



Sassi di Matera



Cattedrale di San Genaro

Basilicata, one of Italy's small, lesser known mountainous regions with 92% of the terrain classified as mountainous or hilly, is situated in southern Italy. Its rugged, unspoiled scenery is mostly untouched by mass tourism. The region can be thought of as the "instep" of Italy, with Calabria the "toe" and Puglia the "heel". It shares borders with Campania to the west, Puglia (Apulia) to the north, and Calabria to the south. It also has two coastlines, one on the Tyrrhenian Sea between Campania and Calabria, and the other along the Gulf of Taranto between Calabria and Apulia. Basilicata covers an extensive part of the southern Apennine Mountains and includes the Pollino National Park, Italy's largest national park, along with the dormant volcano, Monte Vulture, and seismic faults in Melfi and Potenza in the north and Pollino in the south. Earthquakes in 1857 and, more recently, in 1980 have devastated this region. The combination of the mountainous terrain combined with the rock and soil types makes landslides and floods common. Basilicata measures only 3,856 sq. miles with a total population of 611,000 ranking it 18th out of the 20 regions in population. Potenza is the capital of Basilicata, which is divided into Potenza and Matera provinces (named for their capitals). Basilicata gained its current status as a region in 1948.

History

The history of Basilicata, the first known settlement in Italy, tells the story of a people with prehistoric roots who survived only to be constantly overrun and invaded. Known as Lucania to the early Greeks and Romans, the resiliency of the native people was soon demonstrated when they joined Hannibal and the Carthaginians against the Roman Empire. From then right up to the 1861 unification of Italy, the region was plagued by invasion and rampage. For centuries the Normans, Hohestaufens, Angevins, Bourbons, The Papal State, France and finally Spain and Austria tussled over who would rule the area. The Italian Wars of the 16th Century left the area in Spanish hands. Austrian control soon replaced the Spanish rule. The area was ultimately neglected by Austria during the Napoleonic Wars and the people were ready to fight to be free of foreign control.

Basilicata joined the Risorgimento (Rising Again) Italian unification movement and declared its annexation to the Kingdom of Italy in 1860. Unification leader Garibaldi's success in his final battles to unify Italy can be traced to the hills of Basilicata where he won the hearts and support of the people when he needed it the most. He pledged that the newly formed nation would confiscate and sell off vast tracts of Basilicata's territory formerly owned by the Papacy. The Risorgimento dream had been to give back the lands to the peasants. The aftermath of the unification of Italy had a different ending. The new Italian state sold the land to a handful of wealthy aristocratic families who utilized the people to work their land for meager returns.

Poverty continued unabated and the average citizens, not seeing any immediate economic or social improvements after unification, felt betrayed. They responded with armed struggle against their new rulers. This gave rise to the phenomenon of Brigantaggio (banditry), in the area after 1861. This strong opposition movement hid in Basilicata's mountains and caves and continued their attacks for many years resulting in a war between Italians that counted thousands of victims.

By the 20th century, the situation had not improved. Taxation and the unpreparedness of the new government coupled with economic competition from the rest of Italy brought unacceptable levels of poverty to the region. The response was a mass emigration which reached its high point in 1913 with many choosing the USA as a chance to start a new life.

World War II saw the area renamed Bruttium and post war it became Basilicata. Postwar reconstruction brought about land and local political reform, infrastructure projects and repairs and the hope of peace. Today the region sees its resilient population recovering from the thousands of years of foreign occupation and mistreatment. Hopefully for the people of Basilicata, the best is yet to come.

Climate and Topography

The variable climate is influenced by three coastlines (Adriatic, Ionian and Tyrrhenian) and the complexity of the region's physical features. The climate is continental in the mountains and Mediterranean along the coasts. Although it is the occupation of most people in this generally poor region, farming is difficult because of a dry climate and a scarcity of groundwater. Olives, plums, and cereals are grown and sheep and goats are raised.

Culture

In Basilicata, there are many wonderful castles standing against the perfect background of untouched natural surroundings. The most well-known is Melfi Castle built by the Normans in the 12th century. Pope Urban II began preaching the first crusade here and in 1231 the Holy Roman Emperor Frederick II issued the anti-feudal Constitutions (Constitutiones Regni) which centralized authority in Sicily. Metaponto is home to the Greek temple of Hera (sixth century B.C.). Philosopher Pythagoras retired here, Hannibal built his garrison here during the Second Punic War (200 B.C) and Spartacus came here in the first century B.C. Local legend has it that the founder of Metaponto was Epeius, the man who built the Trojan horse. Maratea is a resort in the wooded hills of the Tyrrhenian coast with many churches and a colossal cliffside statue of Christ the Redeemer.

