

# Wish you lived here?

## Matera

Forget Daniel Craig — this ancient Italian town was the real star of the latest Bond film, says Emanuele Midolo

It was the setting for the spectacular opening scenes in the latest James Bond film, *No Time to Die*. Yet Matera, a hilltop town in the southern Italian region of Basilicata, is unknown to most Brits.

The small town, with about 60,000 residents, is older than Rome and has been inhabited for almost 10,000 years. Matera is mostly known for its spectacular *sassi* ("rocks"), unique cave dwellings carved into the soft rock of the hill, which are a designated Unesco world heritage site.

The *sassi* are now home to hotels, B&Bs and museums and attract hundreds of thousands of tourists a year. A repopulation programme began in the late 1980s. By 2019 Matera the town was crowned a European capital of culture.

Richard Hooley, 74, and Esther Hooley, in her mid-fifties, from Leicestershire, have lived in Matera for 12 years. The retired couple had a *masseria* (farmhouse) built on a plot of land just outside the town in 2010. They discovered Matera and the developer while on holiday in Puglia.

"We just went five minutes across the border from Puglia into Basilicata. We discovered Matera and that was it, we fell in love," Esther says.

Their three-bedroom, three-bathroom stone villa sits on a hilltop overlooking the fields around Matera. The house has a vast garden with olive trees and a 15m infinity swimming pool.

"It's been a wonderful place to work from because we were completely isolated," Esther says. "We must be the only people who enjoyed the pandemic."

The *masseria* is a 50-minute drive from Bari airport and one hour, 15 minutes

from Brindisi airport, both in Puglia. "Bari and Brindisi airports are very well served," she says. "It didn't make any difference to me whether I was living in Italy or in the UK."

Richard adds that they sometimes drive to England. "It's 27 hours; you'd need three days to do it comfortably, but it's a very pleasant drive and perfect if you're bringing olive oil up or stilton cheese and pork pies the other way."

The couple speak a little Italian; English has been widely spoken, though, since Matera became a capital of culture — an event for which all the local businesses had to learn English. "Since then tourism has thrived," Esther says.

Francis Ford Coppola, the film director, bought a palazzo in the nearby town of Bernalda, where his grandfather came from. The property, Palazzo Margherita, is now a five-star hotel, charging up to €2,000 (£1,680) a night. There's even a Michelin-starred restaurant in Matera, Vitantonio Lombardo.

However, there are plenty of places where you can eat *cucina povera*: traditional cuisine such as lagane, a local pasta; or *crapiata*, a vegetable and bean soup.

What the couple love the most about the town is the slow pace of life. "It's a dream. When we first came here it felt like stepping back in time 50 years,"

Richard says. "It's a part of Italy that is not so well known," says Gemma Bruce, the managing director of Casa & Country estate agency. However, she adds that it is one of the southern regions of Italy tipped to grow in popularity in the next few years — just as neighbouring Puglia did — as more British tourists discover its charms.



Clockwise from main: the *sassi*; the Hooleys' *masseria*, on sale for €1.3 million; Bond stars Daniel Craig and Léa Seydoux in Matera

"Basilicata has got beautiful rural traditional life and views, but actually you're very close to the coast, so you've got the best of both worlds," says Bruce, who says the region is similar to areas of Tuscany around Grosseto or Arezzo, which are rustic and neither as touristy nor expensive as super-prime Chianti.

"British buyers come to us and say that they don't want to be next to an American or a Swedish family; they want authenticity," she says. "This [Matera] is real Italy. You're not going to have neighbours who are second-home owners, you're going to be surrounded by local Italian farmers who have been there for generations."

Properties are significantly cheaper than in other parts of Italy — about 30 per cent cheaper than the countryside around Grosseto, according to Italian government figures. Don't expect the quality or quantity of properties you

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would find near Florence or Rome, though. Old *masserie* often need work, while new-build homes like the Hooleys' are hard to find (although the couple are selling up for €1.3 million).

"It's obviously not a cheap property," Bruce says, "but it would cost a lot more money if it were in a different part of Italy." The beauty of the place was noted by the Bond film scouts, who asked if they could do some shoots in and around the house. "We turned it down because we'd done film shoots and we know what happens to properties during shoots," Esther says with a laugh.

She says they are reluctant to sell but have decided to move back to the UK to be close to her elderly parents. "People in Matera really welcome you and they want to share their lives with you," she says. "What we've realised living here is that family is the most important thing."