

TRAVEL + LEISURE

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Awards

It List 2020

The Best New Hotels

in the World

Under A Puglian Sun



In this low-key, high-reward corner of southern Italy, **Jacqueline Gifford** visits some of the country's finest hotels and finds a family-style welcome—with just the right degree of sophistication.

Photographs by Paola + Murray



Swimmers cooling off in the Canale del Ciolo, a coastal ravine in the Ionian Sea. Opposite: Carosello, the formal restaurant at Masseria Torre Maizza, near the Puglian town of Fasano.



◀ Clockwise from top left: Grilled vegetables at Masseria San Domenico; the lobby of Borgo Egnazia; chefs in the Borgo Egnazia kitchen.

▼ Clara D'Aprile serves herbal tea and sweets at her trullo outside Alberobello.



THE GLITTERING, ICE-BLUE pool at Masseria San Domenico was the irregular shape and size of a lake. Or maybe a small pond. Ah, no matter, I was smitten, and as I stared at the clear expanse, with its graceful curves, another image kept popping into my mind: my former neighbor's pond in Bucks County, Pennsylvania. From a distance—and through a child's eyes—that pond always looked inviting, especially during the dog days of a Northeastern summer. Appearances can be deceiving. I would run up, ready to dip my toes, only to find algae skimming the surface.

But there were no disappointments lurking in my latest pool/pond wonderland, part of a hotel set among the centuries-old olive trees of Puglia, in the pastoral heel of southern Italy. It was also very much for adults, with loungers perfectly spaced—close enough that you could tap your partner's shoulder, not so close that you could read their book. Wouldn't you know it, there was even a bar under one of those olive trees, with all the fixings for an evening Spritz.

Located near the town of Fasano, in the Valle d'Itria, Masseria San Domenico opened back in 1996. At the time, it signaled a shift for Puglia. The idea of converting the rustic buildings of a *masseria*, or farm, into a hotel wasn't a novel one. But San Domenico's local owners, the Melpignano family, brought an exacting attention to detail that made this property an outlier—a new, spiffed-up breed of hotel for this part of Italy. Guests could wander the sprawling, 40-bedroom estate, where the land had been tended for more than 800 years, and marvel at the



15th-century watchtower, built to look out for marauders' ships. But the high-design touches and level of service were innovative: a state-of-the-art thalassotherapy spa, a wood-paneled bar with Missoni-print stools where the bartender would serve you a negroni. You could find this luxurious style of family-run hotel along the cliffs of the Amalfi Coast or in the vineyards of Tuscany. But not in Puglia.

Since San Domenico's opening, many stories have been told about Puglia's scenic towns, like Alberobello, a hilly maze marked by trulli, the region's now iconic, white-domed conical houses. Or Gallipoli, a breezy, seaside perch of fishmongers and historic churches. There are also two coastlines: to the east, the pebbly beaches of the Adriatic Sea; to the south, the sandy shores of the Ionian. The narrative typically goes that this part of Italy, though not devoid of tourists, is still ripe for discovery.

After years of hearing about Puglia, and with a wave of hotel news fresh in my mind, I whisked my husband, Rob, and preschooler son, Bobby, over there last July, the European heat wave in full swing. There were plenty of American tourists posing in front of the trulli in Alberobello and competing for their own minuscule slice of sand at the oft-Instagrammed beach in Polignano a Mare, a steep coastal town hewn out of the cliffs. It all made me wonder if parts of Puglia have become overcrowded. Maybe. Then I noticed that actual Italians vacation there, too, flocking to the shores with coolers and candy-colored beach umbrellas, which they don't do in, say, Amalfi or on Lake Como. Puglia is richer for it.

The hotels are just as democratic and welcoming. What started with Masseria San Domenico—one family determined to showcase an underrepresented slice of Italy—has blossomed, 20-plus years on, into a full-blown renaissance, with a group of like-minded entrepreneurs opening up places with style, heart, and character. To my mind, they are some of the most interesting projects in all of Europe.

