



BY KEVIN RAUB

THE LECCE LIST: 10 THINGS TO SEE AND DO IN PUGLIA'S MOST BEAUTIFUL CITY

Lecce, the centre of the heel in Italy's boot, is a masterpiece of 17th-century baroque beauty and culinary treasures. No wonder it's known as the Florence of the South. The first thing you notice is the light. Lecce's historic buildings, forged from the city's distinct, straw-hued limestone, catch the sun in a stunning spectacle of brilliance unseen in most Italian cities. As the glow bounces off the classical *barocco leccese* architecture, the streets and alleyways are illuminated in a sort of perpetual twilight that makes Lecce very easy on the eyes.

Much of this historic centre's light-corralling architectural magnificence is the spectacular work of a flurry of 17th-century architect-sculptors led by brothers Francesco Antonio and Giuseppe Zimbalo and Giuseppe Cino, with their Spanish plateresque-influenced design.

Amongst the gorgeous cityscape, a variety of travel-worthy gastronomic specialities await. *Orecchiette* pasta, *taralli* (crunchy ring-shaped crackers), *rustico* (puff pastry with tomato and mozzarella), *caffè leccese* (espresso, ice and almond milk) and *pasticcioni* (pastry tarts pumped full of creamy goodness) are a few of the local delicacies that will delight your palate.

In a sense, Lecce's alluring marriage of exquisite architecture and delightful gastronomy makes it the perfect Italian destination. Here are 10 things to see and do during your next holiday:

Admire the Beauty of Basilica di Santa Croce

It's no exaggeration that one of the most important and admired churches in Lecce inspires a moment of wow in even the most jaded of European cathedral connoisseurs. Completed in 1699, the façade of Basilica di Santa Croce features a trippy stone-carved lineup of grotesque cherubs, sheep, caryatids, beasties and dodos that converge around the basilica's entrance. The building is attached to the lengthy and equally ornate Convento dei Celestini, and together they represent some of the Zimbalo brothers' finest work. Unfortunately, constricted space along Via Umberto makes finding that perfect photo angle frustratingly elusive.

Delve Into the Baroque Extravagance of Piazza del Duomo

Lecce's main cathedral plaza is reached through startlingly narrow entrances, which made the open space a convenient spot for citizenry to barricade themselves during times of invasion. Today, Piazza del Duomo is a feast of baroque mastery, home to the city's 12th-century cathedral, the 15th-century Palazzo Arcivescovile (once home to Neapolitan royalty) and the Diocesan Museum of Sacred Art, formerly the piazza's ancient seminary and a Giuseppe Cino masterpiece. The Duomo (main cathedral) is Giuseppe Zimbalo's reconstruction of the city's original 12th-century cathedral. On a clear day, the slightly leaning 72-metre-high (236 feet) bell tower affords views all the way to Albania.

Discover the Ancient Art of Papier-Mâché

Lecce is one of the world's prominent centres for papier-mâché (a malleable mixture of paper and glue), dating to the 17th- and 18th-century method of plasticising paper to create sacred art as liturgical advertisements for drawing folks into the Counter-Reformation Church. Today, visiting a papier-mâché workshop offers a fascinating look under the hood of this absorbing handmade art form. At Cartapesto Riso, the intricate religious-themed scenes and figurines emerge from flour and water in painstaking, colourful detail and are well worth a deeper dive. The Museo della Cartapesta is located in the aforementioned Castello di Carlo V.

Behold the Bewildering Piazza Sant'Oronzo

The beating heart of Lecce, the expansive Piazza Sant'Oronzo is a fascinating living museum. Its centrepiece is the imposing Roman

Massimo Borchetti/Alamy Photo

Situated in the historic centre of Lecce, the Basilica di San Giovanni Battista al Rosario was the final masterpiece of famed architect and sculptor Giuseppe Zimbalo.

Amphitheatre, dating to sometime between the first and second centuries, and half excavated today. Around the square, a cornucopia of Italian rationalist-fascist architecture stands in direct contrast to both the Roman ruins and baroque surroundings. Together, this hubbub of activity is, for better or worse, a fascinating clash of urban design.

See Priceless Pottery at Museo Sigismondo Castromediano

The free archaeological Museo Sigismondo Castromediano is the oldest such museum in Puglia and, like most Italian civic museums, contains an impressive arsenal of ceramics, jewellery, weaponry, ornaments and statues dating back 10,000 years. Of particular note here is the outstanding assembly of Messapian and Roman finds, including a spectacular collection of Apulian and Attic red-figure pottery. There is no better way to take in such an incalculable assortment of ancient Salentino objects throughout the region.



Nosh on Delicious and Decadent Cafe Treats

Amongst the regional culinary treats you can't miss is Puglia's pastry of choice, the pasticcio. This stuffed extravagance of a short-crust pastry dough chock-full of a variety of fillings (lemon custard, Nutella, pistachio cream, chocolate and more) is baked to warm and gooey perfection (head straight to Caffè Alvino). If your breakfast hankerings lean savoury, seek out Bar Cotognata Leccese for a rustic (a piping-hot puff pastry stuffed with tomato and mozzarella) — residents clamour for them when the doors open at 6:00.

Make sure to also try taralli (ring-shaped crackers baked fresh in assorted flavours such as olive oil, fennel, rosemary, chilli pepper, sesame, turmeric and onion).

