

A Guide to the Parks of Abruzzo



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ABRUZZO,



Abruzzo is the Italian region with the largest number of nature parks, a record that makes it the biggest nature area in Europe. It is without doubt an “anthology” of Europe’s Mediterranean landscape, thrusting the region into the role of absolute leader in the “green tourism” sector, with over a third of its territory dedicated to environmental protection.

This characteristic is underpinned by what is a predominantly mountainous region (even if it overlooks the Adriatic Sea and has 130 km of coastline), with landscapes and ecosystems that vary from typically Mediterranean areas to outright alpine scenarios, depending on altitude.

Abruzzo has the biggest, tallest massifs of the entire Apennine chain, with peaks that reach almost to 3,000 metres, and with two-thirds of the regional area at over 750 metres in altitude. This mighty mountainous shadow extends to within a few kilometres of the coast and the highest peaks form a spectacular inland terrace. The rest of the terrain is filled by the foothills that that slope



the green region of Europe

gently towards the sea. The coastal strip is narrow, the only low-altitude plains area in the region, and home to the terminal sections of the river valleys.

Such rugged territory, with its mighty nature, allows only the survival of the fittest and this has allowed a huge number of plant and animal species to stay in their various habitats. While many were once present throughout the Apennines, today they persist only in Abruzzo, and avoid the risk of extinction thanks to the last natural refuges to be found. The region's typical and iconic species include the chamois, wolf and Marsica brown bear, animals who owe their preservation completely to our mountains. Then there are the eagle, lynx, otter, griffin, as well as species otherwise typical of northern tundra like the rodent snow vole, the charming dotterel (a wading plover), or the mugo pine, all of which biologists define as "glacial relicts". These residues of flora and fauna that inhabited the Mediterranean area during the last Ice Age owe their survival to the high altitudes of the Abruzzo mountains.

Facing page, top: flowering, golden eagle, Apennine wolf, and engleria saxifrage blossom; bottom: hikers on Mount Morrone in the Majella National Park.

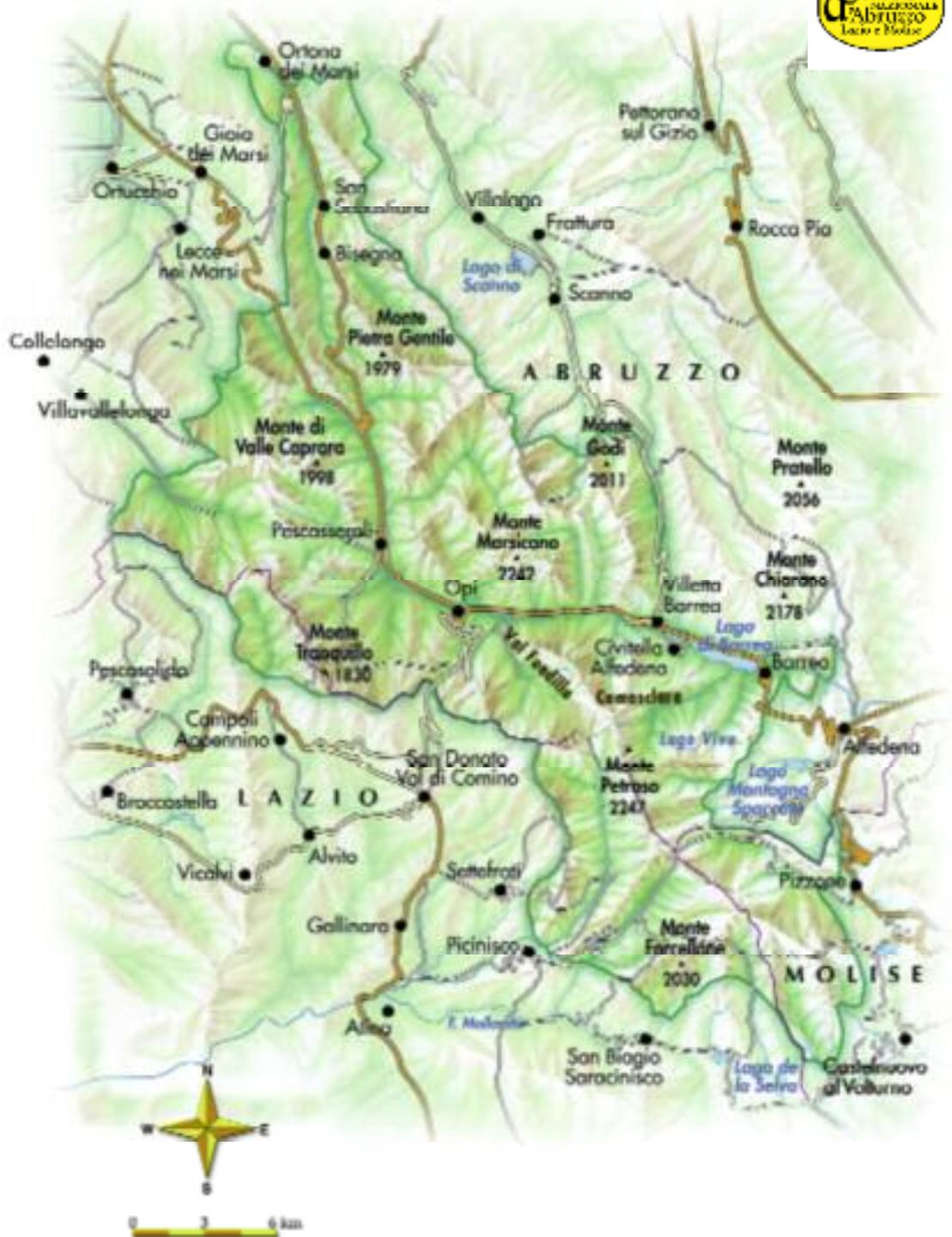
This page: top, the town of Opi in Abruzzo, Lazio & Molise National Park; bottom, aerial view of Rocca Calascio in Gran Sasso & Monti della Laga National Park.



At national and international level the Parks of Abruzzo play a role that cannot be underestimated in environmental and biodiversity preservation, with about 75% of all European flora and fauna represented in this region.



Abruzzo,



Lazio & Molise National Park

This Park, the first and still the most important in Italy, was founded in 1922. It epitomizes every inimitable aspect of the central Apennines, including specimens of flora and fauna that are unique worldwide or have now disappeared from the rest of the chain. There are over one million visitors every year, drawn by the matchless beauty of its landscapes.

Abruzzo, Lazio & Molise National Park covers 50,683 hectares and embraces 24 municipalities in the three regions: 12 in Abruzzo (which accounts for three-quarters of the total area) and all in the province of L'Aquila; five in Molise and seven in Lazio.

The untamed look of the Park's mountains is due to their characteristic gorges, karstic fields and plateaus, which surround the lakes of Scanno, Barrea, Castel San Vincenzo, and the smaller Lago Vivo.

In a geomorphological perspective, this is the heart of the immense central-southern Apennine limestone domain, rolling almost seamlessly from the Sibillini range, in the Marche, down to the Pollino massif. Vast mountain ranges with open valleys, steep bluffs and impervious gorges like Foce di Barrea; spellbinding rock amphitheatres like La Camosciara; grassy flatlands surrounded by



wooded slopes like those of Forme and Campitelli; expanses of resounding, uneven scree; impressive specimens of black pine that cling to pale, stratified rocks. The Park has endless scenarios, no two alike. Generally a rarity in arid limestone areas, a large number of springs tumble amongst the bleached rocks and austere beechwoods. On the eastern side, the Park boundary is defined by the manmade lake of Barrea, which has fitted effortlessly into the environment. In this setting, the vegetation appears in parallel belts that ascend from the valley floors to the peaks.

Facing page, from top to bottom: Apennine wolf, trekking with snowshoes at La Cicerana, trekking in Val Fondillo, the Pescasseroli visitors' centre, crafted gold, the old centre of Opi. Top: Venus's slipper in bloom; Marsica brown bear. Bottom: the town of Barrea and its lake.





The rich biodiversity of Abruzzo, Lazio & Molise National Park comprises a wide range of flora and fauna. Amongst the almost 6,000 species of insects that inhabit Park territory – a record number for Italian entomological fauna – there are beautiful localized beetles like the *Rosalia alpina* or *Chrysochola sipari*, both of which are very rare. Among the mammals that have made the Park famous, apart from the bear (which is the symbol of Italy's oldest national park), there are the Apennine wolf, the Abruzzo chamois, boar, deer, roe deer, lynxes, foxes, badgers, martens, weasels, and the red squirrel. Avifauna includes not only the eagle, with also buzzards, kestrels, peregrine falcons, eagle owls, small owls, griffons, and – typical of the forest – the rare white-backed woodpecker. The rock partridge and red-billed chough can be spotted on the pastures; grey heron linger on the lakes, along with crested grebe, cranes and various anatidae. Several amphibians worth mentioning are the fire salamander, the spectacled salamander and the Apennine yellow-bellied toad, considered the rarest and most typical specimens of Apennine amphibious fauna. The town of Pescasseroli, with its excellent tourist facilities, is the heart of the Park and home to its offices. It is surrounded by peaks of almost 2,000 metres in height, meadows and valleys, watercourses, the Italic necropolises of Barrea and Amplero, the Samnite acropolis of Alfedena, and cosy villages like Bisegna, San Sebastiano, Gioia Vecchio, Opi, Villetta Barrea, and Barrea with its lake, Civitella Alfedena, solitary Scontrone, superb Scanno with its splendid old centre and traditional applied arts of goldsmithing and lace-making. Since this has been a protected area for nearly a century, it is only to be expected that tourist facilities are well established and very well organized. There are over 150 hiking trails and ten or so nature trails, with almost infinite opportunities for trekking, walking, horse-riding and mountain-biking. Nor should we neglect to





mention places that are now considered classic destinations on the mountain tourist map: La Camosciara, Val Fondillo, Lago Vivo, and Forca Resuni, Passo del Diavolo with the River Sangro springs, the lake at Montagna Spaccata. Lake Barrea is perfect for canoeing and windsurfing, but also for less energetic pastimes like bird-watching, which can be practiced on the smaller lakes too. The ample road network provides excellent locations for quiet cycling. The Park offers teaching facilities like its Museum and Zoo in Pescasseroli, Barrea's Centro Rapaci for observing birds of prey, the chamois sanctuaries at Opi and Bisegna, the wolf and lynx sanctuary at Civitella Alfedena, an insect museum and roe deer sanctuary at San Sebastiano.

The road from Villetta Barrea leads up to Passo Godi, where accommodation comes in the form of a refuge-hotel. Here the plateau is an excellent place for a walk before returning down valley on the facing slope, as far as Scanno, the main town in a small but interesting mountain district. Scanno is famous worldwide for its splendid old centre, which has been photographed by leading international names like Cartier Bresson and Giacomelli, but equally for the women in traditional costume, and for the lake that separates the mountains of Abruzzo, Lazio & Molise National Park from the craggy Genzana massif. Here there are extensive tourist facilities and interesting catering options, with typical foods like polenta and wild spring spinach, used for dressing homemade pasta. Lake Scanno is perfect for canoeing and windsurfing, and the road coasting its shores is unbeatable for lovely bicycle rides.



Facing page: Valle Iannanghera.

On this double page, below: the Mount Tranquillo sanctuary.

This page: top, Vallelonga; left, ski-touring at Serra delle Gravare.





LA CAMOSCIARA

For many visitors, Pescasseroli is the heart of the Abruzzo National Park, a small “capital city” of this protected area; for others, the highlight of a visit coincides with the arrival at Passo Cavuto, the pass reached by taking the steep path from Civitella Alfedena, and where the Park’s most important nucleus of chamois is located. Nonetheless, the true historical

heart of the first Apennine protected area is undoubtedly La Camosciara, the craggy valley that is home to bears, chamois, wolves, lynxes, and deer. They have been able to survive mainly because of the impervious nature of these places, with their dense forests and steep slopes broken by the rocky leaps that close the valley, and which were not worth clearing to create pastures.

To reach La Camosciara, Opi or Villetta Barrea, take the SS 83 Marsicana as far as Casone Antonucci, an old stone building used today by the education service as a base for the Park’s volunteer project. The asphalted road for La Camosciara begins here and is closed off by a bar after approximately one kilometre. Cars can be left here and the excursion continued on foot or by bike on the asphalted road that dips slightly and then rises as far as the square of the same name, at 1,100 metres, surrounded by magnificent beech-woods. Here a short nature

trails crosses a bridge over the brook and in a few minutes reaches the Cascata delle Ninfe waterfall. Another, steeper woodland trail offers a lovely view of the waterfall from above and in an hour’s climb reaches the Belvedere della Liscia refuge, at 1,440 metres.

The round trip from the bar to the square takes an hour on foot and far less by bicycle.

Left: flowering tiger lily.



