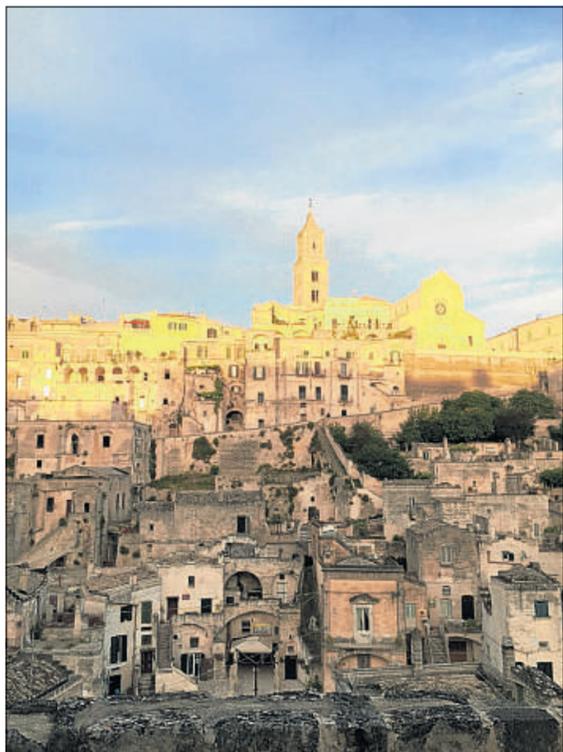


# TRAVEL

At right, a typical climbing street in Matera, Italy. Traversing them requires some skill, but it is definitely worth the effort.



Top-notch accommodations and hospitality await guests in the four-room cave hotel La Dimora di Metello in Matera.



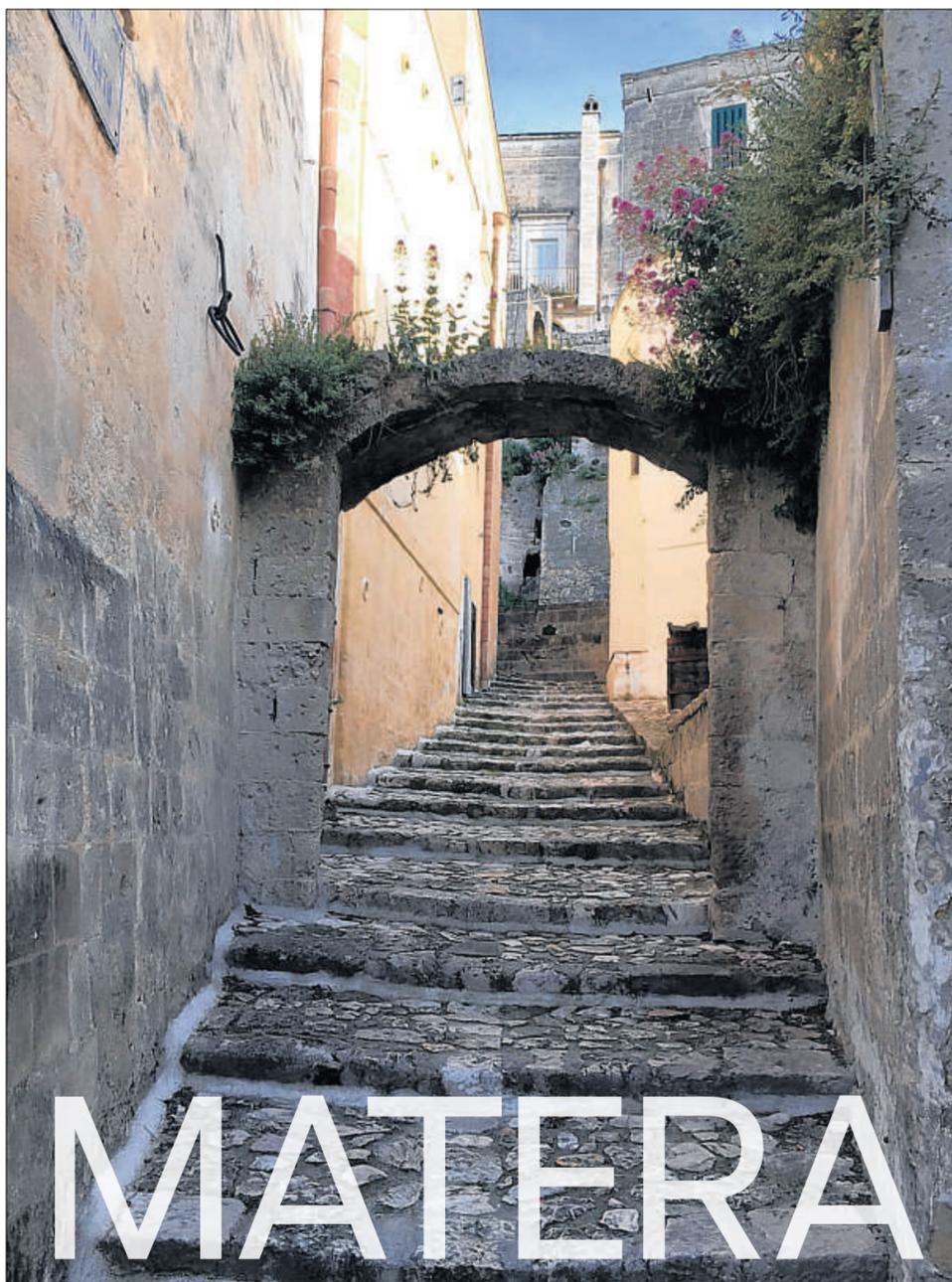
Matera glows just before sunset. The stone city has been named one of two European Capitals of Culture for 2019.

