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Basilicata, Italy: a Tiny Treasure of Passion and Peppers

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The Basilicata, located at the instep of Italy's geographic "boot", is one of the country's smaller regions, one of its least-densely populated, most mountainous, and most often overlooked. But within its 3,869 square miles (slightly under 10,000 square km) are:

- a UNESCO World Heritage site (Matera)
- Italy's largest national park (Parco Nazionale del Pollino)
- the longest escalator-and-pedestrian mobility system in Europe (in Potenza)
- two of Italy's unique 40 *alberghi diffusi* (multi-structure hotels, one in Potenza province, the other in Matera province)
- a world-class wine (Aglianico del Vulture)
- Roman artefacts
- Medieval art
- Renaissance architecture
- and modern accoutrements dear to the most demanding visitor.



A BASILICATA LANDSCAPE

All of which are enhanced by the warmth and cordiality of the *Lucanesi* (the Italian name for residents of Basilicata, because it was known as Lucania in Roman times). The name Basilicata may derive from *basilikos* – the Byzantine official in charge of administrating the region during Greek rule. Or the name may refer to the Basilica of Acerenza, which held judicial power in the Middle Ages. Whatever their name, the locals embody the best of southern Italian sentiment with an economic performance more associated with the north (the region's employment rate and GDP are both higher than the average for the south).



BIRDS EYE VIEW OF MATERA

A tour of Basilicata might begin with a rental car at the airport of Bari, which is actually in the capital of neighboring [Puglia](#). It's about a one-hour drive (65 km) to Matera, the best-known of Basilicata's many attractions. The [Sassi di Matera](#) (literally "the stones") are cave dwellings dug out of volcanic tuff rock. They date to prehistoric times and housed 15,000 people as recently as the early 1950s. Picturesque as they are, living conditions were deplorable by modern standards, with no water, sewers, or electricity. Residents were relocated in 1952, mostly for health reasons. Forty-one years later, in 1993, the Sassi di Matera became a UNESCO World Heritage site. Today 2,000 people have returned to live in grottos that have been respectfully modernized. About a dozen hotels invite tourists to experience cave dwellings with contemporary comforts . . . and prices steeper than the steps to the old town. (Women be warned: do NOT wear heels when touring the Sassi).



CHURCH TOWER ABOVE MATERA

Some tourists love being troglodytes in lodgings like the posh [Palazzo Gattini](#), with its 20 cave-like rooms and suites and a posh underground spa. Others come for the architecture and artwork on display here, such as the Church of Santa Lucia e Sant'Agata alle Malve, with its frescoes from three distinct periods. But many come because of Hollywood, since Mel Gibson, used Matera as the location of his 2004 film, "The Passion of Christ." Tourism has grown "markedly" in the wake of that film, claim local officials.



MATERA

The distance from Matera to the regional capital, Potenza, is 100 km., a 90-minute drive through green fields, working farms, and a state park, [Parco Naturale di Gallipoli Cognato](#), also known as the Little Dolomites of Lucania.

Residents of Potenza may apologize for their town if they know you have visited Matera first. It is true that the former lacks the unique architecture of the latter, but it is not as ugly as its detractors would claim. Some foreigners may find it positively charming, with its medieval centre and hillside setting (at 819 metres, it is the highest regional capital in Italy). Because of the hilly topography, Potenza has developed a bold public mobility project — the largest pedestrian escalator system in Europe. Elevators and escalators provide free access to the historical city center, and are designed for a maximum capacity of 26,000 users per day. Never mind that early usage hovered around 4,000; Vito Santarsiero, who spearheaded the project during his 10 years as mayor, has been optimistic that interest will grow as word spreads about Potenza's attractions.



ONE OF POTENZA'S MANY ESCALATORS, FORMING THE LARGEST PEDESTRIAN ESCALATOR SYSTEM IN EUROPE

For there is more to see here than escalators. Culture mavens can swoon over a little jewel of a municipal theatre (Teatro Bruno Mugellini), a national archeological museum (Museo Archeologico Nazionale "D. Adamesteanu"), and a regional art gallery housed in an 18th century convent (Pinacoteca Civica Raccolta d'Arte "B. Biancolini").



AN OFFERING OF AMUSE-BOUCHES AT RISTORANTE LUCANERIE IN MATERA

Epicureans have equal reason to fawn. The cooking traditions of Basilicata have not made it to the top of any gastronomic hit parade, but that is due to a lack of marketing, not merit. Among the tastiest appetizers are timbales — chicken and potatoes, tuna with eggplant, green vegetables, and farro. The fig and almond *amuse-bouche* at the Palazzo Gattini in Matera is also memorable. Lamb and wild boar are favoured main dishes, as is bounty from the sea. The restaurant of Potenza's Grande Albergo serves an array of delicately fried fish and seafood, including shrimp, octopus, trigli, bluefish, and sole.

