

READY TO ROCK?

Many of the plush pads in southern Italy are hewn from rocks, reports Nicola Venning

MATERA, a beautiful medieval city in Basilicata, on the instep of southern Italy, is fast becoming a rival to nearby Puglia.

With a memorable landscape and renowned for its ancient caves or *sassi*, Matera is an ideal spot for film-makers and tourists alike.

Over the years, these caves, hewn from the hillside, have enticed directors seeking dramatic historic locations, from the latest Bond movie, *Quantum Of Solace*, to Mel Gibson's *The Passion Of The Christ*. Francis Ford Coppola is so taken by the area, he's converting a 19th-century *palazzo* into a hotel in Bernalda, close to Matera.

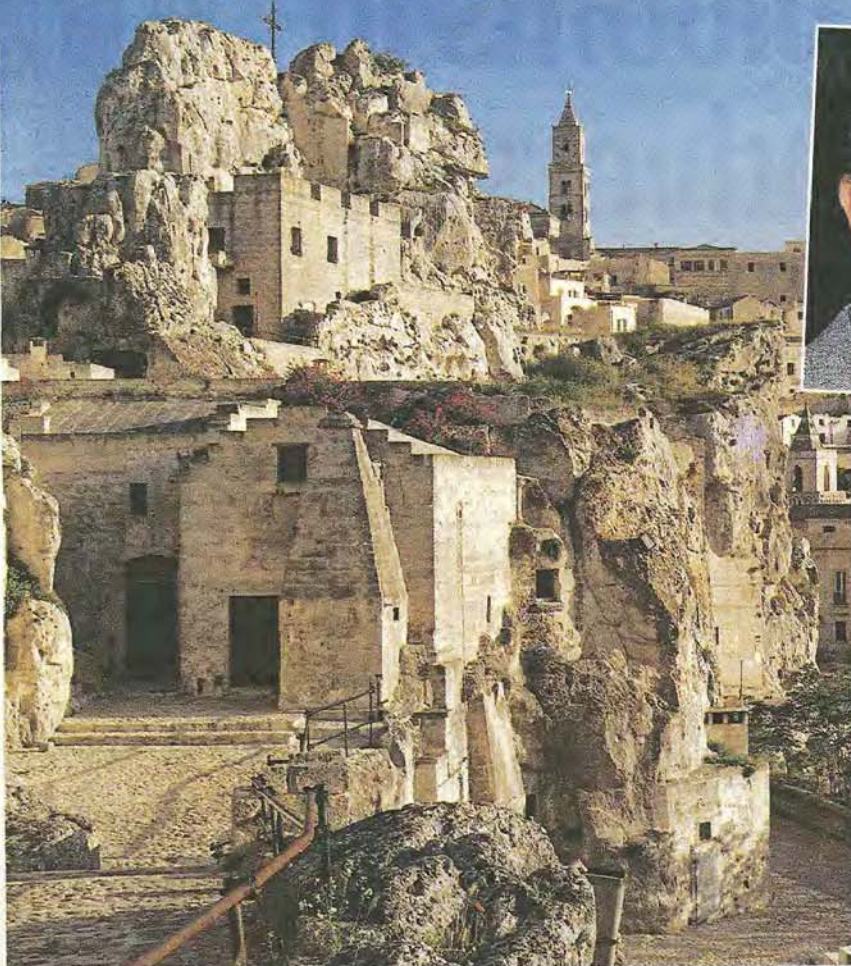
Now, however, this ancient town (population 60,000), also a UNESCO world heritage site, is of increasing interest to British homebuyers tempted by its unusual architecture.

'It's one of the oldest cities in the world and with that stone, looks almost biblical,' says Francesco Carlucci, managing director of Landscape Properties Associates, part of the Knight Frank agency.

Lindsey Watt, a translator, and her husband Mario Intelligente, who works for the local chamber of commerce, live in a two-bedroom *sassi* in the cobbled streets of Matera's old town with their children, Rebecca, nine, and Natalie, seven.

