

# The South Satisfies

*Pedaling Down the Heel of the Boot of Italy*



Story and photos by Nathan Ward

**A** lunch stop along the sea. It's amazing how memory can distill a full day down into a few minutes, regardless of how many miles you ride or how many other things you see. Looking back, I don't remember much about the bike ride that day, and maybe that's how it should be. After all, a bicycle is simply a tool to help propel you through and over landscapes.

We stopped at a simple open-sided bar along a banana-shaped beach. The tourist season had ended, and the beach was nearly empty, although the beach boy still set out row after row of red beach chairs topped with white umbrellas.

The water looked warm and beckoning, green fading to deep-water blue, small waves rolling in. We parked our bikes against the bar and walked down to the water. Kian, my 19-month-old son, stared at the water. He had never seen the ocean before, and he was fascinated.

"Swimming?" he asked as I stripped down to just my bike shorts, then stripped

My wife Andrea jumped in, wearing all her bike clothes, and we all swam in the waves. Kian learned the words "wave" and "surf." He laughed and laughed, kicking his feet with abandon and yelling "Swimming, Daddy! Swimming!"

That swim was some of the best bike touring I've ever experienced.

Southern Italy hasn't always been the site of the happiest memories, and our starting point on this bike tour was still more famous for what it had been, rather than for the fascinating town it has evolved into today. Matera, the city of caves in the region of Basilicata, once represented a forgotten, or perhaps just neglected, part of Italy. In this region, people lived in abject poverty in caves along the Gravina River Canyon.

People lived cheek to jowl with their livestock in these confined spaces, causing many health issues and an infant mortality rate of more than 50 percent. People had always lived this way in these caves since late Paleolithic times several thousand years before.

Then, during the mid-1930s, the activ-

helped instigate positive changes.

In 1952, the Italian government forced around 15,000 cave dwellers in Matera to leave the canyon and move to a new prefabricated town on top of the bluff. The cave city was abandoned, and it's here we started our bike tour of the Salento peninsula, better known in America as the heel of the boot of Italy.

Shuttling from the airport in Bari, our first view of Matera's *sassi* (stone houses or caves) delighted us. The *sassi* looked otherworldly, like a fantasy village, like caveman hyper-urbanism. The ceiling of one cave dwelling served as the floor for the one above, stretching from the valley floor and over the top of a dividing hill. Above it all, a majestic cathedral stood, a sign that perhaps Jesus did finally make it past Eboli after all.

We met the rest of our cycling tour group in a cave that had been transformed into a four-star hotel complete with a thermal spa and pool, in just the next cave over, of course. Dario Carzan, our host and co-owner of the Italian cycling company Siciclundo, greeted us with the promise, "On this tour, you will do a lot more drinking and eating than you do biking. This tour of Basilicata and Apulia (Puglia) is our easiest tour!"

This sounded perfect to us because it was our first international bicycle tour with our new son. I looked around at the other people on the tour, two Canadian couples, an American couple, an older American man, and a young woman from New York City. I tried to read their minds. They were probably thinking something like "Oh, my God! Those people have a baby! Babies cry! He's going to cry during every single meal and make our perfect vacation hell!" But they all just smiled, hiding their feelings well.

Dario had agreed months before to put together a tour for us, a kid-friendly trip that included low-mileage cycling days, historic villages, and unique places to stay at night. Then he sold the trip to all the others as well, which was a risk for him too — just think of a time when you've had dinner with a couple and their baby and the baby freaks out. He had never met us, or our child, so for all he knew, Kian could have been one of those children who rapidly end dinner parties.

Just a few days before the trip, he was still in doubt. "I don't know how you're going to do it. My daughter can't stand more than 10 minutes in the bike trailer,"



him down to nothing. He stood still, with wide eyes, right where the sea lapped at his feet. Then he laughed like a madman and ran into the water, careless and unconcerned. He ran in all the way up to his chest, and I grabbed him just before the first wave rolled over his head.

ist, doctor, and writer, Carlo Levi, was banished to southern Italy for his anti-Fascist views. While there he observed the impoverished living conditions, not only in Matera, but throughout the region. His book, *Christ Stopped at Eboli*, published in 1945, drew attention to the situation and



**Ancient paths.** Smooth stones line the streets below the Matera Cathedral.

he said. At that point, I don't think we'd yet told him that Kian has food allergies and can't eat cheese — and we were in Italy!

Introductions made all around, we took off on a walking tour of the *sassi*. Since its abandonment, the *sassi* has made a remarkable recovery. This is due partly because UNESCO listed it as a World Heritage Site in 1993, and partly because movie directors discovered it. Mel Gibson filmed part of the *Passion of the Christ* here and vaulted the *sassi* into international view. Around the same time, enterprising people saw the tourism potential in this unique cave city

and started transforming the ancient grottoes into modern hotels and restaurants.