An outstanding specialty of the region is *pepperoni crusche* — peppers that are thin-sliced and dried so they resemble potato crisps. The Due Torri restaurant in Potenza serves them as appetizers with chicory and puree of fava beans, or as condiments — along with cascio ricotta — for *strascinati*, a local pasta. The Ristorante Lucanerie in Matera features dried peppers plain (as finger food) and with orecchiette, tomatoes, chicory, and local cheese as a pasta course. Fortunately for foodies, desserts in Basilicata are lighter, often featuring fruit such as kiwi, dates, plums, and that consummate expression of generosity, watermelon.

The local wine is equally generous and glowing red: Aglianico del Vulture. Sometimes called the Barolo of the South, Aglianico can be lighter than its northern counterpart (minimum 12.5% alcohol as opposed to 13%) and much older — it dates back 3,000 years. Yet its fame is restricted to a relatively small group of *cognoscenti*, similar to the reputation of Basilicata itself.



THE ORIGINS OF AGLIANICO DEL VULTURE, AKA THE BAROLO OF SOUTHERN ITALY

The region is beginning to emerge from its modesty, however. It is spreading its wings – literally – with the *Volo dell'Angelo* (angel's flight), a zip line connecting the villages of Pietrapertosa and Castelmezzano in the Little Dolomites. One ticket gives you two "flights", starting from and returning to one of these two villages, with a stop at the other in between. So you combine the adrenalin thrill of a 120-km-per-hour "flight" (at 75 mph) with the more cerebral pleasures of wandering through the streets of Pietrapertosa and

Castelmezzano, with their thousand-year histories.

Pietrapertosa is the location of one of Basilicata's two *alberghi diffusi*, [Le Costellazioni](#) . The hotel's 13 separate houses have been created from old homes and buildings in the village. All have modern comforts, including kitchens, televisions, and can accommodate from two to six people. Breakfast is served each morning at the "reception area" in a central piazza. Basilicata's other *albergo diffuso*, [Il Borgo Ritrovato](#), is a 10-room hotel in Montescaglioso, in Matera province.

The regional park of Monticchio (Riserva Naturale Regionale Lago Piccolo di Monticchio) encompasses two lakes formed from the remains of a volcanic crater. You can hike, picnic, or take a pedalò boat onto the smaller lake. Or you can trek up to the [Abbey of San Michele Arcangelo](#) , originally carved from volcanic rock in the 4th century and successively enlarged to include a convent, a church, and a chapel. If you walk up the *scaline santi* (sacred steps), you are on your way to exonerating your sins . . . or so the story goes. What you can't do in the park is enter a protected area set aside for the Bramea moth, a threatened species, and the only one of its kind in Europe.



VIEW OF A LAKE IN MONTICCHIO. IT IS ONE OF TWO LAKES IN THE REGIONAL PARK FORMED FROM THE REMAINS OF A VOLCANIC CRATER.

The Castello di Melfi is one of the most important castles of Southern Italy. It was built as a Norman structure in the 11th century and was modified by successive invaders and a couple of earthquakes. Since 1976 it has hosted the Museo Archeologico Nazionale del Melfese, tracing local history through six key periods of development.

About half an hour east of Melfi is the town of Venosa, famous for its Parco Archeologico and also for its

curious ties to Christianity and Judaism. The latter include the "*Incompiuta*", an "unfinished" church initiated by Benedictine monks in 1035 as an extension of a 5th century church. Although the project was abandoned in 1297, the basic structure is evident, and so are the recycled bits taken from an old Roman amphitheatre. In fact, only one gothic column was made expressly for the church; the other four were recycled.



VENOSA'S FAMED "INCOMPIUTA" IS AN "UNFINISHED" CHURCH THAT MADE USE OF EARLIER STRUCTURES, INCLUDING THOSE OF A JEWISH TEMPLE

Also recycled are stones with Hebrew lettering and the Star of David, proof of the prominence of a Jewish community in the past. Jewish catacombs discovered in Venosa in 1853 have helped historians determine that the town's population had been half Jewish in late antiquity (5th and 6th centuries), when the total number of residents was about 15,000.

That hospitality and openness to outsiders is still alive and well in Basilicata. You don't need *pepperoni crusche* to savour them. Just come before the rest of the world gets wise.

WHERE TO SLEEP IN BASILICATA

Palazzo Gattini

Matera

Le Costellazioni

Pietrapertosa

Il Borgo Ritrovato,

Montescaglioso

WHERE TO EAT IN BASILICATA

Ristorante Lucanerie

+39 (0)835 332133

Via Santo Stefano 63,

75100Matera, Italy

Due Torri

+39 (0) 971 411661

Via Due Torri 8, Potenza

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Corso 18 Agosto 1860 n. 46, 85100 Potenza

Written by Guest Author Claudia Flisi for EuropeUpClose.com. Claudia Flisi is an award-winning writer based in Italy. She has two passports, two multicultural sons, two bicultural dogs, and one quintessentially Italian husband (one is enough). For more information, visit her [website](#).

Comments



Marilyn says

SEPTEMBER 18, 2014 AT 11:02 AM

Thanks for a terrific story, full of information about a place unfamiliar to me. Now I want to return to Italy and visit this treasure.

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Where?

e.g. city, region, district or specific hotel

Check-in



Day

Month

Check-out



Day

Month

I don't have specific dates yet

Guests

2 adults in 1 room

SEARCH 