



Essential Puglia

Art & architecture in the heel of Italy

28 March–4 April 2023 (MJ 658)

8 days • £2,870

Expert speaker: John McNeill

Fascinating architecture, especially Norman and Baroque, in one of the lesser known regions of Italy.

Exceptionally attractive streetscapes in hilltop towns and coastal cities amid distinctive and dramatic limestone landscapes.

The tour covers a wide range of architecture, art and history, and is led by an expert in the Middle Ages.

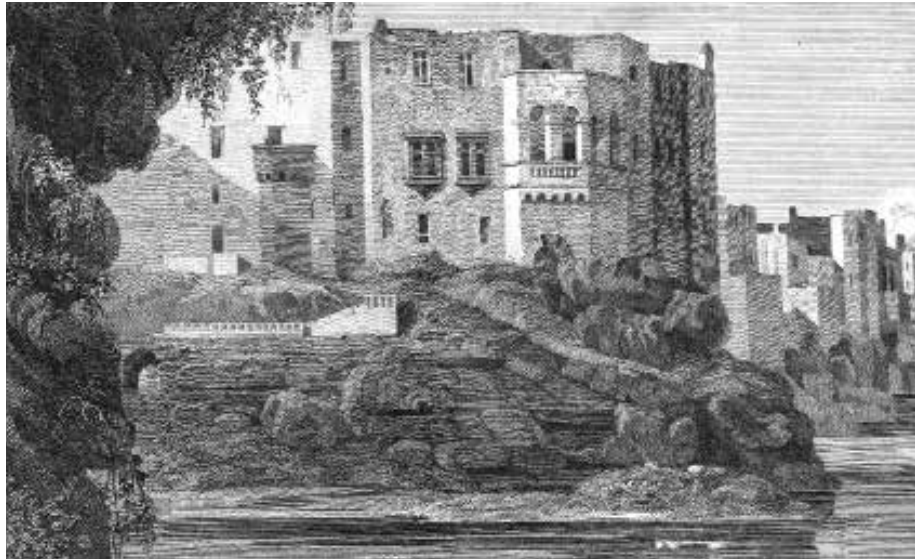
The heel and spur of boot-shaped Italy, Puglia is now returning to the limelight after being ignored or disparaged for centuries. While the sobriquet ‘the new Tuscany’ is a lazy cliché and dangerously misleading (with its raw limestone landscape Puglia looks and feels like a different country), it is the case that only in the last couple of decades have Italophiles and discerning travellers been taking the region seriously.

Its strategic position meant that it was repeatedly invaded and conquered, and each dynasty left its mark. Roman remains are frequent but tend to have been all but eradicated by later prosperity – or warfare. The many magnificent Romanesque cathedrals bear witness to the Norman conquest of southern Italy, one of the most notable episodes in medieval history. Churches and castles from the subsequent Hohenstaufen and Angevin eras abound and exhibit French, Lombard, Byzantine and Saracenic influences.

Much later there was another artistic outburst, appropriately international but characteristically idiosyncratic, a highly elaborate version of Baroque architecture and decoration. Lecce is a glorious example: churches and palaces with intricately embellished façades carved from the local stone line the streets and squares of this lively town, the regional capital of the Salento.

A journey from the north to the south of Puglia, this tour takes in the most important medieval and Baroque sites as well as the noteworthy items from other eras. Particularly memorable are the unspoilt centres of ancient cities and villages built up around narrow twisting alleys, some tumbling down hillsides, most whitewashed, all picturesque. Waterfronts with ancient harbours are another feature.

There is scenic variety from rolling hills



Bari, steel engraving c. 1840.

to open plains, in parts enlivened by *trulli*, conical stone houses which are a unique vernacular phenomenon. In Springtime, and comparatively cooler temperatures, Puglia’s charms can now be enjoyed with comfort and ease.

While including some of the major items visited on our nine-day Normans in the South tour, this itinerary differs by lessening the focus on that era and encompassing a wider range of architecture, art and history.

Itinerary

Day 1: Bitonto. Fly at c. 8.30am from London City to Bari via Milan Linate (ITA Airways). Drive to Bitonto, which has one of the finest of Romanesque cathedrals in the region, with good sculpture and an Early Christian lower church. Continue to Trani, where the first three nights are spent.

