

# THE GARGANO

## Walking and Bicycle Itineraries



Touring Club Italiano

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**Touring Club Italiano**

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THE PRESIDENT

*Francesco Schiavone*





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# THE GARGANO

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# A thousand and one nuances of the Gargano

***T**he Romans knew it as Garganus mons. Generations of schoolchildren learnt about it as the ‘spur’ on the ‘Italian boot’. The Gargano is basically a mountain that stretches out across the shallow, sandy shores of the Adriatic. This massif extends for about 65 km in length and 40 km in width and has little in common with the nearby Apennines. The highest points are Mount Calvo (1,065 m) and Montenero (1,014 m), rising up out of a karst landscape marked by wells, hollows, sinkholes and the light shades of limestone.*





*The headland was once blanketed in forest and, today, a significant section of this original vegetation remains in the Umbra Forest, which covers about 15% of the Gargano. In the other areas, the woods have given way to stony land and, at lower altitudes, olive groves and fruit orchards that boast centuries-old trees. In 1995, practically the entire promontory was included in the Gargano National Park that encompasses 18 municipalities. The landscape is as visually distinct from the surrounding Apulian flatlands as the steep rocky cliffs are from the*



*surrounding farmlands. This separation extends beyond the landscape to the isolated villages where age-old nature and traditions abound in a mix of past and present religious sites and settlements. For centuries, the coastal hamlets had to battle pirates and other forces that attacked from the sea. The folds of the massif are not only home to rocks and forest, but also an abundance of notable places of art – the sanctuary of S. Michele in Vieste, the church of S. Pio in San Giovanni Rotondo, the coastal towers and the*





*convent of S. Matteo – and, excluding the crowded summer months, are a wonderful land to explore on foot or bike. The lack of specifically designed routes for people who would prefer to explore the thousand and one nuances of the Gargano slowly can easily be compensated for by following the secondary roads, paths and old mule and pilgrim tracks. This is a mountainous massif with one foot in Apulia and the other reaching out into the Adriatic and the East.*





# BICYCLE ITINERARIES





# A superb setting for bicycles

An island. Perhaps this is the best way to describe the Gargano, rising up between the Adriatic and the Tavoliere della Puglia. For centuries, the brusque variety of landscapes, a wondrous mix of heights and hollows, was the very reason for this land being largely cut off from the rest of Apulia. The origin of the name remains obscure, but it is surely tied to the landscape. It might have come from one of the Greek dialects, from *Gárgaros*, meaning mountain of stone, or if one believes the poet and historian Matteo Fraccacreta in his magnum opus, from '*gargáreo*, the gurgling murmur of the waves and the wind on the beaches, in the valleys and pools of rainwater, woods and caves'. Eager cyclists will find a treasure trove of options, whether they are travelling these parts as a stage on a longer cycle-tour or have come here using other means, with a bike in tow.



The Gargano is an ideal backdrop for cyclists, a place with a touch of shared adventure where the bicycle is the perfect way to explore the landscape thoroughly. As the Gargano is relatively small in cycle terms, it makes both the rides and the stops especially memorable as one explores the many places of interest, often stopping multiple times on the same trip.

The headland is so filled with cultural interest that every path, corner and view seems to produce something unexpected. As such, cycling – excluding off-road cycling, especially for competitive cyclists, and racing, which are not the focus of this guidebook – becomes the ideal way for people who prefer to explore the beauty, landscape and history of this land in a bike saddle, rather than a car. It is clearly tiring to explore this land by bike, but well worth the effort. Unfortunately,

there is more car traffic than one would like – and this land deserves – for those favouring slow mobility (public transport, bicycle, walking), especially during the summer months in the coastal zones.

## Public transport network

People travelling around by bike should be aware of the opportunities to link up with local public transport. The Gargano is a special land and, fittingly, it has its own transport company – Ferrovie del Gargano – that is the largest local public transport operator in the Foggia province. This railway network was founded in the 1930s as part of the efforts to break down the isolation of the ‘spur’ of Italy – as the Gargano is known – and today it is one of the most fascinating in Italy because of the land it crosses slowly. In recent times, work has also been done to extend and modernise the network. Covering over 100 km, the rail network offers free bicycle transport, although there are some restrictions that cycle-tourists will need to check before embarking on any trip. The local train network links up with the national one at the Foggia and San Severo stations, although people using Trenitalia could also use the ‘shuttle’ train service between Foggia and Manfredonia to access the southern section of the Gargano. Where big groups are travelling, it is important to read the local trains rules and consider the limited space for transporting bicycles.

## Equipment

The ideal bike for exploring the Gargano is undoubtedly a touring bike because of its ability to transport some luggage, its durability and agility across all terrain types. Much of the cycling will be on asphalt roads, but it is not uncommon for the edges of these to be rather poorly maintained, with an uneven surface. The sharp climbs and stunning descents mean proper gears and brakes are essential, especially when travelling with one’s bags. Nonetheless, a normal trekking, mountain or racing bike is also a good option for exploring the length and breadth of this promontory. Regardless of the bike



choice, it is essential, when planning, to take on trips commensurate with one's experience and training.

It is equally important that one's bike is not only functional, but also complies with local safety regulations (including a bell, white front light, red rear light and reflector, reflectors on the pedals and wheels). Remember to take a high-visibility top for any cycling done at night or through tunnels. Adding a mirror on the left side of the handlebars is a good option, to have a better idea of when traffic is coming. A bike computer is another useful addition. Riders should also carry emergency repair equipment, especially a spare air chamber. Helmets are not mandatory in Italy, although strongly recommended.

The choice of personal items to take should focus on clothing. The Gargano has differing conditions, from the sea level areas along the northern coast and lakes, to the hills on the eastern side where one can reach 800 m in the heart of the Umbra Forest (the highest point is over 1,000 m on Mount Calvo). The southern section, on the hills above the sea, is often brushed by a gentle sea breeze, and the villages are normally shaded and cool. Thus, especially outside of summer and winter, it is important to have clothing for most conditions, including rain. Protection from the sun is critical in summer, with the right combination of light clothing and sunscreen for any bare skin.





The climate is temperate, with the temperature never dropping below zero. Enough water should be carried for the leg one is planning, as with almost any form of cycling. A basic first aid kit is also needed, with items to deal with cuts and bruises, as well as some painkillers and something for fever. The towns and villages have pretty much anything one might need, but the opening hours are not as extensive as in major cities.

Most of the routes have places to eat along them. Restaurants, trattorias and farm restaurants in the mountains and countryside are common - and one of the delights of the Gargano. Similar places can obviously also be found in the various towns and there are often options for people looking for a quicker meal than a full three-course sit down. Carrying some snacks is always a good option, especially when cycling through the countryside or to enjoy a brief picnic in nature. Of course, never litter!

The Gargano has an established slow movement network (marked with GTG - Grande Traversata Garganica) covering about 200 km



across 13 routes to be explored on bike, foot or horseback. The GTG can often be integrated into the options outlined in this guidebook, although it is best suited to mountain biking, meaning it is not always ideal when travelling with bags. Thus, such integrations should be examined carefully.

There is also a network of approximately 350 km of cycle routes based on current roads and paths. This was created by the Italian Federation of the Friends of the Bicycle (FIAB, a member of ECF), with the related maps published by the entity that runs the Gargano national park, which covers much of the Gargano area.

Many private operators have bikes for hire, including EPAC options, run bikes tours and offer assistance. Such options generally focus on tourists staying in the Gargano area, but they can be an interesting alternative for a cycle-tourist planning to spend a few days in one place and use a different bike.



## Our itineraries

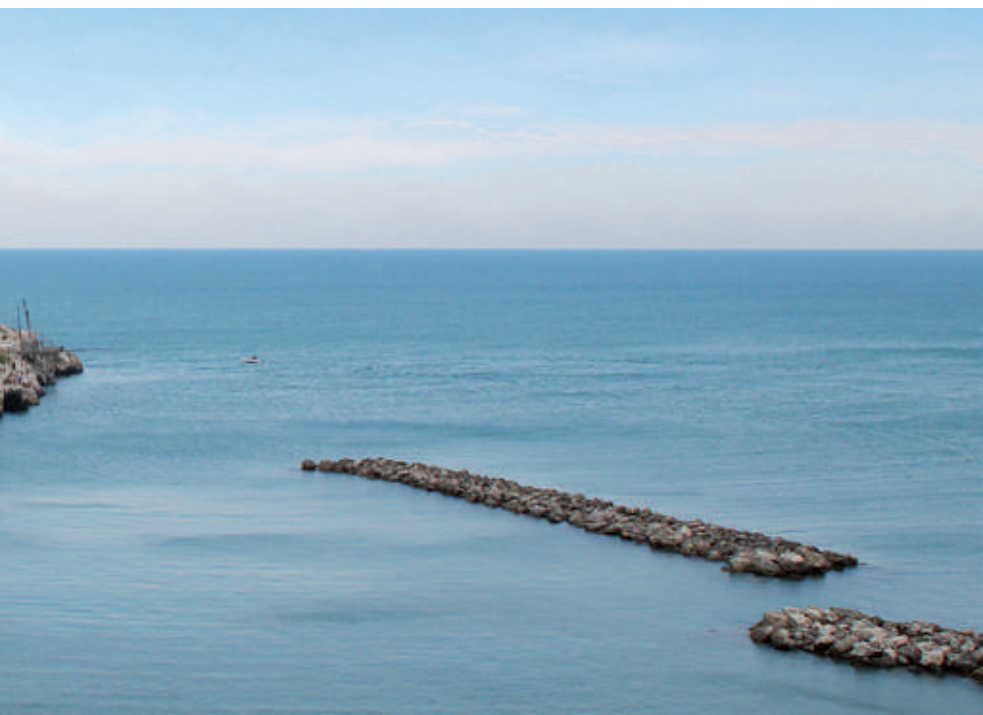
Our itineraries are along the roads (SS and SP) that run across the headland. The routes tend to be quite up and down, especially because the promontory has numerous watersheds. The road network largely follows the coastline, with roads running off this into the interior of the massif. Here, in the Umbra Forest, there are relatively few roads, while the network is a little more extensive towards the west, where the land spreads out – rather than descends – towards San Severo.

The road signs might not be up to the standards most foreigners would expect – especially the kilometre markers on the main roads – but the key roads are fairly easy to work out. The itineraries largely respect the current road network as it is tied to the centuries of local history, making it easy to explore the area in-depth. It would be overly succinct to try and recount the history of the Gargano in these pages, so this has largely been left to the itineraries, with only the connections between history and the road network outlined here.





