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A Busy Crossroads of History

By FREDERIKA RANDALL

THE sun is homing in on the mountaintop, an alien spaceship docking, red as a huge San Marzano tomato. It hovers there above us as we coast down the Apennine foothills onto the tavoliere, the great agricultural plain of Apulia. It's a gorgeous late December sunset as such sunsets go -- but also a bone of contention. I prod the accelerator and squint sideways at my husband, Vittorio, who sits in the passenger seat, a sphinx. Whose fault is it that we'll be arriving in the dark? Well, let's just say we disagree on that point.

It wouldn't really matter except that Apulia's daylight is special, even here in the Mezzogiorno, the sunwashed southern half of Italy. Elsewhere light glows; here, especially as you move south into the part of the region known as the Salento, the point of the heel of Italy's boot, light hums with charged particles, it crackles with electricity -- so potent you want to bottle it and take it home.

In its weightless, immaterial way, light is one of the elemental forces shaping the landscape, the architecture and the anima of this corner of southeast Italy, known to Italians as Puglia. The light is different here, a native once explained to me, because the long, level spur of the region, with its miles of silvery-green olive groves, sits between two seas -- the cobalt blue Adriatic, and the lapis waters of the Ionian -- that mix their reflected sparkle in the limpid Apulian air.

Right now, however, it's a sparkle in short supply. The good thing is, Vittorio and I have agreed not to trade recriminations. We'll just concentrate on getting to Martina Franca, our destination for tonight.

The autostrada runs along the Adriatic side of the peninsula to Bari, then swings west toward Taranto: we'll take the highway down the east coast toward Brindisi. We've seen those three cities -- among the region's largest -- previously. This time we're heading more out of the way.

What's out of the way depends on your perspective, of course, and that applies to the whole of Apulia: a place on the far fringe of Western Europe that's a permanent gateway to the Balkans, the Middle East and Asia beyond. Not by chance is this a region crisscrossed by historic roads, whether they be the wide, grassy tratturi -- the hundreds of miles-long routes along which sheep made the seasonal journey from the mountain pastures of Abruzzo to the Apulian plain -- or the basalt-paved Via Appia, the consular road down to Brindisi, where the Romans launched their ships for the East.

It's a gateway still very much traveled today. In the shadow of the ferries and freighters plying the Adriatic, clandestine vessels of fortune dart across the narrow Strait of Otranto -- the Rio Grande of Southern Europe -- bearing would-be immigrants who have come halfway around the world.

Over the millenniums, Apulia's fertile plains have been settled and resettled, fought over by Greeks and Romans, Orthodox and Roman Catholics, Christians and Muslims.

The history books usually begin with the colonists from Sparta who arrived in the eighth century B.C. and built a flourishing center of Magna Graecia. But the "indigenous" Daunians, Peucetians and Messapians they found here were also colonizers, migrants from the Balkans and Crete.

The Romans made this their territory at the end of the third century B.C. But not before losing a horrific battle to Hannibal, leaving more than 25,000 of the Roman legions dead at Canne della Battaglia.

When, six centuries later, the Roman dominion shrank to its close, Apulia was swept into the Greek-speaking Eastern Empire. Some Apulians -- half easterners, half westerners -- had never stopped speaking ancient Greek. Their Byzantine governors hung on for some 600 years, trading territory with Longobard invaders and Arab raiders preying on the Apulian coast. In 846 the Aghlabid conquerors, the ones who occupied Sicily, got a toehold here, seizing the port of Bari and holding it for 25 years. The West reasserted control in the 11th century, when the Normans arrived. Not long afterward, ragtag bands of Crusaders pledged to the Norman Prince

Bohemond sailed off from here to wreak havoc on Muslims in Antioch and the Holy Land.

After the Normans came the Swabians, the Angevins, the Aragonese, the Bourbons and finally the "Piedmontese" as the southerners thought of the new Kingdom of Italy under the House of Savoy. And that's not to mention the incursions made by the Venetians and the Ottomans in their prime.

