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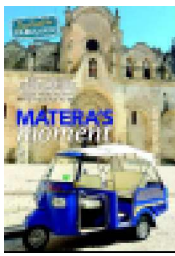
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weeklyTRAVEL

Destination
FABULOUS!

BRETT ATKINSON
EXPLORES THE ANCIENT
ITALIAN TOWN THAT HAS
GONE FROM POVERTY
TO THE PLACE TO BE

MATERA'S
moment



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Matera and its labyrinth-like streets and sassi was inscribed as a world heritage site in 1993.

(traditional cave dwellings) as the UNESCO World Heritage town gears up to be one of Europe's hottest destinations.

The surrounding southern Italian region of Basilicata has traditionally been one of the country's economically poorest provinces. As recently as the 1950s, Matera's basic cave houses – lacking electricity and running water, and often shared with livestock – were denounced as the "shame of Italy".

Subsequently, sassi dwellers were relocated to better housing, and only in recent decades has the extraordinary cultural and historic value of Matera been recognised.

Seen from one of the many view-friendly belvederes or from the square framing the town's gracious 13th-century cathedral, the extraordinary hillside collage

After more than 7000 years, one of the planet's longest continuously inhabited human settlements is about to become world famous. Huddled against the steep sides of a soaring ridge and confined by the deep natural gorge of the Gravina River, the Italian town of Matera is preparing for its role as a European Capital of Culture in 2019. Boutique hotels, wine bars, or enotecas, and cultural performance spaces are opening throughout Matera's idiosyncratic landscape of ancient rock churches and sassi

It wouldn't be an Italian town without stunning frescoes – Matera's are from the 8th century – and artisanal gelati.



Insider's guide to... Matera

WHERE TO STAY: Wake up to incredible views of Matera at Casa Vittoria, a good-value self-catering apartment. Search for 'Casa Vittoria' and 'Matera' on Airbnb or booking.com.
BEST GELATI: Crafting artisanal flavours like pineapple and ginger or lemon and bergamot, Matera's best ice cream is at I Vizi degli Angeli ('The Angels' Vices').
ON A BUDGET: Stock up on wine, formaggio (cheese) and cured

meats at Il Buongustaio on Matera's Piazza Vittorio Veneto. Look forward to local produce from around Basilicata.
WORTH A SPLURGE: At Dedalo, the kitchen's motto is 'sensi sommersi', ('submerged senses'), and Matera's best fine-dining restaurant is concealed within a stylishly illuminated subterranean sasso.
BEST COCKTAIL: Spearheading Matera's after-dark scene, kick off the evening with a zingy and refreshing Aperol Spritz at the cool Vicolo Cieco ('Dead End'). A vintage jukebox and local craft beers complete the picture.

of labyrinthine alleys and steps resembles a life-size 3D representation of an M.C. Escher print.

Exploring on two feet, amid picturesque compact whitewashed valleys, is equally compelling. Deciding which laneway to follow is often like a giant game of snakes and ladders. Will a few minutes' exploration be rewarded with a robust espresso in a quiet piazza, or will a chosen route eventually travel in a loop to a hidden bakery crammed with pistachio-topped pastries?

Despite the enjoyable randomness often at play, the hill town dating back around seven millennia does offer must-visit sights. Recommended as a first stop before exploring the sassi themselves, Casa Noha showcases Matera's history on an interactive big screen concealed within a gracious 16th-century family home.

Used as a backdrop in biblical films including Mel Gibson's

The Passion of the Christ, Matera's ancient subterranean churches, monasteries and crypts are also the legacy of the region's pliable geology. Vibrant frescoes from the 8th-century punctuate its ecclesiastical honeycombs, while the architectural influence from the Byzantine and Norman eras is overlaid to startling effect throughout the town.

Proving Matera's unique history can still surprise in more recent times, guided tours explore Palombaro Lungo, a giant underground water cistern carved by hand in the 1860s. The massive complex was only rediscovered in 1991 with a children's playground and the town's central bus stop sitting atop the huge underground cavern for a few decades. Both have now been relocated, but Palombaro Lungo's towering subterranean arches remain a thrilling sight in one of Europe's most surprising emerging destinations.