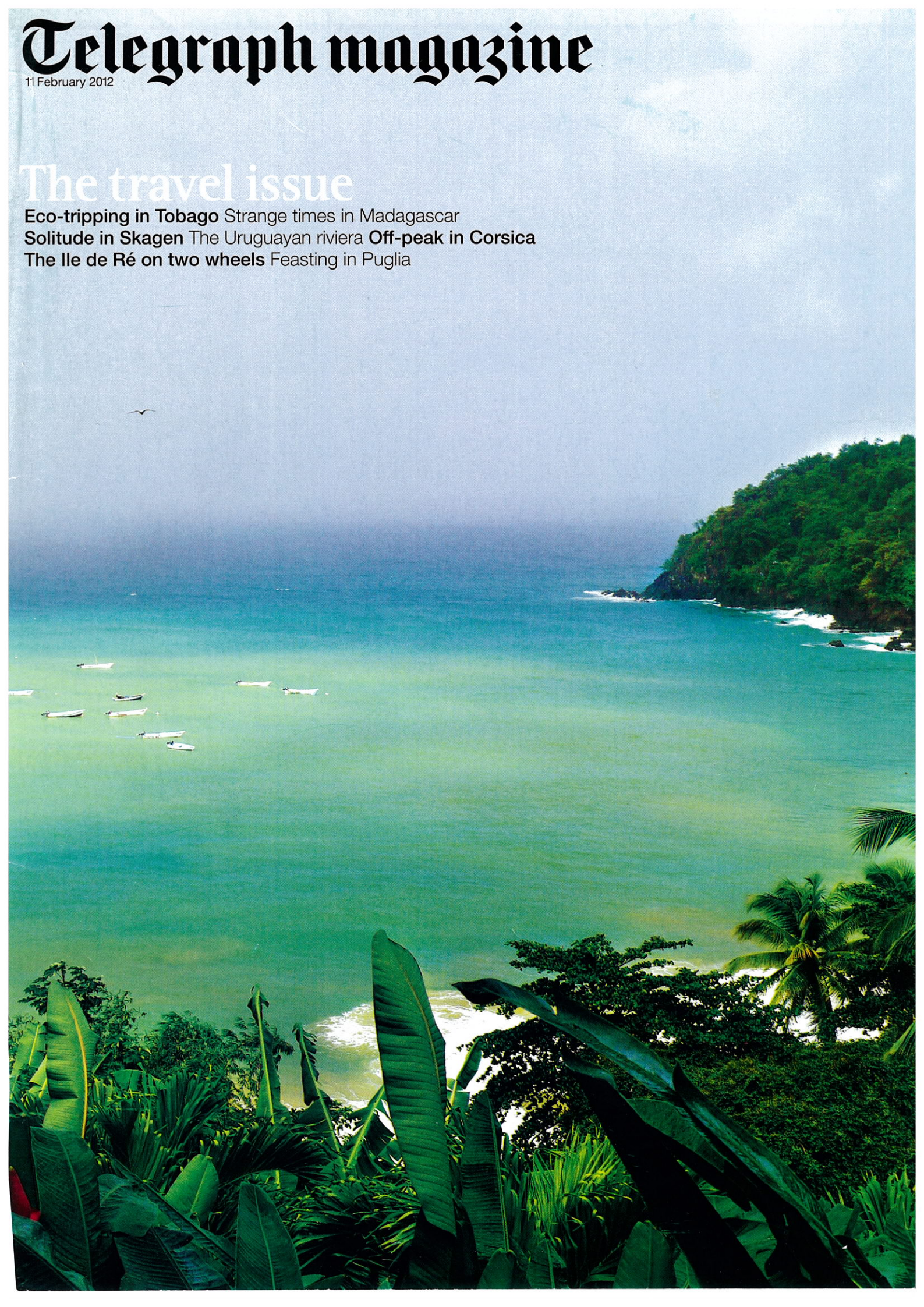


Telegraph magazine

11 February 2012

The travel issue

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Cover Castara Bay, Tobago. Photograph by Edmund de Waal

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the travel issue

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The light in Puglia has a very special quality, casting everything in a soothing, temperate glow, like a blessing. Even at night, its historic little towns, with their hundreds of churches and mix of Baroque and Greek architecture, their maze of streets and steps and tiny piazzas, are beautifully and thoughtfully lit and, out of season, largely empty.

Puglia, on the peninsular heel of Italy's boot, with a population of four million (and an estimated 65 million olive trees) is an interesting area that is barely touched by tourists. Its governor since 2005, Nichi Vendola, is unusual by the standard of most Italian politicians: Vendola is a gay Catholic, and was found in a 2010 poll to be the most popular politician in Italy. A reformer, he campaigns via Facebook and Twitter and has invested heavily in renewable energy sources. Puglia is now the biggest producer of alternative energy in Italy.