"We've been overrun so many times, we don't have a shred of national pride left in us," a friend from these parts says ruefully. Maybe, but on the other side of the coin, the Pugliesi are hospitable, tolerant and have a savoir-faire that means, among other things, they are shrewd businesspeople.

All those great powers coming through left their mark on the landscape, too. Every town has its own archaeological or architectural style. Today a few people here are finally thinking about conservation, after the ruthless postwar real estate rout that spread concrete around the big cities and down part of the coast.

Not much harm ever came to Martina Franca, midway down the region in the stony Murgia highlands. We won't get a good look at it until the following morning, when we walk out in search of that second espresso I always long for immediately after finishing breakfast.

It's a brisk day with bright blue skies and a northern wind that bites, and the ladies of Martina Franca have tossed on their furs to go to market. Mink may sound over the top for southern Italy, but it's right in keeping with the luscious Rococo building fronts of this improbably pretty little town, which took its current shape between the 17th and 18th centuries. The secret of Martina Franca, the Italian art historian Cesare Brandi said, is that its Baroque design contains no grand palazzi, just humble cottages and streets as narrow as the crooked back alleys of Genoa or Venice. It's a whole city carved up and channeled with Rococo details, like the tracings of a rambling vine, he said.

The other secret is that it's so extravagantly different from the surrounding countryside, the green and rustic Valle d'Itria, which runs north toward Locorotondo. The Valle d'Itria takes its name from a Byzantine cave chapel nearby that held a magical image of the Virgin Hodegetria, the protectress of imperial Constantinople.

The basic element around here is the rough gray limestone that litters the fields. It is fitted together without mortar to make the stone fences that crisscross the valley, as well the distinctive local housing unit, the trullo, a white-walled, dome-roofed hut decorated with a whitewashed pinnacle. The trullo's mortar-free vault, made of rings of stone that narrow to the top, predates Roman construction and is similar to dwellings found in Cappadocia in Turkey, Sardinia and elsewhere around the Mediterranean.

Nobody knows when these picturesque houses came to Apulia, nor whether the name comes from the Greek tholoi (designating a cupola found on a tomb at Mycenae) or the Latin turre (tower). Despite their certainly archaic origins, the oldest trulli you see standing today seem to have been built only in the past three or four centuries. A bit like "ancient" Scottish clan tartans, they are actually not that old.

The triumph of the trullo is to be found in Alberobello, where the whole town, some 1,400 dwellings and the church, is composed of trulli. How huts that belonged in a field came to make up a village is a matter of dispute. Alberobello, literally "beautiful tree," was once a forest, and the first settlers were debtors, petty criminals and other fugitives from the feudal order who hid away in "silvam arboris belli," the woods. Later, it seems that the local signore, the count of Conversano, determined to cheat the government in Naples out of its property taxes, made all his peasants live here in unmortared trulli so that the whole town could be knocked down and made to disappear overnight if necessary.

Alberobello is one of Apulia's star attractions, and we drive up nervous that we'll be put off by trullo-tourism. But we end up liking the place, even if there are too many shops. It's otherworldly: Stonehenge-meets-Potemkin village. And anyway, if you want to know what real trullo-kitsch looks like, keep on driving east in the direction of Fasano, where baronial holiday houses built in the roaring 1990's mix suburban-modern comfort with pointy trullo domes.

Only a few miles away, the cool, white-washed hill town of Ostuni is another planet. We've booked a room for a few days at the Masseria Il Frantoio, an inn based in one of the old fortified farms -- like haciendas -- that have dominated the Apulia agricultural countryside since feudal times. Ostuni, like nearby Ceglie Messapico (where we'll dine on big, hard-wheat orecchiette with a strong tomato sauce and grilled kid chops at the excellent Cibus), traces its origins to the Messapic people, the earliest recorded inhabitants for the Salento peninsula.

