



The Best of Bari

by Lucy Gordan | Travel |

During the past few years Puglia has become one of Italy's touristic hotspots thanks to its delicious food, wines, and olive oil, multi-culture history (Greek, Roman, and Swabian), folk traditions like the *pizzica* (a frenzied local dance), beautiful white sandy beaches, and the fact that it's still off-the-beaten-track so the "real Italy" with friendly genuine people and affordable accommodations, the most typical of which are called *masserie* or farmhouses which welcome guests. Magazines often call it "Italy's Second Tuscany" but without the crowds.

Except for Lecce with its magnificent Baroque architecture and papier-mâché artifacts that you can watch being made, Puglia is better known for its scenery and lovely white-washed towns like Alberobello, Ostuni, Martina Franca, Locorotondo, and Gallipoli, than for its cities. However, with Pope Francis' visit on July 7 and six large cruise ships docking here each week Bari, Puglia's capital city and southern Italy's most important commercial center after Naples, is getting more press and tourists.

In brief, ancient Roman Barium was simply a commercial center, but became the regional capital under the Saracens in 847, and was subsequently the seat of the *catapan*, the Byzantine governor of southern Italy. Under the Normans, to whom it fell in 1071, it became a significant maritime center rivaling Venice. Here's why and when you should go?



The Basilica of St. Nicholas

The Basilica of St. Nicholas is Bari's most important touristic and pilgrimage sight. It's located in Bari's Old Town (*Barivecchia*) or medieval center, the location of several other sights. The Old Town is located on a peninsula stretching out into the Adriatic between the city's two harbors.

St. Nicholas is worshiped in more places in the world and by more people than any other saint. Only the Virgin Mary counts more worshipers. He's venerated by Western Catholics, Eastern and Oriental Orthodox, Anglicans, Lutherans, Baptists, and Methodists. Because of the many miracles attributed to his intercession, he's known as "Nikolaos the Wonderworker". He's also the patron saint of children, coopers, sailors, fishermen, merchants, broadcasters, the falsely accused, repentant thieves, brewers, pharmacists, archers, pawnbrokers, virgins, students, and of the Duchy of Lorraine, Russia, and Greece, as well as of Aberdeen, Galway, Liverpool, Siġġiewi, Amsterdam, Moscow and of course Bari.

Wikipedia tells us that in his youth St. Nicholas "made a pilgrimage to Egypt and Palestine. Shortly after his return he became Bishop of Myra and was later cast into prison during the persecution of Diocletian. He was released after the accession of Constantine and was present at the Council of Nicaea." He died at Myra on December 6 (one of his feast days), 343" according to the Gregorian Calendar and on December 19th according to the Julian calendar. Both dates are celebrated with great solemnity in Bari as are the dates of the Saint's translation from Myra to Bari, May 9 for Western Christians and May 22 for the Russian Orthodox.

According to Western Christian tradition, after the Battle of Manzikert in 1071, Myra, a popular place of pilgrimage because of the Saint's tomb, was overtaken by the Turks, so taking advantage of the confusion, some 62 merchants from Bari seized part of the saint's remains and brought them for safe-keeping to Bari where they arrived on May 9.



The crypt of The Basilica
of St. Nicholas

Again Wikipedia reports: "There are numerous variations of this account. In some versions those taking the relics are characterized as thieves or pirates, in others they are said to have taken them in response to a vision wherein Saint Nicholas himself had commanded that his relics be moved in order to preserve them from the impending Muslim conquest." Another justifying legend is that once the saint passing by Bari on his way to Rome, had chosen Bari, not Myra, as his burial place.

Almost for certain the sailors from Bari collected just half of St. Nicholas' skeleton. During the First Crusade (1096-99) Venetian sailors collected the rest. Two scientific investigations in 2014 confirmed that the relics in both cities belong to the same skeleton.

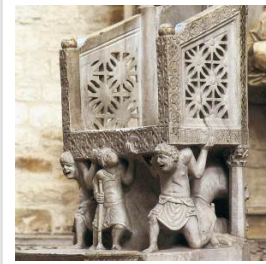
Bari's Basilica of St. Nicholas was built between 1087 and 1197 when the edifice was

officially consecrated and Elias, abbot of the nearby monastery of St. Benedict, was named its first archbishop. His *Cathedra* (bishop's throne), one of the most noteworthy marble Romanesque sculptures in southern Italy, still stands in the Basilica.



Isabella of Aragon

Besides St. Nicholas tomb in the crypt, that of two remarkable international ladies, mother and daughter, unhappily-married intellectual Isabella of Aragon (1470-1527), who became the Duchess of Bari in 1500 and Bona Sforza (1494-1557), the energetic, ambitious and hot-tempered second wife of Sigismund I the Old, King of Poland and Grand Duke of Lithuania, who 8 years after her husband's death returned, like her mother had, to her beloved Bari where she was poisoned, is behind the



Cathedra of Bishop Elias

Basilica's high altar. It was commissioned by Anna (1525-1596), the 4th of Bona's six children, Queen of Poland and Duke of Lithuania in her own right.

