

MOTORING TRAVEL FEATURE

THE REAL ITALY

Jonathan Crouch takes to the Southern Italian roads of Basilicata and finds that here, there really is Latin spirit in every one

You'll probably never have heard of Basilicata, one of Italy's southernmost regions. And that's a good thing. At least for those of us wanting to keep hard-won discoveries to ourselves. Those wanting a break from the established tourist trail. Those wondering how the sun-dried states of Southern Europe *used to be* before package holidays, package food and package people. In Basilicata, armed only with a rental car and a sense of adventure, you'll find out.



Today, it's easy to think that undiscovered Europe – beautiful landscapes largely free of tourists with English rarely spoken – exists only in memory. The kind of trip your parents maybe took in the Fifties. Or something you saw on an old edition of *Whickers' World*. But Basilicata makes you believe again. Here's the part of Italy that EU subsidies forgot. So there's a patchy road network, an almost total lack of railways, not a single major airport and not even a coastal port for the 617,000 inhabitants, despite the fact that this huge region is washed by the Tyrrhenian Sea to the West and the Ionian Sea to the East. Which is just one of the reasons why, down here in the boot of this Latin nation, life really hasn't changed much in the last half century or so.

To be honest, before this trip, I thought I'd already experienced Italy, my motoring travels having taken in the industrial cities of the North, the canals of Venice, the bustle of Naples, the glories of Florence and Siena and the rolling hills of Tuscany. If you've visited any of these, then maybe like me, you've come away impressed but perhaps a little detached from it all. As if something was missing, the real Italy curtained carefully away, far from the sites and splendours, the tourist traps and the trattorias.

“If history doesn't touch you here, then it never will....”

Which was why I found myself one steaming hot summer's day in Basilicata, a long empty road shimmering ahead of me in the July heat, my wife comfortably asleep beside me in our rental car, the children squabbling amicably in the back. Here, I reflected, was a land that, over centuries, has welcomed peoples, seen the rise and fall of civilisations, undergone invasions and given birth to myths. If the real Italy still existed, then here, I decided, is where we would find it.

Like many family travellers, we didn't want the expense or constraint of a hotel or the hard work of a self-catering apartment. Fortunately, consultations with the ever-helpful APT Basilicata tourist office (www.aptbasilicata.it) revealed a third option, found in the region-wide Agriturismo network of farms and old houses that welcome visitors like family members, offering as much – or as little – as you need to make your stay comfortable, affordable and agreeably different. Ours was the L'Orto di Lucania (www.ortodilucania.it), a working farm in yellow, rolling fields below the little 11th century hill-top town of Montescaglioso, where the owners, Fulvio and Cinchia, were waiting to welcome us.

Fulvio, it turned out, was a mine of information about his homeland. The small city of Matera, we agreed, just a few kilometres to the North, was the obvious place to start any search for the heart of such a turbulent and colourful land. It has, after all, captivated travellers and film makers for centuries, most famously in recent times recreating the ancient city of Jerusalem for Mel Gibson's controversial 2004 epic *The Passion of the Christ*. Wandering round the steep cobbled streets of the *Sassi*, an equally ancient district with Neolithic homes and churches dug, quite literally, out of turfaceous rock, you can understand its enduring appeal and countless outings on the silver screen. If history doesn't touch you here, then it never will.

But even here is not where the heart of this Latin nation beats. The lifeblood is in the living, not the dead. In the noisy, colourful carnival we followed through the tiny streets of Montescaglioso. In the little restaurants where the owners insist you try their freshest fish. In the sundried tomatoes that Fulvio and Cinchia bleached for our long, rambling and unforgettable dinner at L'Orto di Lucania. And it's all served against a backdrop of rich, colourful, real Italian living.

Here's a nation that knows how to enjoy itself, something true of course of all Italy. It's just that in Basilicata, you feel you're invited to join in. And get very wet, in the case of Acquazzurra (www.acquazzurrapark.net) a family waterpark near the coastal town of Metaponto. This is probably the closest the region gets to offering up a conventional tourist attraction, but even here, the experience is more one of joining a party than visiting a themepark. Even the food's great.

But the draw of the rich, towering landscape is never far away. Nearly a third of the region is, after all, effectively a national park, a tightly woven coloured web of roads among flowered balconies, red roofs, ancient churches and rocky splendour. Nestled in its centre is the Parco Naturale di Gallipoli Cognato, a forested conservation area in the rocky crags of the *Piccole Dolomiti Lucane* ('the little Dolomites') that's a magnet for hikers, bikers and riders. It's also home to a treasure trove of ancient villages, dating back up to 15,000 years. But if action rather than archaeology is more your thing, just a few kilometres away, near the town of Cirigliano, lies the Lucania Outdoor Park, with everything from adventure courses to archery, horseback riding to hiking. My kids especially loved the treetop rope adventure course.

And of course there's more, much more, about Basilicata that I don't have space to share. But maybe that's as well. A low cost flight and a rental car are the only things that lie between you visiting and making your own discoveries. I'll leave the final words to film director Francis Ford Coppola:

"When you look at Basilicata, you see fields, vineyards, beautiful scenery. You see the earth as it was supposed to be"

And you see the real Italy.

NEED TO KNOW – BASILICATA, ITALY

Planning your trip – www.discoverbasilicata.com/uk

Getting there – Fly to Bari (around 80kms from Matera) with Ryanair from Stansted or British Airways from Gatwick

Where to stay – we tried L'Orto di Lucania (www.ortodilucania.it / info@ortodilucania.it)

What to do – we tried –

- guidance around the ancient city of Matera (www.sassiweb.com/home)
- visiting the Acquazzurra waterpark in Metaponto (www.acquazzurrapark.net)
- exploring the Parco Naturale Gallipoli Cognato
- a day at the Lucania Outdoor Park in Cirigliano