

House & Home

FTWeekend



Lundby living Max inspiration from mini doll's houses — [INTERIORS PAGES 6 & 7](#)

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Nearly as far south as you can travel in Italy, Puglia — the heel of the boot — is a region of compelling variety. From the striking limestone cliffs of the Adriatic coastline to the north, it segues into rolling hills carpeted in olive groves and vines dotted with its signature whitewashed trulli.

The drystone houses with conical roofs — some with Unesco-listed status — were first used as storehouses in the 14th century. Their owners lived in fortified stone farmhouses, or *masserie*, made from the local creamy limestone, or *tufa*, whose Moorish-style vaulted ceilings, arches and internal courtyards were a legacy of the region's Arab and Byzantine influences. In Puglia's southern reaches, fishing villages look out over the gently shelving sandy beaches of the Ionian Sea.

For years, this sleepy rustic holiday destination flew under the radar of international buyers and even many Italians from the north. But that is changing. While the dramatic coastlines of Italy's southern tip compare with those of Liguria's Cinque Terre, Puglia's landscape of *trulli* and whitewashed towns is unique. Add in the lure of Italy's

'Buyer inquiries grew 62 per cent last year and estate agents are rushing to the region to cater for demand'

tax regimes and plentiful good-value renovation opportunities and you can see the appeal. The region is beginning to rival Tuscany in the eyes of those looking for homes.

Buyer inquiries grew 62 per cent last year, compared with just 1.2 per cent in Tuscany, according to James Edition, a portal helping foreign buyers find homes for more than £500,000. High-end estate agents are rushing to the region to cater for the new demand: Coldwell Banker has opened seven offices since 2022; Engel & Völkers first since 2023; Knight Frank's first is planned later this year. And prices are rising: up 20 per cent since 2021 to €3,500 per sq metre for prime homes in the popular central area containing the *trulli*-strewn Valle d'Itria, versus 6 per cent and €4,000 respectively for those in Tuscany's Chianti and surrounding hills, according to Engel & Völkers.

"Renovation projects are a fraction of what you might find in Tuscany's favoured spots, if you can even find them there," says Gemma Bruce, a London-based property finder working with agents across Italy. "We have a longer list of people looking in Puglia now."

Puglia (Apulia in English) stretches from the fertile plains of the north through industrial Adriatic ports to the rugged extremities along Italy's southern heel. The northern stretch between Bari and Brindisi is the most fashionable, dotted with a fast-growing cluster of beach clubs and upscale homes and hotels.



Trulli, madly, deeply

An international crowd is being lured by Puglia's

whitewashed baroque towns, rustic simplicity,

renovation opportunities and lattice of tax perks.

Could it be the next Tuscany? By **Liz Rowlinson**

Fishing villages and low-key beach towns share the rustic feel of Italy's northern regions of Marche and Abruzzo.

South of Brindisi into the Salento peninsula — where, after centuries of Greek ownership, a Greek dialect is still spoken in some areas — it's about characterful coastal towns, such as the island-like fortress of Gallipoli, the pristine beaches of the Ionian coast and the protected national park between Otranto and Santa Maria di Leuca (where properties cannot be built). As Italy's stiletto heel narrows, the Adriatic and Ionian sit close by on either coast. Lecce is arguably southern Italy's most beautiful city — its piazzas and basilicas elaborately carved from pale yellow *pietra leccese* limestone.

The foundations for Puglia's recent emergence were laid in 2010. The sophisticated Borgo Egnazia resort, which opened that year, placed the region on the radar of Hollywood's

A-list. It is built in the style of a traditional Puglian village with modern comforts, including its own nearby beach club La Fonte, and has hosted Madonna, the Beckhams and even the G7 summit last year.

Its success was the catalyst for more openings nearby. They include Rocco Forte's Masseria Torre Maizza — a 16th-century *masseria* in olive groves plus a golf course and Aveda spa — and several chic beach clubs such as San Domenico a Mare, part of the exclusive Masseria San Domenico resort located nearby, and Cala Maki with its raffia parasols and boho hammocks.