Across the Square from the left side of the Basilica's apse is the Basilica's Museum which houses a collection of lamps, chalices, liturgical instruments and vestments, crosses, icons, and

votive offerings given by prelates and Russian princes and pilgrims since the mid-19th century. A section of one of the rooms houses Bohemian glass *ampullae* for manna, many of which are decorated with scenes of St. Nicholas' life. Downtown on *Via Dottula* in the Bishop's Palace there's a museum of sacred art.

Home to 26 other churches, the Old Town's a labyrinth of narrow picturesque winding cobblestone streets and small piazzas. It counts two important piazzas. Through *Piazza Ferrarese*, named for Stefano Fabri or Fabbro, a merchant from Ferrara who settled in



Bona Sforza

Bari during the 17th century, is a good way to enter the Old Town. Lined with restaurants today, recent urban renewal uncovered a short stretch of the *Via Traiana*, an extension from Benevento to Brindisi of the *Via Appia* built by the Emperor Trajan in 109 AD. From here it's a very short walk to the *Piazza Mercantile*, which houses the *Palazzo Sedile* (Palace of the Seat), once the city hall. On its facade is an enormous clock, which strikes not only the hours, but also the quarter-hours. Nearby on a podium is the Column of Justice or of Shame with its ancient Roman lion. Debtors, adulterers, thieves, and other criminals were stripped and for punishment made to sit ass-up on the lion and with their hands chained to the column.



San Sabino, Bari's Cathedral

Only a short walk from the Basilica of St. Nicholas is the late 12th century *Duomo* or Cathedral. Its Romanesque architecture is based on St. Nicholas, but with a dome and one surviving tower (the other tower collapsed during an earthquake in 1613). The magnificent crypt with mosaic floors houses the icon of the Madonna *Odegitria* and the remains of St. Sabinus (461-566), a friend of St. Benedict, whom he visited in Montecassino and Bari's original patron saint.



The icon of the Madonna Odegitria

Nearby is the Hohenstaufen Castle. Probably built in 1132 by the Norman King Roger II,

it was destroyed in 1156 by King William of Sicily, and rebuilt and reinforced by the Holy Roman emperor Frederick II with a moat on three sides and the sea on the fourth. Isabella II of Aragon and her daughter Bona Sforza both lived here during the 16th century. Today the Castle is used for temporary art exhibitions.



Bari's Castle

Wikipedia recounts: "According to tradition, in 1221 Emperor Frederick II met St. Francis of Assisi in this castle. Supposedly the Emperor had a courtesan sent to Francis' room and watched through the peephole to see what would happen. When Francis sent the woman away, Frederick was impressed with his principles; the two spent the rest of the night in conversation."

I have been on underground walks in New York (under St. Patrick's Cathedral), in Orvieto and in Naples, and Bari's starts here at the Castle. It touches on over 1,200 years of history for what remains of Roman *Barium* today is underground. Moreover, all of Bari's medieval buildings in the Old Town were built on top of Roman and then of Byzantine buildings incorporating ancient Roman building materials. From under the Castle, which was built on remains of a Byzantine houses built on the remains of a Roman fort, the walk continues to the crypt of San Sabino, which houses a pagan altar; a magnificent mosaic floor with an inscription thanking its benefactor, once in the entrance of a 5th century Christian church; and Byzantine wells. The walk ends below 16th-century *Palazzo Simi* where there are the remains of a Byzantine church and a medieval fireplace. Today *Palazzo Simi* houses the administrative headquarters of Bari's archeological artifacts. Sadly *Bari Sotterranea* (Underground Bari) is not well publicized. Not held everyday and only for a minimum of 10 participants, this splendid 2-hour tour must be booked in advance from www.eventidautore.it or by phoning: +39-340-9546476. Tickets cost 16 euros or 10 for students. English is possible.



Bari Sottoterranea's mosaic floor

Bari Sottoterranea was even more enjoyable because beforehand I'd visited the Old Town above on foot on a most enjoyable 3-hour Street Food Tour, where we (six participants) sampled local pizza, olives, cheese, prosciutto, wine, and homemade gelato. Our guide Francesco also took us to the modest home of a family where we sampled homemade *orecchiette* (ear-shaped pasta), probably Puglia's most famous dish, in several different sauces, tomato and pepperoncino, with turnip tops and sausage, and with mussels. Thanks to www.veloservice.org it's possible to do the same tour by bike, rickshaw, and Segway or choose from a list of other tours in the Bari area: Castel del Monte, Alberobello, and Matera, this year's capital of European Culture. All their tours leave from *Strada Vallisa*, an easy-to-find narrow street just off *Piazza Ferrarese*. *Veloservice* also organizes cooking and pasta-making classes.



Lady making orecchiette in Barivecchia

Born-to shoppers should be grateful to Napoleon's brother-in-law Joachim Murat. As King of Naples, he ordered the building in 1808 of a new section of Bari, laid out on a rationalist grid plan, which bears his name as the *Murattino*. One of these streets, *Via Sparano*, is a pedestrian lined with elegant designer boutiques and jewelry stores.