In Late Antiquity, this section of Apulia was crossed by a coastal trade route that cut out the Gargano completely, heading through *Buca* (now Termoli), *Teantum Apulum* (now San Paolo di Civitate), *Ergitium* (on the plain, near the entrance to the valley of San Marco in Lamis) and on to Siponto. This left the impervious Gargano largely isolated from the rest of the region. The tenacious local populations lived off the land and sea. There was a path from *Ergitium* to Mattinata, which is roughly the modern SS 272 road. San Marco in Lamis, San Giovanni Rotondo, Monte Sant'Angelo and Mattinata are not only all compact towns with long sacral traditions, but also lie along a fault line that, in geological circles, is the subject of some debate concerning the direction of movement. Some argue for 'right lateral motion', others for 'left' and some even for 'reverse' (perhaps it is all of these), but regardless of the specifics, it is the most identifiable geological feature on the Gargano, an east-west cut that runs against the grain of the others found on the headland, which largely run north-south. The ancient coastal road moved in a largely north-west/south-east direction, following the line of an-





other fault, the one which the Candelaro stream runs along. This watercourse split at this point, dividing the flat areas on the Gargano promontory on numerous different levels (transport, energy etc.). The connection between the power of the earth and sacred appearances remains conjecture, but the geological coincidence is certainly notable.

Later, from the early Middle Ages until modern times (and the SS 272 road), the main communication axis was along the fault line to Mattinata, largely used by pilgrims from across Europe heading towards a site where the Archangel Michael had appeared on numerous occasions, in the village of Monte Sant'Angelo. This was a holy site only behind the tombs of the apostles in Rome and the Way of St James (Compostela) and, accordingly, it became the main route in



the area. Today, it is more commonly used by pilgrims devoted to Padre Pio, a saint since 2002, whose major shrine is in San Giovanni Rotondo. There was also a more southerly route to the Gargano plateau and the site where the Archangel Michael is said to have appeared, passing the splendid abbeys of S. Leonardo di Siponto (12C), S. Maria di Siponto (12C) and S. Maria di Pulsano (6C), which lies on a ridge with a good link to the town of Monte Sant'Angelo. This town could also be reached along a more impervious route, often chosen by those seeking the more penitential option, along the valley of *Scannamugliera* (a name of presumably Gothic origins - *scanderh molelrh* meaning 'steep rise'), right next to where the modern SP 55 road begins to climb. Both these 'lower' routes to the site associated with the Archangel Michael are compatible with the current route of the SS 89 Garganica road, which is often included in these itineraries. The SS Circumgarganica road was built in 1865, when it became necessary, in a now unified Italy, to strip the headland of its isolated status and allow better access for Italian troops seeking to control the preponderance of banditry. The SS 89 road passes Mattinata and winds its way in a circle connecting Vieste, Peschici and Rodi – the 'young' parts of the headland, only having emerged from the sea about 5 million years ago – before going back to the far older San Nicandro, which has been around for at least 100 million years, when the whole area was a tropical savannah.

This excessively brief taste of the history and communication routes will prove useful once on the road, helping cycle tourists gain a better understanding of the exceptionally profound local traditions, history and places. The bicycle is, as in much of Italy, the ideal means for exploring the landscape. And all that remains now is to get on the bike.



# Major shrines along the Mattinata fault

## Itinerary length

77 km

## Time needed

about 6 hours

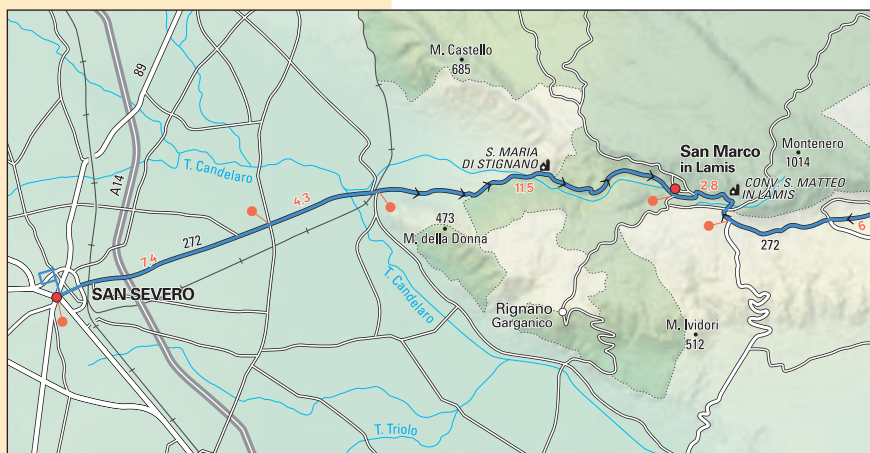
## Itinerary

### From San Severo to Mattinata

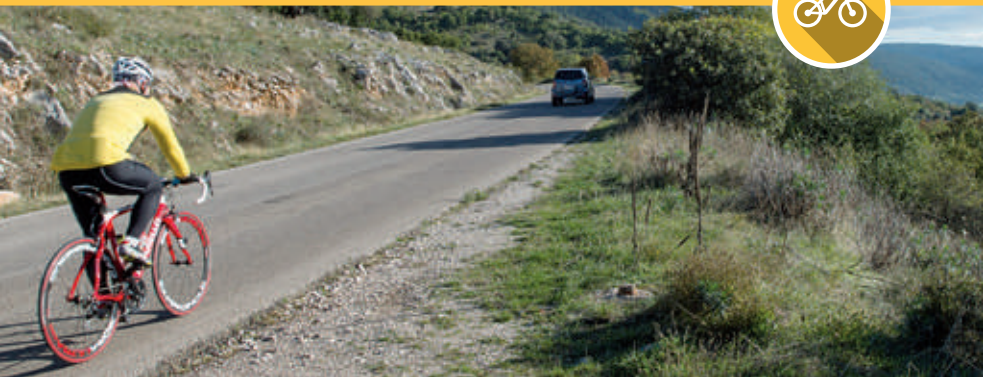
This route, which mainly follows the SS 272, can be tackled by car or by starting at the San Severo train station, from which Trenitalia and Ferrovie del Gargano operate regular services. If you are coming from San Nicanandro (see Itinerary No. 5), you can also start at San Marco in Lamis. The climb from San Giovanni Rotondo to Monte Sant'Angelo is very steep. When you get to Mattinata, the final destination of this itinerary, you can proceed towards Vieste on the SS 89.

*This itinerary, which enters the Gargano from the plain of the Tavoliere, enables you to explore quite a few of the sites which have made this peninsula famous the world over. It's a linear route which can also be divided into several stages, enabling you to spend a night in the most interesting towns along the way.*

*The starting-point is on the railway, and therefore acts as a base for other cycling routes.*







### The itinerary

Heading east out of the town of San Severo (86 m) through the San Marco Gate, take the long, straight SS 272 road to San Marco in Lamis. The road is used by quite a lot of traffic and the only interesting feature is the landscape. The SS 272 is a very old road. It certainly dates from Roman times but may well be even older. After 8.4 km, the area near Brancia was once the site of ancient *Ergitium*. Here, our route runs perpendicular to the old coast road which, in Roman times, ran north-west to south-east along the Adriatic coast, by-passing the Gargano peninsula. *Ergitium*, no trace of which survives, stood

just before the Candelaro River, one of the few water courses in the area, which you cross just before the mouth of the San Marco Valley. Here, having crossed the railway, you enter landscape more typical of the Gargano. Leaving the plain, with its olive groves and various other crops behind, you begin to climb up the bottom of a large tectonic fault, the Mattinata fault, along which our route travels right to the end. This deep, straight crack in the Earth's crust has not only made it possible to build an efficient road over the centuries, but has attracted a number of human settlements, thanks to the very fertile soil and a plentiful water supply.



First on the list of interesting sites to explore in this valley is the **sanctuary church of S. Maria di Stignano** (*see photo*). It was built in the 16th century on the site of an earlier chapel, erected in 1231 to mark the site of a miracle. The sanctuary church is worth visiting because of its peaceful atmosphere – highly conducive to meditation – but also its fresco cycle depicting *Stories from the Life of St Francis* which decorates the cloister of the abbey. There are other retreats like this one in the surrounding hills, miles from any main roads, but most of these haunting reminders of the past are now in ruins.

#### S. MARIA DI STIGNANO

According to legend, in 1216, St Francis of Assisi was passing through this valley on his way to Monte Sant'Angelo. He was deeply struck by the beauty of this place and gave it his blessing. In 1231 a chapel was built here to commemorate an apparition of the Virgin Mary, who had restored the sight of a blind man. After that, a monastery was built, which became larger and more magnificent, reaching its greatest

splendour in the 16th century. But, according to some sources, this has been a religious site since early Middle Ages, when a community of Basilian monks settled here. After 726, and throughout the history of religious settlements on the peninsula, there is constant reference to monks fleeing from Syria and Egypt due to the iconoclastic campaigns of the Byzantine Emperor, Leo III the Isaurian. At that time, religious communities also played a defensive role, providing aid and shelter for wayfarers. In particular, S. Maria di Stignano was the first place in the Gargano to be encountered by anyone coming from the Tavoliere. It gave shelter to exiles fleeing from political strife, and to pilgrims travelling along the Way of St Michael to Monte Sant'Angelo. Even today, the abbey, which has recently been restored, is still a focus for pilgrimages and spiritual retreats.

5 km further on lies the town of San Marco in Lamis (550 m), important for its role in the history and traditions of the Gargano. Our route runs along the main street, Corso Matteotti. The town is named after its patron saint, St Mark the Evangelist, who is worshipped all over the Adriatic. The Latin words 'in lamis' refer to its geographical loca-





tion, and mean 'in the marshes', since the surface of the Mattinata fault is made of impermeable rock where water tends to stagnate. Once upon a time, the Jana River ran through the centre of the town, which is set in a natural depression. Now, the river is reduced to an underground channel.

The town is justly famous for its **festivals**: the festival of its patron saint, St Mark, on 25 April, and its other patron saint, Our Lady of Sorrows, which is celebrated on 19-21 September, along with the fair of San Matteo, and, lastly, the festival of the *Fracchie* (the dialect word for 'fiaccole', or torches), which began in the 18th century, and takes place on Good Friday.

#### THE FESTIVALS OF SAN MARCO IN LAMIS

The festival of St Mark the Evangelist, the town's main patron saint, begins on 24 April, when the trades associations, the confraternities and the different communities in the town celebrate in the streets to the sound of music. On 25 April, the feast-day of St Mark, the religious celebrations take place, involving all the civic and religious dignitaries. They culminate in a solemn procession through the town with a statue of the saint. The festivities continue with a huge fair, concerts by local town bands and firework displays.

