

PRIVATE Clubs



Writer Andrew Sessa (center) and his team make their way through the Pugliese countryside via bicycle.

Puglia: The Italy You Don't Know (But Should)

Writer Andrew Sessa cycles (and eats) his way through the Italian region some call the next Tuscany.

BY ANDREW SESSA

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Squinting into the sun, and with my quads burning, I pedal through the last hill of a cliff-climbing ride. The road flattens as I cycle around one more corner, and I can finally appreciate my surroundings.

In front of me, a centuries-old, sun-bleached stone tower rises, its cylindrical shape narrowing as it reaches toward the sky. Together with its brethren, which I can barely see in the distance, it stands guard over miles of pale calcite cliffs whose rocky summits peek out between clumps of spiky sea grass and shrubs. Beyond, the Adriatic Sea extends to the horizon, its azure waters turning turquoise near the rocks below. I breathe deep. After a recent rain, the air smells fresh and green, with a healthy helping of salt, too. I see a sign that reads "Villaggio Paradiso," and I can almost believe its promise. Maybe I really have pedaled my way to paradise.

This is Puglia - the most picturesque piece of Italy you've probably never heard of. Hidden away in the heel of the country's boot, this rugged land beguiles with whitewashed villages and sapphire-blue waters, endless olive groves, and overgrown vineyards. Here, fertile fig trees produce fruit that ripens to bursting, and the sand practically shines on golden beaches. As for the peninsula's position, it has proved so perfect that every empire-building civilization - the Greeks and the Romans, the Byzantines, and the Spanish - set down roots.

More recently, in-the-know Europeans have rediscovered the region as a holiday hideaway, heralding it as the next Tuscany because of its food and wine wonders, as well as its historical and cultural cachet. But with its beautiful beaches, arid climate, and cliff-clinging white-stucco hamlets, it's equally poised to be the next Sicily, the next Sardinia, the next Santorini.

I've come to discover it while it's still in this state of becoming. For even as luxe hotels and haute restaurants have opened in the last few years, the region remains rough around the edges, a largely undeveloped and unexplored land of authenticity.

Puglia's authentic charms prove most plentiful in its food. The region produces 40 percent of Italy's olive oil, with nearly a million acres of groves. Mozzarella *burrata* - those sought-after sacs of milky-white cheese filled with cream-soaked strips of shredded mozzarella called *stracciatella* - come from here, too, and the region's grape varietals, especially Primitivo and Negroamaro, are enjoying rising profiles.

If I was going to make a trip to explore Puglia from my equally gastronomically inclined home base of Rome, it seemed like it would be smart to counterbalance all the culinary adventure (not to mention the caloric intake) with some energy-expendng activity. So I called my friend Cari Gray - a 15-year veteran of the active-travel company Butterfield & Robinson - who in 2008 launched [Gray & Co.](#), a top-flight outfit whose custom itineraries combine the pleasures of food and drink with the rigors of daily biking and hiking treks. I knew Cari would be my go-to girl.

"Between the sunny weather, the light cuisine, the Baroque villages, and the ancient olive groves, Puglia's a winner," she told me, going on to describe a cyclist's fantasyland of quiet roads and diverse geography. "The area's galleries and museums are the world around you, and you'd miss it if you didn't put your bike shoes on." Best of all? "Because the picturesque towns are perfectly spaced out, you're never more than 10 miles away from your next gelato or cappuccino." *Perfetto*.

And so, a few weeks later, I meet up with one of Cari's go-to guides, the super-fit ex-Butterfield tour leader Paola Sartori, and we begin our trip. Over the next six days, we'll make our way from the fortified coastal city of Otranto - in Puglia's lower stretches - up toward Bari, exploring the Baroque grandeur of the stone-carved city of Lecce, the Acropolis-like hilltop towns of Ostuni and Locorotondo, and the seaside havens of Monopoli and Polignano a Mare. We'll stop in a variety of the charming farmhouse hotels called *masseria*, and we'll see the area's iconic *trulli*, not least of all those of Alberobello, a UNESCO World Heritage site that's home to more than 1,000 of these traditional, circular, domed-roof stone houses. We'll make most of the trip by bike - hopping in a van now and again - cycling upward of 40 miles a day and consuming all the region has to offer. And we'll do it far, far away from the tourist crowds that have turned much of Tuscany into Disney World with wine.