After the tour, Andrea and I mercifully left the group to their own dinner and entertained our wired child at a restaurant full of strangers that we didn't have to see again. He was soon exhausted so we took him back to the cave to sleep, as one does.

Then we sat outside with a bottle of local primitivo wine as a full moon rose over the ancient city and the soft sounds of restaurant conversations drifted out over the ravine. It was quiet and deserted. Locals still stay in the busy modern city

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**Mother and son.** Andrea and Kian break in the shade before the short climb to Alberobello.

on top of the bluffs, their collective knowledge of what life was once like here perhaps keeping them far from this valley of caves and memories.

Rain fell all night, turning the stone streets into a slick skating rink as we pedaled up out of the sassi and back into the modern town of the new Matera. Splashing through the city streets, we headed out of town on roughly paved roads through freshly tilled fields that eagerly soaked up the rain. The showers eased, then quit, as the air filled with the smell of the dark rich

soil's promise of crops to come.

Riding in a group, we pedaled along picturesque and rolling roads with virtually no traffic. Following a dirt road across a wine estate, we dropped into another limestone valley and hiked down into a cave known as the Crypt of Original Sin. Inside, Benedictine monks in the ninth century had painted scenes of the creator, Adam and Eve, apostles, and angels. Their work lay forgotten for hundreds of years before it was rediscovered and carefully preserved just recently.

The depth of recorded human history in southern Italy is hard to comprehend for someone from North America. Of course, human history at home goes back tens of thousands of years as well, but it's the history of Native Americans, and despite their great cultures, their low-impact lifestyle left little mark on the land. If our known history fills a couple of chapters, in Southern Italy history fills an extremely thick book.

After lunch, we rode back to Matera. Basilicata and Apulia are still some of the poorer regions of Italy, and though they've been settled by impressive cultures for a very long time, they still haven't learned how to dispose of their trash.

I had lots of time to analyze the roadsides because pulling Kian in the Burley trailer was like being hooked to an anchor. It was the slowest 20-mile ride of my life. That morning, we had loaded the trailer like it was a minivan headed to grandma's house for a week. We had extra clothes, books, drinks, food, diapers, wipes, and a few tons of toys.

Lesson one, if you plan to bike tour in a group and you're the only one pulling a child, make the trailer as light as possible. Otherwise, you are going to be way off the back.

Once we left Matera and headed east, we rode out of Basilicata and into Apulia on a route that would take us the length of the heel. We followed country roads through the region's famed olive groves, where some of the trees are several hundred years old. I kept looking at the trees and thinking of one of those contests where you try to guess the number of jellybeans in a Mason jar. Except in this case the contest would be, how many olives were produced by a single one of these trees in the last 497 years?

The lack of traffic helped us relax and enjoy the ride. We'd all heard stories about the fast and wild drivers in Italy, and Andrea and I were a bit nervous about taking our young child out on the roads. However, the combination of country roads and very considerate Italian drivers eased our fears, but Andrea still rode a few yards behind me most of the time to buffer close cars if needed.

I do agree with a friend of mine who just finished a different bike tour in Italy, "I felt safer in Italy as a cyclist on the roads than I do in Colorado. In Italy everyone just treated me like a vehicle."

As we passed through villages, we soon discovered bringing our child on a bike

tour was fun in more ways than one. Italians love children, and they continually went out of their way to help us out. Child bike trailers are a novelty in Italy, and in every town we stopped, old men would spot Kian in the trailer and gather round him, talking and gesticulating happily.

Dario drove ahead of the group and stopped in a picturesque field where he and his assistant, Simone, put together magical local lunches — different types of mozzarella, homemade bread topped with garlic and drizzled with olive oil, several types of olives, sun-dried tomatoes pickled with mushrooms, pizza, and fresh melon. It was easy to get used to.

After lunch, we started to come across *trulli*, round stone houses with conical roofs. As the story goes, trulli were built dry by stacking flat stones. At one time, farmers were taxed on the square footage of their buildings, and trullis could quickly be pulled down before the taxman arrived.

Today, many of the trulli still stand, and local entrepreneurs have started turning the old *masserias* (farms) and trullis into B&Bs or luxury hotels. We ended our second day of riding in the outskirts of the town of Noci at the beautiful Abate



**Olives everywhere.** Some of the olive groves in the Salento Peninsula date back 1,000 years.

Masseria, a 17th-century farmstead transformed into a four star farm stay. When the manager found out that Kian's bedtime was before the restaurant even opened, his wife generously offered to make him a plate of the famed local pasta, *orecchiette*, with tomato sauce.

As another way to make bicycle tour-

ing with a toddler work well with the other Siciclondo guests, Andrea and I took turns eating with the group while the other stayed in the room as Kian slept. In Noci Andrea enjoyed a fantastic three-course meal with the group while I stayed in the trulli. It's not the ideal situation for most couples, but it's



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**Ancient way.** Simona Tonna leads the group along the storied coast of the Adriatic Sea.

much better than staying at home.