VAL FONDILLO AND THE CHAMOIS

One of the most popular Park destinations is Val Fondillo, for its fascinating hiking, mountain-biking and cross-country skiing itineraries. The walk along the valley floor is suitable for everyone (even with pushchairs), while more challenging trails lead to the Passaggio dell’Orso and the Mount Amaro di Opi ridges. Here a dirt road of about one kilometre leads to the clearing in front of the Fondillo cave, where a wooden bridge crosses the Scerto torrent and reaches the magnificent meadows, a picnic area and the start of the track for Mount Amaro di Opi. Following the gentle downhill path for a few hundred metres to the point where the trail markers for the peak begin to ascend, we reach a brook that tumbles down in picturesque weirs. The valley-floor dirt

track continues in alternating flat and slightly uphill sections, passes the Cacciagrande valley opening, which rises to the watershed between Val Fondillo and La Camosciara, crosses a conifer grove and reaches a clearing at 1,201 metres, as far as a small shelter once used by shepherds. To the right of the refuge is a footpath that leads into a magnificent beech-wood towards the 1,960 metres of Serra delle Gravare. Just beyond this, the valley-floor dirt track gives way to



a steep, rocky mule track that crosses another conifer grove, and continues into the dense beech woods, towards the 1,672 metres of Passaggio dell’Orso, a pass immersed by the woods, beyond which we can continue downhill Val Canneto and Settefrati, in the Lazio sector of the Park. Apart from the path towards Canneto and Settefrati, which requires a vehicle to return to base, it is worth mentioning the crossing in the direction of Tre Confini, Forca Resuni, Valle di Rose, and Civitella Alfedena. It is a long, fascinating walk, which allows us to observe three of the most beautiful valleys in this protected area, as well as meeting the chamois that graze near Passo Cavuto and in the upper Valdirose basin. Other chamois await visitors at the airy Val Fondillo crest of Mount Amaro di Opi, the elegant mountain that reaches 1,862 metres in altitude and offers a wonderful vista over Val Fondillo, La Camosciara, the Sangro Valley and the basin where both Pescasseroli and Opi are located, as well as over many of the Park’s taller peaks, from Mount Marsicano and Mount Petroso.

At the end of the 19th century, the Apennine chamois, the “lord of the peaks” for the parks of Abruzzo, disappeared from every mountain except those in Abruzzo National Park, which were their final refuge. Today the species is multiplying again and has long since been re-introduced to the other Abruzzo parks. In summer, sighting is easier because the herds, with calves born in late spring, rise to higher altitudes, where lucky visitors who exercise great discretion can observe them quite close up, as they graze on the more elevated grasslands or rest on steep rocky ledges.

Facing page, Val Fondillo; left, chamois.



DISCOVERING THE MARSICA BROWN BEAR

It has never been easy to meet this bear in the woods of Abruzzo, Lazio & Molise National Park, but there are now bear-watching tours that can be booked in several locations at certain times of the year and which may make sighting more likely.

A very panoramic excursion, suited perfectly to this aim, is one that goes from Pescasseroli to the Jorio refuge. The trail can be undertaken alone from October to August, but for the rest of the year the Park regulates the flow of tourists here – an area popular with the bears – and allows no more than 20 people a day to go through, only if accompanied by a guide. The excursion starts from the high altitudes of the protected area at the time of day when most hikers are returning down to the valley bottom. From the refuge, which was only recently restored, the group continue to walk in absolute silence. Anyone who does not have binoculars can borrow a set from the guide.

At every turn of the path, the guide leading the group stops, points their binoculars on the clearings at the foot of the ridge and on the surrounding beech-woods, then they explore all of the terrain with the utmost attention. Half an hour past the refuge, the whole group sits down in a steep meadow in order to watch, setting up a precision telescope on a tripod. The object of all this attention is the bear, an iconic animal for the Park and all Abruzzo's protected areas, and watchers will be lucky about half the time. In addition to – or sometime instead of – bears, deer or roe deer put in an appearance. At dusk they are happen to listen to the howling of wolves that echoes in the valleys and forests of the Park. Even when fauna does not abound, the ritual of the stakeout, the descent towards Pescasseroli in complete darkness, lit only by flashlights, make these walks special.

SCANNO AND ITS LAKE

Scanno is a fine town with Medieval roots and one of the most popular with visitors to Abruzzo. A harmonious blend of architecture, ranging from Medieval to Renaissance, and even Baroque, weaves a fascinating urban fabric for this old town. We suggest starting a tour at the church of Santa Maria in Valle, which contains all three, but all of the old town's many beautiful churches, houses huddled one against the other, the mansions and stairways, all deserve careful observation. Photographers in search of interesting images will be delighted to see the town's old folk in and around the streets and archways, wearing a traditional costume that is thought to be of Montenegro origin. Typical local crafts include pillow lace and gold jewellery: doilies, tablecloths and shawls can be purchased from many craft workers in Scanno, as can pendants, rings and necklaces in delicate filigree. Lake Scanno lies at the foot of the town, along the road that reaches the Gole del Sagittario gorge.

The lake is spectacular and has a pleasant climate so is an excellent destination for tourists seeking fresh air, or for birdwatchers, anglers and canoeists. A massive landslide from Mount Genzana in ancient times blocked the Sagittario Valley and created the lake, which filled a vast basin at 922 metres. In recent decades, the traditional presence of anglers on the shore or in boats (the lake teems with precious fish species) is flanked by bathers, tourists who rent pedal boats, and visitors who enjoy water sports and arrive at the lake to surf or canoe.



Left, bathing facilities.





PESCASSEROLI OLD TOWN

Pescasseroli, the “capital” and starting point for Park tours, has good skiing facilities and tourists will enjoy an elegant old town with fine monuments. On the hilltop we find the remains of the ancient Longobard castle, called a “pesco” (a defended high point from which many early Medieval settlement originated), and in town the Baroque Carmelo church, imposing Palazzo Sipari (owned by the ancestors of philosopher Benedetto Croce and the great environmentalist Erminio Sipari, founder of the Park in 1922). Above all, a visit to the parish church of SS Pietro e Paolo, Medieval in origin but with subsequent layers of different eras and styles: Romanesque, Gothic, Renaissance and Baroque. The interior is severe but harmonious, with a nave and two aisles, and grouped columns pay homage to Cistercian architecture. The façade has a horizontal coping and a campanile dating to the 16th century. The church’s most revered artwork is the statue of a Black Madonna, known as L’Incoronata, the same name given to a statue in Foggia, testifying to very close links between the two areas because of transhumance traditions. The recovery of the oldest part of town has brought many improvements, multiplying accommodation, restaurants and traditional craft stores. At the entrance to the town on the Avezano side there is a fountain with a carved inscription, commemorating the opening of the Park on 9 September 1922.

Left, the centre of Pescasseroli; right, the derelict castle.



LAGO VIVO

The Park’s most elegant mountain chain forms a backdrop to the only natural lake in this protected area, which is also a popular destination for hikers. Vivo is a small, mostly swampy lake, popular in summer with wild grazing cattle and horses. It occupies the bottom of a vast karstic depression, at 1,591 metres, and is flanked on the south shore (left for those arriving along the trail that climbs up from Barrea) by a minor perennial spring. In the background, the chain that joins Mount Tartaro and Meta to the towering crags of Mount Altare and the summit of Mount Petroso, the highest peak of this section of the protected area, is especially impressive when the last snows of spring contrast with the young green beech leaves.

The easy path which leads to Lago Vivo is one of the most interesting and popular of the Park, and can be reached preferably from Barrea. The walk is pleasant (one and a half hours for the ascent, maximum one hour downhill), through a beech-wood rich in tall trees and which opens unexpectedly onto the basin that is home to the lake. Between May and June the spontaneous blooms are spectacular; in summer the hottest

hours are exotically fresh water and beech-wood; in autumn the wood turns a thousand warm colours; even in winter, finally, the hike can be accomplished safely (on foot or with snowshoes) because the thick forest makes that there is danger of avalanches.

Right, winter excursion; left, summer view of Lake Vivo.





IN THE FOOTSTEPS OF THE SAMNITES, FROM ALFEDENA AND BARREA

At the foot of the Meta and Mount Greek massifs, Alfedena and Barrea were built over important Samnite settlements. They are base camps for hikes in the Abruzzo national Park and deserve a visit for the abundant archaeological evidence and finds they preserve. There are few places in the Abruzzo region as rich in necropolises, fortifications, and remains of temples and residential buildings.

A beautiful route to climb reaches Mount Curino from Alfedena, as far as the remains of a sanctuary and a stretch of megalithic walls. At 893 metres, Alfedena deserves a visit to see the remains of the castle and the 13th-century SS Pietro e Paolo church. The Museo Civico houses only a small part of the Samnites collections: the ancient relics that have remained in Abruzzo are now exhibited in Chieti's Museo Archeologico, while the finds stolen by the Wehrmacht during World War II returned to Alfedena after a thorough restoration at the University of Tübingen.

From Piazza Umberto I, we come to the houses of Fonticella and beyond them a mule track continues uphill. At the first fork, we take the right along a steep path that zigzags through a small valley and leads to a grassy plateau on Mount Curino, at 1,020 metres.

An old boundary marks the remains of a *tèmenos*, a sacred enclosure with sides of 11 metres. Rising to the left, through intricate woodlands, we reach the remains of the megalithic walls that once defended the town. The return to Alfedena is down the same route and the return trip takes less than an hour of walking.

Left: Samnite disc armour on show in Alfedena's Museo Civico Archeologico.

VALLELONGA AND THE VALLE CERVARA FOREST

Villavallelonga is the eastern gateway to the Park and fills the most mountainous side of Vallelonga, an area delimited by long mountain chains that are challenging and impervious. It was here in Valle Cervara that Europe's oldest beech-woods were discovered, some of whose trees are over 600 years in age, and it is also where the Marsica bear still finds its natural habitat. There are 11 itineraries of varying degrees of difficulty, and the most fascinating is the route that crosses Valle Cervara to reach the Valle Caprara slope. Cars can be left at Prati d'Angro and a dirt track leads to the valley entrance, where the trail begins for skirting the banks of a torrent that has now dried up. We can linger to admire the huge beeches and even try to encircle one with our arms, but we will find that at least three people are needed to embrace them. Thus we reach the Valle Cervara fountain and begin the uphill trek to the plateau summit of Mount Caprara and an unbeatable panorama. The Serrone basin, and to the south all the Park's mountains: Amaro di Opi, Marsicano, Gravare and San Nicola, the slope of Petroso and Meta, then Velino, Sirente, Corno Grande and, opposite, Montagna Grande. If we choose to avoid the hike, we can follow the "bear's nature trail", which begins at the Villavallelonga visitors' centre and reaches a wildlife area which is home to two lovely Marsica bears.

Another tour includes the towns of Bisegna, San Sebastiano and Ortona dei Marsi, small medieval towns in Valle del Giovenco, where other charming nature trails start out from Bisegna's Centro Capriolo and Ortona's Centro Verde. One unique place and not to be missed is the Ferriera aqueduct at Bisegna.





Above: the monumental maple at Mount Tranquillo.

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Park Facilities

PESCASSEROLI (Aq)

• Centro Visita, Museo Naturalistico, Ufficio Informazioni, Parco Faunistico, Giardino Appenninico tel. +39 0863 9113221

CIVITELLA ALFEDENA (Aq)

• Centro Visita, Museo del Lupo appenninico, Ufficio Informazioni, Sentieri Natura, Aree Faunistiche del Lupo appenninico e della Lince tel. +39 0864 890141

BISEGNA (Aq)

• Centro Visita, Museo del Capriolo, Ufficio Informazioni, Area Faunistica del Capriolo, Sentiero Natura – Associazione “Montagna Grande” tel. +39 333 1948465

VILLAVALLELONGA (Aq)

• Centro Visita dell’Orso, Museo Naturalistico, Ufficio Informazioni, Area Faunistica dell’Orso, Sentiero Natura – Cooperativa “Sherpa” tel. +39 0863 1940278
• Ufficio Territoriale del Parco tel. +39 0863 949221-9492617

VILLETTA BARREA (Aq)

• Centro Servizio Educazione tel. +39 0864 89102
• Museo della Transumanza – Associazione “Borgo Fattoria Didattica” tel. +39 340 3174515

LECCE NEI MARSII (Aq)

• Area Faunistica del Cervo

SCANNO (Aq)

• Punto informativo tel. +39 348 0548804
• Area Faunistica del Cervo

OPI (Aq)

• Centro Visita, Museo e Area Faunistica Camoscio appenninico Coop. S.O.R.T. tel. +39 333 4228260

CAMPOLI APPENNINO (Fr)

• Centro Visita, Museo e Area Faunistica dell’Orso Cooperativa “VerdeBlu” tel. +39 335 6846414

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• Centro Visita – Cooperativa “VerdeBlu” tel. +39 335 6846414
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• Punto Informativo di Forca d’Acero Cooperativa “VerdeBlu” tel. +39 335 6846414

CASTEL SAN VINCENZO (Is)

• Centro Visita e Museo dell’Avifauna tel. +39 0865 951354

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• Centro Visita dell’Orso Marsicano tel. +39 0865 951435

