



How to Spend One Day in Matera, Italy

The ancient city of Matera is one of the most fascinating places I've ever visited. It's one of the oldest continuously inhabited cities in the world, and it's hard to believe that people have called this place home for over 9,000 years!

The city was once an impoverished and overcrowded slum and was labeled the "shame of Italy" due to extreme poverty and poor living conditions. Thanks to the revitalization efforts in the 1980s, Matera has been restored to its historic beauty and was even designated as a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1993. Today, as you walk the ancient streets, it feels as if the city has been frozen in time.

If you find yourself lucky enough to spend a day in Matera, keep reading to discover a few spots you don't want to miss!

The Best Things to Do if You Only Have One Day in Matera

Explore Sassi di Matera

Matera is divided into two main historic districts, Sasso Barisano and Sasso Caveoso. The Civita, or old historic city center, sits on top of a ridge between the two districts that stretch down into a valley on either side.

Sasso Barisano is on the northern side and is the first district you'll enter if you're coming from Piazza Vittorio Veneto. It's considered the more modern of Matera's two historic districts. Its history still dates back to the Paleolithic and Neolithic periods, but over the centuries, stone facades, arches, and other structures were built over many of the original caves.

Today, Sasso Barisano is also the more commercially developed of the two districts, with hotels, restaurants, museums, galleries, and shops tucked into the ancient cave-like structures.

Sasso Caveoso lies on the southern side of the Civita and is where you'll find more of Matera's preserved prehistoric cave dwellings carved into the calcarenitic rock, known as "tuff."

Archaeological evidence suggests that some of these cave dwellings date back as far as 7,000 BC!

Sasso Caveoso has a more rugged and authentic feel, with stacked stone terraces, ancient cave dwellings, and rock-hewn churches scattered throughout the landscape.

Both districts are made up of a complex maze of narrow alleys and steep staircases. It feels like you're walking around a movie set, and not a real city. In fact, Matera has served as the backdrop for several movies, including *The Passion of the Christ*, *Wonder Woman*, and *James Bond: No Time to Die*.

Matera is the kind of city where you could easily spend hours getting lost just wandering the streets. We stumbled across so many hidden corners and picturesque alleys as we explored without an agenda.

That said, it's very easy to literally get lost here! Both Apple Maps and Google Maps led us astray more than once, so I recommend following the arrows marked "tourist route" instead. The route connects Sasso Barisano and Sasso Caveoso and leads you to many of Matera's main attractions, making it much easier to navigate the maze of streets and staircases.

Dine at a Cave Bar or Restaurant

One of my favorite things about Matera is the way its ancient caves and historic structures have been repurposed into modern spaces. A perfect example is Zipa Café, where you'll find a bar built right into a cave!

It has a fun, casual vibe, with lounging cushions tucked into little alcoves throughout the space. In addition to alcoholic drinks, they serve smoothies, non-alcoholic beverages, and a selection of small plates. We ordered bruschetta, a mango smoothie, and fresh-squeezed lemonade, which totally hit the spot on a hot day!

I especially loved the view from the bar overlooking the Sasso Caveoso district.

For a traditional Italian meal, Trattoria del Caveoso is one of the best restaurants in Matera. This charming trattoria is located in the Sasso Caveoso district and serves home-cooked Italian cuisine in a historic cave setting.

Café Bistrot Crialoss is another great option. The food is delicious, and the views are amazing from the hidden terrace.

For dessert, I Vizi degli Angeli is the best place to go for authentic gelato!

Take Photos at the Best Viewpoints

Because the Sassi districts are built into a natural amphitheater, there are several incredible viewpoints where you can look out over the maze of ancient stone homes and buildings. Here are a few of my favorite spots for taking photos in Matera.

Belvedere Luigi Guerricchio

This lookout point is one of the first viewpoints you'll come to as you enter Sasso Barisano from Piazza Vittorio Veneto. It offers a beautiful introduction to the Sassi before you descend the stairs into the heart of the district. Since this spot is easy to access, it is often crowded, so just be patient if you want to take a photo.

Piazza Duomo

Piazza Duomo is a picturesque square where you'll find the Cathedral Basilica of Matera. It's also one of the highest points in the city, and the terrace here offers panoramic views over Sasso Barisano.

Just below the piazza, you'll find Via Gradoni Duomo. This stone staircase and pedestrian walkway is one of my favorite places to photograph Matera, with its sweeping views of the seemingly endless maze of stacked tufa-stone houses.

While you're in the area, be sure to wander over to Salita Castelvechio. This historic alleyway is covered by a stone arch and is another beautiful spot for photos.

Steps of Santa Maria de Idris

The stone steps leading up to the Church of Santa Maria de Idris are one of the most Instagrammable spots in Matera.

