

ITALIAN CAVE DREAMS

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‘Come look, it’s perfect’

She was almost skipping with pleasure.

About twenty meters below the regular path, there was a small trail to a cave with a low opening. Once inside, the ceiling was high, the cave was deep and dry and smelled only of dust, undefiled by the tourist hoards that had spoilt the caves closer to the cliff top. The sun had now set, and darkness was beginning to fall. We dragged the bikes down the cliff through the tall grass, parked them inside and looked across the canyon at the ancient city.

Matera is built atop a cliff, reigning over a deep canyon with a thundering river running hundreds of meters below. On our side of the canyon, hundreds of Sassi dot the cliffs; traditional caves of the area, used by humans for over 7000 years. We’d wanted to camp where ancient shepherds had slept and old pagan families had installed their family chapel; to sleep in a Sassi and dream of days of old.

From the bottle of wine we’d been toting around for a special occasion, we filled our camping cups and toasted our luck. The cave was spacious, and had two old alters from its chapel days, that were shortly repurposed for a kitchen and a bar. ▷



We didn't even bother to set up the tent, just the tarp, our mattresses and sleeping bags. The lull of the river put us to sleep. At first light we awoke to the sun's first rays pouring over Matera, working their way into all the nooks and crannies of the city.

It's nights of wild camping like this that make the journey so rewarding, the long distances in the saddle glide by. Four months ago, in the dead of winter, we rode down our driveway for the last time and set off on an expedition with no end date, most-likely from France to Indonesia by bicycle and horseback. Determined to break our preconceptions of how life should be and throw ourselves into a new reality, along the way we're stopping periodically to work with grassroots projects to promote biodiviersty and protect local peope and environments.

Sleeping in the Sassi cave marked the true beginning of spring, wild camping through the cold winter nights now a worry for next year. We have a week ahead of us, cycling in southern Italy, through the string of beautiful Trulli villages in Vallée d'Itria up to Bari. After cycling these last kilometres, we will cross the Adriatic Sea by ferry to Albania. Here we will stash our bikes and ride horses 600km across the country. Where we will camp with our equine companions, only the mountains can say. ▲