## IF YOU GO ...

Matera is a 40-minute drive from Bari and a five-hour drive from Rome. Nonresidents cannot park in the sassi district, so unload your suitcases, then leave your car on the edge of the city and walk back by foot. Don't have a car? Fly or take the train into Bari (it's a four-hour train ride from Rome). Once you get to Bari, look for the local train from Bari Centrale in the Ferrovie Appulo Lucane building to Matera Centrale, and it's an additional 90-minute ride. The national train schedule (Rome-Bari) can be found at [www.trenitalia.it](http://www.trenitalia.it). For local trains to Matera, visit [www.fal-srl.it/it/index.html](http://www.fal-srl.it/it/index.html).



A fantastic grilled goat cheese appetizer is served at La Gatta Buia, one of the many restaurants in Matera.



# MATERA

## Ancient Italian city of caves resurfaces as bustling tourist destination

STORY AND PHOTOS BY LINDA DINI JENKINS | Special correspondent

One morning, my husband awoke before dawn and walked barefoot through the alleys and stairways of Matera. It's that kind of place: a little mystical, with a biblical feel that says time has stood still here. Nothing could be further from the truth. The last 50 years have seen enormous changes in this stone city set among the rugged landscape of Basilicata in Italy's boot. An intricate troglodyte settlement of caves, churches and circuitous and climbing streets, Matera is one of the oldest inhabited cities in the world.

When author Carlo Levi was exiled to Basilicata between the two world wars, he witnessed firsthand the life in the sassi (stones). People were living in caves, with the family in the front and the animals in the back. There was no indoor plumbing or electricity. And the area was one of the poorest in Italy. But there was a robust community among the farmers, and the people lived together outdoors in the vicinati (neighborhoods), sharing meals and retiring to the caves at night to sleep.

In 1945, Levi published his memoir, "Christ Stopped at Eboli," which described the conditions and, in the wake of the post-war trauma and Italy's desire to expunge its past, the government decided to do something. In the early 1950s, nearly 20,000 cave dwellers were relocated to new housing in the modern upper part of the city, and a way of life that had existed for more than 8,000 years was almost lost.

Fast forward a few years and resettlement began with an influx of homesteaders and artists. In 1986, thanks to restoration subsidies of up to 50 percent, small shops started to appear, as well as the first of many high-tech companies. Then in 1993, UNESCO named Matera a World

Heritage Site. In just 40 years, Matera evolved from what many called a disgrace to an outstanding example of an ancient urban settlement.

Today, Matera is on the brink of becoming a bustling tourist destination for those wise enough to go off the beaten track and explore the many paths winding in and around the two sassi districts (Barisano and Caveoso). Entrepreneurs from Italy and beyond have come to Matera to restore the most habitable caves and transform them into luxury hotels, restaurants, shops and businesses. There is an energizing sense of taking the place back, of highlighting an almost-forgotten way of life and of breathing new life into what is surely one of the most unusual destinations on the planet.

Filmmakers know about Matera and use it as a stand-in for ancient Jerusalem. The arts are thriving, thanks to the potters and weavers and painters who call Matera home.

Hospitality is key here, as evidenced by Elisabetta, the proprietor of La Dimora di Metello, the four-room cave hotel we stayed in, and our guide, Anne Demay, a Frenchwoman who has made a life here with her Italian artist husband. Restaurants are plenti-

ful and most proffer the regional Basilicata fare of lamb or pork accompanied by chickpeas, fava beans, crushed peppers and the famous Matera bread. The local wines are surprisingly good, and there are fantastic regional sheep and goat cheeses to complement them.

Matera requires a little climbing skill, but it is completely worth the effort. If you go in the summer, bring a hat and sunscreen and be prepared to carry water and take frequent rests in the shaded alleys to listen to the ever-present birdsongs. Visit some of the ancient frescoed cave churches, as well as the Church of Saint Francis of Assisi and the stunningly gilded Matera Cathedral. Take a taxi over to the sculpture garden Il Parco Scultura La Palomba for an unforgettable experience. Back in the sassi, take the time to meet the cave dwellers who are more than willing to show you what life was like c'era una volta (once upon a time).

Matera's latest coup is being named one of two European Capitals of Culture for 2019. The Materans are getting ready for you — go and be delighted.

Linda Dini Jenkins blogs at [www.travelthewriteway.com](http://www.travelthewriteway.com) and runs tours to Italy for people who hate tours.

*In just 40 years, Matera evolved from what many called a disgrace to an outstanding example of an ancient urban settlement.*

