



Puglia, Basilicata & Calabria

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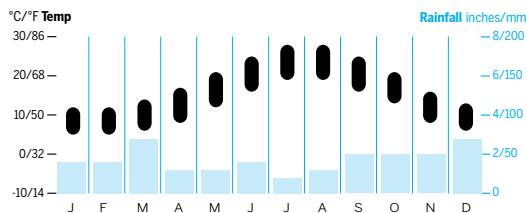
Why Go?

Southern Italy is the land of the *mezzogiorno* – the midday sun – which sums up the Mediterranean climate and the languid pace of life. From the heel to the toe of Italy's boot, the landscape reflects the individuality of its people. Basilicata is a crush of mountains and rolling hills with a dazzling stretch of coastline. Calabria is Italy's wildest area with fine beaches and a mountainous landscape with peaks frequently crowned by ruined castles. Puglia is the sophisticate of the south with charming seaside villages along its 800km of coastline, lush flat farmlands, thick forests and olive groves.

The south's violent history of successive invasions and economic hardship has forged a fiercely proud people and influenced its distinctive culture and cuisine. A hotter, edgier place than the urbane north of Italy, this is an area that still feels like it has secret places to explore, although you will need your own wheels (and some Italian) if you plan to seriously sidestep from the beaten track.

When to Go

Bari



Apr–Jun Spring wildflowers are blooming: a perfect time for hiking in the mountains.

Jul & Aug Summer is beach weather and the best party time for festivals and events.

Sep & Oct No crowds, mild weather and wild mushrooms galore.

PUGLIA

Puglia is comprised of sun-bleached landscapes, silver olive groves, picturesque seascapes, and memorable hilltop and coastal towns. It is a lush, largely flat farming region, skirted by a long coast that alternates between glittering limestone precipices and long sandy beaches. The heel of Italy juts into the Adriatic and Ionian Seas and the waters of both are stunningly beautiful, veering between translucent emerald green and dusky powder blue. Its extensive coastline bears the marks of many conquering invaders: the Normans, the Spanish, the Turks, the Swabians and the Greeks. Yet, despite its diverse influences, Puglia has its own distinct and authentic identity.

In a land where the cuisine is all-important, Puglia's *cucina povera* (peasant cooking) is legendary. Olive oil, grapes, tomatoes, eggplants, artichokes, peppers, salami, mushrooms, olives and fresh seafood strain its table. Although boasting some of Italy's best food and wines, in some places it's rare to hear a foreign voice. But in July and August Puglia becomes a huge party, with *sagre* (festivals, usually involving food), concerts and events, and thousands of Italian tourists heading down here for their annual break.

History

At times Puglia feels and looks Greek – and for good reason. This tangible legacy dates from when the Greeks founded a string of settlements along the Ionian coast in the 8th century BC. A form of Greek dialect (Griko) is still spoken in some towns southeast of Lecce. Historically, the major city was Taras (Taranto), settled by Spartan exiles who dominated until they were defeated by the Romans in 272 BC.

The long coastline made the region vulnerable to conquest. The Normans left their fine Romanesque churches, the Swabians their fortifications and the Spanish their flamboyant baroque buildings. No one, however, knows exactly the origins of the extraordinary 16th-century conical-roofed stone houses, the *trulli*, unique to Puglia.

Apart from invaders and pirates, malaria was long the greatest scourge of the south, forcing many towns to build away from the coast and into the hills. After Mussolini's seizure of power in 1922, the south became the frontline in his 'Battle for Wheat'. This initiative was aimed at making Italy self-sufficient when it came to food, following the sanctions imposed on the country after its conquest of Ethiopia. Puglia is now covered in wheat fields, olive groves and fruit arbours.

PUGLIA ON YOUR PLATE

Puglia is home to Italy's most uncorrupted, brawniest, least known vernacular cuisine. It has evolved from *cucina povera* – literally 'cooking of the poor' or peasant cooking: think of pasta made without eggs and dishes prepared with wild greens gathered from the fields.

Most of Italy's fish is caught off the Puglian coast, 80% of Europe's pasta is produced here and 80% of Italy's olive oil originates in Puglia and Calabria. Tomatoes, broccoli, chicory, fennel, figs, melons, cherries and grapes are all plentiful in season and taste better than anywhere else. Almonds, grown near Ruvo di Puglia, are packed into many traditional cakes and pastries, which used to be eaten only by the privileged.

Like their Greek forebears, the Puglians eat *agnello* (lamb) and *capretto* (kid). *Cavallo* (horse) has only recently galloped to the table while *trippa* (tripe) is another mainstay. Meat is usually roasted or grilled with aromatic herbs or served in tomato-based sauces.

Raw fish (such as anchovies or baby squid) are marinated in olive oil and lemon juice. *Cozze* (mussels) are prepared in multitudinous ways, with garlic and breadcrumbs, or as *riso cozze patate*, baked with rice and potatoes – every area has its variations on this dish.

Bread and pasta are close to the Puglian heart, with per-capita consumption at least double that of the USA. You'll find *orecchiette* (small ear-shaped pasta, often accompanied by a small rod-shaped variety, called *strascinati* or *cavatelli*), served with broccoli or *ragù* (meat sauce), generally topped by the pungent local cheese *ricotta forte*.

Previously known for quantity rather than quality, Puglian wines are now developing apace. The best are produced in Salento (the Salice Salentino is one of the finest reds), in the *trulli* area around Locorotondo (famous for its white wine), around Cisternino (home of the fashionable heavy red Primitivo) and in the plains around Foggia and Lucera.