Which brings us back to that cliff-top ride overlooking the Adriatic. We'd started out from [Masseria Montelauro](#), our sweet little Otranto hotel, to do penance for the gargantuan welcome-to-Puglia meal we'd enjoyed there the night before: blackened fried green peppers, succulent stuffed eggplant, strips of zucchini marinated in vinegar, four kinds of local cheese, whisper-thin slices of fat-ringed prosciutto, olive oil-soaked sauteed onions, and whole sweet cherry tomatoes spooned over crunchy rounds of bread called *friselle*. And that was all before two giant bowls of pasta and a dessert of *pasticcotto leccese*, the region's typical pastry cream-filled torte.

Thus that leg-burning ride along the seafront road to admire the views from the tower - which I learn is

a 16th-century construction known as Torre Minervino - followed by further curving stretches up and down hills, all with the sea on our left and an 8,000-acre national park on our right. And then? Well, lunch, of course.

So we traverse a series of dusty little towns reminiscent of the Sicily scenes from *The Godfather*, eventually arriving in the sand-colored stone village of Minervino di Lecce and the tasting room and restaurant of [Cantine Menhir Salento](#), an up-and-coming winemaker. Sitting outside under a pergola, we sample Menhir's best bottles and savor local specialties, among them the ubiquitous Pugliese dish of pureed fava beans topped with garlicky sauteed chicory, and a mix of grilled and roasted meats, including *bombette*, thin slices of meat stuffed with cheese and pancetta. I expect my clothes to feel considerably tighter when we finish, the morning's harrowing ride notwithstanding, but the stretchable spandex biking gear we're still wearing proves surprisingly forgiving.

We spend the night, once again, at Masseria Montelauro, venturing beyond the hotel's walls for a fine pasta-and-fresh-fish dinner in the cozy, honey-hued dining room of [Peccato di Vino](#), one of Otranto's more elevated restaurants. Early the next day, we make our way to Lecce, where we start the morning at a café on Piazzetta Arco di Trionfo drinking *caffè leccese* - a shot of inky-black espresso sweetened with sugary, fresh local almond milk and poured over ice. After the caffeine jolt, we meet our guide, art historian Patrizia Durante, for a tour of her millenia-old hometown.

Known variously as the Florence of the South or the Florence of the Baroque, the city boasts an array of ornate architectural icons heavy on rococo flourishes. These exuberant details, easily carved out of the soft off-white stone found all over the area, define every cathedral we see - and we see cathedrals everywhere we look. Patrizia tells us that locals joke there are more churches than houses here, more priests than lay people.

Lecce, perhaps more than any other town in this much masticated and mixed up region, has a history of invasion and colonization that goes back almost 3,000 years, to the pre-Christian Messapii (contemporaries of the ancient Greeks), who were followed by the Romans, the Byzantines and Turks, and the Spanish. At the city's Faggiano Museum, we descend through 2,000 years of this past, discovering a Renaissance convent inside a contemporary home on top of a ruin of an early Christian dwelling. The symbol of the Knights Templar is carved into one wall; majolica tiles cover another.

Then it's on to lunch at Osteria da Angiulino, a local institution whose no-frills plaid tablecloths, exposed stone ceilings, and linoleum floors belie the quality cooking coming out of the kitchen. Nearly all the simple pasta dishes - pure-of-flavor fresh tomato sauces and tangy ricotta fondues ladled over the local ear-shaped durum-wheat pasta called orecchiette or its frilly-edged counterpart, *sagne ncannulate* - cost either \$7 or \$8. The meaty second courses (grilled veal steaks, pork chops, sausages) and that ubiquitous fava puree with turnip tops go for about the same, and are equally tasty, made with love and care and a practiced touch that, truth be told, shows more on the taste buds than it does on the artlessly arranged dishes unceremoniously flung in front of us by the too-busy-to-particularly-care servers.

