



Sassi di Matera

words & pictures
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Previous page: Sunrise view from Belvedere di Piazzetta Giovanni Pascoli

Above: Art installation *IDRA – Istituto di Ricerca Anime* by Alfredo Pirri, in the water cistern of Corte San Pietro hotel

Opposite: The Crypt of the Original Sin

‘This is the only cave in the world with a Michelin star,’ says Vitantonio Lombardo, gesturing at the fossil-studded walls of his subterranean restaurant with a broad smile.

‘In many ways, it’s symbolic of Matera’s own rejuvenation,’ adds the award-winning chef. ‘It was once an historic dwelling, then a stall for animals, and there are remains of an ancient rock church too. It lay abandoned for many years, and now we’ve brought it back to life.’

In a side chamber now housing the kitchen Lombardo begins work on the day’s tasting menu, which showcases classic dishes with contemporary twists. ‘While we respect the culinary roots of the region, we are open to new influences too,’ he says while preparing rooster, a classic ingredient in *cucina povera*, or ‘cooking of the poor’, and embellishing it with lobster tails and a Campari jelly. ‘It all ties in neatly with the spirit of Matera as European Capital of Culture 2019: looking to the future, but never losing sight of our past.’

Located in Italy’s deep south, this small city of just 60,000 people boasts a quite extraordinary history. Perched on the edge of a vertiginous ravine, its ancient heart is comprised of two

districts: Sasso Barisano and Sasso Caveoso. Collectively known as the Sassi, (‘the stones’), they contain thousands of man-made cave dwellings gouged from the pale, golden limestone. Dating back some 8,000 years, they are thought to be the first human habitations anywhere in Italy.

The Sassi and the plateau which surrounds Matera are also dotted with over 150 rupestrian (or rock) churches, sculpted by hand in the early Middle Ages by communities of devout monks, who painted their grottoes of worship with intricate icons using natural earth dyes and pigments.

‘What’s thought to be the oldest of all the churches was only rediscovered by chance in the 1960s,’ explains local archaeologist Nicola Taddonio, of the astonishing 8th-century Crypt of the Original Sin.

‘Like many of the cave churches it was eventually abandoned,’ he says. ‘Then, so one story goes, a shepherd stumbled upon it one night and took shelter there with his flock of sheep. He awoke the next day and was surprised to see all these eyes looking down at him. They were in fact exquisite frescoes of the Madonna,





the apostles and the archangels; the most beautiful Benedictine artwork complete with swirling tendrils of red flowers – in a cave full of mud, moss and animal dung.’

By the mid-1800s, many of the cave homes in the Sassi had begun to resemble the conditions of the crypt, as abject poverty gripped the historically underdeveloped Italian south. A mural by Carlo Levi in the Palazzo Lanfranchi is a powerful evocation of the era when malaria, cholera and typhoid were rampant, when entire families of peasants and farmers lived with no natural light, running water or electricity and shared their dwellings with pigs, mules and other farmyard animals.

The authorities were so horrified upon discovering such fetid squalor that Matera was denounced as ‘the shame of Italy’ and in 1952 living in caves was declared illegal. The residents of the Sassi were forcibly moved to Matera’s new town and the area remained almost entirely empty, a ghost town, until 1986, when people finally recognised its historical and commercial value and began investing money in rehabilitating the caves and converting them into bars, restaurants and galleries.

Key to the Sassi’s regeneration were the *alberghi diffusi*, or ‘dispersed hotels’, historic structures transformed into characterful accommodation, which attracted a first trickle of open-minded tourists looking for a uniquely authentic experience; to spend the night underground, whilst also staying in the heart of the local community.

‘We’ve always wanted visitors to feel that this is more like a temporary home,’ says Fernando Ponte, owner of Corte San Pietro, a collection of once-abandoned cave dwellings, now a boutique hotel with minimally designed spaces that dance with flickering candlelight.

‘Each room was once an entire cave home and we’ve ensured it bears the same street number as in the past when it would have been inhabited by a family with their horses and sheep,’ he explains. ‘We also put a plate by every door and write the guests’ first names alongside the nickname of the family who once lived there – the hunters, the animal keepers, the flatbread makers and so on. It’s important to keep a connection to Matera’s past, especially with all the landmark changes that have taken place during the city’s revival,’ he says.

Opposite: Detail of the Crypt of the Original Sin

Above: *Lucania 61* by Carlo Levi, showing the hardships of peasant life in the Sassi and the Basilicata region

Left: Street selling 'traditional products' including the local loaf, *Pane di Matera*.

Opposite: *Motorino* mirror view of Matera.



Such milestones include the Sassi and the Park of Rupestrian Churches being awarded UNESCO World Heritage status in 1993, then Matera's labyrinth of cobbled streets finding fame as a Hollywood film location, notably for Mel Gibson's 'The Passion of the Christ' in 2004. Ponte himself is actively involved in Matera's latest significant step forward, European Capital of Culture status, as the Corte San Pietro becomes the first of six hotels to transform into art galleries as part of the festival programme, hosting permanent modern art installations which are open to paying guests and the general public alike.

"One of the key points of Matera 2019 is to get people to think more deeply about their relationship with the local landscape", explains Ponte. "We wanted to highlight that many early dwellers here had no running water so they invested tremendous energy in building impressive water tanks and channels", he says. In response to this, a voluminous rainwater cistern underneath the hotel now houses the striking 'Idra - Istituto di Ricerca Anime', a sphere of reflective glass enclosed by a rim of gently glowing light by the Italian artist Alfredo Pirri.

"His idea is that you should walk on the mirror and he wants you to physically break it", says Ponte. "He wants you to feel and hear the sound of shattering glass with each footstep,

to understand that each step represents the passing of time. This is a particularly important concept in a place as old as Matera."

'Idra' is just one of many pieces in the year-long 'Open Futures' festival which involves local and international artists, and boasts a highly eclectic programme; from sound sculptures and contemporary dance performances, to workshops about the city's famous bread and an exhibition exploring a southern perspective on the Renaissance, a period in history traditionally focused on the north.

"Our aim is to open minds, as well as open the city to beyond the Basilicata region", says Salvatore Adduce, President of the Matera 2019 Foundation, "so we don't really want people just coming for a quick 'selfie' and a plate of pasta. Instead, our invitation is that everyone becomes temporary cultural inhabitants, to immerse themselves here, and have an interchange of ideas and experiences with the local people."

Adduce is also keen that visitors leave behind a personal item; a memory, a message, a physical possession, and at the end of 2019, these objects will become part of their very own exhibition. "It will be a fitting finale to our year as European Capital of Culture", he says. "A memorial to show how Matera has connected not just with Europe, but with the world."

