



The art of craft

Sally FitzGerald travels to Puglia to discover how a derelict *masseria* was transformed into a tranquil retreat for craft and textile enthusiasts, offering innovative holidays for all... ➤





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Over there is where the animals would have fed," Andrew explains as he points to a series of enclaves carved into the thick white stone walls of one of Masseria della Zingara's ground-floor rooms. I note the irony in the situation – what used to be an animal feeding area has now become the house's dining room. I am being given a tour of the *masseria* by Andrew Salmon, co-owner of the house, and so far I like what I see. A lot.

Situated in the heart of the Puglian countryside, just 40 minutes from Bari airport but what feels like 10,000 miles away from the stresses of everyday life, the historic *masseria* is surrounded by 20 acres of olive groves, courgette patches, almond trees and who can guess what else! It would take weeks to explore these grounds properly. But what makes this house so special is not just its beauty, peaceful ambience and its history, but also its modern-day purpose – it has been transformed into a textile holiday centre offering those with a

passion for craft the chance to enjoy the trip of a lifetime.

HUMBLE BEGINNINGS

As we continue the tour I learn that this beautiful building wasn't always as grand as it appears today – when Andrew and his business partner Jan King originally bought the property it was merely a shell. Originally built in the late 17th century, Masseria della Zingara, meaning 'the house of the gypsy', was one of the most important buildings in the area, but as is the fate of many fine buildings, the *masseria* was abandoned and left to slip into decline.

But Jan and Andrew spotted its potential. The size both impressed and intimidated them – with two separate living quarters built on top of the large main building, a small annexe on the side, plus the extensive land surrounding the property, they wondered if it would be too much – but the unusual shape complete with castle-like turrets triggered their imagination about potential uses of the property.

Andrew and Jan bought the *masseria* and started work straight

away, using local people to carry out the renovations. It took around 18 months to do the building work, transforming the old ground-floor animal living quarters into a kitchen, dining room and studio space, doing up the top-floor apartments and even restoring the small church that's tucked behind a discreet wooden door at the front of the house.

It took a further year to add decorative touches, finish off the swimming pool and fit special features into the textile studio, such as industrial-sized sinks for washing dye out of fabric. Even today the renovations aren't quite finished – the garage will be turned into another apartment next spring, and there are two *trulli* houses perched behind the swimming pool that need to be stabilised – but the *masseria* has finally opened its doors to a very special kind of holiday.

Every few months excited craft enthusiasts pile into cars at Bari and Brindisi airports and are whisked through the rich green pastures of Puglia's countryside, while they wonder at the quirky, cone-shaped *trulli* buildings and anticipate

Photography © Sally Fitzgerald and Rob Kennard

the reception that awaits them at Masseria della Zingara. If you know your knotwork from your appliqué, then the thought of getting to spend a week with Claire Benn, John Allen or Jean Littlejohn as they guide you through the secrets of their trade, is a priceless experience – not only offering the chance to improve your skills but also to discover the personality behind your favourite artist on a one-to-one basis.

NATURAL INSPIRATION

As soon as you drive down the narrow lanes leading to the *masseria*, encased on either side by vines and olive groves, you can see why Andrew and Jan decided to open their creative hideaway in this area. It's breathtaking. The pure sense of tranquility means you can immerse yourself in whatever you're doing, allow your mind to wander and your thoughts to flow freely without interruptions. It's a land that's built to inspire creativity. Andrew explains to me that when

he first approached some of the world's best textile experts and suggested the idea of a week-long textile course in Puglia they had only tentatively agreed. When they actually went to visit the *masseria* for the first time, he was greeted by an overwhelmingly positive response. "They felt energised by the whole area," Andrew recalls.

While the essence of each course is to explore a subject matter in depth, such as layered patterning in cloth, landscape drawing, re-creating objects in miniature, or screen printing, the teachers like to use the surroundings to give the course an Italian slant. After all, you can learn crafting techniques at any one of the workshops back in Britain, but could you be inspired by the scent of vines, the sound of local farmers as they tend their crops, or the taste of fresh Italian food for your lunch break?

The focus of each course is not on learning a specific technique – many of the students will already have a solid grounding in the

Clockwise, from top right: cove near Monopoli; trulli in the masseria's garden; view of the masseria; one of the craft classes; Lello at work in the kitchen



CREATIVE BEGINNINGS

Andrew Salmon and Jan King first entered the crafting world in 1991, when they joined forces to set up Creative Exhibitions, a small exhibition company organising public textile events in the UK and Ireland. Throughout the years they've become friends with some of the leading figures in the textile industry and started to put together small specialised craft symposiums as well as large exhibitions. There's pretty much nothing that Andrew and Jan don't know about textiles.



The pair initially bought Masseria della Zingara as a holiday home for both families, but when they realised that the size, shape and feel of the house could provide the perfect teaching area, they began to think about the logistics of creating a textile retreat at the *masseria*. "Only two per cent of the world are interested in this type of textile," Andrew explains. "But those people have a real passion for what they do." Having met thousands of textile enthusiasts at the shows, the couple realised that it would be a dream come true for ten people a week to fly over to Italy and spend a week immersed in their favourite hobby while simultaneously getting the opportunity to spend time with, learn from and be inspired by the personalities that they had been worshipping for years.

