



Basilicata & Calabria

Italy's undiscovered South

10–18 October 2025 (ML 810)

9 Days • £3,890

Lecturer: John McNeill

An area rich in ancient Greek sites, medieval buildings and enthralling townscapes.

Unknown and unspoilt – a chance to explore the smaller centres of southern Italy with few other tourists.

Sparsely populated and beautiful landscapes.

Led by an architectural historian and devotee of southern Italy John McNeill.

Although it is difficult to claim that anywhere in Italy is 'unknown', the regions of Calabria and Basilicata are at least less familiar, and rank among the least visited parts of Mediterranean Europe. As the instep to Puglia's heel, Basilicata misses out on the flow of visitors that its neighbour attracts, while Calabria, being mountainous and appreciably less fertile, has suffered from centuries of economic neglect.

Over the last two decades that has started to change. Matera, the renowned city in Basilicata, has become a UNESCO World Heritage Site and was European Capital of Culture in 2019. Calabria is finally reversing the outward migration that has marked its recent history and is investing in itself.

Most impressive in Matera are the Sassi, the rupestrian dwellings terraced into two ravines at the heart of the town, with rooms quarried into the bedrock at the rear behind architectural facades built of the self-same stone. Developed, enhanced and inhabited for over 1,000 years, the caves were forcibly depopulated in the 1960s but are now being thoughtfully and sympathetically re-developed.

To the north are the volcanic hills around Melfi and Venosa, the early Norman base from which the 11th-century conquest of Puglia and Calabria was undertaken – both of which possess mighty fortresses and impressive Romanesque churches. To the south are the important early Greek settlements that line the Ionian shore – Metapontum, Sybaris and Locri. The latter bring us into Calabria, and face to face not only with ancient Greek culture but with its medieval successor as well, for much of southern Italy was in the hands of Byzantium and its legacy lived on in centres such as Rossano and La Rocceletta.

Our base for most of the time in Calabria is in the culturally richer south, ideally placed



Map of Southern Italy.

for the great coastal centres of Vibia Valentia, Mileto and Reggio, as well as the wooded Aspromonte and that real jewel of a medieval city at Gerace.

Nor should one fail to mention food and wine – with some of the best Aglianico, the star grape variety of the south, grown on the volcanic soils of northern Basilicata, while Calabria is a provider of the most wonderful peppers, olives, citrus, figs, mozzarella, and spicy 'nduja sausages.

Itinerary

Day 1: Fly at c. 8.00am from London Gatwick direct to Bari (British Airways). Drive into Basilicata. First of four nights in Matera – our hotel is in the re-developed Sassi.

Day 2: Matera. Morning walk through the improbably picturesque streets, whose ancient dwellings are crammed into a ravine. Set-pieces include the quirky late Romanesque church of San Giovanni Battista, the Baroque church of San Francesco, Palazzo Lanfranchi and the recently restored cathedral, a fine example of southern Italian Romanesque. In the afternoon, walk through the Sasso Caveoso to see a handful of cave churches, most them frescoed, finishing at the delightful San Pietro Caveoso.

Day 3: Venosa, Melfi. Drive along the valley of the Bradano to the monastery of La Santissima Trinità at Venosa, impressive but unfinished,

built alongside a surviving early Christian church. Walk through the charming town centre and to the archaeological collections in the 15th-century castle. Continue to Melfi, the centre of Norman power in the early phases of their immigration and conquest of southern Italy. The impressive Norman castle hosts a good archaeological museum, and the cathedral remains substantially Romanesque.

Day 4: Matera. The fortuitous discovery of the Crypt of the Original Sin a few miles south of Matera in 1963 was a significant artistic event, bringing to light one of the most accomplished cycles of Carolingian painting known in Europe; it is not only an outstanding discovery for the history of early medieval art but is also an example of the most advanced conservation techniques. Return to Matera to visit the archaeological museum. The afternoon is free.

