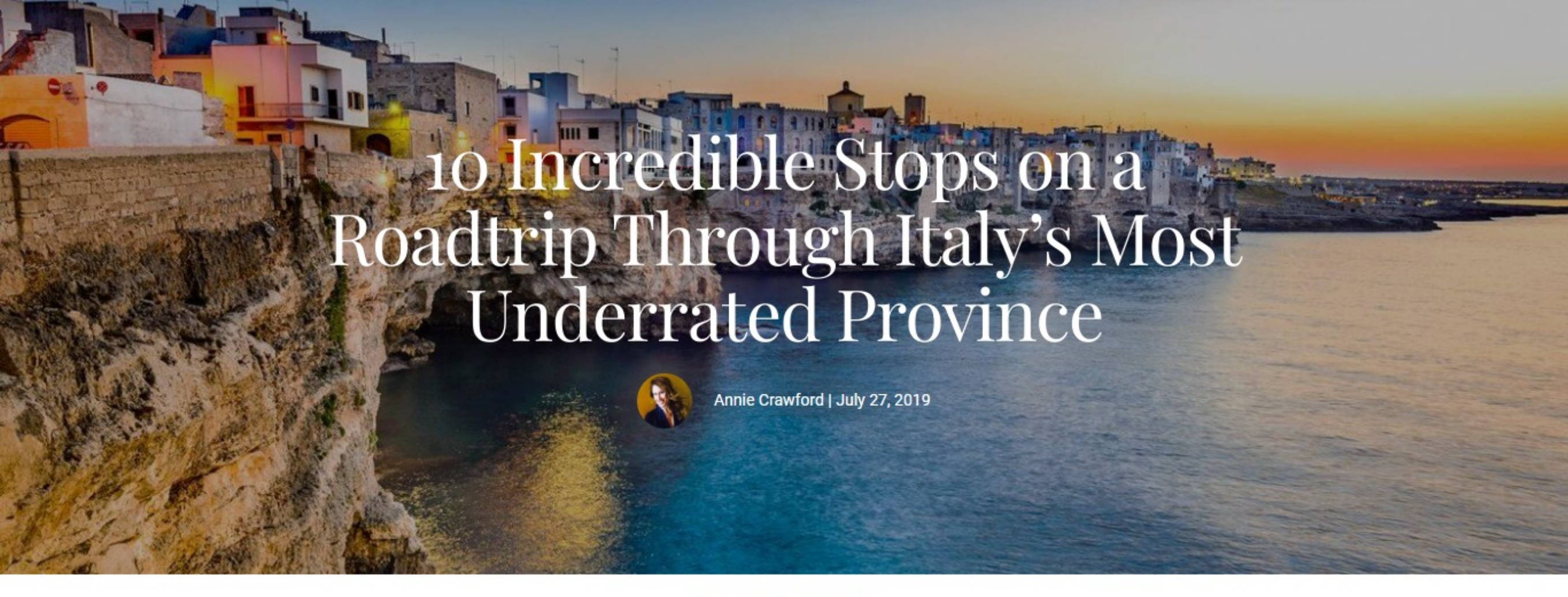
10 Incredible Stops on a Roadtrip Through Italy's Most Underrated Province



Annie Crawford | July 27, 2019

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Perfect Puglia. Azure water, warm beaches, and history for days (millennia, really). It's affordable, friendly, and right for a road trip.

Just hours from Rome, the beauty and warmth of Puglia awaits.

Puglia—aka Italy's boot heel—features affordable food and lodging, famous Southern Italian hospitality, and short drives (often one hour or less) between mind-blowing destinations. Envision warm turquoise waters, soft sandy beaches, hyper-local farm to table food culture, and historical sites scattered all around, casually dating back three millennia. Explore the southern half of Puglia by way of a relaxing road trip. The plan stays in the vibrant cities of Lecce and Ostuni then take daylong excursions into the surrounding country and seaside. Public transit in Puglia is minimal, so your own ride means unfettered access to all the glory.

