

Photographer: Alessandro Boschi/500px Prime

Daily Daydream

# The Trip to Italy We’d Love to Take When This Is All Over

The words “a group trip to Italy” seem unfathomable right now. But when I’m at my most hopeful, it’s what I think about.

By [Nikki Ekstein](#)  
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*Here at Bloomberg Pursuits, we know most of your plans are on hold. Ours are, too. But that doesn't mean we're not daydreaming about the trips, meals, and other worldly delights that we'll rush out to experience when it's fully safe once again to do so. We're sharing our ideas with you in the hopes that they will help inspire you—and we'd love to hear what you are daydreaming about, too. Send us your thoughts and plans at daydreams@bloomberg.net, and we'll try to flesh some of them out for you in future versions of this column.*

*Today's daydream is from Pursuits Travel Editor Nikki Ekstein, who has been thinking about how she can return the gestures of kindness one Italian chef has extended to her family over the years.*

When news started to break about the global ripple of coronavirus, I couldn't help worry about Italy's *nonnas*. The country is now suffering from one of the worst outbreaks of Covid-19 in the world; as of press time, it has logged more than 162,000 cases and the death toll has risen past an unimaginable 21,000.

With the elderly being especially susceptible, my thoughts went to all the gray-haired matriarchs whose kitchen clanking you could hear from the streets off Rome’s Campo de Fiori, the ones serving hand-cut tagliatelle by the mountainful in Alto Adige’s ski towns, and the women who single-handedly perpetuate ancient recipes in Sicily. As a travel editor besotted with Italy and that familial style of Italian hospitality, these nonnas have unknowingly carried my travel dreams on their backs, and sometimes even brought them to life.

Tracking COVID-19

87,544

New cases reported worldwide, April 17

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155,768

Total deaths reported worldwide

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31,905 in U.S.


Most new cases today



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-16%


Change in MSCI World Index of global stocks since Wuhan lockdown, Jan. 23



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-1.091

Change in U.S. treasury bond yield since Wuhan lockdown, Jan. 23

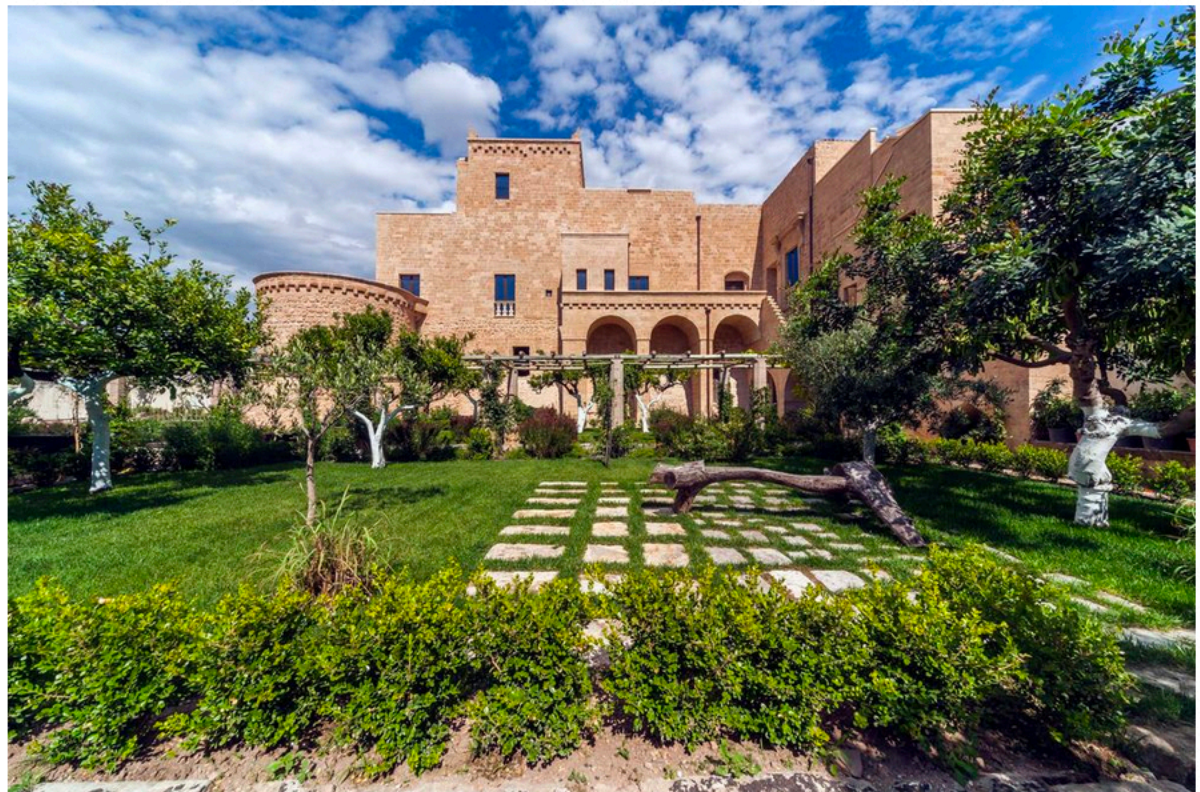


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Watching from another Covid-19 hotspot—Brooklyn, New York—the tragedy felt twofold, measured in both lives and culture lost. But as the weeks have gone by, Italians have shown that their sense of community and culture is not easily shaken. They sing opera from their balconies and leaving prepared food in baskets on the street for those in need. The children of Italy began what is now a global tradition of painting rainbows and placing them in windows to signal optimism.

At home, we’ve made a rainbow in solidarity: *tutto andra bene*, it says: “Everything will be OK.” And as soon as it is, I need to get back to the trip I’d been planning when this all started: a relaxing, food-filled week in Puglia, at the heel of Italy’s boot.

