

# ASK THE FAMILY

With Puglia's mild autumn months, there's still plenty of time to indulge in the sprawling rustic luxury of a family-friendly resort on Italy's Adriatic coast, says **Caroline Phillips**

**Mediterranean charm:** Puglia, in Italy's heel, has the country's longest coastline and a rich culinary history

## DETAILS PUGLIA

Scott Dunn has seven nights at Borgo Egnazia from £2,500 per adult (£1,900 per child) B&B based on a family of four sharing a Grand Garden Villa with return flights to Bari with British Airways and transfers  
■ [scottdunn.com](http://scottdunn.com)

THE plane lands to an unusual chorus. "Santo bravo," the plane's incumbents, many of them schoolchildren, shout and clap. "They are thanking the pilot," explains my octogenarian neighbour, an Italian lady in black. It's our first insight into the warmth of the Apulians, as the locals are known. Welcome to Bari in Puglia, high on Italy's heel.

After a 45-minute drive past ugly bungalows and industrial areas, we're ready to turn around and go home – to give up our annual family holiday. Puglia is not your traditional tourist destination, and we can see why.

"Beautiful white hilltop towns, fortresses, strange trulli houses like Hobbits' homes..." I bleat from the guide book in an effort to generate enthusiasm from our 13- and 16-year-old daughters, who've morphed into versions of Harry Enfield's Kevin.

I know when I'm talking to myself. "Humble agricultural past... Greek invaders, Roman and, oh, bloody everyone has conquered Puglia..."

But then, suddenly, we reach a spot between the foothills of the Apennines and the Adriatic. The air is filled with the scent of figs and there are monumental olive trees, more beautiful than any I've ever seen. Their trunks are knotted and gnarled, and they stand in the fields like giant soldiers.

Suddenly a white building shimmers in the sun like a splendid Moroccan fort. It's our destination, Borgo Egnazia, a swanky resort near the fishing village of Savelletri.

Inspired by the rural architecture of traditional Apulian villages and masserias – with Greek and Moorish influences – it takes its name from the nearby ancient Roman town of Egnazia. It's a borgo (Italian for village),

comprising a masseria (farmhouse) style hotel, townhouses and villas.

It almost looks as if it has been here for centuries. But it took 10 years to plan, six to build, and some of it only opened fully this year.

Its creamy tufo (local sandstone) walls rise proudly from its 40 acres – set within a 250-acre private estate – with fields of purple aubergines, vineyards and olive groves. Our kids' eyes widen excitedly and, suddenly, they aren't Kevins any more.

We enter under a Spanish arch which leads on to a courtyard with caditoie, like flying buttresses along the roof for pouring hot olive oil onto attackers, and I can see First Born wondering whether we could have them at home in Kensal Rise.

Inside the main hotel is a calm world of flickering candles, creams and Mediterranean minimalism – a contemporary reworking of local farmhouse interiors. Inside the borgo, we marvel at the detail – from piazza and church to ceramic street names.

The guests are mostly accessorised with tiny kids. If you don't already have children you'll want to make some here, perhaps in a pool villa like ours, with a garden filled with bougainvillea, abundant rosemary and dining area under a pergola of jasmine (privacy comes from a cacti hedge sprouting prickly pears, which First Born tries to pick until the fruit gets its revenge). I'm almost moved to go forth and multiply when I see the Kids' Club with its mini bidets, trulli houses and staff who make Mary Poppins look like a serial killer, but ours refuse to go to Teen Club. "Watermelon party? Puh-lease."

But I'm sold on Borgo Egnazia. There's something extraordinary about this village. I like getting lost in empty honey-coloured alleys, and love

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watching chic Italians at play. More importantly, feeling safe and running around enjoying plenty of activities, our children turn into charmers.

We play golf, even though we can't play golf. It's our first lesson on the lovely San Domenico course that overlooks the sea. There's an embarrassment of pools (four to be precise) and tennis games with a coach from Modena. "Like the vinegar?" I ask him. "Most guests," he replies, "say, 'That's where my Ferrari is from.'"

We also have a fantastic cookery lesson making taralli (like melting salty shortbread) and orecchiette (rabbits' ears pasta, a local speciality). And

where else can you learn to make pizza Margherita in an al fresco pizza oven?

Ah yes, the food. Mix three ingredients – Michelin-starred chef Mario Musoni, fish from the Adriatic and organic produce from the estate – and what do you get? Something – sorry to be hyperbolic – beyond the beyond. Fish and chips for children's meals is bass in batter. For adults, there's stuffed baby squid and moonbursts of burrata (forget double, think quadruple cream mozzarella), cuttlefish ink risotto as black as night and more wondrous, and pistachio ice cream drizzled with olive oil.

There are 20 local dishes at the buffet lunch – and that's not including the desserts. "I had five puddings today," boasts svelte Second Born. Who are you calling resort lizards?

At dawn we creep out, leaving the children sleeping, and accompany Mario to buy the day's catch from Savelletri's returning fishing boats. But the boats don't oblige. "The weather's too bad at sea," explains a fisherman. Instead we stand happily by the dockside as three nuns in white habits buy pesce for their orphanage, choosing from piles of glistening red

mullet, halibut and a swordfish with eyes the size of tennis balls.

A fisherman peels its shell to offer us raw langoustine. "Molto dolce (very sweet)," he says. Molto dolce indeed. We lunch at the kiosk on the beach, where just-caught fish is sold by weight and grilled immediately. And supper? Succulent sea bass baked in a mound of salt, served by the sea at Maddalena, a restaurant opened by Vito Nardelli, Giorgio Locatelli's erstwhile manager.

Afterwards, with girths like dolphins, we get out on bikes to discover what our kids groaningly dub "another pile of old stones". These are the ruins of the ancient city of Egnazia, with pots and skeletons in the museum and outside, tombs, crypt and acropolis – excitingly some still unexcavated and dating back to the Bronze Age – all in a beautiful setting beside the sea.

The great Augustan poet Horace – son of a freed slave – passed through here on the Via Traiana, the relics of which remain on the estate, leading to the beach. Carpe Diem – "seize or enjoy every day" – as he wrote.

Indeed. But so much harder for a poor chap who didn't get to stay at Borgo Egnazia.



**Southern belle:** Borgo Egnazia features a luxury hotel and private villas with a children's pool and playground