

Puglia: The Poetry of My Land

Letizia Airos (December 12, 2012)



Nichi Vendola, governor of Apulia, talks with us about his region, its beauty and richness.

“If I close my eyes I can picture myself on the Salentine Coast between the countryside and the sea, where my soul is on fire because of the aromas—sweet and sour mixes with the sea breeze and the perfume of iodine and salt...

And at the end of an afternoon in a very special place, where the countryside plunges into the sea and the sea rambles up the countryside, something unusual happens: you realize that there is a dimension of light, or rather of luminosity, that is stunning.

Because the light becomes sound, it becomes smell, and the senses intertwine. Puglia (Apulia) is multisensory... and I often wondered whether the myth of the spider bite which gave birth to the rhythm of the tarantola really has more to do with this mixture of countryside, sea, light... in the Apulia of dry stone walls and lizards, in the Puglia where even the stones are poetry.”

So said center-left political leader [Nichi Vendola](#) [2], governor of the region of Puglia.



There is no better description of this region in southern Italy. With [Bari](#) [3] as its capital city, it lies on the [Adriatic Coast](#) [4] to the east and north, and the [Ionian Sea](#) [5] to the south. Vendola has suggested that poetry is what unites his political and literary identities. And when he speaks of his region, his prose is often poetic. “The economic crisis has certainly been an obstacle. We were gearing up for the first few months after I had been elected in May 2005.

We were attempting to get out of the economic and cultural stagnation in which Puglia had found itself. It’s an unknown region, without infamy and without praise. Around the world, no one knew anything about Puglia except for Brindisi—and that’s only because you take the ferry from [Brindisi](#) [6] to get to Greece. It was only a place to transfer and it did not generate any curiosity or inspire interest. We’ve now brought Puglia to the forefront around the world and we’ve revealed its multi-dimensional facets. We have invested in culture against the rising tide of right wing politicians who rule Italy and who don’t support culture or public education. Several initiatives sprang up around the idea of cultural and creative industries.

New products have been launched and are starting to generate profits, and they’re drawing attention to a region that has suddenly become fascinating. The world has started to notice us. Being from Puglia has started to mean something, and Puglia is now synonymous with quality. For a long time, famous people from Puglia had to take on other identities simply because of Puglia’s lack of recognition.

For most people all over the world, [Domenico Modugno](#) [7] is a Sicilian singer even though in reality he is a singer from [Polignano a Mare](#) [8] in the province of Bari. Renzo Arbore was a major force in Neapolitan music but in reality he is from Foggia. This was in the past when it was necessary to keep one’s identity hidden; it was too prosaic and didn’t communicate anything significant. Today, Puglia’s identity reflects cultural effervescence and a spirit of innovation.” One cannot avoid talking about some scandals that have affected other Italian regions. “The dance between money and politics was characteristic of Berlusconi’s administration, and as such, there were no deterrents or consequences.

It’s been theorized that it was necessary to break free from the commitment to the greater good to focus on the dynamism of the private sector. But if the private sector cannot provide for the common good and act in the collective interest, then individuals are forced to embezzle and commit fraud. Moderation is one of the key ingredients of the anti-Berlusconi movement.” You’ve said that you would submit a 6,000 euro bill for expenses incurred during your last trip to the U.S. This is striking...

“They were seven hectic days but very important in which I cemented relationships and increased attention on Puglia. I was in California for the birth of a worldwide network against environmental degradation, in Washington where I met with Kerry; we also met with the Rockefeller Foundation, the Ford Foundation, with Chambers of Commerce. But it’s true - we spent very little. I think that sobriety especially in these times must be one of the key ingredients.”

Let’s say a visitor has four days to spend in Puglia and would like to get to know the area but would also like to relax. What would you suggest? “Four days would be good for a short, passionate romance. Four days to dive into the enchanting towns of the [Gargano](#) [9] such as [Vieste](#) [10], [Rodi](#) [11], [Pugno Chiuso](#) [12], and [Mattinata](#) [13] to explore the extraordinary geography of Salento, passing through [Alberobello](#) [14] (the land of the trulli), overlooking [Costa Merlata](#) [15] and the white city known as [Ostuni](#) [16], and finally arriving in [Santa Maria di Leuca](#) [17]. The indescribable spectacle of [Otranto](#) [18] and a trip to the hinterlands to discover the baroque city of Lecce with its small towns, churches, castles, and palaces are not to be missed. There’s also enough time to visit [Le Murge](#) [19], go through the city of [Altamura](#) [20], and head to [Gravina di Puglia](#) [21] to see the castle of [Frederick II of Swabia](#) [22]. There might also be time to take a stroll in Trani, one of the most invincible and paradoxical cities, with its cathedral suspended above the sea and amazing historical center. There may also be time to explore small villages such as Pietra Monte Corvino and [Orsara](#) [23], or head back down into Salento and visit the small area in that region called Brescia Salento, where inhabitants still speak an ancient Greek dialect called [Griko](#) [24]. You could then enter the suffering, struggling city of Taranto with the tongues of fire exploding from its steel mills, softened by the beauty of its historic center. Taranto was the former capital of a large [Magna Grecia](#)

[25]settlement, and it's now a capital city with many of the same problems that Italy faces as a whole. In short, Puglia in four days can be experienced, touched, and caressed but to develop a deeper love you must go back and spend more time."

"When the body is between four walls it is then that the spirit travels the farthest." This was [Augusta Amiel-Lapeyre in *Pensieri Selvaggi* \(1909\)](#) [26]. There are those who are not able to visit Puglia. What would you recommend to those who live far away?

"There is a new generation of young writers who often write about Puglia and who should be discovered: [Nicola Lagioia](#) [27], [Alessandro Leogrande](#) [28]. Recently, a new book by [Giancarlo Visitilli](#) [29], a young teacher-journalist, named *È la felicità, Prof?* [Is this happiness, Prof?]. It's an entertaining book. Then there also detective novels written in the Barese style; those by [Gianrico Carofiglio](#) [30] are very interesting. As for music, there are several names that stand out: [i Negroamaro](#) [31], [Erica Mou](#) [32], [Emma](#) [33], [Caparezza](#) [34]. They are all products of the creativity and inspiration that has characterized the past few years in Puglia. Then I really love Mediterranean Pugliese music that focuses on the rhythm of the [tarantella](#) [35] like [Canzoniere Grecanico Salento](#) [36]. Radiodervish also sings in Arabic as well as Pugliese dialect. And of course another way to get to know Puglia is through its cuisine. There are so many chefs who are successfully leading the way to a cultural cuisine that rediscovers our roots. Even in my administration there are so many talented cooks who are beyond me! Tasting the products that we export abroad is another way to get to know our region."

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