



Puglia, Basilicata & Calabria

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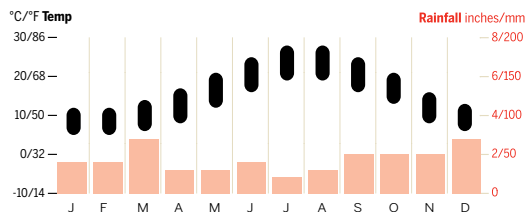
Why Go?

The Italian boot's heel (Puglia), instep (Basilicata) and toe (Calabria) are where you can witness the so-called Mezzogiorno (southern Italy) in all its throbbing intensity. This is a land of drying washing on weather-worn balconies, speeding scooters and dilapidated *centro storici* (historic centres) that haven't yet qualified for a Unesco listing. Though the south's more down-to-earth cities lack the extensive tourist infrastructure of northern Italy, there's prettiness amid the grittiness.

Head to Lecce for an eye full of baroque magnificence, or soon-to-be European Capital of Culture Matera and its remarkable cave houses. Other southern secrets have yet to seep out: the intricate mosaic floor of Otranto cathedral and the Amalfi-like luminescence of Maratea have figured little in most travellers' itineraries to date. Equally underplayed is the simple yet epic *cucina povera* (peasant food) and the wild national parks (including Pollino, Italy's largest).

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 Italy's ascendant region, a place where savvy travellers bored or worn down by the crowds of Campania and Tuscany escape for something a bit less frenetic and manicured. Top of the list for prospective newcomers is the food. Puglia's *cucina povera* is about as earthy as Italian cuisine gets without eating it straight out of the soil. Then there's the exuberant architecture, best summarised by the word 'baroque' and exhibited in all its finery in the glittering 'Florence of the South', Lecce, and its smaller sibling, Gallipoli.

With the longest coastline of any region in mainland Italy, Puglia is larger than many people realise. In the north, the spur of land sticking out into the Adriatic is occupied by the balmy microclimates of the Gargano peninsula, a kind of miniature Amalfi with fewer poseurs. The Italian boot's 'stiletto' hosts the land of Salento, a dry scrubby region famous for its wines, and bloodthirsty Greek and Turkish history. In between lies the Valle d'Itria, a karstic depression populated by vastly contrasting medieval towns that have little in common apart from their haunting beauty.

Of the larger cities, Brindisi, an erstwhile Roman settlement, is one of the major departure points for Greece (by ferry), while Puglia's largest metropolis, Bari, has a university and trendier inclinations.

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.

Bari

POP 320,200

If Lecce is the south's Florence, Bari is its Bologna, a historic but youthful town with a high percentage of students lending it a cooler and hipper edge. More urban than its neighbours Lecce and Brindisi, with grander boulevards and a more active nightlife, Bari supports a large university, a recently renovated opera house and municipal buildings that sparkle with a hint of northern grandiosity.

Some time-poor travellers skip over Bari on their way to Puglia's big-hitter, Lecce (the towns have a long-standing rivalry, especially over soccer), but Bari doesn't lack history or culture. The slower-paced old town contains the bones of St Nicholas (aka Santa Claus) in its Basilica di San Nicola, along with a strapping castle and plenty of unfussy trattorias that arguably plug the delicious local nosh – *cucina barese* – better than anywhere else in Puglia.

As the second-largest town in southern Italy, Bari is a busy port with connections to Greece, Albania and Croatia, and sports an international airport used by popular budget airlines.

Dangers & Annoyances

Once notorious for petty crime, Bari has cleaned up its act of late. Nonetheless, take all of the usual precautions: don't leave anything in your car; don't display money or valuables; and watch out for bag-snatchers on scooters. Be particularly careful in Bari Vecchia's dark streets at night.

Sights

Most sights are in or near the atmospheric old town, Bari Vecchia, a medieval labyrinth of tight alleyways and graceful piazzas. It fills a small peninsula between the new port to the west and the old port to the southeast, cramming in 40 churches and more than 120 shrines.