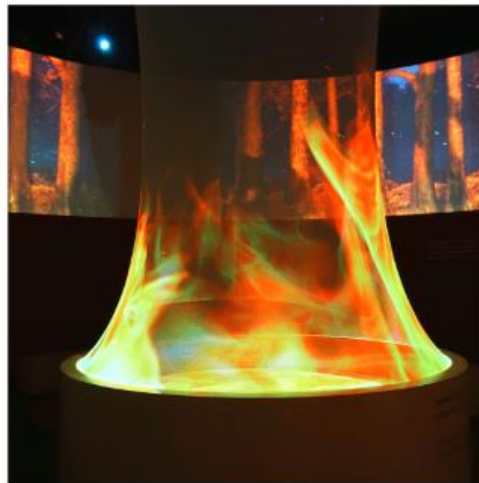


The New York Times

PLACES 37 AND 38

The 52 Places Traveler: Two Versions of the Slow Life in Central and Southern Italy

A long night of explorations and revelations in Bologna, the capital of Emilia-Romagna, and a leisurely introduction to the city of Matera in the region of Basilicata.



Clockwise from top right: Tortellini in brodo at Trattoria del Rosso in Bologna; an interactive exhibit on fire's role in food preparation at FICO Eataly World; the 059 Bistro Emiliano in Modena, also in Emilia-Romagna; peppers at a Modena market. Jada Yuan/The New York Times

By [Jada Yuan](#)

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Our columnist, Jada Yuan, is visiting each destination on our [52 Places to Go in 2018 list](#). This dispatch brings her to two places: Bologna, the capital of Emilia-Romagna, which took the [No. 40 spot](#) on the list; and Matera, a city in Basilicata, which took the [No. 3 spot](#). They are the 37th and 38th stops on Jada's itinerary.

A Night Out in Bologna

“You know the word decumano?” asked Armando Comi, a friend of a friend I had just met at a small bistro near his apartment in Bologna's medieval city center. In an ancient Roman city like this one, he explained as we downed Campari and sodas, a decumano ([Decumanus Maximus](#) in Latin) was the most important street, where all business took place. In the daytime, at least.

To truly understand Bologna, though, you need to go to the bustling, tiny Via del Pratello, one block from the decumano (the grand Via San Felice). It's where we were sitting, downing Campari and sodas, and envisioning night life here centuries ago.

“Imagine just alcohol and prostitution, basically,” Armando said.

He loved using the word “imagine” as he showed me around his city. “Imagine that just 10 years ago this was a street just for a little slice of pizza and kebabs,” he said, marveling at the teeming outdoor cafes. Imagine, he went on, being a student in the 11th century at the University of Bologna, the oldest in the Western world, or during the 1950s, '60s and '70s, when Bologna was the most left-wing city in Italy, and producing the country's most iconic pop musicians.

“Imagine Bologna from the eyes of someone who came from a really provincial situation as in the south of Italy where you find nothing interesting,” he said. Armando is from Calabria and has lived in Bologna for 20 years. “You come here because it is not a city, it is a legend.”

I soon learned that Armando [writes historical thrillers](#) using research he had done on heretical religious movements while earning his doctorate in history of philosophy at the University of Bologna.

New Campari and sodas appeared at our table, courtesy of Armando’s friend Francesco Bianchini. He’s an assistant professor of philosophy of science at the university and appeared to be about seven feet tall with glasses and an inviting grin. He spun the picture of arriving to Bologna from small-town central Italy as a student in the ’90s, when it was both the country’s hip cultural capital — and home to the notorious criminal gang, the [Banda della Uno Bianca](#) in which police officers, driving white Fiat Uno cars, went on a multi-year crime spree.

“How much time can you spend with us?” Francesco wanted to know.

I was open, I said. I’d been waiting all week to see how the Bolognese spend their Saturday nights.

“That’s a little dangerous,” said Francesco, predicting we’d be out until the wee hours, hopping from pub to restaurant to bar to hole-in-the-wall-snack spot, surrounded by others doing the same thing. Such is what happens when you have 100,000 students in a city with 500,000 citizens, many of them former students.

Everyone talks about the food in Bologna, capital of the region of Emilia-Romagna (the entirety of which was on the 52 Places list). This is the land that brought you balsamic vinegar and ragù Bolognese. But what gets lost in Instagram filters is the kind of rebel spirit you feel on the ground: the intensity it takes to achieve simplicity and craftsmanship; the discourse on history and religion and relationships and vices that leaves you buzzing long after a delicious meal. This region's greatest product might be its endless stream of maniac geniuses.

