



TRAVEL

# Discovering the Ruins of Italy's Ionian Coast

By HELENE STAPINSKI MARCH 6, 2015

It was my first day back in Metaponto in a decade, and I was anxious. As my train from Rome pulled into the station, after a six-hour descent past Vesuvius, the craggy Lucanian Dolomites, olive groves and pebbly streams, and finally the small hill towns and low, pale mountains (calanchi) of the Basilicata region, I wondered what had changed in this place since my last visit. My family was from this area originally, four generations back, and I had come here twice before to do genealogical research. But it had been a while.

A friend met me at the station, grabbed my bag and immediately drove me around for the whirlwind mini-tour.

The station, with a fresh coat of cream-colored paint, looked bright and inviting. But the small stone square and area around it had been abandoned mid-construction, resembling the nearby Greek ruins more than the modern welcoming point the planners had envisioned.

My unofficial guide took me straight to some of the actual Greek ruins — the Tavole Palatine, the area's most famous site. When we got to the gate, the ticket booth was closed. It wasn't clear if it was just for lunch or forever.

A rusted chain was pulled limply across a path leading to the columns in the distance, which stood gleaming in the October sun. We were about to leave disappointed when I looked again and saw that the iron gate leading to the ruins was wide open.

We walked excitedly down the path, tall oleander bushes lining our way, their pink flowers smelling of bubble gum. My companion told me the oleander was beautiful but deadly. I had read years ago that the Roman soldiers who came here in the third century B.C. roasted their meat on oleander branches and unwittingly poisoned themselves.

At the end of the deadly hedgerow were the 15 Doric limestone columns, from the sixth century B.C., as tall as three men standing on one another's shoulders, their girth too wide to wrap my arms around. There wasn't a soul here besides us, no tourists with cameras, no yammering tour guides, just a few lizards skittering about, so it was easy to imagine what it would have been like here in the eighth century B.C. when the city of Metapontum rose up on the edge of the Ionian Sea, part of the Magna Graecia colony. (Some believe Metapontum was founded even earlier; local legend has it that the founder was Epeius, the man who built the Trojan horse.)

In the silence of the afternoon, I envisioned Greeks in long robes worshiping at this most holy site, their temple to Hera. I thought of Hannibal, who built his garrison here during the Second Punic War around 200 B.C., surrendering only after his brother's head was delivered to him. And of Spartacus coming here with his troops in the first century B.C., pillaging and sending the natives and Greeks running for the nearby hills.

On the way out, we laughed about that chain blocking the path. "Logica zero," my companion said. "That's Italy." Typical Basilicata, I thought, a gorgeous, mind-bogglingly historic, slightly dysfunctional heaven on earth.

These days, Metaponto proper is a small town of about 1,000 people, under the commune of the nearby town of Bernalda, in the province of Matera, a larger city 30 miles inland. All of this lies in the region of

Basilicata, one of the poorest parts of Italy.

For the next five days, I would visit the area's breathtaking museum collections (in both Metaponto and nearby Policoro), swim in its transparent turquoise waters, lie on its empty, soft, sandy beaches pretending to be like Odysseus, washed up on some lost and distant shore. The same shore the philosopher Pythagoras retired to. The same shore conquered by Saracen pirates and later the Normans. The same shore plagued by malaria for many years, though it has since been eradicated.

Tourists haven't exactly discovered the Ionian coast yet, as they have Matera, which was chosen as the European Capital of Culture in Italy on the last day of my trip. (Local business owners are hoping the tourists will trickle down to the water's edge of the region.) But the lack of visitors makes the place all the more appealing, frozen in time and unsullied. And bought for a song.

The people here aren't fans of self-promotion and don't really encourage tourism like the marketing experts over in nearby Puglia do, whether out of insecurity, malaise or a desire to protect what's theirs (probably a combination of all three).

But once you arrive, the Basilicatans are extremely friendly and will go out of their way to accommodate you, treating you like family and even inviting you into their homes or giving you a ride. (Note that renting a car is a bit of a challenge. My hotel hosts offered to pick me up at the station and helped me arrange to have a rental car delivered from Policoro, about 14 miles down the coast.)

The only tour group I saw the whole time was a dozen Germans who came solely because everything was booked in Puglia. But they were pleasantly surprised by what they found. They, and I, had lunch one day at a restaurant called *Riva dei Ginepri*, a small oasis down the road from Metaponto proper, with a few bent palm trees, some bean bag chairs, beach chairs and a couple of wicker couches with white pillows — like something you'd see in the Hamptons.

The restaurant and bar serve upscale meals throughout the summer, and then only on weekends in early autumn. For a prix fixe of 25 euros, or about \$27 at \$1.11 to the euro, the Germans and I ate lemon shrimp caught right there on the shore, salmon tartare with tomatoes, capuntino frutti di mare (pasta made by the young owner's mother, mixed with fresh seafood and ceci beans) and orecchiette pomodoro. I was too full for dessert.