Sated, we head out of Lecce by car, crossing west across the heel of the Italian boot to Manduria, a tiny village near Puglia's southwest coast, where our next stop, [Masseria Potenti](#), awaits.

"What do you call that woman you have in the States ... Martha? People come here from America. They say, 'You're just like Martha Stewart!' And I say, 'No. No! I am *nothing* like her.' "

It's later the same day, and I'm spending the early evening cooking with earth mother extraordinaire Maria Grazia Di Lauro. A Puglia-born attorney turned food guru, she now owns and oversees Masseria Potenti, the rustic-chic hotel and still-working farm where we're spending the night. Like many locals who made their careers elsewhere in Italy but have recently come back to their now-burgeoning native land, Maria Grazia saved this 300-acre estate from near-ruin a few years back, carving the hotel's handful of guest rooms and suites out of its crumbling 17th-century farmhouse and the former sheep stalls surrounding it.

Right now, we're in the *masseria's* kitchen, and Maria Grazia, in a most un-Martha-like manner, is stuffing homegrown herbs, stalks and all, into her food processor. She's ostensibly showing me how to make some of her favorite and most authentic Pugliese recipes, but it seems she's holding court as much as offering culinary wisdom. "Never in my life have I followed another person's recipes. Never!" she tells me emphatically, the auburn tendrils of her hair looking like the untamed vines of her vineyards. "I like very much to depart from tradition.

"Pugliese cuisine is filled with vegetables," she continues, "because that's what we've always had." She's now chopping zucchini, eggplant, and onions - all from Potenti's gardens - liberally sprinkling the produce with the herbed rock salt she made in the food processor, then dousing it all in the *masseria's* own olive oil. "If the oil is no good," she says, "why bother cooking?" And then, as she lovingly arranges fresh sage leaves atop a carefully braided round of homemade whole-wheat bread, she concludes, "The secret is: When you look at it, you can tell it's good."

Several busy hours later, in Potenti's candlelit, barrel-vaulted dining room, an olivewood fire dies down in the hearth as we come to the end of another marathon meal - fresh octopus just pulled from the sea, then stewed with tomatoes, onions, and potatoes; handmade orecchiette topped with whole-sauteed San Marzano tomatoes; fava puree with chicory; slow-braised pork jowl; and more. Each dish offers a genuine taste of Puglia unlike anything we've found elsewhere, but I can't quite figure out why. "It's because the food is generous," Maria Grazia explains, referring to the breadth and the bounty of what we made.

The fact that puglia produces nearly half of Italy's olive oil means you see the wizened old trees literally all around you: abutting the runway at the airport, lining both sides of roads, marching across every field. They're with me now, too - their gnarled trunks twisting and torqueing like plumes of smoke frozen in time - as I spend much of the next afternoon cycling between the hilltop towns of Ostuni and Locorotondo, then on to the *trulli* of Alberobello. Their silver-gray leaves blow in the breeze, growing on young branches that emerge phoenixlike from arthritic trunks, and the particular mix of new and old strikes me as an apt metaphor for modern-day Puglia.

The ride started with a rather ominous sign for Villaggio SOS, followed by Paola's announcement that the roads here are less than perfectly paved. They prove less than flat, too, and my energy flags as dusk falls. I've had time to commune with the craggy olive trees along my route, but I haven't moved quickly enough to make it to the *trulli*, which I'm starting to think of as Puglia's Holy Grail, what with the wondrous tones everyone uses to describe them and their status as a UNESCO-protected pilgrimage site. I console myself with a drink in the picturesque piazza of Locorotondo, a village whose impeccably bleached stucco houses look like they've been cleaned with Crest Whitestrips - a bright shiny smile to dazzle the tourists.

We bunk down for the night at [Borgo Egnazia](#), a haute-concept resort about a half-hour drive from the

seaside town of Monopoli that could serve as a new-meets-old model for high-end hospitality in Puglia. With 182 rooms and suites plus 29 villas, all designed to resemble the exterior architecture of the nearby village of Cisternino, the hotel unfolds across some 22 acres, beckoning with its historic olive groves and newly planted gardens, five restaurants, and four pools, plus a recently opened spa.

