

SUMMER OF LOVE

HOT SPOTS
IN IBIZA AND
COOL CAVES
IN PUGLIA

JULY 2009

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URBAN BUZZ

WHY MR BUMBLE
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In Italy's sultry southern state,
summertime is all about dining,
drinking and dancing underground

PUGLIA ROCKS

WORDS JO CAIRD

Cave dwellers probably didn't have the benefit of Grotta Palazzese's extensive wine list



IT'S WELL KNOWN that Italians flee their cities for the seaside in the summer, seeking refuge from the scorching temperatures of late July and August. However, for the hippest and northern Italian crowd – the fashion designers and film stars of Milan, Turin and Bologna – a beautiful beach and a picturesque piazza for the evening passeggiata are simply not going to cut it. Members of this elite club choose a holiday destination to be seen in, along with the kind of super-slick venues to which they are accustomed in the fashionable north.

Which is where Puglia comes in. The heel of Italy's boot, it has long been known for its stunning beaches and fantastic cuisine. Now another feature of the region has taken its place in the spotlight: its caves.

Due to movements in the Earth's crust 150 million years ago, much of Puglia is made up of very soft sandy rock, known as *tuffo*. As well as contributing to the formation of Puglia's stunning coastline, punctuated by grottoes appreciated by scuba-divers, the softness of this rock allowed ancient dwellers to make their homes in cave settlements.

Now, thanks to the ingenuity of a handful of businessmen, these caves, transformed into bars, clubs and restaurants, are the hottest thing on the Italian summer scene.

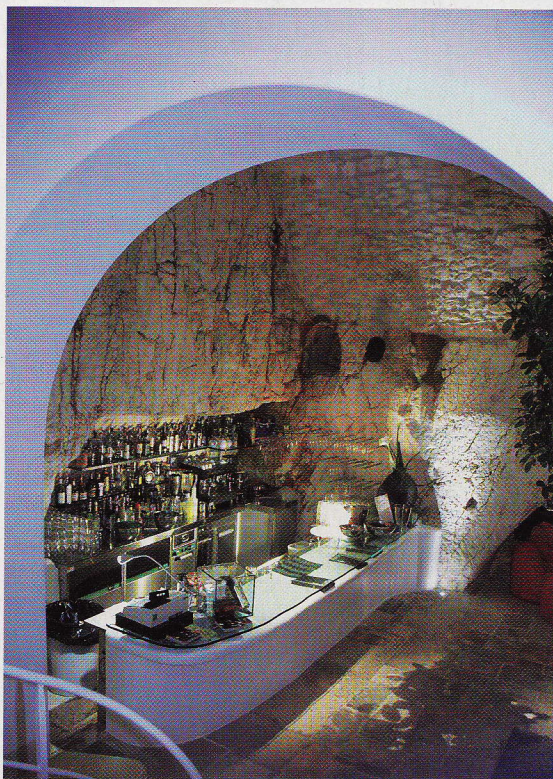
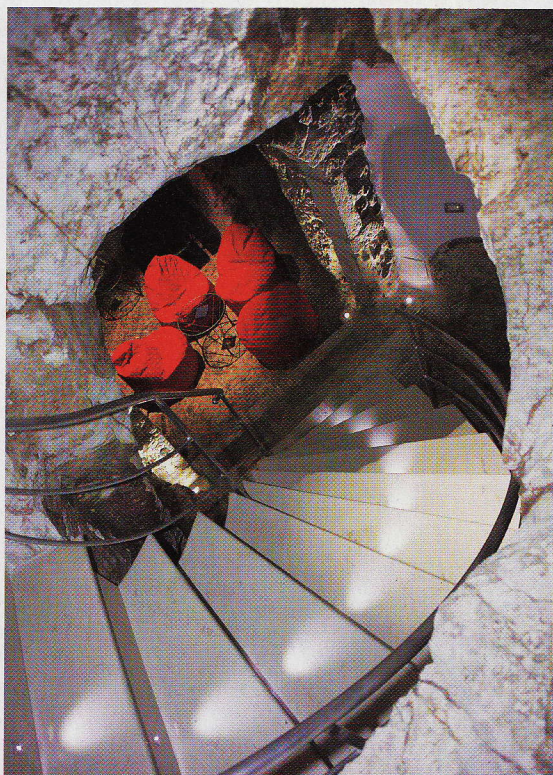
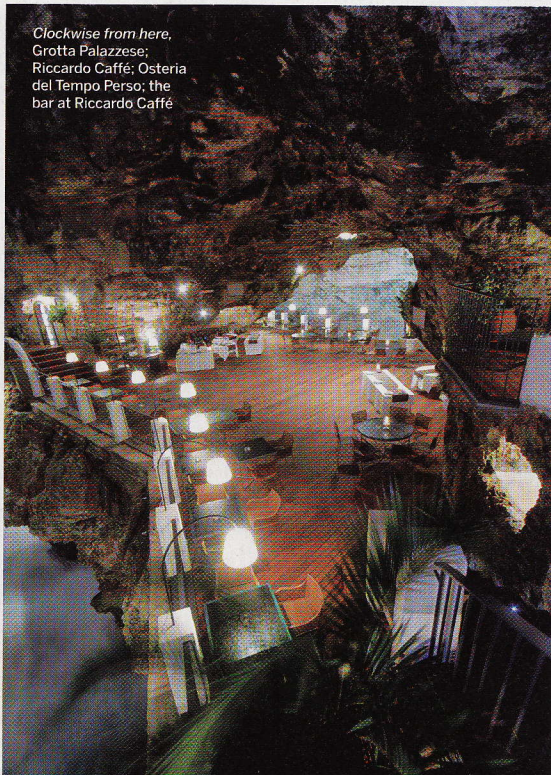
★ THE PLACE TO BE SEEN

Situated in the heart of Ostuni, Puglia's most charming hill town and a hugely popular spot for both Northern Italians and British tourists, Riccardo Caffè is *the* place to be seen. Ideal for a chilled-out early evening aperitivo, after dinner it is transformed into a quirky lounge bar that spills out into the cobbled, labyrinthine streets of Ostuni.

