

Conical Houses of Alberobello



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Ir. Chin Mee Poon is a retired civil engineer who derives a great deal of joy and satisfaction from travelling to different parts of the globe, capturing fascinating insights of the places and people he encounters and sharing his experiences with others through his photographs and writing.

Alberobello is a small town at the heel of the boot-shaped peninsula that makes up the bulk of Italy. My wife and I spent a night there and had a great time.

What attracted us to Alberobello were its many stone-houses. These are unique in that part of the world. The houses are typically cylindrical in plan, one-storey high and topped with a conical roof; the whole structure is made of stones piled up neatly without any cement mortar to bind them together. The Italians call such a building trullo (plural trulli). In 1996, UNESCO listed the trulli of Alberobello as a World Heritage Site.

Most trulli in Alberobello were built in the second half of the 19th century and the first half of the 20th century. Being constructed entirely of piled-up stones without binding cement mortar, the buildings were understandably small and were mainly dwellings for poor peasants. Some of them were used as stores.

Why was cement mortar not used to make the buildings more stable? Different historians came up with different explanations, the most laudable of which was that property tax was very high in the old days and well beyond the means of the poor peasants, so an uncemented stone building could be quickly pulled down should a tax inspector come around.

Almost all the original occupants of the trulli in Alberobello have moved to more spacious and comfortable



houses. The trulli that tourists see in Alberobello today have been converted to souvenir shops, cafes, restaurants or small lodging houses to satisfy curious tourists who want to experience a taste of life in a trullo. A few trulli have been abandoned and are in a derelict condition.

My wife and I travelled from Lecce to Alberobello by train. We emerged from the railway station without having made any reservation for accommodation, so we headed straight to the tourist information office for help, but it was closed. A good Samaritan brought us to Trullidea Resort, an agency for rooms in trulli, and the friendly lady there got us a trullo with a double bed, ensuite facilities and a kitchenette. It was

very nice and cosy and we liked it very much. It reminded us of our stay in a fairy chimney in Cappadocia in Turkey.

Wandering aimlessly amidst the trulli, the maze-like alleys gave us one pleasant surprise after another – a tastefully decorated little café, intricate artefacts on display in souvenir shops and even a church.

Yes, like many popular tourist destinations, Alberobello can be quite touristy during the peak travel season. It was good that we were there at the end of September, when it was possible to get away from the crowds and explore almost deserted nooks and corners of the trulli communes. This made our stay in that small town thoroughly enjoyable. ■