

# Buy in a trulli lovely part of Italy

The quieter southern region of Puglia may not be for high-end culture vultures but it has its share of history and bags of unspoilt charm, says **Cathy Hawker**

**P**UGLIA, in the heel of Italy's long, thin boot, is slowly but surely winning new friends. It might lack some of Tuscany's high-culture polish but that means it also lacks the visitors that gridlock Florence and Siena. This is undiscovered, traditional Italy, complete with mesmerising architecture and fresh local food, where visionary hoteliers and home-builders are completing some interesting renovations of historic buildings.

"Puglia is really a peninsula, caught between the Adriatic and Ionian Seas rather like an island," says Antine Meinardi, of rental company Think Puglia. "So while it can get very hot, there is always a breeze."

Think Puglia has 35 properties on its books, ranging from trulli – the traditional conical stone houses – to town centre palazzi (palaces) and thick-walled masserie (large farmhouses). Antine says the season lasts from Easter to mid-October and weekly rents for homes on the company's website range from £3,440 to £21,500.

## ART OF RESTORATION

Four years ago, Jano and Johnny Clarke from south-west England found a cluster of trulli in the farming area of Valle d'Itria. The property was in a state of total disrepair but the couple fell in love with it. For Jano, a potter with a love of olive trees, the kiln-shaped trulli and the land smothered with centuries-old olive groves represented the opportunity to save, and use something historic.

"We love this house," says Jano surveying her fabulously understated and now fully restored four-bedroom home. "Of course, we never realised what it would cost to



**Traditional appeal:** the medieval harbour at Bari, one of the main cities in the Puglia region of Italy, in the south of the country

restore. Everyone told us it would be double what we paid for it but no, it was much more."

The couple paid £154,800 for the house and spent a further £404,300 on restoration. They now have a house worth over £860,250, which they have furnished with trestle tables bought locally in the antiques market in Martina Franca, and intricately carved Indian doors made into tables. Outside, a large pool sits in casually landscaped gardens loaded with fruit trees.

They rent out their home through Think Puglia from £3,500 a week. Last year, it was booked for 15 weeks, with more already reserved for this summer.

"We wanted to retain the rustic simplicity of the house while making it totally comfortable with en suite bedrooms," says Jano. "We've kept the curving ceilings and used stone basins and wrought iron."

The house is filled with light, thanks to immaculate whitewashed ceilings, and has modern underfloor climate control.



**White stuff:** a traditional row of trulli in the pretty town of Alberobello

## NEW COUNTRY HOMES

The soft, pale local limestone is a feature of many buildings in Puglia, where stonemasons have played an important role through the centuries. Yet their art is dying out as fewer Italians learn the necessary skills. "This area has no problem finding



**Made to order:** modern versions of masserie have been built in Lecce

materials to make houses but it has a big problem finding the people with the skills to use those materials," says Francesco Carlucci, of Essentis Properties.

He builds stone houses to order for clients who want modern versions of classic masserie and has sites near

Lecce on the Adriatic coast and in Manduria near the Ionian Sea.

"We were in danger of losing the skills that made Puglia special," says Francesco. He responded by setting up a Stonemasons Academy employing 42 masons to train a new generation of craftsmen. He builds four or five houses each year and has completed and sold 21.

His homes take one year to build and feature exquisite vaulted and star ceilings with gardens of at least five acres surrounded by long, low stone walls. The houses are all unique, the smallest 2,560 square feet with four or five bedrooms, and have pools and lush gardens. Prices start from £1.29 million.

Alice and Peter Smith from Surrey bought a five-bedroom home near Lecce from Essentis and holiday there regularly with their children. "It is a complete family home because there are beaches, history and nightlife," says Alice, 48. "I love the markets, the seasonal food and the easy life."

■ [Thinkpuglia.com](http://Thinkpuglia.com) (020 7377 8518); [essentisproperties.com](http://essentisproperties.com) (020 7352 9384).



**Lovingly restored:** Johnny and Jano Clarke rent out their trulli in Valle d'Itria

## STAY HERE MASSERIA TORRE MAIZZA

LANGUID Puglia is the perfect place for a long weekend break. Fly into Bari or Brindisi directly from London and within a short drive there is a selection of classical hotels with a contemporary twist, accompanied by the friendliest welcome.

Masseria Torre Maizza is a converted 16th-century farmhouse one hour from Bari, where ancient olive trees line the entrance. The dreamy, family-run hotel has a nine-hole golf course, an Aveda spa and a linen-draped beach club one mile away but it is the restaurant which

most appeals. Plates overflow with local produce: fat red figs, squid and swordfish and creamy white mozzarella and burrata cheeses. Or take a cookery lesson with the hotel's chef to produce panzerotti (Puglia's version of pizza), orecchiette pasta and bouillabaisse.

Masseria Torre Maizza has five nights with one free night from £1,225 per person, with a saving of £460 per couple, including return BA flights from Gatwick, booked through Citalia. Call 0843 770 4443 or visit [citalia.com](http://citalia.com). For more details, see [masseriatorremaizza.com](http://masseriatorremaizza.com) or call +39 080 441 40 59.



**Magical menu:** the restaurant offers delicious local produce