

# ITALY: BIKING IN PUGLIA



As our band of a dozen gay cyclists glided over the bleached stone pavement of the strangely silent seaside city of Trani, worn smooth by a thousand years, and as we wheeled along its waterfront, stopping to tour a mysterious medieval church where the Knights Templar—already on horseback—would leave the altar with the blessing of the bishop sending them directly onto a ship bound for the Crusades, I thought about all my worrying before embarking on a week of bicycling through the magical towns and scenic countryside of Puglia, an unspoiled province on the Adriatic coast of southern Italy.

Well accustomed to cruising around flat Fort Lauderdale at a leisurely pace, I booked Alyson Adventures' Puglia Villa & Biking Experience with some hesitance. Did I have the stamina at age 61 for this type of vacation? Would I be twice as old as the other guests? What if I got winded during one of the daily cycling excursions to nearby towns? What if I got a flat tire? What if my back goes out? What if I don't like the company, the food, the room or the pool at the luxurious Villa

Cappelli which was occupied exclusively by our group of gay men for the entire week? Is the description on Alyson's website accurate or colorized? The older I get the more time I spend fretting, in this case needlessly. I recommend this trip for anyone who loves to bicycle, loves the thought of meandering roads through endless olive groves and vineyards, loves exploring quirky little ancient cities and loves the idea of excellent gay companionship in the context of an elegantly renovated 14th century stone villa on the ancient Apennine Way.

The dozen men who shared the week with me ranged in age from 20s to 60s with no one feeling alienated or left in the dust. They were friendly, intelligent, enthusiastic, sexy single men and couples who like to explore, laugh and enjoy life immensely.

On our daily excursions, rarely did anyone decide that the pace or length of the ride was uncomfortable, but if so, our handsome Italian road crew was always with us and ready to collect the weary fellow into the van and place his bike on the flatbed until he was ready to jump back into the pack.

Our Italian guides kept us safely off main thoroughfares and away from traffic as often as possible. Cycling the rustic country roads of Puglia is hypnotic. Drawn into the endless stretches of olive groves, vineyards and ancient ruins, the mind is easily transported to the zones of euphoria that all cyclists crave but rarely enjoy at home because of the constant need to dodge buses, taxis, pedestrians and uncut curbs.

We were careful riders, but our vigilant guides chose idyllic routes that allowed for plenty of pauses to pinch the wild arugula, rosemary or fennel growing by the road, to photograph another vista, another church, another ancient ruin, to rehydrate or snack from the van that always shadowed us. This is cycling minus the hardships.

I will admit that I was often tempted to skip the biking and submit to the pampering of our hosts at the Villa Cappelli where the gardens, groves, pool, terraces and al fresco dining room were a pleasant way to start and end each day.

We were constantly surprised and delighted by the food and wine served by owners/partners Paul

Cappelli and Steve Crutchfield who are justifiably proud of the culinary products including olive oil, gourmet spreads and wine produced at the villa. Paul, whose family is from the region, was always eager to share his deep knowledge of its history and to show us around his favorite towns and restaurants. Steve, "Capo of the Kitchen," constantly surprised us with his expert delivery of southern Italian cooking.

I vow to return to the scent of jasmine or freshly baked rustic bread wafting into my bedroom through open windows, to the taste of olives grown and cured at the villa and for another glass of their robust red "Nero di Puglia" wine.

We weren't always on our bikes. We inspected the underground ruins beneath Gravina, a cliff city carved out of tuffo stone. We walked among the exotic *tulli* (comical stone turrets) of Alberobello. We spent an afternoon laughing and giving into the irresistible aquamarine water of the secluded beach of Polignano di Mare. We picnicked in the pine forest of La Murgia National Park. We climbed to the top of the mysterious pentagonal Castel del Monte built high on a bluff by knights charged with protecting the Holy Grail.

We wandered the narrow stone streets of fascinating Matera carved into a valley like a stone bowl to save every precious raindrop for the long annual dry spell. We spent a few evenings relaxing and strolling through convivial Terlizzi before returning to our villa in the country for a late night dip in the pool and peaceful sleep to restore our energy for the next day's adventures.

*Still afraid to book a gay cycling vacation because of some dreadful vision of a pack of grim triathletes in flashy spandex?*

*If so, snap out of it and reserve a spot on the next available Alyson Adventures "Puglia Villa & Biking Experience" tour.*

*In 2013, there are two tours planned: one for gay men and the other for gay men, lesbians and friends.*

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