



# Matera's renaissance: new life in Italy's ancient cave city

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There's a new buzz in the ancient southern-Italian cave city of Matera, with boutique hotels, superb restaurants and innovative cultural hubs blossoming in the timeworn streets that so nearly sank from sight after forced clearances in the 1950s.

Nine millennia have elapsed since humans first took shelter in *grotte* (caves) in the soft tufa limestone of Basilicata's Murgia plateau. Matera's original *sassi* districts shelter priceless secrets: over 150 frescoed churches and an intricate





network of homes, cisterns and tunnels riddling the living rock. In 1993 the *sassi* were given Unesco World Heritage status, and in 2019 one of the world's oldest continuously-inhabited human settlements will rise again as the European Capital of Culture.



The ancient town of Matera at sunrise © bluejayphoto / Getty Images



## Explore the history of the *sassi*

Walking the impossibly picturesque streets of the *sassi* today it's hard to believe that, in the 1950s, they were lamented as *la vergogna nazionale* – Italy's 'national shame'. Following the relocation of Basilicata's regional capital to Potenza in 1806, economic and demographic pressures made life in the *sassi* deprived and miserable. Animals and humans shared overcrowded *grotte*; malaria, dysentery and malnutrition ran unchecked; and plumbing and electricity were non-existent.

These were the 'Dantean' conditions described by Carlo Levi in his 1945 memoir *Christ Stopped at Eboli*, which awoke politicians, the media, and finally all of Italy to the deprivation in the south, leading to the clearances of the 50s.

The best introduction to this story is a visit to Casa Noha. This fascinating, immersive exposition is projected across five walls of a handsome 16th-century house, donated to the city by a proud Materan. It's an unflinching history of the city's historical misery and



grandeur, complemented by the free walking-guide app 'Matera Invisible'. As you walk the streets, you'll discover two distinct districts: Sasso Barisano and the older, historically poorer Sasso Caveoso. Forming an urban landscape as intricate as an Escher engraving, they're best appreciated in the company of a guide. Try the well-established Altieri Viaggi, which offers guided walking tours, longer treks, trail rides and even tours in an Ape Calessino (three-wheeled scooter-buggy).







You'll quickly acquire the sense of a city apart: while Matera's many masters (Lombard, Byzantine, Norman, Aragonese and German) built *palazzi* and cathedrals on the high ground, the *sassi* were left to the peasantry, who farmed the nearby hills and nurtured their own dialect, customs and cuisine. A tangible (if sanitised) sense of what their life was like is conjured up by Casa-Grotta di Vico Solitario, a reconstruction of a 'typical' cave-dwelling. Beneath low, stained limestone ceilings sit marital beds, rustic furniture, sentimental photographs and other signs of domesticity nestle alongside spaces for pigs, donkeys and even manure.

### **Visit elaborately frescoed crypts and churches**

Undoubtedly, the ancient churches and crypts that pit the limestone of the *sassi* and Murgia are Matera's greatest treasure – no visit is complete without taking in their vivid frescoes and ingenious architecture.





Frescoes in the Crypt of the Original Sin © Mondadori Portfolio / Getty Images

Foremost amongst these is the Cripta del Peccato Originale (Crypt of the Original Sin), 7km to the south of the city. Dubbed the city's Sistine Chapel, this extraordinary cave system is flord with eighth- and ninth-century Benedictine frescoes, depicting biblical scenes with animated immediacy. Having once sheltered shepherds' flocks, the Crypt is now a renowned treasure of Italian sacred art, accessible only by appointment.





Of the many churches in Matera itself, the most impressive is the 12th-century San Pietro in Barisano. Built ingeniously into the tufa, daubed with precious frescoes, it's heavy with the atmosphere of centuries of devotion. Beneath lies a network of stone niches, once used for draining corpses.





The church of San Pietro in Barisano © Marka / Getty Images





## Descend into the 'Cathedral of Water'

While churches and crypts are the biggest drawcards, nothing expresses the ingenuity and resourcefulness of Materans better than the Palombaro Lungo, known colloquially as *Il Duomo d'Acqua* (the 'Cathedral of Water').

