

## The Fascinating and Eerie Sassi

The four days I spend on my own in the stark and beautiful Sassi of Matera fly by way too fast! After this time on my own, I join an Overseas Adventure Travel (OAT) trip to the province of Puglia southern Italy - the part called “the boot” and continue to Sicily.

This part of Italy is often referred to as “the boot,” and the province of Puglia can be considered the heel of the boot.



It took a bit of doing to get here, including an 11 hour layover in Zurich. When I first booked the air, the layover was just a few hours. I learn an important lesson here. When there is a significant change in a flight schedule, you can change your reservation for free. I should have! However, Zurich Airport has just been named one of the best airports in the world by Skytrax, and it turns out to be a joy to explore.

My hotel, the Locanda di San Martino, is in the district called the Sassi (translates to “rocks” in Italian) and it’s the same as the group hotel which I join in four days. This area has been continuously occupied for 9,000 years, is a UNESCO site and is known for its cave dwellings. It has a long and sometimes sad history but it is enjoying a renaissance as a important archaeological as well as tourist area.

So I arrive at this lovely hotel on Via Fiorintini at 9pm after 24 hours in transit. I’m hustled into an elevator, escorted around on a walkway, then up about 20 stone steps to my cave-room complete with its own private terrace. The view is spectacular - especially at night as the whole Sassi is floodlit.



The view from my terrace is outstanding. I love sitting out each night and watching the lights come on.

I had asked my transfer driver if he knew a good guide. He gives me the phone number for a woman named Dora but doesn't mention much more about her. Later that night, I contact her and arrange for a walking tour for the next afternoon.

So my first morning, I set out to discover this amazing place. I expect to become lost in a short time, and it doesn't matter as my only obligation is to meet Dora at 2pm. Within five minutes, I start chatting with a local woman. A tuk-tuk passes us and I ask her if it is a taxi -- no, she says, he does tours! Soon I am riding with Paolo all around the Sassi, thru its labyrinthian streets - many not much wider than his vehicle. I must mention that his tuk-tuk is like a Ferrari compared to tuk-tuks I've ridden in India and Thailand. White, sleek with a convertible top. Heaven!



In Paolo's tuk-tuk at one of our stops. Paolo also includes a quick espresso and a cookie snack as part of his tour.



Somehow we communicate just fine with his broken English combined with my knowledge of Spanish, and we understand each other. So within hours I have the lay of the land, know where the Cathedral, rock churches, main square, spectacular viewpoints, souvenir shops and a few nice restaurants are located. It is a good two hours. We make a date for his "Tour #2" -- a visit to a Neolithic cave complex in the hills just outside the city.

At 2pm, I meet Dora Cappiello in the lobby of the hotel for our walking tour. She is incredible! A licensed guide, speaks English like you and me, has multiple degrees in the humanities, and is willing to share her information. Of special note, her father wrote some of the early histories of Matera and the Sassi. This woman knows her stuff! I later learn she is one of the owners of Ferula Viaggi Travel company which is cited in *Lonely Planet* and *Rough Guides*. I had lucked out!

Not only did I enjoy a good walking tour, but we visit the roof terrace of a 5-star hotel where she has friends at the reception desk who allow this non-resident in.



Though a large percentage of the houses in the Sassi have been restored, like on the left; about 15% are abandoned (photo on right). Perhaps they are too far gone to be restored, or their title is in dispute.

Buildings in the Sassi climb up and down the hillside - so everything is "up" or "down". Streets and stairs are 95% cobblestone. Not nice flat stones, but large, irregular, uneven and bumpy stones. It is very hard walking - almost like being on a stairmaster for hours. Little did I know that the next few days would be the most taxing on my legs that I've ever experienced -- even more than on the Camino de Santiago!



In addition to an historical look at the city, we take care of some details -- buying a local sim card, finding insect spray, locating a nail salon (though I never get there as I run out of time), as well as stops here and there to sit a bit and discuss what I am seeing.

She makes sure I know how to get to museums, historical houses, and the churches close to my hotel. I especially enjoyed when she shares stories of relatives who lived in the Sassi. She also helps me notice the architectural details of homes and buildings that are unique to this area.