My mad geniuses were now leading me across the incredible Piazza Maggiore to Bologna's oldest pub, [Osteria del Sole](#), around since 1465. It doesn't serve food these days, but does have convivial low ceilings and long tables, and serves its own brand of wine for 2 euros, or about \$2.30, a glass. After a scary brush with foreclosure, the place has cleaned up a bit — no more sawdust on the floor — but the prices have stayed about the same, Francesco said.

Dinner was a nice long walk under Bologna's many porticos to [Osteria da Mario](#), founded in 1900. "This restaurant, once it was just an old man named Mario with a lot of salumi and a knife and a lot of wine," said Armando, wistfully recounting Mario's gruff demeanor. Now it's a hip gastro pub with white tablecloths and a backlit bar and caricatures of dearly departed Mario lining every wall. We paid tribute to him with an antipasto plate — prosciutto di Parma, mortadella — paired with incredibly creamy cheeses. And a lot of wine. You might sense a theme to our night.

Like so many other places in Bologna's city center, Francesco said, Osteria da Mario has had to compromise, transform into a modern version of a traditional osteria, to keep up with tourism. High-speed trains, and a location in the center of the country, along with draws like the newly opened [FICO Eataly World](#) (a giant mall for eating and learning about Italy's food production), have made this city a regional hub. The students who congregated nightly in piazzas have been forced to move outside the city wall, replaced with temporary visitors like me, heading to Airbnb with their roller suitcases click-clacking on cobblestone streets.

That rebel spirit, though, still persists. We found it at [Mercato delle Erbe](#), a food market by day that fills with mostly crowds of residents at drink stands by night, and while nursing negronis next to a Fidel Castro poster at [Osteria del Montesino](#), and also while munching on fried Sardinian street food after one last, ill-advised glass of grappa.

I'd been charmed by Bologna earlier in my trip, the pink buildings that glowed even pinker at sunset. The pace of living that seemed so slow and unforced. But with Armando and Francesco that night, I felt like I was seeing it for the first time. Did you know that those porticos were a genius way of expanding the city's housing stock — building apartments on top of the porticos — without losing sidewalk space? Or that you can find three arrows stuck in the roof of a portico on Strada Maggiore from a robbery gone wrong? Or that there's a canal in the middle of town if you just know where to find the right window to peer upon it?

That night, Bologna felt like home, with endless surprises. But maybe that was the negronis talking.



Sasso Caveoso, seen from Via Duomo next to the Matera Cathedral.
Jada Yuan/The New York Times

A Warm Welcome in Matera

Luggage still in hand, two minutes after arriving in one of the oldest sectors of the ancient southern Italian city of Matera, I wandered onto a [viewpoint balcony](#) near the main square of Piazza Vittorio Veneto and into utter awe.

Below me and before me were tiers upon tiers of buildings in pale gold and white stone, leading to a valley of more pale stone, and another steep hill in the distance filled with tier upon tier of the same. It felt like looking at a city on the moon, or standing on the world's largest wedding cake. The sheer feat of human endeavor that had created this gleaming expanse was overwhelming. I was shocked to find out it has never been used as a shooting location for the "Star Wars" universe. But it has been a double for ancient Jerusalem in many a biblical movie, including Mel Gibson's "The Passion of the Christ," which filmed here in 2004, and is credited for being a major factor in boosting the city's tourism profile.

At the moment, though, I had more pressing things to think about, namely if I was going to have to sleep on that balcony.

Matera lies in the far south region of Basilicata, at the arch of Italy's boot. Getting there had been so logistically exhausting — a four-hour, delayed train trip from Bologna, to an overnight pit stop in Salerno (the southern entrance to the Amalfi Coast), to a three-hour bus ride at 5 a.m. — that I was almost there, on a bus without Wi-Fi or cell signal, when I realized I'd neglected to book a place to stay.

If there's one overarching lesson from my time in that beautiful, economically challenged city, though, it's that Matera takes care of people. It hit me when I was in a cellphone store buying a SIM card and a woman overheard my housing dilemma, called her cousin, Simona, who owns a bed-and-breakfast, and within 10 minutes I had a room at one of the most charming places I've stayed at on this entire trip.

Simona's B&B, [Hoplites](#), was exactly where you want to be, in one of two Sassi, or rock districts, of Matera's Unesco World Heritage-protected old towns. Both Sasso Barisano and the even older Sasso Caveoso began as cave dwellings; the city has been occupied since 7,000 B.C. To get to Hoplites, in Sasso Barisano, I dragged my bags up and down cobblestone hills.