From here it's less than an hour south to Lecce, a city famous for its avvocati -- its huge population of lawyers -- and for some of the loveliest and most exuberant Baroque architecture in all of Italy. Rodolfo Fontefrancesco, an architect who is a friend of a friend, has offered to show us around and he insists, with a pinch of provocation, that what people call Lecce's Baroque period is really its Renaissance. All this -- he waves at the thick flower garlands, the gargoyle caryatids and foolish putti of the facade of the church of Santa Croce -- was started in the 1500's, long before Bernini and Borromini came along, he says.

If sunlight itself had a color it would be that of the local pietra leccese, the honeyed, golden limestone of which Lecce's many Baroque churches and palazzi are built. Rich in clay, pietra leccese is so soft when it comes from the quarry that it can be modeled like wood, and the voluptuous carving that comes forth is so fine that gilt was once applied directly to the stone.

South of Lecce toward Otranto, bits of the ancient Greek presence in the Salento still cling to the language, like the dregs of resinous wine in a cup. Just a few decades ago many people here still spoke Griko, a dialect traceable in part to Doric Greek. In the Griko funeral laments collected by the folklorist Brizio Montinaro, born in the Griko-speaking town of Calimera, the dead wrestle directly with Thanatos in an underworld untouched by Christian saints. Much like the pizzica, the time-honored local dance of seduction and sexual possession, the Griko love songs are all about hot desire.

"Oh lucky little flea, what you get to do," goes one published by Mr. Montinaro, "my sweetheart is at your mercy. On her lovely white flesh you come and go -- you pounce upon her bosom."

It is lunchtime and at a nearby table, gentlemen in suits (avvocati?) are devouring cime di rapa stewed with oil and garlic with a pleasure so rich it's almost embarrassing to watch. In this corner of the earth, real men do like their green vegetables.

When we get to Otranto, a pretty whitewashed city on the sea, we're unlucky to find the little Church of San Pietro, with its 11th-century Byzantine frescoes, locked up. But we do see the Romanesque cathedral, and its unforgettable polychrome mosaic floor laid down in 1165, where Norman, Greek and Byzantine ideas of fate and sin intertwine in a great Tree of Life. It hurts to look at these raw medieval images, this universe of graceful animals and rough human beings, especially when you think how much more elegant the mosaics of the Romans were. Poor, unlucky Jonah cast overboard, head down among the seaweed and the fishes.

As the sea road winds down to Santa Maria di Leuca -- finibus terram, land's end -- the coast turns steep and rocky. Near the spa town of San Cesarèa Terme, the Grotta Zinzulusa, at sea level, is a cave full of stalactites and stalagmites where we had a wonderful swim on a previous visit.

Round the point at Gallipoli, the beaches are white as salt and the sea comes in absurdly beautiful shades of violet and turquoise. We wander through the white alleyways of the old town. It's the hour of the struscio, the evening stroll. Up on a balcony, two teenagers who look like Britney Spears rest their elbows on pillows as they look down pitilessly on the old folks strolling around. We linger in the huge fish market, watching gentlemen stand by a stall, eating raw sea urchins from the shell. It's getting late. Time to begin the journey home.

On the way back we'll swing by the caves of Castellana (not as exciting as we were led to think) and Castel del Monte, the mysterious octagonal castle built in the 13th century by the Hohenstaufen King Frederick II (not to be missed). At Ruvo di Puglia we'll see the Jatta Museum, a collection of Greek red figure vases and rhyton drinking cups (excellent). Up the coast past Bari, we'll stroll through Molfetta and Trani, each with its monumental Romanesque cathedral thrillingly perched on the very edge of the sea.

In Trani the fishermen are bringing in the afternoon catch. Octopus, red mullet, anchovies and cicale di mare, like little lobster tails. I try to remember the fish I've seen on Greek pottery. Was this what they caught in Homer's Mediterranean, or have the fish moved on, too?