Good Friday is the festival of the *Fracchie*. The *Fracchie* are long, cone-shaped bundles of wood filled with branches, which are lit and dragged on carts through the streets of the town along the route of Our Lady of Sorrows, symbolising the search for her dead son. However, the pre-Christian tradition of lighting ritual bonfires to celebrate the passing of the seasons does not seem to be the basis for this Gargano tradition. In fact, it seems to date from 1717, when the new church of Our Lady of Sorrows (the Addolorata) was built outside the town. The *Fracchie* were simply a way of illuminating the route of the Virgin Mary

towards the mother church of Ss. Annunziata (11th century), the site traditionally symbolising the resting-place of the Dead Christ.

The fair of San Matteo and the festival of the patron saint of Our Lady of Sorrows (19-21 September) celebrate both the Apostle Matthew, a relic of whom has been kept in the monastery named after him since the second half of the 16th century, and Our Lady of Sorrows, the town's other patron saint. The festival begins by processing an old painting of St Matthew through the town and ends with a similar procession carrying an image of the Virgin Mary.

At San Marco in Lamis, they make the noble, strong-smelling, mature *caciocavallo podolico* cheese. It is made with the milk of Podolica cattle, which are very hardy and thrive on the scanty grazing in this area. Regarded as a local breed, they actually originated on the Podolian steppe of modern Ukraine and were introduced during the Barbarian invasions.

Heading east out of town, after 2 km you come to the **monastery of S. Matteo**, or the monastery of S. Giovanni in Lamis. The abbey sits on the top of a hill covered with ash and hornbeam on the lower slopes of Mount Celano, dominating the Stabile Valley below. Seen from the winding road leading up to it, the abbey looks more like a fortress.

#### THE MONASTERY WITH TWO NAMES

The monastery that stands on the hill above the town of San Marco in Lamis has a long history. The first trace of a religious settlement, a hermitage with a hospice for pilgrims and refugees, dates from the 5th century, but it is possible that there was no permanent building until the Lombard period. The first documentation we have for the site dates from 1007, when an abbey enters the records of the estate and feudal lands of the Benedictine monks,



dedicated to St John. It was about this time that the nearby town grew up. In 1311 it passed into the hands of the Cistercians, then, in 1568, to the Friars Minor. Its name changed from St John to St Matthew – but only the name – canonically, it was still dedicated to St John – when the cathedral of Salerno donated one of St Matthew's molar teeth. This relic is especially dear to the inhabitants of Cerignola, who, on 21 September, the feast-day of St Matthew, flock here to take part. The building, which looks like a solid fortress, has been enlarged and improved over the years, up to the 20th century. The cloister still has the decoration and forms of the Benedictine period, whereas the rest of the complex is decorated in the Renaissance style. It has a splendid library, with more than 60,000 books and documents.

The almost flat section of road leading to San Giovanni Rotondo passes through bare landscape, dotted with long enclosures formed by dry stone walls, called *jazzi*, also used for sheltering livestock during the transhumance. *Jazzi* are a typical feature of the Gargano landscape and, especially in the areas of inter-

mediate altitude, have always been used for livestock farming.

The town of **San Giovanni Rotondo** (566 m; *see photo*) is indissolubly linked with 'Padre Pio' (Father Pio) from Pietrelcina (1887-1968), who spent his long life here and championed the building of a hospital, the House for the Relief of Suffering, which opened in 1956. The town has expanded thanks to Padre Pio's activities, and ever since the friar was canonised (in 2002), large numbers of pilgrims have continued to flock to the large sanctuary church dedicated to his name, not to mention patients to the hospital. Everything in San Giovanni Rotondo revolves around the saint and it is hard to discern the traditions and features of the town that existed prior to his enormous influence.

#### THE TOWN OF THE SAINT

The town of San Giovanni Rotondo is situated in an area with plentiful reserves of water. There has been a settlement here since at least the 4th century. We first hear the name in 1095, when it was founded by the inhabitants of Castel Pirgiano and other nearby towns. The word 'Rotondo' refers to its earliest building, a round baptistery dating from the 6th and 7th centuries. This was extended and became a church dedicated to St John in the 11th century. According to legend, the church stands on the site of a pagan temple dedicated to Janus. An inscription dated 1231 tells us that San Giovanni was declared a 'royal burgh' by Frederick II of Swabia, thus releasing it from its dependence on San Marco in Lamis. There are many signs of the town's glorious mediaeval past. The flourishing mediaeval town had economic influence throughout the South of Italy. As well as numerous religious buildings, there are still several of the towers in the walls built by Frederick, many of which have been converted into houses. The four gates (12th-13th centu-





ries) are still fairly well-preserved and there are also a number of interesting noble residences.

At San Giovanni Rotondo many festivals are dedicated to St Pio – a native of Pietrelcina (near Benevento) who came here in 1916 – but also to other cults and local traditions. There are five annual festivals in the calendar of celebrations of the life of St Pio. They begin on 2 May, with the commemoration of his beatification (1999); on 16 June they celebrate his canonization (2002), while, on 1 July, they celebrate the dedication to his name of the new church (2004), designed by Renzo Piano. The church is well worth visiting: its light, all-embracing structure, and its seamless continuity with the outside (*see photo*) are quite extraordinary. On 14 September they celebrate the day when the monk saint received the stigmata and, on 22 and 23 September, the anniversary of his death (1968), with a vigil and a torchlit procession.

Another place where you can learn more about the life of St Pio is the Capuchin monastery of S. Maria delle Grazie, begun in 1538, where the friar lived for 50 years. You can visit his cell and admire the enormous number of relics associated with the saint and his work. On the feast days of Santa Maria delle Grazie (8-10 September), a solemn procession of the Holy Painting of Santa Maria delle Grazie leaves the Mother Church and, on the real feast-day, 2 July, another long procession walks from the monastery to the gates of the town.

Moving swiftly from the sacred to the profane, during the first two weeks of August, San Giovanni Rotondo holds a gastronomic festival called the Sagra dell'Arrostato e dei Prodotti tipici.

Our route continues east along the SS 272, which you can join near the cemetery of San Giovanni Rotondo. Following directions for Monte Sant'Angelo, after 25 km, you encounter two downhill and three uphill slopes, the last of which climbs for almost another 300 m over a distance of 5 km. However, before setting off for Monte Sant'Angelo, we suggest you make a slight detour to visit the Grava di Campolatto, one of the Gargano's largest swallow-holes (about this argument see Itinerary No. 5). About half-way along the road from San Giovanni Rotondo, at Kilometre 43 (look out for the modern milestone), a small road leads off to the right. Keep right at the next junction, after which a dirt track leads to the cave. Hidden amongst the vegetation which grows around this depression in the landscape, the swallow-hole acts as a drain for all the water from the large enclosed

surrounding valley which, when it rains, feeds a large underground stream. The narrow opening at the top of the chasm conceals a vertical shaft about 100 m deep, at the bottom of which tunnels lead off for more than 1 km, reaching a maximum depth of 304 m.

Back on the SS 272, the last climb is the most demanding of all, and should be tackled with due calm. However, it is very satisfying, partly because the views stretch into the distance over the valley below and the scenery of the Gargano. At the end of it lies **Monte Sant'Angelo**, which looks out over the Bay of Manfredonia.

Monte Sant'Angelo (796 m; *see photo below*), perched on a rocky spur, has a number of important buildings and monuments dating from the 7th century onwards, when the Lombards began to rule the area. However, its greatest claim to fame is the sanctuary church of S. Michele Arcangelo (*see photo opposite page*), one of the most venerated holy shrines in Christendom. Pilgrims first came here in the 5th century. In 2011, it

was granted UNESCO World Heritage status. In the lower level of the sanctuary is St Michael's Cave, the scene of apparitions in the past and other important events. In 2014, the National Geographic Society ranked it eighth in the table of the world's most important holy caves.

### MONTE SANT'ANGELO

The oldest part of the town, divided into three districts, is full of charm. The architecture of the Junno district (6th century) is the most characteristic and simple of all. The mighty castle (9th century) stands on the site of an Iron-Age necropolis (8th-7th centuries BC). In the 16th century, it was updated by the famous military architect Francesco di Giorgio Martini. The so-called Rotari Tomb, actually a 12th-century baptistery, is currently being restored. The Museum of Local Arts and Traditions has an interesting collection about the history of the Gargano, and some remarkable ethnographical collections. Festivals revolving around food and wine here include the Sagra del Pane, dell'Olio e dei Prodotti tipici (bread, olive-oil and local food products, second half of July) and the Sagra della Castagna (chestnut festival, 1 November).

Before descending towards Mattinata, we recommend a slight detour to the abbey of S. Maria di Pulsano (485 m), built in the 6th century. It





stands alone surrounded by rocky landscape. From the west of the town, follow the SS 272, then the SP 56 Monte Sant'Angelo-Pulsano road (look for the 'Via S. Maria di Pulsano' sign). The detour involves a drop in height of more than 200 m over a distance of just under 10 km. Back on the main route, the road drops 700 m in height over a distance of 19 km, so we recommend you check your brakes. Following signs for Mattinata, turn off onto a branch of the SS 89 which winds down along the ridge beside the line of the fault. The descent, with views over the hilly landscape and intermittent views of the sea well repays the effort of the climb.

At the end of a series of tight hairpin bends before Mattinata, there is a turning with a sign to the Mount Saraceno necropolis. It lies astride a rocky spur above Mattinata and is worth a visit. Following signs for Vieste and Mattinata, turn right onto a paved road going uphill. This immediately becomes a dirt track leading to the archaeological site (To visit the site, contact the tourist office in Mattinata.

Booking is compulsory). The spur on which the necropolis (9th-7th centuries BC) is situated is the last obvious part of the tectonic fault which route has followed up to now. The necropolis is an important testimonial to the Eurasian Daunian civilisation. It contains more than 500 rock-cut tombs in which bodies were laid in the foetal position. The Dauni, who arrived from the Illyrian coast, were represented here by the Matini tribe, after whom the nearby town is named. Mount Saraceno was the burial site, whereas the actual settlement probably lies below the modern town.

Having rejoined the route, we finally reach **Mattinata** (75 m), ancient (pre-Roman) *Apeneste*, which subsequently became *Matinum*. The town, which until the 1950s depended administratively on Monte Sant'Angelo, has always been an important farming town. Sheltered from the mistral and tramontane winds, the area is ideal for growing olives, and the local olive oil is of excellent quality.

