



# Italy's Secret Coast

by **Jurica Pavan Shamdasani**

*A journey through Puglia in southern Italy yields surprising delights that have yet to be tainted by mass tourism*



Photo: David Epperson/Getty Images



*A man cycles past Alberobello's distinctive trulli structures*

*Right, clockwise from top left  
In Lecce, an artisan produces a mask used in traditional processions in Puglia*

*A quaint alleyway of Puglia*

*Local products of Alberobello*

*The fishing port of Trani*



Photos: Shutterstock, Francesco Iacobelli, Getty Images, Corbis, Damiano Simonini

*Trani Cathedral in Trani, a town that feels like the heart and soul of Puglia*

*Below, from left  
Small village in Lecce*

*For a change of honeymoon destination from the more well-known Amalfi Coast, why not discover Puglia?*

*The morning fish catch being off-loaded at Trani harbour*





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In the seaport town of Trani, Italy, a dozen or so scraggly fishermen have lined the water's edge with cardboard tables laden with today's impressive catch. The seafood is fresh from the deep, hauled up not too long ago from the surrounding crystal-clear waters. From my perch on a window at Hotel San Paolo al Convento, I observe the men enticing passers-by to their makeshift stalls with calls of "vieni".

They don't have to try too hard. A cheerful *nonna* buys a dozen prawns for tonight's family dinner, a commis picks up some scallops for the next service, and the rare tourist stops by to peer at the ugly monkfish.

This is Puglia, one of the most diverse yet lesser-known parts of Italy, located in the southeast and lining the "heel" of the country's boot-shaped peninsula. I've been to Italy numerous times before - I'd even lived in Florence, the birthplace of the Renaissance, for a year in my late teens - but never have I seen this side of the country... until now.

I imagine this is what the more popular parts of the Italian countryside felt like 50 years ago, before the throngs of tourists took over the likes of Tuscany and the Amalfi Coast. Here are all of the country's charms: quaint little towns, pristine beaches with gorgeous views of the Adriatic and Ionian seas, fresh and inventive food, and wonderfully underrated wine.

It's the food and the wine that I'm here for, the Puglian tourism division having organised a trip for journalists to sample the region's distinctive offerings. Unlike the northern parts of Italy, Puglia is defined by a more Mediterranean diet: seasonal vegetables, plenty of seafood, only the leanest of meats and, of course, lots of wine.

I was told early on that the majority of Puglia's visitors are Italians who want to escape their country. Confused? I was too, until I realised Puglia is, in fact, closer to Greece than to Rome. As a historical port, it's been invaded by - and has hence been influenced culturally by - the Romans, Greeks, Normans, Turks and Spanish, amongst others. →



This page, clockwise from left Carvinea vineyard

A bustling street of Alberobello

Trani port at sunset

Opposite page Alberobello, with its iconic trulli, is a UNESCO World Heritage Site

There are even a couple of small villages near the city of Lecce where people still speak an archaic Italian-Greek dialect called Griko. All this gives it a diverse melting-pot feel that's unlike any other part of Italy. Going on the road and sampling what you find along the way is really the only way to truly experience such a varied region.

My companions and I started our journey in the very south of Puglia, in Salento, where we came across the Duca Carlo Guarini (*ducacarloguarini.it*), a winery whose moniker is often synonymous with the region. The Guarini family once owned at least a third of all the land in Puglia and can trace its roots back to the 11th-century Normans. Its current owner has less grandiose ambitions and would rather just settle down with some wine. He ferments his grapes the old-fashioned way, using vast subterranean tanks. It's how they did it hundreds of years ago, and the results speak for themselves.

Guarini is known for his use of the primitivo grape, one of the region's native varieties and often compared to the Californian Zinfandel. His most famous bottle, the Boemondo, has a crusader's sword on the label in honour of his roots. Ironically enough, Guarini didn't even begin bottling it until the '80s – it was mostly sold in kegs before then. Now, the region can't get enough of the stuff.

As we drove through different parts of Puglia, the landscapes started to become more familiar to the eye: thousand-year-old olive trees, vineyards as far as the eye can see, and a slightly rundown *masseria* (country house) gleaming white in the midday sun. It all becomes quite common until you reach Alberobello, the town of the *trulli*.

A UNESCO World Heritage Site, Alberobello is possibly the tourist centrepiece of Puglia, mostly because of its iconic *trulli*: white-stone circular houses that seem to have come straight from medieval times. Their most

renowned feature is the coned roofs, which were designed to keep those inside cool in the summer and warm in the winter.

The town is undoubtedly filled with tourists, but it also houses some of the finest restaurants in the region. Avoid the crowds who would lead you to La Cantina or L'Aratro and head straight to the Michelin-starred Il Poeta Contadino (*ilpoetacontadino.it*). It aims to recreate both the ambience and food from the region's medieval past, taking diners into a time warp. Ornate chandeliers and classic wax candles dot much of the restaurant, and the dishes are naturally heavy on the fish: rustic offerings like mullet paired with simple potatoes or monkfish alongside seasonal vegetables.