I haven't come to laze the day away poolside or at the spa, however, so we head out the next morning for a long ride up the coast. It's easy pedaling past the ruins of the ancient Roman city of Egnazia, then a series of beach clubs and seafood shacks. The coast is quiet and low here, its little inlets lit turquoise by the still-rising sun. Monopoli's city wall soon comes into view ahead of me, jutting into the blue expanse. The once-whitewashed town feels more lived in, more real, than pristine Locorotondo. It's the kind of classic Italian locale where every street seems to dead-end but also simultaneously connect to everything else. Paola and I break for savory puff pastries filled with fresh ricotta and spinach, then set out for Polignano a Mare.

Like Monopoli in miniature, seaside Polignano appears on the horizon just as clouds gather overhead and the skies open up, unleashing a thrashing thunderstorm I'll later hear locals call a *tempesta*. So much for the afternoon's plan to reattempt the ride to Alberobello, but settling for the spa at Borgo Egnazia, before one final night spent cosseted in its decadent beds, doesn't seem like such a bad second choice.

The next day, our last, is my final chance to see those Holy Grail *trulli* of Alberobello. I'm almost more focused on my ultimate opportunity to enjoy the tangy taste and creamy consistency of just-made mozzarella *burrata*, however. I help myself to heaping spoonfuls of the stuff at breakfast, justifying the richness as energy I'll expend on the ride.

The day's now-clear skies notwithstanding, circumstances continue to conspire against me on my *trulli* trail. First, I lose a chain, tying it in a knot so convoluted it looks like an olive tree trunk. I switch bikes and try to make my way up and down the hills, but winds threaten to blow me off the road. And then I get lost, somehow losing Paola's lead while lost in my own thoughts.

Thankfully, she finds me soon enough, and I wobble my way into Alberobello, feeling a strong sense of accomplishment for finally completing this epic ride. But the excitement I expected to experience at the sight of all those vintage *trulli* quickly turns to disappointment. The conical structures, crawling with tourists and scrubbed-clean to a Disney-like sheen, now nearly all serve as souvenir shops. Alberobello is no longer in that particularly Pugliese state of becoming; it's already become what it's going to be, and it ain't *Paradiso*.

Before I get too out of sorts, Paola tells me she has a surprise: a last-minute trip to Caseificio Lamapecora, where mozzarella maestro Giovanni Tauro works his magic. Every day, he takes nearly 200 gallons of fresh milk from his 25 or so cows and turns it into some 20 different kinds of cheese, many of them out for the tasting and all available to buy. As for Giovanni himself, he stays in Lamapecora's lactose laboratory - a glass-walled, stainless-steel kitchen in which he douses the pure-white cheese curd with scalding water, then pulls and stretches it into long strands before folding it into its final forms: mozzarella, *scamorza*, and so very many more.

More than anything else, however, I want to try the *burrata*, which Giovanni's grandmotherly assistant now starts prepping, shredding one of the just-made mozzarella balls into fine threads then soaking them in cream. This is the *stracciatella*, which Giovanni then places in a thinly stretched mozzarella

wrapper, tying the whole package off into a petite little flavor-packed purse.

I order one and dive in, savoring that signature sweet-sour taste and velvety softness, and then I immediately ask for another to bring home - hoping, but doubting, that I can make it back to Rome without eating it on the plane.

That bike ride to Alberobello may have ended up a bust, but it served to throw the rest of the trip into wonderfully sharp relief - the one inauthentic misstep that makes people like Maria Grazia and places like Monopoli and mozzarella moments like these all the more special and satisfying.

Back in Rome that night, my body feels sore, but my mind soars even more with memories of the last six days and the authentic rewards of cycling through one of Italy's only remaining Edens.

While working out a kink in a knotted calf, I think back to something I learned in middle-school gym class: Aches like these, I recall, come from a post-workout buildup of lactic acid in the muscles. I wonder if this has any relation to lactose, and if I've maybe made a terrible mistake eating all that mozzarella ...

Could be, I suppose. But no matter. That *burrata* was worth every bite. Especially the one I ate on the plane.