It is an arid and unprepossessing journey from Bari airport to the Masseria Torre Coccaro near Savalietri. An old fortified farmhouse, the Masseria is more of a country estate than a hotel. Surrounded by huge ancient olive trees, its buildings date from the 16th century, when it was created as a watchtower to guard against Saracen invaders, then became a farm where pilgrims would take refuge. Its current owners, Vittorio Muolo and his family, opened it as a hotel in 2002. Muolo's siblings and parents live in nearby Monopoli and are all involved in the running of the Apulia Collection hotels (there are three others, including the neighbouring Maizza Torre Coccaro), but Vittorio is deeply connected to the Masseria, his favourite child, which he designed with his brother, Domingo, using local artisans and materials. He lives there with his German wife, Katya, and directs operations with care and attention to detail.

There is a mulberry tree at the splendid arched entrance to the Masseria, and its surrounding

The harbour is elaborately picturesque with a skirmish of fishing boats, scooters and fishermen untangling their nets

gardens are lined with bougainvillea, pomegranate trees, jasmine, myrtle and hibiscus. Through the arch is a beguiling little courtyard with a spaghetti western vibe, and a handsome 17th-century chapel, still used for the occasional mass. Most of the hotel's 39 rooms have lovely vaulted limestone ceilings, one has its own private sunken garden and small pool; you can learn yoga on the sunroof, and in one of the underground caves (built for the olive mills) there is an Aveda spa.

Arriving in the late afternoon one day in October, we repaired to the comfortable, book-lined bar for a sharpener. A solicitous barman named Natale knocked us up a bespoke cocktail containing chilli jam, vodka, fresh grapefruit juice and bitter orange, served alongside vast orb-like green olives, fresh almonds and tiny croquettes. Presently the staff laid a table in the dining-room and then drew a curtain across, and all settled down to a very jolly-sounding early supper, laughter pouring from behind the curtain.

There are many lovely things about the Masseria,

The fishing port of Monopoli, on the Adriatic coast between Bari and Brindisi

Photographs by Jessamy Calkin

All you can eat

The Puglia region of Italy is famous for its food.

Jessamy Calkin and her family take their fill







in particular the endless places scattered around the grounds to sit or read – all kinds of benches and sofas and daybeds and little tables and lovely views. There is an underground billiard room, and in another cavern-like room I had the best yoga lesson of my life. The vegetable and herb garden is abundant and pretty: rows of herbs, chilli peppers, tomatoes, aubergines and fruit – figs, lemons and plums – a hammock strung beguilingly between almond and pomegranate trees. On my first morning I took a walk through the immaculate little planted rows, past the gardener mending his bicycle and a white donkey and two goats, and on towards a small riding arena, and then climbed over a dry-stone wall and got lost among the endless olive groves, shimmering with early morning dew.

Puglia is famous for its food – there are 200 types of pasta, and traditionally they eat raw fish – which is largely why we came. My husband, Ralf, is a cook and my children (11 and 15) love food, so we were here to eat and to cook and to eat what we cooked. Our first evening was a very promising sign of things to come. Supper began with intriguing hors d'oeuvres including *barattieri*, a local vegetable shaped like a fat courgette and tasting like a cross between cucumber and melon. The children chose a starter of Parmesan custard with mushroom and bacon (there is no children's menu here, a good thing, but the staff will cook something special if necessary). There were plates of shellfish – clams, oysters and mussels, with lumps of pecorino cheese; there was violet prawn risotto, tuna carpaccio with avocado ice and strawberries, broad bean purée, tuna steak and countless other delicious dishes and delectable wines, including a magnificent local *primitivo* wine. I loved how the waiter would tip your white wine into a freshly iced wineglass when the previous one became warm. Then there were the puddings – sorbet millefeuille and chocolate mousse with oranges from the Masseria, pistachio crumble with lotus figs and lemon custard – until we had to surrender. 'Is it going to be like this every night?' whispered my son in awe, and indeed it was.

And not only at night. The next morning, after summoning an appetite with a quick swim in the stimulatingly chilly pool, we were confronted with a breakfast array beyond compare. As well as every conceivable type of fruit, mostly from the hotel's gardens (almost everything here is locally produced), there were cold meats – salami and prosciutto and coppa; and delicious creamy cheeses – straciatella and a mozzarella called *burrata*, which is stuffed with cream. To crown it all, and my son could scarcely believe his eyes, was a table covered with pies: 22 of them. Crisp, crusty-looking cherry jam pie and cream and wild berry tart; chocolate torte and *crostata*, apricot pie and *torta margherita*, cheesecake and strawberry pie and plum cake

and chocolate tarts and yogurt muffins and – just to finish him off – a Nutella pie. (I worried about the waste, with all these pies, but Vittorio assured me that with 90 staff, very little is squandered.)

