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THE SASSI AND THE PARK OF RUPESTRIAN CHURCHES OF MATERA

“The two funnels, I learned, were called Sasso Caveoso and Sasso Barisano. They were like a schoolboy’s idea of Dante’s Inferno. And, like Dante, I too began to go down from circle to circle, by a sort of mule path leading to the bottom. [...] the alleys in the narrow space between them and the hillside did double service: they were a roadway for those who came out of their houses from above and a roof for those who lived beneath.”

Christ Stopped at Eboli, Carlo Levi

Visiting Matera today is a cultural and anthropological experience at the same time. Several geological eras seem to have passed since that far-off 1935, when Carlo Levi visited the city, recording those impressions which still surprise us by their sharpness and liveliness. From a place of “national shame” according to Palmiro Togliatti, to a stop that cannot be missed on the modern Grand Tour, European Capital of Culture in 2019 and a highly coveted location for films and TV series, Matera is now the symbol of a redemption which has few like it in Italy. Before being moved to modern neighbourhoods after the war, thousands of Matera’s inhabitants lived crowded together with their animals in damp and foul-smelling grottos, facing terrible hygienic conditions and with a high rate of child mortality. The path of this rebirth was long, but has produced amazing results (to tell the truth, many directors, from Pier Paolo Pasolini to Mel Gibson, had already been bewitched by one of the oldest and most stratified cities in the world). For more than two thousand years and without interruption, the slopes of the ravine had housed people in natural or artificial shelters: it was exceptional town-planning, made up of cave-homes, rupestrian churches and tanks for rainwater dug below ground level, while places of worship and buildings stood on the surface.

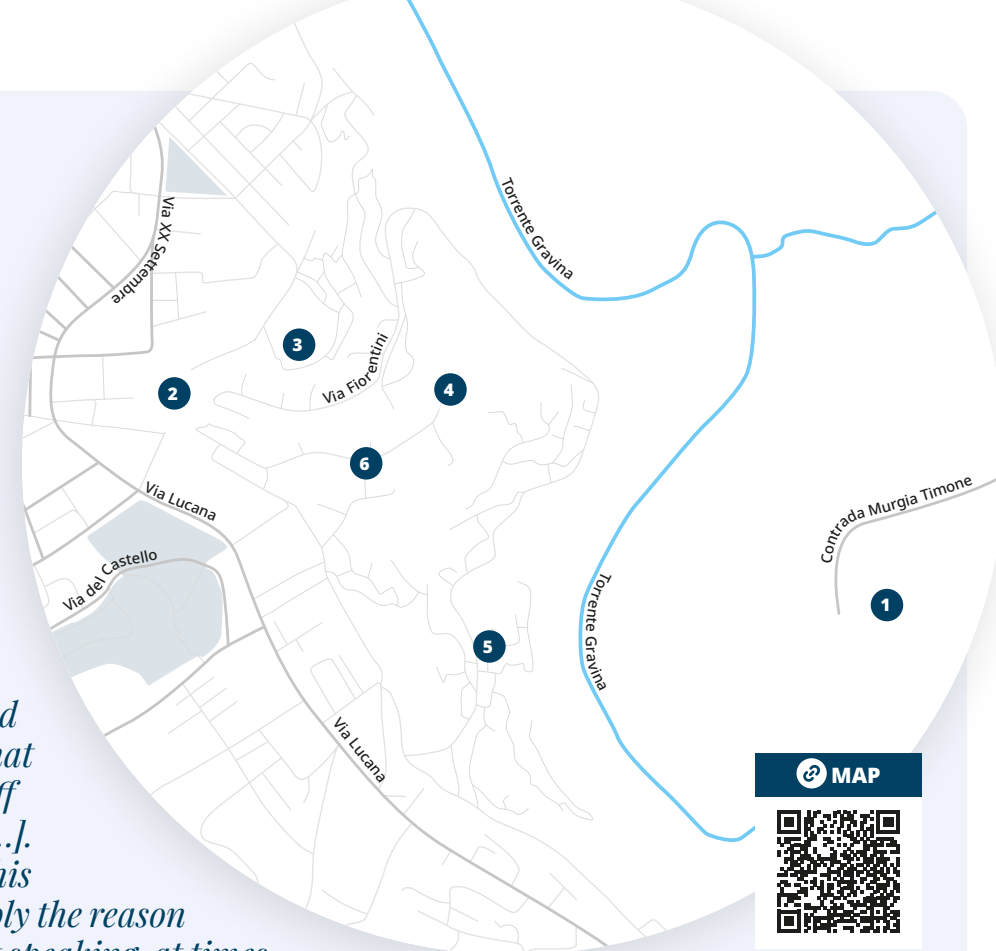


CULTURAL HERITAGE

UNESCO DOSSIER: 670
PLACE OF INSCRIPTION: CARTAGENA, COLOMBIA
DATE OF INSCRIPTION: 1993



CRITERIA FOR SELECTION: The Sassi and the Park of Rupestrian Churches of Matera are an exceptional example of a rocky settlement that has perfectly adapted to both the geomorphological context and the ecosystem, with a continuity of over two thousand years.



