

# Brindisi & the Salento



After Sicily and Sardinia, the Penisola Salentina (Salentine Peninsula) is considered by some to be the third island of Italy. It is hot, dry, cut off and remote, retaining a real flavour of its Greek past. Here the lush greenery of the Valle d'Itria gives way to ochre-coloured fields hazy with wildflowers and immense olive groves. And amid the cacti and the crickets you'll find Messapic, Greek and Roman relics popping up alongside much older menhirs and dolmens.

But it's not all dry sierras and sunny beaches; go inland and you'll find the beautiful city of Lecce, nicknamed the Florence of Puglia, for its heritage of highbrow scholarship and crazy carved churches. Its baroque elegance is echoed throughout the region, from big towns like Galatina and Gallipoli to tiny villages like Specchia.

Until quite recently the Salento was a poor and isolated region, as you can see in Eduardo Winspeare's film *Il Miracolo*, but with flash new neighbours in town like Lord MacAlpine and Helen Mirren, this southern outpost is enjoying a cultural renaissance as more and more people head south to savour its intriguing traditions and ancient history.

Add to this Italy's finest beaches (six of them blue-flag approved), almost endless sunshine and a general desire to party all night to musical styles as varied as *pizzica* and house, and you can see why the Italians have been keeping the Salento something of a secret.

## HIGHLIGHTS

- Make new friends and learn to cook Pugliese at Lecce's **Awaiting Table** (p149) amid the town's legendary baroque extravagance
- Go crazy and dance like you've been bitten by a tarantula at Melpignano's **Notte della Taranta** (p153) or remember Otranto's 800 martyrs at the **Festa dei Martiri Idruntini** (p163)
- Dive the rock caves around **Santa Caterina** (p156) and eat fish so fresh it's actually raw in **Gallipoli** (p159)
- Party hard at **Gibò** (p160), near Santa Maria di Leuca, and sleep off the night's excesses on the white sandy beaches of **Marina di Pescoluse** (p160)
- Spend a lazy day sailing up the Adriatic coast visiting sea caves and sunbathing on the deck of one of the beautiful boats from **Smarè** (p160) in Santa Maria di Leuca
- Scuba dive in the grottoes of **Castro** (p161) or trek inland amid the *maquis*-covered hillsides of the Adriatic Coast



# BRINDISI

pop 87,900

Brindisi is no stranger to fame. It has been southern Italy's busiest merchant and passenger port for centuries. It was the end of the ancient Roman road, Via Appia, down whose weary length trudged legionnaires and pilgrims, crusaders and traders, all heading to Greece and the Near East. Then it was the main terminus for the Indian Mail Route, a business that brought a steady stream of 19th-century society to the city's doorstep.

With a colourful past, Brindisi is searching for its soul in the 21st century. Sure it is southern Italy's busiest port – in summer about 1000

tourists transit through the city every day – but somehow that hasn't made it the focal point it should be and it continues to languish in Bari's shadow. Also, the city is struggling to discard a bad reputation – stories about thieves and touts have plagued Brindisi for years, but in reality the palm-planted *corso* is very pleasant, but there is simply very little to do.

## HISTORY

There is a great scene in the film *Spartacus*, where Kirk Douglas enthusiastically exclaims to sidekick Tony Curtis that they are 'off to the Roman city of Brundisium!' And there, where the Appian Way meets the port, ships would lie waiting to take Spartacus and his great army of freed slaves off to Greece.