REGIONS OF ITALY

By JIM SANO



Museo Archeologico Nazionale di Metaponto

Matera and Sassi District

The city of Matera, known as "la città sotterranea" (the Subterranean City), and Matera's Sassi have been designated as one of two European Capitals of Culture in 2019. This would have seemed laughable years ago. Sassi means stones in Italian and the old town itself is a jumble of houses, caves and chapels set into a funnel-shaped spiral of labyrinthine alleys. These houses dug into calcareous rock originated from a prehistoric settlement and were home to humans until 50 years ago. The houses are stacked so that each forms the roof of one and the base of another. For decades, this was one of the most deprived places in western Europe. Italian artist and author Carlo Levi published his memoir, "Christ Stopped at Eboli," about his year of political exile in Basilicata under the Fascists. Levi painted a vivid portrait of a forgotten rural world that Christianity and civilization had never reached, leaving it a pagan, lawless land, riddled with ancient superstitions. Levi singled out the Sassi for its "tragic beauty".

The town's prehistoric cave dwellings by 1950 had become dark holes riddled with filth and disease. Overpopulation caused the collapse of the water and sewage systems and the resulting decline in hygiene forced the Italian government to declare this area a "national disgrace".

In 1953, the Italian government relocated the Sassi's 20,000 inhabitants to new housing developments and the caves were cleared. They remained derelict until 1993 when the Sassi was designated a UNESCO World Heritage site and declared the most outstanding, intact example of a troglodyte settlement in the Mediterranean. Italian government grants for regeneration have restored nearly 70 percent of the abandoned old town. The Sassi and Matera are now home to cafés, galleries, restaurants and hotels sparking a renaissance in Matera's fortunes. Today the Sassi district is looked upon with pride and no longer is "the shame of Italy".

Festivals

The Maggio di Accettura (May Chopping) is a typical pagan festival whose origins lie in antiquity. In Matera on July 2nd, the villagers celebrate Festa Madonna della Bruna. This festival, which has been held for over 600 years, has its origins in a legend which tells of a beautiful, impoverished woman who asked a peasant, traveling by horse cart, for a lift into town. The peasant agreed and at the entrance to the village the woman revealed herself to be the Madonna.

Language

As with all regions in Italy, Basilicata has its own language-dialect, Lucano. Lucano is a mix influenced by the regions that surround it. Cities nearer to Campania use the accent more like Napolitano, those nearer to Puglia use Pugliese and those nearer to Calabria use Calabrese.

Wine

The Basilicata region's upper slopes are where the region's finest wines are made. Basilicata is responsible for one of Italy's most respected wines, Aglianico del Vulture. Made from Aglianico grapes and born on the slopes of dormant volcano Mount Vulture, it is a favorite all over Italy and many parts of the world as well. Aglianico a full-bodied red wine, deep in color and rich in flavor. It pairs well with rich meats, roasts and wild game.

Food

Basilicata's "cucina povera" (poor cooking), has led to creativity in the kitchen using simple ingredients to create delectable dishes. Caciocavallo podolico, a variety of cheese produced exclusively from the milk of the podolico cows, is one of Italy's most prized (and priciest) cheeses. The name (which translates as horse cheese) derives from the fact that these cheeses are hung up to age in pairs, rope-bound and slung over a wooden board or beam thus taking a saddlebag shape. Senise peppers, a staple of Basilicata's cuisine, are used in many ways. In their fresh version, they're added to sauces, stuffed with meat or grilled and preserved in oil. They're often hung to dry in the sun, further enriching their taste. The tastiest version is peperoni cruschi found only in Basilicata. Soppresata and pasta originated in Basilicata. The most well-known of the pastas is orecchiette meaning 'little ears'. Sanguinaccio dolce, a sweet cream made with bitter dark chocolate and pigs' blood is traditionally prepared during Carnival and is accompanied with savoiardi biscuits. It is recognized as a traditional food product of Basilicata.

Personal Note

For the sake of disclosure, my mother's side of the family (Autilio) came from a very small town called Marsico Nuovo (population of 4,098) in the province of Potenza. My grandfather, John Autilio Sr., left at the height of the mass emigration period in 1908 for New York City and eventually settled in Gloversville. He cut hair for 80 years from the time he was an apprentice at age 11 until he retired at age 91. I once asked my grandfather why he left and he responded with "the town already had a barber".



Statua del Cristo Redentore di Maratea