It doesn't take long before I ask her about a day trip. With being in Matera four days on my own, and two more with a group, I will know this area well. After some discussion, we settle on visiting Altamura, a medieval town, then continuing to Castel de Monte (castle in the mountain, in Italian), which was built by Holy Roman Emperor and King of Sicily Frederick II in the 13th century and is now a UNESCO World Heritage Site. It is also an archaeological mystery....



- Is it a defensive fort? No, there is no moat, no defensive wall, no arrow slits, no drawbridge
- Is it a residence? No, it's too small and with only one main door or access (there is an even smaller door at the back) and no way to bring in large furniture, also there is no evidence of bedrooms or a kitchen - however, there is a toilet!
- Is it a hunting lodge? Possibly, as it is located on a high hill and in ancient times, in the middle of a forest
- Is it a hammam? Possibly, as Frederick had participated in crusades to Jerusalem, in fact, he was the "King of Jerusalem" thanks to a fortuitous marriage to Isabella (Yolande) of Brienne as Jerusalem was part of her dowery.

It is such a nice experience to walk and talk with a knowledgeable person who has a clear understanding of ancient times.



Two days later, we are on our way. Our stop in Altamura, a medieval town with winding streets and a stellar cathedral is a nice surprise. Here Mariella, a local guide who knows every nook and cranny of the area, joins us. There is nothing nicer than having two guides!



The cloistered nuns have long been known for their pastries. Now that their group has aged, they have turned over their recipes to a bakery, but still supervise. Much of the work is still done by hand.

We stop for coffee and treats at the bakery connected to the Monastery of Santa Chiara. They use the cloistered nuns' original recipes to make cakes, cookies, breads and candy. Thanks to Dora's friendship with the manger of the bakery, I visit the kitchen, meet the master baker and have a demo of how cookies are coated with both chocolate and sugar. The manager proudly shows me cupcakes known as "nuns' titties" which are very popular.



Here they are - the famous and controversial cupcakes!

The four days on my own are idyllic. From living in a cave-room, to exploring the Sassi with a expert guide, roaming thru ancient rock churches with their magnificent frescoes, tooling around in a tuk-tuk, and enjoying Italian food at a family owned trattoria just yards away from the hotel, it is a perfect way to begin my adventures in southern Italy.

Soon it is time to begin the group tour. Together we spend another two days exploring the Sassi as well as modern Matera, then we set out to travel and visit even more of this beautiful land nestled in the instep of Italy before moving on to Sicily.

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Places I visited during the four days on my own:

Churches:

Chiesa di Madonna delle Virtu (10th Century) and Chiesa di San Nicola del Greci (11th Century)

These two rock churches and monasteries are next to each other and the complex is considered one of the most important in Matera

Chiesa di San Pietro Caveoso (13th Century with 17th Century facade) --a purpose built church overlooking the ravine and river. It is not carved into the rock



Chiesa di Santa Maria d'Idris is a rock church containing 12th to 17th century frescoes



It takes a lot of climbing to see the frescoes in the San Nicola del Greci Church (11th Century), as it is built on several levels.

The Cathedral/Duomo - I visited three times! First with Dora on our walking tour, then I returned on my own to go thru more slowly using the cathedral's information sheets, then again with the OAT group. It has been under restoration for 13 years and just opened earlier this month.

Unfortunately, one church I hoped to visit -- the Crypt of Original Sin, which is located out of the city, is closed for restoration.

#### Museums:

Casa Noha: this centuries-old home near the cathedral, was donated to the city. The reason to visit is to view "I Sassi Invisibili", a film on the history of the Sassi. This is the single best way to understand the history as well as the renaissance of this area. I was able to see it again with the OAT group.

MUSMA - a contemporary sculpture museum. This residence boasts seven caves, with a palace built on top. Each cave as well as the palatial home is filled with modern sculpture. I am more interested in seeing the caves and architecture than the artwork.

Archaeological Museum - this was interesting but the signage is in Italian only and there is no guidebook or other information in English available.

#### Other:

Neolithic Cave Complex --This is Paolo's "tour #2". It is a beautiful ride in the countryside, then a walk on a narrow trail lined with wildflowers. This tour includes another natural cave complex, but the terrain turns out to be too steep and slippery for me.



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