Day 5: Metaponto, Santa Maria d'Anglona, Sybaris, Rossano. Metaponto was one of the most important Greek settlements on the shores of the Ionian sea – though its site is ruinous, the exemplary museum charts much of its history. Isolated and offering breathtaking views across the valley of the river Agri, Santa Maria d'Anglona is one of the loveliest churches in southern Italy, rich in 12th-century frescoes. Picnic lunch here. Drive south-east along the coast to the ruins of the Achaean city of Sybaris. Overnight near Rossano.

Basilicata & Calabria
continued

Day 6: Rossano, Cosenza, Lamezia. Start with the beautifully sited Abbazia del Patire, an 11th-century monastery founded under early Norman patronage just outside Rossano. Thence to the city itself to see tiny medieval San Marco and, in the Museo Diocesano, the celebrated codex rossanensis, a superb sixth-century manuscript made in Constantinople. Drive across the Calabrian peninsula to Cosenza – visit the cathedral – and continue to Calabria's western seaboard near Lamezia. First of three nights near Lamezia.

Day 7: Vibo Valentia, Reggio. In Vibo Valentia, an ancient Greek city historically famed as a tuna fishery, visit the Baroque cathedral, serene 16th-century church of San Michele and the part-Norman part-Hohenstaufen castle, looming over the town on the site of the former acropolis. Then drive to Reggio to see the Riace Bronzes, over-life-size male nudes associated with Phidias and Polyklitos. Discovered off the Calabrian coast near Locri, they are among the finest Greek sculptures to survive.

Day 8: Gerace, Locri. Gerace is a stunningly well-preserved medieval town, high in the Aspromonte overlooking the Ionian sea above Locri. Visit late medieval San Francesco and an 11th-century cathedral built using columns from ancient Locri. Afternoon by the coast at Locri, where the archaeological site preserves the Greek theatre and a major sanctuary devoted to Persephone.

Day 9: Altamura. Drive to Altamura for a short visit and lunch before then heading to Bari Airport to catch a direct flight to London Gatwick, arriving c. 8.00pm (British Airways).

Lecturer

John McNeill. Specialist in the Middle Ages and Renaissance, John lectures for Oxford University's Department of Continuing Education. He is Honorary Secretary of the British Archaeological Association, for whom he has edited and contributed to collections of essays on medieval cloisters, chantries, Anjou, and King's Lynn and the Fens. In 2010 he established a biennial series of international conferences on Romanesque visual culture. His most recent effort in this field – *Romanesque Patrons and Processes* – was published in 2018. He is also author of the *Blue Guides* to both Normandy and the Loire Valley.

Practicalities

Price, per person. Two sharing: £3,890 or £3,570 without flights. **Single occupancy:** £4,590 or £4,270 without flights.

Included: air travel (economy class) on scheduled British Airways flights (A320); travel by private coach; accommodation as described below; breakfasts, 3 lunches (including 1 picnic) and 5 dinners with wine, water, coffee; all admissions; all tips; all taxes; the services of the lecturer and tour manager.

Accommodation. Sant'Angelo Luxury Resort, Matera* (santangeloresort.it): a stylish 5-star hotel located in the Sasso Caveoso, overlooking the ravine. **Casa Solares, near Rossano** (casasolares.it): charming family-run guest house with a good restaurant; some rooms are 500m from the main building. **Hotel Marechiaro, near Lamezia** (www.hotelmarechiarogizzeria.com): tasteful 4-star beach-side resort – in an excellent location for exploring southern Calabria. *Single rooms are doubles for sole use throughout.*

How strenuous? Matera's topography and the hotel's location mean that there is a lot of walking up and down hills and cobbled steps which can be slippery. Coaches cannot be used within the town centres. The tour involves a lot of walking on archaeological sites. Uneven ground, irregular paving, steps and hills are standard. Good mobility, sure-footedness and agility are essential. Average distance by coach per day: 80 miles.

Group size: between 10 and 22 participants.

* Please note that Sant'Angelo Luxury Resort, the hotel in Matera, consists of caves and apartments set into a hillside, some adapted from caves. Each room has individual access through doors leading outside, separate to the reception building. Please be aware that reaching the hotel restaurant, where breakfast and dinner are served, requires walking outside your room uphill over uneven, rocky ground. Additionally, the rooms have intentionally dim lighting to create a serene atmosphere, which may not suit all clients.