

from CAVES to CASTLES

EXPLORING THE SOUTH'S ARCHITECTURAL TREASURES

BY KRISTIN D'AGOSTINO

At 26 years old, having finished a five-month stint working as a nanny in Salerno, I celebrated my newfound freedom by renting a Fiat with a friend and heading south. The rocky Amalfi Coast's bustling port towns gave way to verdant hills dotted with olive trees and farmhouses. My companion, a cheerful New Zealander named Arianna, was also a nanny whom I'd met just a few weeks earlier when we were both flirting with the same Italian guy at the local tourism office. No romance came out of our efforts, but a much-needed friendship formed. Finally, after a long summer of raucous family dinners where my Italian vocabulary ran out before the pasta was served, I had found an English-speaking friend to share the joys and challenges of navigating Italian culture.

Our first stop was Alberobello, a UNESCO site known for its 14th century limestone houses—or *trulli*—whose conical rooftops resemble mushrooms. Thousands of trulli filled the narrow streets, forming a white-washed wonderland, each one bearing its own rooftop symbol painted in white on the gray stones. Suns, hearts, and moons decorated the rooftops. What did they mean? During my brief visit, I never learned.

Arianna and I rented a trullo for the night—the perfect cozy setting for sharing stories. Red wine flowed along with tales of failed romances and pointed remarks on Italian families.

“Why do they call it a *matrimonia* bed anyway?” I asked, plopping down on one of the full-sized beds. “It’s not just for couples. In the house where I lived the entire family slept together every night. Two parents, one cat, and three kids!”

Late into the night our laughter filled the one-roomed chamber, echoing off the round stone ceiling. For the first time in five months, I felt warm, connected, and at home.

Now, nearly two decades later and cooped up during the pandemic, my memories of this road trip spark wanderlust. What would a road trip through the south be like these days? What other architectural wonders lay waiting to be discovered? To shed light on my wonderings, I consulted Art and Architecture Professor Rocky

Ruggiero and Puglia-based tour guide Emanuela D’Andria.

THE CAVE CHURCHES OF MATERA

The south is unique, D’Andria says, because it forms a crossway between East and West. Many cultures have dominated this area through the centuries—Greeks, Romans, Byzantines, Normans, Ottomans, Germans, and Spanish. All have left their mark on the south’s art, culture, and traditions.

No visit to the Deep South would be complete without a visit to Matera, situated in the Basilicata region on the instep of the boot’s heel. Narrow streets climb up to this otherworldly city built on a hill, its houses formed within ancient caves. Matera’s resemblance to Jerusalem has earned it a place in many Biblical films



SAN PIETRO CAVEOSO (LEFT) AND SANTA MARIA DE IDRIS (TOP RIGHT) ARE SOME OF THE ANCIENT CAVE CHURCHES THAT CAN BE SEEN IN MATERA. (Massimo Todaro)



SAN PIETRO BARISANO, THE LARGEST OF MATERA'S ANCIENT CAVE CHURCHES.

throughout the years. The city's cave dwellings, or *sassi*, date back to the Paleolithic period more than 2.5 million years ago. Despite unseemly living conditions, up to 12 family members lived together in one room. The *sassi* were inhabited up until the 1950s, when the government stepped in and forced people to leave their homes and move into a newly constructed neighborhood. In later decades, the *sassi* received a facelift, and now most of its 3,000 caves serve as home for the city's inhabitants while many others function as restaurants and hotels.

Lovers of antiquity will no doubt enjoy simply wandering the city's many serpentine alleys and climbing its winding staircases. But to get the full experience, one must duck inside one of many cave churches. With their shadowy stone chambers rich in frescoes, they are a mix of haunting and holy, beautiful and beatific. The largest of them, San Pietro Barisano, dates back to the 12th century and is particularly spooky as its altar was plundered in the 1970s and the surrounding statues were rendered headless. Visitors are greeted at the church entrance by frescoes of the Annunciation and the saints. Exploring the underground area where a

labyrinth of stone niches forms an ancient catacomb, one can say they've truly experienced Matera—the *Città Sotterranea*, or Underground City.

FREDERICK II'S CASTLE

The Puglia region's culture and architecture have been greatly shaped by Holy Roman Emperor Frederick II. Though he had German and Norman blood, Frederick II lived in Bari for many years and considered Italy, particularly Puglia, his home. During his time as emperor, he transformed Puglia's landscape by having numerous castles constructed throughout. By far, the most magnificent of these is Castel del Monte, located northwest of Bari.