“As if with time it was condensed and became matter, silence is exactly what the ravines of Craco [...], and the tuff of the Sassi of Matera are made of [...]. The whole of Basilicata is made of this immaterial substance and is probably the reason why its inhabitants, when they start speaking, at times never stop. Silence can drive a person mad.”

For a contemporary approach to Matera and the character of its inhabitants, there can be nothing better than to read *Come piante tra i sassi* and the other volumes in the tetralogy (so far) by Mariolina Venezia, featuring the deputy public prosecutor Imma Tataranni.

Every visit to Matera that is worthy of the name itself starts from two points. From the panoramic viewpoint of **1 Murgia Timone**, the view over the city-Nativity scene is breath-taking. The plateau is the heart of the Park of Rupestrian Churches of Matera, a fascinating natural habitat excavated over thousands of years and eroded by the flow of the waters, where there are abundant traces of remote human presence. Moving to the city, on the opposite side of the ravine, looking from the viewing point in **2 Piazza Vittorio Veneto**, reveals the extraordinary urban layout of Matera: the huge amphitheatre of the **3 Sasso Barisano**, so called because it looks towards the capital of the Apulia region, opens up below. On the highest hill, the Civita, the **4 Cathedral** with its very tall bell-tower

is dominant; a masterpiece of Apulian Romanesque, it is a real treasure-trove: frescoes from the 13th and 14th centuries, decorated capitals, Renaissance sculptures and an exuberant 18th century facing. In the heart of this Sasso, there is the **church of St Peter Barisano**, almost fully dug out of the rock. The earlier of the two old parts of Matera is the **5 Sasso Caveoso**: to go into it, the best route is along the sensational and panoramic Via Buozzi. Here typical examples of “neighbourhoods” are concentrated – households looking on to the same enclosed courtyard – and various rupestrian sites: the circular view of the spur of Monterrone is fabulous, with **St Mary of Idris** partially dug out in the stone and, linked to this by a tunnel, **St John in Monterrone**, with the precious frescoes of full-figure saints. Then there

is the **church of St Peter Caveoso**, which dangerously looks on to the ravine. To complete your visit of Matera, you must not overlook **6 Il Piano**, a neighbourhood that expanded when the population increased and the city was made regional capital (1663). The area is full of attractions such as the **Palazzo del Sedile**, but above all there are a couple of beautiful places of worship, like **St John the Baptist’s church** with the precious Romanesque forms of the 13th century, and **St Francis’s church**, which is ostentatiously Baroque. To come full circle with history, it is worth remembering Carlo Levi in the **National Museum of Medieval and Modern Art** in Palazzo Lanfranchi: the very long painting *Lucania '61* is a vibrant tribute by the artist to the poet Rocco Scotellaro and to this entire land.



A TANGLE OF STONES AND DREAMS

“The houses are flowers of stone. Small houses, like bees’ cells. Crystals of tuff. An anxious rocky cobweb where men and animals fought with their breath against the damp that came from below. A landscape of wrinkles and folds. A peat bog of fumes and mud in the winter and clay in the summer, clay and dust, crevices and dung. Now, without the smoke, without the effluents of history, the tuff looks clean, deprived of the patina that time and its inhabitants had slipped on to it.”

Geografia commossa dell’Italia interna, Franco Arminio

Franco Arminio, the great modern singer of the poetry of villages and towns “on the sidelines”, reads Matera through the aesthetic of poverty. Even though today there is no longer any trace of that past, the signs can still be seen on every occasion. A visit to Matera, therefore, must never be hurried, because underneath the glossy surface of a showcase-city for tourism, there hides a profound soul with many layers, exactly like its Sassi.



"HUNDREDS OF HOUSES, ALMOST ALL OF THEM IN WHITE STONE, WERE CLINGING TO THE SIDE OF AN ESCARPMENT. IT LOOKED LIKE ONE HUGE JIGSAW PUZZLE OF REDDISH ROOFS AND WHITE FACADES, WITH EMPTY WINDOWS. IT ALL GAVE THE IMPRESSION OF ORGANISED CHAOS, OF CONFUSION REGULATED BY A DARK ORDER WHICH OBEYED LAWS OF ITS OWN."

