

Matera's paleolithic past has made it a thriving tourist destination: It is competing with cities like Siena and Ravenna to be the European Capital of Culture 2019.

The Cave Dwellers

Once the "shame of Italy," the ancient warren of natural caves in Matera may be Europe's most dramatic story of rebirth

by Tony Perrottet



You know that travelers' tastes have come full circle

When hotel guests are clamoring to live like troglodytes. In the southern Italian town of Matera, I followed a sinuous laneway down into a haunting district known as the Sassi (Italian for the “stones”), where some 1,500 cave dwellings honeycomb the flanks of a steep ravine. First occupied in the Paleolithic Age, the myriad natural caves were gradually burrowed deeper and expanded into living spaces by peasants and artisans throughout the classical and medieval eras. Today, these underground residences are being reinhabited by Italians, and staying in one of the Sassi's cave hotels has become one of Europe's most exotic new experiences.

Near a summit of stone crowned by an iron crucifix is a cave complex called Corte San Pietro, where the owner, Fernando Ponte, greeted me in a fine silk suit and cravat. (Being a troglodyte, as locals cheerfully refer to themselves—the word's literal meaning is “cave dweller”—evidently doesn't preclude being stylish.) Ponte opened the

smoked-glass door to what was to be my own rock-hewn refuge, one of five rooms dug into the soft limestone off a small courtyard. Elegant designer lighting suffused the raw stone walls, which were adorned with contemporary artworks and a flat-screen TV. A sleek stone bath was embedded in the cave's farthest corner. Naturally, my cave was Wi-Fi enabled. Whenever I brushed against the golden walls, a gentle shower of sand fell onto the polished stone floor.

It's difficult to imagine that Matera's ancient warren was known not too long ago as “the shame of Italy” for its dismal poverty. In the 1950s, the entire population of roughly 16,000 people, mostly peasants and farmers, were relocated from the Sassi to new housing projects in an ill-conceived government program, leaving it an empty shell. Ponte, who grew up in the modern part of Matera, which sprawls along the Piano (the “flat”) above the ravine, was one of the first to take advantage of this ready-made real estate. He moved nearby with his wife around 1990, and has been renovating the compact complex, with five cave-rooms and a dining hall around a courtyard, ever since, installing plumbing, electricity, heating and ventilation systems to counter the subterranean humidity. “My wife's family was violently against us living here,” he said. “Back then, the



Sassi had been abandoned, virtually given over to wolves.”

Working on their caves—which gives new meaning to the term “fixer-upper”—the Pontes discovered eight interconnected cisterns below the floor, part of a network developed to catch rainwater for drinking. “We had no idea these were here until we started,” he said, as we walked inside the now-immaculate cone-shaped spaces. “They had been filled with debris.” The cisterns are now being turned into a “soul spa” for meditation.

“You don't think of a cave being complex architecturally,” says American architect Anne Toxey, author of *Materan Contradictions*, who has been studying the Sassi for over 20 years. “But I was blown away by their intricate struc-

tures.” The most elaborate stonework dates from the Renaissance, when many caves were adorned with new facades, or had their ceilings extended to make vaulted rooms. Today, carved stone stairways still connect arches, attics, belfries and balconies, each grafted onto the other like a dynamic Cubist sculpture. Hidden behind iron grilles are rock-hewn churches, created by Byzantine monks, with splendidly frescoed interiors. On the opposite side of the ravine, on a plateau called the Murgia, more mysterious caves stare back like vacant eyes.

It's easy to see why Matera has been chosen to double for ancient Jerusalem in films, including Pier Paolo Pasolini's *The Gospel According to St. Matthew* and Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ*. “Matera is one of the oldest living cities in the world in terms of continuity,” Antonio Nicoletti, an urban planner from Matera, told me. “You can find older cities in Mesopotamia, but they have not been occupied in modern times. Where else can you now sleep in a room that was first occupied 9,000 years ago?” Estimates of the earliest occupation of the site vary, but archaeologists have found artifacts in local caves dating to the Neolithic period and even earlier.

At the same time, the modern repurposing of the Sassi's historic interiors has been endlessly inventive.