HOW TO BOOK

[Gray & Co.'s](#) custom Puglia itineraries start from \$6,000 per person for five days. For more information and to plan your trip, call 416-998-4082 or visit grayandco.ca.

Puglia Go-To Guide

Puglia's pedaling pleasures are many, not least of all the sybaritic stops along the way. Here, a few can't-miss local-cuisine restaurants to replenish your energy and some thoroughly atmospheric hotels to rest your tired limbs at night.

Lecce

EAT

Osteria da Angiulino: There's nothing fancy about this down-home eatery, which the locals fill every day for lunch and dinner. Simple pastas topped with tomato or ricotta cheese sauces, eggplant Parmesan, and lasagna are the way to go, followed by hearty meat dishes, if you have room. Via Principi di Savoia, 24; 011-39-083-224-5146

Manduria

SLEEP

Masseria Potenti: Manduria, near the region's southwest coast, isn't on the usual Puglia circuit, but it's worth a leisurely stop for a few nights at this lovingly restored, beautifully decorated farmhouse hotel. Owner Maria Grazia Di Lauro makes you feel like you're part of her family, pampering you in artfully

appointed, antique-filled suites; treating you to pitch-perfect local cuisine (nearly all of it made from produce grown on site); and inviting you to explore her 300 acres of olive groves, vineyards, vegetable gardens, and orchards. The turquoise-blue pool, set amid a grassy and fruit-tree-filled courtyard, is a beautiful thing to behold. From \$220. 011-39-099-973-5408; tenutapotenti.it

Monopoli

SLEEP

[Borgo Egnazia](#): This expansive, recently opened resort just outside of Monopoli has put Puglia on the map for high-flying international travelers, especially since Justin Timberlake and Jessica Biel married here in October 2012. Its rooms and suites, as well as its spa, four pools, and five restaurants - all tastefully decorated in ivory tones and a mix of textures - occupy an ancient-looking, but newly built, manor house plus a villagelike borgo (small town) of winding alleys and low-rise buildings. A short drive away, on the Adriatic, lies the hotel's beach club. From \$300. 011-39-080-225-5000; borgoegnazia.com

EAT

[Angelo Sabatelli Ristorante](#): This haute-cuisine restaurant at the hotel Masseria Spina offers both a la carte and tasting menus that see the eponymous chef reimagining Puglia's local bounty and traditional regional recipes in highly modern ways. Viale Aldo Moro, 27; 011-39-080-802-396; angelosabatelliristorante.com

Il Guazzetto: At this classic, and super-traditional seafood-focused spot in the center of whitewashed Monopoli, the raves come more for what's on the plate than the slightly kitsch, but still cute, decor. Via dell'Erba 39/41; 011-39-080-410-7175

Ostuni

EAT

[Osteria del Tempo Perso](#): Carved into the hillside atop which Ostuni perches, Tempo Perso occupies an atmospheric, cavelike space that served as Ostuni's public bakery for about 400 years. Today, the warmly lit, white-tablecloth spot is a top choice for lunch or dinner. Start with the appetizer assortment, then move on to seasonal Pugliese pastas such as *orecchiette con le cime di rape* (ear-shaped pasta with broccoli rabe). Via Gaetano Tanzarella Vitale, 47; 011-39-083-130-4819; osteriadelttempoperso.com

Otranto

SLEEP

[Masseria Montelauro](#): This indigo-trimmed, white-stucco farmhouse-turned-hotel sits slightly inland from bustling seaside Otranto, but it feels worlds away. A serene landscape of green lawns, olive trees, cacti, and fresh herbs surrounds a crystal-clear swimming pool and 29 simply decorated, high-ceilinged rooms, all done up in minimalist white-on-white and punctuated with Moroccan-tinged

details. From \$116. 011-39-083-680-6203; masseriamontelauro.it

EAT

[Cantine Menhir Salento](http://cantinemenhir.com): Feast on Pugliese specialties or just stop by for a tasting flight at the osteria and specialty food shop from the up-and-coming local wine producer Menhir. (It's in the quiet village of Minervino di Lecce, seven miles from Otranto.) Via Scarciglia, 18; 011-39-083-681-8199; cantinemenhir.com - A.S.



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