"These attracted the fashionable crowd and digital nomads from Milan during the pandemic," says Diletta Giorgio, head of residential at Italy Sotheby's International Realty. Compared to the long-established fashionable seaside towns of Portofino, on the Italian Riviera, or northern Tuscany's Forte dei Marmi, this coastline offers



Main image: a four-bedroom property in Ostuni, €1.05m through Puglia Dream; (above) Ostuni at sunset
Getty Images

pared-down simplicity, local traditions and privacy.

"The bumpy roads and shops that close for lunch in rural Puglia add to its authenticity," says Francesco Distante of estate agency Puglia Dream, which is based in Ostuni, of the area's slow-paced allure.

The same features now appeal to international buyers, who are seeking out homes in the medieval and baroque towns dotted between Bari and Lecce. Ostuni, Nardò and Monopoli are among the most popular. Distante says that foreign clients have increased from half of his sales before the pandemic to 80 per cent today. "Americans, French and Germans dominate the €1m-plus market; while homes for €500,000 to €800,000 are popular with Dutch, Italians and British," he says.

Puglia is benefiting from Italy's new tax regimes, which have been quietly reshaping property markets across the country. The most high-profile has been the "high net worth flat tax" introduced in 2017 at €100,000. By the time the rate was increased to €200,000 last August, roughly 4,000 foreigners had relocated to Italy to benefit.

A lesser-known scheme (*rientro del cervelli* or return of the brains) offers returning expats and highly qualified foreigners earning below €600,000 a 50 per cent discount on domestic income tax for five years (under a previous iteration this reached 90 per cent in Italy's south). The scheme has attracted 50,000 people to Italy since 2015, according to the Ministry of Finance.

A third scheme for pensioners limits tax on foreign incomes to 7 per cent for a period of 10 years. It is restricted to those living in qualifying towns of fewer



than 20,000 people across Italy's central and southern regions. It has attracted around 1,000 people since 2019, among them Jeffrey Larson, a retired immigration attorney from Minneapolis, who bought a villa near Brindisi in June. He and his husband confined their search to towns enjoying the tax break — one of several financial benefits that incentivised the purchase, he says. "The cost of living is 50 per cent lower than the US. Our healthcare insurance is €900 a year here compared to €6,000 back home."

A new direct flight from New York to Bari, introduced in June, could fuel further interest from US buyers.

Distante notes that the stretch between Polignano a Mare and Brindisi contains much of the most expensive property in Puglia; in and around the Valle d'Itria, Savelletri, Fasano Mare and Ostuni are among the most sought after for second homes. Engel & Völkers report that prices for renovated properties here can reach €6,000 per sq m, compared with €2,000 for typical unrenovated homes.

Besides Polignano a Mare, where the expansive Valle d'Itria ends in cliffs, with crystal-clear water below, and the hill town of Ostuni, Monopoli offers a labyrinth of pretty whitewashed streets and piazzas.

Sotheby's International Realty is selling a seven-bedroom estate including a *trullo* near Ostuni for €3.35m; Coldwell Banker has a five-*trullo* complex with two bedrooms at €699,000.

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Let's repatriate the British table setting



William Hanson Perspectives

The British place setting has been lost. Thanks to the increased Americanisation of the western world, what many places now call a British place setting is, in truth, a bit Yankified. Even a purportedly stalwart British etiquette authority published a book a few years ago with an illustration showing a hybrid UK-US setting labelled as British. Etiquette land was – understandably so – up in arms, oyster forks aloft, ready for a fight. While I am all for updating our codes of behaviour to reflect life as it is today, the table setting is where I balk. My aversion is not founded in any sort of tableware xenophobia, however. It's purely that the British setting is the easiest one for all to get their heads around.