Along with cave hotels, there are now cave restaurants, cave cafés, cave galleries and cave clubs. There is an underground swimming pool, evoking an ancient Roman *thermae*, with lights creating hypnotic water patterns on the ceiling, and a contemporary art museum, MUSMA, with its own underground network, highlighting—what else?—sculpture. One cave complex is occupied by a computer software company with nearly 50 employees. Visitors to Matera can follow metal walkways through an enormous 16th-century cistern complex under the main plaza, with chambers some 50 feet deep and 240 feet long, which were discovered in 1991 and explored by scuba divers.

“The Sassi are like a Swiss cheese, riddled with tunnels and caverns,” remarks Peppino Mitarotonda, an artist who works on renovations with a local cultural group, the Zétema Foundation. “What you see on the surface is only 30 percent. The other 70 percent is hidden.”

In southern Italy, the past has often helped rescue the present. Ever since the excavation of Pompeii brought grand tours to Naples in the 18th century, historical sites have lured foreign travelers to impoverished outposts. But Matera may be Europe's most radical rags-to-riches story. Located in the instep of the Italian boot, the town has always been an isolated, forgotten part of Basilicata, among the least populated, least visited and least understood regions of Italy. Even in the 19th century, few travelers ventured through its arid, desolate landscapes, which were known to be full of *briganti*, or brigands. The rare adventurers who did stumble upon Matera were mystified by the upside-down world of the Sassi, where, at their peak, 16,000 people lived one above the other, with *palazzi* and chapels mixed in among cave houses, and where cemeteries were actually built above the church roofs.

Matera's obscurity ended in 1945, when the Italian artist and author Carlo Levi published his memoir *Christ Stopped at Eboli*, about his year

of political exile in Basilicata under the Fascists. Levi painted a vivid portrait of a forgotten rural world that had, since the unification of Italy in 1870, sunk into a desperate poverty. The book's title, referring to the town of Eboli near Naples, suggested that Christianity and civilization had never reached the deep south, leaving it a pagan, lawless land, riddled with ancient superstitions, where some shepherds were still believed to commune with wolves. Levi singled out the Sassi for their “tragic beauty” and hallucinogenic aura of decay—“like a schoolboy's idea of Dante's *Inferno*,” he wrote. The town's prehistoric cave dwellings had by then become “dark holes” riddled with filth and disease, where barnyard animals were kept in dank corners,



Valley Authority in the 1930s. The new public houses were designed by Italy's most avant-garde architects, in a misguided utopian vision that would actually isolate families in dismal, claustrophobic boxes.

“In the next few years, the Sassi were emptied,” says Nicoletti. “It became a city of ghosts.” Some Materan officials suggested that the whole district be walled up and forgotten. Instead, the ancient laneways became overgrown and decrepit, and the Sassi soon gained a reputation for crime, attracting drug dealers, thieves and smugglers. At the same time, the Sassi's former inhabitants had difficulty adjusting to their new lodgings.

Many relocated families pretended they came from other parts of south-

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A child plays on tin can stilts in one of Matera's troglodyte villages in 1948. A government program later relocated the villagers to new housing projects.

chickens ran across the dining room tables, and infant mortality rates were horrendous, thanks to rampant malaria, trachoma and dysentery.

Levi's book caused an uproar in postwar Italy, and the Sassi became notorious as *la vergogna nazionale*, the disgrace of the nation. After a visit in 1950, Italian Prime Minister Alcide De Gasperi was so appalled that he set in motion a draconian plan to relocate the Sassi's entire population to new housing developments. Italy was flush with funds from the Marshall Plan, and American experts such as Friedrich Friedmann, a philosophy professor at the University of Arkansas, arrived with Italian academics who had studied the mass rural relocation programs of the Tennessee

ern Italy. The planner Antonio Nicoletti was puzzled that his own father, Domenico, had never visited the Sassi since his family was moved in 1956, when Domenico was 20—even though his new home was less than half a mile away. I asked if his father might now consider revisiting his ancestral residence. A couple of days later, I got my answer. Signor Nicoletti would try to find his old home, accompanied by both his sons and two of his grandchildren.