At this point I felt it was appropriate to tell my children about *La Grande Bouffe*, the 1973 film starring Marcello Mastroianni as one of four friends who go away for the weekend with the intention of eating themselves to death. For a second they looked disconcerted. Then they helped themselves to more pie.

Vittorio had organised a ravishing food-related itinerary for us. A bike ride – borrowing scruffy bikes from the hotel – through beautiful countryside, past olive groves and farmland where broccol

There were puddings until we had to surrender. 'Is it going to be like this every night?' whispered my son in awe

Above the Masseria Torre Coccaro hotel near Monopoli, with its array of dessert pies. **Below** the vegetable garden



chard, fennel, celery and carrots were growing ('We are passing a woman labouring in the fields!' called our guide cheerfully), then up an affluent lane where the olives in front of the houses had been minimalistically cropped, like people do to their poodles, to a mozzarella farm called Lamapecora, run by a laconic family who spoke no English. We watched the son making scamorza, kneading and pummelling the cheese into shape, his huge arms reddened from submersion in very hot water, teasing and stretching and turning the cheese inside out and tying it in knots. Then when he nipped outside for a smoke we tasted the delicious cheese and bought caciocavallo fresco for €7 a kilo.

We cycled on to the coast, past more olive trees about ready to be harvested, more drystone walls, which my son climbed over to pick a wild pomegranate, ending up at Savalletri. We dismounted and gazed at the sea then sidled into a glass-walled cafe called the Pescheria 2 Mari for snacks of fresh raw fish – sea bream, scampi, tuna and king prawns – washed down with chilled prosecco.

Barely anyone speaks English in this area, which was refreshing. We cycled on to the Cocco Beach Club, which is available to residents of Masseria and Maizza where – because we hadn't eaten for at least 30 minutes – they served us lunch in a lovely wood-panelled room looking over the sand dunes and the waves beyond. After a pre-starter of Parmigiana di melanzane – made with deep-fried aubergine layered with cheese and tomato sauce and baked – we ate antipasti, vegetable gratin and bresaola, coppa, vegetable tempura, octopus and prawn salad, and chard in broad bean purée. 'I'm still full from yesterday's breakfast,' moaned my daughter, but we pressed on, until we were told that this was only the starter. 'Please, no more food,' we begged. *Prego!* said the waiter in the pale blue cashmere jumper. 'No problem!' and brought over a vast tray of the most succulent grilled fish I had ever tasted: swordfish, octopus, king prawns, cuttlefish, tuna. It seemed rude to turn it down. Then there was pudding. 'No pudding,' we said, 'we really can't manage any pudding.' 'No problem!' said the waiter, and brought over four portions of melting tiramisu.

We waddled down to the beach but it was too cold to swim and we were too full to cycle so obligingly the Masseria's driver, Jean Luigi, a charming redhead, flung the bikes in the back of his van and drove us back to the hotel. On the way we passed a young Italian zipping along on a scooter, no helmet. 'The hair is more important,' Jean Luigi said laconically, 'than the head.'

We learnt to pace ourselves with the eating, or maybe we just got used to it. More foodish trips followed. Accompanied by Eric Leautey, a French chef with his own TV show (on 'Cuisine Television'), who was staying in Maizza, we visited the baroque town of Martina Franca up in the mountains, where we went to a specialist shop and bought capocollo, coppa and speck Nostrano from a man with a very specialist moustache. Then on to Il Frantolio di D'Amico Pietro – a mill producing extra-virgin olive oil which I must admit I thought would be dull but which turned out to be very absorbing. It's a co-op where families and farmers can bring their olives for pressing (at a cost of €10 to press 100kg of olives, 250kg minimum,



which makes 30-35 litres of oil), and we learnt all about how the taste varies according to the type of tree and where it grows, on the coast or in the mountains, and how once harvested the olives must be ground within 36 hours and how the pulp is recycled back into the land as fertiliser. Extra-virgin means cold pressed. The oil-tasting was sublime – lacrima oil (the tears) siphoned off from the pulp before the pressing (ie not pressed or filtered), and nettari (very first pressing). We bought a bottle of organic oil and a delicately lemon-flavoured one, and learnt how you should always buy oil in a small, dark-green bottle because the light and similarly the air in the bottle will affect its quality. The label should read 'prodotti Italiano cento percento'

– 100 per cent Italian produce – as opposed to 'Made in Italy', which could mean bottled in Italy and made somewhere else.

