

CARLOS SOLITO

SALENTO

Itineraries and Hiking Tours

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Introduction

Stunning the senses is a magic spell only few places are able to cast. The endless chirping of one, ten, a hundred, a thousand cicadas fills your ears. The rough, age-old stones rich in history are everywhere, ready to be caressed. The scents of the Mediterranean scrub and the salty breezes tickle your nostrils. The wild greens, the figs, almonds and pomegranates tempt your palate. Then, you open your eyes, and slivers of sun, between land and sea, dazzle you from dawn to sunset. A dry-stone wall populated by lizards and geckos. A dusty dirt road. The outcropping *chianconi*. Red soil. *Nnu pajanu*. A whitewashed farmhouse. Tufts of poppies, scented rosemary and the never missing age-old olive trees.

There's always an olive tree to introduce this region, from whichever side one approaches it. Everywhere in the Heel of Italy the countryside is enlivened by the silver flickering of olive leaves that have meant everything to this land over the centuries. Wise patriarchs, mothers, wealth, dignity, history, love, strength and obstinacy to "colonize" small patches of land amidst the hard stone, just like

the Salento people who have relied for centuries on a dignified lifestyle, on sacrifice and hard work. From the endless expanses of the Tavoliere Messapico to Capo di Santa Maria di Leuca, the places wouldn't have the same charm of lands that leave space for dreams, if there weren't the olive trees: twisted, knotty, rough, like an old bone. They embrace snow-white old villages, they shade aristocratic *masserie*, they conceal remains of the past, cover the entrances to caves, stand sentry in front of manor houses and castles, overlook the sea surrounded by Mediterranean fragrances, climb the Serre ridge competing with the arrogance of the limestone. Penetrating into these woods, roaming them, getting lost in them, always conveys a surreal feeling. A picture in pastel tones able to keep us spellbound, where the major actor is always the same, the olive tree, the undisputed king of this landscape and its history. And then the wind... oh, how windy it is down here!

A countryside dressed by the wind, between the two seas, the Adriatic and the Ionian. Duality is a constant aspect of Salento. Opposites, polarity, but above all union find in this corner of Apulia their



The tower of Roca Vecchia dominates the turquoise-coloured bay bearing its name



true stronghold. The ambivalent meaning of this number has made history, reconciling the opposites par excellence: East and West. Since time immemorial a crossroads of peoples, there is no place in the so-called Heel of Italy where the imprint of past civilizations is not evident. The coasts and the interior are full of the traces left by man in the course of millennia, tracing a clear sequence of epochs starting from the Stone Age.

In the remote Palaeolithic, the hunters that frequented the Romanelli cave carved some pictures into the limestone cave walls, which vaguely suggest the surreal image of this easternmost tip of Italy made up of savannah and swamps, populated by hippopotami, elephants and lions. Not far from there, in the same age, the Cavallo caves in Baia di Uluzzo on the Ionian Sea were frequented by Neanderthals who expressed with exceptional skill the Mousterian culture on numerous pebbles and flint nodules. The humans of the Neolithic chose the Grotta dei Cervi (Deer Cave) of Porto Badisco to consecrate a downright sanctuary where to worship the lifecycle through cave paintings. To call back to mind the Bronze Age across the whole peninsula, instead, are all those scattered dolmens, menhirs and *specchie* (stone piles) with chamber tombs set up by an Indo-European population that had reached this area passing the Alps first, and then migrating further south along the Adriatic ridge. The first to settle per-

manently the peninsula around the 5th century BC were the Messapians (*people between the two seas*) who were coming from Illyria; they founded cities enclosed by cyclopean walls and engaged in agriculture, horse breeding and pottery with significant affinities with the Greek world. In fact, already before the arrival of Greek settlers in the 8th century BC – who founded Gallipoli and further north Taranto, two cities bound to become the small capitals of Magna Graecia – trade relationships along the Adriatic routes were already well developed.

With the arrival of the Romans between 300 and 250 BC the entire peninsula's strategic significance reached its utmost recognition. The system of roads coming from Rome was enlarged, a great number of *municipia* was established, and ports like San Cataldo and Roca were built. At the same time, agriculture was subjected to a strict organization, soon boasting a sensational production of olive oil exported throughout the Mediterranean. After the fall of the Western Roman Empire in 476 AD, at the dawn of the Middle Ages, the Byzantines began exerting their strong influence starting from the 6th century, right after the Gothic war (535–553), a war strongly pursued by Emperor Justinian. The Byzantines expanded their power over an increasingly vast area, at the same time importing their customs, language and religion. Otranto became the most im-

portant bridge to the Orient, replacing the role of the Roman *Brundisium*, the end station of the Appian and Trajan Roads. After the fights in the 8th and 9th centuries against the Lombards who had conquered Apulia's central and northern portions, the Byzantines promoted the arrival of a new migratory wave from Greece, which has left the heritage of a linguistic enclave (the *griko*) reflected by language and toponymy, and a culture rooted in architecture, cuisine, dances, folk music and religious life: the *Grecia Salentina*. In those days also monks arrived from the Orient, persecuted by the iconoclastic struggle initiated by Leo III the Isaurian who had ordered the destruction of sacred images to fight what was considered – instead of worship – a downright superstition and idolatry. Thousand of hermits of the order of St Basil fled to Salento and other regions in southern Italy hiding in isolated spots like hills, forests, caves or dugouts where to keep practising their cult.

After a brief period under Lombard rule in the late 6th century, the Middle Ages were marked by the Norman conquest which turned the region into a feudal system with the establishment of counties. Architecture was deeply renewed as well with the building of castles, churches and defensive walls. This was the time when the cathedral of Otranto with its precious mosaic was built. Then Salento was ruled by the Swabians, the Anjous and the Aragonese. It experienced its

worst period in history under the Spanish dynasty, when the Saracens started raiding the Salento coasts. The bloodiest attack was that of the Sack of Otranto in 1480. So, all along the coast a great number of towers began being built to sight the sails of terror and let out the cry of alarm *mamma li Turchi* ('My God, the Turks'). From the 16th to the early 18th centuries, Salento and particularly the city of Lecce, often called "little Naples", experienced the great age of the Baroque, marked by the spreading of sumptuous architectural city sceneries rich in palaces and churches which were literally chiselled thanks to the pliable local stone, to celebrate beauty and exalt the temporal and religious powers with spectacular means.

History. History. History. The Salento region is really full of it, manifesting itself in the cities' historical districts, along the coast and in the interior. But this flat peninsula also displays a rich nature with many different facets, just like the most precious of diamonds. To discover this place, ambassador of the East in the West and vice versa, any excuse is good. Take your time, and enjoy the sun, the sea, the wind.

The sea of Capo di Leuca seen
from a terrace of dry-stone
walls full of flowers



NATURE AND LANDSCAPES

