

PEACEFUL *Puglia*

A stunning coastline and an intriguing legacy of Jewish life both settled and transient await visitors to the heel of Italy's 'boot', writes **Beatrice Sayers**

In the centre of the town of Santa Cesarea Terme in Puglia, on the walls of a café on the main road, is the astonishing sight of Hebrew signage. A notice below the entrance to Porta D'Oriente (Gate of the Orient) café explains that the building was used by Jewish refugees during the war, the resort being one of four to have housed DP (displaced persons) camps.

The many holiday villas in these towns accommodated Jews who flocked to the liberated areas in the country in 1944 and, later, camp survivors who made their way to Italy in the hope of sailing to Palestine. The main sign reads *Poalei Yisrael* (workers of Israel) and the wording above the doors reads *mazkirut* (secretariat) and *hadar haochel* (dining room).

The Pugliese are proud of their association with these Jews who stayed among them, and they are also remembered in the other

villages – Tricase, Santa Maria di Leuca and Santa Maria al Bagno; the last, on the region's western coast, has a Piazza Golda Meir. The former Israeli prime minister is said to have got married in a DP camp in the village.

Puglia extends for 500 miles along the eastern coast – the heel of the Italian boot. Covid was in abeyance across much of the continent when we travelled last year and we were lucky to get there during a window when quarantine for travellers to and from Italy had been lifted.

The dilemma on a visit to Puglia is whether to concentrate inland or on the coast. The alluring blue of the Adriatic and its beaches – some rocky, some with miles of white sand – will satisfy those looking to fly and flop.

We had made a foray inland from our seaside base, Otranto, where we rented an Airbnb just outside the Old City. There is plenty to see, including a 15th century castle and an 11th century cathedral. A magnificent mosaic across the cathedral floor, installed in the 1160s, shows biblical themes, including the Garden of Eden and the Flood, as well as scenes from the life of Alexander the Great, all alongside a Tree of Life running up the central nave.

We took a day trip to Alberobello, known for its district of trulli – distinctive drystone houses with conical roofs, a design that enabled the 16th century dwellings to be



The trulli of Alberobello

easily dismantled in the event of a royal inspection, so keeping the local ruler's tax bill down. Now they presumably contribute handsomely to the local tax take as they attract tourists throughout the year.

We also visited Porto Badisco, a deep rocky cove with good bathing and lovely views, which for centuries has attracted visitors to its thermal baths.

Earlier in the trip, the colours and scents of a working farm in southern Italy were an effective antidote to months of lockdown monotony in a north London townhouse.

Fly to the port city of Bari and the historic city of Matera with its rock dwellings, known as sassi, and stunning landscapes are within reach just an hour's drive away, as is the medieval Sclanova synagogue in Trani, north along the coast. Jews have had a presence in Puglia for at least 2,000 years, but at the end of the 13th century toleration came to an end and they were forced to convert – and all synagogues were turned into Catholic churches. The synagogue in Trani was rededicated and opened for Jewish worship in 2006.

My daughter and I flew to Brindisi, 70 miles further down the coast, to spend our first few days doing as little as possible other than reading, which had been curiously difficult during lockdown. The ideal place to do this was at an *agriturismo* (farm stay). Ours, Masseria Baroni Nuovi, was a 20-minute drive inland and

offered a boutique hotel experience, including a gorgeous pool and grounds.

Along a path from the main courtyard, we walked out to explore the farm's 400-acre estate and found olives, grapes, tomatoes, peaches, melons and a variety of prickly pear. For supplies and a bit of sightseeing, the medieval town of Mesagne is a short distance away. The most relaxing place to dine was Baroni Nuovi's courtyard restaurant, where pasta was the speciality. *Orecchiette* (little ears) are the signature shape of the region, often combined with broccoli, tomatoes or anchovies. It felt as though the region was all ears – just about every restaurant serves them.

Return flights in May from Stansted to Brindisi start at £79 with Ryanair or £260 from Heathrow with BA. Costs for a B&B stay for two at Masseria Baroni Nuovi start from £100. www.masseriabaroninuovi.it/en



The beach at Otranto



Above: The pool at Masseria Baroni Nuovi. Left: Fruit from the estate, including a variety of prickly pear, and pastries for breakfast

