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Sassi di Matera: one of the oldest cave dwellings in Matera.

On February 18 and 19 the Institute for Tourism, Travel & Culture at the University of Malta participated in the kick-off meeting for a prestigious Erasmus+ collaboration with key cultural organisations in Europe in Matera, the European Capital of Culture for 2019.

The meeting was hosted by the dynamic outfit led by 15 young professionals called Materahub, and featured important partners namely the European network for cultural managers ENCATC, the Italian innovator catalyst Fondazione Fitzcarraldo, the Flemish heritage and pedagogic agency Alden Biesen, the Italian Chamber of Commerce in Spain, the Institute for Applied Media Technology and Culture at City University of Applied Sciences in Bremen M2C, the National Institute for Cultural Research and Training in Bucharest, the Madrid-based cultural organisation La Cultora and the Hellenic Open University.



Sassi di Matera: one of the oldest cave dwellings in Matera.

The University of Malta was represented by us in our capacity as director and projects coordinator respectively of the institute. During our stay further links were forged with cultural and tourism stakeholders in Matera, including the foundation responsible for the European Capital of Culture in Italy.

Tales from two cities of culture

This year-long cultural event, following that in Valletta in 2018, has challenged the small, historical city of not more than 60,000 people in Basilicata, to rise to the occasion in terms of developing the necessary infrastructures, and developing the necessary skills, to put Matera on the European tourism map.

Getting to Matera may not be as easy as travelling to other Italian jewels in the south of the country, such as Palermo or Naples. However, regular flights to the international airport of Bari, in the neighbouring region of Puglia, allows visitors to travel cheaply within less than an hour from the city known for its nature, food, wine and heritage. A train connection is long overdue, which leaves road transport, public or private, as the only alternative. Arranging transport through shared taxis or vans is advisable in order to keep costs low.

Matera

Matera itself is somewhat of a well-kept secret that local cultural and tourism operators and entrepreneurs are keen to give away to lovers of dramatic natural environments and ancient heritage sites. The city is chiefly known for what seem to be an infinite number of rock dwellings, inhabited as recently as the 1960s, and medieval churches of profound beauty hewn from the same cliffs.

Getting about in Matera is simple, and going from churches to museums while stopping for excellent, and very well-priced local food and wine, on the way, allows travellers to explore the urban and natural beauties on foot. Like Valletta, Matera is full of steps, exceeding the Maltese capital city for the challenge the centuries-old stones and passages may pose to visitors.

Good walking shoes and comfortable clothing will enable one to enjoy a full and comfortable experience, justifying the delicious pasta dishes, meats, sweets and ubiquitous home-made bread to be washed down with the deep, ruby red wines and cool, fruity white ones.

Matera features unique geological features which have been utilised as a troglodyte settlement comprising of domestic dwellings and public spaces such as churches and guesthouses. These are located in the 9,000-year-old Sassi, white limestone hills pock-marked with cave entrances, which up to half a century ago were occupied under impoverished conditions by cave-dwellers.

These homes had no services such as water, electricity or drainage systems. Whole families including domestic animals lived in cramped living conditions until the late 50s when around 15,000 people were evicted and re-located to modern housing on the outskirts of Matera.

With the declaration of The Sassi and the Park of the Rupestrian Churches as a Unesco World Heritage site a re-valorisation of the zone took place and this was further developed as Matera embarked on its bid to win the prestigious European City of Culture 2019 title. As a result many of the abandoned caves were bought up by locals and foreigners and converted into guesthouses, hotels, restaurants and rental accommodation.

A commercial support structure has sprung up around this to offer tours to the Sassi homes, Rupestrian churches and chapels, tours of the ravines and shepherd tracks. The Park of the Rupestrian Churches and the ancient district of the Sassi have been occupied on and off since the Palaeolithic era and evidence of this can be seen on site as well as at the Museum of Archaeology.

The residents of Matera are proud to tell visitors about their heritage including the fact that they have over 100 churches, chapels and basilicas in such a concentrated area, something that is synonymous with the Maltese Islands. The Materan residents also share a traditional past time with the Maltese – the passeggiata. In the evenings, locals take to the city centre or the cliff edge streets for a stroll to meet up with friends and families, or stopping to buy a local gastronomic delicacy such as an aperitivo or gelato.

Open future

The future for Matera looks bright. It is not resting on its marvellous laurels but engaging young people and international cultural and tourism professionals in projects that promote the territory in ways that are innovative, respectful of the people and their environment and hence sustainable in the long term.

The University of Malta is proud to be able to contribute to this renewal of this city that is so representative of the region also known as Lucania, by bringing to the table its expertise in the fields of training, research and networking.

In the true spirit of European collaboration, the Institute for Tourism, Travel and Culture is committed to furthering long-term planning, policy and projects that benefit people and their communities in a spirit of discovery and appreciation on the heritage we have inherited and the future we are called on to build together.

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