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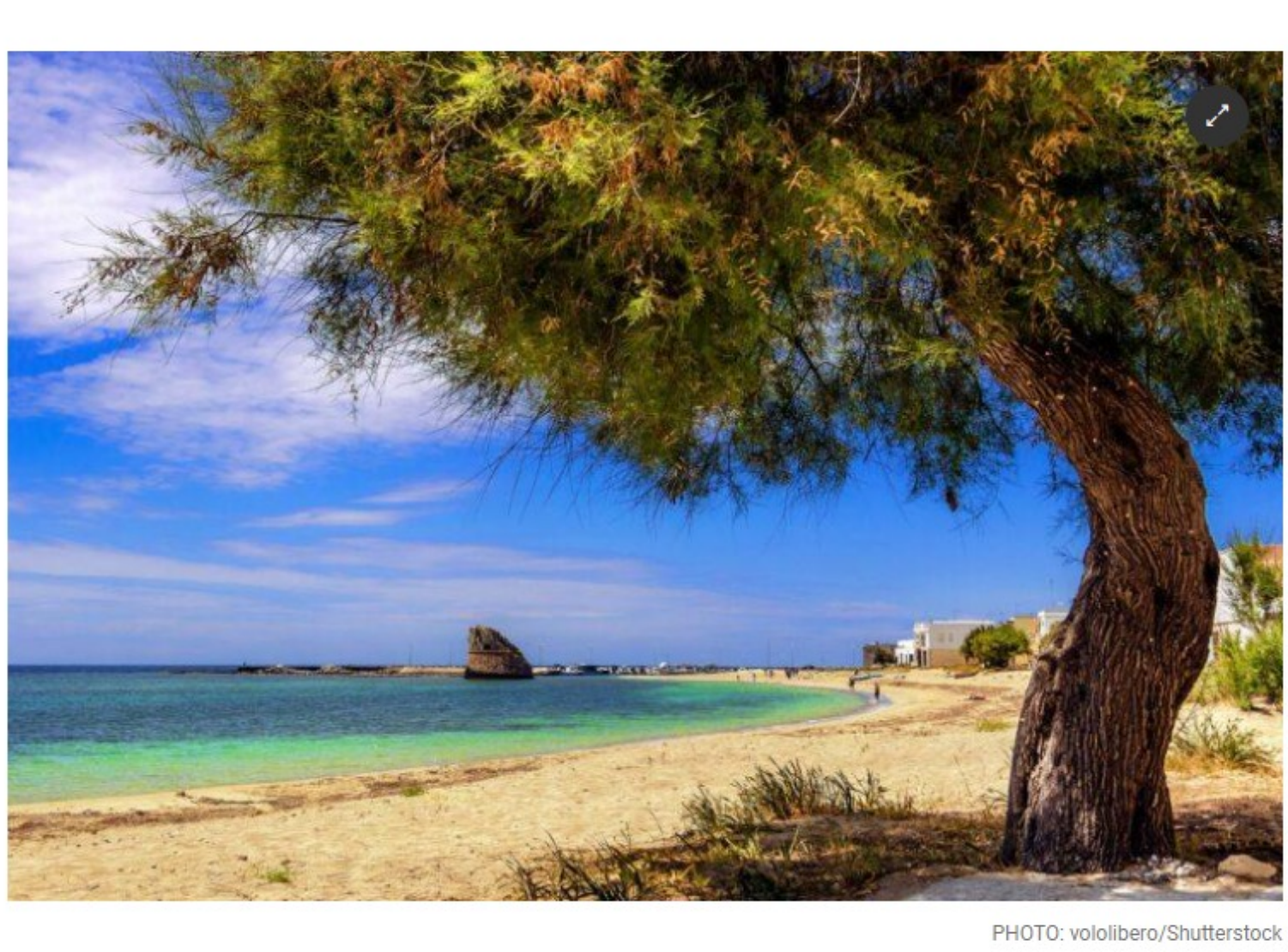
1 OF 11

Lecce

WHERE: Province of Lecce

Lovely Lecce with its rich, baroque architecture is particularly resplendent at sundown, thanks to the honey-hued glow of its regional limestone. The distinctive architectural style—as seen on the Basilica of the Holy Cross or in the Piazza del Duomo—is known as Barocco Leccese, and features elaborate facades and effusive imagery from the natural (and supernatural) world carved from Lecce limestone.

