

ITALY

# The last steppe

by Alessandro Gandolfi





Gravina in Puglia (Bari), men congregate in the Piazza (square) to wait for mass on the feast day for the town's patron saint, San Michele.



## A WILD, STONE TREASURE CHEST: THE REBIRTH OF ALTA MURGIA

**If there were a ranking of Europe's most magical and forgotten lands, then Alta Murgia would surely be in first place. Italy's last arid steppe, with its dry stone walls, limestone caves and grazing sheep, resembles a slice of Ireland just a stone's throw from the Mediterranean.**

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While 60 years ago some of the area's deep ravines housed nuclear missiles aimed at the USSR, today they serve as film sets for blockbusters like the latest in the James Bond film franchise.

"No one knows us yet," explains the president of the Alta Murgia National Park, "but we are the best preserved jewel in all of Puglia, and we are destined to grow."

There is just one problem: Alta Murgia hates notoriety. The "heart of stone" loved by Frederick II is still a wild and unpopulated land, described in 1925 by the writer Tomasso Fiore as "desolate, bleak, repelling, evocative for its stark boundlessness". In this karst desert, however, something has changed in recent years.

Keen new generations are renovating old family farmhouses, new museums are being opened (like the museum dedicated to Altamura Man, the remains of a Neanderthal man discovered thirty years ago), rock-hewn churches that have been closed for years are finally accessible and thousands of dinosaur footprints dating back 85 million years are on display at the incredible Pontrelli quarry. All the while, the Castel del Monte on its hill continues to attract visitors from all over the world.



Dry stone walls, a feature of Alta Murgia (the name derives from the Latin word "murex"), at the Masseria Pisciuolo in Altamura (Bari).



The Church of San Nicola dei Greci in Altamura (Bari), where Giuseppe and Maria Cristina have just been married.



Gravina in Puglia (Bari), young people have fun on the bumper cars at the fairground on the feast day for the town's patron saint, San Michele.

Artist and storyteller Donato Laborante enters the underground complex beneath the estate of Casale Cagnazzi in Altamura (Bari).





Gravina in Puglia (Bari), at the Cathedral of Santa Maria Assunta, Bishop Giovanni Ricchiuti is about to enter Piazza Benedetto XIII to celebrate mass on the feast day of the town's patron saint, San Michele.



Gravina in Puglia (Bari), the apartment of Baron Ettore Pomarici Santomasi (1854-1917), which today is a museum managed by the foundation of the same name.



A model dinosaur head in a play area at the Boscosauro park in Altamura (Bari). The park is located just a few kilometres away from the site where thousands of dinosaur tracks were discovered in a quarry.



Altamura (Bari), two bakers at work at the famous Di Gesù bakery, the temple of P.D.O. certified Altamura bread. The bakery produces 1500 kg of bread each day, some of which is exported as far afield as Belgium, Germany and Switzerland.

A view of Gravina in Puglia (Bari), in the Alta Murgia National Park. Crossing the rocky limestone canyon is the Madonna della Stella Viaduct, where a scene from the James Bond film "No Time to Die" was filmed in 2020.





Gravina in Puglia (Bari), on the feast day for the town's patron saint, San Michele, people gather in Piazza Benedetto XIII to watch the mass on a giant screen.



A detail of one of the dry walls that are features of the Alta Murgia landscape (the name, in fact, derives from the Latin word "murex" meaning sharp stone) at the Masseria Pisciuolo in Altamura (Bari).



Gravina in Puglia (Bari), preparations for the mass at the Cathedral of Santa Maria Assunta on the feast day for the town's patron saint, San Michele.



At sunset two friends relax and contemplate at the Pulo di Altamura (Bari), a spectacular 70-metre-deep doline in the heart Alta Murgia.



Gravina in Puglia (Bari), businessperson Grazia Scarciolla, who in 2014 opened the restaurant called "13 Volte", which is located in the caves dug out beneath the town.



The National Museum of Archaeology in Altamura (Bari), a reproduction of the skull of the so-called Altamura Man, the remains of a Neanderthal discovered in a local cave in 1993 and still conserved there.



Local poet Vito Ciaccia gives a recital with some friends in a room at the Masseria Jesce in Altamura (Bari). Built on the ancient Via Appia, over the years the building has been used as a monastery and a farm.

Farmer Agostino Moramarco, aged 51, with his sheep near the Masseria Pisciuolo in Altamura (Bari). Agostino began looking after the family's sheep when he was 7 years old. Today he runs the family cheese making business together with his brother Angelo, their father Raffaele, aged 92, and Agostino's son Raffaele, aged 24.





Outside the Church of San Nicola dei Greci in Altamura (Bari) friends celebrate the wedding of Giuseppe and Maria Cristina.



The celebrated Castel del Monte (Andria), a symbol of Alta Murgia, built for Frederick II, Duke of Swabia, in the 13th century.



Raffaele Moramarco, aged 92, at his Masseria Pisciuolo in Altamura (Bari). Today his sons Angelo and Agostino and grandson Raffaele, aged 24, run the family cheese making business.



Donato Mercadanti, aged 28, in the stables of the farm he runs together with his uncles and cousins, the Masseria La Calcara, in Altamura (Bari).



Gabriele Tarantino, who manages the Lo Cuocio farm stay, rides a horse in Gravina in Puglia (Bari) in the Alta Murgia National Park.

Gravina in Puglia (Bari), three punching games at the fairground on the feast day for the town's patron saint, San Michele.





The Pulo di Altamura (Bari) is a spectacular 70-metre-deep doline in the heart of Alta Murgia.

Large model dinosaurs at the Boscosauro park in Altamura (Bari). The park is located just a few kilometres away from the site where thousands of dinosaur footprints were found in a quarry.