Now that our efforts are over, the



obvious thing to do is to head for the beach and enjoy an invigorating swim – the water is warm enough in spring and autumn, too – in the magnificent bay below the town.

### MATTINATA

Although recent building has altered the appearance of the town, Mattinata (see photo) is still a charming place. The abbey church of Maria Ss. della Luce dates from the 12th century. At the end of summer, the festival of the local patron saint of the Madonna della Luce (14-16 September), is well worth seeing: three days of religious events and folklore with much processing of holy images, concerts by town bands and firework displays. The town has numerous local specialities to tickle the taste-buds of foodies. Many of the festivals and other events revolve around the local olive oil, of excellent quality, and utterly delicious on a slice of toasted bread. The bread here, related to the traditional bread of Monte Sant'Angelo, is a fundamental component in many of Mattinata's most typical dishes. They tend to be very simple but taste extraordinary because of the quality of the ingredients. For example, do not miss *Pane e Pomodoro* (made with tomatoes, salt and origano) and the famed *Acqua Sala fredda*, made with bread soaked in water and seasoned with peppers, onions, capers, olives and, of course, a generous dose of olive oil.

To learn more about the history of Mattinata, take a short ride on an unladen bike up to Mount Sacro. Head north east out of town and follow the SS 89 for about 3 km. Turn left (signs for 'Strada Contrada Stinco'). After another 5.5 km through ancient holm oaks and oak trees, the ground becomes red due to the iron minerals in the soil. Eventually, you come to the Benedictine abbey of Ss. Trinità di Monte Sacro (560 m higher than Mattinata), on the hill of the same name. In ancient times there was a temple here dedicated to the cult of Jupiter Dodonaeus. After the Archangel Michael first appeared in the cave of Monte Sant'Angelo (490), the Bishop of Siponto, Lorenzo Maiorano, decided to destroy the pagan idols here and rechristen the place 'Monte Sacro'. The abbey, now in ruins but still a charming place to visit, is mentioned from 1138 onwards. Once very influential, it fell into decline around the turn of the 14th century. In 2012 it came third in the Places of the Heart census organised by the FAI, having received more than 50,000 votes, partly because of its breathtaking views.



# High road of the Gargano, from one sea to another



## Itinerary length

42 km

## Time needed

about 4.5 hours

## Itinerary

**From Mattinata to Vieste**  
SS 89

*This route passes through the lovely wild landscape of the Gargano, from one sea to another; through the southern part of the Umbra Forest, a route that incorporates all the best features of a cycling holiday. The ride through the beautiful landscape is dotted with interesting places to visit, like the town of Mattinata itself, where the route starts, and the town of Vieste where it ends. For the first 18 km, the road climbs*

*constantly, gaining 700 m in height. Having crossed the top of the ridge, for the next 24 km, there is an easy, gradual descent to Vieste, but you should keep a lookout for uneven sections of road. You can also take the option of the coast road (SP 53, SP 54), which is very challenging with constant up and down sections, but gratifying because of the amazing views straight down to the sea. In any case, it's a good idea to take food and water with you because there is nowhere to stop for refreshment on the way. On the other hand, you can take your pick of scenic picnic spots. If you take your time and enjoy the natural scenery, the route can be stretched out over a whole day. There is usually not much traffic on the SS 89, whereas the coast road can be quite busy. You just need to be careful and are advised carry out a full technical check of the bike before you leave.*



### The itinerary

From Mattinata take the SS 89, heading north-east. Following the contours halfway up the hill, you will be amazed by the size of the olive trees and the extent of the foliage of the

trees in the Gargano. The luxuriant growth of these olive groves is due not only to the farmer's assiduous care but also to a natural phenomenon known as plant macrosomatism (gigantism), a typical feature of the peninsula, which affects trees, plants and shrubs. Sometimes the scenery is rather bare, with occasional outcrops of rock and deep valleys, home to ravens and various species of falcon. You can pedal along in silence, enjoying the birdsong and watching the pallid swifts, the Alpine swifts and the occasional kite.

If you choose to take the coast road, you will notice the abundance of Aleppo pines, which grow in the reserve of Mount Barone (on the SP 53, level with Baia delle Zagare). These woods are unlike any other in Italy. Above an altitude of 500 m, you enter the forest proper. Here the vegetation consists mainly of oak and hornbeam. Pedalling along in the cool shade of these giant trees seems to remove all the effort. The habitat of the forest floor is home to many species of small mammal such





as badger, pine marten, porcupine, fox and wild cat. Finally, a long open downhill section of the SS 89 leads you gradually out of the steep forest valleys into the flatter landscape of the olive groves, and eventually to **Vieste** (43 m).

### VIESTE

The area of Vieste (*see photos*) was documented in Greek and Roman times but has been inhabited since prehistoric times. In fact, thanks to an abundance of natural springs and considerable quantities of flint in the subsoil – flint is ideal for making tools – people settled here as early as the Palaeolithic.

Having become prosperous thanks to fishing and farming, in the first half of the 20th century, Vieste was suddenly hit by a long, persisting economic crisis, forcing many of its inhabitants to emigrate. But in the 1960s, the area suddenly found itself with a new role as a holiday destination. The rise of tourism, although limited to the summer months, generated considerable investments – such as the restoration of the oldest part of the town – halting the decline in the population.

Each year, on 23 April, Vieste celebrates an important festival dedicated to St George, one of the town's patron saints (according to tradition, he died on 23 April 303). A Roman soldier, he later became an invincible hero

and a Christian martyr. From the early hours of the morning, the sound of bangers being let off and performances by the town band let everyone know that the festivities have begun. Then, a procession sets off carrying a statue of St George on his horse to the church of S. Maria delle Grazie, where a special mass is celebrated. Finally, near the church of S. Giorgio, they celebrate the Sagra della Frittata (Omelette Festival), re-evoking a miracle that took place at the beginning of the 12th century. Vieste is the only place where this miracle is commemorated. It is probably based on stories brought back by sailors on Genoese or Venetian ships in the 14th century. The legend goes that in Paflagonia, an ancient region of Anatolia facing the Black Sea, a little boy promised to give the saint an omelette if he would enable him to beat his friends in a game, since he was unable to do it himself. His request was granted and the little boy left the promised gift in the church where he had invoked the saint's name. Some merchants, who had committed sacrilege by taking the omelette off the altar and eating it, were badly treated by the saint and were not released until they had forked out a large sum of money for the poor and asked for forgiveness.

After the Sagra della Frittata, in the late afternoon, a horse-race is held on the beach in honour of the saint, who is traditionally depicted on horseback. At dusk, the celebrations end with a firework display and a concert.





The castle is a good place to start exploring Vieste. This imposing building was erected during the Swabian period (13th century). Today it is still used by the Italian army. The cathedral of S. Maria Assunta, not far from the castle, bears signs of the town's complex and colourful history. Begun in the second half of the 11th century, the plan of the church is still Apulian Romanesque. Rather than detracting from the building, the earthquake of 1223, Venetian raids in 1239, more raids by the Saracens (in 1480 and again in 1554) and another earthquake in 1646 have added to its eclectic beauty, resulting in a marvellous concoction of mediaeval, Renaissance, Baroque and 18th-century features.

The streets of the town are dotted with small craft shops and workshops selling all kinds of local products, especially food and wine. At the main market of Vieste, in Piazza Jenner, you can hear the sounds and enjoy the smells of the local tradition. The Museo Malacologico (Via Pola, 8), a private museum in a building with an unusual stone ceiling, has a display of more than 12,500 shells from all over the world, as well as minerals and fossils. The shop sells all kinds of natural objects.

Vieste is also famous for its fish cuisine, and there are plenty of excellent restaurants in the town centre and nearby

where you can try it. On the first Saturday of each September local fishermen dedicate a local festival to their patron saint, Santa Maria Stella Maris. The main focus of the festival is *pesce azzurro* (oily fish), cooked on the grill the minute it comes off the boat. In order to savour all the delights of this fantastic little town, we recommend you spend several days here, using your bike to get around, both within the town and venturing further to visit the area's many attractions.

The coastline around Vieste has some spectacular landscape which is deservedly regarded as the finest in the Gargano. It's certainly very popular. The *Pizzomunno* (see photo), a white mass of rock 25 m high, dominates Castello Beach just south of the town. It's become one of the symbols of the area and features in one of the most famous views of the Gargano coast. Another icon of the landscape, also just south of the town, is the Arch of San Felice, a natural stone arch not far from Testa del Gargano, the easternmost point of the peninsula, not far from Pugnochiuso.

On the north coast, the harmony of the alternating seasons of farming and tourism is often upset by tragic events, like the major fire in 2007 which devastated the section of coast between Peschici and Vieste, and frequent flash floods.



# The great Gargano circuit



## Itinerary length

80 km

## Time needed

about 8 hours

## Itinerary

**Circular route starting and ending at Vieste**  
SP 52, SP 52 bis, SP 528, SP 52

*This is one of the great walking routes of the north-east Gargano, a circular route that ventures right into the heart of the Umbra Forest. The route can be divided up into sections, separating the coastal route from that of the mountains. What's more, it can be added onto the*

*previous route and part of it can be done in conjunction with the route that follows this one. The paved roads are perfectly good, and can be tackled with a normal racing bike. However, if you decide to make the route longer, it's best to do it with very little luggage – especially the route into the interior – and to stay a night at Vieste, Peschici or Vico. In summer, take sunscreen and plenty of water. There are a few cafés along the route but they are less frequent in the area of the Umbra Forest.*

### The itinerary

From Vieste, set off on the SP 52 following signs for Peschici. The road hugs the jagged coastline as much as it can, passing cliffs, long beaches and narrow coves. As you will soon find out, the most interesting features in this part of the world are the many **lookout towers**, often in ruins, and the **trabucchi**, wooden platforms used for fishing, poised precariously above the sea, usually over a sheer drop. If you fancy stopping to rest on a beach, just turn off the SP 52 onto any one of the many minor roads that will take you down to a beach or the rocks.

### THE TOWERS AND THE TRABUCCHI

Most of the towers were built under the rule of the Spanish viceroy, Don Pedro Álvarez de Toledo (1484-1553). The towers formed an effective lookout system. In fact, each tower stood within sight of the tower on either side, so that the alarm could be raised very quickly in times of danger. The problem at that time was that Ottoman Turks frequently carried out brutal attacks on the towns along the coast. At Vieste, the so-called *chianghè amerè* (bitter stone), located near the cathedral, is a chilling re-



minder. In fact, on that occasion (1554), the lookout towers didn't manage to sound the alarm in time to prevent the arrival of Turgut Reis (he succeeded the admiral Khayr al-Din Barbarossa). According to the legend, after a week's siege, the condottiere used the stone to have 5,000 of Vieste's inhabitants beheaded, after which it was named the 'bitter stone'.

