



Matera in Basilicata: a Unesco World Heritage site famous for its ancient cave dwellings and the filming of Mel Gibson's *The Passion Of The Christ*

Drink in Puglia's charms

The sleepy, rural peninsula of Puglia offers a centuries-old winemaking tradition, excellent food and plenty of history-laden locations to explore, writes Isabel Conway

The women leap from the back of a little red van. Flying between uniform lines of leafy vines they snip off bunches of blowsy, blue-black grapes, filling bucket after bucket with lightning speed.

Down here in the Negroamaro vineyards of Feudi di Guagnano in the heel of Italy's boot, timing is crucial. When grapes burst with juice and the voluptuous bunches hang almost by a thread, the hardy, nut brown women from the nearby village of Guagnano in North Salento are mobilised.

Unlike the giant tractors that plough through other vast vineyards, their tentacles vigorously shaking grapes free of their vines before sucking up all of the fruit, here the traditional method of hand picking 'so as not to stress the grapes' is revered.

Each woman at Feudi di Guagnano picks a mountainous 35 tons of grapes, often under intense heat, and in the space of two weeks.

Sandro Chirizzi is one of four

friends who rescued family vineyards that were disappearing due to neglect and lack of new investment.

"What we do is a labour of love," he says. "Making our wine demonstrates our love for the land, our culture, our past. As children we helped with the harvest, so we could not bear to lose those traditions and memories."

Puglia (Apulia in English) is a thin peninsula running from the ankle down to the tip of the heel of the Italy. It is famous for its somnolent vibe, but the region is full of purpose and buzz during the short grape harvest.

We travel through vineyards and groves of ancient gnarled olive trees, exploring villages, some with conical shaped white trulli dwellings, a wine museum here, an underground olive press there, savouring treasured recipes made from organic produce at agri tourism restaurants, washed down with the famed wines of the region.

Puglia today is what Tuscany was in the 1980s and Umbria in



Pasta makers in the old streets of Bari in Puglia

the 90s, it is often said. Next door, neighbouring Basilicata – an unspoilt region with interesting historic sites – is tipped as the new kid on the block and the place 'on the verge'.

Both Basilicata and Puglia offer up many clues to the past – Greek remains, Norman Castles, Byzantine painted cave chapels, extraordinary archaeological finds (such as the 28,000-year-old skeleton of a young pregnant woman uncovered in caves outside Ostuni in Puglia).

Matera in Basilicata is a Unesco World Heritage site famous for its ancient cave dwellings, where Mel Gibson's *The Passion Of The Christ* was filmed. Matera's caves

were inhabited until the 1960s, when the cave dwellers, suffering from extreme poverty, malaria and TB, were forcibly re-housed.

Tenuta Monacelli (tenuta.monacelli.com), a fortified farm in the heart of Salento, is our base for the holiday. It is one of those luxury hideaways so far off the radar that Google Maps takes us around in circles.

Side tours on this five-day grape harvest odyssey with Puglia specialists in Ireland, Discovery Puglia, alternate from wine and food tastings at venerable Conti Zecca (contizecca.it), to organic wine and olive oil tasting at Masseria L'Astore, Cutrofiano. Customers include Mick Jagger and

Helen Mirren. Down here, a ten-litre wine container can be filled up for less than the price of car fuel.

Fine dining at Torre del Parco (torredelparco.com) in Lecce – an ancient round tower that has opened as a sumptuous boutique hotel – is another highlight.

We try our hands (badly) at shaping pasta at Masseria Salinola on the outskirts of Ostuni and wander through a fascinating wine and rural life museum in the heartlands of Primitivo at Vini Manduria (museodelprimitivo.it).

The baroque city of Lecce, known as 'the Florence of the south', touristy Gallipoli and dignified Ostuni are all explored on our trip. At Troia, home to a lavishly embellished cathedral and the highest situated vineyard in Puglia (La Terre del Catapano) we taste various vintages down in the cellars. On the edge of Troia's piazzas, elderly men in heavy coats and fedoras gossip and doze beneath fig trees shading them from the noonday sun.

Bari and its colourful old town is where you will find the comic opera of Italian life played out in all its glory. Be sure to visit the Basilica of St Nicholas where the remains of the saint who inspired Santa Claus are now interred. Then wander through the labyrinth of the old town's atmosphere-filled back streets in search of the famous women pasta makers. They sit outside their houses deftly shaping the signature pasta of Puglia, Orecchi-