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## out on a limb

TRAVEL FALL 2008 Olympic National Park, Washington

consulting for a number of hotels in Basilicata, but “had my eye on those caves for a very long time.” So she chased Kihlgren down and told him she was trying to do something similar with the *sassi* to what he’d done in Abruzzo. The two found they had an instant and enduring aesthetic rapport. “He arrived in Matera a week later, took one look at the caves and said, ‘I’ll do it,’” she says. “I was so happy to find an investor who understood their potential and wouldn’t ruin them with lots of contemporary design furniture and Jacuzzis.”

In order to balance the demands of both preservation and high-end visitors, Berg and Kihlgren sought out Enrico Ducrot, a 45-year-old former archaeologist and the owner of the Italian travel company *Viaggi dell’Elefante*. The group’s savvy has been to highlight the region’s history and unusual topography as much as the hotel itself. “When you open the door to your room, the only thing you see is the wild canyon in front of you,” Ducrot says. “We’ll be organizing hikes down into the ravine for guests, with a picnic carried by mule.” Likewise, breakfasts are served in the rock church next door to the caves, on a long table spread with yellow durum wheat bread, local honey and fruit

piled into century-old ceramic bowls.

The team also hired Michele Zasa as its resident guide, who leads excursions around the area. Nearby is the Park of the Rupestrine Churches, which is filled with Byzantine frescoes; among the most outstanding are the interconnected caves of Madonna delle Virtù and San Nicola dei Greci, where Gibson shot his Last Supper scene. Nine miles south of Matera, hidden under a field of wild scrub, is the Crypt of Original Sin, the astonishing ninth-century painted cave known as the Sistine Chapel of rock churches for its frieze of saints in bright floral robes. And just beyond that are lush vineyards with wine-tasting cellars and the pristine white sandy beaches of the Ionian coast.

“We try our best to be linked to the local culture,” Kihlgren says, pointing out that so far none of the *sassi*’s old inhabitants have ventured across town to give their opinions on their former home. “In Italy, there’s a kind of snobbish idea of what culture is — only the rich patrimony from the Caesars and popes is considered worth saving. These caves in Matera aren’t beautiful in the classic sense, but they’re still very moving and must be preserved.” ■

## Essentials Matera, Italy

**GETTING THERE** Fly to Bari and rent a car. Matera is about 40 miles from the airport, roughly an hour’s drive away.

**HOTEL Sassi di Matera Albergo Diffuso** Eighteen restored rooms in the caves. 011-39-06-678-0231 to reserve; [sassidimatera.com](http://sassidimatera.com); doubles from about \$370.

**RESTAURANTS AND BARS Baccanti** Stylish cave-meets-contemporary restaurant with elegant takes on peasant food. Via Sant’Angelo, 58/61; 011-39-0835-333-704; entrees \$12 to \$20. **Le Botteghe** Family-style trattoria with great antipasti and regional fare. Piazza San Pietro Barisano, 22; 011-39-0835-344-072; entrees \$15 to \$25. **Ristorante Lucanerle** Authentic regional specialties like ricotta balls with cinnamon; book ahead. Via Santo Stefano, 61; 011-39-0835-332-133; entrees \$22 to \$34. **Shibuya** Tiny, hip cafe near the archaeology museum that also sells music, run by a local D.J. Vico Purgatorio, 12; 011-39-0835-337-409.

**SIGHTS AND ACTIVITIES** There are several good museums in Matera, including the Museum of Contemporary Sculpture, the Museum of Medieval and Modern Art of Basilicata and the Domenico Ridola National Archeological Museum. **Viaggi di Architettura** (011-39-0835-334-033; [viaggiarchitettura.it](http://viaggiarchitettura.it)) offers specialized tours of cave churches, *sassi* renovations and a nearby ghost town. Also in and around Matera are the stunning tufa cave churches of **Madonna delle Virtù** and **San Nicola dei Greci** (Via Sette Dolori, 10, Matera; 011-39-349-718-4357); outstanding ninth-century frescoes in the **Crypt of Original Sin** (in Pietrapenta, by appointment; 011-39-0835-330-582); and **Dragone Vineyards** (Via Cappuccini, 7, Pietrapenta; 011-39-0835-261-740), which offers tastings of spumante and Matera primitivo vintages.