As well as the towers, the *trabucchi* (see photo) are also worth looking at. These typical contraptions also appear on the coast of Abruzzi and Molise, but in the Gargano, they are remarkable because of the way they are built, clinging to the rocks, right over the water below, rather than on the sea floor. The *trabucchi* in the Gargano are part of Italy's monumental heritage and are protect-





ed by the Gargano National Park Authority. Documented since the 18th century, but possibly of Phoenician origin, these devices made it possible to fish even in bad weather without going to sea. At that time, the sea was full of fish but going to sea was always risky. The *trabucco* is a wooden platform that clings to a rock overhanging the sea. Fishermen could sight shoals of passing fish from them and could catch the fish as they swam close to the coast by letting down a large square net, suspended from long wooden arms called 'antennas'. Now only a few of the *trabucchi* are still working, but there is no doubt that these ramshackle contraptions have their own special charm, and have become part of the landscape. There are about a dozen of them on the coast between Vieste and Peschici, each with its own particular character.

Level with Kilometre 6 of the SP 52, a sign on the left marks a road leading to the **Umbra Forest** (in the direction of Mattinata and Monte Sant'Angelo, SP 52bis). It climbs for about 3 km until it joins the SS 89. Follow this road, keeping to the right. After about 300 m, turn left back onto the SP 52bis. The road climbs in an almost straight line for another 16 km to the highest point on the route (800 m), with hills that are never too demanding, and gradients of about 7%. At the top of the

road is the National Park Visitor Centre with its little museum. It has all kinds of useful information about the forest and the Gargano National Park, of which the Umbra Forest is an integral part. Near the Visitor Centre is a small lake, Cutino or d'Umbra, the starting-point for many marked trails. The surrounding area has many parking areas with facilities and picnic sites. Opposite the turning to the lake is a bar which is open throughout the summer.

#### THE UMBRA FOREST

With an approximate area of 11,000 hectares and an exceptionally high level of biodiversity, the dark, shady Umbra Forest (*see photo*) is one of Europe's most precious natural treasures. Equivalent to about 0.7% of Italy's total area, it is home to 2,000 different plant species, 33% of the national total. Its habitat hosts an incredible number of orchid species: the Gargano has 85 of the 235 species found in Italy, belonging to 17 different genera. Each year, half a million people come to see this extraordinary forest. The cool climate here allows beech trees to grow at a very low altitude for the Mediterranean, that is from 300 m upwards, and there are many examples of gigantic trees. As well as beech, the forest comprises English oak, hornbeam, laurel, elm, lime, oak, chestnut and yew hundreds of years old,



including some of Italy's oldest trees. The fauna, which is equally diverse, includes the roe deer and the wild cat (*Felis silvestris*). The unique wildlife of the Umbra Forest is linked to the uniqueness of the whole peninsula. In fact, the Gargano is an island of biodiversity because it really was once an island several times during the Quaternary period, having been literally surrounded by the sea.

Beyond the highest point of the route, the road begins to drop down. After about 500 m there is a junction: here take the SP 528 to **Vico del Gargano**. Riding down the 13 km which separate the Umbra Forest from Vico is an unforgettable experience in any season. The only possible risk is the rain, which is particularly frequent between spring and summer and between summer and autumn. So it's advisable to be equipped for wet (and windy) weather and to be sure to brake gently if the road is wet.

### VICO AND ITS ORANGES

According to tradition, Vico (445 m; see photos) was founded by Slavs (probably former pirates) and indigenous people, who were brought together in 970 under the authority of a Slav condottiere called Sueripolo. The town is first documented in 1113. After this date, Vico was ruled in turn by the Norman-Swabians (the castle dates from this period) and the Aragonese. During the Age of Enlightenment, the number of civic buildings proliferated, and remarkably so if we consider that it was far removed from the centres of revolutionary ideals. As well as the Accademia degli Eccitanti (the headquarters of a literary association with enlightened ideas), they erected a Tree of Liberty, a typical symbol of support for the ideals of the French Revolution. Vico was one of the first places to build a cemetery outside the town walls, as prescribed by Napoleonic Law.

Much of Vico's more recent history is linked to the cultivation and trade of citrus fruit. It's quite a rarity in the Gargano,



where the countryside tends to be dominated by olive groves. Citrus fruit has been grown in the Gargano since about the year 1000. Duretta and Bionda oranges, Femminiello lemons and the ancient Melangolo, a kind of bitter orange, became famous all over the world in the 19th century, when farmers began to export them by sea in traditional cargo boats called *trabaccoli*. Their fame derives not only from the quality of the fruit, which is quite unique, but also the quantity. In fact, the unusual climate of the north Gargano coast, the availability of spring water and the characteristics of the trees make it possible to pick the fruit throughout the year. The fruit reaches maturity here much later than in other regions. This enabled the fruit farmers of the Gargano in the area between Ischitella, Rodi, Vico and San Menaio to be competitive on markets as far away as the U.S.A. and Canada, even though they had to be reached by sea. To protect the fruit during the voyage, the various companies producing citrus fruit printed beautifully decorated paper wrappers, depicting allegorical scenes and views of the Gargano, which are now a collector's item. By 1870 the citrus plantations ('gardens', as they are usu-



ally referred to) covered more than 800 hectares, and production exceeded 15,000 tons a year. The citrus fruits from the Gargano have become a Slow Food presidium supported by the Gargano National Park, and have been awarded IGP (Protected Geographical Origin) status. The producers belong to a consortium which keeps alive this extraordinary aspect of biodiversity, resulting in food specialties of extremely high quality. As well as fruit, local products include jams, candied fruit and products under oil.

The festival dedicated to St Valentine (14 February), the patron saint of people in love and protector of citrus groves, is an event that combines religious piety and local farming activities. In fact, Vico is known as 'the town of love'. At this festival, all the houses are decorated with orange, lemon and laurel branches. Local courting couples and visiting tourists drink the juice squeezed from oranges that have been blessed in the hope that their dreams of love will come true. According to tradition, the couples must walk through a very narrow street only 50 cm wide called Vicolo del Bacio (Kiss Lane), where it is very difficult not to come into contact.

The castle that overlooks the town is of Norman-Swabian origin, as well as the old town centre and its walls. The neo-Gothic

Palazzo Della Bella, built in the 20th century, is supposed to be a copy of Palazzo Vecchio in Florence. It's well worth visiting the Trappeto Maratea, a 14th-century olive oil press. The room housing the machinery once used for pressing the olives also contains a collection of farm implements. Before leaving Vico, you must try to taste some *paposcia* (from the French word *babouche*, meaning slipper), a special kind of bread dough baked in the oven and then stuffed with two local food specialties: olive oil and *caciocotta* cheese.

Our route continues towards Peschici on the SP 528, past orchards and olive groves, towards Calenella Bay. The SP 528 joins the SP 144. As it passes through the Marzini pine-forest, it becomes the SS 89 and remains so all the way to Peschici. This pine-forest is a Site of Community Importance within the Natura 2000 Network because it contains Aleppo pines hundreds of years old. It is part of the Gargano National Park and is well equipped with lay-bys and picnic areas. Further on is Calenella Bay, with its





beautiful beach almost 1 km long, stretching between the pine forest and the Mount Pucci tower (*see photo above*). Between San Menaio and Peschici you can admire the ‘Zappino dello Scorzone’, an Aleppo pine at least 700 years old, the trunk of which has a circumference of 5 m, and the ‘Zappino di Don Francesco’, at Calenella, which is almost as old and almost as large. Beyond Mount Pucci and its archaeological site (a vast necropolis discovered in the 19th century and excavated more recently after a long period of neglect and plunder), after a few more uphill and downhill sections (the last section, with a gradient of 10%, has often been incorporated in the Giro d’Italia cycling race), you arrive within sight of **Peschici** (90 m).

#### PESCHICI

Peschici (*see photo right*) is first mentioned in historical documents in 970. The town was probably founded by Slavs, people from the Balkans, who helped to drive off the Saracens although they returned *en masse* four centuries later. The

old town is dominated by the castle, possibly of Norman date. It’s a maze of narrow streets and marvellous views, with plenty of churches to visit and charming venues. The castle houses a collection associated with the folklore and history of the town and you can see the Tremiti Islands from the terrace.

From the late 15th century to the late 16th century, Peschici appears in many Venetian ship’s logs. It seems to have been a shipbuilding centre for Dubrovnik, now in Croatia, a marine republic that competed with the Most Serene Republic of Venice. The main festival here is dedicated to Our Lady of Loreto on the second Monday after Easter. It involves a long procession carrying five sacred images to a place 2 km beyond the town. The festival of the *Madonnina del Mare* is held at the end of May; and, on 12 and 13 June, a huge bonfire is dedicated to St Anthony Abbott. The festival of the patron saint, St Elias (19-21 July), lasts for three days, with folklore, eating and drinking, and ends in a spectacular firework display. Finally, at the festival dedicated to St Matthew, on 21 September, the town band accompanies a religious procession around the town and it all ends with a firework display.

We suggest a short detour to see the **abbey of S. Maria di Càlena**. The abbey is situated not far from Peschici, on the SS 89 to Vieste,



just after the junction with the SP 52. Shortly before a roundabout, a road on the right with a sign to 'SC Calena' leads to the abbey (200 m).

### S. MARIA DI CÀLENA

This is one of Italy's oldest abbeys and certainly one of the Gargano's most important monuments. S. Maria di Càlena was founded as a monastery – probably by the Basilian order – in 872. Subsequently, Benedictine monks arrived at the '*ecclesia deserta in loco qui vocatur Ca' lena*', as we know from the deed of donation of 1023 signed at the abbey of S. Maria di Tremiti, in which the Bishop of Siponto gave the monks the land they needed for subsistence farming. By 1058, the influence of the abbey at Càlena stretched far beyond the borders of Italy and it had many assets outside the Gargano.

The architecture of the church is several layers deep: Apulian Romanesque features (such as the domes of the earliest building, no longer extant) were replaced by others typical of Burgundian architecture, brought here by master craftsmen

from Central Europe. An underground passageway led from the abbey down to the sea, enabling the monks to escape when Saracen pirates attacked. They say that, if you listen carefully, you can hear the sound of the waves in one of the church's holy water stoups.

