

Heading deep into the land of caves

By Elinor Goodman

THIS was a holiday for serious walkers and serious foodies. It helped to be seriously interested in Italy too, as in eight days we journeyed through centuries of its tangled history.

At no point, though, did we lack all the best that the 21st Century can offer in terms of hospitality. During every walk we would find a table with a three-course picnic laid out, featuring delicacies such as courgettes baked in ricotta. At each meal two kinds of wine were offered – not just vino plonko but wines of known local origin.

I was on a small group tour organised by Hedonistic Hiking, which was founded by Australian chef Mick Parsons and his English wife Jacquie.

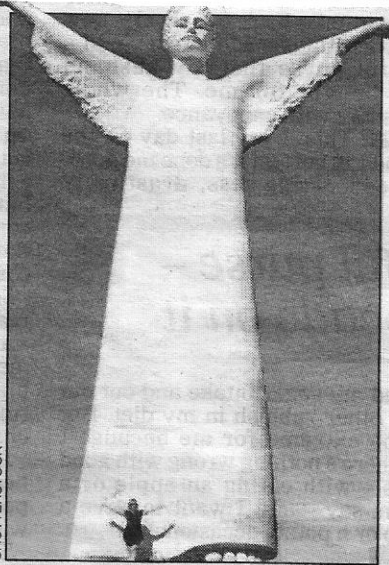
Our first stop was at a buffalo farm which produces creamy mozzarella and dried buffalo meat. After lunch there we drove past the Greek ruins at Paestum and further into Basilicata, one of the most underdeveloped regions for tourism in Italy. There are some beautiful buildings such as

the monastery at Montescaglioso, but this area is most famous for its magnificent landscape.

We drove along the spectacular coast road to Maratea, a town dominated by a 70ft statue of Christ the Redeemer. We stayed in an old convent, La Locanda delle Donne Monache, where the old cells now have all mod-cons, including wi-fi.

The first day we walked along a mule path between chestnut trees where the occasional farmer picked his crop and shepherds watched their flocks.

En route to our next hotel, we stopped at a village called Papisidero and walked along a six-mile track marked with the stations of the cross, accompanied by a dog called Beethoven with a nose for



SHUTTERSTOCK

TALL ORDER: The 70ft Christ the Redeemer statue in Maratea

foreigners. We ate at a rough mountain refuge which fed us as if we had been lost for days. The owner's pride in her cooking meant that you couldn't refuse anything. Afterwards we paddled through the rain to the Grotta del Romito, one of the oldest known inhabited caves in central Italy. On one wall is an astonishingly lifelike picture of a bull drawn about 12,000 years ago.

Our next stop was at a comfortable refuge with accommodation, high up in the Pollino National Park.

We walked up through beech trees to a plain where wild horses grazed and on to a ridge from which we could see the Ionian Sea.

In some ways the best had been saved until last.

Matera, near the border with Puglia, is one of the oldest inhabited settlements in Italy. It towers above the Gravina Gorge

like an abandoned pile of children's building blocks. Get closer to the stones and you see that they have doors in them like open mouths. You then realise they are houses made out of limestone caves and that some are inhabited and bursting with new life.

After the war, Sassi de Matera was branded the 'shame of Italy' because of the appalling poverty of the inhabitants. Entire families lived in a single cave with their animals. Disease was rife.

In 1952, a bill was passed to relocate those living in the worst caves to new suburbs.

By the 1960s, the Sassi were abandoned. Some of the residents welcomed not having to live in what amounted to medieval conditions but other mourned their old life.

Then craftsmen began to move back in, and in 1993 it was declared a World Heritage Site.

Over the next decade some caves were taken over by hotel chains such as Sextantio and converted into luxury accommodation. I stayed in a vast cavern in Le Grotte della Civita. The pockmarked rock had been maintained and most of the light was provided by candles, but the manger had been turned into a wash basin and a bath installed where once a mule would have lived.

It is possibly the only example of an abandoned town being reclaimed for the future.

Matera will be a European city of culture for 2019 – so, if you want to see it before it really gets on the tourist map, go as soon as you can.

● Hedonistic Hiking (hedonistichiking.com) offers an eight-night tour of Basilicata departing October 14, 2017, from £2,500, including accommodation, all meals with wine, gourmet picnics, and guides. Flights are excluded.