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**MATERA'S SEXTANTIO**  
**GROTTE DELLA CIVITA**  
**ITALY**

Matera is a city of extremes. A prehistoric puzzle of limestone caves carved into a towering mountaintop, it was dubbed the “shame of Italy” in the 1950s for the antediluvian lifestyle of its impoverished inhabitants. The Bronze Age settlement had no public drinking water and a scourge of malaria until it was evacuated in the postwar period. When Unesco declared the town a World Heritage site in 1994, it harboured drug dens and illicit squatters. But from that moment on, Matera seemed more like a long-overlooked opportunity. Now it has been named the 2019 European Capital of Culture.

One site above all has become the symbol of the town’s rebirth: the Sextantio Grotte della Civita. The hotel, which opened in 2009, transformed a portion of the village’s neglected stone grottos – many of which dated back to the Paleolithic age – into 18

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candle-lit guestrooms decorated with recouped local furniture.

“Globalisation is making places lose their identity, but poor places, having been mostly abandoned, have held on to theirs,” says Daniele Kihlgren, the founder of Sextantio, who studied philosophy before running hotels. “There are travellers out there who are looking for the kind of things that tourism typically destroys. What make these places beautiful are these traces, these sediments, of human existence.”

Sextantio is part of the *albergo diffuso* (“scattered hotel”) movement originally conceived by Giancarlo Dall’Ara, who called for the revival of Italy’s derelict towns through hotel developments. The goal is to kickstart tourism and boost employment. Kihlgren’s idea to bring luxury to Matera’s caves brought a wealth of

attention to the city. He hopes to open two further hotels by 2020: a sprawling network of caves and a 17th-century *palazzo*.

Sextantio has brought 2,000 residents back to the caves. Businesses employ locals, including the 20 people who work at the hotel. “Tourism is bringing the young generation back to Matera,” says Michele Centonze, Sextantio’s head of sales. “We’re ones creating alternatives. It’s no longer about waiting for the government to do something for us.”

Mario Daddiego has been handcrafting ceramics in the caves for decades and can hardly believe the change. “Today everyone knows that Matera exists,” he says. — LR  
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