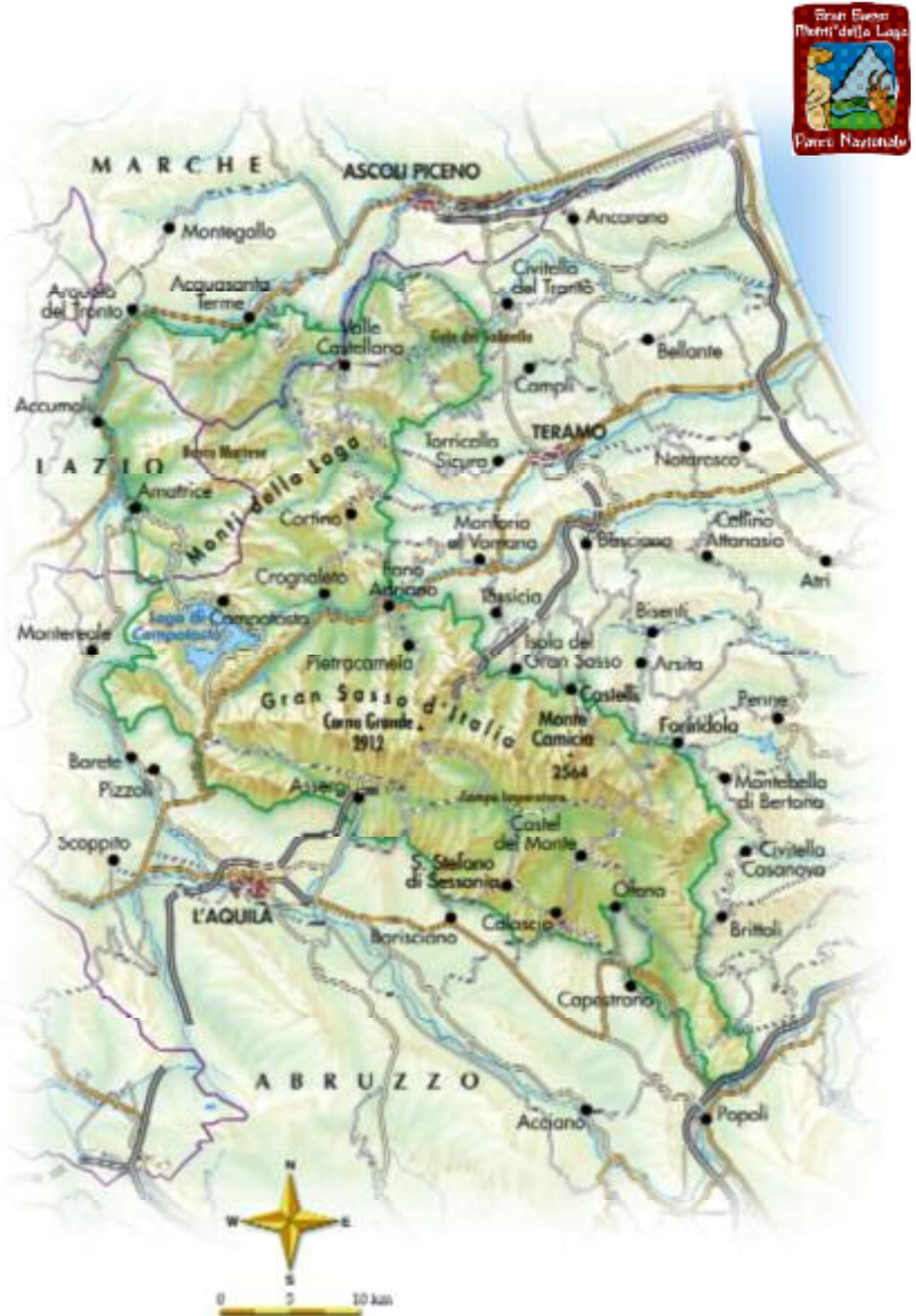
Tourist Information

IAT Pescasseroli (Aq) tel. +39 0863 910461
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Pro Loco di Villetta Barrea (Aq) tel. +39 0864 89333

Events in the Park

Full details of the many activities in an extensive schedule of events that the Park Authority promotes and organizes within its territory for both adults and youth and children of school age, are continuously updated and promoted on the web at these addresses: www.parcoabruzzo.it and parks.it/parco.nazionale.abruzzo, for an intensive calendar of events (environmental education programmes; nature excursions; cultural encounters).

Gran Sasso &



Monti della Laga National Park

The park comprises two separate geological entities: the **Gran Sasso** massif (calcareous, karstic, predominantly arid and rocky); the **Laga** (arenaceous marl, thickly wooded, rich in watercourses). The two very different natural environments are consequently inhabited by different flora and fauna, with the two massifs literally wedged together in the upper Val Vomano and in perfect ecological continuity. A marvellous natural and geographic environment, inextricably intertwined with human settlement for many thousands of years, as demonstrated by the boundless pastures, high-altitude farming, Medieval villages, churches, and castles.

Facing page, from top to bottom: eagle owl, peonies in blossom, Abruzzo sheepdog with its flock, dairy products, the abbey of San Bartolomeo at Carpineto della Nora, the village of S. Stefano di Sessanio.

Above: Abruzzo chamois and excursion to Corno Grande.

Bottom: the small lake of Pietranzoni at Campo Imperatore.



The Park has an area of 148,935 hectares and also skirts the regions of Lazio and the Marche. The Abruzzo sector, which accounts for nine-tenths of the total area, includes 40 municipalities in the provinces of Teramo, L'Aquila and Pescara, while the Marche contribute two municipalities in the province of Ascoli Piceno, and Lazio two municipalities in the province of Rieti. The Gran Sasso massif, with its majestic dolomite peaks, is the most important group of mountains in the Apennines and is the highest





of the entire chain, culminating in the Corno Grande (2,912 metres), Corno Piccolo, Pizzo d'Intermesoli and Mount Camicia. The Calderone glacier, unique in the Apennines and the southernmost in Europe, is found here and is flanked to the south by the Campo Imperatore plateau, an immense, high-altitude karst wilderness rising from 1,600 to over 2,000 metres above sea level, whose breathtaking beauty is the closest thing to Tibet that we may find in Europe. Its morphology is characterized by high faces, moraines, glacial cirques, valleys, cliffs, karst fields and numerous ponds that are also of karstic origin. To the northwest it welds to the Laga mountain range, which is geologically different as it was formed from marls and sandstones that are found in the northern sector of the Park, involving all three regions (Abruzzo, Lazio, the Marche). Human presence on these mountains can be deduced from the different types of forest coverage: continuous and dense on the Teramo slopes of Gran Sasso and the Laga range; a clear

preponderance of grasslands and pastures in the Aquilan Gran Sasso and Lazio Laga; predominantly pasture in the southern sectors and forests to the north and east. The vegetation includes beech-woods (with the rare silver fir, a glacial relict at these latitudes) on the Laga and on Gran Sasso's Teramo slopes, pastures on Campo Imperatore and magnificent high-altitude blossom on Voltigno.

This Park's natural environments are not its only attraction. Indeed it is characterized by the communion, the inextricable merging of nature and human presence on its landscapes. The countless ancient villages and castles scattered on its slopes, dominating the

*This page: the via ferrata to Bivacco Basile; below, Campotosto lake at sundown.
Facing page: top, snowshoe trekking in the Prati di Tivo beech-wood and excursion to Valle delle Cento Fonti; below, the open fields of S. Stefano di Sessanio.*





intra-mountain basins, are proof of this. On the Teramo side there are small Medieval villages nestling amid the Laga forests, and hermitages on the Montagna dei Fiori slopes; the splendid Renaissance town of Campoli; Civitella del Tronto with its mighty fortress; the spectacular ruins of Castel Manfrino overlooking the Salinello gorge; the medieval castles of Castel di Luco and Piano di Roseto; Castelli with the famous prized potteries and San Donato oratory (known as the "Sistine Chapel of maiolica"); the lovely towns of Isola del Gran Sasso, Cortino, Valle Castellana, Tossicia, and Pietracamela. On the Aquilano slopes we find Campotosto and its huge lake; Gran Sasso's old towns like Assergi, Barisciano, Santo Stefano di Sessanio, Calascio and marvelous fortress, Castelvechio Calvisio and Carapelle Calvisio, Castel del Monte, Ofena, Bussi sul Tirino whose Medieval atmosphere is intact. On the Pescara side, the slopes roll steeply to the hills and down to the sea, passing Farindola, famous for its Pecorino cheese.





CIVITELLA DEL TRONTO AND ITS FORTRESS

The town occupies the top of a high hill that overlooks the River Tronto which was, for centuries, the boundary between the Kingdom of Naples and the Papal States, nowadays the border of Abruzzo and the Marche. The current structure dates back to the 16th-17th centuries, but its bloody history began well before, in the Middle Ages, and ended with the Unification of Italy, when the Bourbon garrison capitulated during the 1860-61 siege.

Beyond the 13th-century gate that enters the old town (to be visited for its narrow streets and significant monuments), we climb up to the fortress for a visit to the large Piazza D'Armi, the San Giacomo bastion, and the Palazzo del Governatore. The old Bourbon barracks house a small but interesting museum dedicated to the history of the fortress and the great siege of 1860-61.

Left, aerial view of the old town; right, the Bourbon barracks of the fortress.



CASTEL MANFRINO, THE SALINELLO GORGES AND HERMITAGES

One of the most spectacular canyons in the Apennines, furrowed by the Salinello during its course between the Montagna dei Fiori and Mount Campli. At its entrance we find its first marvel, the Grotta Sant'Angelo, at Ripe di Civitella del Tronto, a cavern that has been a place of worship without interruption for over 10,000 years. Then, on the upper valley bluffs, a series of hermitages stand in impressive position: Santa Maria Maddalena, Santa Maria Scalena, San Francesco alle Scalelle and, the most spectacular of all,

Sant'Angelo in Volturino (the name comes from the Latin vultur, a vulture). The ruins of Castel Manfrino, erected in 1258 by order of Swabian King Manfredi, dominate the narrow gorges where the Salinello's tumultuous waters flow

Left, inside Grotta Sant'Angelo; right, the Salinello gorge.



CAMPLI AND THE NECROPOLIS OF CAMPOVALANO. FROM THE MEDIEVAL VILLAGE TO ABRUZZO'S RICHEST ARCHAEOLOGICAL SITE

Found at the foot of Laga, from the 13th to the 4th centuries BC the Campovalano plain was a simply a huge "cemetery without a town", gathering the burials of the aristocracy from a vast district and with thousands of graves that have returned goods of stunning richness, elegance and state of preservation. They are on show in a museum in the old part of Campli, a splendid Medieval town with a beautiful square, old palazzos and the churches of San Francesco (early 1200s) and Santa Maria in Platea (late 1300s). Also worth a visit is the church of San Pietro, which is early 13th century and lies on the edge of the Campovalano plain, near the ruins of a Benedictine convent.

Left, the church of S. Pietro di Campovalano; right, ivory plaque from Campli's Museo Archeologico Nazionale.





BOSCO MARTESE WOODS AND LA MORRICANA

Laga's largest forest lies on the eastern flank of the massif, between the Cavata and Morricana valleys, alternating typical Apennine beechwoods with large, regular firs. The Ceppo pass is the best point of access for those who wish to visit these woods and from here a dirt track of about six kilometres leads through the most evocative part.

A steeper path leads up from the Ceppo to Jacci di Verre, which faces the Laga's highest peaks, then continues to the "faggi torti", the Cavata waterfall or the Pizzo di Moscio. By the ENEL hydro capture point, where the track ends, another trail leads to the wild Morricana waterfalls, a true gem on this side of the massif.

Left, aerial view of Bosco Martese; right, the Morricana waterfalls.



VALLE DELLE CENTO FONTI, CESACASTINA DI CROGNALETO

Conversely to the almost complete aridity of Abruzzo's other massifs, which are calcareous and therefore karstic, the Laga mountains have an arenaceous-marly geological structure that favours the surface flow of water, which is consequently abundant throughout this territory. The most spectacular watercourse is found near Cesacastina, where the Fosso dell'Acero descends the valley to stunning effect.

The location, at the foot of Mount Gorzano and Cime della Laghetta, boasts a fairy-tale landscape that reveals the Gran Sasso chain from Mount San Franco to Mount Camicia. The departure point for the itinerary is the village of Cesacastina, also worth visiting for its lovely belvedere with a wonderful vista over Gran Sasso.

Left, the chapel of SS Pietro e Paolo at Cesacastina; right, one of the valley's waterfalls.



ON THE CAMPOTOSTO LAKE SHORE

Campotosto is Abruzzo's biggest artificial lake and in fine weather enthusiasts of canoeing and windsurfing gather here, as does anyone who enjoys a good picnic. In winter the lake freezes and is a fantastic sight. Its altitude of 1,313 metres ensures it is cool even in the height of summer. There are pleasant itineraries from here to Mount Cardito, Mount di Mezzo and Cime della Laghetta, while the road that encircles the lake is great for cycling or, in winter, for some short but interesting cross-country skiing routes. Apart from the lake, Campotosto is famous for its salamis, including the renowned Slow Food Presidium, *mortadella di Campotosto* (locally known as "coglioni di mulo"), as well as cheeses and meat produced by local farmers.

Left, view of the lake; right, Campotosto mortadellas.