They serve the usual beverages, the local wine, limoncello, Amaro Lucano (made in nearby Pisticci), but also mojitos, Cuba libres and, most appropriately, gin and lemon. Ginepri is the word for juniper tree, a small forest of which stands behind the beach.

The owner, Leonardo Fuina, told me the spot is famous for a battle that took place when the Saracens sailed in to invade many centuries ago. The locals, who had seen them coming, hid behind the juniper trees and sprang a victorious surprise attack.

These days, the place is most famous for hosting the film director Sofia Coppola's prewedding cocktail party. The family of her father, Francis Ford Coppola, is from the same nearby town as mine, Bernalda, a 15-minute drive inland. Three years ago, Mr. Coppola opened a nine-room hotel in Bernalda, where Sofia was married. Palazzo Margherita, a refurbished 19th-century palace in the middle of the town's lively, palm-tree-lined Corso Umberto I, has lush gardens, a stone fountain, a quiet courtyard, an antique private upstairs bar, cooking classes, a screening room, a Los Angeles-style bar and restaurant with a well-stocked jukebox, and several suites, one of which is reserved for Mr. Coppola whenever he comes to town.

Unfortunately, in high season, the rooms start at 500 euros and stretch to 1,800 (for Mr. Coppola's suite, naturally). The locals shake their heads at the prices. Dinner prices in the public restaurant downstairs, Cinecittà, are more reasonable, though some people complain the portions are too small.

I ate delicate batter-fried sage leaves baked and served over creamed bread and tomato, followed by grilled fresh sausage from Pollino, the mountainous part of Basilicata to the north, with a side of chicory. It was

delicious and cost a mere 29 euros.

The other restaurants in town serve more traditional dishes. My favorite place to eat in Bernalda is Al Vecchio Frantoio, where the service is notoriously slow, but the food is always excellent. At a place called Alle Porte, in a 16th-century building in the town's historic district, my antipasto included squash blossoms stuffed with ricotta and prosciutto, homemade soppressata, polpo salad, cold risotto, cruschi (crunchy sun-dried peppers fried in olive oil) and various other local delicacies.

Since I last visited, several new hotels had popped up in the area, including a beautiful place on the other side of Bernalda, called Giamperduto. I didn't know it existed until after I arrived. The former caseificio (where fortified cheese was once made by the owner's family) is deeply buried in a scrappy residential neighborhood, but once you are inside, it is quite peaceful. There are citrus and olive trees, a swimming pool and a view of the Basento valley below.

Another good place to stay is Eden Village Argonauti, a larger resort type of spot with its own harbor and brightly colored buildings in Pisticci Marina, with both rentals and apartments for sale. Not far from there is Torre Fiore, an old, whitewashed masseria, or farmhouse, which has been turned into a very modern boutique hotel. Both Eden Village and Torre Fiore were closed for the season.

When I was planning my trip, my Basilicatan friends warned me away from staying at Metaponto Lido. And when I got there, I understood why. Metaponto Lido, the main public beach in the area, had slowly deteriorated since my last visit, its buildings literally crumbling like the ruins, its passeggiata (concrete walkway) aged — and not in a good way, lamp posts rusting, pathway stones broken.

I chose to stay at San Teodoro Nuovo, a working farm on the Metapontan plain. One reason the Greeks came here nearly 3,000 years ago was for the abundance and fertility of the land. As you drive through the countryside to San Teodoro, you understand their logic. The land is

exquisite, with pomegranate trees; fields of kiwi and strawberry plants; cornfields; orange, lime and lemon trees; and row after row after row of mournful-looking olive trees and twisted grapevines. I arrived between olive and grape harvesting time.

San Teodoro is owned by the Visconti clan, the noble family that dominated northern Italy in the Middle Ages and whose members include the acclaimed filmmaker Luchino Visconti. The place is run by the marchesa, Maria Xenia Doria, an extremely down-to-earth woman who operates the hotel and 370-acre farm. I had no idea who she was until long after we had hit it off.

She told me about how her grandfather had used this primarily as a hunting ground but transformed it into a working farm by putting in roads and irrigation. Ms. Doria grew up farther north and didn't come to San Teodoro until she was 10 years old, on the same rail line I arrived on in Metaponto.

"I fell in love with it immediately," she said. "I woke up in the morning and saw the olive trees and all the beautiful colors. I was astonished. It's kind of like another world." She went on to study agriculture in Milan, and then settled there with her husband and three children, longing to return south for decades. After she was divorced, Ms. Doria took over San Teodoro in 2000 and moved in permanently.

The place is a small paradise, with a bougainvillea-covered palazzo, several smaller buildings, a pool and a restaurant, which serves dinner upon request but always serves breakfast, and the occasional snack.