It felt like an Italian version of “This Is Your Life” as we gathered in a café at the top of the Sassi. It was a Sunday, and the extended family was fresh from church service, crisply dressed and chatting excitedly over potent espressos. They deferred politely to

the patriarch, Domenico, now 78, a tiny, subdued man in an immaculate three-piece gray suit and brush of silver hair. As we all descended the slippery steps, a fine drizzle shrouded the stone laneways in a haunting mist, and Signor Nicoletti gazed around the Sassi with increasing agitation. He suddenly stopped next to a fractured staircase: “There used to be a well here, where I’d get the water as a little boy,” he said, visibly shaken. “I once tripped and cut my leg here. I still have the scar.” A few paces later, he pointed down to what looked like a hobbit’s house, built below ground level and opening onto a small courtyard beneath the stairs. “That was our home.”

He pretended to clean his glasses as tears welled up in his eyes.

Composing himself, Signor Nicoletti said, “Of course, without running water or electricity, life was very tough here. The women did all the hard work, *con coraggio*, with courage. But the beauty of it was the community. We knew every family.”

“My father has some very black memories of the Sassi,” Antonio added. “But he also has a nostalgia for its social life. People lived outside in their *vicinato*, or courtyard, which was like a tiny piazza. There would be children playing, men gossiping, women shelling peas with their neighbors. They helped each other in every difficulty.” This traditional life drew photographers like Henri Cartier-Bresson in the 1950s, who captured images, despite the poverty, of a mythic Italy—of priests with black caps riding donkeys through stone alleyways, archways festooned with laundry on lines, women in embroidered dresses lined up with leather buckets at the communal wells. “But when they moved, that community simply disintegrated.”

As we talked, a young woman peered at us through the small window of the cave house. She explained that she had leased it from the city a decade ago, and offered to let us visit. The rough walls were now whitewashed with lime to seal the rock, but the layout was unchanged. Signor Nicoletti showed where he and his three sisters once slept on straw mattresses separated

by curtains, and he found the spot in the kitchen where his mother had built a false wall to hide valuables from the Nazis, including his sisters’ linen dowries. (One of his earliest memories was his father’s return to Matera after migrating to Germany to become a laborer. The family had had no news of him for two years. “I ran up to hug him and nearly knocked him over!”)

Later, as we dried out in a warm café, Signor Nicoletti said that he had been glad to see his old home again, but was in no hurry to go back. “I had three brothers who all died there as infants,” he said. “When there was a chance to escape, I took it.”

“My father didn’t tell me about his lost brothers until I was 18,” Antonio confided. “To me, it was shocking: I



might have had three uncles! But he didn’t think it was news. He said, “They died from hunger, malaria, I don’t want to remember.”

In the late 1950s, as the Sassi’s last inhabitants were being evacuated from their houses, about two dozen Materan students, who had grown up in the more modern, affluent world of the Piano, decided to rebel against their city’s notoriety. “We asked ourselves a simple question: Who are we?” recalls one of the leaders, Raffaello De Ruggieri, today. “Are we the children of misery and poverty, as the government was telling us, or are we the descendants of a long, proud history?”

I met De Ruggieri, now a retired law-

yer in his 70s, relaxing with his wife on the garden terrace of their renovated mansion in the Sassi, eating cherries in the sunshine. In 1959, at age 23, De Ruggieri and his older brother founded a cultural club to salvage Matera’s past, called the *Circolo la Scaletta*, the Circle of Stairs. “We were a tight group of friends, men and women, medical students, law students, housewives—and not a single trained archaeologist among us.” The members began exploring the desolate Sassi, which were by then becoming overgrown and dangerous, and realized that the cave dwellings’ reputation was misleading. “Obviously, there was a truth there, the houses were unhealthy, conditions were terrible. But why did the government focus on the failures of the last 100 years,

“Without running water or electricity, life was very tough here... But the beauty of it was the community. We knew every family.”