Wander Around Castello di Carlo V

This domineering fortress was originally built more modestly by the Normans in the 12th century, but Spanish Holy Roman Emperor Charles V oversaw a 16th-century expansion that helped ensure it's Puglia's largest castle. Over the years, it has been reinvented as a prison, court and military barracks, but today it houses the city's cultural authorities. Spend some time wandering around its enormous trapezoidal walls.

Get Away to Gallipoli

Puglia's coastline beckons with a laundry list of enticing destinations. Gallipoli, 25 miles (40 kilometres) south-west of Lecce, stands out for its *centro storico*, which entirely occupies a limestone island jutting out into the Ionian Sea. Highlights here run far and wide across a bevy of ancient cultures: a 13th-century Byzantine castle, a 16th-century Greek fountain, 17th-century baroque churches and an endless maze of picturesque alleyways and sea-hugging thoroughfares constructed throughout the centuries.

The scene feels vaguely *Game of Thrones*-y in a King's Landing sort of way. Pro tip: grab a takeaway panino from the wondrous Baguetteria De Pace and head about 250 feet (76 metres) to the benches along the fortified Riviera Sauro for Gallipoli's ultimate sea-view sandwich experience.



Dedicate a Day to Churches and Cathedrals

Lecce is home to a daunting 40 or so churches and cathedrals. It would be remiss not to indulge in a handful besides the most famous Santa Croce and the Duomo. A few other can't-miss houses of the holy include Chiesa dei Santi Nicolò e Cataldo (a Norman-built sensation dating to 1180 and located in Lecce's monumental cemetery), Chiesa di Santa Chiara (an ornate offering from the 15th century given a baroque makeover between 1687 and 1691) and Chiesa di Sant'Irene (famed for its mirror-image baroque altarpieces completed in 1639).

Explore the Nooks and Crannies of Museo Faggiano

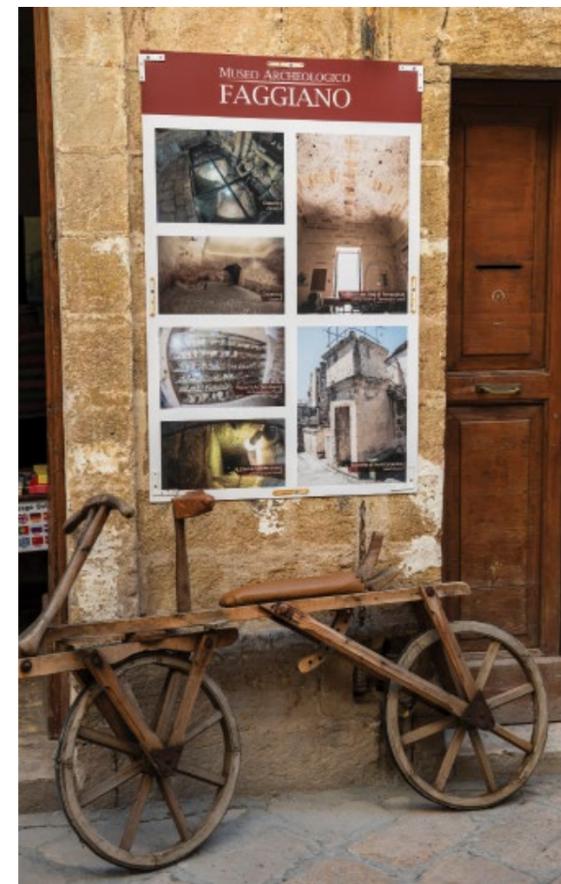
The city's most fascinating museum is a happy accident, discovered by chance in 2001 when its owner, Luciano Faggiano, was renovating his home. As is often the case in Europe, Faggiano struck ruins whilst looking for sewer pipes. Remnants of a 15th- to 16th-century convent were uncovered, as well as vestiges from the fifth-century B.C. Messapian period, and emblems on frescoes and wall etchings from the Knights Templar, who lived here from 1000 to 1200. Roman crypts, Jewish insignia, mediaeval walls and a treasure trove of ceramics were discovered — all in the name of a busted sewer pipe. Today, the converted home is a stirring step back in time.

Wine and Dine at La Cucina di Mamma Elvira

This purveyor of classic Pugliese cuisine is reservation priority No. 1 in Lecce (book the front patio). As an offshoot of the stylish wine bar of the same name, La Cucina is hyperfocused on local food and wine, so it's a wonderful place to take a deep dive into *primitivo* (zinfandel), Puglia's varietal of choice, paired with anything on the menu that has *orecchiette*, the region's local pasta variety. Taking in the gastronomic best of the region makes for a quintessential Lecce evening. ■

KEVIN RAUB IS A BOLOGNA-BASED TRAVEL JOURNALIST AND CO-AUTHOR OF THE LONELY PLANET GUIDE TO ITALY.

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TOP: Museo Faggiano features more than 5,000 artefacts spanning over 2,000 years of history. RIGHT: Chiesa di Santa Chiara is one of the city's most important and admired churches.



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Antica Masseria Rottacapozza (AMZ)
Located in a historic building with charming rooms overlooking a garden (some with a patio), Antica Masseria Rottacapozza is less than 1 mile (1.6 kilometres) from the beach in Torre Mozza.



Michelangelo at Meridie Village (MDV)
Surrounded by olive and orange groves in the Calabria region, this property offers fully furnished flats with limited kitchens, as well as numerous on-site facilities.

The accommodation at AMZ is available for purchase through the Getaway programme and generally will not be available for exchange.