Frederick II, besides being a skilled hunter and passionate traveler, was a great lover of art and science.

"He was an enlightened man," says Art and Architecture Professor Rocky Ruggiero. "The fact that he settled in Bari meant that artists and musicians came there. There was a 13th-century flowering in that area because of the presence of the imperial court."

Castel del Monte, which is pictured on Italy's one-cent Euro coin, is unique because it combines diverse styles of architecture, mixing Islamic

and Classical with North-European Cistercian Gothic. The majestic building is a testimony to Frederick's fascination with astronomy and science. Shaped like an octagonal prism, the castle is located in a carefully chosen manner to invite symmetries of light during the winter and summer solstice. Frederick's love of numbers is also evident, as both of the castle's floors contain eight rooms and an eight-sided courtyard forms the heart of the castle.

No one knows exactly why Frederick constructed Castel del Monte. It has no moat, no arrow slits, and no drawbridge—it was not built to serve as a fortress. With its octagonal union of a square inside a circle, some speculate it was built to be a celebration of the interconnecting relationship between humanity and God.



CASTEL DEL MONTE, FREDERICK II'S MEDIEVAL FORTRESS. (Stefano_Valeri)

LECCE AND THE FRESCOS OF BASILICA DI SANTA CATERINA D'ALESSANDRIA

Southern Italy may not contain Tuscany's Renaissance treasures, but it boasts its own version of Florence and a cathedral that rivals Florence's finest frescoed churches. The city of Lecce has been called "The Florence of the South" with its baroque old town adorned with noble palaces, charming squares, baroque churches, and Roman monuments.



THE BASILICA DI SANTA CATERINA D'ALESSANDRIA. (Gherzak)

The Basilica di Santa Caterina d'Alessandria in Galatina, a town south of Lecce, has an array of vibrant 14th-century frescoes. The church was built by the Franciscans, whose patron was Frenchwoman Marie d'Enghien de Brienne. De Brienne was married to Raimondello Orsini del Balzo, a wealthy noble who traveled to Mount Sinai to visit the relics of Santa Caterina. After kissing the dead saint's hand, he bit off a finger and brought it back to the basilica as a holy relic. Though the finger has since disappeared from the basilica, del Balzo remains—as it is where he's buried.

The cathedral exhibits a mix of Romanesque, Gothic, Norman, and Byzantine architecture. Its interior is entirely covered in frescoes painted by Neapolitan artists, which are said to rival Giotto's frescoes in the Basilica di San Francesco d'Assisi. One of the most unique frescoes depicts angel musicians holding an array of medieval instruments—the oldest recorded depiction of harps, double flutes, and lutes in Europe.

THE TRULLI OF ALBEROBELLO

But what about Alberobello's mystical dwellings and their strange symbols? According to Ruggiero, the

houses began as small agricultural constructions built by shepherds tending their flocks in the fields. Constructed by placing rock over rock, the improvised huts protected them from the blazing southern sun.

"Later," D'Andria continues, "the town's peasants adopted the trullo's construction when the King of Naples imposed a tax on new constructions."

"It was then necessary to build something temporary, easy to dismantle, that could not be considered a regular permanent home," D'Andria points out. The townsfolk adapted the shepherds' trullo to their needs, the weather and everyday life. Being superstitious, the homeowners added symbols on the conical rooftops to protect them from the evil eye and bad luck.



THE TRULLI OF ALBEROBELLO. (Marcin Krzyzak)



(Alvaro German Vilela)

THE FRESCOES INSIDE THE BASILICA DI SANTA CATERINA D'ALESSANDRIA.

"The symbols can be very different," D'Andria says. "A cross, a dove, a sun, moon, star, menorah, a letter, a tree, but they all have the same aim: to protect the trullo and its inhabitants."

Architecture aside, the regions of Puglia and Basilicata offer many gastronomic treasures for foodies and wine lovers. Ruggiero, who lived in Tuscany for 20 years, said he prefers to buy his olive oil from Puglia. In Tuscany, olive trees are trimmed to a smaller size yielding a more refined taste, whereas in Puglia they're allowed to grow wild resulting in a fruitier, spicier flavor. Dotting the southern landscape, the olive trees are architectural gems all their own.

"Giant, gnarly, centuries old ... they're like works of art," Ruggiero says. "The form they take is breathtaking."

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