The building that owner Riccardo Semeraro bought 10 years ago was far smaller than the one we see today. Taking the 13th-century flour mill as inspiration, he dug further into the hillside, creating a series of intimate cave rooms that allow privacy in the midst of the bar's party atmosphere.

The minimalist interior design makes excellent use of lighting and the modern furniture contrasts with the ancient rock walls of the bar. As well as Milan's fashion set, clientele includes the actors Sebastiano Somma, Valeria Marini and Ezio Greggio, who come to mingle, savour the fresh fruit >

Clockwise from here,
Grotta Palazzese;
Riccardo Caffè; Osteria
del Tempo Perso; the
bar at Riccardo Caffè



"CAFFÉ CAVOUR'S CAVE DATES BACK TO 1100, WHEN IT WAS AN OIL MILL"

cocktails and enjoy the resident and visiting DJs. *Riccardo Caffè, Via 61-63 G. Tanzarella Vitale, Ostuni, tel: +39 083 130 6046, www.riccardocaffe.com*

★ CLIFF-TOP CLUBBING

The motto of club-restaurant Gibó is 'Just for special people' and it's easy to see why. Only open to the public 35 days a year in July and August (it's available throughout the year for private functions), and enjoying the seclusion of its cliff-face location, Gibó's air of exclusivity makes it popular with holidaying VIPs from entertainment, sport and politics, including glamour model Maddalena Corvaglia or writer Giampiero Mughini.

Terraces for dining, lounging or dancing, tumble down the cliff near Santa Maria di Leuca, Puglia's southern-most point, where the Ionian and Adriatic Seas meet. The menu is based on typical Puglian flavours presented with a modern twist, such as *laganari* (a type of long pasta) with sword fish, black olives and wild baby fennel.

International bands and solo artists play every night and DJs keep the party going till dawn. The capacity is 2000, but its secluded spots means things never feel too hectic.

Perhaps Gibó's most spectacular feature is the grotto, a natural cave at the base of the cliff. With its sandy floor and low-level lighting, this is intimate, desert-island chic. *Gibó, Località Ciolo, Santa Maria di Leuca, tel: +39 083 354 8979, www.gibo.it*

★ DINING BETWEEN SEA AND SKY

Grotta Palazzese, a four-star boutique hotel in Polignano a Mare, 37km south of Bari, offers a magical nightlife experience. Suspended between the sea and the roof of the most famous of Polignano's coastal caves, the restaurant and bar appear to float in space. Exclusivity is guaranteed, as both are accessible only to those staying at the hotel.

The food is regarded as some of the best in southern Italy. Specialising in fish and shellfish, its monthly menu features fillet of sea bream served with mussel soufflé on a bed of battered turnip leaves.

The grotto was first made accessible at the start of the 18th century and has since featured in travelogues and art works. Today's design is characterised by clean, modern lines and bright lighting, but this



Osteria del Tempo Perso has a cave interior dating from the 1500s

in no way disrupts the sense of history that clings to the place, or the feeling of being among the elements. *Grotta Palazzese, 59 Via Narciso, Polignano a Mare, tel: +39 080 424 0677, www.grottapalazzese.it*

★ AN OIL MILL FROM 1100

Caffè Cavour is another Ostuni venue frequented by the trendy Northern Italian crowd. Fabrizio Nacci's bar seems at first like any stylish Italian watering hole, with high ceilings, white walls and elegant furniture, but there is more than meets the eye.

Down a small flight of stairs lies a cave that dates back to 1100, when it was first dug out of the hillside for use as an underground oil mill. The cavity down which olives were poured from the building above, and the iron rings where the donkeys were tethered, can still be seen. This is a deliciously cool retreat for a drink on scorching summer evenings.

Only moments from the main square, Caffè Cavour has tables on Piazzetta Sant'Oronzo. There's live jazz several nights a week outside in the summer, while in the winter the bands move to its cave interior.

The bar is open until 3 or 4am on most evenings, the sultry atmosphere of jazz giving way to a party mood. In addition to cocktails and local wines, the dinner and snack menu offers excellent local cuisine. We suggest the *crostini* with carpaccio of local fish. *Caffè Cavour, 5 Corso Cavour, Ostuni, tel: +39 083 130 1709, www.caffecavour.it*

★ FOOD THAT'S THE REAL DEAL

For the ultimate romantic dinner, check out Osteria del Tempo Perso (which translates as the Osteria of Lost Time) in the heart of Ostuni's old town. The rough walls of the 16th-century cave interior are thrown into relief by the bottles, plates and copper pots that decorate the walls and catch the light.

Typical Puglian cuisine, undiluted by modern variations, such as fresh pasta and vegetables, simply cooked fish and meat and robust, flavoursome wines, is the speciality here. The Northern Italians know they are getting the real deal.

Puglian classics include *orecchiette* (fresh 'little ears' pasta) with *cime di rape* (a local slightly bitter green) and *mollica di pane tostato* (toasted breadcrumbs). The Osteria's offering changes according to the season; almost all the produce that goes into their dishes is local, and its quality guaranteed.

The cave it occupies is a former bread oven; it is fitting that a place that began by supplying one of Italian cuisine's most basic staples has been transformed into a restaurant that takes pride in simple and elegant fare. *Osteria del Tempo Perso, 49 Via G. Tanzarella Vitale, tel: +39 083 130 3320, www.osteriadelttempoperso.com*

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