"WHAT'S THE CLOSEST THING you have to a large pizza?"

I could sense the desperation in my husband's voice. We had just checked in to Masseria Torre Maizza after 12 hours of travel, with a tarmac delay at JFK leading to a hairy connection in Zurich where one of us carried Bobby (I still can't remember who) while the other toted three carry-ons. Frayed nerves, all



round. The afternoon light was fading, and we were sitting at one of a handful of tables by the hotel pool, a perfect rectangle cocooned by white stone walls, fragrant orange trees, and cascading bougainvillea—a feast for the eyes. But we were hungry. And the pizza oven was closed.

The kitchen did a quick pivot and brought out focaccia flecked with rosemary and a bottle of olive oil, thick and grassy. We helped ourselves to cucumber-and-mint water from the elegant glass pitchers on the bar and ate bread, bread, and more bread, before napping on loungers in the shade of a vine-covered pergola. Wait, why were we stressed again?

At Torre Maizza, which is also near Fasano, it's easy to

▲ *Tasting Puglian wine with expert Giuseppe Cupertino on a rooftop at Borgo Egnazia.*

► *Opposite, clockwise from top left: Prawn and burrata pizza at Torre Maizza; San Domenico's palatial pool; Spritz time at Torre Maizza.*

Plan the Perfect Trip to Puglia

Getting There & Around

There are no nonstop flights from the U.S. to Puglia. We flew **Swiss** (swiss.com) via Zurich to Bari. (Brindisi is another alternative.) Rent a car or arrange for transportation through a ground operator, as taxis can be hard to find.

Where to Stay

In northern Puglia, near Fasano, you'll find **Masseria San Domenico** (masseria.sandomenico.com; doubles from \$300), a 15th-century farmhouse with a magnificent free-form pool and a thalassotherapy spa.

Borgo Egnazia (borgo.egnazia.it; doubles from \$300) is a modern, highly stylized take on a traditional Puglian village, with a Michelin-starred restaurant and one of the best hotel boutiques I've ever seen. At **Masseria Torre Maizza** (rocco.fortehotels.com; doubles from \$367), now part of the Rocco Forte portfolio, you'll find airy, farmhouse-inspired rooms and an enchanting pool shaded by bougainvillea.

Castello di Ugento (castellodiugento.com; doubles from \$502), in Salento, is set in a 17th-century castle with nine lovingly decorated rooms and a state-of-the-art kitchen where guests can hone their skills. **Masseria Le Mandorle** (masseriale.mandorle.com; doubles from \$313),



a second property from the same family that's just a five-minute drive away, is another great option.

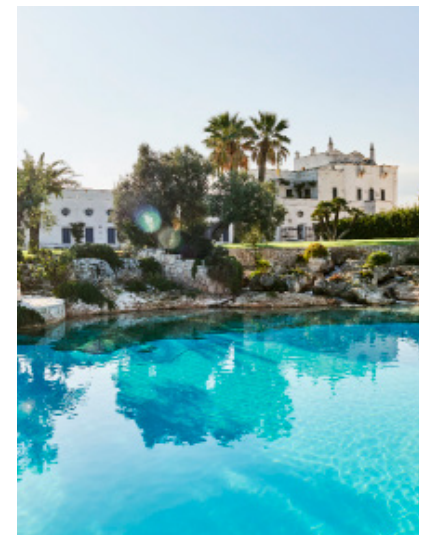
Palazzo Daniele (designhotels.com; doubles from \$417), in nearby Gagliano del Capo, is a 19th-century town house with a well curated collection of contemporary art.

What to Do

Access Italy (access.italy.net), an operator with deep connections in the region, arranged most of our tours and transportation. They planned our day trip to Lecce, a city with rich Baroque art and architecture. We strolled past a sunken Roman amphitheater, but spent most of our time learning how to roll orecchiette with Paola Puzzovio, who, along with her mother, welcomed

us to her apartment as if we were long-lost friends. Puzzovio started cooking when she was seven and now runs a school in the town of San Cataldo, but gives lessons in her home on request. I will never forget her.