Everyone's seen *Titanic* and knows the "start on the outside and work inwards" rule – which gets tricky to explain if you start popping a fork and spoon above the plate for one course or, as some more bizarre US settings do, going totally out of the standard sequence with a teaspoon (for pudding) in between a dinner knife and a soup spoon. Just why?

It's time to repatriate our tableware and relearn how to do it in style.

Coasters for glasses are never used on a dining table, no matter how precious your wood is

When it comes to laying a table in the British style, the first rule is that cutlery is only placed on each side of where the food will go. See that space above the plate? Ignore it. Put a fork and spoon there and you have, in effect, deported the pudding cutlery. You can set it there, however, if you are doing a "nursery" setting – reportedly done by Northern nannies in children's nurseries. But not really correct.

British tables are often straight-edged rectangular affairs, as opposed to the round ones favoured in the US since Jacqueline Kennedy reintroduced them for presidential hospitality. The linear shape of the table informs the accepted rules of our table settings. All cutlery is set aligned to the edge of the table, a centimetre or so away from the edge. Assuming you have mislaid your butter stick, using your thumbnail as a guide will suffice. Forks are set to the left of the setting; knives and spoons to the right.

The bread knife's position is a moveable feast. In more old-fashioned British settings, a small luncheon knife was set on the outermost of all the knives – the logic being that you used it first, to add butter to your bread. You would then leave it resting on the plate for the rest of the meal.

Today, modern practice is to pre-set it on the plate, in line with the other cutlery, the blade of the knife pointing to the left, as it will

end up there anyway. It's your call as to how old-fashioned you want to be. If space is tight, you probably want to be modern. Wherever you stick your stuff, remember that in Britain all forks are set with their tines (the prongs) pointing upwards; knives with their blades pointing to the left; spoons with their bowls facing upwards. Forks laid on the table with their tines facing downwards is a French and Italian custom – although, granted, we in Britain did also set forks like that until around 1750.

Bread plates are set to the left, aligned with the edge of the table. The napkin can sit folded in a neat, crisp rectangle on the bread plate, unless any origami has been practised on the linen, in which case the design faces the diner. Napkins in glasses were popular in the 1980s, and should stay there. Napkin rings are similar outcasts of the tableware world.

Glasses are set last and placed to the right of the setting, above the knives and spoons. In a bygone era, they were a wine for each course. There may well still be today in more fortified houses, but most prefer to stick to one or two wines, and so there are fewer glasses on the table than there once were.

How glassware is placed on the table can vary, but the general rule of thumb is similar to cutlery – order of use. The glass that is closest to the diner is used first; the glass furthest away is used last. Coasters for glasses are never used on a dining table, no matter how precious your wood is.

Finally, the centre of the setting. This is where the food will once served, but for British settings, nothing is in the centre when the diners arrive, save for a place mat or an origami large napkin (which usually looks naff). America pioneered the charger – this is a china plate an inch or two bigger than a regular dinner plate and used purely for decoration, but we're still a little sceptical about them this side of the Atlantic.

While there are many images available online of the British state banquet table complete with silver gilt lay plates from the George IV Grand Service, it must be noted that such images were taken from a display for the summer opening of Buckingham Palace. In both 2008 and 2015, the Royal Collection Trust did an exhibition on state entertaining and – for whatever reason – decided to go full whack and amaze the tourists with every bit of bling they could find. For actual state banquets, nothing sits in the centre except the napkin.

The British place setting is the most logical, elegant and enduring. Let's not allow it to be muddled by misplaced forks and rogue spoons. Reclaim your cutlery, lay your table with the quiet confidence of a nation that knows which side its bread plate is on.

William Hanson is the author of *Just Good Manners: A Modern Guide to Good British Behaviour* (Penguin, £10.99)



Can you spot the faux pas? – Getty Images/John RF



Driftwood to Hollywood

The Crafted Home | The humble straw-backed Orkney chair, built originally from found wood, is now in demand all over the world, reviving a once-threatened craft.