Casa Cava (top right) hosts concerts and cultural events; excavations unearth ancient artifacts (left). Domenico Nicoletti returns to his childhood home along with his son and grandson (bottom right).

and forget that the Sassi had thrived for the previous 9,000?” De Ruggieri asks. “The only real problem of the Sassi was economic: It was poverty that was making the Sassi unhealthy.”

Much of the unique architecture, the group discovered, could easily be saved. “Only 35 percent of the cave residences had been declared dangerous,” De Ruggieri says, “but 100 percent of them were evacuated.” The abandoned architectural treasures included many *rupestrian*, or rock-hewn, churches, covered with priceless Byzantine frescoes. Over the years, the group identified over 150 cave churches, some of which had been turned into stables by shepherds with their flocks, including one majestic Byzantine-era





Inside one of Matera's *rupestrian churches*, frescoes from the ninth century A.D. on the walls of the Crypt of Original Sin depict scenes from the Old and New Testaments.

cavern now known as the Crypt of Original Sin, which has been dubbed the Sistine Chapel of rupestrian art.

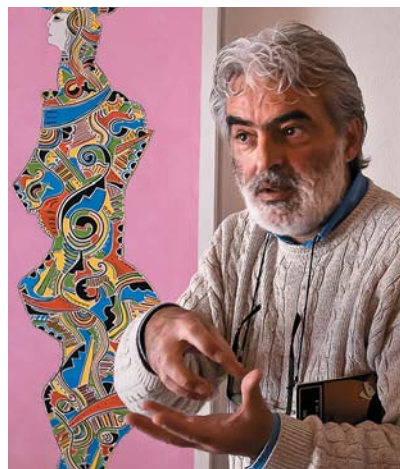
Many of the frescoes were painted by anonymous, self-taught monks. In the church of Madonna delle Tre Porte, images of the Virgin Mary date back to the 15th century A.D. and are executed in an informal style, Michele Zasa, a guide at the Murgia plateau, explained: "You can see that his Madonnas are not queen-like figures or remote, heavenly virgins typical in Byzantine art, but fresh-faced and open, like our own country girls."

La Scaletta published its own book on the cave churches in 1966, and began lobbying for conservation funds, supported by the writer Carlo Levi, now a senator, who declared the Sassi to be an architectural treasure "on a par with the Grand Canal of Venice." In the late 1970s, De Ruggieri purchased a ruined mansion on the fringe of the Sassi—"for the price of a cappuccino!" he jokes—and began restoring it, despite fears that it was dangerous. At the same time, adventurous local artists began to drift into abandoned buildings. Donato Rizzi, a painter, recalls discovering the Sassi as a teenager. "I just wanted a place to sneak off for a cigarette with my friends," he said. "But I was overwhelmed by what I found! Imagine Paleolithic people coming here to find these caves near fresh water, flowers, wild game," he told me from the terrace of his gallery in the Sassi, which has a panoramic view. "It must have been like finding a five-star hotel, without the padrone!" He and friends first moved in as squatters in the 1970s, and today, the complex, abstract shapes of the Sassi are echoed in his paintings.

The tide began to turn in the 1980s. "The young adventurers of our club had become part of the political class, with lawyers, businessmen, even two mayors among our number," said De Ruggieri. "We all had different politics, but we shared the goal of restoring the Sassi." They organized volunteer garbage collectors to shovel out cisterns

filled with debris and churches scattered with used hypodermic needles. The first government archaeologists arrived in the early 1980s. A few years later, an Italian law La Scaletta lobbied for passed, providing protection and funding. In 1993, Unesco listed the Sassi as a World Heritage site, calling it "the most outstanding, intact example of a troglodyte settlement in the Mediterranean region, perfectly adapted to its terrain and ecosystem."

The first cave hotels opened soon after, and city authorities began offering 30-year leases at nominal cost to tenants who agreed to renovate the caves, under the supervision of conservation experts. "The paradox is that 'historical preservation' can generate so much change," says architect Toxey. "Rather



they never had a golden age. The Renaissance, the Enlightenment, the Industrial Revolution—they all passed Matera by. There was nothing but poverty and exploitation. So today, there is no knee-jerk resistance to new ideas."

