

## WEEKEND

## Cathedrals by the Sea

Three Towns in Puglia Are Crowned With Powerful Examples of Norman Architecture

By Lana Bortolot  
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Those who cross mountain and *murge* (*pugliese* for plateau) to reach the Adriatic Sea will be well-rewarded by three towns in an area known as *Terra di Bari*. Once outposts for seabound Crusaders, now Barletta, Trani and Molfetta are visited for their Romanesque cathedrals. Just north of Bari, they remain unspoiled by time and tourism.

For much of the 10th and 11th centuries, Puglia was under Byzantine rule, then Norman rule. The surviving architectural form of this period is known as "Apulian Romanesque." Combining Norman, Lombard and Pisan characteristics with Eastern influences, the style was popular with cathedral builders into the 13th century.

The fortress-like churches reflect not only the first building boom in Europe after the Dark Ages, but also an attempt to bolster communities after those chaotic years. They are simple in design and message. But, they are also curious contradictions, combining mass with ornament and religious gravity with fantastic parable.

In Barletta, the most northern of the three towns, medieval streets paved with large smooth stones spill onto the *Piazzetta del Duomo*. Here, in the shadow of Santa Maria Maggiore, the two life-defining activities of the local males are well observed: young boys chasing a soccer ball, pivoting on the Duomo steps, and old men sitting on scoops and chairs, hunched over their canes or themselves.

The 12th century Duomo hulks over the *piazzetta*, its rose window a huge watching eye on an unadorned face. Just below it, the most-ornamented, but least-visible arched window gives a hint of small treasures to come.

The interior is a series of columns and arcades; an orderly cadence set by lacy bronze hanging lamps. The timbered ceiling along the center aisle opens to a Gothic ceiling and apse free of fresco and fanfare and, surprisingly, full of diffused light from windows cut high into the dome.

Two inscriptions record relationships between the church and its foreign donors. The capital of the first left pillar notes the gift, in 1153, of 200 Venetian ducats for the purchase of two columns. A second inscription, above the left door, records the donation from England's Richard the Lionhearted for a new door.

A 12th century sculptural group

along the aisles reflect Barletta's crusading spirit, such as a lonely boat overtaken by two sea monsters. Capitals, embellished with elephants, mermaids, monsters and the like, also reinforce the preoccupation with lands afar. Other carvings, like the worn, solitary praying Virgin, her hands upraised, simply reinforce the grace of everyday piety.

The capitals of the ciborium came from the same workshop that carved the narrative scenes on the facade window. But here, the work is richly undercut, creating delicate vines and leaves that twist into knots and niches.

Called the Queen of Puglia, Trani's cathedral, 13 kilometers south of Barletta, sits precariously on the water's edge. Indeed, to the left of the building, there's only sea and sky. To the right, the pencil-like *campanile* rises well above the cathedral roof, creating a visual vertical barrier between the church and the pedestrian surroundings, so that the cathedral seems to belong more to the sea than the land.

San Nicola Pellegrino, its official name, was begun in 1159 over the foundations of two earlier churches. The upper church, built over a 27-year period, was named after Nicholas the Pilgrim, an obscure Greek miracle-worker who died in 1094. He was canonized not so much for his deeds as to spite Trani's southern rival, Bari, which boasts a better-known Saint Nicholas.

Aside from its dramatic perch, the most unusual visual feature of the church is its 13th-century bell tower. Rising nearly 59 meters, it appears even more spindly because of its extraordinary archway. Higher than even the main portal, it carves out a window to the sea.

Up close, the church is just as stunning. Trani's tympanum — the semicircle above the main door — is one of the best examples in Puglia of portal design brought South by the Normans. Typically, this spot is reserved for elaborate sculptural work, usually cluttered narratives from the Bible. Trani's entire portal is a puzzle of knots, rosettes, flora, fauna, and Bible works. Untangling the arms and legs, vines and lions' tails — as well as the allegory itself — is a hypnotic exercise.

What gives the cathedral its intimacy isn't readily visible. Below the superior church lies the 7th-century Santa Maria della Scala (reached from an outside door in the *campanile*) and, below

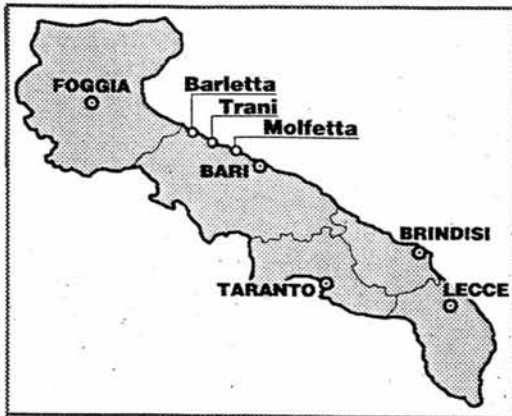


Built in the 12th century, Trani's cathedral sits precariously on the water's edge. Right, a modern crucifix inside Molfetta's San Corrado casts a shadow high on the church's walls.