By Isabella Smith

A former chicken shed on a family farm on Scotland's Orkney Islands is not a typical place for an international HQ. And yet from here, new iterations of the straw-backed, wood-framed Orkney chairs that have been made in the archipelago for centuries are shipped around the world – to members of the Hollywood elite such as Brad Pitt. "It's all become more than I ever imagined," says chair-maker Kevin Gauld. "I didn't really set out with any big ambitions – I just wanted to go to the workshop everyday and make furniture and be myself."

Oradians have been making their own style of chairs since the 1700s. It is a tradition borne of resourcefulness. With very few trees on the archipelago, crofters relied on driftwood – often, timber from shipwrecks – to build furniture. They used straw for the chairbacks – not only did it reduce the amount of wood required, but its insulating properties helped keep draughts at bay.

"An old Orkney croft was quite cold in the wintertime," says Gauld. "Some chairs were made with hoods to stop



Clockwise from main: Resting Bench, by Kevin Gauld; a Brodgar chair, designed with Gareth Neal, being stitched with sisal string by Gauld; modern designs keep the traditional straw backing

These crofters lived in a time where if you needed something, you didn't go to a shop. You made things

soot and dripping water from landing on you." Others came with an under-seat drawer – where knitting, fishing hooks, a Bible, or perhaps a whisky bottle could be tucked away. No two were the same: their varying shapes and heights lent them an improvised, idiosyncratic quality.

Gauld's interpretations of rockers, fan-backs and "gents" chairs – some stocky as a commode, others refined and regal like a throne – are true to this spirit. He had left school at 16 to apprentice with a local chairmaker, setting up

Trulli, madly, deeply

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The number of property transactions in and around Brindisi increased by 34 per cent between 2018 and 2023, according to Istat, the Italian statistics office.

Popular locations further south in addition to Lecce include Gallipoli. The small, fortified city is surrounded by the Ionian coast's beaches – the best in the region.

"[Increasingly] the trend is to live not right by the sea, but a 10-minute drive behind it," says Nino Filotico, an architect, who has extended his business to Puglia from Milan because he is so busy with requests for renovations. Current projects include the transformation of a historic 10-bedroom house in Cucumola for a couple from San Francisco. "I am scouting for so many properties to renovate for buyers."

Near to Gallipoli and slightly inland is Nardò, Lecce province's second-largest town, prized for the baroque palazzi and piazza of its medieval centre and a busy calendar of cultural events such as summer concerts and its cheese festival.

Late last year, Adam Chappell bought a 500-year-old property near the town's castle, drawn by the home's high vaulted ceilings and hand-painted tiles – and the town's buzz.

He paid just €70,000 and will spend a further €200,000, half to renovate the property into a three-bedroom house for himself, the other half to convert the festive block into a flat he can rent out.

"There are festivals galore and plenty of creatives. This summer has felt more happening than hipville Prague [where he lives]. In the winter, I loved the fact that it was not a ghost town like other areas of Italy's coast," he says.



Above: Polignano a Mare, a village on a dramatic cliff in Puglia; (below) a two-bed flat for sale in Alessano, Lecce with Engel & Völkers – Getty Images/John RF

One perk of Chappell's renovation is Italy's exemption on capital gains tax for second homes owned for five years or more. With demand for short-term rentals increasing by 31 per cent in the two years to June, according to AirDNA, investment-driven renovations are a big part of Puglia's appeal.

There are plenty of small rundown palazzi – built centuries ago as family homes in the beautiful golden *pietra leccese* in baroque or renaissance styles with

arches, courtyards and roof terraces. Unrenovated properties in the Salento region cost €1,000 per sq m on average, much cheaper than the €2,500 per sq m in Chianti and the surrounding Tuscan hills, according to Engel & Völkers.