GRAN SASSO, ITS HISTORIC REFUGES AND THE CALDERONE GLACIER

Gran Sasso is the most important mountain in the Apennines, the birthplace of mountain trekking (with a documented ascent made by Captain Antonio De Marchi in 1573). Its historic refuges (the 1886 “Garibaldi” and the 1908 “Duca degli Abruzzi”) are still extremely popular and have been perfectly restored, offering hospitality to generations of trekkers and climbers.

The so-called “Paretone”, the 1,600-metre face of Corno Grande that looms over the hills of Isola del Gran Sasso and Castelli, is an iconic slope: openly alpine, vertical, a bare rock that is also home to the southernmost of Europe’s glaciers, the Calderone.

Left, the eastern peak of Corno Grande and the Calderone; right, the Garibaldi refuge.



CASTELLI, “CAPITAL” OF GREAT ABRUZZO POTTERY TRADITION

At the foot of Mount Camicia’s impressive north face, Castelli is one of Abruzzo’s most picturesque villages and home since the Middle

Ages to some of Europe’s most prestigious and finest ceramic traditions. Castelli works were to be found in every European court (and today in all the most important museums in the world), and its most fertile period was from the 15th to the 17th century. The Grue,

Fuina, Gentili and Cappelletti families produced objects of great beauty, well-illustrated in the local pottery museum. The church of San Donato, known as the “Sistine Chapel of Abruzzo maiolica” for its vaulted ceiling tiles, is an extraordinary example of the standard of even ordinary work produced in Castelli.

Left, pottery vase on show in the Museo della Ceramica; right, Castelli.



CAMPO IMPERATORE, “LITTLE TIBET”

“Campo Imperatore is infinite, an ocean of pastures lapped by mists carried by the winds. It really could be Tibet.” In 1937, Fosco Maraini, the great Florentine mountaineer and orientalist used these words to describe this marvel of Abruzzo. For centuries it was the setting for the golden age of the region’s shepherd community (when hundreds of thousands of sheep pastured here) and in the 1500s even the Medici of Florence, international wool merchants, had bought fortified villages and pastureland at the foot of Gran Sasso. Now, as then, the scenarios are boundless and surreal, and for decades have provided unique locations for the film industry. The area lies between 1,600 and 2,200 metres in altitude, is 25 kilometres long and eight wide, and its peak is home to the legendary hotel where German paratroopers liberated an imprisoned Mussolini in 1943.

Left: Campo Imperatore; right, Great Yellow Gentian in bloom.





**ROCCA CALASCIO,
THE MOST STRIKING OF THE ABRUZZO CASTLES**

Rocca Calascio is a fortress that soars like an eagle's nest at 1,460 metres in altitude and is the most spectacular of the many castles that controlled the wool routes to and from the Campo Imperatore plateau. It dominates an extensive territory and unfolds a breathtaking landscape. The castle was founded in about the year 1000 and was initially a single square tower, which was later equipped with exterior fortifications of four round towers that gave it a distinctive look and made it visible from afar. Over the centuries it belonged to the Benedictines of San Vincenzo al Volturno, the Acclozemoras and the Piccolominis. In 1579, along with neighbouring Santo Stefano di Sessanio, it became part of the Medici possessions, a family whose wealth came from the wool trade.



Right, the church of S. Maria della Pietà.

SANTO STEFANO DI SESSANIO. AN ANCIENT VILLAGE THAT BELONGED TO THE MEDICI FAMILY

One of the most interesting towns on the southern slopes of Gran Sasso is undoubtedly Santo Stefano di Sessanio, at 1,251 metres, on one of the most important access roads to the rich pastures of Campo Imperatore. For this reason it became a fief owned by the Florence Medici family, which had substantial interests here for the production of wool. The old town centre is a perfect Medieval layout, intact and fully restored thanks to the unique restoration performed for the creation of a multi-site hotel. The only damage caused by the 2009 earthquake was to the great Medici tower that soars above the town but it is soon to be restored. Around the town is a fascinating system of karst dells, with an archaic farming landscape of open fields, cultivating the renowned local lentil that is now a Slow Food Presidium.



Left, lentils; right, a street in the old town.



CASTEL DEL MONTE, THE MUSEUM-TOWN OF SHEPHERDS AND TRANSHUMANCE

The Gran Sasso shepherd "capital" still welcomes visitors who come up from Navelli plain on their way to Campo Imperatore, the "little Tibet" of the Abruzzo mountains. The tiny town's economy has been based since ancient times on transhumant flocks and the wealth produced by sheep-farming is testified by the many lavish churches and mansions. The heart of the town is in the fortified quarter of Ricetto, with its "rue" or the steep stepped streets, arches and beautiful stone houses, which can now be visited as part of the many areas of an original multisite museum, for a complete vision of shepherd life and cultural traditions. Some of the best Pecorino cheese in Abruzzo is made here, including the renowned Canestrato di Castel del Monte, a Slow Food Presidium.



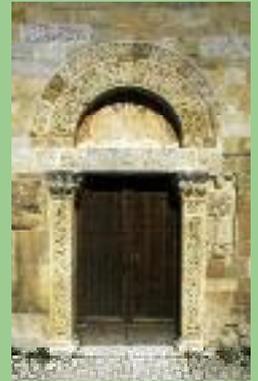
Left, Castel del Monte old town; right, an exhibit in the Centri Espositivi di Cultura Materiale.





SAN PIETRO AD ORATORIUM

The church sits solitary at the foot of Capestrano, along the River Tirino, hidden in a thicket of willows and poplars. The exterior, seen from the rear, is very simple, with its three semi-circular apses in bare stone. The façade, an upturned ashlar, bears the enigmatic magic square stating “sator arepo tenet opera rotas”, while the portal architrave carries an inscription that dates the church: “a rege desiderio fundata anno milleno centeno renovata” – “founded by King Desiderius, renovated in the year 1100”. The church is in the Romanesque style and the interior has great charm, with mighty columns dividing the nave and two aisles, a beautiful 13th-century ciborium, and interesting 12th-century frescoes in the central apse, painted only in red ochre.



Left, inside the church; right, the portal.

AMITERNUM.

PLEASURES AND PASTIMES OF THE ANCIENT SABINES

In the green landscape of the Aterno Valley, to the north and above L’Aquila, the majestic remains survive of two large buildings of antiquity: a Roman theatre and amphitheatre. These are the vestiges of ancient Amiternum, homeland of the great historian Sallustius. The important town, of Sabine origin, became great and powerful, and took its name from the River Aterno that flowed beside it or perhaps, at the time, actually cut through the settlement. Its ancient splendour can be glimpsed today in the two buildings for public entertainment but also in the baths. Within walking distance

we find the Medieval village of San Vittorino, with its beautiful 12th-century church of San Michele, whose interesting catacombs are linked to the cult of the local martyr, St Vittorino.

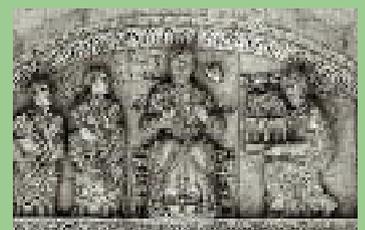
Left, aerial view of the theatre; right, aerial view of the amphitheatre.



THE ABBEY OF SAN CLEMENTE A CASAURIA

The abbey of San Clemente a Casauria, along the Pescara river valley, has survived to the present day in its impressive might, and can be found a short distance from the Torre de’ Passeri motorway exit. It is without doubt one of the key monuments in Abruzzo’s artistic and architectural heritage. The original church was built in the 9th century, as stated in the bas-relief of the central portal, but was destroyed and rebuilt on countless occasion. Its current structure dates to the 12th century, with just a few additions. The splendid façade and porch has three beautifully decorated portals and impressive bronze doors, leading into an interior of rare beauty, with three valuable items: the ambo, the paschal candle and the ciborium, all in finely crafted stone.

Left, the façade; right, detail of the portal lunette.





OFENA AND THE “PAGLIARE”

The Medieval town of Ofena, ancient Afuninum, stands at the start of an important transhumance route that climbs towards Castel del Monte and Campo Imperatore. It has a perfectly preserved old centre and several churches of great interest, while pleasant walks lead upstream to the villages of Garrufo (with its very picturesque Medieval layout) and Villa Santa Lucia.

Downstream, on the plateau below (where, among other things, one of the region’s best red wines is produced), we find the site of the “pagliare” complex, an ancient hamlet composed of seasonal dwellings used by farmers working the plain. The walk or cycle ride to the abandoned pagliare village starts from the handsome church of San Pietro ad Cryptis, downstream of Ofena.

Left, the “pagliare”; right, Ofena.



ON AND AROUND THE TIRINO

The Tirino, one of Italy’s clearest rivers, rises at the spectacular Capo d’Acqua and Presciano springs, between Capestrano and Ofena, on the southeast slope of Gran Sasso. This valley paradise for anglers (with fishing fans coming from all over Italy), canoeing enthusiasts and birdwatchers (thanks to stable colonies of kingfishers, water rails, moorhens, and the seasonal presence of coots, little grebe, herons and wild ducks), also offers beautiful walks, horseback or mountain-bike tours, while the crystal-clear watercourse is perfect for rowing. Thanks to the flat terrains, the paths are suitable for everyone, even babies in pushchairs.

Also worth a visit are the ancient nearby villages of Capestrano and Ofena.

Left, a rowing event on the Tirino.



FARINDOLA, VALLONE D’ANGRI AND PIANA DEL VOLTIGNO

The distinctive village of Farindola (also known for an extraordinary Slow Food Presidium Pecorino cheese) is the gateway to the Vallone d’Angri, which cuts across the southeast side of the Gran Sasso massif with a deep, rocky, wild canyon. This is a challenging hike, from the beautiful Mortaio d’Angri basin at an altitude of 695 metres, up through breathtaking scenarios as far as Campo Imperatore.

Alternative, easier trips (even by the car) lead to the vast Voltigno karst plateau, beautifully set between the mountains a little further south (and with splendid winter itineraries for cross-country skiing), or towards Montebello di Bertona to admire the limestone towers of the Villa Celiera “merletti”.

Left, snowshoe trekking in the beech-wood; right, Farindola pecorino.





NAVELLI AND ITS SAFFRON

Navelli is a beautiful Medieval town, perched on a hill that dominates the plateau, and known for centuries for its extraordinary production of saffron. The plateau has a stunning background of almond groves and lies between Gran Sasso and Sirente, and is indeed the heart of one of Abruzzo's most interesting traditional products. From the 13th century, saffron has been produced always using the same ancient method, and continues to survive on the strength of its quality, which makes it real "red gold", the secret ingredient of a number of delicate Italian and international haute cuisine recipes, like the renowned risotto alla milanese. Since 2005 it has been a product with protected designation of origin, safeguarded and promoted by a consortium under the name "Zafferano dell'Aquila DOP".

Left, picking saffron at Navelli; right, Crocus sativus blossom.



LE LOCCE AND SANTA MARIA CARBONI, A TIMELESS ITINERARY

The Gran Sasso massif has a linear, compact rocky face on its seaward side, but inland it presents an extremely complex system of plateaus, folds and intra-mountain basins: a landscape made of endless pastures and remarkable karst valleys, each with its own Medieval village, castle, and rural churches. This is the case of Piano delle Locce, a large grassy valley that extends up to about 1,250 metres, deeply wedged between the reliefs skirting Campo Imperatore, just north of Santo Stefano di Sessanio.



On the northern side there is the old chapel of Santa Maria Carboni and all around the valley slopes are lined with various stalls, the "locce" used to shelter livestock at night.

Left, one of the many stalls; right, the chapel of S. Maria dei Carboni.



IPPOVIA DEL GRAN SASSO, A 300-KILOMETRE CIRCUIT

This route encircles the entire massif, touching all of its most picturesque towns, its natural and historical-cultural monuments, and networking all local resources: landscape, nature, traditions, gastronomy, tourist facilities. It is about 300 kilometres in length, including the main circuit and the ramifications, recovering old mule and cart tracks amid landscapes of unspoiled beauty, villages and castles, pastures and woods. The paths are well signposted and equipped with facilities that include the drinking troughs and fountains found along the route, which have been restored, bonfire points, huts, rest or stopover areas, and stabling facilities. Of course, this extraordinary circuit is not just for horse riders, but also for walkers and mountain bikes.

Left, equestrian tourism in the park; right, a mountain-bike tour near Campotosto lake.





Top: Corno Piccolo and the Franchetti refuge.