Lana Bortolot

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## Traveler's Log: Puglia Coast

**TOURIST OFFICE,  
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### WHERE TO STAY: BARLETTA

- Hotel Royal  
 via Leontina De Nittis 13  
 Tel. 0883 531139  
 Fax. 0883 331466  
 Doubles from 150,000 lire

- Hotel Vittoria  
 via Brigata Barletta 78  
 Tel. 0883 534247  
 Fax. 883 37235  
 Doubles from 90,000 lire

### TRANI

- Hotel Regia (and restaurant)  
 Pza. Duomo 2  
 Tel. 0883 584444

Fax. 0883 506595  
 Doubles from 210,000 lire

### MOLFETTA

- Hotels  
 The Garden Hotel  
 Strada Provinciale per Terlizzi  
 Tel. 080 3341722  
 Fax. 080 3349291  
 Doubles from 210,000 lire

### WHERE TO EAT:

#### BARLETTA

- Antica Cucina  
 Via Milano 73  
 Tel. 0883 521718  
 Seafood, Puglian specialties,  
 and wide choice of wines.

60,000-70,000 lire

### TRANI

- Torrente Antico  
 via Fusco 3  
 Tel. 0883 487911  
 One of the best-known  
 restaurants of the region,  
 specializing in seafood.  
 Great choice of wines.  
 90,000-100,000 lire

### MOLFETTA

- Bufi  
 Via Vittorio Emanuele 17  
 Tel. 080 3971597  
 Typical Puglian cuisine  
 70,000-80,000 lire

### WEB SITES

[www.apulia.com](http://www.apulia.com) • [www.puglia.org](http://www.puglia.org) • [www.pugliaturismo.com](http://www.pugliaturismo.com) • [www.comune.barletta.ba.it](http://www.comune.barletta.ba.it)

many ancient towns, it's hard to know what's being restored and what's being simply sustained. Still, it's a good preamble for the atmospheric San Corrado, itself a jumble of styles and constructions.

There's little confection to the Duomo: the exterior decoration is more architectural than ornamental. Started in 1150 and finished near the end of the 13th century, it combines the stoic and exotic. Two tall Romanesque *campanili* give San Corrado some symmetry, but much of the building overturns your assumptions.

Pyramidal roofs hint at peaked interiors, but actually conceal Byzantine domes. Delicate interlacing blind arcades on the exterior play an optical game: looking Byzantine (rounded) or Gothic (peaked), as the eye pleases. On the apse side of the building, two stocky lions on carved brackets support two spindly columns leading to the church's only sculpted window. A stone visage — more a mask than face — seems better suited for a theater than a church.

In contrast to its irregular exterior, the interior is simple and harmonious. Nearly square in shape, it's ornamented only by arches, domes and capitals. Unfortunately, the whimsical capitals, carved with faces and vegetable-motifs, are difficult to see because the height of the columns pitches into darkness. A modern crucifix hangs in the window of the apse and sun filtering through the high dome windows casts a shadow of the emaciated Christ that is more evocative than the original.

Without the carvings of the other churches, the Duomo does look very holy. But it is no less a contemplative or weighty space. Indeed, without the usual layers of stucco and shellac, not to mention the ideals accompanying them, one can concentrate on the purity and purpose of these Norman churches: really, the light at the end of Dark Ages.

that, the 6th century crypt of San Leucio. There's not much of decorative interest in San Leucio, but Santa Maria contains the crypt of St. Nicholas with its intricately carved capitals and medieval frescoes showing Byzantine and Venetian influences.

Before leaving the cathedral, stand under the archway of the campanile. A careful eye will make out inscriptions on the walls, a coat of arms and a primitive etching of a crusader, frozen in either departure or return.

Like Trani, Molfetta's cathedral is seaside, but is unfortunately situated at the edge of a parking lot.

Meandering through the medieval streets, however, will set the mood for the Molfetta's Duomo, San Corrado. Inside the city walls, the buildings almost buckle onto themselves, supported by timbers criss-crossing the streets. Where there isn't a slash of wood, there's laundry obscuring the little available light. Like the texture of

