

# ... and the pleasures of PUGLIA



Andrea Nuzzo of SalentoTime

Paolo flirts outrageously with his wife behind the counter of his bar and eatery, just a whisper away from the ancient walls of historic Otranto.

He grins mischievously, sharing the moment with a local couple and other customers who were in on the joke from the start – they watch with amusement.

“E woulda not-a be ‘appier eef ‘e were-a a multi-millionaire,” remarks Andrea Nuzzo, my guide, with confidence brought by the knowledge of an immutable truth.

He explained. For six months of the year Paolo and his wife work very, very hard. With the guaranteed great weather of the southern heel of Italy, tourists keep the old fortified town bustling, and Paolo will be as busy as a blur throughout the summer. And of course they love their work and the constant flow of people.

For the rest of the time, the bar will

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still stay open, but Paolo will manage a good holiday with his family; regularly take his boat out fishing and he always enjoys the company of his friends.

Easy and sociable Paolo is absorbed with his life, revelling in it, and it is not hard to see why – one only needs to look around and soak up the atmosphere.

Otranto’s old heart is a busy maze of high-walled alleys, narrow streets and elegant squares. Because of its ‘exposure’ on the heel of Italy, history has blessed the area with a multi-cultural mixture which displays itself in a variety of ways.

Andrea’s passion for the area is deep. He has worked in the global travel business, lived in Albania and China and many places in between, but he has returned to his first love southern Puglia. He says the influences of Greek, Roman, Arab and Ottoman have left their mark, not just in the



grand mixture of architecture, but in everything, so as to create a uniqueness in Solentine people themselves.

One of the greatest aspects of this, claims Andrea, is a broad tolerance among the local people to foreigners. They are friendly and welcoming and would regard it as their pleasure to help you.

Certainly this was my experience. I have been visiting Puglia for the past eight years or so, and, without criticising the popular north too much, have told many of my belief that the people in southern Italy are far more friendly. Andrea takes in a step further than that, to one beyond tolerance, to one of warmth, openness and generosity of spirit.

I don’t and would not want to argue. Paolo, and everyone else that I met, exuded this in abundance.

We spent a wonderful evening in a restaurant that tantalized us with its completely amazing range of anti-pasti, and stayed at a very tasteful farmhouse courtyard conversion. The property, which houses a number of suites of rooms, has been renovated and refurbished to a high standard, and is one of many that Andrea manages. I do love under-floor heating!

The next morning, the main town of Lecce, itself an architectural treasure with its marvellous balconies, buttresses and balustrades awaited me. Chic and elegant, and a shopper’s delight, it also boasts some marvellous, very good value places to eat and drink. And right in the centre is the excavation of a Roman amphitheatre.

There was plenty to investigate, but we left and headed for the village of Vignacastri. There is

nothing amazing about the village - it is a typical rural community, except that here history is being reversed.

In recent times in communities such as this, the more wealthy have headed off to the main cities to make their fortunes grow, but have left behind some marvellous old buildings, which frankly, have fallen into a very poor state of repair.

In the middle of the village of Vignacastri, Andrea’s business partner Sergio has bought the palazzo opposite the town’s main church. In the process of renovation, it will transform into something of its former glory. It will be a very high class bed and breakfast, and also be used for a wide range of speciality themed breaks and courses, ranging from Italian cookery classes to cultural appreciation. What a place to experience that? If you can’t cope...one could just spend time, reading and wandering around the orangery out the back!

Moving on to a jewel in the coastline, we visited the little port of Castro Marina and above it, Castro Alta. Many visit and enjoy Castro Marina, because, of course it is beautiful, but they would be missing so much if they ignored Castro Alta. Towering above the marina, it dominates the headland, but you have to go there. In its centre there are two squares that you have to see. The first provides the most spectacular panoramic views along the coast to the north. On the far side is a great bar where they can offer something to help you soak it all up. On the opposite side of the square the men congregate at certain times of the day to meet and talk about everything important to them.

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