Stroll the cobblestone streets while sipping a sweetly refreshing *caffè in ghiaccio*, an almond-cream iced coffee native to Lecce. Relax on the patio of Caffè Alvino eating *pasticciotto*, a locally loved vanilla custard-filled breakfast pastry. Overlook the ruins of an ancient Roman amphitheater in Piazza Sant'Oronzo. Lecce is the provincial capital of the Salento region, and although landlocked, it's the ideal headquarters for day trips to the Ionian Coast, the Santa Cesare hot springs, mystical swim grottoes, and Otranto, because at night the streets come alive with music and artisan vendors and fabulous people watching. Lecce is 385 miles from Rome or 95 miles from Bari airport.



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2 OF 11

Ionian Sea Beaches

WHERE: Lecce

The Ionian Sea swims between the heel and arch of Italy's boot. The soft white sand and crystal clear waters make for summer perfection. More protected than Puglia's Adriatic Coast, the Ionian beaches are a well-known secret in Southern Italy (but not too well-known beyond). A mere 25 miles from Lecce, the beaches of Porto Cesareo are particularly stunning with inviting water temperatures, shallow sea beds, and typically gentle waves. Beach Torre Lapillo is a standout in this string of jewels. You can hunt for a free, public beach (parking can be the real challenge here) or pay a nominal fee to a *lido* (a maintained, private beach) for parking and use of a lounger and umbrella. One sparkling pick is the Bahia Porto Cesareo with fun inflatables for rent, a restaurant and bar, DJs in the evening, and azure water as far as the eye can see.

INSIDER TIP

July and August are holiday months for Italy and other European countries, so arrive early for a waterfront spot.

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3 OF 11

Santa Cesarea Terme

WHERE: Lecce

Soak in the healing waters of the Santa Cesarea thermal springs while overlooking the cerulean waters of the Straits of Otranto—yes life really can be this sweet. Here the Adriatic and Ionian Seas meet and natural hot springs bubble up from below the rocky ocean cliffside, forming four natural caves of warm mineral waters. Slip into your swim cap and get to healing in the temperature-controlled sulfur pool of the Terme di Santa Cesarea. Floating in the pool carved high into the sea cliff you'll soak away your worries. Spa treatments are available at the related spa. Only 30 miles from Lecce, this is an amazing all day adventure.

INSIDER TIP

Use your spa entry ticket to pop into Lido Caicco right next door, where a grotto forms the perfect natural seawater swimming pool, sun loungers await you on the terraced cliff side, and the cutest cocktail spot and cafe awaits you with spectacular views.

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4 OF 11

Grotto della Poesia

WHERE: Lecce

This natural swimming hole is pure poetry. Jump 15 feet off the rocky lip into a protected pool, formed from a 100-foot sinkhole elliptical in shape. For the non-jumpers in your crew, there's a staircase carved into the stone down to the crystal clear water. Swim through the tunnel connecting the Grotto della Poesia to the open sea and marvel at nature's perfection. Bring your snorkel or scuba gear, bring your towel and picnic, and lounge on the rocky promontory between jumping and swimming. It's an easy 20-mile drive from Lecce, but plan to take the day tooling around and taking in the sights. You'll be just two miles north of the soft, sandy (and also busy) beaches of Torre dell'Orso. Grotto della Poesia is a historic place of worship associated with the nearby archaeological site of Roca Vecchia dating back to the 2nd millennium B.C.

INSIDER TIP

Many come to (sun) worship at this ancient site, so come earlier in the day if you're seeking solace. Be sure to pack a towel, refreshments, and umbrella as there are no services or shade onsite.