Joachim Murat

A fourth and romantic walk, which also needs no guide or guidebook, runs about three quarters of a mile along the picturesque fishing port on *Lungomare Nazario Sauro*, Sauro was a World War I hero). Just beyond a permanent Ferris wheel (well-worth a ride for its views of the city) is the sadly under-visited Bari Provincial Art Gallery. It houses splendid collections of paintings, from the Renaissance to the present, including works by Veronese, Bellini, and Tintoretto, of ceramics, of Neapolitan terracotta crèche figures, and of clothing.



Bari's Provincial Art Gallery

A block away is Bari's only five-star newly-renovated hotel, *Grande Albergo delle Nazioni*. Its excellent rooftop restaurant "La Terrazza" offers an outstanding menu of pasta and seafood dishes.

Puglia is renowned for its food and wine. Typical dishes in Bari include *orecchiette alle cime di rape e salsiccia* (orecchiette with turnip tops and sausage), a *tiella* or casserole of rice baked with potatoes and mussels, *burrata* (a soft white cheese more gooey than mozzarella), and *panzarotti* (a savory turnover stuffed with tomato and mozzarella or mushrooms, or onions, anchovy, and caper fillings), and of course fresh seafood.

Downtown Bari counts no Michelin starred restaurants, but five have been awarded Michelin plates: “*La Bul*”, “*Ai 2 Ghiottoni*”, “*Osteria delle Travi’Il Buco*”, “*Biancofiore*”, and “*La Pignata*” with two others in the city’s outskirts “*La Taberna*” and “*Da Nicola*”. I also recommend “*Terranima*”, “*La Battigia*” and most of all “*Al Pescatore*” for its sea urchin



A casserole of rice, potatoes, and mussels



Panzarotti

dishes and seafood antipasto. For unbeatable local snacks head straight for reasonably-priced, informal “*Tiella*”. Just across a side street, it’s especially convenient before or after an opera or ballet performance at the magnificent *Teatro Petruzzelli*, burnt down by arsonists during the night October 26/7, 1991 and reopened after restoration in 2009.

Inaugurated on February 14, 1903 with Meyerbeer’s *Les Huguenots*, *Teatro Petruzzelli* is Italy’s fourth largest theater and it’s worth a trip to Bari to see a performance there. If your dates don’t coincide, be sure to book a tour when you’re in town.



Teatro Petruzzelli

Another reason to come to Bari is for Bif&st, the annual film festival held at the end of April. Its splendid program for movie lovers includes a Oscar-like competition for new

films from all over the world, remakes of old films, master classes, press conferences by that year's contestants of actors and directors, symposiums on film-related subjects, and lectures by film producers and directors. Some are held at the *Teatro Petruzzelli*. At Bif&st 2019, April 27-May 4, the festival will celebrate its 10th anniversary. Buy your tickets on line by clicking on Bif&st.

Still another reason to come to Bari is to participate in the St. Nicholas celebrations on December 6th and from May 7th to 9th. In particular on May 8th, the anniversary of the arrival of his relics in Bari, the relics are carried in procession through the Old Town and, after a 2-hour mass, put on a boat out to sea in front of the city only returning after

sundown for an evening of festivities and fireworks.



Sadly the destruction of the *Teatro Petruzzelli* was not the darkest night in Bari's modern history. That little known disaster (even living in Italy

for almost 50 years I had never heard about it until my trip to Bari for Bif&st 2018) dates to December 2, 1943.

Wikipedia recounts: "105 German Ju 88 Junker bombers

attacked the port of Bari, which was a key supply center

for Allied forces fighting their way up the Italian peninsula. Over 20 allied ships were

sunk in the overcrowded harbor, including the U.S. Liberty Ship John Harvey, which was

carrying mustard gas; mustard gas was also reported to have been stacked on the

quayside awaiting transport (the chemical agent was intended for retaliation in case

German forces initiated chemical warfare.) The presence of the gas was highly classified

and the U.S. had not informed the British military authorities in the city of its existence.

This increased the number of fatalities, since British physicians—who had no idea that

they were dealing with the effects of mustard gas[burns and blindness]-prescribed

treatment for those suffering from exposure and immersion, which proved fatal in many

cases. Because rescuers were unaware they were dealing with gas casualties, many

additional casualties were caused among the rescuers through contact with the

contaminated skin and clothing of those more directly exposed to the gas...On the orders

of Franklin D. Roosevelt, Winston Churchill and Eisenhower, records were destroyed and

the whole affair was [shamelessly] kept secret for many years after the war. The U.S.

records of the attack were declassified in 1959, but the episode remained obscure until

1967, when the writer Glenn B. Infield exposed the story in his book *Disaster at Bari*.

Additionally, there is considerable dispute as to the exact number of fatalities. In one

account: [S]ixty-nine deaths were attributed in whole or in part to the mustard gas, most

of them American merchant seamen. Others put the count as high as "more than one

thousand Allied servicemen and more than one thousand Italian civilians." This tragic



Little Pearl Harbor

incident, nicknamed “Europe’s Pearl Harbor”, gained Bari the unwelcome distinction of being the only European city to experience chemical warfare during World War II.

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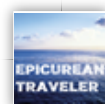
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