

# From fortress to five stars... a renovated ruin in Puglia

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10 Sep 2023 [+1 more](#) By Jeff Mills

NO WONDER the ancient Knights Templar, and later the Italian dukes, so loved this place – the location lords it over the surrounding countryside and would have given ample warning of approaching enemies.

The area was first established as a stronghold for the 12th Century religious crusaders. In the 16th Century an imposing fortress, Castello Nuovo, was built on the site. And now, 500 years later, it has become an impressive 20-room hotel, Palazzo Ducale Venturi, in the Puglia town of Minervino di Lecce.

When the renovations were taking place, under the direction of the local government cultural heritage department, the builders came across an ancient door, which led to a tunnel. It had been long since blocked up, but previously was used by the then duke to secretly visit his

mistress, who, it is said, was none other than the Abbess of the convent.

It is just one of many quirky features at the Palazzo. The tranquil garden with its heady scent of flowers and a 13th Century well is an ideal spot for contemplation.

There are original, if faded, frescos on the ceilings and a series of underground caves which once formed the Palazzo's armoury and are now a small spa, which includes Puglia's first cryotherapy chamber. In three minutes, the temperature drops to around -120 C (-190F). It sounds scary but, apparently, it's good for you.

An exploratory excursion from the Palazzo takes you along sleepy streets fronted by ancient cream and terracotta terraces. Very little



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seems to happen. I ask an elderly man sitting on chair for directions to the main square and the nearest bar. I find the square but there's no

sign of a bar.

The bigger Lecce and its magnificent Roman amphitheatre is a 30-

# uglia

juicy scallops.

The following day, I visit the little harbour town of Otranto, where you can take a boat trip along the coast to anchor in secluded coves and take a dip in the sea. But hope your captain doesn't venture too close to the beach. According to my skipper, a revenue-raising game involves the Coast Guard fining boats deemed to have bent the rules. Mind you,

ure is more than 30C (86F) in the evening, but fascinating anyway. The chef works his magic with local ingredients: Umbrian seafood, fresh vegetables from nearby fields and

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heated arguments in Italy, with wild gesticulation, always add to the entertainment is this passionate country – especially when the calm of the Palazzo awaits your return.

■ B&B Doubles at the Palazzo Ducale Venturi from £172 per night ([palazzoducaleventuri.com](http://palazzoducaleventuri.com)). BA fly from Gatwick to Bari from £124 ([ba.com](http://ba.com)).



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