

DOMENICO MATARRESE

POLIGNANO A MARE

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The landscape





Rising at the top of steep cliffs high above the sea, Polignano a Mare, “gem” of the Adriatic, is situated 30 km south of Puglia’s main city, Bari.

The municipal district has an approximately triangular shape and stretches across an area of 62.50 square kilometres. Its 16 km long coast stretch runs in north-west-southeast direction. The coastal plain gradually rises landwards up to reaching an elevation of 80 m a.s.l. and more. In this direction the municipal district projects into that of Castel-

lana Grotte, reaching an altitude of about 290 m a.s.l.

In relation to the area’s geology, the formations cropping out date from the Upper Cretaceous and have marine origins (Bari limestone, Altamura limestone, and Mola limestone); they make up the substrate of the entire Murge region. On them rest the Plio-Pleistocene units (Gravina calcarenite and Murge tufa with great amounts of fossil rests) and the terraced marine and continental units from the Middle-Upper Pleistocene and the Holocene.

In terms of morphology the coast appears extremely jagged. Steep, rocky shores alternate with low ones, reaching a maximum height of about 15 m to the north of the town, and 22-23 m near the historic district. This kind of morphology has been determined by tectonic processes, but is also the result of the combined action of sea and weather as well as karst phenomena.

What makes this shoreline landscape so peculiar are the high cliffs and caves resulting from the erosion of the calcareous and calcarenite



outcrops. The cliffs form a vertical rock face with a flat rocky platform at the top that displays a slight slope in direction of the sea. They run along most of Polignano's coastline, particularly between Chiar di luna and Torre Incina, at the border with the municipal district of Monopoli.

Here and there, the rocky platform is interrupted by the outlet of the so-called *lame*, namely shallow little streambeds that are usually dry and fill only after heavy rain. They are the only visible trace of surface

waters, which are mostly missing due to the features of the karst soil. As happens throughout the Apulian platform, water runs mostly underground through the fissures and hollows of the limestone.

The *lame* run mostly orthogonally to the coast and have a flat bottom, with vertical slopes and a drainage divide that is hard to define. Based on their size, there are larger *lame*, such as Cala Incina, Bagiolaro, Carbonelli, Lamafico, Santa Candida, Baldassarre, Macchialunga. Others are small-

er, like Pozzovivo, Monticello, Cala Sala or Portalga, Cala Messa, Sant'Oronzo or Monachile, Cala Pau-
ra, Lapilli, Torre Ciaffata, Cala San Giovanni, the Lamione, and Pozzo Cavalieri. The *lame* end at picturesque little sand or pebble beaches, once the seat of a thriving fishing business, now offering a shelter to the colourful *gozzi*, as the fishing boats are called, but serving above all as landing places for tourist boats and as popular lidos during the summer.

The cliffs looking south

Underground, the limestone of the Apulian platform holds a freshwater aquifer resting above saltwater intruding from the sea. Along the coast, the aquifer lies at sea level and when it flows under pressure, it is often associated with freshwater or brackish water springs in the sea.

The peculiarity of the coast

of Polignano a Mare is given by the presence of caves. There are about seventy of them at an active evolution stage. Many of them take up different levels on the cliff walls and are often the result of karst passages shaped by the erosion of the sea.

In terms of climate the area enjoys the typical weather of Mediterranean coast-

al regions with mild and rainy winters and hot and dry summers. The average annual temperature is $15/17^{\circ}\text{C}$, with the lowest in January (7°C) and the highest in August ($25^{\circ}/26^{\circ}\text{C}$) and wide average temperature ranges, both in diurnal and yearly terms ($19/20^{\circ}\text{C}$). Rainfall, which is less intense in summer (50/75



mm), is more frequent in autumn and winter (500/700 mm), with possible thunderstorms and hailstorms. The forming of frost is frequent, whereas snowfall is quite rare and mostly occurring in the months of January and February.

Associated with these climate conditions, along the coast and up to 200 m

a.s.l. the vegetation mainly includes evergreen trees, such as oaks (holm oak and downy oak), olive trees and typical species of the Mediterranean *macchia*, or scrub, such as evergreen bushes and shrubs growing in dense groups and often covered with thorns. Near the coast, where there is more humidity, we can find

marshland grasses (reed and semi-aquatic plants). Above the altitude of 200 metres we find little mixed woods or downy oak groves, instead. Intensive farming has significantly reduced the area covered with woods, and

The historic district rising from the steep cliffs