Near Alberobello is the Castel del Monte, an area of Puglia named after the vast falcon-watching castle sitting atop a hill. It's one of the very few regions recognised by Italy's DOCG quality assurance label, and chief



Photo: Francesco Caracciolo / Getty Images, Alessio Manno / Hemis / Corbis

## STAY

Not far from Brindisi – Salento Airport is Puglia's most famous resort, the **Borgo Egnazia** ([borgoegnazia.com](http://borgoegnazia.com)). You might've seen its immense facade in the tabloids: Jessica Biel and Justin Timberlake got married here not too long ago. Set across 40 acres, only its golf course separates it from the Adriatic and it recreates the style of a small Puglian town.

For something a little simpler, both the **Masseria Potenti** ([www.tenutapotenti.it](http://www.tenutapotenti.it)) in Manduria and the **Masseria Montelauro** ([masseriamontelauro.it](http://masseriamontelauro.it)) in Otranto are recommended. The former offers a family-style country farm where warm hospitality and delicious homestyle food await; the latter has a more upscale resort feel, but it still keeps things simple and personal.



## EAT

**Il Poeta Contadino** and **Corteinfiore** are two of the best restaurants in the region, each offering classic and modern spins on traditional Puglian dishes.

But if you're looking for more options, **Laltrobaffo** ([laltrobaffo.com](http://laltrobaffo.com)) in Otranto puts an equally modern take on the region's cuisine, while **Gallo Restaurant** ([gallorestaurant.it](http://gallorestaurant.it)) in Trani has a seafood-only menu that people come far and wide to sample.

## DRINK

Visits to wineries are a must when travelling through Puglia, but keep in mind that appointments are necessary. Top picks include **Duca Carlo Guarini** and **Rivera**.

Equally interesting is the incredibly exclusive **Carvinea** ([carvinea.com](http://carvinea.com)), as well as the science-based wines at **Tenute di Emera** ([claudioquarta.it](http://claudioquarta.it)). And if you're looking to be entertained, Francesco Winspeare, owner of **Castel di Salve** ([casteldisalve.com](http://casteldisalve.com)) is quite a character.



*This spread, clockwise from right*  
Familiar Italian landscape of Puglia

*Steep cliffs of the Adriatic coast as seen from Lecce*

*While in Puglia, consider cycling to explore small streets and villages*

*Fresh produce for sale in an open-air market in Alberobello*

*Trani Cathedral*



Photos: Riccardo Vallini Pini/Getty Images; Frank Lukassek/Corbis; Sabino Parante/Getty Images; Shutterstock; Maremagnum/Getty Images; Martin Child/Getty Images



among those who helped insure that merit was the Rivera winery ([rivera.it](http://rivera.it)).

Far from the oldest in the region (it only set up shop in the '60s), Rivera is nonetheless one of the most forward-thinking. Its founder Sebastiano de Corato predicted that Puglia would one day become a major wine region and marketed his wines as such.

It's arguable whether Rivera's Il Falcone was the wine that put Puglia on the map, but there's no doubt it's now one of the region's most popular internationally. Named after the castle, the wine is a 70/30 mix of the native Nero di Troia grape and the country's more popular Montepulciano – for me, it has come to define the wines of Puglia. Bold, medium-bodied flavours dazzle the palate but are nonetheless light enough for pairing in the day or at night. In many ways, it's a metaphor for the entire region.

But for all that Alberobello and Castel del Monte offers, with their gorgeous *trulli*, incredible wineries and surprisingly high number of fanny-packed tourists, it was Trani that

impressed us the most. The town feels like the heart and soul of Puglia, the place where all its finest elements come together at once.

Nowhere is that more apparent than in its food and, for those in the know, Corteinfiore ([corteinfiore.it](http://corteinfiore.it)) is the epitome of Puglian fine dining. Packed to the brim with locals, the restaurant is high-end but worth every penny. Here, you're treated to the most fascinating takes on classic Puglian cuisine, fresh seafood and vegetables dished up using innovative, original methods, alongside white wine and even whiter tablecloths.

Stumble upstairs afterwards to one of the few private B&B rooms or, better yet, stay at the Hotel San Paolo al Convento ([hotelsanpaoloalconventotrani.it](http://hotelsanpaoloalconventotrani.it)), whose views continue to stick in my mind as I write this.

The final morning of the trip, before I was due to catch the 7am train to Rome, I looked out the window of my hotel room to see the Trani harbour just waking up. Seagulls were breakfasting on last night's bread leftovers and joggers were running off their Med

diets. There was a feeling that this was all very unreal: Puglia seemed too beautiful, too healthy and too moreish to exist altogether. And as much as I hated letting the world know about such hidden pleasures, such was my duty – and it's safe to say I'll be back very soon.

*Puglia can be reached by train from Rome in about four hours. THAI operates flights four times weekly to Rome. For more information, please visit [www.thaiairways.com](http://www.thaiairways.com).*



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