

Festive Ways To Enjoy Southern Italy This Winter

Experts reveal what to do and see in Puglia, Basilicata, and Sicily, where the holidays are celebrated with gusto; many hotels have off-season rates; and menus include once-a-year specialties.

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f Rome and Naples are among Italy's most popular holiday destinations, with thousands arriving in the Eternal City for seasonal events at the Vatican. Lively Christmas markets and Nativity displays are big draws for Naples. You can avoid some of the crowds and experience other rich, festive traditions if you head to various cities and towns in Italy's South, where Christmas is celebrated with decorative and culinary gusto; temperatures tend to be mild (with highs in the mid-50s °F); off-season rates at hotels are attractive; and menus abound with dishes and sweets often available only at this time of year.

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Here, experts reveal what to see and do in Puglia, Basilicata, and Sicily during the holidays. (Note the Christmas season typically runs from December 8 through January 6.)

PUGLIA

LECCE



Piazza Sant'Oronzio in Lecce during the holidays last year. (Photo by Manuel Romano/NurPhoto via Getty Images) NURPHOTO VIA GETTY IMAGES

The Baroque palazzi and churches of **Lecce**, splendidly lit at night, provide a majestic backdrop for all the city's end-of-year happenings. "Lecce, the capital of the Salento, is the custodian of art, rituals, and traditions linked to the most wonderful time of the year," says Giovanni Colonna, an official with ArtWork Culture, a group dedicated to showcasing the area's cultural heritage.

"In many churches [among them the Chiesa del Rosario, the Duomo, the Basilica of Santa Croce], it is Christmas year-round with scenes and altars dedicated to the Nativity." ArtWork offers tours, titled, "Christmas in Lecce," from December 21 to January 6, departing from the Palazzo Scarciglia.



An artisan decorates papier-mâché figures for a Nativity scene in Lecce. DE AGOSTINI VIA GETTY IMAGES

Lecce hosts several markets, like the Mercato di Santa Lucia, dating from the 1500s, which is renowned not only for its longevity but also for its artisan crafts (December 1-23). "The Santa Lucia Fair is reserved for papier-mâché artists, nativity scene designers, and puppeteers," says Colonna. This mercato is followed by another artisans' fair (December 27-January 6).

Those with a fondness for sweets can head to the annual Festa del Cioccolato, a multi-day event coinciding with the religious holiday, Immaculate Conception, on December 8. “The more classic Christmas market [runs] until the Epiphany,” says Colonna. “In Piazza Mazzini, there will be a skating rink and a toy fair.”



The Baroque Basilica di Santa Croce houses “The Adoration of the Shepherds,” says Giovanni Colonna of ArtWork Culture. DE AGOSTINI VIA GETTY IMAGES

A sleek holiday tree dominates the Piazza Sant’Oronzo throughout the season. Another high point is the “monumental nativity scene in the Piazza Duomo,” says Colonna.



Artisanal panettone at Zephyr Restaurant at La Fiermontina Luxury Home. A portion of the proceeds from the sales of the panettoni will be donated to charity. COURTESY OF LA FIERMONTINA FAMILY COLLECTION.

Dining: On December 24, it's typical to have a pasta with seafood or with *cime di rapa*, turnip greens; on Christmas Day it's often a lamb dish for the entrée. The local sweet to try is Pesce di Natale, a marzipan dessert shaped like a fish.



A suite at La Fiermontina Luxury Home. COURTESY OF LA FIERMONTINA FAMILY COLLECTION.

Lodging: For those seeking high-end options, there's the five-star [La Fiermontina Luxury Home](#), a restored masseria located in the *centro storico*. The intimate property has 16 rooms and three suites, with grounds that include an olive grove and the Fiermonte Museum, with art from the family collection (an ancestor, Antonia Fiermonte, was a prominent artist and muse to sculptors René Letourneur and Jacques Zwobada). Art lovers can even stay in one of the museum's four stylized suites. On New Year's Eve, the hotel's Zéphyr Restaurant will offer a special menu.