We also made a quick stop in Santa Maria di Leuca, a town at the tip of the Salento Peninsula with rocky beaches, a lighthouse, and seaside restaurants. Gallipoli, in the southwest, is worth a day trip: park by the fish market and get lost in the maze of streets. Through his tour operator **Indigenus** (indigenus.it), Aldo Melpignano, owner of Borgo Egnazia, can arrange a tour of the town of Alberobello, where the trulli are not to be missed, followed by a visit to the home of historian Clara D'Aprile. — J.G.





▲ A bird's-eye view of a beach on the Canale del Ciolo, which sits at the very tip of the heel of Italy.



▲ Clockwise from above: Bougainvillea blankets Torre Maizza; a pocket of tranquility at Castello di Ugento; San Domenico's elegant dining room.

forget what you did five hours ago—hell, five minutes ago—and surrender to life in a bubble. The property, which opened in 2006 but just went through an overhaul courtesy of Rocco Forte Hotels, is at once hushed and lively. You pick your moments to find or flee the party at this enclave, which consists of a blistering-white 16th-century farmhouse, a golf course, a pool, a beach club, and now 10 new garden rooms, which brings the total up to 40.

Sir Rocco's sister and the brand's chief designer, Olga Polizzi, added restrained, thoughtful doses of color and texture throughout Torre Maizza that enhance the lived-in, residential feel of the place. A vase of wildflowers decorated the hearth of our suite; a plate from the nearby town of Grottaglie, painted mustard and maroon, was mounted on the wall above.

The real show, however, occurs outside—the wild herbs, the flowers, the people-watching. Rosemary, citronella, and myrtle line the pathway that separates the main restaurant, Carosello, from an annex with a small bar and patio, where our trio found ourselves every evening. You see, Carmelo Padellaro holds court from a baby grand piano on the patio. And if you miss him, you miss the entire spirit of Torre Maizza.

Padellaro is from Sicily. He wears fabulous hats and



▼ Clockwise from top:
The honor bar at Palazzo
Daniele; one of the courtyards
at Castello di Ugento; a classic
pick-me-up at Palazzo Daniele.



▲ The Grand Hall of Justice at Castello di Ugento, with its ceiling frescoes of Neptune and Icarus.

oversize glasses and speaks English with a thick, endearing accent. He loves children, and encourages them to dance to Frank Sinatra, maybe a bit of Billy Joel, and southern Italian folk dances like the tarantella. But it's actually the adults who get up and move the most, as if they're in some weird trance. They don't care that strangers from around the world are watching them. They just feel free.

We discovered Padellaro after attempting to take Bobby to dinner at Carosello, with its soft lighting, starched white linens, and couples locked in quiet conversation. One course in...utter failure. Again, a pivot: the team whisked away our handmade pasta with chickpeas and mussels and planted us in front of the pianist, where we could be as

loud as we wanted. Shoulders relaxed, happy to be awake at 11 p.m. with a preschooler in Puglia.

AFTER THREE DAYS, we left the bubble of Torre Maizza with promises to return. A road trip lay ahead of us. The highway south to Salento, the region at the tip of Puglia, wound past more of those ancient olive trees. We saw fields of green and gold that seemed to stretch to the horizon: for a minute, we could close our eyes and imagine a world of farms, mules, and not much else.

Yet some of the trees' gnarled branches were utterly barren, while others had clumps of green intermingled with gray spiny sticks—skeletons with

(Continued on page 110)



(Puglia, continued from page 89)

living tissue attached. *Xylella fastidiosa*, a bacterium that slowly kills olive trees, has infected one-sixth of Puglia’s groves, devastating farmers and oil producers. (Typically, more than 40 percent of Italy’s olive oil comes from the area.) Scientists are working on a cure, but they aren’t there yet.