When I arrived, a lunch of soppressata, provolone, roasted peppers, black olive focaccia, mozzarella, a carafe of wine (Aglianico del Vulture) and Matera bread (famous in Italy for its crunchy crust and honeycomb insides, made the same way since the 15th century) was waiting for me, just in case. The mozzarella, I discovered at first bite, was actually a creamy burrata. I saved half of it and took it with me the next day to Spiaggetta, my favorite beach in the area, just a 10-minute drive from San Teodoro.

I also drove to Terzo Cavone, a narrow beach down the road. It was once a secluded gay beach with occasional nude sunbathing, but was discovered by families from Bari and other parts of the Mezzogiorno when the potholes on the road in were fixed and a concession was set up, renting chairs and selling panini, focaccia and Coke.

A friend told me sea turtles and dolphins can often be seen frolicking in the water there, but when I went, it was just me and a fisherman with a large net, catching small fish for his fritto misto. Granted, it wasn't high season. But it was an 80-degree Sunday afternoon, and I was the only one there. Besides the fisherman.

In the days that followed, I visited some of the surrounding hill towns to which many of the natives had escaped during the lowland invasions throughout history. There are so many beautiful towns in the area, including Pisticci, a white hill town with several gorgeous medieval churches. When they're locked, you simply knock on the door of one of the old women living next door, who keep the keys for visitors like you.

There's Grassano, the town made famous in "Christ Stopped at Eboli" by Carlo Levi, who was exiled there by the Fascists in the 1930s and sentenced to work as a village doctor. His book, published in 1945, described the harsh living conditions and embarrassed the Italian government, leading to social changes in Matera.

The mayor of New York, Bill de Blasio, whose family is from Grassano, recently visited. (The locals love Mr. de Blasio, but don't mention Levi. Some still hold a grudge about the depiction of their town.)

Another place worth exploring is Santuario di Santa Maria di Anglona, a 12th-century church made from tufa stone near the village of Tursi. Once again, I was the only tourist. The priest wasn't even there, but the church was wide open.

Over its rounded portal were carved animal representations of the four evangelists, and inside were colorful frescoes of saints. Because this is a

working parish, there were antique confessional boxes with modern signs over them, as well as a lottery board with a list of prizes in handwritten marker. Outside was a blooming rose garden.

On a drive through the nearby calanchi, which resemble America's Badlands, I got out of the car on the deserted road for a closer inspection and discovered small fossil shells in the rock, from prehistoric days when this land was covered by the sea.

I carved a whole day out of my schedule to visit Matera, about a 45-minute drive inland depending on how fast you drive. (The Italians tend to drive very fast, so I always add 10 minutes for any trip they suggest).

Matera is famous for its sassi — its cave churches and cave dwellings, which were lived in until the 1950s but evacuated after Levi's book. Many of the homes have been turned into luxury hotels and restaurants. The beautiful city looks as if it's been carved from one piece of stone. Because of its resemblance to Jerusalem, it's often used as a stand-in for biblical films.

The 2004 Mel Gibson release "The Passion of the Christ" was filmed there, as was Pier Paolo Pasolini's "The Gospel According to St. Matthew," 40 years earlier. When I visited there was a wonderful exhibit about Pasolini and the film. In one room, still images from the film were superimposed with shots of the same spots from today. Matera's latest epic is "Ben-Hur," whose stars include Morgan Freeman, which began filming last month.

In the morning, I visited an underground cave spa and swam in its blue, blue waters, then ate lunch in an old cave prison called Gatta Buia, and had possibly the best cappuccino of my life at the Tripoli Bar on Piazza Vittorio Veneto.

But the height of my Matera visit was the Crypt of the Original Sin, a cave church on the outskirts of town. It's filled with colorful frescoes painted by monks from around the ninth century who hid there in flight from persecution during the Byzantine Empire. For centuries after the



frescoes were painted, the place was used as shelter by local shepherds, who made their mozzarella on the cliff's edge in a small hole in the stone. But in 1963, it was discovered by conservationists and then restored. The ceiling on its edges is black from the fires the shepherds used to cook. Last time I was here, the crypt was being rehabilitated, so I made a point of visiting before they decided to close it again for further renovations.

Inside is a painting of Adam and Eve's fall. The two are naked and depicted in an unusually natural way, curvy and fully human unlike much of the art from the Byzantine era, which tends to be more stiff and formal. The Madonna — with Child — on the adjacent wall has full lips and an elaborately painted ocher and lapis lazuli gown, which brings to mind a Klimt painting. Swirly ocher flowers connect all the scenes. The crypt is known as the Sistine Chapel of rupestrian art. It is a wonder.

Back in Metaponto, I also made a point of visiting the local museum, which had always been closed when I tried to visit before.