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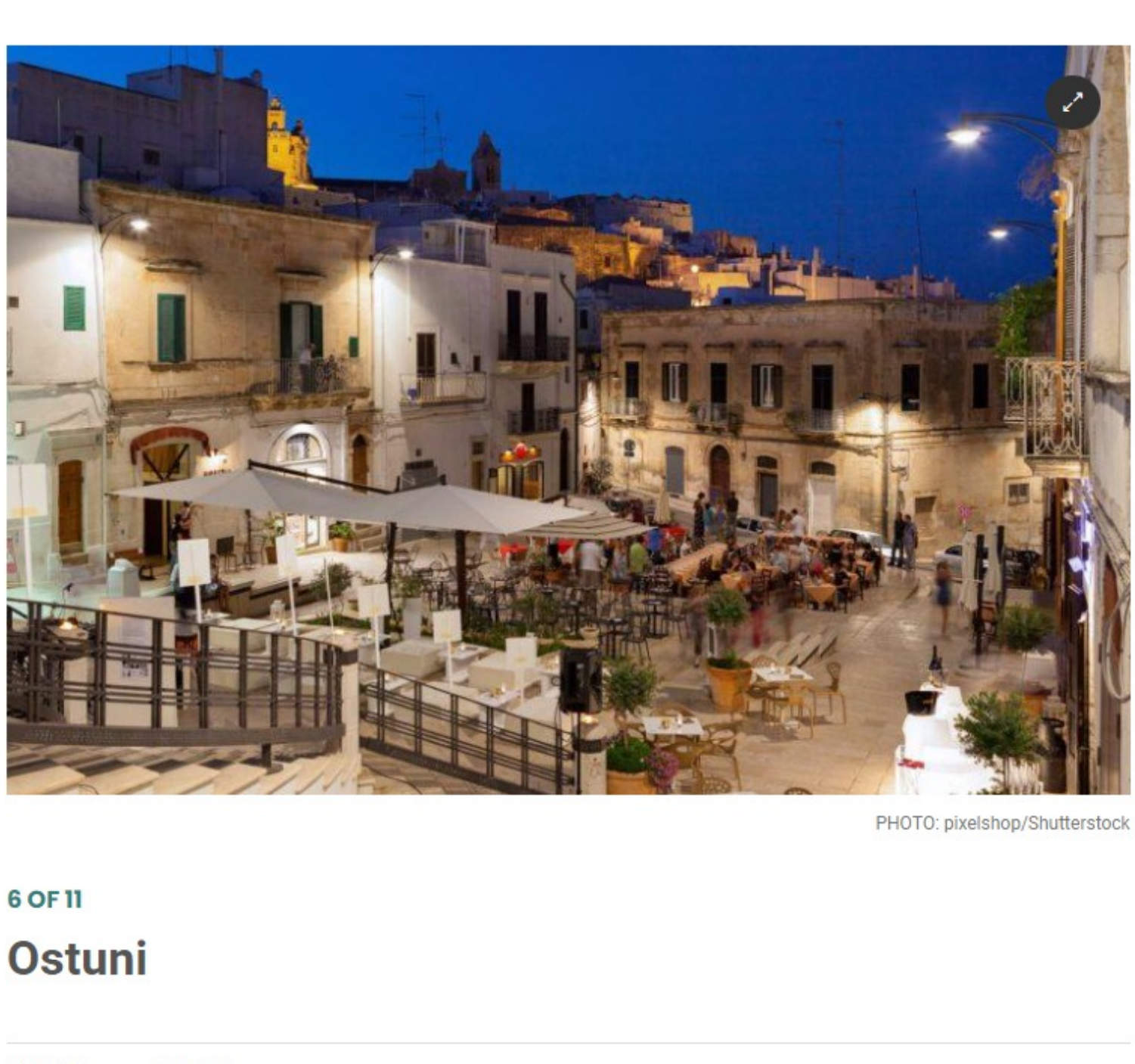
5 OF 11

Otranto

WHERE: Lecce

This fortressed town straddles the Straits of Otranto where the Adriatic and Ionian Seas meet. The easternmost part of Italy, Otranto was a strategic site in the ancient world, and everyone from the Illyrians, Greeks, Romans, Turks, and Normans have battled for and ruled the city—leaving behind their cultural and architectural marks. Step into the Cathedral of Otranto to view the massive Tree of Life floor mosaic dating back to the 12th century. Tucked further inside the cathedral you'll find a shrine of more than 800 skulls, an homage to the Martyrs of Otranto killed in the 1481 invasion by the Ottoman Turks. The narrow streets of the historic old town bustle with visitors in high season, so tuck away into the welcome retreat of Arbor Vitae's garden patio. Their refreshments and upscale seafood bites are divine. It's 30 miles from Lecce, and there are public beaches, so pack your suit if you fancy an ocean dip under the castle walls.



