

Matera: European Culture Capital 2019

N. L. (October 29, 2014)



Matera simply is one of the most unusual and memorable cities in Italy. Basilicata's favorite city was just picked as European Culture Capital 2019, beating some all time-favorites Cagliari, Lecce, Perugia-Assisi, Ravenna and Siena. The initiative is meant to highlight the richness and diversity of cultures in Europe, to celebrate the cultural features Europeans share, to increase European citizens' sense of belonging to a common cultural area, and to foster the contribution of culture to the development of cities.

Matera simply is one of the most unusual and memorable cities in Italy. When Carlo Levi was exiled to the remote southern region of [Basilicata](#) [2] (also called Lucania) by Mussolini for his anti-fascist views, he wrote of his experience in his famous memoir, "Christ Stopped at Eboli." The title meaning, of course, that Italy's bleak south couldn't have possibly been visited by Christ. Ironically, Matera has



in recent times become a stomping ground for filmmakers searching for a biblical landscape, and finding it in the abandoned [Sassi](#) [3] (cave-dwelling districts).

Here in the States we heard about it when [Mel Gibson](#) [4], a cherished filmmaker back in 2004, shot his controversial [The Passion](#) [5]. "Certain sections of the city are 2,000 years old, and the architecture, the blocks of stone, the surrounding areas and rocky terrain added a vista and backdrop that we [used] to create the backdrops for our lavish sets of Jerusalem. We relied heavily on the look that was there. In fact, the first time I saw it, I just went crazy, because it was so perfect," he said to the Daily News.

Before Gibson, forty years ago, [Pier Paolo Pasolini](#) [6] shot "[The Gospel According to St. Matthew](#) [7]" there. When Mel Gibson first saw Matera, he envisioned the sassi caves as the perfect backdrop for his Jerusalem sets. In fact, Gibson used some of the same locations as Pasolini when filming "The Passion of The Christ." UNESCO calls the Sassi of [Matera](#) [8] "the most outstanding, intact example of a troglodyte settlement in the Mediterranean region, perfectly adapted to its terrain and ecosystem.

The first inhabited zone dates from the Palaeolithic, while later settlements illustrate a number of significant stages in human history."

And Matera has been awarded for all its beauty: indeed it was just picked as European Culture Capital 2019, beating some all time-favorites Cagliari, Lecce, Perugia-Assisi, Ravenna and Siena. In 1985 the Council of Ministers of the European Union started regularly designating what they labelled the "European Capital of Culture." Florence, Bologna and Genoa are among the Italian cities that have already obtained this prestigious title. As stated in the European Commission website, the initiative is meant to highlight the richness and diversity of cultures in Europe, to celebrate the cultural features Europeans share, to increase European citizens' sense of belonging to a common cultural area, and to foster the contribution of culture to the development of cities.

The city's mayor, Salvatore Adduce, has said: "the designation of Matera is an example of civilization and rebirth that comes to Europe from Matera and the whole of the south." In Brussels, the European Culture Commissioner, Androulla Vassiliou, voiced confidence that the designation would decisively boost the region's tourism industry.

According to Vassiliou, this year's competition for the title in Italy was one of the strongest ever, with 21 initial contenders narrowed down to six finalists; Cagliari, Lecce, Perugia, Ravenna, Siena and Matera, confirming the immense popularity and prestige of this European Union initiative.

This year's other European cities are Umea (Sweden) and Riga (Latvia), Mons (Belgium) and Plzeň (Czech Republic), followed by Donostia-San Sebastián (Spain) and Wrocław (Poland) in 2016, Aarhus (Denmark) and Paphos (Cyprus) in 2017, Leeuwarden (Netherlands) and Valetta (Malta) in 2018 and Matera (Italy) and Plovdiv (Bulgaria) in 2019.

To see Matera thoroughly, and to get an idea of the living conditions of the former cave-dwellers, you should spend at least a day in town. Among the several things to see there are beautiful chiese rupestri, churches cut into the rock of hillsides and ravines; the Museo Nazionale Ridola, which contains exhibits from distant eras of Basilicata's past, from prehistory to the Roman age; Palazzo Lanfranchi, which houses the Museo Nazionale d'Arte Medievale e Moderna della Regione Basilicata, an art museum including the Pinacoteca D'Errico, which has lots of religious paintings by southern painters; the [Centro Carlo Levi](#) [9], which contains a range of paintings by the twentieth-century artist and writer who is a part of this region's modern history.

As tourism in Matera is becoming big business, various enterprising locals have set up tourist attractions such as cave reconstructions: cave-houses which have been filled with period fittings to show how life was once lived here.

But this is only the beginning, the Italian city now has four years to plan 12 months of outstanding events that will offer Matera and its surrounding area significant long-term cultural, economic and social benefits, as it happened with all previous [European Capitals of Culture](#) [10].



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