From Peschici the SP 52 continues towards Vieste in a series of up hills and descents, back to the start of our route. When you have passed the houses on the edge of the town, the SP 52 – or rather, a parallel road higher up, not signposted – leads to an old church, which you can see on the right about 200 m before you get there. This is the **church of the Madonna di Loreto** (16th and 17th centuries). There is no sign to the church even though it is very important to the people of Peschici. Unfortunately you are unlikely to find it open, since it was recently damaged in a storm.





### THE MADONNA DI LORETO

The church (*see photo below*) was built as the result of a terrible storm. Some fishermen, who lost out at sea in their boat, begged the Virgin Mary for help. They were guided ashore by a bright light at the point where the church now stands. To show their gratitude, they decided to build a church that was the same size as their boat. Since then, the church has been cherished by the fishermen in the area. Many of them have left the votive offerings inside the church over the years: models of boats and sailing ships, and many items of ship's equipment. The festival of the church falls on the second Monday after Easter. The holy images of St Matthew, St Roch, St Michael, St Elias and Our Lady of Loreto are processed to the church, preceded by the confraternities of Purgatory and the Holy Sacrament, and followed by the townsfolk. They make special Easter cakes in the shape of a basket for this festival, called *canistredde*.

The SP 52 continues up and down through the Mediterranean maquis. A road leads off to Manaccora Bay (*photo on next page*), with signs to the holiday resort. A straight road leads downhill for almost 2 km to the beach. On the west side of the bay is a cliff with a cave, the Manaccora archaeological site (called the **Grottone degli Dei** or Cave of the Gods), where some of

the most interesting evidence of Italic proto-history have been found.

### THE GROTTONE DEGLI DEI (CAVE OF THE GODS)

The cave contains the remains of a Bronze Age settlement and necropolis, which stretches back for 90 m under the promontory. Excavations, begun in the 1930s and continued in the 1990s, have revealed a complex historical sequence. The huge cave was already settled in Neolithic times, and was possibly also used for cult purposes. The numerous lateral caves were used during the Middle Bronze Age (14th century BC) and Late Bronze Age (12th century BC) to bury the dead of various social levels, with different kinds of inhumation burials. The discovery in the cave of a sandstone smelting mould and a large number of metal tools are proof of metal-working. The material found shows that this part of the Gargano was in touch with the Aegean and Anatolia, whose populations were also attracted by the availability of flint in the Gargano. Flint is an excellent material for making tools, and was used a great deal to make tools during the Palaeolithic, but also in the Early Bronze Age.

12 km further along the SP 52, on the right, is a sign to the **church of S. Maria di Merino** and the adjacent archaeological site, which is fenced off (tourist information boards); the turn-off is 350 m before





the turning onto the SP 52bis which took us into the Umbra Forest.

### S. MARIA DI MERINO

Thanks to alluvial deposits and the presence of a water course, the plain that leads from the Tesoro Valley to Scialmarino Beach is extremely fertile. Local inhabitants realised the potential of the area even in Antiquity. There was a large farming settlement here until the Early Middle Ages (from the 1st to 10th centuries). Some of the reception rooms of the *villa* have partly survived and this part of the archaeological site is open to the public. (You can book a visit at the tourist office in Vieste Town Hall). Not much is known about the part of the site where the slaves lived, partly because of local farmers' opposition to the excavations. The size of the buildings that emerged during the earlier phase of excavation in 1938, and then in 1954 following an earthquake, suggest that this was very much a thriving town. This is confirmed by a controversial interpretation of passage in Pliny the Elder, which attributes the finds to ancient *Merinum*. Eventually the town was abandoned due to increasingly frequent raids by Saracen pirates. Later, in the 10th century, a chapel was built here (later extended), and is still much revered, following the discovery of a statue on the beach. The chapel is the focus of one of the area's most important religious events. Many of the local people who emigrated return to their home town for the festival. According to a ritual with strong emotive appeal, the statue of the Virgin Mary – now kept in Vieste cathedral – returns each year to Merino on 9 May, and is then taken back to the cathedral, accompanied by a large

crowd. The sacred statue is carried from the town centre to the sanctuary church. On the way there, the statue faces the sea while, on the return journey, it faces the fields, the idea being to bless the local inhabitants' two main sources of income – the sea and the fields – in equal measure. The large necropolis at Salata, the earliest evidence for Christianity in the Gargano, is associated with an ancient Roman *villa*. The complex is situated next to a rock wall with a number of rock-cut hypogea and burials of different types. The presence of pagan and Christian graves next to each other suggests that a cultural transition took place without any major upheaval.

Further on – about 4 km after crossing the SP 52bis – there is a petrol station on the right at a place called Defensola. This place is one of the largest deposits of flint in the Mediterranean. To a passing cyclist, it may just look like another good stopping-place, but as you adjust your panniers, you might like to consider that the hillside that lies in front of you, which has remained unspoilt because of its archaeological importance, was one of the largest flint mines in prehistoric Europe. Unfortunately the tunnels are no longer visible. The route ends back at Vieste. The last kilometre before the town overlooks the famous Baia degli Aranci (Orange-tree Bay).

# The north coast, from Vico del Gargano to Peschici

## Itinerary length

78 km

## Time needed

about 8 hours

## Itinerary

### From Vico del Gargano to Peschici

SP 51, SP 50, SS 89, SP 42, SP 41, SS 89



*This section from Vico del Gargano circumnavigates Lake Varano in a clockwise direction, and continues to Peschici along the north coast. Overall, the route is fairly simple and mainly downhill. The northern shore of the lake is a straight road where you are advised to be careful of the traffic, which tends to travel quite*

*fast on this stretch of road. This route can be added to Itinerary No. 3, either in a clockwise or counter-clockwise direction, starting from either Vico del Gargano or Peschici. In the latter case, you can add another variation: from Capotiale, at the far north-west tip of Lake Varano, continue on the SP 41 towards San Nicandro (see Itinerary No. 5), and then on the SP 48 to San Marco in Lamis, where the route merges with Itinerary No. 1.*





## The itinerary

Leave the old town centre of Vico del Gargano on Via del Risorgimento, and take the SP 51 to **Ischitella** (314 m), a distance of 6 km along an almost straight, easy downhill road.

### ISCHITELLA

In a papal bull issued by Pope Stephen IX (1058), we find Ischitella under the protection of the abbey of Càlena (see *Itinerary No. 3*). The town is situated high up, overlooking Lake Varano and the Adriatic and has

always played a defensive, military role. In the 13th century, it was usually referred to as a *castrum* (fortress). The old town centre was altered considerably after the earthquake of 1649, resulting in an interesting concoction of architectural styles. One very important characteristic of this area is the fact that it has plenty of water. In fact, there are numerous fresh water springs, fountains and wash-houses around the town. The cool, damp micro-climate here means that tree species normally found in mountain habitats, like beech, can flourish at an unusually low altitude. These beech trees grow at the lowest altitude in Europe. The Folicara beech forest,







located on the line of the river of the same name, lies at an altitude of only 160 m. The economy here is again linked to the production of olive oil, but Ischitella (*see photo*) is also a fruit-growing area. It is home to some of Italy's oldest fruit varieties, for instance, *Ceccantonjè* and Spadone pears. Traditional farming in the Gargano was based on growing different crops in the same fields, in order to ensure subsistence for the farmers' families. At the same time, it created synergies between insects and plants for combating parasites and disease (pesticides and weedkiller were unknown here until a few decades ago).

One of the main local crafts is basket-weaving. Called a *crueddë* (possibly from the Latin word *corbula*), this type of woven basket has strong ancestral links. Materials like linen, Bianchetta wheat – now replaced by varieties with a higher yield – and reeds from Lake Varano are used to make them, and are all sourced and harvested locally. The *crueddë* played a vital role in daily life: it was used for taking laundry to the stream to be washed and for bringing bread home from the village oven. Since it was difficult to distinguish the baskets of the various families, small pieces of coloured fabric, known as *pintë*, were woven into the reeds, decorating them in a way that could be instantly recognised. At the festival of the town's patron saint, St

Eustace (20 May), the local people carry a statue of the saint and his family around the town in a solemn procession. During the rest of the year, the statues are kept in the charming 18th-century church in the town centre. The procession is followed by traditional events and tastings of local products.

About half-way along Via Valloncello, between a house with a red-brick facade (no. 75) and another with a yellow facade, a steep, narrow, rather uneven lane leads up through the maquis, past olive groves and fields of crops to the **abbey of S. Pietro in Cuppis**, one of the area's most ancient and interesting monuments.

#### S. PIETRO IN CUPPIS

Like Ischitella, the Benedictine monastery of S. Pietro in Cuppis – as we know from Pope Stephen IX's bull of 1058 (*Iustis Petitionibus*) – reported to Abbott Oddone at S. Maria di Càlena, near Peschici (*see Itinerary No. 3*). In 1225, as the result of a privilege granted in Foggia by Frederick II, it passed into the hands of the remote abbey of S. Maria di Pulsano, near Monte Sant'Angelo (*see Itinerary No. 1*). The abbey was seriously dam-



aged in the earthquake of 1777, but continued to operate until the 1920s. Now it is in ruins, but it has great charm and is well worth a detour. However, you are strongly advised not to enter the church or wander among the crumbling walls, with their traces of frescoes. It is one of the few churches in Italy to have an iconostasis.

Back in Ischitella, take the road under the superstrada (SS 693) and continue on the SP 51, following signs for Carpino. About 7 km beyond Ischitella, after a hill, you come to a junction with a number of tourist signs to places of interest. Turn left here and, after about 1 km, you come to the manor farm of Masseria Niuzi. Near the farm are three hypogea. If you continue for another 2 km along the dirt track, you come to the necropolis of Mount Civita (see *Itinerary No. 2*).

The road linking Ischitella, Carpino and Cagnano Varano passes through an area where a huge number of proto-historic and prehistoric finds have been made. At Vadovina, between Cagnano and Carpino, excavations have unearthed flint tools datable to between almost one million and 30,000 years ago, belonging to the Acheulean and Mousterian cultures. From here, the road descends gently for a few kilometres to **Carpino** (147 m).

