

Southern Italy travel guide: From Puglia to Sicily and every slice of pizza in between

La dolce vita is alive and well in Italy's most magical regions, Puglia and Sicily.

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Travelling to Southern Italy this September, I only had two simple wishes.

The first was to win over an Italian. We didn't have to become besties or anything like that. I just wanted to get to know a real-deal local and pick their brain for locals'-only tips.

The second wish was to stumble across a restaurant so authentic and off the beaten track that the menu was only in Italian, no English translation version available.

Who knew that Puglia and Sicily would deliver these dreams so many times over...

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Putting on the Puglian charm

Our first stop on the trip was the enchanting sanctuary [Masseria Potenti](#) in Puglia.

The family-run villa is bursting with love, character, colour and hand-picked flowers. It's also the stunning location where *The Bachelor's* [Tim Robards married Anna Heinrich in June this year!](#)

As soon as we arrived, we were given a warm welcome by the villa's owner Maria Grazia and served an amazing homemade lunch of fresh tomato relish and burrata on crutons, penne pasta and a zingy salad fresh from their garden.

My dream of a non-English menu came true when we drove into the nearby town Avetrana and had a delightful dinner at Osteria Sud e Terre Lontane with the local punters in a fairy-lit alleyway.

I played menu roulette and ended up getting a beautifully fresh seafood marinara pasta and an ultra-creamy [cheesecake](#) for dessert.

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Taking in the enchanting settings of Masseria Potenti.

The ultimate day trip

After finally peeling ourselves away from the cactus-lined pool at Masseria Potenti, it was time to acquaint ourselves with the Mediterranean H2O.

Our first beach stop was Porto Tricase, at the very bottom of the heel on the map of Italy. There's loads of places to perch on the rocks and the water is unbelievably warm.

After a busy few hours of soaking up the sun and jumping in and out of the Med, I'd worked up quite an appetite. We happened upon a cute cafe in nearby town Castro called Underground and once again the menu was only written in Italian - and what do you know? It was the best meal of the entire trip made up of hand-cut chips fresh from the oven, wobbly burrata that makes my mouth salivate just thinking of it and a tomato-based orecchiette all washed down with a generous glass of rose.

Have a post-lunch nap/swim/sunbake on the spacious cement pavers at the nearby beach, Porto di Castro Marina.





THIS was the meal of the trip.

The long lunch

All holidays need a stand-out moment, a special experience you'll talk about for years to come. For my partner and I, that came when we went to Masseria Trapanà in Lecce for lunch.

As soon as I stepped into the grand entrance of the 16th century property, it was easy to see why stars like [Hugh Jackman](#) and Helen Mirren holiday here.

Upon arrival, we were greeted with a glass of prosecco and given a tour of the show-stopping property's 60-hectare olive grove, rambling gardens and even an original olive oil press that has been restored.

As the hotel only has nine rooms and most of the guests were at the beach when we visited, we literally had the entire place to ourselves.

Lunch took place in the shade of the olive trees in a courtyard that could have been straight from a romantic date on [The Bachelor](#) as our attentive waiter helped us pick cracking dish after cracking dish.

We drink and eat ourselves silly and very nearly book ourselves a room at Trapanà for the night. But alas, our next destination was waiting...



Seriously contemplating moving into Masseria Trapanà.

The royal treatment

[Il Melograno](#), which is considered one of Puglia's oldest masserias and is part of the Small Luxury Hotels of the World group, is a luxurious country estate just outside of Monopoli that's well worth a few nights of your time.

Staying here makes you feel like a Puglian princess, whether you're enjoying an Aperol Spritz in the bougainvillea-lined courtyard, or tucking in to the buffet breakfast as the soothing sounds of their harp player (yes, they have a harp player! She plays at breakfast, happy hour and during dinner) gently wake you up for the day ahead.

[READ NEXT: How to travel like a royal in real-life](#)



Il Melograno is renowned throughout Italy as the first masseria to open its doors to guests and reveal 400 years of history.





The country estate outside Monopoli is a place of simple beauty, echoing with past lives of noblemen and farmworkers.