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6 OF 11

Ostuni

WHERE: Brindisi

Ostuni, La Citta Bianca, is a hilltop city famed for its whitewashed walls and buildings. The beautiful, bright white architecture seems to glow as the evening comes on. In addition to its beauty, the city is vibrant with locals and visitors and the tiny streets are packed with energy—especially during summer afternoons and evenings. Inhabited since the Stone Age, the "current" city walls were constructed during the Middle Ages. Wander the meandering tangle of cobblestone streets, take in the stunning sunset views, and enjoy the Saturday market stocked full of the region's freshest produce. Tomatoes, plums, fava beans, olive oil and more await you. Ostuni is 50 miles northwest of Lecce and makes a fine landing pad for adventures exploring the more northern reaches of the area.

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7 OF 11

Masseria Brancati

WHERE: Ostuni, Brindisi

Sip liquid gold at Masseria Brancati, an organic olive farm just down the road from Ostuni's hilltop perch. The delicious and informative tour is part agricultural experience and part historical immersion. Masserie are historic farming estates, walled to protect against invaders in centuries past. Many are now converted to luxury hotels, some are dedicated to agritourism, but all speak to the agricultural heritage of the region and the love Apulians have for their locally grown produce. On this farm tour, you'll see monumental olive trees (one dated at over 2,500 years old) and learn about harvest and olive oil production. The farm dates back to Roman times and the owners have maintained the ancient modes of olive oil production used on site from the 1st century B.C. to the late 19th century. At the end, you'll taste the farm's organic olive oil produced by the very olive trees you just met. The farm is a four-mile drive from Ostuni.

