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La DOLCE VITA

With Puglia's sun-baked beaches and unfussy charm, Italy's most secluded coast makes a rewarding alternative to the tourist-laden north – and is wonderfully family friendly, discovers **RUTH FORSYTH**.

They call Lecce the Florence of the South, and it's easy to see why. On arrival, the architecture will likely take your breath away, with numerous ornate Baroque churches huddled in among the small streets of the old town, and a Roman amphitheatre to boot.

However, if this was Florence, you'd be battling droves of irate tourists to catch a glimpse of these ancient sites. Here in Lecce, a town located at the base of Italy's stiletto heel, and all over Puglia, life is much more laid-back and languorous. This easy-going charm combined with the region's sun-drenched stretch of coastline, Baroque architecture and unfussy trattorias serving feasts of orecchiette pasta, make this an ideal spot for a family getaway.

We booked into an Airbnb in Lecce and were thrilled when we rocked up to find the entrance to our apartment hidden behind a set of unassuming doors on a tiny pedestrian street. The children were enchanted from the get-go. We loved feeling like locals that evening as we

ABOVE AND RIGHT

Just two of the many laid-back outdoor spaces at the Masseria Potenti in Puglia. The word *Masseria* is used to describe this special type of family-run, farmhouse accommodation in the region.





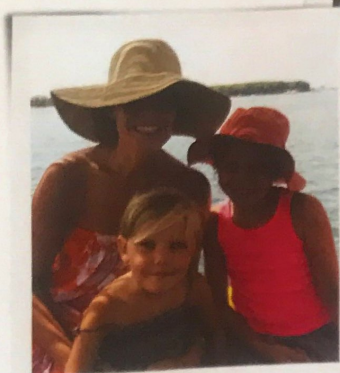
Run by Maria Grazia, Paolo and their children the Masseria Potenti is a very special place where guests are made to feel like part of the family. Each room has been tastefully designed and decorated by Maria Grazia and her daughter Chiara.

headed out to explore our new hood. In the morning, I snuck off early to buy fresh bread, pastries and fruit for breakfast, which we ate on our little roof terrace, looking out over the town. While our days were filled with easy excursions to the nearby public beaches, which were vibrant with the hustle and bustle of local families piled in tight. These local beaches can feel a bit chaotic, but they're so colourful and atmospheric, I highly recommend them. If you prefer something more refined, you can book beds for the day at the infamous Borgo Egnazia beach club, in Fasano, and avail of their fabulous facilities, including a great selection of water sports. But we preferred the people-watching and theatre of the public beaches.

If you can, do try and drag the kids away from the beach for a visit to nearby Otranto, where the Cathedral boasts the most incredible mosaic floor dating back to the 12th century. We wandered in to escape the midday heat and practically had the place to ourselves. Had this been Rome or Florence, there would have been crowds, queues and restrictions. The children's attention was happily held by the gruesome display of skulls from 800 murdered martyrs while we soaked up the peace of the place.

A few days later, we hit the road for our next destination, the Masseria Potenti (masseriapotenti.it) – located about an hour's drive from Lecce, near the historic city of Manduria, among the dunes, fine sandy beaches and nature reserves of Puglia's quiet Ionian coast. *Masseria*





is basically the word used to describe an old farm or country house in this region.

Historically, they were fortified towers, but generally today, the term is used quite broadly to describe the guesthouse-style accommodation in the area. There are a host of them in the region, with prices and facilities varying greatly, but we found our special place in the Masseria Potenti, where the setting is remarkable, but the family who run it even more so.

We stayed in the *Torre* or Tower, which was enchanting to say the least. Every detail was considered, unique and perfectly imperfect. If big screen TVs and room service are your thing, you won't find them here. Instead, you'll find yourself surrounded by an endlessly intriguing curation of the family's lifelong collection. Owner Maria Grazia and her daughter Chiara have such exquisite

"The architecture in Lecce will take your breath away, with ornate Baroque churches huddled in among the small streets of the old town."



One of the beautifully appointed bedrooms in Masseria Potenti.
LEFT Ruth and her children fell in love with the Masseria Potenti, where the children took part in cookery lessons. **BELOW** The nearby town of Lecce.

taste, and this is abundantly evident in every room, including the cute vintage shop they run on site, where my girls spent most mornings playing dress-up. The food here is also flawless. They make their own olive oil, sourced from the olive groves that surround the estate, plus their own wine, and of course Maria Grazia's famous home-baked bread. Since our visit, they have opened a spa on the property, which I can't wait to return to. Maria Grazia also runs a series of creative workshops during the quiet off-season, which are well worth checking out.

Another truly unique and special place in this region is Il Convento di Santa Maria di Costantinopoli in Diso, which is further south again, just outside the pretty little town of Marittima. Owned and run by Athena McAlpine, here you really do feel like you are staying in the home of a special friend with the most incredible eye and an insatiable appetite for collecting.



IL CONVENTO DI SANTA MARIA DI COSTANTINOPOLI
IMAGES BY HENRY BOURNE



The Convento is a 500-year-old ex-Franciscan monastery, which has been restored and filled to the brim with *objets d'art* from all over the world. As a host, Athena is warm and welcoming, and keen to share her abundant knowledge of each piece in her museum-quality collection. This is a really special place where guests are invited to make themselves at home and help themselves to a glass of wine or fruit from the kitchen, when not sitting down to be fed by the talented chef Pierluigi. Although children are welcome, I'm not sure how relaxed I would feel with my three running around all these wonderful works of art, so it might be one to earmark for a more romantic break *à deux*.

To get there, Ryanair flies into Bari twice a week during the summer months and then it's best to rent a car and explore the best of the Puglia region.

Another unique place to stay or visit in the region is Il Convento di Santa Maria di Costantinopoli in Diso. Owned and run by Athena McAlpine, it houses the most exquisite collection of *objets d'art*.



My Puglia

Irish fashion designer and Puglia native Deborah Nolan shares her tips on places not to miss in the region.

EAT at the Masseria Torre Coccaro, Egnathia is an authentic fine dining restaurant close to the fishing village of Savalletri di Fasano and serves fresh local produce and delicious wines from the region. Set in a wonderfully romantic and rustic old farmhouse, it's not to be missed, masseriatorrecoccaro.com.

SHOP The wonderful Sunday morning antique markets are the place to browse for old local ceramics and wicker baskets. In Lecce, the market is held on the last Sunday of the month and in Ostuni, it is held on the second Sunday.

WITH KIDS Puglia for families is all about the beach. A favourite of ours is the hidden beautiful stretch of sand dunes at Torre Guaceto – a marine nature reserve. For surfers, San Foca near Lecce is excellent – book in for lessons with Carlo at Surf in Salento, surfinsalento.it.

AFTERNOON PITSTOP Don't leave the area without dropping into Caffè Tripoli in Martina Franca,

where they are famous for their ricotta pear tarts and *caffè al ghiaccio* (iced coffee). Divine.

VIEWPOINT The coastline between Otranto and Santa Maria di Leuca is some of the most unspoilt in Italy. The coast has high cliffs and stunning landscapes. Stop at Porto Badisco to eat freshly caught *ricci* and make time to visit the tiny beach at Acquaviva di Marittima – an amazing hidden spot.

Come home with one of Deborah Nolan's gorgeous hand block-printed kaftans, available at her Tulsi design stores located in Marittima di Diso, Gallipoli and Savalletri di Fasano, tulsishop.com.