank you
- Prego* – You're welcome
- Per favore* – Please
- Sì* – Yes
- No* – No
- Mi scusi* – Excuse me/pardon me
- Non parlo italiano* – I do not speak Italian
- Lei parla inglese?* – Do you speak English?

**WHEN TO GO**

The summer months of July and August are glorious but crowded in Italy; opt for September/October for a more relaxed vibe.