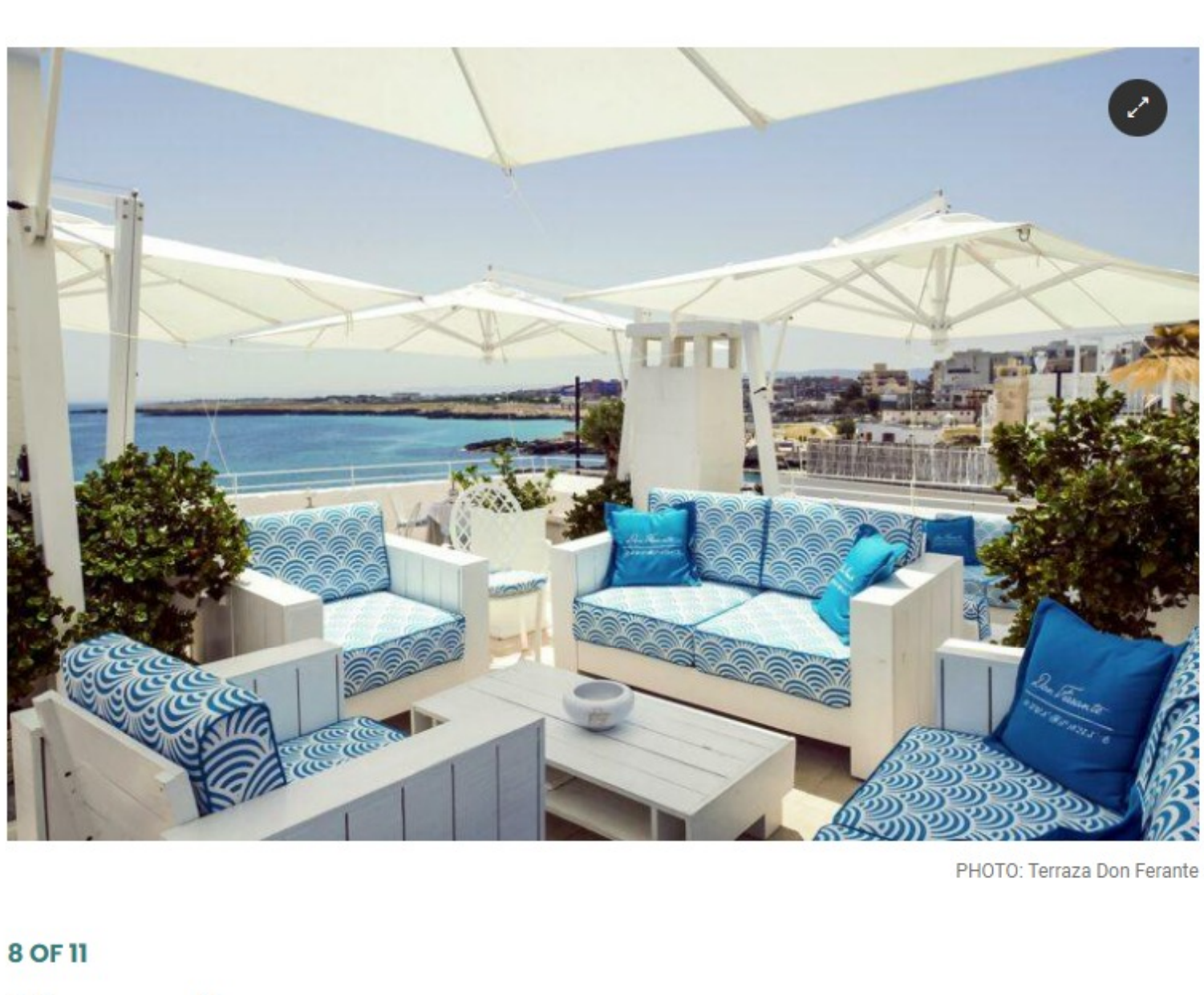

PHOTO: Terraza Don Ferrante

8 OF 11

Monopoli

WHERE: Bari

First settled in 500 B.C., the turquoise waters and charming historic center of Monopoli provide an intriguing day trip just 25 miles outside of Ostuni. A seafaring city, the active port still has the traditional wood fishing boats painted blue and red. Shop and eat and explore and take in the sights, but once you've filled up on culture, have a rooftop drink at the absolutely dreamy Terraza Don Ferrante. Furnished in the Mediterranean style with potted prickly pear cactus and gorgeous views, it's the best way to end your day.

PHOTO: The Archconfraternity of Death

9 OF 11

The Archconfraternity of Death

WHERE: Oria, Brindisi

Add a sepulchral stop to your Puglia explorations with a visit to an underground crypt. Inside the Romanesque and Baroque architecture of the Basilica of Santa Maria Assunta you'll find a small side door leading to the oratory of the Archconfraternity of Death. Below this is a crypt, where 22, black-robed, mummified members of the brotherhood of death hang on open display. The brotherhood formed in 1484 to celebrate soldiers returning from battle against the Ottoman Turks, as time would pass "newer" mummies would be placed on display and the elders would be buried under the crypt. The organization meets to this day, organizing a Holy Week parade through the town of Oria. And though women can now be members, mummification has not been practiced since the late 19th century. Oria is 19 miles outside of Ostuni.

INSIDER TIP

Papier-mâché is an elevated art form in Puglia, and the statues depicting the crucifixion of Christ in the oratory are particularly elaborate. Arrange ahead if you would like an English-speaking guide available.

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10 OF 11

Alberobello

WHERE: Bari

Travel back in time with a visit to Alberobello, the UNESCO heritage site known for its corbelled, mortarless architecture. The conical roofs and rounded, whitewashed buildings are unique to the city. Visit the Museo del Territorio for a deep dive into the history, construction of, and life inside these fascinating structures. As an added bonus, you get free entry to the Museo Dell'olio, a mini-museum highlighting olive oil production—just ask about it when you're at the main museum. Only 20 miles outside of Ostuni, this is a perfect day trip.

INSIDER TIP

Alberobello is popular. For a less commercialized experience, start in the Rione Aia Piccola district before making your way over to Rione Monti where the shops and souvenirs are. Be sure to bring coins to donate if you tour one of the inhabited trulli and consider packing an umbrella for the unshaded streets if it's high summer.

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11 OF 11

Traveling in Puglia

Rent a car in Rome or Bari (the two closest airports) to drive through this magical land. Be sure you have GPS or arrange for internet connectivity prior to departing, as road maps and street signs could lead you in circles. Driving in Puglia is not panic-inducing like a jaunt through Rome's traffic, but be aware that drivers drive on the center line and pass in a cozy fashion.

Download a translation app (if you'll have internet access on your phone) or bring an Italian/English dictionary, as English isn't a given. Even if your Italian is non-existent, the friendly folks of Puglia extend an extra warm welcome to those who try with phrases such as *Ciao* (hello) and *Grazie* (thank you).

For LGBTQ+ travelers, although Italy's current government is not so friendly, the Apulian people seem welcoming and open to all.