



8 Life-changing travel experiences in Salento, Puglia

Puglia's lower province Salento and now my home is a pretty special place and worth exploring to enjoy its breath-taking monuments together with its dazzling coastline and exuberant party atmosphere. **Salento** is indeed a unique place, the most oriental in Italy, a border land that faces two seas, the **Adriatic** and the **Ionian** and it's filled with extraordinary natural treasures.

Among the overwhelming variety of places to visit, I can highly recommend these **8 life-changing travel experiences in secret Salento** that will make your next stay truly memorable:

1. Do something after dark

The **Abbey of Santa Maria di Cerrate**, only 20 minutes away from **Lecce**, once a Greek Orthodox monastery then later on a farmhouse, is an important example of **Apulian Romanesque architecture**.

It's quite remarkable how the site, besides the beautiful interior of the abbey, complete with **Byzantine frescoes**, also combines stables and mills with their grindstones for the processing of olives.

A unique site by day, it really comes alive at night when during certain days in August you can take part in star gazing through powerful telescopes and knowledgeable stuff is on hand to tell you about all the visible constellations. I took part in one of these experiences last summer and it was truly memorable!



Abbazia di Santa Maria di Cerrate, Salento

2. Don't just visit, engage

From local *masserie* (farmhouses) and ancient olive mills and wineries where you can get involved in the local activities to wild dining which gives you the opportunity of picking your own ingredients and recreating dishes with the help of a local cook, there are plenty of opportunities to engage in local life and come away with very special memories.

Not only will you be contributing to the community but experience, first hand, what goes into the making of some of the wonderful local produce.



Masseria Salinola in Ostuni, the White City

3. Join the crowd

A holiday in Italy can offer so much more than sightseeing. The country has an unrivalled artistic and musical heritage, today displayed in opera houses, theatres and outdoor festivals. Most regions will also host historic pageants, medieval-style tournaments, colourful religious rituals, contemporary arts events, cinema festivals and much more. There is indeed **something for everyone**, whether you want to add variety to your holiday or plan a trip around attendance of a special event.

Here in Salento there's a huge variety of festivals and the magazine called **Qui Salento** sold at newsagents will give you a rundown of any event taking place month by month.



Impressive display of illuminations in Salento

4. Make a personal pilgrimage

At the turn of the first millennium, many pilgrims crossed Europe to go in prayer at the tomb of the **Apostle Peter in Rome** or to continue to the **Holy Land in Jerusalem**. The practice of pilgrimage assumed such importance that they developed real "ways of faith" dotted with resting places, villages and abbeys to accommodate pilgrims. Among the most important routes, the **Via Francigena** still represents the main path.

There comes a time in life when you might feel the need to disconnect from the stresses and monotony of everyday life. What better way to do so than to walk the Via Francigena?

The **Via Francigena in Puglia** is divided into many routes, but the one in **Salento** stands out in particular: from **Lecce** and ending at the tip of this region at **Santa Maria di Leuca**. On the way don't miss visiting the fortification of **Acaya**, dating back to the 16th century and **Otranto**, also a fortified seaside town.

It's an experience that will not only revive your spirits but also your senses!



Otranto, Salento

5. Learn something new

Lecce, the capital of Salento, is not only a feast for the eye with lavish architecture tucked in every corner, but also a very creative city with many unique artisanal shops, some of them specialising in *papier-mache'* art and sculptures.

The city's *cartapesta* culture originated in the 17th century when glue and paper offered cheap raw materials for religious artists who couldn't afford expensive wood or marble. It was said that the barbers were the first to engage in this activity, merging art and craft. These artisans used the back of their shops as workshops, and in between haircuts they spent their free time modelling statues out of *papier-mache'*.

These days this art is still practised in Lecce and elevated to new levels of skill and craftsmanship in a number of traditional workshops, such as **La Cartapesta di Claudio Riso**. His sculptures are true works of art and are to be seen to be believed. You can meet some of the local artisans and even try your hand in one of the papier-mache' workshops around the city and come away with your own little masterpiece.



A local artisan producing papier-mache' sculptures

6. Go far from anywhere

Aside from its stunning countryside, picturesque towns, vibrant cities and art at every turn, Italy counts amongst its many gems a number of relatively **unknown islands** that beg to be discovered. If you crave to get away from it all, the **Tremite Islands**, an archipelago in the Adriatic Sea, north of the **Gargano Peninsula in Puglia**, couldn't be a better choice.

The **Tremiti** are a very popular diving destination due to the number of coves and underwater caves in the archipelago's waters. Most tourists are Italian weekenders, although these stunning islands are slowly gaining popularity among overseas visitors too. You can reach them by ferry in summertime from the **Apulian towns of Vieste, Peschici, Manfredonia and Rodi Garganico.**

Can you see yourself catching this breathtaking sunset on **Cala delle Arene**, its only sandy beach?



Isole Tremiti, Puglia

7. Be wowed by nature

The land of **Puglia** is indeed a tumultuous mix: bleached sea cliffs, dense dark-green scrub, wild orchids, pine forests, silver beaches and marine caves. It's easy to see why nature here can weave a captivating spell that will make you want to return again and again.

Among the many caves you'll come across past the city of **Otranto** down to the tip in **Santa Maria di Leuca**, the **Grotta del Soffio** stands out for its beauty and needs to be visited at least once in your lifetime. It can only be reached by boat and being partly submerged, you need to dive in to enter it and once you are in you'll be truly spellbound!



Grotta del Soffio, Santa Maria di Leuca, Puglia

8. Do something out of the ordinary

Forgotten by men and time, the **ghost towns of Italy** or otherwise known as '**Le Citta' Morte**' (dead cities) are hauntingly beautiful remnants of the ravages of nature. These towns and villages have been abandoned by their inhabitants, mostly due to natural disasters such as earthquakes or landslides, but also for economic reasons such as the depletion of natural resources.

Monteruga in Salento is one of these places, which grew during fascist times and was then later abandoned in the 80's. Walking through this town can send shivers down your spine, but at the same time you feel glad that the memory of its people's presence and lives have been preserved forever more.



Monteruga, Salento

If you have enjoyed reading this guide and would like to enjoy all the magic that **Salento** has to offer, **my friend Noelle and I will be leading some very special travel experiences in October 2023 and in May 2024.**

For any further information on these Travel Experiences, sign up here: [Authentic Italy - Inspired Travel for women to Puglia](#)

Also watch out for **future tours in Salento** that will include all the wonderful experiences mentioned in this guide.

I hope to help you make your travels to Italy memorable!



Giuseppe Verdi

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