Early in the year, I had the good fortune of meeting with Diana Bianchi, the co-founder of a historic estate in Puglia called Castello di Ugento—a place lined with fig trees, herb gardens, trellised walkways, and cobblestoned walls that make you feel as if you’re in an ancient, holy cloister. Though Bianchi’s partner, Massimo d’Amore, made his own fortunes as the longtime chief of beverages at PepsiCo, the limestone castle, with its 400-year-old frescoes, Bronze age artifacts, and 18th-century walled garden, has been in his family since 1643. Restoring it to its former glory and opening it as a nine-suite hotel was a labor of love, she told me—one that had cost \$14 million by the time the ribbon was cut in 2018.



Castello di Ugento, a castle-turned-hotel in Puglia. *Source: Castello di Ugento*

Puglia is a place I’ve written about many times, as travel editor at Bloomberg. Initially, Bianchi’s pitch felt too obvious, less next-big-thing and more been-there-covered-that. But after a labor-intensive ski trip to the French Alps with our nearly-1-year-old in January, my husband and I knew that an easy, laid-back vacation was just what we needed for summer. Then Bianchi sealed the deal (before the ensuing pandemic aggressively unsealed it). As part of the hotel’s dust-off, she said, she and d’Amore had hired chef Odette Fada, a stalwart of the New York dining scene, to run Ugento’s restaurant and cooking school.



The cooking school at Castello di Ugento. *Source: Castello di Ugento*

Fada, as many aficionados of Italian food may know, helmed the kitchen for years at San Domenico, a Central Park South icon, where she created iconic dishes such as *uovo in raviolo* (a giant ravioli with a tender egg yolk hidden inside) and served my husband and me some of our earliest meals together. We were college freshmen the first time we showed up at the white-tablecloth spot and paid upward of \$100 per person—money we’d scraped together. Fada and the restaurant’s proprietors took special care of us, sending complimentary dishes to the 18-year-olds who’d somehow showed up without their parents. We kept coming back, occasion after occasion, for their generous hospitality. Sharing Fada’s bounty with our daughter, who is new to eating real (non-pureed!) foods, felt like a must.



Dusk on the castle grounds. *Source: Castello di Ugento*

Luckily for me, Castello di Ugento has a strong element of family-friendliness. Bianchi assured me that they have trusted, on-call babysitters and a great pool for my 1-year-old; the sprawling grounds would be the perfect place to let her run free in a diaper while my husband mastered that mesmerizing *uovo in raviolo* recipe during a day at the culinary academy. Better yet, close friends agreed to join us. As two sets of parents with similarly aged kids, we imagined spa days for the moms and multiple-course dinners with free-flowing prosecco while the babies sleep at night.

Once it's safe to do so, here's the trip we'll book. We would love to return the kindness Odette Fada showed to us over the years, and Italy will need visitors then, more than ever.

## A Couple of Days Near Bari



Alberobello, one of the towns in Puglia where it's easiest to find trulli architecture. *Photographer: Matteo Colombo/Moment RF*

Driving in Italy is something my husband and I love to do. This time, we'd start in Bari, which receives international flights from a large array of destinations, and head south along the coast for about an hour to the whitewashed oasis of Borgo Egnazia. The hotel is one of the region's most famous luxury stays; its monochromatic rooms are like floodlit sanctuaries that spill out onto expansive grounds. We'd spend a day or two adapting to Italy's leisurely pace by chilling at the resort's three pools, then carve out time to explore surrounding small towns with historic architecture, such as the conical-roofed stone structures called *trulli*.

Not optional: visits to local cheesemakers where the girls could pet goats and a baby-free sailing excursion in the shimmering Adriatic.

## A Few More Days at Castello di Ugento



The streets of Lecce. *Photographer: EunikaSopotnicka/iStockphoto*

The hotel that inspired it all is just a bit farther toward the heel of the boot—a less-than two-hour drive from Borgo Egnazia. We could stop and stretch our legs in Lecce along the way; it’s one of the larger cities in Puglia, known for its impressive amphitheater, beautiful Baroque buildings, and lively piazzas. Then it’s another set of lazy days, punctuated by beach trips, lots of *spaghetti ai ricci di mare* (seafood pasta with lemon) in the area’s port towns, and an adults-only day in Santa Casarea Terme, which has sulphur-rich hot springs in a series of cliffside caves.

## A Final Stop, in Rome



Hotel de Russie, in Rome. *Photographer: Hotel Photography srl*

It's one of the least car-friendly places in the world, so we'd return our rental and take the train to the capital—which I first visited on my honeymoon and haven't revisited in too many years. It's a little out of the way, yes, but I dream frequently about the perfectly charred pizza slices at Antico Forno Roscioli, the gelato at Millennium near the Vatican, and morning *cornettos* stuffed with ricotta and chocolate at Cristalli di Zucchero. Besides, once I learned how baby-friendly the Hotel de Russie is—it provides everything from diapers to non-slip bath mats and chef-made purees—I decided I had no choice but to make a pilgrimage. After all, the five-star icon is one of the most enduring (and alluring) classics in a city that's full of them.

*For now, consider supporting the Heritage Crafts Association, which is keeping cultural heritage alive across Europe and Asia even as small, hyper-local artisans struggle to stay afloat. It's with this organization's help that we'll have sandal-makers and damask weavers to visit in places like Puglia when it's safe to travel once again.*

*Want to add Puglia to your bucket list? Family Twist is a travel agency that can unlock the area's best draws for—you guessed it—parents and kids, while Andrea Grisdale at IC Bellagio is a trusted source for luxury trips to Italy.*