PARCO NAZIONALE DEL GRAN SASSO E MONTI DELLA LAGA

Via del Convento 1, 67010 Assergi L'Aquila
tel. +39 0862 60521 – fax +39 0862 606675
ente@gransassolagapark.it – www.gransassolagapark.it

Park Facilities

ASSERGI (Aq)

• Polo Amministrativo del Parco, Punto Informativo, Antiquarium del Parco, Punto Informativo Estivo con Showroom dei prodotti tipici a Fonte Cerreto tel. +39 0862 60521

BARISCIANO (Aq)

• Orto Botanico, Museo del Fiore, Centro Ricerche Floristiche dell'Appennino – San Colombo tel. +39 0862 899025

ARISCHIA (Aq)

• Punto Informativo, Museo del Legno – Associazione “Abruzzo 1573” tel. +39 340 3345990

CALASCIO (Aq)

• Museo delle Fortificazioni tel. +39 0862 60521

SANTO STEFANO DI SESSANIO (Aq)

• Punto Informativo Estivo, Museo Terre della Baronia tel. +39 0862 60521 / 899117

BUSSI SUL TIRINO (PE)

• Centro Visite Fiume Tirino, Punto Informativo, Laboratorio Didattico, Biblio-Mediatca – Cooperativa “Il Bosso” tel. +39 085 9808009

FARINDOLA (Pe)

• Polo Scientifico del Parco, Centro Visite, Museo interattivo e Area Faunistica del Camoscio appenninico, Aula Didattica tel. +39 085 823100

VALLE CASTELLANA (Te)

• Ecomuseo Terre del Castellano tel. +39 0861 93130 / 345 4314796

SAN PIETRO DI ISOLA DEL GRAN SASSO (Te)

• Centro per le Acque, Ecomuseo, Sentiero Natura, Laboratorio Formativo – C.E.A. “Scuola Verde” tel. +39 335 1048318

ISOLA DEL GRAN SASSO (Te)

• Polo Patrimonio Culturale del Parco e Area Faunistica del Cervo tel. +39 0861 97301

CORTINO (Te)

• Area Faunistica del Cervo

ARSITA (Te)

• Museo del Lupo tel. +39 0861 998016

PRATI DI TIVO DI PIETRACAMELA (Te)

• Museo dell'Alpinismo tel. +39 0861 959619

RIPE DI CIVITELLA DEL TRONTO (Te)

• Centro Visite di Ripe di Civitella, Museo della Grotta Sant'Angelo, Centro visite di Macchia da Sole, Antiquarium di Castel Manfrino – Associazione “Verdelaga” tel. +39 328 6118276 / 336 660510

ARQUATA DEL TRONTO (Ap)

• Centro dei due Parchi (Country House, Casa del Parco, Punto Informativo e Centro di Educazione Permanente) – Cooperativa “Forestalp” tel. +39 0736 803915

AMATRICE (Ri)

• Polo per il Patrimonio Agroalimentare del Parco tel. +39 0746 824519

MONTORIO AL VOMANO (Te)

• Mediateca Ce.D.A.P., Centro di Documentazione sulle Aree Protette tel. +39 0861 501049

• **Equipped circuit** (Guazzano di Campli – Macchia da Sole – Castel Manfrino – Ripe di Civitella) with rest areas, bonfire points, observation shacks, captions

• **Ippovia del Gran Sasso d'Italia horse trails** (320 km through the provincial territories of L'Aquila, Pescara and Teramo) with equipped rest areas, refuges, resting and stabling facilities, drinking troughs and fountains (departures from Assergi, Bussi sul Tirino, Prati di Tivo, Rigopiano, Capestrano, Campotosto)

Tourist Information

IAT L'AQUILA tel. +39 0862 410340

IAT TERAMO tel. +39 0861 244222

IAT BARISCIANO tel. +39 0862 89735

UFFICIO TURISTICO DI CASTEL DEL MONTE tel. +39 0862 938404

Events in the Park

Full details of the many activities in an extensive schedule of events that the Park Authority promotes and organizes within its territory for both adults and youth and children of school age, are continuously updated and promoted on the web at www.gransassolagapark.it and www.parks.it/parco.nazionale.gran.sasso, for an intensive calendar of events (environmental education programmes; excursions; cultural encounters).

Majella



National Park

Majella, the mountain that has forged the identity of the entire region, soars rugged and imposing in the heart of Abruzzo. Its large Park, one of the most important biodiversity containers in Italy and Europe, also includes the ramparts of Mount Morrone and the Pizi mountains, besides the great Altopiani Maggiori system they embrace.

There has been constant human presence on its slopes since the dawn of time, as witnessed by finds from prehistoric sites dating back to the Palaeolithic era. Majella is the very essence, the distinctive identity of the Park, indissolubly the guardian of Nature and humanity. Palaeolithic sites, Neolithic villages and caves, and Iron Age settlements, Italic and Roman towns and sanctuaries, cave hermitages and shrines, caves and inscriptions left by shepherds and brigands, tholos huts scattered around the fields and hill pastures, all revealing that there has been human presence on its rounded, wooded slopes, its high pastures and deep valleys from the origins of humanity. It has been a refuge and source of livelihood for farmers, hunters and shepherds, hermits, soldiers and brigands, charcoal-burners and quarrymen, villagers and travellers. Majella, aboriginal and maternal even in its name, which invokes



Facing page, from top to bottom: Apennine Edelweiss in bloom, deer, Mount Amaro, the collegiate church of S. Maria del Colle in Pescocostanzo, typical Guardiagrele cakes called "sise di monaca".

Top: Apennine wolf, the hermitage of S. Bartolomeo and the unique access to the hermitage of S. Giovanni all'Orfento.

Bottom: vista of the Majella Blockhaus", a tholos hut.





Maja the goddess of harvests adored by the first farmers, is imbued with a mysticism owed to the fact that it has always been considered a sacred mountain, a womb for its inhabitants. The Park has an area of 74,095 hectares and comprises 39 municipalities in the provinces of L'Aquila, Chieti and Pescara. The geomorphology of Majella reveals a large, rounded limestone block, deeply furrowed by yawning valleys, culminating at Mount Amaro, for an altitude of 2,793 metres. Geographically it is deep in the Mediterranean and its range of altitudes (at least 30 peaks exceed 2,000 metres), tortured formation, and a harsh and unstable climate make this mountain unique, the guardian of one of Europe's most important biodiversity areas, which includes the presence of Alpine, Mediterranean, Balkan, Illyrian, Pontine, Pyrenean, and Arctic

This page: left, aerial view of Badia Morronese near Sulmona; top, Majella in winter; bottom, Valle dell'Orfento.

Facing page: top, Apennine chamois; right, ski-trekking in the Bosco di S. Antonio woods; below, the tall peaks of the Majella massif.





elements of enormous biogeographical value, with many rare and valuable species.

The Majella is home to wolves, bears, chamois, otters, deer and roe deer. The 130 species of birdlife include the golden eagle, peregrine falcon, eagle owl, the lanner, the goshawk, and the dotterel. The beech-woods cover the slopes from 1,000 to 1,800 metres, while higher up there is the mugo pine, a glacial relict that is typical of the upper tree altitude limit. There are over 1,700 species of vegetation, many of which are endemic, and Park flora includes over 2,100 entities, many of which are endemic, relicts, rare and/or deserving of protection. Current Majella plant communities are the result not only of the most varied geomorphological and climatic conditions, also of lengthy human presence and agroforestry, as attested by the numerous rock paintings that survive in Neolithic sanctuaries.

The Park is home to small towns of great historical interest like ancient Pacentro, Caramanico with its spa waters, Guardiagrele with its rich applied arts, and splendid Pescocostanzo with its stately Renaissance and Baroque architecture, all worth visiting. Also fascinating are hermitages and places of worship like the

abbey of San Liberatore a Maiella; the Celestinian sanctuaries of Morrone (Sant'Onofrio and San Pietro) and Majella (San Bartolomeo di Legio, Santo Spirito a Majella, San Giovanni all'Orfento, Sant'Onofrio di Serramonacesca, Madonna dell'Altare); the sanctuary of Hercules Curino, and the church of San Tommaso in Caramanico.





SULMONA AND THE SANTISSIMA ANNUNZIATA

Sulmona, in the heart of Abruzzo, was the birthplace of the Latin poet Ovid, but it was in the Middle Ages that it reached its period of greatest splendour, enriched with its most prestigious monuments, like the elegant aqueduct completed in 1256, crossing Piazza Garibaldi (setting for the Easter Sunday pageant known as “La Madonna che scappa”); the imposing cathedral of San Panfilo; the church of San Francesco della Scarpa; the church of Santa Maria della Tomba; nearby Porta Napoli; the Annunziata complex that comprises the palazzo and church of the same name. The complex was founded in 1320 over an extant Roman building and has a splendid Renaissance façade, Baroque and 18th-century interiors, and is home to the Museo Civico, which displays Italic and Roman antiquities, Medieval statues and paintings, and precious sacred objects.

Left, the façade of the Annunziata complex; right, a detail of the portal.



THE HERMITAGE OF SANT'ONOFRIO AND THE SANCTUARY OF HERCULES CURINO

The hermitage of Sant’Onofrio al Morrone soars over the Peligna basin. It is linked to Pietro da Morrone, who became Pope Celestine V and gave scandal with his “great rejection” of the Papacy, returning to his mountain and hermitages. At the foot of the huge rock face that houses the hermitage, we find the great Italic-Roman sanctuary of Hercules Curino, the main Italic divinity.

Halfway down the slope, between the two sites, there are a number of prehistoric red ochre rock paintings of praying human figures. Over the millennia, places of worship have overlapped here, proving the timeless sanctity of this part of the Park.

Left, detail of the hermitage of S. Onofrio; right, the sanctuary of Hercules Curino.



SANTOMMASO, VALLE DEI LUCHI AND THE MARMITTE DELL'ORTA

Between Caramanico and Salle, near the Medieval church of San Tommaso, we find the “luchi” (from the Latin lucus – woods sacred to the gods). Here the erosive action of the River Orta as it flows down Majella in a deep canyon, has moulded truly unique forms and landscapes: majestic rock towers on the valley floor sketch out an incredible landscape. Lower down, towards the river’s current course, we find the “marmitte”, a series of siphons and erosive stretches carved by the water. These two natural wonders are enhanced by the ruins of the ancient Roman bridge and Luco castle, and by the beautiful church of San Tommaso, with three beautiful portals, lavish sculptures and bas-reliefs, built in the early 13th century over an earlier pagan temple.

Left, the “marmitte”; right, detail of a bas-relief decorating the central portal architrave in the church of S. Tommaso.





THE HERMITAGES OF SAN BARTOLOMEO AND SANTO SPIRITO

The beautiful complex of San Bartolomeo in Legio and Santo Spirito a Majella survives in the heart of this “hermit mountain”, camouflaged against the rock where it was built. The hermitage of San Bartolomeo, at 600 metres above sea level, is located midway down the slope, below a wide erosive ledge. Its origins are prior to 1000 and it was rebuilt in the 13th century on the initiative of Brother Pietro Angeleri, the future Pope Celestine V, who lived here in 1274–76. The hermitage of Santo Spirito, just 1,000 metres further ahead, is set in thick beech-woods. San Bartolomeo is the departure point for a pleasant walk; Santo Spirito is reached by an asphalt road through woods and rocks. Both are on the Sentiero dello Spirito, one of the longest trails in the Park.

Left, the S. Spirito hermitage; right, the façade fresco at the church of the S. Bartolomeo in Legio hermitage.



THE KINGDOM OF STONE. THE IMMENSE WORK OF OUR ANCESTORS

Terraces, dry stone huts, extensive stone clearance, places of worship, ancient springs, caves and shepherd carvings. Northeast Majella was the setting for millennia of coexistence between Nature and human activity, of which a veritable outdoor museum of impressive testimonials remain of drainage to eek fields and pastures from this “kingdom of stone”. The local road that connects Passolanciano to Lettomanoppello uncovers a series of landscapes with countless of these testimonies, particularly “tholos”, a faux-dome hut similar to the Apulian trullo and to many similar primitive buildings typical of the Mediterranean area.



Left, tholos entrance; right, the La Valletta complex, Passolanciano.



VALLE DELL'ORFENTO

The Orfento valley, which descends Majella towards Caramanico Terme, is one of the wildest in Abruzzo. In a few kilometres, and without a trace of human presence, it plunges from the 2,676 metres of Focalone to the 556 metres of Caramanico, the town famous for its Medieval churches and its spa waters, and which offers an excellent base for visiting this natural monument. The lower part of the valley reveals spectacular rocky landscapes and the ruins of the Sant'Onofrio hermitage, as well as the Medieval bridge of San Cataldo. Anyone wishing to walk in the Orfento valley is required to collect a free permit from the Caramanico visitors' centre.

Left, Valle dell'Orfento; right, the assisted trail.





FROM THE BLOCKHAUS TO TAVOLA DEI BRIGANTI

Once past the Blockhaus, the Majelletta meadows start one of the most stunning walks in Abruzzo, offering breathtaking views over the wild valleys of Selvaromana, Tre Grotte and the Orfento. This trail is not too strenuous and is well marked, through a thick mugo coppice that leads to the foot of Mount Focalone, where the rock outcrops found amongst the shrubs were carved by shepherds and brigands of the past, including an extremely famous rebuke to Vittorio Emanuele II for having transformed the “kingdom of flowers” into the “realm of poverty”.

Left, some of the inscriptions on the “Tavola dei Briganti” with Mount Focalone in the background; right, an inscription left by a shepherd.



