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## Discover the gift of time in the jewel of the large crown of Italy - Puglia









Matera in southern Italy - trekking Matera- Hotel Sassi Matera - a beautiful evening in the ancient city of Matera

## by Chris Parry

I'M standing on a clifftop, looking across a ravine to the ancient city of Matera in southern Italy. Though no longer formally part of the Puglia region, it forms part of the Exodus Travels Walking Tour of Puglia and Matera which I have joined.

I'm standing where

the crucifixion scene in the 2004 movie, The Passion of Christ, was filmed. Last year the quirky comedy *Tulipani* was filmed throughout Puglia, including Matera. Also jostling for space at the same time were the cast and crew of Wonder Woman who used Matera as the fictional city of Themyscira.

The funny thing is, I

didn't know any of this when I went to Puglia. I've fallen in love. That's what it is. I've come home and can't stop researching the history, the events coming up, anything I can find.

Puglia is often described as being the heel of the boot shape of Italy.

The gift of Puglia is There is a feeling

that you have more time for that espresso in the middle of the day or that limoncello after dinner in the evening. You have time to stop and embrace an olive tree that is hundreds of years old and, like some sort of arbor matriarch, watches over younger trees in the grove, preparing them for their life under the warm Puglian sun.

So back to falling in As well as the movies that have been recently made in Puglia, I've also discovered that Matera is one of two cities to be 2019 European Capitals of Culture. Next year, Matera will welcome visitors with an extensive program of cultural events and activities that acknowledges Matera as one of Europe's oldest, continuously inhabited cities. It is renowned for its caves that until the mid-20th Century were home to many of residents. Many caves have been restored as restaurants, hotels and art galleries. The more I learn, the more my love grows.

From the caves, canyons and ravines that surround Matera, our next destination is Montescaglioso, a small castle and village set on top of a hill surrounded by a green belt of forest and overlooking a series of rolling hills and valleys filled with olive groves and vineyards. We stand in front of an ancient stone archway which frames the view where we will be walking today - down through the forest and then small farms and fields of olive groves and vineyards. Beyond that is the Parco della Murgia Materana, a canvon wilderness with many formerly occupied caves, including several cave churches still in use today, particularly for

weddings. With all this talk of canyons and ravines, the walking on this tour possibly sounds a bit more difficult than it is. Exodus Travels website provides a rating for each of their walking tours and this tour is in the easy to moderate range. Our tour stays pretty much in the easy zone and just for a few moments becomes moderate and slightly tricky. It's fair to say a trekking pole is handy but many in the group don't use them.

Our walking group of ten are all from England. Some are recently retired, some are a long time retired. Each day's itinerary allows plenty of time to rest and it's the first walking tour or trek I've undertaken where the worst injury was a headache from drinking the beautiful, local red wine with lunch.

My love for Puglia continues to dive headlong into the reckless territory of the completely besotted. There is something special about places you visit that have names you just enjoy saying; Ostuni, Locorotondo, Polignano a Mare and Alberobello.

The narrow alleyways and low arches of Ostuni lure you with the promise of a new discovery around each corner. Sitting atop a hill overlooking olive groves that stretch to the sea just a few kilometres away, Ostuni's white washed buildings are the result of an attempt to beat the plague in the 17th century. The limestone and water mix that was applied to all buildings in Ostuni was thought to prevent illness. These days, the white buildings are encouraged by the local government which contributes half the cost of repainting.

Locorotondo is a small village with an ancient heart located in the Itria Valley. Its beginnings date back to 1000 AD and the surrounding countryside features the famous cone-roofed trulli; round, stone huts that many people still

live in today. While Locorotondo means 'round place', the historic part of the part of the town (centro storico) has a similar meaning. It is circular and, like Ostuni, is a maze of alleyways filled with cafes, art galleries, churches and nonas flicking wet towels at tourists who stumble into their washing baskets.

Walking tours have a wonderful ability to slow down the pace of life. While you have a daily destination, it is planned so you have time to sit in the shade of an olive grove, pick figs and grapes to snack on and even stop for a swim at the beach. Things don't rush by. If you see a horse stick its head over ancient old stone wall in an olive grove, you can stop and create your own experience; rubbing its nose and asking nicely if you can take a photo. There's no rushing past in a car or bus, snapping your head around and wishing you could have stopped for a better look.

It hardly seems necessary to include a rest day in the itinerary but this part of Italy is already proving such an indulgence that a rest day just seems to make sense. While most of our group head south for the day by train to Lecce, described as the Florence of the south. I strike out north for a little village on the coast called Polignano a Mare.

This little town perches on a coastline of cliffs that don't have to work too hard to hold back a serene Adriatic Sea that is more intent on sparkling flashes of blue brilliance than going to the trouble of throwing waves against a rocky shore.

Along this coastline of cliffs is the Ponte dei Lapilli, a very popular small cove for swimming It's a public beach and completely hassle free, but it is not for the selfconscious. It's a bit like a fish bowl with people on the bridge behind the beach and on both cliff sides watching and taking photos.

continued on page 33





who is your assistant. Our goal is to satisfy our clients' wishes, providing good service/assistance and making them feel comfortable and happy throughout their tailored trip.

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