

36 Hours in Lecce, Italy



Gianni Cipriano for The New York Times

Clockwise from top left: on Via Libertini, cycling by Porta Rudiae, detail of Basilica di Santa Croce, the beach in San Cataldo and Trattoria di Nonna Tetti. [More Photos »](#)

By SETH SHERWOOD
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Thanks to dozens of mostly Baroque-era churches packing its maze of narrow streets, Lecce, the “Florence of the South,” dazzles with elaborately carved facades and interiors that erupt with symphonies of angels, cherubs, saints, saviors and Madonnas. But this small gem in Italy’s heel is far from a haven of monkish abstemiousness. A capital of southern Italian cooking, the city brims with rustic restaurants serving the hearty peasant cuisine and robust red wines of the Puglia (Apulia in English) region. Throw in a buzzing bar scene and nearby beaches of sun-bronzed bodies and you have a city fit for holy men and hedonists alike.

FRIDAY

Photos and Map

5 p.m. 1. History and Coffee



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During the Roman era, some 20,000 spectators would fill the stone seats of the arcaded amphitheater in what is now Piazza Sant’Oronzo. Today the locals tend to congregate on the lively outdoor terrace of Caffè Alvino on the Piazza Sant’Oronzo, which sits alongside the partly excavated

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ruins and other landmarks from Lecce’s past. Sit back, order a Lecce specialty called caffè in ghiaccio con latte di mandorla (espresso with ice and almond milk) and admire the majestic stone Sedile — a former town hall and armory built in the late 16th century — and the soaring stone pillar topped by a statue of the city’s patron saint, St. Oronzo, from the Baroque period.

7 p.m. 2. Champion Chiselers

No, you’re not hallucinating. With the frenzied crowdedness of a Hieronymus Bosch painting and the intensity of a fever dream, the colonnaded, multitiered and ornately sculptured exterior of Basilica di Santa Croce on Via Umberto, just north of Piazza Sant’Oronzo, bursts exuberantly with hundreds of finely detailed forms. Pacing lions, howling dragons, cross-bearing angels, undersea creatures, turbaned Turks, topless women, urns, scrolls, shells, birds, horses, heralds, shells and flowers fill the facade of Lecce’s iconic church, completed in 1695 after work by three generations of architects and artisans.

8 p.m. 3. Salt of the Earth

Trattoria di Nonna Tetti restaurant on the Piazzetta Regina Maria keeps things simple. The décor is a humble amalgam of rough stone, tiles and wood. The culinary components are equally rustic, as befits a restaurant specializing in cucina povera, the “poor people’s food” that has traditionally made up the local diet and is now gaining favor among foodies for its authentic salt-of-the-earth flavors and healthy Mediterranean ingredients.

Representatives include fava beans in oil with chicory and a gooey, crunchy, starchy, garlicky gut-filler called ciceri e tria, which blends fried and boiled pasta and cooked chickpeas. Italian classics round out the menu, from caprese and mozzarella antipasti to a spongy tiramisù. A meal for two, without wine, costs around 50 euros, or \$65 at \$1.30 to the euro.

10 p.m. 4. Start Your Wining

Wine bars have sprouted in bunches on Via Umberto I, north of the Basilica di Santa Croce. As night falls, grad student types and young professionals fill their stone-vaulted interiors and spill onto crowded sidewalk tables. Decorated with books, artworks and shelves of wine bottles, boho-cool Vineria Santa Cruz has a lengthy wine list that includes a regional primitivo (similar to zinfandel) from the Tenute di Eméra winery that’s deep, dark, dry and tannic (5 euros a glass). Nearby at Shui, the buttery-yellow paint job and suspended contemporary lighting create a medieval-modern ambience in the stone chapel-like interior. Salice from the Cantele winery (4 euros a glass), made from the negroamaro grape, is acidic and juicy.

SATURDAY

10 a.m. 5. Go for Baroque

No street in Lecce oozes Baroque extravagance like Via Libertini. Enter the southwestern gate to the city’s historic core, the 18th-century Porta Rudiae, and pop into the Basilica di San Giovanni Battista. Completed in 1728, the church is a soaring, light-flooded expanse

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ringed by high windows and packed with stunningly detailed carvings of cherubs, wreaths and more. The richly decorated pulpit is flanked by twisting spiral columns and chiseled scenes of the Apocalypse. Farther up Via Libertini on the same side, the 17th-century Chiesa di Santa Teresa has a restrained neo-Classical facade and an interior containing macabre artworks, from an emaciated statue of Jesus writhing in a glass-box coffin to a painting of Salome with the head of St. John. The stunning finale appears in Piazza del Duomo. Alongside a tall, tapering bell tower, the city's 17th-century cathedral (cattedraledilecce.it) is another highly chiseled edifice that houses stained-glass windows, a coffered wood-and-gilt ceiling and a Greek marble altar decorated with lapis lazuli.

Noon

6. Deli Cafe by the Duomo

Tucked next to Piazza del Duomo, Doppiozero is a hip, modern, delicatessen-style restaurant amid the time-fissured buildings. Under a jazzy soundtrack, convivial groups fill long communal tables illuminated by abstract arty lamps made from half-melted glass bottles. One wall is stacked with pastas, olive oils and wines for takeout; the other is lined by a deli counter showcasing fresh cheeses (Gorgonzola, pecorino, scimudin) and cured meats (salami, speck and coppa) that get sliced into made-to-order combo platters. Also worthwhile are the bite-size meatballs in zesty tomato-onion sauce and the roast beef crostini with horseradish mayonnaise. Lunch for two is 30 to 40 euros.

2 p.m.

7. The Big Sleep

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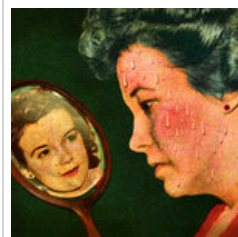


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