BOSCO DI SANT’ANTONIO: MONUMENTAL BEECH-WOODS A STONE’S THROW FROM PESCOCOSTANZO

The road from Pescocostanzo down to Cansano crosses the Bosco di Sant’Antonio, one of the most beautiful beech-woods of Abruzzo. It survived intact for centuries because it was forbidden to cut down the trees (the legacy of its ancient sacredness), crossed by the Roman Via Minucia that links Corfinio and Isernia.



Protected as a nature reserve since 1985, the forest covers 550 hectares at 1,290–1,420 metres. In addition to the beeches, there are many age-old trees like maples, wild pear, yew, turkey oak and cherry. These wood are worth visiting all year round. In winter one of Abruzzo’s loveliest cross-country skiing trails wends through the beeches and across the plateau below.



GROTTA SANT’ANGELO, PALOMBARO

One of the most amazing hermitages of Abruzzo lies on Majella’s rugged eastern slope, in the Palombaro district, in a colossal cave where ancient Italic peoples worshipped Bona, the goddess of fertility. At its edge, several tanks dug into the rock testify to the presence of an ancient water cult, while its interior contains a surprising, tiny but beautiful Medieval apsed chapel, created in pure Romanesque style. This work probably dates back to the 11th century, and the style and the decor suggest that it was by the same workers who built the nearby abbey of San Liberatore a Majella.

Left, the remains of the Grotta S. Angelo chapel; right, the assisted trail to the cave.





FARA SAN MARTINO AND VALLONE DI SANTO SPIRITO

The Majella massif looms over Fara San Martino, the ancient Longobard village that is now home to Abruzzo’s most famous pasta factories. A short distance from the town, the mountain’s limestone ramparts are furrowed by two gorges, Valle di Santo Spirito and Valle Serviera. While the latter is inaccessible from below and is suitable only for expert mountaineers and speleologists, Santo Spirito is accessible to all, popular for its beauty and proximity to the town. The opening section is the most frequented, with its tall, very spectacular, narrow gorge; further ahead the trail offers trained hikers the biggest height change in the Abruzzo mountains, reaching as far as Mount Amaro, at more than 2,300 metres. Recently, just beyond the opening to the gorge, the ancient monastery of San Martino in Valle (9th–15th centuries) was brought to light. *Left, Fara S. Martino and the gorge; right, gorge entrance.*



THE JUVANUM HILLSIDES

Overlooking the spectacular panorama of Majella’s eastern slope, the archaeological area of the ancient Italic-Roman town of *Juvanum* is located near Montenerodomo. The excavation site rolls across broad grassy slopes that encircle the top of the acropolis, and includes twin temples (at least one was devoted to Hercules) connected by a beautiful paved street to the forum, which has a central square. This was the site of a basilica dedicated to the worship of the emperor. Around the temples are the remains of the massive acropolis walls. A short distance away from the sacred area there is also the cavea, with an extensive vista. The area is ideal for cycling tours, mountain-biking or horse-riding.



VALLE GIUMENTINA, THE ANCIENT LAKE OF ABRUZZO’S FIRST SETTLERS

Just before reaching Roccamorice, a right-hand fork turns uphill to the mountains and reaches a striking intra-mountain basin. This is Valle Giumentina and five hundred thousand years ago it was a large lake fed by the waters of the same river that now runs much further down, in the narrow Orfento gorge. The first groups of prehistoric peoples arriving in Abruzzo settled on its banks, where they found fresh water, animals to hunt and rich flint deposits with which they constructed their weapons. Today it is also the site of some fine tholos huts and stone wells, testimony of a more “recent” presence of shepherds and farmers. *Left, the complex of tholos huts in Valle Giumentina; right, inside a hut.*





**SANT'ONOFRIO, SERRAMONACESCA.
THE STORY OF THE SAINTS AND HERMITS
OF THE CHURCH UNDER THE MOUNTAIN**

Serramonacesca, at the foot of Majella's eastern slope, is famous for its beautiful Romanesque Abbey of San Liberatore, but few know that there is another attraction of considerable interest here: the Sant'Onofrio hermitage, a solitary church hidden in the nature of the valley of the same name, located below an imposing cliff. The overall effect is stunning and certainly worth the visit. The interior is very unique, with the altar resting against bare rock and a narrow rock shelf called "St Onofrius' cradle", where even now pilgrims still go to treat fevers and stomach ailments. The path is well marked and departs from above the district of Contrada Brecciarola di Serramonacesca.

Left, the hermitage; right, picnic area near the chapel.



SANTA MARIA MAGGIORE, GUARDIAGRELE

Guardiagrele is a beautiful town on Majella's eastern slope, with fine churches, mansions, gates and walls. The jewel in the crown is the church of Santa Maria Maggiore, built over the remains of a pagan temple and developed in several stages throughout the Middle Ages.

The façade has an unusual central tower structure also used as a belfry, with a beautiful Gothic portal surmounted by an elegant single-light window. There is a large portico on each side of the church, in two differing styles, with a huge fresco of St Christopher on the right, the only signed work by Andrea Delitio, the most important painter of the Abruzzo Quattrocento. The crypt is home to the diocesan museum and its beautiful church treasures.



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Left, the fresco of St Christopher; right, church façade.



**MANOPPELLO AND THE VOLTO SANTO,
A RELIC THAT SHOWS THE REAL FACE OF JESUS**

Just outside Manoppello old town, we find the Capuchin Volto Santo church, which for centuries has been home to one of the most famous, important relics of the Christian world. The Volto Santo is a transparent veil on which are imprinted the features of a male face with open eyes and mouth, considered by many to be the real Veronica Veil that covered the face of Jesus deposited from the cross. According to the studies of Professor Heinrich Pfeiffer, this relic (displayed on the high altar) can be considered the true image of Christ and constitutes, together with the Turin Shroud, the only known example of an acheropite, an image not made by human hand.

Left, the sanctuary of Manoppello; right, the veil of the Holy Face.





SANTA MARIA ARABONA, MANOPPELLO

The abbey of Santa Maria Arabona is one of Abruzzo’s five great Medieval Cistercian churches and the most significant example of the architecture of this Order, which revolutionized the region’s history, culture and economy. The abbey was built in the 12th century, on the site of an earlier pagan temple but never completed. It is in pure Gothic style, with beautiful furnishings and stone decorations (particularly a tabernacle and a monumental candelabrum), with numerous frescoes including a Crucifixion and, above all, a beautiful Madonna and Child, both by Antonio da Atri (1373), an Abruzzo master of the late 1300s.

Left, the abbey with Gran Sasso in the background; right, the abbey garden.



PESCOCOSTANZO, THE RICHEST ART VILLAGE ABRUZZO

In describing the historical, artistic and monumental heritage of Pescocostanzo it is very difficult to suggest priorities because the whole town is worthy of attention. It is a Renaissance and Baroque town of unique splendour, uniformity and state of preservation, whose prosperity grew thanks to numerous excellent artisans (goldsmiths, blacksmiths, woodcarvers, marble-workers) and the many large families of farmers who owned immense flocks that were moved between Abruzzo and Puglia by transhumance. Do not miss the tour of the entire old town, with its palazzos,

typical “vignale” terraced houses, the collegiate church of Santa Maria del Colle (an authentic museum), the Gesù e Maria church (a gem by Cosimo Fanzago, the great Baroque architect who also designed the Santa Scolastica convent, in Piazza Municipio).

Left, detail of an altarpiece in the church; right, Piazza Municipio.



PACENTRO

Postcard pretty and reminiscent of the Tuscan town of San Gimignano, the towers of Pacentro castle soar majestic on the Morrone slope, dominating the Peligna valley. Now labelled, along with Rocca Calascio, as one of the symbols of Medieval Abruzzo, Pacentro’s three tall towers conjure up a reliable image for visitors of what the region’s mountainscape must have looked like in the Middle Ages and until at least the 15th century. That same alternation of hills, churches, villages and fortifications that the painter Andrea Delitio used as backdrops for his splendid frescoes.

Left, Pacentro; right, portal of the S. Maria Maggiore church.

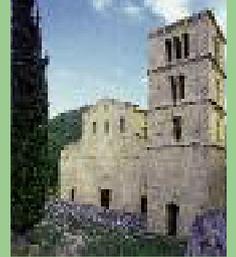




SAN LIBERATORE A MAJELLA, SERRAMONACESCA

The abbey, immersed in Majella's wooded slopes, is one of the jewels of Abruzzo's Medieval religious architecture. It was first built in the 700s but assumed its current pure Lombard Romanesque style in the 11th century. For centuries it was flanked by a great monastery but this was completely destroyed by landslides caused by the erosive action of the Alento, which flows at its side. The large, stately abbey has three portals, a mighty bell tower and an utterly understated interior that is still home to masterpieces like a magnificent ambo, a cycle of fine 13th century frescoes and, above all, the magnificent 1275 tessellated floor in opus sectile, made up of thousands of polychrome marble tesserae. At the foot of the church, the rising Alento flows in an enchanting course above which we find an ancient Early Christian necropolis.

Left, interior; right, belfry and façade of the abbey of San Liberatore a Majella



GROTTA DEL CAVALLONE

On Majella there are more than one hundred more or less fully explored caves, of very different size and structure, but the most beautiful is Grotta del Cavallone. Although it is located at the top of the steep Taranta Peligna valley, on the southern slope of the mountain, it was organized and equipped for tourism and is easy enough to explore. A handy cable car actually departs from the road just outside Taranta Peligna. The route is about one kilometre and winds through huge chambers, all fascinating and well lit to enhance the phantasmagorical effect of the stalactites and stalagmites, and grottoes that are often enormous.



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CINQUE MIGLIA PLATEAU

The plateau is in the inland mountain area to the south the region, between Rocca Pia and Roccaraso, at an altitude of about 1,200 metres. It owes its unusual name – “Five-Mile Plateau” – to the fact that its length from northwest to southeast is nine kilometres, corresponding to five ancient miles. Today it is easily crossed by car in just a few minutes, yet in the past and for centuries it had an awful, sinister reputation for the terrible massacres of those attempting its crossing in frosty winter weather, which sometimes swallowed up whole armies. Today, it is perfect for lovely walks, hiking and mountain-biking, horse-riding, skiing or snowshoeing in an endless scenario of great beauty. The best hike is towards Montagna Spaccata. At the north end we find the beautiful Medieval church of Madonna del Casale and at the south tip, the chapel of Madonna della Portella.

Left, aerial view of the plateau; right, Medieval church of Madonna del Casale.





Above: spring gentian blooms on Mount Morrone, with Majella in the background.

PARCO NAZIONALE DELLA MAJELLA

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info@parcomajella.it – www.parcomajella.it

Park Facilities

ATELETA (Aq)

- Area Faunistica del Cervo tel. +39 0872 946022 / 340 9775462
- Ostello della Stazione tel. +39 085 922343

BOLOGNANO (Pe)

- Centro Informazioni del Parco tel. +39 085 8880114 / 085 922343

CANSANO (Aq)

- Centro Informazioni del Parco tel. +39 347 1344793

CARAMANICO TERME (Pe)

- Centro Informazioni del Parco, Centro di Visita del Parco, Museo Naturalistico e Archeologico, Museo della Fauna Italiana ed Europea, Area Faunistica della Lontra, Foresteria del Parco “Casa del Lupo” tel. +39 085 922343

FARA SAN MARTINO (Ch)

- Centro di Visita del Parco, Museo Naturalistico, Ostello “Macchia del Fresco” tel. +39 0872 980970 / 339 2615405

LAMA DEI PELIGNI (Ch)

- Centro di Visita del Parco, Giardino Botanico “Michele Tenore”, Sentiero Natura, Area Faunistica del Camoscio Appenninico, Biblioteca tel. +39 0872 916010

PACENTRO (Aq)

- Centro Informazioni del Parco e Area Faunistica del Camoscio Appenninico tel. +39 0864 41304 / 349 8474470

PALENA (Ch)

- MOM Museo dell’Orso Marsicano tel. +39 339 8629165 / 0872 918951 / 0872 918898-919009
- Ostello del Parco “Ostello dei Quarti” tel. +39 085 922343

PESCOCOSTANZO (Aq)

- Centro Informazioni del Parco tel. +39 0864 641311 / 339 8629165

PRETORO (Ch)

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ROCCAMORICE (Pe)

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SAN VALENTINO IN ABRUZZO CITERIORE (Pe)

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SERRAMONACESCA (Pe)

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Tourist Information

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IAT ROCCAMORICE tel. +39 085 8572614