#### **CARPINO**

Carpino was founded by the Normans in the 11th century and, like many other towns in the peninsula, has a long history. Its territory was privately owned during the 16th century, when the town was given as a feud to a number of noble families, often for reasons of insolvency or debt. During the period leading up to Italian Unification and the decades that followed, the area was very unstable due to the presence of

bandits. In the 20th century, Carpino, like other towns overlooking Lake Varano, benefited from the improvement of the marshland below, which was rife with malaria. This enabled the farmers to grow crops and graze their livestock. Now the town is home to the Carpino Folk Festival (which takes place during the first ten days of August), an important date for fans of folk music and ethnomusicology. Here you can listen to the sound of traditional Apulian songs accompanied by tambourines or the *chitarra battente*, an instrument of the Gargano that was very popular in the Baroque period. Carpino has produced some of the finest players of this traditional guitar. Local cultural associations organise courses so that young people can learn to play both these traditional instruments.

During the first half of August, festivals are held to celebrate some of Carpino's traditional food and wines. For example, broad beans, olive oil, Podolica beef, and *caciocavallo podolico* cheese. In winter (7 December), there is a festival called '*Frasca, Fanoia e Olio novello*', when olive branches are used to build a bonfire (*fanoia*), a rite intended to purify the new year's pressing of olive oil. Another exclusive local product is the Carpino broad bean, a small to medium-size bean with a thin skin and a strong smell. Carpino broad beans, local Podolica beef and *caciocavallo* cheese are all Slow Food presidia. The women of Carpino help to keep alive the local weaving tradition.

As you leave Carpino, take the SP 50 and follow signs for Cagnano Varano. Then follow a very uneven country road with a slightly downhill slope: be extremely careful. When you emerge from the underpass below the superstrada (SS 693) and the railway, you join the Garganica SS 89, and turn left towards Cagnano Varano. After about 2 km of straight road, the road curves slightly to the right. Here, near a road sign giving warning of a level crossing, opposite a vineyard, on the left (at **Avicenna**) you will see an old abandoned railway station. This was the



site of an important Roman *villa* (1st to 7th centuries), and it is thought that, in Antiquity, there may have been a large town close by.

#### THE ROMAN VILLA AT AVICENNA

In the 1950s, at Avicenna di Carpino, excavations uncovered the remains of a Roman *villa*. (In Latin, the word '*villa*' meant a country house or rustic dwelling.) During the Lombard period, the rooms of the bathhouse, which are well preserved, were used as a necropolis and contained about ten tombs. Despite the amazing scale of the buildings, it has proved impossible open the site to the public. As a result, the excavations – which were never completed – were soon covered over again and the place sank back into oblivion. Important finds from the site, many of which are of high quality, can now be seen in the collections of several different museums (Bari, Taranto and Siena).

**Lake Varano** (*see photo*), the largest lake in the South of Italy, has been in view for some time. It is actually part of the lagoon (salt water) and not a fresh-water lake, and was formed relatively recently.

#### LAKE VARANO

At the time of Pliny the Elder (1st century AD), what is now known as Lake Varano was merely a sea inlet. Gradually, proba-

bly in the Early Middle Ages, the inlet was 'sealed off' by a strip of fluvial detritus which had gradually accumulated as the result of underwater currents. The narrow strip of land separating the lake from the sea is now known as the Island or Isthmus of Varano. This special ecosystem is home to a large number of wetland bird species, including cormorant, grebe, merganser and little egret, as well as other waders and migratory species.

The west shore of the lake may have been the site of an ancient town called Yria, or Uria, founded in the 1st millennium BC, and which mysteriously disappeared some time in the first few centuries AD. The town was probably founded by the Dauni. It was referred to by many ancient writers but the precise location was never identified. Between the 8th and 5th centuries BC, it was important enough to mint its own coins. One theory about how it may have disappeared suggests that, after an earthquake, it was engulfed by the waves. The modern name of the lake comes from the Roman word for the town, *Urianum*.

A gentle incline of nearly 3 km leads up from the edge of the lagoon to **Cagnano Varano** (165 m), which sits in a central position overlooking the hilly shore of Lake Varano.

#### CAGNANO VARANO

The town of Cagnano Varano (*see photo*) has a number of interesting buildings,



some of which are very old, and dates back to Antiquity. The name possibly derives from *ca' lani* (meaning 'house of Janus', a two-faced god who was very popular in this area in pagan times). The old town centre, also called *Cavùt* (because of the way the houses are dug, like holes – *cavùti* – out of the rock), is one of the most charming places in the whole Gargano peninsula. Before Lake Varano was created, Cagnano faced directly onto the sea. The patron saint of the town, along with St Cataldus, is St Michael. In fact, Cagnano is on the list of places associated with the cult of St Michael because of St Michael's Cave, a karst cave where the archangel saint is supposed to have appeared, about 2.5 km from the town and 900 m from the lake. The two patron saints of Cagnano are celebrated in a major festival lasting three days (8-10 May). On the first day, they celebrate the event that launched the cult of St Michael, when he first appeared in the cave at Monte Sant'Angelo. On the third day they celebrate St Cataldus, who was born in Ireland and became Bishop of Taranto, where he died in 685.

From Cagnano our route heads east on the SS 89, in the direction of San Nicandro. For a while it runs along beside the superstrada (SS 693). It comes to a very narrow underpass, on the right, de-

void of signs, where you should take extreme care. Having crossed under the superstrada, the road runs along on the far side of it, heading slightly uphill. A bit further on, on the way up a hill, you come to a junction, where you turn right onto a road signposted for Torre Mileto. You soon come to St Michael's Cave, which is worth stopping to look at. Important finds dating from the Middle and Lower Palaeolithic have been made in this area (Vadovina), attributed to *Homo erectus* and *Homo neanderthalensis*.

Just beyond this point you can see the former Ivo Monti Military Seaplane Base, a piece of military archaeology dating from 1915, now totally neglected. During the two world wars, it was a base for hydroplanes used for reconnaissance and assault. They had the task of controlling the Middle and Lower Adriatic, and fighting the Austrian fleet based at Cattaro, in Montenegro. Near the seaplane base there is a turning to Capoiale (SP 42).





Continuing up the gentle slope, you come to another turning devoid of signs, where you should turn right (SP 41). Just beyond the turning, after a bridge, you reach a place where the coastal strip, known as the Island or Isthmus of Varano, opens out into the sea at the end of a short canal about 2 km long. Capoiale, a village in the municipality of Cagnano Varano, is one of Europe's largest producers of mussels (*in the photo, a typical mussel fishing-boat*).

Now the SP 41 runs along beside a long line of eucalyptus trees, before curving left. This is the beginning of a straight road 10 km long leading to the other end of the isthmus, the Foce di Varano. On this stretch of road you should take extreme care as the traffic tends to go very fast. Beyond the far canal, on the right, you can just make out Varano's crumbling 13th-century towers among the holiday houses. Having passed the holiday resort of Lido del Sole, the road runs along beside the beach. After about 7 km, after quite a steep ascent, you come to **Rodi**

**Garganico** (42 m), perched on a short rocky spur overlooking the sea and surrounded by luxuriant vegetation, mainly olive trees, fig trees, pines, carobs, and citrus trees.

This area is part of the citrus-growing belt, home to Femminiello lemons, and Bionda and Duretta oranges (*see Itinerary No. 3*).

#### RODI GARGANICO

The history of the town is closely linked to that of its main production activity, growing citrus fruits, which began in the 17th century. In fact, whereas at Vico del Gargano, St Valentine is mainly celebrated as the patron saint of people in love (*see Itinerary No. 3*), at Rodi, he is worshipped as the protector of the citrus groves. On the saint's feast day, 14 February, which occurs at a time of year when the risk of frost is high, the statue of St Valentine is carried in procession up to Carmine Hill, so that he can bless all the citrus groves from on high and severe winter weather can thus be averted. For a long time, the town searched for a patron saint with a festival that would coincide with the time of year that is so critical for the crops. Then, in the 18th century, relics of the saint providentially arrived from Rome and Valentine was immediately adopted as the town's patron saint. The Orange Festival (held between April and May) is a time when all





the traditions connected with citrus cultivation are brought into play. It's a really good time to visit the old town, with its flights of steps, steep streets sloping down to the sea and houses interspersed with tiny gardens.

The church of the Madonna della Libera houses a sacred icon of the Virgin Mary from Constantinople. According to tradition, the icon was seized by Venetians fleeing from the capital when it fell into the hands of the Ottomans, in 1453. Somehow, it was washed up on the shore of Rodi Garganico. The icon is carried in procession each year on 2 July.

The prosperity brought by farming citrus fruit ended with WWII. Like other towns in the Gargano, the area only became prosperous again with the advent of mass tourism. In July, at Rodi, there is an important musical event called Rodi Jazz Fest, at which the folk music of the Gargano is interpreted in a contemporary way, attracting musicians from Italy and abroad.

Heading east out of Rodi on the coast road (SS 89), you soon come to the little town of San Menaio. Originally, it was a cluster of houses for farm-workers and fishermen around the Preposti Tower, built in the 14th century and fortified in 1569. It lay on the estuary of a small river where boats called *tra-*

*baccoli* were moored. From the 16th century onwards, these boats were used for transporting citrus fruit. Nowadays, the holiday resort of San Menaio is famous for its beaches of very fine sand.

The SS 89 winds its way through the Marzini pine-forest, with its monumental Aleppo pines, and then curves slightly inland (*follow signs for Peschici*) opposite Calenella Bay, a popular tourist resort with a famous beach. The northern branch of the Ferrovie del Gargano railway ends here. Now the road begins to climb quite steeply, up Mount Pucci, past its necropolis. Here, as elsewhere, the countless finds of pre-Roman date are associated with the local abundance of flint. When you reach the top, it's worth going out to the viewpoint to see the amazing *trabucco* of Mount Pucci, and the tower close by (see *Itinerary No. 3*). On the other side of the ridge, the road descends towards Peschici Bay, where the route ends.

# Exploring the wild heart of the Gargano

## Itinerary length

81 km

## Time needed

about 8 hours

## Itinerary

**Circular route starting and ending at San Nicandro**

SS 89, SP 48, SP 22, SS 43



*This circular route explores the heart of the wild Gargano landscape. We ride along the provincial roads of the west, which have very little traffic even in summer. However, you should always be on the alert, watch out for traffic and be aware that the road surface is very uneven in places and in need of repair. We advise you to take food and plenty of water with you, since the few bars and caf  s are very far apart. There are some quite demanding ascents, since we reach a high-point of about 900 m above sea-level, but they are concentrated in the first 30 km of the route. This route can be tackled in conjunction with Itinerary No. 4, which it joins at Cagnano Varano. Or, at San Marco in Lamis, you can link it to Itinerary No. 1.*







### The itinerary

Head south-west out of San Nicandro (220 m) on the SS 89, following signs for Foggia (also Apricena and San Severo). After about 1 km, you come to a junction with the SP 48 which leads to San Marco in Lamis and San Giovanni Rotondo. Turn left here. Having crossed the Ferrovia del Gargano railway, the road begins to climb

and you are suddenly immersed in the wild, sweet-smelling countryside of the peninsula, pedalling between two walls of vegetation, with occasional gaps giving views of the surrounding hills.