'When I first came here in 1993, the *sassi* were quite isolated and there was no lighting,' says Lindsey, 40. 'Now we are surrounded by B&Bs and hotels, and I frequently hear British voices.'

The once-abandoned old town is being restored with government funding and an increasing number



Biblical scene: Matera's cave-like houses are tempting a new generation of buyers

of *sassi* are being redeveloped to accommodate the 2,000 or so people living and working in the area.

'There is a strong market for these homes, though most buyers are locals,' says Francesco Foshino who runs the *sassi* tourist website (sassiweb.it).

'The history is a part of the attraction,' says Lindsey, whose own home is 400 years old with vaulted ceilings and rooms spread over three levels. 'Though they can take longer to heat up and cool

down because the walls are a metre-and-a-half thick.'

A chic *sassi* costs about £1,600 per sq metre, which means a medium-sized cave home costs about £400,000, roughly the same price as a new home in modern Matera.

'Though the old town is more prestigious and the quality of life is better, there are disadvantages,' says Foshino. 'There is nowhere to park your car and it is hard to reach on foot — that is why

property prices are the same as in the new town.'

The Basilicata region has traditionally been a poor olive, wheat and grape-growing area, but it is now undergoing a resurgence. New budget airlines flying into nearby Bari, 45 minutes away, and Brindisi, 90 minutes' drive, have opened up the area, while British buyers are attracted by homes which are roughly half the price of Tuscany.

Should you prefer a more Tuscan-style setting, Landscape Properties



On Location in Matera: Mel Gibson, who directed *The Passion Of The Christ*

is building elegant *masseria* (traditional farmhouses) in the cypress-dotted hills just outside Matera.

The elegant, colonnaded farmhouses set on golden hillsides in five-acre plots are made from local *pietra leccese* creamy limestone. Many of the three- to six-bedroom villas will have a view of nearby San Giuliano lake and will cost from £400,000 to £1.2 million. The beach is 40 minutes away and the Amalfi coast is a two-hour drive.

If you prefer to renovate your own ruin, Casa Travella is selling an unrestored five-bedroom apartment in a former *palazzo* in the nearby town of Irsina, 20 minutes from Matera, for £116,000.

A TWO-bedroom ground-floor apartment costs £40,000. Though there is a small British expat community here, the town is off the beaten track and has few foreign visitors.

'If you are looking for a place where everyone speaks English, this is not for you,' says Travella. 'It appeals to Italian lovers and people seeking adventure.'

If it is the sea you're after, then Casa Travella has a choice of six new two-bedroom apartments at £88,000 in Riva dei Tessali, a nearby coastal resort where the beaches are golden and life is — well — the *dolce vita*.

■ *Locanda di San Martino*: 0039 0835256 600, locandadisannmartino.it
 ■ *Knight Frank*: 020 7861 1097, knightfrank.com
 ■ *Landscape Properties*: 020 7352 8158, landscapeproperties.com/dreamhomesinmatera.com
 ■ *Casatravella*: 01322 660988, Casatravella.com

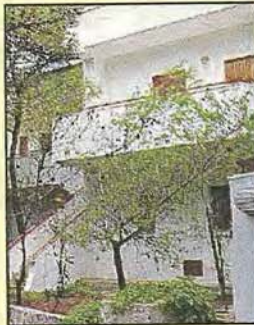
ON THE MARKET ... in up-and-coming Basilicata



KNIGHT Frank is selling three- to six-bedroom *masseria* built to order from £385,000 to

£1,153,846 on hillside plots outside Matera. (020 7861 1097; knightfrank.com)

A SMALL complex 300 metres from the sea, adjacent to Riva dei Tessali golf course and 30 minutes from Matera. Prices for the two-bedroom properties start from £87,500 (01322 660 988; casatravella.com)



LIDO di Metaponto, an attractive residential village, is situated about 1km from the sea at Metaponto and close to the Club Med village. Two- or three-bedroom properties

come with a terrace, car space and use of the communal pools. Prices start from £127,000 for a two-bedroom property, (01322 660988; casatravella.com)