IAT PESCOOSTANZO tel. +39 0864 641440

IAT RIVISONDOLI tel. +39 0864 69351

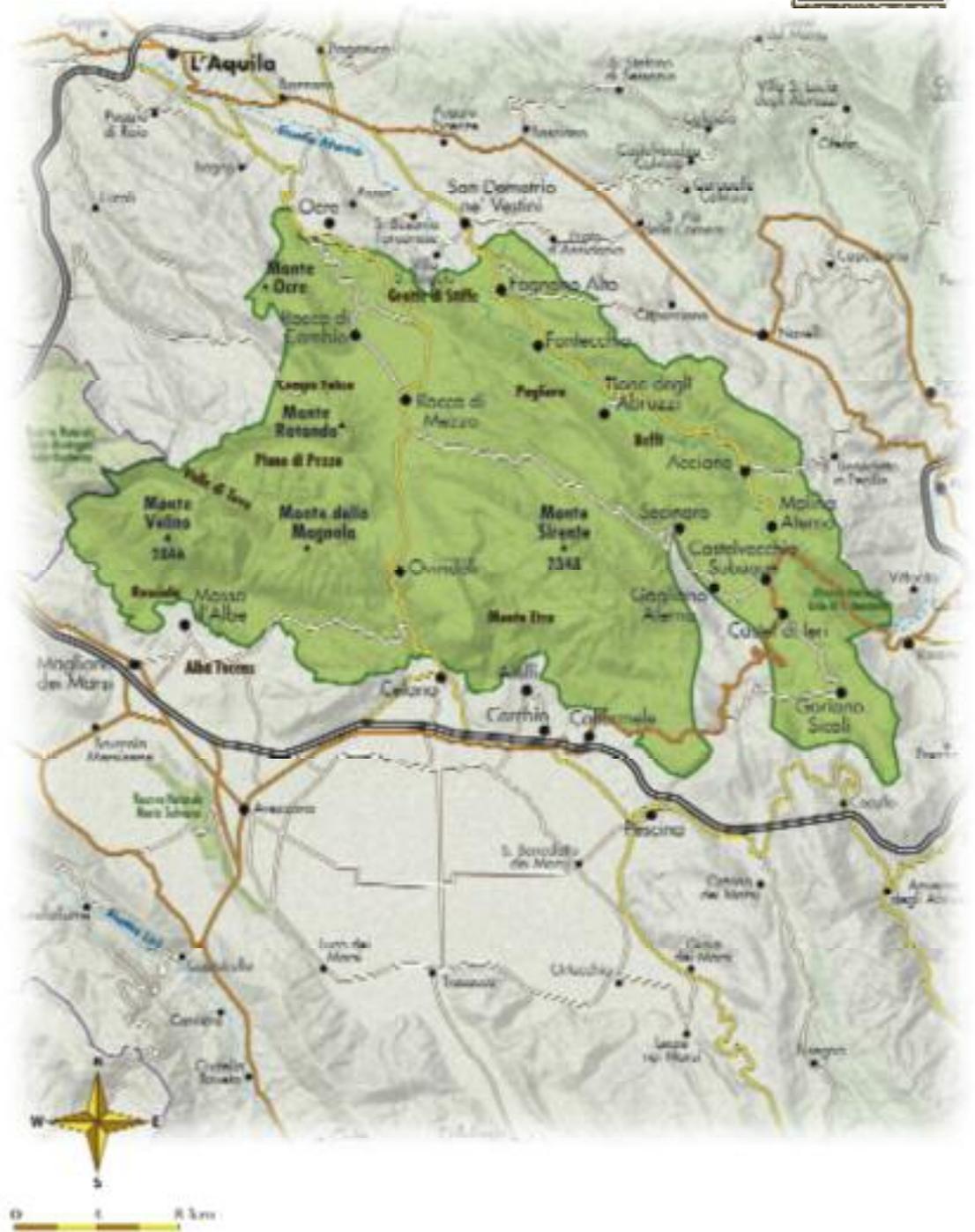
IAT ROCCARASO tel. +39 0864 62210

IAT SULMONA tel. +39 0864 53276

Events in the Park

Majella National Park’s own organization promotes and arranges hiking, snowshoeing, mountain-biking, horse-riding, environmental education courses and packages for adults and children, on local territory. Of particular interest are three long treks that last several days: Sentiero dello Spirito, Sentiero del Parco, and Sentiero della Libertà. Full details are available on the Park website: www.parcomajella.it and www.parks.it/parco.nazionale.majella.

Sirente Velino



Regional Nature Park

The Velino and Sirente massifs are just over an hour from Rome and are easily reached from all over Abruzzo. Although they are not as tall as Majella and Gran Sasso, they are as interesting for visitors as the bigger mountains.

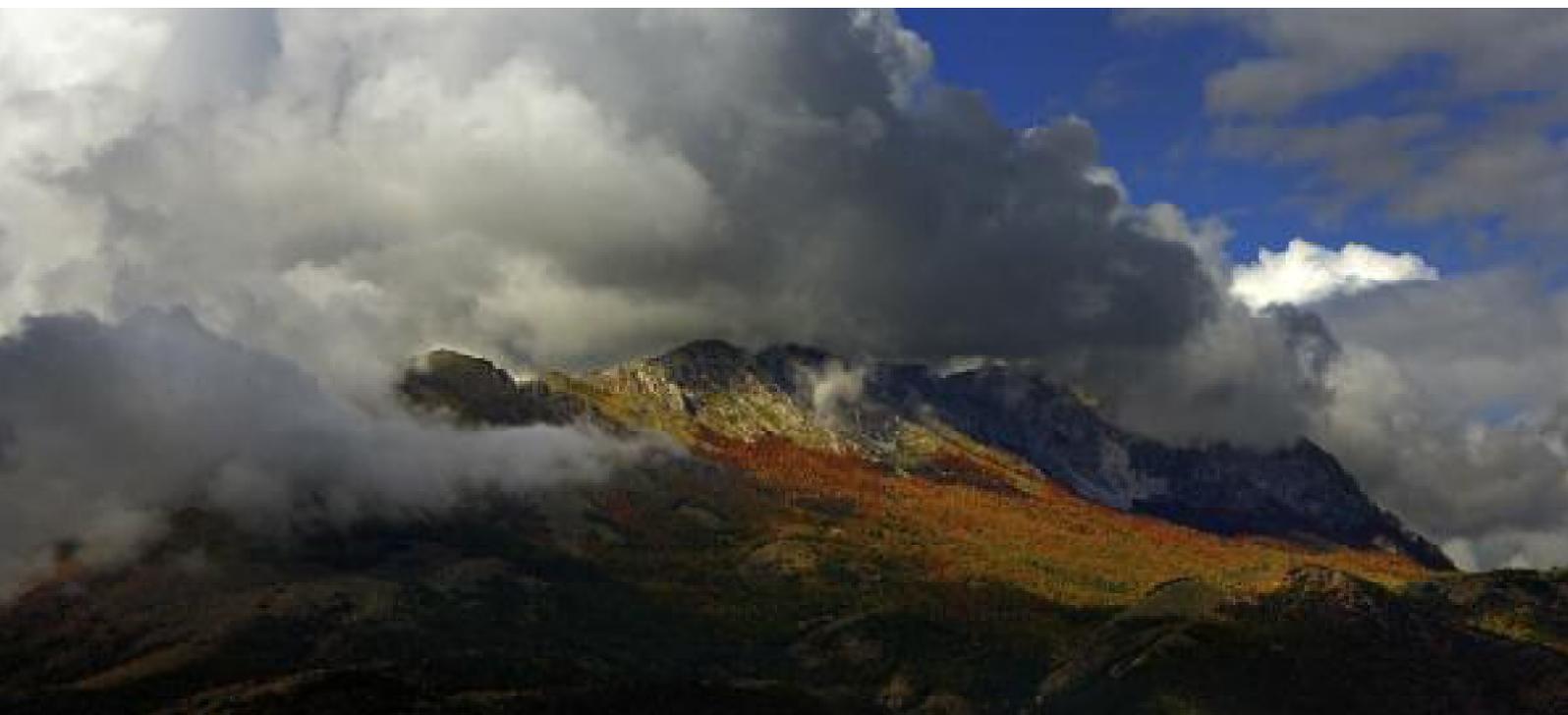
The historical, cultural and artistic heritage guarded over by the Park and its ancient towns is hugely important, and the contribution of this central mountain region of Abruzzo to the history and formation of the region's identity profile is remarkable.

The Sirente Velino regional nature park is home to 22 municipalities and spans 50,288 hectares in the province of L'Aquila, straddling the Aquilan basin and Marsica, with head offices in Rocca di Mezzo.

The rock faces defend the taller peaks and the scree is rich in rare botanical species. These mountains are popular with skiers for the slopes of Ovindoli and Campo Felice, but are also greatly appreciated by hikers. The geomorphology comprises the two calcareous massifs, including the Rocche, Pezza and Prati del



*Facing page, from top to bottom: griffon in flight, trekking on Mount Velino, picnic area, detail of S. Francesco church in Castelvecchio Subequo, Secinara, Celano castle.
Above: European Honey Buzzard in flight.
Below: the Sirente mountain chain.*





Sirente plateaus, all characterized by karst fields and cliffs, the Celano and San Venanzio gorges and the Grotte di Stiffe caves. The beech-woods include those of Sirente, Valle Cerchiata and Cerasolo.

The park is home to the Apennine wolf, the Marsica brown bear, roe deer, deer, porcupine, fox, wild cat and boar. Birdlife includes the golden eagle, buzzard, black kite, sparrowhawk, kestrel, common raven, griffon, peregrine falcon, lanner falcon, eagle owl and the green woodpecker. There are also countless amphibians, such as the fire salamander and newt, and reptiles such as the green lizard and various species of viper.

Any historical and geographical profile of the Park – which moreover has been inhabited constantly since antiquity – is based on consideration of three territorial areas: the Velino, overlooking the Fucino basin and tied to its history: the Subequana valley,



tending more towards the L'Aquila basin; the intermediate Altopiano delle Rocche, linked to sheep-farming and with a stable population only from the Middle Ages.

The history and settlement of the area and of the Velino towns were driven primarily because they were part of the Fucino area, which had an important role both in prehistoric times (with the important archaeological sites along the entire perimeter of the former Lake Fucino) and in the Italic-Roman era, testified by the presence of one of the most important towns of ancient Italy, Alba Fucens, located at Massa d'Albe.

The Valle Subequana, on the other hand, is naturally and historically connected with the L'Aquila basin, both at the time of the ancient Italic settlement (seen in the extraordinary necropolis of Fossa) and in the Middle Ages. The beauty and the state of conservation of its castles, abbeys and monasteries, its towns and the actual landscape, are indeed living testimony that this area of the Park is one of the best surviving examples of Medieval Abruzzo. On the Altopiano delle Rocche, sheep-farming was already being practiced in the protohistoric age, as it was throughout the Abruzzo mountains. Nevertheless, settlements date to the Middle Ages, when the plateau first assumed military importance as the frontier between the Fucino and the L'Aquila basins (proved by Rovere castle, scene of many battles, with an interesting museum), and then became an economic kingpin for its high-altitude pastures and seasonal crops (not to be missed, at the plateau's eastern edge, the seasonal pagliare farming villages of Tione, Fontecchio and Fagnano, all singular sites of the integrated economy of mountain farming and vertical transhumance).

Facing page: top, Mount Sirente and a pair of Apennine chamois; below, archaeological site at Alba Fucens, with Mount Velino in the background.

This page: top, narcissus blooming on the Altopiano delle Rocche; right, Piani di Pezza; below, aerial view of the Sirente beech-woods.





GROTTE DI STIFFE

Abruzzo's most popular cave lies on the edge of the Sirente Velino regional park and collects most of its groundwater. The waters that tumble into the karstic sinkholes of the Altopiano delle Rocche actually reach the Stiffe cave after flowing about three kilometres underground and modifying their height by 600 metres. The assisted trail continues for 650 metres through a sequence of magical chambers, with magnificent stalactite concretions, crossed by the roaring waters of the underground stream that then cascade in a large waterfall.

Information: Grotte di Stiffe
tel. +39 0862 86142

Left, the Cascata chamber; right, translucent fan concretions.



TIONE, FONTECCHIO AND FAGNANO: PAGLIARE VILLAGES

Three tiny villages settled for seasonal farming needs. These picturesque and unique houses are made of limestone and were used in summer by families from the lower-altitude settlements, when they came to work the surrounding terrain. The *pagliare* of Tione are the most famous and photographed, set on a rocky spur overlooking a plateau of pastures and with a stunning vista onto the Sirente slopes. The miniscule village is equipped with a large round well. More secluded and less frequented are the Fontecchio and Fagnano *pagliare* but they are equally interesting.



The area is ideal for hiking, horse-riding and mountain-biking and, in winter, for some fascinating cross-country skiing or snowshoeing tours.

Left, the church at the Fontecchio pagliare; right, the large well for rainwater collection at the Tione pagliare.



ALBA FUCENS AND SAN PIETRO D'ALBE

Abruzzo's two oldest towns stand on a hill overlooking the Fucino plain. *Alba Fucens*, a settlement founded by the Marsi tribe in the 4th–3rd century BC, is at almost 1,000 metres. It preserves the remains of its ancient streets, forum, amphitheatre, the Massima, Fellonica and Massa gates, and splendid walls that are almost three metres thick and just short of three kilometres in length; it was crossed by *Via Tiburtina Valeria*, which connected the town to the Adriatic coast. *Alba Fucens* was also important in the Middle Ages, proved by the Romanesque church of San Pietro, built in the 12th century by the Benedictines on a previous temple dedicated to Apollo. The impressive interior has a nave and two aisles separated by classic-style columns that the monks recovered from Roman buildings at *Alba Fucens*. The church's refined furnishings include two valuable items: the ambo and the iconostasis. The battle of Tagliacozzo was fought here in 1268, when the Angevins defeated Corradino's Swabian army. The most important findings from *Alba Fucens* are in Chieti's Museo Archeologico Nazionale.