From here, you'll have a stunning view of the Sasso Caveoso district, with a sea of ancient stone buildings cascading down the hillside.

This spot is especially magical at sunset and after dark, when the streets and buildings are illuminated by a warm, glowing light. It's a popular photo spot, though, so visit early in the morning or later in the evening if you want a better chance of enjoying it without the crowds.

Here are a few more of the best viewpoints and photogenic spots in Matera:

- Piazzetta Pascoli: This central city square has a large balcony offering beautiful views over Sasso Barisano. It's easy to access and is one of the most popular viewpoints in Matera, so expect it to be fairly crowded.
- Recinto S. Nicola, 21: Here, you'll find a hidden viewpoint tucked into an alley at the end of Recinto San Nicola 21. It offers an awesome view of Santa Maria de Idris without the crowds.
- Via D'Addozio: This scenic stone walkway runs below the Convent of Saint Agostino and offers great views over Sasso Barisano. The views from the square in front of the convent are also fantastic.

Visit an Ancient Church

Matera is known for its unique and beautiful cliffside churches, many of which are carved directly into the rock. It's worth taking the time to visit a few of them as you explore the city.

Cathedral Basilica of Matera

This stunning 13th-century cathedral sits at the highest point in the city, overlooking the

picturesque Piazza Duomo. It's known for its grand rose window, intricate frescoes dating back to 1270 AD, and incredible views over the Sassi districts.

Church of Santa Maria de Idris

This 14th-century rock-hewn church is carved directly into the dramatic Monterrone cliffside and offers one of the best views of Sasso Caveoso. Step inside to admire the ancient hand-painted frescoes, then follow the tunnel that connects the church to the crypt of San Giovanni in Monterrone. A ticket is required to visit the church and the crypt.

Chiesa di San Pietro Barisano

Chiesa di San Pietro Barisano is one of the largest rock churches in Matera, featuring a beautiful stone façade and intricately carved stone altars.

One of the most fascinating features is the underground chamber known as a *putridarium*. These chambers were used to store deceased clergy members while their bodies decomposed. Once the process was complete, their bones were moved to a burial site. A ticket is required to tour the church and its underground chambers.

San Pietro Caveoso

This beautiful medieval church is dramatically perched on the edge of a cliff, with sweeping views over Sasso Caveoso. It features a 17th-century bell tower and a beautiful interior.

Convent of Saint Agostino

This Augustinian convent was founded in 1591 but was later destroyed by an earthquake. The massive Baroque-style monastery you see today was rebuilt in 1750 and features an 18th-century organ, statues of Saints Peter and Paul, carved marble altars, an underground crypt, and the "Virgin of Miracles" fresco, which dates back to 1595.

Be sure to step out onto the terrace in front of the church, where you'll find incredible views over Sasso Barisano.

Take a Tour of Palombaro Lungo

Palombaro Lungo, which translates to "long cistern," is a massive underground water reservoir built in the 16th century.

This man-made public water cistern was created by connecting a series of pre-existing caves that had previously been used as wine cellars, snow houses, and tanneries.

It was constructed beneath Piazza Vittorio Veneto to collect and store spring water to be used as drinking water.

During the summer months, when the public fountains didn't provide enough water, residents could access the drinking water by lowering buckets through wells in the square above. From inside the Palombaro Lungo, you can still look up and see the openings where the wells once were.

The cistern remained in use until 1927, when a national aqueduct was built that provided Matera with a more modern water supply. Today, visitors can walk through the cavernous underground reservoir along elevated platforms illuminated by colorful lights.

It only took us about 15 minutes to walk through, but we thought it offered a fascinating glimpse into Matera's history and was well worth a quick stop while exploring the city.

When we visited, admission was €3, and it was open daily from 10 AM–1 PM and 3–6 PM. Reservations were not required.

Final Thoughts

There really is no place in the world quite like Matera, and it's definitely worth adding to your Italy itinerary!

Matera is located in southern Italy, in the Basilicata region near the border of Puglia. We visited Matera as a day trip from Polignano a Mare, which made the perfect home base for exploring the surrounding area. I highly recommend spending a few days in Polignano a Mare, and I've put together a guide to the [Best Things to Do in Polignano a Mare](#) to help with your planning.

We felt like one day in Matera was enough to see the main highlights, but I would love to go back and spend the night in a cave house and spend more time wandering the streets and soaking up the atmosphere.

A few vacation rentals that caught my eye are [The Embrace of the Sassi](#), the [Suite Santa Maria](#), and the [Casa Tudor Art](#).

Whether you have one day or one week to spend in Matera, I have a feeling that you are going to fall in love with this incredible ancient city!