Matera sits on a vast network of subterranean cisterns, built to husband the scant water provided by the grudging Basilicatan terrain. The greatest of these, the Palombaro, lies beneath the town's central square, the Piazza Vittorio Veneto.

Built in the early 19th century to hold water brought from nearby springs through a network of subterranean canals, it's a vaulted cistern of staggering proportions. Winding down into the darkness, past arches soaring to the heights of a Gothic cathedral, peering into pellucid reservoirs vast enough to be navigated by boat, it's impossible not to be slightly awestruck. Guided 30-minute tours in English are frequent, but prebooking is a good idea.





Some of Hotel Sassi's rooms are underground © Hotel Sassi

## Bed down in a five-star cavern

Ironically, given the *sassi's* history of squalor and overcrowding, they now house some of southern Italy's loveliest hotels. The experience of sleeping in a cave that may have been inhabited for millennia, but is now appointed to the latest standards of luxury, should not be passed up. Both Barisano and Caveoso are riddled with hotels today, but the ground was first broken by Hotel Sassi, in 1996. Partly dug into the rock and partly built atop it, it's a multi-levelled collection



of rooms clustering around a central *vicinato* (the courtyard that was the focus of traditional *sassi* life).



Spectacular views of the city from the terrace of L'Hotel in Pietra © L'Hotel in Pietra

Such clever re-use of existing architecture is common. L'Hotel in Pietra, for example, was once a 13th-century monastic complex; its arched chapel now serves as the hotel's lobby, and suites have barrel-vaulted ceilings of timeworn limestone. And Hotel Il Belvedere, in carefully





restoring a series of caves and above-ground dwellings to create one of the best hotels in the *sassi* (certainly with some of the best views) took pains to preserve the original system of rainwater cisterns.

### Dine in a gastronomic grotto

Happily, it's a short stroll from any of these cave boutiques to some of Basilicata's best dining. If you're staying in Sasso Barisano, the art-strewn fine diner Dedalo takes cave-food well beyond the Palaeolithic. Sculptures carved from the same rough tufa as the cave walls provide a distinctive setting in which to appreciate tender *scottona* (yearling beef) and other luxury ingredients. Cleaving more closely to the peasant fundamentals of Basilicatan food, La Grotta nei Sassi takes dishes such as *orecchiette* with turnip-tops to the limits of their refinement in a cosy low-ceilinged chamber built into the Sasso Barisano hillside.





Fine dining in the atmospheric surrounds of Baccanti © Baccanti

In Sasso Caveoso, Baccanti blends outsized lamps, polished concrete and other modern design touches with ancient limestone walls to create a classy cave setting for its stunning food. At all three of these restaurants, local foods such as *cardoncelli* mushrooms, fatty *pezzente* sausage and sun-dried hot peppers crop up in dishes that epitomise the restraint and refinement of the best Italian cooking.

**Experience the cutting edge of cave culture**



## Experience the cutting edge of cave culture

But Matera's renaissance isn't all about reviving past glories: its final flourish has been the emergence of new and forward-looking operations amongst the *grotte*. For example, look no further than Area 8, a production agency by day that morphs into a bar, 'nano-theatre' and event space at night. Expect hipster bartenders shaking perfect cocktails, avant-garde film screenings, and insouciant young Materans spontaneously bursting into dance.







During the day, beguile an hour or two at the Museo della Scultura Contemporanea, a modern sculpture museum that makes striking use of the caves and frescoed chambers of Sasso Caveoso's 16th-century Palazzo Pomarici. Or, to wind down in style, Vicolo Cieco is a quirky, welcoming little wine bar that wouldn't be out of place in Pigneto, Trastevere, or any of Rome's bohemian enclaves.



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With so many old and new facets of this tough, enduring city currently aglow, Matera has emphatically re-joined the ranks of Italy's most unique and fascinating destinations.