Juan and Zeinab from Washington are restoring a 16th-century ruin in the Ruffano into a four-bedroom property with a three-bedroom guesthouse, employing local stonemasons, ceramists and iron specialists.

"We had looked in Spain over several summers. [Its] Atlantic coast was too cold; the Andalusian coast crowded, but Puglia surprised us with its simplicity of life, [and] low-key historic towns," says Zeinab.

"The Apulia region is generous with grants for those converting historical buildings for tourism purposes," says Mikaela Bandini, an Italian-South African travel marketer and property investor, currently working on her third renovation in Nardò for Area 8, the holiday rental business she owns.

But southern Italy also has a reputation as something of a wild west for plan-



on his own in 2007 as the Orkney Furniture Maker, just one of a handful of practitioners of the by-now endangered heritage craft.

Alongside the chairs, he began creating a line of original designs: earthy yet elegant tables, stools and mirrors. By 2020, he had to double his workshop space and hire additional artisans to cope with demand. His work has been exhibited locally, nationally and around the world – including at the Pier Arts Centre in Stromness on Orkney, London Design Festival and Homo Faber in Venice.

Today, the homes Orkney chairs appear in couldn't be more different from those original crofter houses. But Gauld says his client base owes much to an emotional connection with the islands. "Many are people who've come to Orkney on holiday and just fallen in love. They often see an Orkney chair as a piece of the place they can take home with them."

For the frames, Gauld favours sycamore and elm, sourced from a local tree surgeon, Scottish hardwoods or, occasionally, imported timber. He seasons the wood before weaving and stitching the straw backs with sisal string. The straw is made from black oats, a near-extinct and highly-prized local variety.

"There was only one man left growing the traditional black oat crop, and he's in his seventies. I was honoured when he asked me to take over," says Gauld, who now grows the grain on land his family has farmed for four generations. He feeds any leftover oats to his chickens, and if straw is unsuitable for the chairs, it becomes their bedding. Sawdust from the workshop floor is passed on to local butchers and fishermen for their smokers, while small cuttings fuel his woodburner in winter.

"These crofters lived in a time where if you needed something, you didn't go to a shop and buy it," says Gauld. "You made things, and you made them from materials that you had. From humble beginnings, the Orkney chair has come such a long way."

A 19th-century Orkney chair now sits in London's Victoria & Albert Museum – alongside a contemporary Brodgar chair by Kevin Gauld and Gareth Neal.

Prices start from £250; commissions take from two weeks to one month; orkneymuseum.co.uk

ning rules. Often homes have illegally closed-off courtyards, or built over gardens or on roof terraces. Caroline Edwards, of 20-year-old property consultancy Personal Puglia, warns of buying anything historic with modifications. She says that since 1942 buildings in the historic centres of towns have required planning permission; those outside the *centro storico* since 1967. "If you are buying a 16th-century property for a century that is fine, but anything with parts built after those dates requires paperwork to prove it is legal."

"The trend is to live not by the sea but a 10-minute drive away – I am scouting for properties to renovate"

A notary (lawyer) will spot problems, she says. Sometimes alterations may be fixable because they comply with current regulations – and the new owner might be happy to pay a fine and put it right – but illegal extensions usually need to be knocked down.

Many properties are being marketed without legalised alterations or fully legal paperwork. "We sell only vetted properties and if there is an issue with documents the buyer will be told," says Distante. Engel & Völkers turns down 60 to 70 per cent of properties it is asked to sell because they have illegal alterations or there are problems with title deeds, says agent Raphaële Godfrey.

Planning rules mean there are no new-build developments available. But investors and hospitality groups are eyeing large estates to restore, according to Distante and Edwards. Newly opened high-end hotels include Palazzo Tafari in Nardò and Vista Ostuni.

By 2027, with the planned opening of the Four Seasons Costa Merlata near Ostuni, the jostle with Tuscany for attention is set to reach new heights.