This was one of my favourite days. Nea Cisternino are the Giardini di Pomona, founded and run by Paolo Belloni, a lovely man in a scruffy jumper who devotes himself to cultivating his amazing gardens with their 283 different varieties of fig – the ancient and venerable fig. (He has one type of which only two specimens exist in the world.) Dried figs, he tells us, were found in archaeological excavations in Jericho, that's how old the species is. Belloni lives here with his wife, in a beautiful trullo – the little hobbit-like house peculiar to this area – and is building a hostel with

Once harvested the olives must be ground within 36 hours and the pulp is recycled back into the land as fertiliser

The road to the coast at Savalletri is bordered by fields of crops. **Above** Jessamy Calkin's son Jonah, stops to eat a pomegranate. **Below** a crop of chard



magnificent vaulted ceilings for visitors to stay and where he can accommodate the many school trips.

Paolo and Christina, his elegant translator, show us around his kingdom, where he is encouraging all kinds of non-native trees and plants to grow and observing the results – as well as the fig orchard he has white raspberries, feijoa, grenadine, date palm, fig, vines, lemon grass, medlar, jojoba, medicinal plants from India. Amazingly, he even has four tiny baobabs which he is trying to grow from seedlings. There are elaborate pomelos and weirdly shaped lemons with long twisted fingers. He is not afraid of interfering and grafting. ‘Every collection should start from the original,’ he says, holding out an impoverished little bunch of shrivelled grapes. ‘This is what the domestic grape would look like if it had been left alone.’ A tray of ridiculously small Bonsai pomegranate trees sits on the terrace – ‘I come and look at them whenever I need to amuse myself.’

We sit down to a ravishing lunch cooked by Christina’s husband, with everything originating from the premises apart from the salami and cheese, which comes from a few metres down the road: black orechiette with aubergines, roast peppers, olives, fresh almonds, prickly pear, quince, artichoke, jojoba and crusty bread. As we are leaving, a couple of men wander up the drive, one of them holding a small sapling in a pot that he has brought for Paolo to identify and nurture – people bring him their stray plants like others bring stray dogs to animal shelters.

A few kilometres south of the Masseria lies the enticing little port of Monopoli, a fishing village established by the Greeks which came under Venetian control in the 16th century. Cosimo, one of the chefs at the hotel, drove us there one morning to buy fish in the market. The harbour is elaborately picturesque with a skirmish of fishing boats, scooters, fishermen untangling their nets and sorting out their catch, local children running around and an elegant yacht moored 100m out. On the way to the market we pass the magnificent and bizarre Purgatory Church, its portal festooned with skulls and crossbones and costumed skeletons. The little market sold a gaudy selection of vegetables – a kilo of the sweetest, reddest tomatoes for €1. While my son ate chocolate ice cream (‘I was getting peckish’), we bought mussels from Cozza da Bed Bed, a fish stall in the market, and baby squid at an exciting little pescateria, where I grimaced hypocritically at the sight of a live octopus for sale, and a man who looked like Sal in the *The Sopranos* grinningly held open the mouth of a huge dogfish for our approval.

Back to the charming little cookery school at the Masseria for our fish lesson. We prepared lomachine di mare – tiny snails which we cooked up with garlic and tomato and olive oil and ate with toothpicks, followed by baby squid eaten raw, Puglian-style, with lemon juice. Cosimo showed my unsqueamish daughter how to prepare the squid, the black ink running down their wrists as they pulled out the guts; both children ate it with gusto. A bottle of chilled prosecco arrived to help things along and then we began on the main course: tiella alla barese, a sublime dish, made with mussels, rice, pecorino and potatoes, which we prepared and the restaurant later cooked for us



and served up as our lunch. Cosimo, who trained in Japan to make sushi having won a Bonsai competition, patiently showed my children how to prepare and cut the tuna, swordfish and salmon with nishiki rice – the best – and explained how in Japan girls don’t make sushi because their body temperature is higher.

The hotel runs cooking courses of varying degrees of sophistication. The children had already had a chocolate-making lesson – truffles, chocolate squirrels and a vast egg – and on another day we all learnt to make pizza and pasta. The traditional way to make pasta in Puglia is without eggs, so we rolled the dough on to a wooden frame strung with wire – the chitarra (guitar) – and pressed it through.

If you use enough flour it won’t stick, and underneath the chitarra you’ll find a perfect little he slim spaghetti. We learnt how to make the favourite, orechiette (little ears), and ravioli, semolina flour; Ralf, meanwhile, did a more sophisticated cooking course at Maizza: parmigian lamb timbale and ricotta cheesecake with chocolate chips. We ate the lot that night, sitting on the elegant ivy-clad dining-room at Maizza.

The restaurants in the Masseria never disappointed us, and there is an impressive variety of osterias in all the local towns; Ralf’s favourite is a little trattoria in Monopoli, where for a few euros we sat in a brightly lit canteen next to a table full of fishermen and – no menu – were served

Two men wander up with a sapling in a pot. People bring stray plants like others bring stray dogs to animal shelter

Above Giardini di Pomona, where 283 varieties of fig are grown. **Below** the 17th-century chapel at the Masseria, with its adjoining cookery school

