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TRAVEL LUXURY

Well Heeled: Puglia has an old soul, now it's getting fresh polish

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I first encountered Pugliese hospitality years ago while working as a journalist in Milan, where I had the great fortune to befriend a gaggle of twentysomething Apulians.

They plied me with pasta, wine and conversation, inviting me to visit their native region on the heel of Italy's boot. The area was still fairly sleepy in 2003. At the time, budget airlines were beginning to connect the region to European capitals, and the entrepreneurial Melpignano family had only recently pioneered luxury hospitality on the coast south of Bari, with the opening of Masseria San Domenico in 1996.

Returning last summer, I discovered a region just as welcoming, but notably more focused on upscale international visitors. Today, an abundance of excellent hotels dot the landscape, from the Borgo Egnazia resort opened by the Melpignanos in 2010 to "grande dame" masserie (renovated agricultural estates) like Masseria San Domenico and newer bella boutiques like Vista Ostuni and Palazzo Tafuri.

And the boom in the boot is far from over: In 2028, the Four Seasons opens its first property, and Rocco Forte Hotels will add its second.

Puglia's boosters laud development, saying it makes the region a year-round destination. They're not worried about overcrowding: Puglia spans nearly 7,500 square miles. Zoning regulations prohibit excessive construction and protect nature preserves on the Adriatic and Ionian coasts.

In Lecce, 50 miles south of Ostuni, the spirit of nonna guides La Fiermontina Luxury Home. Owned by siblings Yasmin Antonia and Fouad Giacomo Filali, the 19-room hotel honors their grandmother, Antonia Fiermonte. A Leccese beauty, Fiermonte was a muse to two Roman sculptors — she moved with them to Paris, married each in turn, and died, unexpectedly, at 42.



Those searching for sophisticated comfort in Lecce should visit the boutique La Fiermontina Luxury Home, where the hospitality is inspired by the owners' own nonna.

La Fiermontina

Her grandchildren never met her. First visiting Puglia in 2001, they marveled at Lecce's Baroque architecture, its Greek amphitheater and Norman fortress. Mr. Filali purchased a rundown 17th-century masseria as a vacation home. When excavation revealed that the basement was double the expected size, the siblings created the hotel.

"We realized that we had brought my grandmother back to her land, to reconstruct our relationship with her," Ms. Filali said.

Since its 2015 opening, La Fiermontina has elevated tourism in Puglia's Salento region (towns like Lecce, Otranto and Gallipoli). Filali says a "wonderful heritage" informs its generosity. "Jews, Turks, Greeks, French, and Spanish were all here. In the end, we all share this land," she said.

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