Northern Basilicata

Basilicata's isolated yet strategic location on routes linking ancient Rome to the eastern Byzantine empire has seen it successively invaded, pillaged, plundered and neglected. Its tragic and violent history produced a wary people suspicious of strangers and resigned to a life of hardship and suppression. As recently as 60 years ago, Carlo Levi, author of the superb tragic and violent history "Christ Stopped at Eboli", exposed the harsh life of the average Basilicatan peasant. His treatise, that Christ stopped at Eboli (256km south of Rome), alluded to Basilicata's wild and unloved nature; it was a place beyond the hand of God, where outlaw bandits roamed the forests and pagan magic still existed and thrived.

However, it is exactly Basilicata's isolation and 'lost' reputation that is attracting the attention of travellers. In the last few decades roads have slowly opened up the once-secluded land of ancient Lucania, an exposure accompanied by a strong self-awakening in its people. This and a strengthening economy – the revival of the Fiat works at Melfi, the discovery of Western Europe's largest oil field near Potenza in the 1980s and the emerging tourist market – has seen them wear their turbulent past with pride and the ever-increasing trickle of travellers is now warmly welcomed.

The only towns of any size in Basilicata are the provincial capitals, Potenza and Matera, both found in the north. The landscape is a fertile zone of gentle hills and deep valleys once covered in thick forests, now cleared and cultivated with wheat, olives and grapes. Frederick II loved this land, leaving a legacy of castles in his wake. Towards Matera in the east the rocky limestone bedrock is harsher and drier, the famous sassi – the famous cave-and-stone houses inhabited since the Palaeolithic Age – sprawl below the rim of a yawning ravine like a giant nativity scene, its 21st-century makeover highlighting its austere beauty. It was these same caves that in the 8th to 9th centuries attracted Byzantine monks seeking refuge from persecution (p23). Painting coloured frescoes on the walls, they transformed the dank, dark cells into places of worship. These chiese rupestri (rock churches) are scattered throughout the sassi and the scrubby rock-strewn countryside of the Murgia plateau. Once past the ravine the landscape changes markedly, the Matera Murgia smoothing into undulating wheatfields and olive groves that sweep around the pretty medieval hilltop town of Montescaglioso and into nearby Puglia, while only 60km to the south are the long sandy beaches of the Ionian Coast.

Matera is unique. In no other city do you come face to face with such powerful images of Italy’s lost peasant culture. Its famous sassi tell of a poverty now difficult to imagine in a developed European country, a clichéd image of rudimentary human civilisation that made it Mel Gibson’s location of choice for the film ‘The Passion of the Christ’. Matera is ancient; a difficult-to-reach, isolated town heavily influenced by its earthy roots and the succession of passing races and cultures.

History lies in thick layers on the surface of the land – Neolithic settlements, ancient Greek and Roman artefacts and abandoned limestone caves in the Murgia bedrock – but the most impressive layer of history is the city itself. In Matera, the ash-grey sassi – the famous cave-and-stone houses inhabited since the Palaeolithic Age – sprawl below the rim of a yawning ravine like a giant nativity scene, its 21st-century makeover highlighting its austere beauty.

MATERA & THE MURGIA PLATEAU

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HIGHLIGHTS
- Sleep in Matera’s stylishly converted medieval caves (p176)
- Hike the rocky Matera Gravina (p176)
- Explore the sassi (p170) of Matera during the day; return for an eerie night walk through the cave city
- Visit beautiful Venosa (p179), birthplace of the Latin poet Horace
- Cycle through the timeless landscape of the Murgia plateau to the medieval hilltop town of Montescaglioso (p175)

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Disguised in the deep ravine on whose edge the new town is set, Matera’s dramatic appearance is hidden until you round the corner of Via d’Addazio. In the early evening this all-encompassing view of the Sasso Barisano is magical, a jumble of glowing tufa-stone houses hugging the limestone hill which they cover entirely; from its pinnacle rises the encompassing view of the Sasso Barisano which is hidden until you round the corner. The new town is set, Matera’s dramatic appearance is hidden until you round the corner of Via d’Addazio. In the early evening this all-encompassing view of the Sasso Barisano is magical, a jumble of glowing tufa-stone houses hugging the limestone hill which they cover entirely; from its pinnacle rises the encompassing view of the Sasso Barisano which is hidden until you round the corner.

History
Matera’s cave dwellings are the most extensive and complete troglodyte complex in the Mediterranean, and one of the oldest inhabited human settlements in the world. Until the 20th century the sassi were pretty successful dwellings – what started out as simple grottoes were extended and enlarged to become homes. An ingenious system of canals regulated the flow of water and sewage, and small hanging gardens lent a splash of colour. They were so prosperous, in fact, that Matera became the capital of Basilicata in 1663, a position it held until 1806 when the Sassari province was created.

In 1993 Matera’s sassi were declared a Unesco World Heritage Site. Ironically, the town’s history of outrageous misery has now made it Basilicata’s leading tourist attraction and the sassi are now undergoing systematic and stylish renovation.

Orientation
A short walk down Via Roma from the train and bus stations off Piazza Matteotti brings you to Piazza Vittorio Veneto, the pedestrianised heart of town. The two sassi districts open up to its east and southeast. From the piazza, Via delle Becciere feeds into Via Duomo as it climbs a spur to the cathedral, the highest point in town, in the area known as the civita.

Information
BOOKSHOPS
Libreria dell’Arco (0835 31 11 11; Via Ridola 37)  
This well-stocked bookshop (with some English titles) also sells maps of the sassi, Matera: Percorsi Turistici, (€1.30) with four walking itineraries in English.

EMERGENCY
Ambulance (118)  
Police (113; Piazza Vittorio Veneto)

INTERNET ACCESS
Mediateca (0835 33 06 71; Piazza Vittorio Veneto; per hr €2; 8.30am-6.30pm Mon-Thu, 8.30am-1.30pm Fri & Sat)  
All the main banks can be found around Piazza Matteotti.

MONEY
All the main banks can be found around Piazza Matteotti.

POST
Post Office (0835 26 87 11; Via Passarelli 13b; 8am-6.30pm Mon-Fri, 8am-12.30pm Sat)

TOURIST INFORMATION
Tourist office Via Dei Viti De Marco (0835 33 19 83; www.materaturismo.it; Via Dei Viti De Marco 9; 9am-1pm Mon-Sat, 4.30-6.30pm Mon & Thu; Via Spina Bianche (0835 33 18 78; www.apptbasilicata.it; Via Spina Bianche 22; 9am-1pm & 3.30-7pm Mon-Sat)  
Tourist information kiosk (0835 24 12 60; Via Maddona delle Virtù; 9.30am-12.30pm & 4-7pm summer) This kiosk is handy if you’re in the sassi. There are other kiosks at Piazza Matteotti and Via Lucana; they’re all run by the Comune di Matera.