Despite Matera's sudden upscale swing, the homespun eccentricity that marked the revival of the Sassi has persisted. The caves do not attract big hotel chains but enterprising individuals like the Pontes, who like to spend time with their guests in the old vicinato, chatting over an aperitif. Visits tend to be arranged by word of mouth. Access to many rock-hewn churches is arranged through friends of friends, depending on who has the key.

And the ancient rural culture is surprisingly resilient. The new cave restau-

"Imagine Paleolithic people coming here to find these caves near fresh water, flowers, wild game."

Painter Donato Rizzi (left) first lived in the Sassi as a squatter in the 1970s. A cheesemaker perfects his ricotta (top right). The ancient town grew on the slope of a ravine (bottom right).

than being put in mothballs, the Sassi are becoming dramatically different to what they once were. It's a form of gentrification, but it doesn't quite fit the model, since the Sassi were already empty, and nobody is being displaced." Today, around 3,000 people live in the Sassi and about half of the dwellings are occupied, with Matera firmly on southern Italy's tourist circuit. "It's like a gold rush here," Zasa, the guide, says with a laugh.

"Matera is a model for making use of the past without being overwhelmed by it," says American-born novelist Elizabeth Jennings, who has lived here for 15 years. "In other Italian cities like Florence, history is a black hole that sucks everything into it, and makes any innovation difficult. Here,

rants in the Sassi offer modern takes on Matera's (now fashionably simple) peasant cuisine: plump orecchiette, ear-shaped pasta, tossed with broccoli rabe, chili and breadcrumbs; a rich bean soup called *crapciata*; and *maiale nero*, salami made from "dark pig" and fennel. And with a little effort, it is still possible for travelers to slip back in time.

One afternoon, I followed a trail that left the Sassi into the wild ravine and connected to paths once used by pagan shepherds. When I spotted the stone facade of a church in the wilderness, it looked like a mirage: Etched into the raw flanks of a cliff, it could only be reached by scrambling across pebbles as slippery as ball bearings. In the icy interior, light filtering through a collapse in the ceiling revealed the faded re-



See more of Francesco Lastrucci's photographs at Smithsonian.com/matera

mains of frescoes on the scarred walls.

Afterward, scrambling up the Murgia plateau, I heard the distant tinkle of bells. A leather-skinned shepherd wielding a wooden crook was driving podolico cattle to pasture with a phalanx of dogs. Introducing himself as Giovanni, he led me to a stone house, where one of his friends, a sun-parched farmer named Piero, was making cheese. Balls of his prized caciovallo podolico hung from the rafters, and a small dog darted about the disordered room yapping at our ankles. Piero was boiling ricotta in a vat and stirring it with a cudgel the length of a gondola's pole. As the ripe cloud of steam hung in the room, he scooped out a scalding sample and offered it to me.

"Mangia! Mangia!" he insisted. It was delicate, closer to cream than cheese.

"Yesterday's ricotta is tomorrow's butter," Piero said, as if it were an alchemist's secret.

The pioneers of Circolo la Scaletta, now in their 70s, are handing over the reins to a younger generation of Italian preservationists. "Twenty years ago, we were the only ones who were interested in the Sassi," says artist Mitrottonda. "But now the circle is wider. We've achieved our goal." The biggest challenge, he says, is to ensure that the Sassi develop as a living community rather than a tourist enclave. "This can't just be a place where culture is consumed," says De Ruggieri. "Then it's just a museum." Access to schools, hospitals and stores of the Piano remains difficult and there are bitter disputes over whether car traffic should be allowed on the Sassi's only road.

On my last day, I was strolling with Antonio Nicoletti when we met a group of old men in workers' caps taking the air in the plaza. At the slightest prompting, they took turns regaling us with their childhood memories of "troglodyte life" in the Sassi, including how to wash laundry using ash and how many goats they could squeeze into their homes.

"Before the revival, people who grew up in the Sassi would pretend they came from somewhere else," Nicoletti mused, as we strolled away. "Now they're celebrities." ○

The Museo Nazionale Domenico Ridola houses local artifacts, including many from the age of Magna Graecia, when Greeks settled in the area some 2,500 years ago.