Castello di Ugento, by contrast, is a story of restoration and rebirth. A passion project that defies all rational thought. If one couple can turn a crumbling 17th-century castle into a nine-room hotel and state-of-the-art cooking school—powered by geothermal energy drawn from 23 specially built wells—then maybe a cure for the trees isn’t out of reach.

The hotel hovers like a cloud above Ugento, a sun-bleached town in Salento, where, over the centuries, the Romans, Greeks, Normans, Ottomans, Spanish, and French all left their mark. It was the Normans who built the foundation of the Castello in the 11th century, long before it was expanded and acquired by the D’Amore family in 1643.

When his mother passed away in 2003, Massimo D’Amore—a former executive at PepsiCo and a 22nd-generation D’Amore—inherited one-twelfth of a castle. I suppose

there’s not much you can do with one-twelfth of a castle, except buy up the remaining 11 shares from your relatives, which is exactly what he did. Then what do you do with a whole castle, landmarked by the government? You restore it—and uncover a large Norman fresco in the process. You craft nine guest rooms out of the local *carparo* stone, then decorate the place with heirlooms—like the 1930s Poltrona Frau couch you sat on as a child. And you turn part of your whole castle into a full-fledged cooking school, in partnership with the Culinary Institute of America and the Italian chef Odette Fada, where students train for seven months a year.

D’Amore and his wife and business partner, Diana Bianchi, live on the piano nobile, or second floor. “Every night, we welcome people from all over the world,” explained Bianchi, a willowy blonde with a graceful smile, as she led us from a courtyard through a tiny passageway to their walled garden, open to guests. There: lemon trees and 250-year-old pomegranate trees, a respite within a respite. Bianchi then glided—and we followed—up a staircase to a series of salons empty of furniture but not of soul. There: a bold Baroque fresco depicting Venus and Cupid frolicking on the ceiling.

The beauty of Castello di Ugento is that you revel in the historical details, and then you socialize in the way that travelers of a certain spirit and sensibility tend to do, by putting down their phones and making polite conversation with total strangers. Each night my husband and I would step out of our spare, soothing room to the central courtyard and join new friends in the fading light, as it shifted from orange to pink to a deep cobalt, offset

by the gold of the castle’s arches. We’d talk to other couples over drinks and then retreat to our respective tables, briefly glance at the menu, and leave ourselves in the hands of Puglian chef Tommaso Sanguedolce, the Castello’s wunderkind and secret weapon.

Five years ago, it would have been unthinkable that someone like Sanguedolce should choose sleepy Ugento over Rome or Milan. But the chef—a violin string of a man, humming with energy—is thrilled to be a part of Salento’s resurgence. He is touched that you’ve made it this far south in Puglia, that you are game to eat dishes like tender, savory cuttlefish over julienned green beans, accented by artful splashes of squid ink. On our last night at the Castello, we popped upstairs to see those frescoes again, their blue and gold decorative leaves from the 17th century as vivid as the colors of the night in the 21st.

JUST 20 MINUTES away, in the equally trapped-in-amber town of Gagliano del Capo, lies the equally charming Palazzo Daniele. Roman entrepreneur Francesco Petrucci inherited this gem—a slightly faded, 1861 family pile—in 2015. “I am very Roman, but Puglia is like my second home,” explained Petrucci, who splits his time between the capital and a farm not far from the palazzo, where he produces olive oil—just 13 gallons per year, for his family.

After living abroad, Petrucci moved back to Italy in 2008. To the lawyer turned art collector, rural Puglia felt like a blank slate. His first project, the now 10-year-old Capo d’Arte, a contemporary art festival, has drawn such artists as Chinese photographer and painter Yang Fudong and Indian sculptor Shilpa Gupta. To put the town

on the map, however, Petrucci needed another act for the palazzo. Enter Thierry Tessier, the founder of roving hotel concept 700,000 Heures, who in 2018 chose Daniele as the site of his first location. Then Gabriele Salini, founder of G-Rough hotel, in Rome, stepped in last year to manage the property full-time.