Observe the panorama of Matera as Licia Troisi describes it in *L'ultima battaglia*. From the observation point of **1 Murgia Timone**, the city will look like a strange honeycomb made of stone. The hill facing you is full of holes and so are the facades of the houses. Men have lived in these grottoes since the remotest of times, just as the lesser kestrels have sought refuge in the cavities between the stones. Keep your eyes peeled and binoculars ready: when, slightly trembling, you cross the **2 Tibetan bridge** over the stream, you might be able to spot one. Once you have conquered the city on the other side of the ravine, spend a few moments getting to know its story,

starting from its most recent history. In the **3 Vicinato Cave House**, you will discover the harsh living conditions of the inhabitants who, before the renovation and the boost given to tourism, were forced to share their poor homes with their domestic animals. Matera is truly a very ancient city: this will be confirmed when you visit the small but fascinating **4 Racconti in Pietra (Tales in Rock) Museum**, where you journey back in time to fossils and dinosaurs and 3D reconstructions. On the other hand, if you want to meet Giuliana, go to the **5 Domenico Ridola National Archaeological Museum**.

Who is Giuliana? She is a whale that was found in 2008 on the shores of the Lake of San Giuliano, a few kilometres away. This "lady of the depths", which lived about a million and a half years ago, weighed more or less 150 tons and was 26 m long: it was therefore the most gigantic living being to ever grace the waters of the Mediterranean. A cartoon, an immersive video and a videogame have also been dedicated to Giuliana of the Depths. There are also two fantastic reconstructions of a grotto and of a Neolithic hut in the same museum. The time has come to go below ground. After having been distracted by the view in Piazza Vittorio Veneto, take the steps that lead into the **6 Palombaro Lungo**, a system of underground caves full of water: you will discover an upside-down world right under the city.

As you might most certainly be a little tired after all these emotions, get on an Ape Calessino motorbike to run up and down the Sassi; these fascinating labyrinths of stone and dreams are called Barisano and Caveoso and are the two historic neighbourhoods of Matera. Before leaving them, spend some time visiting **7 La Palomba Sculpture Park**, an old stone quarry where truly surprising contemporary works of art spring up as if by magic.



THE SASSI OF MATERA in books

Suggestions for further reading to get to know the city of the Sassi.

- **Christ Stopped at Eboli**, Carlo Levi (1945). An essential classic to get to know Basilicata and Matera. A writer, doctor and painter, in his bitter experience of exile, Levi leaves descriptions of society in the 1930s which still cannot be bettered.
- **Come piante tra i sassi** (2009), **Maltempo** (2013), **Rione Serra Venerdì** (2018), **Via del Riscatto** (2019), **Ecchecavolo** (2021), Mariolina Venezia. These books focused on the character of Imma Tataranni, deputy public prosecutor of Matera, are an entertaining and very up-to-date slice of life in Matera and Basilicata. A highly successful television series based on the books was made by RAI (Italian State Television).
- **Gardens of Stone**, Pietro Laureano (2012). Written by one of the great scholars of the subject, this is an in-depth study on the architectures of stone, excavated or built, which characterise Matera and many corners of the Mediterranean and form an element of strong identity.

- **Geografia commossa dell'Italia interna**, Franco Arminio (2013). The writer describes Italian villages, starting from the emotions that the human and natural landscapes arouse in him.

- **Guida indipendente alla città di Matera**, Simonetta Sciandivasci (2018). Fresh and frivolous, this tells the story of an underground, unknown and surprising Matera. Beautifully illustrated by Marta Pantaleo, it is a guidebook for slightly more "demanding" explorers.

- **La ballata dei sassi**, Carlos Solito (2018). Two fates cross paths in the city of stone. Ettore, a mysterious writer, returns to the land of his birth after many years and sows his verses to the wind. Maria makes it her job to collect them in a poetic treasure hunt.

- **Andare per Matera e la Basilicata**, Eliana Di Caro (2019). The journalist from Matera takes her readers around the city and the whole of the region, in the company of the figures who have indelibly marked the imagination: Carlo Levi, Pier Paolo Pasolini, Giovanni Pascoli and many others.

- **Matera. Le radici e la memoria**, Francesco Niglio (2019). To discover the Matera of peasants, craftsmen and shepherds, that of the 1950s and 60s, still a very long way from that international fame.

Children's books:

- **L'ultima battaglia**, Licia Troisi (2012). The fifth and last book in the saga of *La ragazza drago*, also has a chapter set in Matera, one of the places where the main characters go to discover the fragments of the fruit of Thuban.

- **Matera 21 settembre 1943**, Pino Oliva (2014). Matera was the first city in the south of Italy to rebel against Nazi-Fascism. This lovely graphic novel is dedicated to true events that took place in those frantic and dramatic days, reconstructed by the historian Francesco Ambrico.

- **Il licantropo di Matera** (2020). The Sassi, with their alleys and their innate mystery, are the ideal setting for this horror story with werewolves and vampires in the cartoon series *Dampyr*.

- **Pimpa va a Matera**, Altan (2022). The little spotty dog goes walking through the city of the Sassi, discovering churches dug out of the rocks, ancient traditions and fabulous views.

- **Topolino e il segreto dei Sassi** (2022). Matera is the star of this issue of the Mickey Mouse magazine. The most famous cartoon mouse leaves Texas for the city of the Sassi to solve the case of the kidnapping of Uncle Rocco.



KIDS