Where the humblest vegetables are given the royal treatment

Getting Around

Bari and Brindisi airports are served by national and international flights. By car from Rome, take the A2 south toward Naples, then follow the A16 toward Bari, changing for the A14 at Canosa.

Unless you plan to travel in a small radius around your hotel, you will need a car. Apart from downtown

Brindisi, where petty crime can be a problem, normal precautions will do -- lock your car and do not leave valuables inside.

Dining

Pugliese food is simple, and cooks are fussy about their ingredients. From the plains come high-quality olive oil and durum wheat for homemade pasta. Humble vegetables have cult status -- cime di rapa (turnip greens), wild salads and cicoriotta (dandelion greens), lampascioni (a kind of wild onion) and ciceri (chickpeas) appear on every menu.

Wines include the dense, powerful red Primitivo di Manduria; Rosa del Golfo, a Salento rosé; and the red Patriglione.

Cibus, Via Chianche di Scarano 7, 72013 Ceglie Messapica; (39-0831) 388980. An attractive place carved out of the stables of a 15th-century convent with a top-class wine cellar and a cheese cellar. Antipasti del territorio change with the season; ours included slices of capocollo and lardo (cured pork); goat's milk ricotta and a little torte of mushrooms and nuts. Second courses include grilled kid chops and braciola di cavallo (stewed slices of horsemeat). Lovely desserts included plain pan di Spagna cake in a very liquid orange custard and fresh ricotta with an intense sauce of cotto di fichi (reduced fig juice). Dinner for two with wine, about \$135, at 1.16 euros to the dollar. Closed Tuesday.

Alle Due Corti, Corte dei Giugni 1, Lecce; (39-0832) 242223. Traditional home cooking, with a good list of Pugliese wines. The menu, in dialect, is hard to read even for most Italians. Ricciarieddhe cu li pummitori scatt are big, flat pasta with a sauce of tiny, strong, quickly-cooked tomatoes. Turcinieddhi are little sausages made of roughly chopped sheep's liver and offal. Meal for two with wine, about \$41. Open for lunch and dinner Monday to Saturday.

L'Aragosta, Piazza Imbriani 22, Gallipoli; (39-0833) 262032. Fish and seafood -- linguine tossed with sea urchins, carpaccio of swordfish, grilled triglia (red mullet). Dinner for two with wine, about \$68. Open daily except Mondays in winter.

Accommodations

Il Frantoio, Strada Statale 16, Kilometer 874, Ostuni; telephone and fax (39-0831) 330276; www.trecolline.it. A converted masseria, or fortified manor house, with a rambling, whitewashed stone hacienda in the middle of a vast olive grove. A working farm that sells organic produce and olive oil, it is stylish yet has a relaxed hospitality thanks to its proprietors, Rosalba Ciannamea and Armando Balestrazzi. The eight rooms are furnished in country Victorian; there's a walled citrus garden. Breakfast includes a dazzling selection of homemade jams, bread and cakes. Meals of up to 11 courses (\$37 a person), based on the estate's own produce, are served each night. Double room with breakfast, \$112 to \$121.

Masseria San Domenico, Savelletri di Fasano 72010; (39-080) 4827990, fax (39-080) 4827978, www.imasseria.com. This elegant 50-room hotel is also a spa specializing in thalassotherapy and hydro-massage. Doubles with breakfast run \$158 to \$279, depending on season; suites, \$503 to \$711.

The 67-room Patria Palace Hotel, Piazzetta Riccardi 13, Lecce, (39-0832) 245111, fax (39-0832) 245002, a converted 18th-century palazzo in the heart of Lecce, is one of the city's grandest hotels. Double room with breakfast, \$189 to \$195.

Correction: May 12, 2002, Sunday Because of an editing error, a listing of restaurants and lodgings on March 31 with an article about Apulia, Italy, misstated the price of dinner for two with wine at Cibus. The writer of the article pointed out in an e-mail message on April 30 that it was about \$72, not \$135.

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