



A Postcard from Puglia

Report from Lee Jackson of Bliss Travel

For the second time on this holiday I stand absolutely astonished at the view I behold. In front of me lies the Sassi of Matera, as recently as the 1950's a malaria infested warren of cave houses quoted at the time as being "Italy's shame". Fast forward 60 years and I witness a location largely unknown to the British traveller and yet so striking in its presence, and fascinating in its history, it beggars belief that it has not become more firmly entrenched in our must visit map. Accompanied by Antonio our personal English speaking guide we enjoy a two hour walk amongst the houses and such is the interest in the vast labyrinth of houses, churches and underground water systems we manage to ignore for a short time the intense heat of the August sun.

The day in Matera came right in the middle of



our two week visit to Puglia with a brief stay in Venice en-route. After many years of good intentions we finally make the effort to reach the sun soaked heal of Italy and it's much talked about cuisine.

After the difficult humidity of Venice our arrival in Bari airport with 37degrees of searing dry heat was actually welcome, and after negotiating the weekend holiday traffic on the outskirts of the city we make it to our "Trullo Holiday Home within 90 minutes. Just a mile outside the Trullo capital that is Alberobello our converted Trullo sits on its own amongst olive groves and lemon trees. From here we intersperse lounging around the pool with visits to the endless array of towns and coastal ports that make Puglia such a fascinating region.

Alberobello is the picture perfect Trullo town, it's historic centre a mass of over a thousand Trulli. As we wander the steep streets that are pretty much wall to wall with local souvenirs and delicacies, I note the elderly ladies sat in the doorways and wonder how different life must have been on these streets before the

lure of tourist income. Before this visit I had long associated the region of Puglia with the simple conical Trullo dwellings but in effect they are only part of the Puglian picture as this Architecture is concentrated primarily in and around Alberobello.

Beyond this we take in the coastal ports of Monopoli and Polignano de Mare, each with its historic centre and a myriad of narrow streets. In Polignano the preparations for the music festival were well advanced as was the case on our visit to Locorotondo, described by some as the most picture perfect town in Italy, a slight exaggeration but worth a visit to stroll the whitewashed streets and take in a lunch of saffron risotto with zucchini flowers.

As part of our week in Alberobello we made the 90 minute drive to discover Matera in the neighbouring region of Basilicata. As stated earlier the sights of Matera cannot be underestimated and with the development of high quality tourist accommodation within the infrastructure of the Sassi the city deserves a longer stay.

From Alberobello we drive 250 kilometres to Peschici on the Gargano peninsula. The Gargano National Park at the Northern border of Puglia is a vast promontory of lagoons and mountains covered in forests of oak and beach surrounded by a seemingly endless line of beautiful beaches. Our destination was the Agriturismo Hotel Torre dei Preti just outside the popular seaside resort of Peschici.

The Torre Dei Preti rural resort stands in over 26 acres of farmland and woodland with accommodation provided in modern bungalows built around the 16th Century Tower that provides the focal point of the complex. The accommodation is impressive, as is the surprisingly large pool but the most striking feature of the Torre Dei Preti is the

food. After many years of reading about the rustic splendour of the Puglian menu the locally sourced, home cooked food at Torre Dei Preti was simply outstanding. Figs, tomatoes, wild onions, aubergine, grapes, a vast array of fresh ingredients were included in the daily menu. Outside of high season the hotel runs 4 day cookery courses but I doubt that such expertise can easily be acquired in much less than half a lifetime.

Our days in Gargano are spent almost entirely on the beaches and along the way we capture lots of photographs of the Trabucchi, the traditional fishing huts that are unique to the region. From these striking locations the fishermen raise and lower their nets and contemplate impossible lengths of wooden rods that provide the reach beyond the shoreline.

On our final day I stand on a promontory looking one way along the sand beach that extends for miles into the horizon, then back to the white washed hilltop port of Peschici. In combination with the excellent food and hospitality provided by the Torre Dei Preti it really is hard to comprehend that such delights seem to evade the UK traveller.

From Peschici we took the decision to drop the car in Foggia and make a 5 hour train journey up the Italian Coast for an overnight stop in Bologna and our return flight to the UK. Our investment in First Class tickets provided a little more room and air conditioned comfort from which we were able to enjoy the sunlit trail of the Adriatic Coast.

All in all we spent two weeks in Italy in high season and can report Puglian pleasures to be vast and plenty for those that choose to make the journey.