The large black, white and brown clay vases decorated with Greek mythical figures and legends were some of the most intact I had ever seen, as if they had been thrown on the potter's wheel just last week or discovered in someone's closet. There were perfectly preserved glassware, stunning gold jewelry, rusted swords and helmets. My favorite piece was a crown found in Bernalda in the third century B.C., which was made of bronze leaves, carved terra cotta grapes and carved grasshoppers. It was delicately beautiful, and looked brand-new.

When I had asked the locals earlier in the week if the Archaeological Park was still open, they had shrugged and said the last they had heard it had been flooded. (Visiting the Greek ruins is for the locals what visiting the Empire State Building is for New Yorkers.)

I drove the mile or so over to the park, past more silent vineyards and olive trees, the sun beginning to set over the vast Metapontan plain. And there, on the lonely road, past the remains of the ancient city, the temple to Athena and the sanctuary dedicated to Apollo, was the rounded

amphitheater. To my delight, its stone semicircle was filled with people — hundreds of young philosophy students on a field trip, singing and clapping and celebrating the glory that was, and still is, Metaponto.

### ***Correction: March 15, 2015***

An article last Sunday about exploring the Ionian coast of Italy described incorrectly a wine, an Aglianico del Vulture, sampled by the writer. It is an Aglianico, not a Primitivo.

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## **IF YOU GO**

### **Getting Around**

It’s essential to have a car in Basilicata. You can fly into Rome and rent a car there, then drive the five hours south. Or you can connect in Rome and fly to Bari and then rent a car and drive a little over an hour. A favorite way to go is to take the train directly from Rome to Metaponto, which leaves several times a day. There are no car rentals in Metaponto, but most hotel hosts will meet guests at the station and arrange for a car to be delivered.

### **Where to Stay**

**San Teodoro Nuovo**, [santeodoronuovo.com](http://santeodoronuovo.com). A working farm on the Metapontan plain. Apartment with double room between 115 and 140 euros per night, or \$127 and \$155, at \$1.11 to the euro. Breakfast included. Closed from November through Easter.

**Hotel Giardino Giamperduto**, Via Giamperduto; [giamperduto.com](http://giamperduto.com). An oasis in a busy neighborhood in Bernalda. Breakfast included. Open year round. Double rooms start at 100 euros per night.

**Locanda di San Martino**, 71 Via Fiorentini; [locandadisanimartino.it](http://locandadisanimartino.it). A modern boutique cave hotel in the heart of Matera. Rooms off season start around 100 euros; high season, 150 euros. Breakfast included.

### **Where to Eat**

**Riva dei Ginepri**, Lido 48; [rivadeiginepri.it](http://rivadeiginepri.it). Snacks, cocktails and a multicourse prix fixe lunch for 25 euros in Marina di Pisticci. Open May

through October.

**Cinecittà Bar**, 64 Corso Umberto I; [coppolaresorts.com/palazzomargherita](http://coppolaresorts.com/palazzomargherita). The hip but affordable restaurant inside Francis Ford Coppola's luxury hotel in Bernalda, Palazzo Margherita.

**Al Vecchio Frantoio**, 70 Corso Umberto I. Considered by many to be Bernalda's best restaurant.

**La Gatta Buia**, 90-92 Via delle Beccherie. This cozy restaurant is in an old cave jail in Matera. Modern cuisine based on regional classics.

**Alle Porte**, 1 Via Redi; [ristorantealleporte.it](http://ristorantealleporte.it). A great pizzeria and restaurant in a spacious 16th-century building in the historic district of Bernalda.

## What to See

**National Archaeological Museum of Metaponto**, 21 Via Aristeia, Metaponto, [sba-bas.metapontomuseo@beniculturali.it](mailto:sba-bas.metapontomuseo@beniculturali.it), houses a vast collection of Greek vases, jewelry, weapons and sculpture. Open Tuesday to Sunday from 9 a.m. to 8 p.m. and Monday from 2 to 8 p.m. Admission, 2.50 euros.

**The Archaeological Park in Metaponto** is where many of the ruins are, including an amphitheater and temples dedicated to Athena, Apollo and Hera. Always open.

**Tavole Palatine**, the site of 15 Doric columns dating from the sixth century B.C., just off Highway 106 in Metaponto near the Bradano River.

**The Crypt of the Original Sin**, [cryptofororiginalsin.it](http://cryptofororiginalsin.it), a cave just outside Matera with beautiful ninth-century frescoes of Adam and Eve, the Madonna and Child, and SS. Peter and Agatha, painted by troglodytic monks escaping religious persecution in the Byzantine Empire. Guided tours only; 8 euros.

A version of this article appears in print on March 8, 2015, on page TR1 of the New York edition with the headline: A Solitary Pilgrim Among the Ruins.