If you're not kicking back by their pool, or making the most of the fact their chic apartments have two separate bathrooms, one at the top end of the space and the other at the bottom – my partner and I got such a kick out of having our own separate quarters, book yourself a lunch at the nearby Saleblu restaurant.

There's a courtesy bus that ferries hotel guests to and from the beach club so you can really embrace the spirit of the long lunch. Ask for a table overlooking the ocean and if you can actually manage to stop taking photos of the uninterrupted view of the sparkly blue, order their legendary local delicacy the fish cooked in salt.

Afterwards guests can digest their epic feast and take in the dreamy surrounds on a day bed by the beach. And when you're ready to return to Il Melograno, the courtesy bus will simply pick you up and take you home.

Like I said, these guys know how to make you feel like royalty.

[To book a stay at Il Melograno with Small Luxury Hotels of the World head here](#)







The face of a very happy camper who can't quite believe the view at Saleblu.

Volcanic magic

Our next stop on the tour of southern Italy was Sicily.

For a truly special stay, look no further than [Villa Neri Resort and Spa, which is part of the Small Luxury Hotels of the World](#) Nestled under Mount Etna in the quiet surrounds of a lush valley, this five-star slice of heaven became our Sicilian sanctuary.

When it comes to hotel pools, I consider myself quite an aficionado and Villa Neri's pool game was strong. I spent hours perched on the lounge simply taking in the wonderful views, dip in and out of the water to cool off.

A meal at one of Sicily's most revered restaurants, La Dodici Fontane, makes for a really special night out. With the menu embracing seasonal and local ingredients, it would be criminal not to order a pasta off the menu.

I picked the sweet and sour ravioli with rabbit stuffing and inhaled it in about 30 seconds. For the full culinary experience, you can settle in and experience chef Elia Russo's curated eight course degustation.

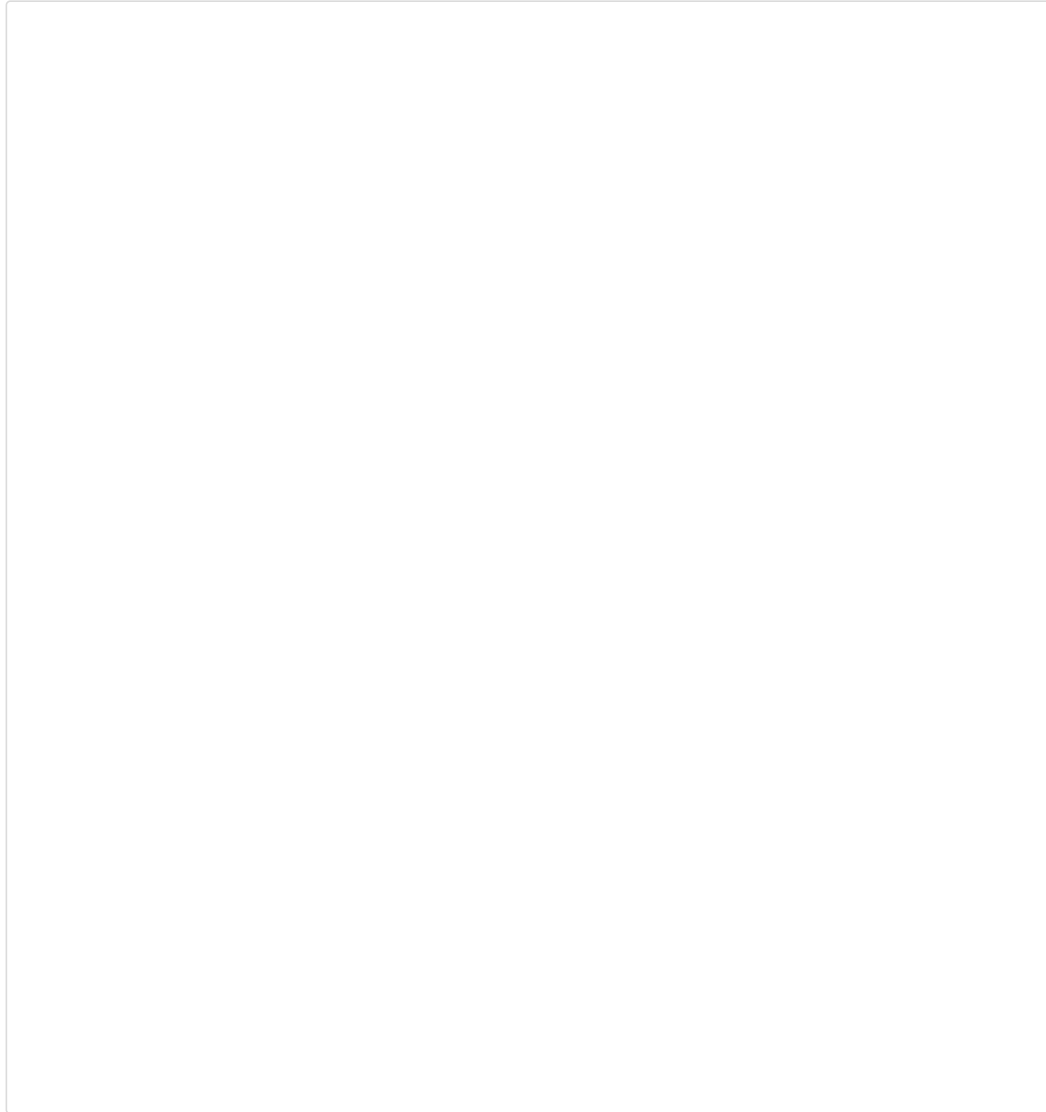
A word to the wise: even the bread basket, which comes with a drool-worthy ricotta butter on the side to dip in, at La Dodici Fontane is phenomenal. It took so much self-control not to fill up on it.

