

This, it turns out, is to be our own hive of activity as we are put into the care of sous chef Luca, who takes the five of us in turn and shows us how to make our dinner for the night: pizza.

Despite my misgivings that I'd rather eat anything made by anyone other than me, the result is a triumph. Proof, if any were needed, that good cooking is all down to the quality and freshness of the ingredients – plus a 500-year-old oven.

We take our plates to the enchanting garden glittering with fairy lights and agree it is the latest best meal yet.

The wine flows freely as does the chatter. The girls compare toppings while Felix, having spied the saltwater pool, asks if he can get in.

Not tonight. We have an 8am hike along the coast the next morning and it's time for bed.

Lulled by the comfort of our rooms, we oversleep and by the time we get downstairs for an al fresco breakfast, our guide Andrea, is already waiting for us.

'There's no such thing as late,' he says, as I start to apologise. 'It's Italy.'

Thank goodness as there's no way any of us is passing up breakfast here. Dozens of artfully prepared dishes line the tables inside, offering everything from traditional home-made pastries to slices of savoury roulade. We fill our walking boots. Now to put them to the test.

It's 9am and the sun is already beating down as we begin our mission – to discover the dramatic rocky coastline of Salento and get to the beach club before noon.

Andrea leads the way, his dry sense of humour enjoyed by all. As he steers us along dusty red paths through fields, past ancient ruins and rustic farms, we begin to appreciate the raw beauty of the place.

We stop at a bauxite quarry where the ground is so red we could be on Mars. It is worlds away from the manicured landscapes of the north.

'Tuscany makes me sick,' he says, as I point out the contrast. 'I love to cycle there. But all those perfect rolling hills. It's just too much.'

He has a point. There is nothing comforting or complacent about this terrain. You have to earn its respect. And it, in turn, earns our admiration.

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By FIONA HARDCASTLE FOR MAILONLINE

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Originally a settlement for the Knights Templar and then a medieval fortress, the Palazzo Ducale Venturi is a magical place, steeped in legends and myths. The wonderful general manager, Martina, whose passion for Puglia is infectious, tells us the story of the former owner, a Count who had an affair with the Abbess who lived next door. Her punchline makes me laugh out loud: 'He ended up leaving her for a younger nun.'

But despite its rich history, this is a palazzo without pomposity, one where as soon as you step through its unassuming green door there is a welcome so warm you feel as though you're being greeted by long-lost friends.

If only any of our friends had interiors like these.

A pair of grandiose candelabra held aloft by twin African statues stands guard at reception. We move into the heart of the building - a glorious and inviting space filled with the loveliest furniture. A glass of chilled white wine appears as I sink into a cream sofa and survey our surroundings.

Gilt-framed portraits of noblemen and women look down from dazzling white walls while every surface holds a thing of beauty.

Vintage gramophones. Burnished candlesticks. Lanterns, vases, objets d'art. A pair of carved horses lowering their heads. Flair, although never flaunted, is everywhere. For although this majestic building oozes refinement, it remains at heart a home.

One open doorway leads to the kitchen, a reassuring hive of early evening activity under the supervision of the excellent head chef Antonio; another leads down to a restored salt oven now used to teach guests how to prepare ancient Salento recipes.

We stand on an outcrop looking out over the crystal-clear Adriatic and Andrea tells us we are at Italy's furthest south-eastern point.

Our mission – to travel the length of the country (or as much of it as a two-week holiday would allow) is complete.

To the buzzy beach club for our last lunch – enormous platters of succulent fruit followed by carpaccio of sea bass on a cucumber bed. Not a battered cod in sight.

We kick off our dusty boots and make a final stony descent into the sea.

Dare I say it, but I think we've mastered the rocks.