Day 2: Trani, Castel del Monte, Barletta. A walk along the harbour of the small city of Trani includes the 12th-century church of Ognissanti and the magically beautiful Romanesque cathedral perched on the waterfront. In the afternoon drive out to Castel del Monte. Situated on an isolated peak, Frederick II’s extraordinary octagonal hunting lodge of c. 1240 is one of the most intriguing secular buildings of the Middle Ages. Return to Trani via Barletta.

Day 3: Monte Sant’Angelo, San Giovanni Rotondo. High on the southern slopes of Monte Gargano sits Monte Sant’Angelo, where the apparition of the Archangel Michael in the 5th century has made the grotto sanctuary a popular destination for pilgrims. The massive castle was started by the Normans and extended by the Swabians, Aragonese and Bourbons. The Tomba di Rotari is a baptistery with 12th-century decorations and a domed roof. One of the most visited pilgrimage sites in the world, the complex of San Giovanni Rotondo includes San Pio’s new church designed by Renzo Piano.

Day 4: Bari, Ostuni. Capital of Puglia, Bari has a wonderful walled medieval quarter beside the sea, extensive and unspoilt. The Basilica of San Nicola, begun in 1087, is not only the first but also the greatest of Puglian Romanesque churches; the episcopal throne here is remarkable. Also visit the cathedral (1170) and the later mediaeval Angevin castle. Continue to Ostuni, a delightful, white-washed hilltop town and on to Martina Franca for an overnight stay.

Day 5: Martina Franca, Taranto, Lecce. Morning walk through the enchanting town of Martina Franca, see the 17th-century Palazzo Ducale with its fine Baroque façade and the cathedral of San Martino. The National Archaeological Museum of Taranto houses one of Italy’s most important archaeological collections, from Prehistoric times to the

Essential Puglia
continued

Middle Ages with a particular concentration on Magna Graecia. It includes the Ori di Taranto (Golden Treasure of Taranto), a stunning collection of Hellenic-era golden artwork. Drive to Lecce where the final three nights are spent.

Day 6: Lecce. Lecce is distinguished by an elaborate style of Baroque and Rococo decoration wrought in the soft, honey-coloured tufa of the region. The outstanding examples are the church of Santa Croce, Santi Nicola e Cataldo and complex of buildings surrounding the cathedral. See also the well-preserved Roman theatre. Free afternoon.

Day 7: Galatina, Gallipoli, Giurdignano. Explore the Salentine Peninsula, the southernmost tip of the heel of Italy. Drive out to Galatina to see the remarkable late gothic wall paintings at Santa Caterina. Gallipoli was the centre of Byzantine Italy until conquered by the Normans in 1071. The highly picturesque old town is on an off-shore island protruding into the Ionian Sea. Return via Giurdignano to see the cripta di San Salvatore, the best of the area's *chiese rupestri*, the painted underground churches.

Day 8: Brindisi. Possessing the safest natural harbour on the Adriatic, Brindisi has been of intermittent strategic importance for over 24 centuries. Visit San Giovanni al Sepolcro with a splendid portal decorated with reliefs and the Roman columns marking the end of the Via Traiana. Fly from Brindisi via Milan Linate, arriving at London City at c. 6.30pm.

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: £2,870 or £2,640 without flights. **Single occupancy:** £3,300 or £3,070 without flights.

Included: flights (economy class) on ITA Airways (Airbus 320 & Embraer 90); travel by private coach; hotel accommodation as described below; breakfasts and five dinners with wine, water and coffee; all admissions to sites and museums visited with the group; all tips and taxes; the services of the lecturer & tour manager.

Accommodation. Hotel San Paolo al Convento, Trani

(hotelsanpaoloalconventotrani.it): a charming 4-star hotel converted from a 15th-century convent. Service and maintenance can be erratic. **Relais Villa San Martino, Near Martina Franca** (relaisvillasanmartino.it): a converted villa 3 km outside the town. Rooms are tastefully and individually decorated but vary in size. **Patria Palace Hotel, Lecce** (patriapalace.com): a stylish 5-star hotel in an excellent location near the church of Santa Croce. Rooms are spacious and elegantly furnished. *Single rooms are doubles for sole use throughout.*

How strenuous? There is quite a lot of walking, some of it uphill as the coach cannot enter the historic town centres. Some days involve a lot of driving. Average distance by coach per day: 70 miles

Group size: between 10 and 22 participants.