

EXPERTISE

RESURRECTION CITY

HOW A SYMBOL OF ITALIAN SHAME BECAME ONE OF PRIDE



Set on wild, arid slopes, covered with a labyrinth of caves built into porous rock, Matera provides one of the most distinctive urban landscapes in the world. Its subterranean homes have been occupied since Paleolithic times and it is reputed to be the most ancient inhabited city in the world after Jericho and Aleppo.

But Matera also boasts more modern accolades. In 1993, it was named as a Unesco world heritage site and this year it finds itself one of two European capitals of culture, along with Plovdiv in Bulgaria.

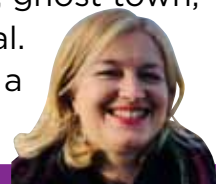
Yet the southern Italian city was not always so cherished. For centuries it was associated not with beauty and culture but with grinding, absolute poverty and disease, and – more recently – exile.

In the 1930s, the surrounding region of Basilicata was where suspect individuals were sent by the fascist regime under its policy of confinement.

The Jewish writer and painter Carlo Levi was exiled here from Turin from 1935 to 1936 because of his anti-fascist

From its ancient beginnings, the southern Italian city of Matera has had various incarnations: slum, ghost town, film set, tourist hotspot and cultural capital.

HELEN SHEEHAN reports on a place with a remarkable capacity for revival



activities. His place of confinement was the small hilltop town of Aliano, around an hour and a half's drive from Matera itself.

At the end of the war he wrote a memoir of his experiences there, *Christ Stopped at Eboli* – a local phrase referring to a town on the route into Basilicata, and to the deeply-held feeling that the impoverished region remained beyond civilisation, somehow overlooked, or bypassed, by the advances of history.

The book – later made into a film – was to provoke national outrage in the post-war febrile Italian political

consciousness, exposing, as it did, this bubble of pre-history in a country that was making significant strides towards affluence.

Many of the city's inhabitants at the time were living in the cramped conditions of the *sassi* (from the Italian for 'stones') – the cave homes dug into the rock – which give the name to Matera's central, hillside district, the Sassi (actually two distinct neighbourhoods, Sasso Caveoso and Sasso Barisano).

The grotto homes had survived the ebb and flow of the region's history, with the passing of the Romans, Lombards,

Byzantines, the Holy Roman Empire, Normans, Aragonese and the forces of Napoleon, among others. None of these overlords drastically improved the town's community, which also suffered routine bouts of pestilences and earthquakes.

In the late 1800s, landless farmers were moved out of the countryside and into the Sassi, together with their animals, intensifying the city's fetid conditions. In *Christ Stopped at Eboli*, Levi quoted his sister, Luisa, who had passed through Matera, while visiting him.

She described the tightly-knit hillside housing of the Sassi as "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".

Typhoid, cholera and malaria were rampant here. Other parts of Italy, notably the Veneto region in the north of Italy, were also very poor with miserable conditions, but here in Matera what shocked was this image of people living in caves.

Luisa Levi went on: "[There] were

TIMELESS: Matera seen from the Murgia Timone viewpoint

Photo: Getty Images

REVIVAL: Extras on the set of *Ben-Hur* in Matera, 2015

Photo: Francesco Giase/ Mondadori Portfolio via Getty Images

MODERN MATERA

Matera's unique landscape itself forms the main attraction of its year as Capital of Culture, but the city is also putting on plenty more for visitors, including concerts, theatre performances and exhibitions.

While its ancient heritage is most apparent, the city is also trying to

develop itself as a technological hub, and organisers hope to use 2019 to pivot it in this direction. There are plans to encourage digital start-ups in the area, which already houses a space centre, operated by the Italian Space Agency. To find out more visit: www.matera2019.it/en

caves, dug into the hardened clay walls of the gully... In these dark holes with walls cut out of the earth I saw a few pieces of miserable furniture, beds and some ragged clothes hanging up to dry. Most families have just one cave to live in and there they sleep all together; men, women, children, and animals. This is how 20,000 live."

But the city that was once a place of national shame has become quite the reverse. The extreme poverty that once marked its very existence has gone and Matera has been brought back to life. The once overcrowded, insanitary neighbourhoods are now thronging with tourists. Yet the process of transformation was not a straightforward one. Before its revival, the once teeming city became a ghost town.

As Italy experienced an economic boom, after the Second World War, a commission was established, under the entrepreneur Adriano Olivetti, to address this source of national shame highlighted so graphically by Levi. The solution was to relocate the population of

the entire old city of Matera. A new rural village, La Martella, was created in the countryside, modelled on the architectural structures of the houses in Matera, and two other estates were built in the suburbs.

Both of the two main political parties of that time, the Communists and the Christian Democrats wanted to address the region's living conditions. In particular, Alcide De Gasperi, one of Italy's longest-serving prime ministers and a founder member of the European Union, was determined to clear out the Sassi.

The old ways were gradually lost, traditions associated with the life in the Sassi began to fade and the old city was physically closed up. No one went there any more. It became an abandoned space.

Then, miraculously, the film industry discovered Matera. Pier Paolo Pasolini chose the abandoned Sassi in 1964 as the set for his film *The Gospel According to St. Matthew*, its empty homes and arid slopes of porous calcite rock, where time had stood still, providing the perfect

backdrop for biblical Jerusalem. It seems Christ did not stop at Eboli, after all.

Ever since, a steady stream of filmmakers have followed the same path to Matera. Among the many films the city appears in are *Quantum of Solace*, *The Passion of the Christ*, the 2016 remake of *Ben-Hur* and 2017's *Wonder Woman*.

But it wasn't the filmmakers and actors who were to save the day for the Sassi of Matera, and establish its restoration, but the locals, in partnership with the same authorities who had first ordered the city to be abandoned.

The revival really began in 1986 with the passing of law 771 in the Italian parliament, which paved the way for people to renovate the cave properties. The state also began handing out grants, supporting up to 25% of the restoration costs. Eighty percent of the homes in the Sassi are state-owned, but residents were given long leases to encourage improvement projects. Thus, life was gradually breathed back into the old city.

The government funds supporting the city's revival eventually dried up, but not

before Matera had won its title as a Unesco world heritage site, one of only a handful in the south of the country (most are concentrated in the north).

Most of the former inhabitants, who had lived in the squalid, over-crowded Sassi did not wish to return. But many of their children are among those who did lease back properties from the government. There are now around 2,000 people living in the area, a tenth of its former population, creating a thriving and sustainable – as well as safe and sanitary – population.

Matera's story of revival and the return of its population stands in stark contrast to the situation in Venice – a Unesco site with a somewhat higher profile – which is today being emptied of its people.

That said, the southern city still faces the familiar challenge of how to balance the benefits of tourism, with the demands and needs of its local population. But, as it enjoys its year in the limelight, it also offers a salutary lesson in how to bring a city back to life.