You pass the palazzo’s main gate, expecting to find the mosaic stone floors, and the frescoes, and the walls overrun with ivy. Then you get a jolt of the contemporary: custom wardrobes by Palomba Serafini in the dimly lit, spare suites and an open kitchen in the back of the house that wouldn’t look out of place in a Milanese apartment. We quickly parked it by the pool, where the loungers are shaded by a jet-black wall with three cacti in front, like alien sentinels flown in from Arizona.

Palazzo Daniele is a place that brings a pared-down, global design sensibility to a fairly traditional locale and somehow ties it all together. You look and touch and wonder how this all works, but it does. I paused in front of a quirky piece of art: an altar of rocks, a piece of coral resting on an open book, and candles set on top of a white lace cloth. Not an antique, but a site-specific work by the artist Niccolò Morgan Gandolfi. What else might one discover in this fantastical piece of theater? “My grandmother used to measure all the heights of her kids, including my mom, by marking them on the wall,” Petrucci told me. “The notches are behind the door in one guest room—anybody staying there will get to see it.” Maybe next time.

ALDO MELPIGNANO WON’T confirm how many green apples there are at Borgo Egnazia, his resort near

Fasano. The property is a stone’s throw from Masseria San Domenico, which his mother runs. The apples pop up in vases of water, on tables, hidden in corners where you wouldn’t expect to see a green apple. But there they are, and they are perfectly beautiful.

You may have heard that Borgo Egnazia is where Justin Timberlake and Jessica Biel got married. That is true, but it is also true that this place is by far the most ambitious property in the region. We ended the trip there because we couldn’t go to that part of the world and miss it: an entirely new village built from *tufo* stone, modeled after an old Puglian village, with a central piazza; whitewashed, linen-bedecked guest rooms; and evening festivals of song and dance—all antidotes to the intense summer heat.

“It was limiting with the *masseria* concept, so there was a need for something like Borgo,” explained Melpignano, who is often on site, monitoring his 40-acre, 10-year-old paradise. “My desire was always to create a hub, to talk about Puglia and bring the best of Puglia in.”

You don’t so much vacation at Borgo as float, from the grand lobby with its soaring ceiling and spiral staircase to the subterranean spa and the pools—oh, the pools. There are three outdoors, and though we were relegated to the kids’ pool, we never felt like we were missing out. My husband and I took turns floating in its chilled salt water on an inflatable watermelon while sipping rosé, then splashing with our son, who told us that this was the best place he’d ever been in his life.

The resort invites you to live large, and on an Italian vacation, that usually

involves carbohydrates. For example, we had four pizzas at the hotel’s casual yet sophisticated Trattoria Mi Cucina. Please, don’t judge. Several Italians, real Italians, told me that the pizza at Borgo Egnazia was legit: earthy, light, and not overly sauced. They were right, and that’s why we could eat four of them.

One night, Melpignano took us to meet a friend, Clara D’Aprile, an evangelist for preserving Puglian tradition and culture. So much so that she has turned her trullo home near Alberobello into a living museum. Rooms are sparsely decorated with simple wooden furniture and religious iconography, as they would have been generations ago. She gave us all rosaries made from olive pits and toy horses made from acorns (you had to get creative before YouTube). Melpignano and D’Aprile told me they plan to build a museum, a repository for the old ways of Puglia, which are becoming increasingly endangered.

D’Aprile showed the three of us her backyard, where fairy lights illuminated a long table and another family of three (a mom and two daughters) were the other guests. They spoke no English, we spoke no Italian, but we spoke the universal language of liking good food. First: fried zucchini flowers. Then a *cialleda*, the salad made of stale bread, tomatoes, onions, and basil; then zucchini with fresh wild mint. We called it quits after our fennel liqueur, but Bobby had made friends with one of the girls, and they were off exploring. So there you have it: Mom and Dad’s shoulders were relaxed, and we were all once again awake at 11 p.m.—happy to be alive, and in Puglia. ♣

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