Simona, a woman in her early 30s who speaks little English, greeted my arrival with cheek kisses. I got a two-story apartment to myself, with a private roof overlooking all of Sasso Barisano for 70 euros a night. The other rooms are in refurbished caves, as are most lodging options in the Sassi. The shower in at least one of Simona's rooms is built into a former Roman grain silo from many years before Christ. Simona, her husband, her father and her mother, all of whom I met over breakfast (her mother makes homemade cake for the guests) spent three years turning fetid, pitch-black caves into cozy, white-painted havens.

Later in my stay, I moved to a fancy boutique hotel, [La Casa di Lucio](#), for the chance to stay in a cave, which was painted all white and had a leopard print couch, and was just as fabulous as it sounds.

Anyone in Matera can tell you the story of how far the city has had to come to be a place that has things like bed-and-breakfasts and hotels; I strongly encourage making [Casa Noha](#), an interactive museum, your first stop, to hear about the city in dramatic narration with visuals. Matera was once the capital of Basilicata, but a move of the capital to Potenza, and the funds that came with that, began a long descent into poverty. Up until the 1950s, families with six or more children still lived in caves in the Sassi, along with their livestock, and without electricity, running water or sewers. Politics, but also the urgency of a 50 percent infant mortality rate, led to the relocation of the Sassi's 15,000 citizens to nearby modern communities.

The Sassi were empty for 30 years, well into the 1980s, but [its citizens never abandoned](#) them. A group of young, untrained citizen archaeologists documented its cave churches with their priceless Byzantine frescoes — and then those culture preservers became politicians and began cleaning up the Sassi. Unesco designation came in the 1990s, as did government programs to practically give away caves to anyone who'd renovate them. Next year Matera is going to be a [European Capital of Culture](#), with a year of celebratory events and an influx of funds for renewal projects.

I had arrived in Matera with grand ambitions to explore the Basilicata countryside, but soon found myself too engrossed to want to go anywhere else. That, and getting myself up and down Matera's pedestrian-only streets proved so tiring I couldn't even fathom how I'd get to a car rental.

Every walk that Google Maps told me was going to take five minutes took at least 30, since that app does not account for hills. Or for an entire city being white. Wrong turns led to other wrong turns. But I was too busy taking pictures and gawking at every vista to be bothered.

Finding restaurants, too, proved to be a challenge. By the end of my five-day stay, I had gone to two, the cave bistro [Osteria Al Casale](#), and a modest cafe, [L'Arturo Enogastronomia](#), which had delicious small plates, Wi-Fi and the advantage of being one of the few places in town I knew how to find on a regular basis.

Slowing down, too, allowed for relationships to blossom, which, in the end, is where Matera's true magic lies. On my first night, I met a photographer, Cosimo Martemucci, who was born and raised here, and, over two incredible evenings, showed me the visual playground — such as the hilltop cave church Chiesa Madonna della Idris — where he learned his trade.

The most magical evening of all, though, might have been when an art restorer named Angelica Malizia took me across a canyon — Le Gravine di Matera — to a lookout called Belvedere in Parco di Murgia Timone for a complete view of the city with all its lights. We had come with her friend, Mariangela Fugliuolo, a tour guide, and their two boyfriends, Alessandro and Marcello, delightful jokesters both.

After taking in the view, we sat at tables near the visitor's center, picnicking with wine we'd brought and a local delicacy called panzerotto, similar to a calzone, that we'd picked up on our way out of the city at a fast-food bar called [Sottozero](#). Marcello helps run an outdoor film festival at the visitor's center in the summer, and the five of us talked politics and romance and our favorite movies for hours.

In a few months, the cultural capital events would begin and the whole city might change, but I felt grateful to have had this night, and the kind of warm Matera welcome I hope will last for eons to come.

Practical Tips

See Bologna has an emotional statue of Jesus's death at Santa Maria della Vita church, and the fascinating San Stefano, an unfinished complex of seven churches. But the real sightseeing thrill is Le Due Torri (The Two Towers), the taller of which, Asinelli, offers a panoramic view of Bologna in all its pink-stoned glory to anyone willing and able to climb 498 steps.

The most eye-opening attraction I saw in Matera was [Casa Grotta di Via Solitario](#), which recreates a furnished cave, complete with a horse near the bed.

Eat Try the tortellini in brodo at [Trattoria del Rosso](#), where Francesco took me for lunch. Bologna is where [the modern gelato machine](#) was invented and the city is awash with options: [Sorbetteria Castiglione](#), [Gelateria Galleria 49](#), [Gelateria Delle Moline](#), and [Cremeria Cavour](#) to name a few.

Down south, make sure you try the [pane di Matera](#), a slow-baked bread with a recipe so old it has an archaeological designation. I tried mine dipped in homemade tapenades at the office of [Matera City Tour](#). The rosé wines of the region are also surprisingly dry and delicious.