

ITALY

# I've explored all of Puglia — and these are the best places to stay

From simple seaside masserias to grand old palazzos, our Italy expert knows the top spots to book in this captivating region in the south of the country

Julia Buckley | Thursday May 25 2023, 12.00am BST, The Times

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‘**T**he new Tuscany’ some call Puglia — wrongly, because nowhere is quite like the heel of Italy’s boot. Whitewashed towns shimmer on hilltops like mirages. Net-laden fishing boats snooze below creamy-stoned palazzos in elegant seaside villages. One minute you can be walking along the rocky Adriatic coast, the next you’re at a Roman harbour, an ancient city unfurling behind.

Time-travelling is a given here. Unlike Renaissance-centric Italy further north, Puglia is a land of prehistoric dolmens slumbering amid centuries-old olive groves, its coastline speared with Saracen-repelling watchtowers, its ravines and caves dug out to form houses and medieval churches. The food is unlike anywhere else: veg-heavy *cucina povera* — peasant food — grown in the fiery red earth. A Pugliese aperitivo platter means dish after dish of intricate vegetable delights.

Puglia is huge, but the best bits are in three areas. Radiating out from Bari, the regional capital, you’ll find a coastline dusted with bijou fishing villages to the south, and the Valle d’Itria, with its famous trulli houses on a plateau above. West of Bari, dramatic canyonlands splinter the border with Basilicata. Two hours north is the Gargano peninsula: the mountainous spur of the boot, home to a national park and pristine beaches. The stiletto tip south of Brindisi is the sizzling Salento peninsula, where the Ionian and Adriatic seas fuse. It’s a land of sleepy villages, baroque architecture around Lecce, and two spectacular coastlines: dramatic corniches on the east, wild sandy beaches on the west. Italian beaches are mostly manicured and privatised; Puglia’s rocky coves and sandy sweeps are an exception.

Puglia’s hotel scene is as unique as the region itself. This is the land of *masserie*: ancient farms, fortified against invaders, which now as swish country house hotels welcome foreigners (there’s a beach-adjacent cluster around Fasano and Savelletri). Its tangled town centres, often emptied by postwar migration, are also a hub for *alberghi diffusi*, or “scattered hotels”, where abandoned houses dotted around town are converted into rooms.

Down at heel? Not a chance.



La Fiermontina, Lecce

## 18. La Fiermontina, Lecce

### Refined city hotel with herb garden and pool

When other Pugliese hoteliers were nailing the art of the masseria, siblings Fouad Giacomo and Antonia Yasmina — of Pugliese origin via Paris and Morocco — decided to open the kind of refined city hotel that southern Italy had rarely seen. La Fiermontina opened in 2015: 16 rooms in a honey-stone baroque retreat within Lecce's city walls. Not that you'd know you were in the centre; out the back is a beautiful garden stuffed with herbs (which end up on your plate at dinner), striking modern sculptures, and a bijou pool surrounded by gnarled olive trees. City escapes don't get much better.

**Details** [B&B doubles](http://lafiermontinacollection.com) from £374 (lafiermontinacollection.com). Fly to Brindisi