Make sure you book an appointment at their world-class spa! There's a comprehensive list of incredible treatments but you can never go past a classic massage, you'll be so blissed-out after.

[To book a stay at Villa Neri Resort and Spa with Small Luxury Hotels of the World head here](#)



How charming is the facade of Villa Neri Resort and Spa?



Must-do activities in Sicily

Explore Taormina: The old Roman city of Taormina is about a half-hour drive from Villa Neri and is a total treat for the eye. The bustling hilltop town has A LOT going on! Walking through the old town reminds me of a hybrid between Capri and Positano - it's flashy and touristy but still a great perve. Known as one of the most beautiful natural

settings in Italy, it can be best appreciated from the Roman theatre, perched on a rocky outcrop 350 metres above the sea. Pro tip: When your energy is flagging from hours of walking, smash a Chinotto - the yummiest Italian fizzy drink ever!

Take the cable car down the the beach: Isola Bella is the nearest beach and reachable by cable car. It really lives up to its namesake, beautiful island. Oh, and you can get a \$10 massage on the beach!

Dinner at a local agriturismo: There's so many amazing agriturismos in Sicily. We booked at Torre Del Gheppio (another authentic, non-English menu place!) and were blown away by the lovely staff and fab, fresh food.

Isola bella in Taormina, Sicily.

Going country

Our next base for the trip was the sprawling Homi Country Retreat in Partinico, Sicily, [which I found on Airbnb](#).

The peaceful property boasts an enormous pool, comfortable rooms and a delectable breakfast buffet to set you up nicely for a day of exploring the area.

But the best part?

The Homi team are Airbnb Superhosts and our host Mirella gave us some of the most amazing tips of the trip!

If you need me, I'll be by the pool at Homi Country Retreat.

Mirella's first local tip was dinner at Mamma Rosa, a buzzing hot-spot that brings classic Italian fare to life.

You can't go wrong with a traditional diavola pizza and spaghetti bolognese, followed with a Cannoli pastry (after all, Sicily is the birthplace of this dessert!).

In fact, the food and company (yep, we hit it off with our waiter) was so good at Mamma Rosa's we went back there the following night and were given a bonus dessert for free.

Oh Italy, you sure know how to turn on the charm!

Mamma Rosa's: So nice, we went back twice!

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