Left, aerial view of the amphitheatre and the church of S. Pietro d'Albe.



THE CELANO GORGES

Overlooking the Fucino plain, the Celano gorge was the most spectacular and easy of Abruzzo's great canyons. Tall faces of about one hundred metres and in the narrow main approach are just a few metres apart, separate the Serra di Celano massif from Sirente. The gorge is accessible, but in winter and during thaws is awkward and dangerous, crossed by a boisterous torrent; in the height of summer it becomes very hot because of its lack of altitude. The best time to visit is between late summer and early autumn, or alternatively May-June, when it may be necessary for hikers to soak their feet in the water at some point!

Left, the Celano gorge; right, a rock partridge.



PIANI DI PEZZA

Piani di Pezza is the most intact karst plateau of the Velino massif, stretching from west to east for more than five kilometres, dominated by the Magnola, Costone della Cerasa and Cimata di Pezza peaks, in fine weather it is easily reachable by car. The glades at the edge of the Valle Cerchiata woods, at the tip of the plateau, are an ideal place for a picnic, while the paths into the beech-wood offer walks in a particularly striking environment. A charming path climbs towards the Sebastiani refuge and, at 2,271 metres, the Costone summit with its stunning vista

over the Teve valley and distant Gran Sasso. In winter it is one of the busiest cross-country skiing circuits on the Abruzzo Apennines. Skiers can reach Piani di Pezza from Ovindoli, Rovere or Rocca di Mezzo.



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Left, excursion to the ridge; right, Piani di Pezza.



BEFFI CASTLE

Located in the heart of the Valle Subequana, in the Acciano district, a well-preserved square tower stands amidst the ruins at the foot of the Beffi hamlet. This was the "strut", the main defensive element from which fortified walls began, and this was a castle with an enclosure, which exploited the natural slope of the land on the flank of the mountain. It is likely that this fortified enclosure was home not only to military garrisons, but also to the feudal lord.

On the other side of the valley there is a tall, round, slender tower, which stands out in the woods under Goriano Valli. It is easy to see how the two fortifications were part of a single integrated defence system. Nearby there is also the other castle-enclosure of Roccapreturo.

Left, Beffi castle; right, the round tower at Goriano Valli.





MOUNT SIRENTE

Abruzzo's widest and most complex mountain rampart, and one of the most spectacular of all its peaks, stretching for ten kilometres on Sirente's northern side. The ten kilometres of width are deeply etched with gravel gullies, separated by rock towers, faces and spurs up to six hundred metres in height. The height difference from Prati del Sirente's high-altitude meadows and small round lake (once believed to have been caused by a meteorite, while it is actually a shepherd karst pool) to the ridged summit (2,358 m) is nearly 1,200 metres. The trails up to the summit are long, tiring, and treacherous due to the poor quality of the rock, which is crumbly and unsteady almost everywhere, while the woods and pastures are suitable for everyone to walk. In winter, however, when snow and ice coat the rock face, hundreds of downhill skiers travel up and down the slope along the magnificent Maiori canyon, the widest found here, which reaches the ridge just to left of the summit.

Left, Prati del Sirente and the small karst lake.

Fontecchio and the Medieval Fountain

Almost all villages of the Valle Subequana, which wends its way at the foot of Sirente, have preserved almost intact a Medieval charm. Of these, Fontecchio is a gem that seems to come from a distant past, thanks largely to its splendid Gothic fountain, still a perfect part of the urban fabric. The village is a typical fortified hilltop village, protected by two concentric circles of walls. In



Fontecchio old town there are not only striking walls and doors, but also fortified buildings and several examples of Medieval workshops, with the typical Pompeii-style entrance. In the upper part of the village we find the remains of the Vittoria church, formerly the San Pietro, built over an ancient pagan temple dedicated to Quirinus.

Left, the Santi gate; right, Medieval fountain.



GAGLIANO ATERNO AND ITS ELEGANT CASTLE

The upper Aterno valley is one of the least known and least frequented by classic tourist routes in the region, but for this reason all the richer in pleasant surprises. In the splendour of a luxuriant nature, an open landscape is embraced by gentle mountains, dotted with woods and small watercourses, and lovely picturesque villages as well-preserved as Gagliano Aterno, which is small but does not lack for churches, buildings and artworks, dominated by an enchanting castle. It is immediately apparent how it differs from the classic, severe Medieval fortress as it is a rare example of a castle-residence, with a graceful, elegant look thanks to the beautiful loggia with two orders of windows that overlook the town, a large inner courtyard with a beautiful stone well, and a spectacular staircase to the first floor.

Left, aerial view of the castle; right, a fountain with mascheron.





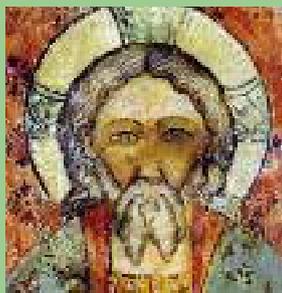
SANTA MARIA IN VALLE PORCLANETA

This small village, near Rosciolo, overlooks the valley that reaches the Fucino plain, and is a gem of Romanesque architecture in Abruzzo. Santa Maria in Valle Porclaneta was mentioned in the early 11th century as one of the possessions of the Benedictine Abbey of Montecassino, and boasts a lavish sculptural and decorative apparatus of immense value. There is a striking transenna with refined pluteuses and a unique wood iconostasis, amazingly intact after almost a thousand years, dividing in two the church and separating the section near the entrance for worshippers from the altar, reserved for religious community. Also extremely important are the ciborium and the ambo, two extraordinary works realized in 1150 by the masters Nicodemo and Roberto. *Left, the abbey façade; right, sculpted capital detail.*



ROCCA DI CAMBIO, THE HIGHEST MUNICIPALITY IN THE APENNINES

Rocca di Cambio is the highest town in Abruzzo, at 1,433 metres in altitude. It is the ideal place for summer excursions, and an excellent starting point for ascents to Mount Cagno, Mount Ocre and Mount Rotondo, in the Sirente chain. It is also a lively winter sports resort. But the real art treasure is just outside the village at the small Romanesque church of Santa Lucia. Prosperous 13th century life is narrated by the marvellous cycle of frescoes painted inside, depicting scenes from the Passion, Resurrection and the Assumption of the Virgin Mary, in addition to an extraordinary Last Supper that occupies an entire wall. There are also scenes from the life of Saint Lucia and various figures of 14th-century saints, found in the crypt. *Left, detail of the frescoes in S. Lucia church; right, Altopiano delle Rocche, with Rocca di Cambio in the background.*



SANTA MARIA DELLE GRAZIE, COLLARMELE

The surprise of this small Marsica village comes in the form of the singular sanctuary of Santa Maria delle Grazie, just out of town, along the ancient Regio Tratturo shepherd's road. The upper half of the 16th-century church façade is completely covered with glossy, coloured majolica tiles. On days of bright sunshine, it glitters like a mirror and stands out in the green landscape. It is unique in its genre and speaks of the importance of Italian pottery production since the Renaissance. There are about four thousand Collaromele tiles, created by master potters from nearby Anversa degli Abruzzi, and have various shapes: square, rectangular and triangular. The decorative richness requires more than a hasty visit because the eye is dazzled by the collection: in fact, visitors should look at each tile with attention, perhaps with small binoculars. *Left, church façade; right, detail of ceramic tiles.*





THE CHURCH AND CONVENT OF SAN FRANCESCO, CASTELVECCHIO SUBEQUO

The ancient village of Italic-Roman origin perches on a rocky spur, and among its houses reveals a convent and a church where St Francis of Assisi is said to have stayed. What makes the church dedicated to the Saint so fascinating is its surviving cycle of Giotto-style frescoes which are unique in the broader spectrum of Medieval Abruzzo painting. The frescoes, painted in 1375–93, feature episodes from the Life of St Francis and Stories of Christ and Mary. The beautiful monumental high altar, however, dates to the 1600s and includes a huge and magnificently inlaid tabernacle in three orders. The convent next to the church is now home to a small museum of sacred art, whose masterpiece is the valuable and famous “Pasquarella”, a small silver and gold sculpture, depicting a standing Madonna with Child flanked by two angels, an excellent example of Sulmona goldsmithing dated 1412 and made by Nicola Piczulo.

Left, S. Francesco church façade.

VALLE DITEVE

The Valle del Salto motorway exit, the old town of Corvaro and the tiny village of Cartore, almost a Rieti enclave in the heart of Marsica, are the starting point for a trail that leads towards the Valle di Teve, one of the most impressive fissures found in Abruzzo’s great

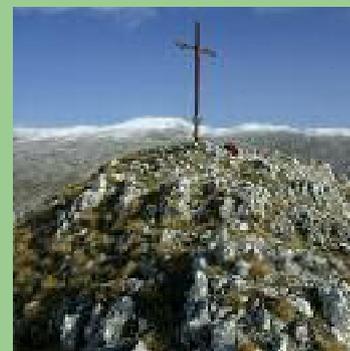
mountains. From the 940 metres of Cartore, a dirt track can be walked or cycled as far as the entrance of the Teve valley and continues amidst fields and scrub to the 1,221 metres of Passo le Forche, which overlooks Rosciolo and the Fucino plain. A longer but perhaps more interesting path allows exploration of the Capo di Teve basin along the valley floor, encircled by Mount Velino, Mount Cafornia, Punta Trento, Costone and others of the area’s most beautiful tall peaks.



MOUNT ETRA AND MOUNT SAVINA

Between the Celano gorge and Sirente, the long ridge beneath Mount Savina and Mount Aethra offers easy and little-known excursions, with a wonderful view over the gorge, the Fucino and the nearby massifs. To reach these two beautiful peaks, or simply the grassy Bocchetta Prato del Popolo for a pleasant picnic at the southern foot of Sirente, we start off along the asphalt road that enters winding Valle d’Arano after Ovindoli, then continue on foot towards the vast panoramas over the Arano valley, the gorges and Serra di Celano. Bocchetta Prato del Popolo can be reached on foot in one hour.

Left, the Celano gorge; right, the summit of Mount Etra.

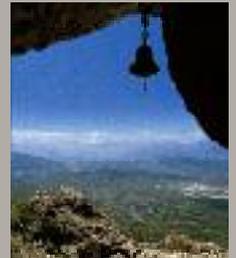




ACROSS THE ROCKS OF MOUNT VELINO TO THE SAN BENEDETTO HERMITAGE

Velino, the third biggest mountain in the Apennines and in Abruzzo, at 2,486 metres, entrances with its contrasts. Gentle wooded slopes on the Rocche plateau side, and sheer crags plummeting towards the Fucino plain, with steep slopes of grass and rocks, interrupted by rocky walls and towers. However, starting at Forme, a handy road and then a path on mid-slope are less tiring for reaching Colle Pelato and the basin at the foot of Canalino del Velino, two of the wildest, most evocative places on the mountain. Continuing on steeper terrain we can arrive at San Benedetto, a natural cavern used as chapel, opening in a rock face at 1,610 metres, where the reclaimed Fucino plain and the Simbruini range stretch as far as the eye can see.

Left, the steep Velino slopes; right, the hermitage of S. Benedetto.



FROM AIELLI TO MOUNT SECINO

Overlooking the Fucino plain, Aielli preserves traces of its Medieval past with a tower built in the Middle Ages, but also a strange Fascist-style church. On Mount Secino, which can be reached only on foot, there are gigantic Italic fortifications. The poor road conditions for the route to the mountain make the approach to Mount Secino complicated, but from its 1,506 metres overlooking the Celano gorge there is a splendid view not only of the gorge but also Serra di Celano, the Simbruini range and Fucino, and over the mountains of Abruzzo, Lazio & Molise National Park, which once housed an Italic fortress whose remaining walls and earthworks are easily perceived.

Left, Aielli's Medieval tower; right, evident traces of the Italic fortification of Mount Secine with Serra di Celano in the background.



SANTA LUCIA, MAGLIANO DE' MARSI

One of Marsica's most impressive churches rises before the steep grass and rock slopes of Mount Velino, encircled by peaks. The Aquilan-style façade, with portals carved by French masters and the severe interior with lavish artworks make it a very attractive destination. The church was built in the 13th century, in the Burgundian style, but completed in later centuries with elements like the arched ceiling that dates back to the mid-15th century, or the great Late Renaissance window installed during 1600s extension work.

The church has a nave and two aisles, of which the nave is taller and has pointed arches resting on variously ornamented capitals. The baptismal font is dated 15th century.

Left, the interior of the church; right, portal surmounted by a rose window.



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Above: Gagliano Aterno old town against the Sirente massif.

Events in the Park

Full details of the many activities in an extensive schedule of events that the Park Authority promotes and organizes within its territory for both adults and youth and children of school age, are continuously updated and promoted on the web at www.parcosirentevelino.it and www.parks.it/parco.sirente.velino, for an intensive calendar of events (environmental education programmes; nature excursions; cultural encounters).



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