

# or the Don

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I stayed in the dreamy luxury of suite 4 – ‘Sofia’s room’ – where Coppola’s daughter spent her honeymoon

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tape and empty promises. Even Coppola’s notoriously delayed project, *Apocalypse Now*, which drove the star, Martin Sheen, to a heart attack and nearly resulted in financial ruin for Coppola, took less than half as long as Palazzo Margherita.

Fortunately, Fabio is still standing. “Francis was very sentimental about this project, and he was very clear about how he wanted it to look,” he says. Every detail had to be exactly right, down to the bedside reading lights.

Fabio walked me around the pleasingly overgrown, scented garden, pointing out the vegetables and herbs that Filumena, the chef, uses in the kitchen. Gianni, the handsome, silver-haired gardener attired in tasteful greens and greys (comparisons with Don Vito Corleone are inevitable), bustled about with pots and hoes, while in the courtyard the uniformed staff were busy laying tables for lunch.

The staff are warm and efficient, and add greatly to the family atmosphere that Coppola is so keen to create. I got to know them all by name: Michele, Daniele, Roberta, Daniela, Donato. The latter is a cousin of Coppola’s. Another cousin is restoring the palazzo next door.

That evening, we gathered at the communal dining table in Filumena’s brick-vaulted kitchen to eat her rural, unpretentious food. Coppola is her number one fan, and he credits her with cooking one of the best meals he has ever eaten. With Filumena’s cooking “it’s one thing after another”, he says. “I love her unusual stuffed breads, the vegetables, her home-made pasta and the salsiccia.”

Horsemeat is a speciality of the region, though not, I am assured, served in your bed in the morning. You can try it in

so self-centred as to put my own movies in my collection of films to see.”

Coppola’s hotel is, in fact, building on a great cinematic and literary tradition in Basilicata. Its desolate landscapes, ghostly abandoned towns like Craco, and superstitious traditions have fascinated writers such as Carlo Levi (whose novel, *Christ Stopped at Eboli*, was based on his experiences of being a political exile here in the 1930s) and film-makers such as Pier Paolo Pasolini. Matera, with its ancient cave dwellings hacked into the side of a terrifyingly deep ravine, is a kind of Italian Jerusalem. It’s been used in many biblical films, including Mel Gibson’s *The Passion of The Christ*. Drive to the other side of the ravine and you can stand on the spot where Jim Caviezel was crucified, and explore the *chiese rupestri* here — strange, mystical cave chapels with frescoes that date back to the 8th century.

Matera is a magically beautiful city, with fine churches and labyrinthine streets, and it’s worth staying late to see it illuminated at night. There’s a fascinating reconstructed home in one of the abandoned caves, known as sassi. As late as the 1950s it was normal for a family to share their cave with horses, pigs and chickens. Coppola’s grandfather was one of thousands who left this poverty-stricken region to find a better life abroad.

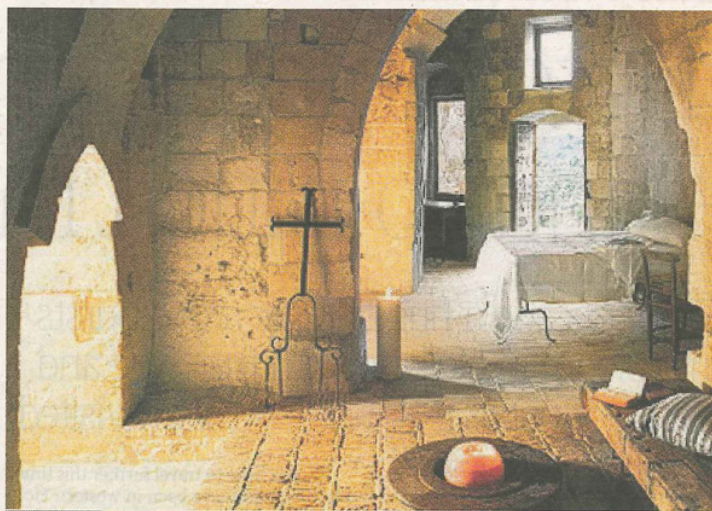
To those who can afford it, Palazzo Margherita is a welcome addition to this overlooked, sparsely populated region. Such is the allure of Coppola’s legend, Bernalda will inevitably see more tourists passing through, even if it’s just to sink a drink at his Cinecittà bar, which is inexpensive and open to non-residents.

“Much of what is wonderful about Bernalda are its traditions and people,” says Coppola. “The Palazzo is in the centre of the town, and I hoped it to be part of the essence of Bernalda and its friendliness.”

He’s right about that. Old ladies stopped to talk to me, and even the taxi drivers treat you like an old pal. Pasquale, who drove me to Matera one sunny afternoon, stopped the car unexpectedly to buy us both ice-creams (well, why wouldn’t you?), but refused to let me pay for mine.

Of course, I tipped him at the end. It’s business. But in Coppola’s Italy, it’s always so very personal, too.

Need to know



## Basilicata on a budget

### Le Grotte della Civita, Matera, Basilicata

The Sassi (old town quarters) of the Unesco-listed town of Matera, in the east of Basilicata, perch on the side of a hill and are divided in two by the Gravina ravine. The houses on one side of the ravine were carved into the ancient limestone caves by 2nd-century monks. The other side was developed between the 12th and 18th centuries with a warren of tiny cobbled streets too narrow for cars, ensuring that the area is almost silent. This hotel, above, spread through several caves, has an irregular shape. Low vaulted ceilings lead through narrow corridors into bare stone rooms with vaulted ceilings and grottos lit with candles and decorated with carved crosses. There are open fires for colder evenings. The 18 rooms have been renovated over ten years, so you get the best of the historic and the modern. **Details** From € 100 per room per night based on two people sharing (i-escape.com)

### L’Hotel in Pietra, Matera

This 12th-century church conversion, below, on the hill of Matera overlooks the Sassi. The original features nearly all remain, with soaring ceilings, arched doors and exposed sandstone walls. The hotel opened four years ago and has eight rooms, all of which are completely different because of the unusual shape of the church. Each has very different views, some looking down over the cave-houses, some across to the cathedral. Not suitable for the less agile, some of the rooms are accessible only by ladder or by narrow, uneven staircase. **Details** From € 110 per room per night based on two people sharing (i-escape.com)

### San Teodoro, Pisticci, Basilicata

Just outside Matera is this old shuttered mansion, below, hidden in 370 acres of vineyards and citrus groves. It is run by the ever-present Maria and you can either rent an apartment in one of the wings of the house or one a short walk away in the stables. The rooms are all beautifully furnished and spacious. Have a candlelit dinner (good vegetarian options) in the huge, beautifully maintained gardens, book a cookery class, play golf on one of the nearby courses or have a dip in the pool. **Details** B&B from €70 per person per night (santeodoronuovo.com)



### Orto Farm, Bradano Valley, Basilicata

The traditional farm of L’Orto (meaning “kitchen garden”) in the Bradano Valley — not far from Matera — is untouched, basic, family-run and a haven for foodies.