So, Andrew and Jan got in touch with 22 textile experts and asked them if they'd be willing to take part in the new venture. The response was resoundingly positive and this year Alice Kettle, Michael Brennand-Wood, John Allen and Clyde Olliver (among others) are taking classes. Courses cover a wide spectrum of subjects, focusing on the trends that Andrew and Jan see are particularly popular. Next year classes based around creative stitching, such as creating an Italian knot garden with Owen Davies and capturing the landscape in stitch with Maggie Gray, will join the programme. Those with a more artistic bent can try drawing or photographing with names such as John Allen, Pauline Burbidge and Charlie Poulson.

Course prices vary, but include the tuition, accommodation, breakfast and light lunch, dinner at the *masseria* for three nights and transfers to and from the airport. For details visit www.masseriadellazingara.com



► subject – but is more about practising that technique in a creative environment and being helped along the way by top experts in each discipline. For this reason some teachers choose to take their students to explore the surrounding area, heading to the secluded coves and beaches a few kilometres away to soak up the sound of lapping waves, or visiting one of the nearby towns to appreciate the hustle and bustle of everyday Puglian life. Other teachers prefer to surrender to the isolation of the *masseria* itself, using the grounds to spark ideas and the building to influence texture and mood. Whatever the creative result, it means no two courses are ever the same.

Clockwise, from top right: the masseria; Maria cooking; olive trees in the grounds; the vegetable patch; the grounds of the masseria; Andrew and his wife

SOMETHING FOR EVERYONE
Although the original programme was solely for textile courses, Andrew and Jan began to see potential in other areas. The sheer tranquility of the area lends itself perfectly to a yoga retreat where

guests can spend a week focusing on contemplation, gentle exercise and a detox diet. The first retreat proved a great success and the tutor is set to return several times next year. There are also talks about developing walking holidays, using the *masseria* as a base for a local guide to take guests on day-long walks to ramble around the area.

Another course emerged when Andrew and Jan were introduced to Lello and Marina, two chefs who own a local company called Degustacion – Creativa & Naturale which aims to keep the traditions of Puglian cooking alive. During one of their courses you will not only learn a greater appreciation for using natural ingredients, but you will also be taught how to forage for ingredients within the *masseria's* grounds and incorporate them into your own creations, plus how to make pasta, and even how to use wild flowers to decorate salads. Each day the activities culminate in a feast for the senses as you sit down



There are 20 acres of land, with new types of fruit and vegetables being found here every day



to enjoy a meal with wines carefully selected to match each course.

If you'd like to enjoy all the *masseria* has to offer but don't want to take part in an organised week, during selected months all courses are stopped and the house is open for private rental, either on a room-by-room basis, or in its entirety. Each apartment has been renovated with all the mod cons you could need, including heating and Sky TV, while décor is simple – uncluttered expanses of white walls providing the perfect arena for a relaxing holiday.

In front of the main building there's a swimming pool with deckchairs dotted around it, ideal for passing a few hours with a book or taking a short repose from the unforgiving midday sun, while the roof-top terrace offers spectacular views stretching for miles. In my opinion, little could beat sitting on that terrace with a glass of wine watching the sun go down.

A PROMISING FUTURE

As Andrew finishes off his tour, he starts to point out areas of the property that he hopes will

change in the future. The décor was deliberately kept simple to fit with the feel of the building, but as more textile classes take place, he is hoping each teacher will leave behind something that the *masseria* has inspired them to produce, so that one piece at a time the building will become a modern art gallery of Italian inspiration fused with European and American crafting techniques. Later on in the year Charlie Poulson is going to start a new project in the middle of an overgrown area to the left of the *masseria*. He will create a living sculpture – Europe's first natural sculpture, in fact – using olive trees, which will be left to grow organically while the school itself grows and changes.

In addition to the aesthetic changes, Andrew and Jan are thinking about making use of the beautiful miniature church as a venue for weddings, so you can rent the *masseria* and have a private ceremony within the grounds. Then there are 20 acres of land, with new types of fruit and vegetables being found here every day and potential

uses arising constantly. It seems that around every corner there is a new area of this beautiful property to discover and utilise. Masseria della Zingara certainly is a special place, and I challenge anyone, whether visiting for a craft holiday, cookery break or simply using it as a base to explore the area, not to leave with an array of wonderful memories that will last a lifetime. ■

GETTING THERE

► **BY PLANE**

Masseria della Zingara is around a 40-minute drive from both Bari and Brindisi airports. Ryanair (www.ryanair.com) flies from London Stansted to Brindisi and Bari on an almost daily basis, while British Airways (www.ba.com) flies daily from London Gatwick to Bari. Once you have reached your chosen airport, a car will collect you at the airport and drive you straight to Masseria della Zingara.

► **BY TRAIN**

Bari is easily accessible by train from all the major Italian cities. The train station is called Bari Centrale and is generally accessed by Eurostar Italia and Intercity trains. From the station a transfer can be arranged to Masseria della Zingara.