On Day Three, we enjoyed the best cycling of the whole trip. It started in Noci and led through Alberobello, another World Heritage Site and home of a historic neighborhood made up of over 1,000 trullis. Although Alberobello is more famous, the small city of Locorotondo impressed me more.

We stopped in Locorotondo for a picnic in the city park and spent time wandering

through the town's historic center, a maze of narrow whitewashed passageways, each ending in a high view over the green farms and forests below. Old men rode colorful Vespas through the lanes. Old women in flowered dresses hung laundry out on lines high above the street. It felt like we were in a movie set from any feel-good Italian movie that you've ever seen.

Harold Fisher, a fit emergency-room doctor from Toronto, exclaimed, "Aren't

these towns incredible? Every one of them is like a fairy tale village." They may not have the perfection of Tuscany, but the old hilltop towns of Puglia are still stunning and impressive.

Leaving Locorotondo, we rode a busy road downhill out of town, then turned onto a thin road through fields and forests. It climbed steeply to a low pass where we first saw the alluring Adriatic Sea in the near distance. From this high point, we let our wheels flow fast and free downhill toward Ostuni, the White City.

Kian was melting down after being in the Burley bike trailer most of the day, so we didn't stop until we reached the *gelateria* in the central piazza of Ostuni. A lemon gelato quickly dried his tears.

A soothing ocean breeze blew that evening as we sat outside in the last golden rays of the sun, Ostuni spread out below us like a bride's dress. We drank a cold Peroni beer and then wandered the narrow alleyways until we found a tiny restaurant with just three tables where we enjoyed the local wine and a bowl of fresh pasta.

I've always thought that one of the most important things to do when bike touring is not to ride your bike every day. Leave



**Sweet dreams.** Sun, sand, sea — and too much pizza — sends Kian to a land of endless gelato.

the bike in your room, or tied to your tent, and spend the day wandering the streets of wherever you are in the world. Sit in the churches and cafés, let the choir's chanting and the neighborhood chatter float around your head, and soak in the magic of the planet's diversity.

In Lecce, a town called the jewel of the Salento for its elaborate baroque architec-

ture, we did just that. We walked through the cathedrals, went to a photo exhibition, ate local bread, wandered the streets, listened to a band, and kept Kian up late to play in the *piazze* after dark.

As the sun set over the ornate cathedrals in Lecce, and the hour grew later, the city became more alive, the bars and trattorias filled to overflowing with people from

all walks of life. I could almost feel the ideas — and excitement for life — flowing through the air.

After our day off the bikes, we pedaled straight east to the coast of the Adriatic Sea. The road followed the coast with its promise of green water and mystery. As someone who has spent most of my life in the misty mountains, far from any oceans, the sea holds a magnetic mystery for me.

The sand and sea called us, and just when we couldn't stand it anymore, I spotted the Siciclano van parked at a rustic roadside bar. As Simone and Dario put lunch on the table, Kian, Andrea, and I ran and dove into the sea, my son swimming in the big water for the first time.

"Aren't you worried about riding in wet shorts?" someone asked. No, I wasn't. I only knew that we were biking along the shores of the Adriatic, a promising beach came into view, and the sea begged me to jump into the surf and swim in the water. So I did.

Wet and happy, we spun on to Otranto, our bodies drying quickly in the coastal sunshine. Originally established as the Greek city of Hydrus, Otranto is the easternmost point of the Italian mainland.

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Because of its position, waves of successors and conquerors came to these shores throughout its history.

From this spot, generation after generation watched their fathers, brothers, and husbands head out to fish the rich waters of the Adriatic. These same waters saw bigger changes as empires rose and fell, the town of Otranto frequently caught right in the middle of it all.

The next day we rode south of Otranto along the coast. Huge stone watchtowers punctuated the bluffs along the shore,



remnants of the Normans who took the area for their own nearly 1,000 years ago.

Later that day after our ride, Kian and I walked by the cathedral in Otranto, and he looked up at a statue of a stern-faced Catholic saint who looked like a muscled warrior, his arms raised high. However, to my young son, there were no conquerors and conquered in this multilayered province, no masters and slaves, just the present moment. He pointed at the statue and said, “Look, Daddy, man dancing!” Then he spun his arms and did his funny little fast step dance, laughing and spinning around the courtyard. He stopped, looked at me, and shouted “Dance, Daddy!”

We danced, and then I buckled him back in the trailer and got on the bike. He shouted “Andiamo! Let’s go!” and we pedaled off down the storied stone streets of Southern Italy. **AC**

*Nathan Ward is a regular contributor to Adventure Cyclist. He has covered many areas in the U.S. as well as exotic locales around the globe. More can be learned about his writing and photography at [nathanward.com](http://nathanward.com)*



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