The ground on each side of the road is either the red of the local clay, or the white of the limestone, a clue that this is a **karst landscape**.





### UNDERGROUND GARGANO

Karst topography is a landscape formed from the dissolution of limestone by rainwater, made acid by carbon dioxide which it absorbs as it passes through the atmosphere or through the ground. It is the predominant geographical feature of the Gargano. Over thousands of years, the mainly limestone bedrock and the dense network of tectonic faults in the area, into which water can easily seep, have resulted in a maze of caves, tunnels, swallow-holes, springs and underground rivers. Because of this, the area is awash with karst phenomena, especially in the west of the peninsula, which belongs geologically to the Italian carbonate platform. These cavities of various shapes and sizes, which are often difficult to access, appeal mainly to speleologists, who tend to be experts. However, many of the karst phenomena of the Gargano are accessible to non-experts. For example, the famous St Michael's Cave at Monte Sant'Angelo, which is a karst limestone cave. Swallow-holes, such as the Grava di San Leonardo and the Grava di Campolato (*see photo*), the former situated 10 km south of San Giovanni Rotondo, and the latter on the SP 272 to Monte Sant'Angelo, are respectively 80 m and 300 m deep and are quite remarkable.

The most famous karst phenomenon in the area is the Dolina Pozzatina, near San Nicandro. The dolina – a depression in the land caused by underlying karst phenomena – is 600 m long, 400 m wide and 100 m deep, with a perimeter of about 2 km. Often karst cavities are subject to pollution or more serious environmental crime, as in the case of the Grava di San Leonardo. For many years it was used as a dump for toxic waste, and there was a serious danger that it could have contaminated the aquifer below.

Continue along the SP 48. About 8 km from San Nicandro, after a while there is a small sign to the Dolina Pozzatina at the side of the road. A small paved road on the left sets off through open countryside to a point where there is an information board. You can leave your bike here or continue along the dirt track leading to the dolina. Just beyond it, another sign on the right points to the 'Sentiero dell'Anima' (Path of the Soul), a park with a cultural theme which organises literary events, poetry sessions and nature walks, including visits to the dolina.





After visiting the dolina, the SP 48 continues through verdant meadows where Podolica cattle and flocks of sheep roam freely, sometimes wandering onto the road. After a few gentle inclines, the road climbs steeply onto rolling hills until, at the top of one of them, there is an easy stretch of road leading downhill to San Marco in Lamis (550 m, *see Itinerary No. 1*).

From San Marco in Lamis, you can easily visit the **Dinosaur Park at Borgo Celano**, situated on the SS 272 on the way to San Giovanni Rotondo.

#### DINOSAURS IN THE GARGANO

In the year 2000, during open-cast mining operations at a quarry at Borgo Celano, near San Marco in Lamis, several blocks removed from the processing line were found to have the footprints of the-rapod dinosaurs (which had two legs and were carnivorous). The quarry was working on layers of limestone dating from the Lower Cretaceous period, dated to about 133 million years ago. At that time, the rock was just soft, muddy ground – a tidal plain, perhaps – in an

area that had recently emerged from the sea. The animals left their footprints there just before the ground began to solidify slowly, and were thus brought down to our own time. The discovery was made by pure chance. A biologist noticed the first footprints on a block of limestone in the harbour of Mattinata, and decided to find out where the material had come from. This important find – since dinosaur footprints contain all kinds of useful information for scientists – led to the idea of creating a museum, a theme park with life-size reproductions of dinosaurs, a botanical garden, tourist facilities, and a place for walkers in the area to visit.

Go through San Marco in Lamis and, ignoring the SP 272, leave the town on the side of the football stadium. Join the SP 22, which acts as a southern ring-road for the town. At the first junction, follow signs for the Grotta di Montenero and the important monastery of San Matteo (*see photo; see Itinerary No. 1*). After about 200 m, you come to another junction, where you turn right, uphill. On the right-hand side is a wooden sign announcing that you





are entering the Gargano National Park; after about 200 m, at a second junction with no signs, turn right again.

This road sets off through the maquis. Here you can really appreciate the splendid biodiversity of the park at first hand. Sometimes you may encounter animals on the road, since they are left to roam freely, but they do not pose a threat. Continue to pedal uphill. However, at times the road surface can be very uneven and you should look out for potholes and cracks in the tarmac. About 20 km after San Marco, the SP 22 joins the SP 43, which you should follow to the left, in the direction of Cagnano Varano (*see photo above*). At the next junction, follow again for Cagnano. From here, the road descends to Cagnano Varano (165 m, *see Itinerary No. 4*). Be careful how you brake on this section and watch out for bad patches of road.

Heading west out of Cagnano, join the SS 89 Garganica road again, fol-

lowing signs for San Nicandro. Here you are likely to encounter traffic again, especially in summer. For a long time the SS 89 runs parallel to the SS 693 superstrada and the railway (on your right), across a plateau at an altitude of about 250 m with views down to the lake and out to sea. Follow the road round to the right when **San Nicandro Garganico** (220 m) comes into sight. The route ends here.

#### SAN NICANDRO

The town of San Nicandro (*see photo opposite page*) is possibly named after a Roman soldier who was put to death in 303, together with a fellow soldier, Marciano, for refusing to sacrifice to the pagan gods. Alternatively it may have been named after another Nicandrus who was Bishop of Myra, in Lycia, and was worshipped during the palaeo-Christian period at a monastery in the area of eastern origin. In fact, it was not until the 17th century that the town's inhabitants worshipped the soldier Nicandrus, who was martyred at Venafrò. However, the town is first documented in 1095, in the Norman period. Referred to in documents of the time as a *castrum* (fortress), the town probably expanded with the arrival of people from the



coast, fleeing from the constant threat of pirate raids. In 1627, there was an earthquake, whose epicentre lay in the north of the peninsula, along the Apricena fault. It wrought major catastrophe throughout the Kingdom of Naples, according to chronicles of the time. Not only was San Nicandro virtually destroyed but the surrounding countryside was devastated by a vast tsunami which flooded everything within 3 km of the shore. For a while, people took shelter in clusters of tents and improvised houses. One of the street names in the town, 'Via Baracche' (Shelter Street), is a reminder of this. After a seemingly endless series of changes of ownership by noble families, in the late 18th century, the land of San Nicandro ended up in the hands of families of bourgeois estate owners, like the Zaccagninos. After WWII, these privately-owned estates were replaced and farmers were allowed to invest money in land belonging to the state. The social and economic role of San Nicandro, which has always been based on woodcutting and livestock rearing, expanded considerably in the 19th century. One of the traditional local dishes is called *muscisccka*. It consists of strips of meat, usually goat's meat (the Gargano goat is a Slow Food presidium), boiled and marinated in aromatic herbs and vinegar. The meat is then roasted just before serving.

It's an extremely old recipe and was made during festivals that have now really disappeared, called Fire Festivals. They were held in the second half of January and early February, and were intended to promote good neighbourly relations. The *muscisccka* was eaten as soon as it was ready, usually cooked on fires made of stubble. Families who lived in the same neighbourhood used to light the fires in the street at dusk during the festivals of St Anthony Abbott, St Sebastian and, in particular, St Blaise. The purpose of the fires, where families would gather and also share a dish of *cicè asckàtè*, made with chickpeas, was to strengthen bonds within the community and encourage people to help each other.

On the festival of the town's patron saint, 17 June, the wooden statues of St Nican-drus, St Marcianus and St Daria (Nican-drus' wife, who was martyred for having encouraged her husband to declare his faith) are carried in procession around the town. The statues, normally kept in the 17th-century mother church of S. Maria del Borgo, are mainly Baroque, due to repairs which took place after the earthquake of 1688. On about 10 August, one of the main food festivals of the Gargano is held here. Known as the Piazza dei Saporì Garganici, it attracts visitors from all over the region.







# WALKING ITINERARIES





# Exploring nature, art and history by foot

The Gargano promontory is a land of diverse, spectacular landscapes making it an exceptional place for walking. The mountain in the sea contains a diversity of spectacular landscapes: the Adriatic coast, where coves and bays are marked by rocks and cliffs; the grim silence of the Umbra Forest; the sun-drenched ridges that lead to the plain, starting from Maria di Pulsano and Monte Sant'Angelo; and the shady woods that rise up suddenly near the lakes on the northern coast. This stunning landscape is dotted with age-old villages and shaped by centuries of human labour. It is also the final leg on many journeys to the Cave of Archangel Michael, one of the most venerated Christian sites.



These pilgrim routes are not the only ancient paths on the Gargano, as many *tratturi* crossed this area, created by shepherds moving their flocks to more temperate zones for the colder winter months. For the modern hiker on the headland, this amounts to a range of itineraries of differing lengths, between different municipalities. Anything from an hour's walk without any hills to tiring treks that only practised walkers should take on can be found. The morphology, where ridges often run parallel but separated by deep hollows, means hiking can be quite tiring as one climbs up and down. Exploring the interior on foot does require a degree of determination because, excluding the numerous routes leading off from the Visi-



tor Centre in the heart of the Umbra Forest, the number of clearly marked trails is limited. In many cases, one might find signs, usually wooden with red and white markings, indicating the beginning of the trail, but once the first few checkpoints have passed, the trail maintenance is not up to scratch. Consequently, if one is honest, the number of properly maintained trails can be counted on one hand.

Yet, walkers should not be discouraged. Some of the trails are wonderful and easy to follow. Plus, the growing interest in walking on this wondrous headland will inevitably drive municipalities, entities and associations to create, hopefully in the near future, a proper network of paths that truly make it possible to explore the delightful nature of these parts.

## Best seasons

Hikers exploring the south and Mediterranean sections of Italy avoid the depths of winter and the height of summer to reduce the chance of cold rain or suffocating summer heat. Here, excluding the cool, shaded Umbra Forest where the temperatures are pleasant





even in August, the best months for exploring the Gargano rocks are April, May and June, or autumn. These times not only avoid the intense summer heat, but also the crowding this brings. The prices also tend to be better, with more options.

The headland does not rise especially high, but bad weather can be severe, with thick fog in the forest that makes it easy to lose the trail and strong winds buffeting the ridges. Accordingly, especially when walking in the cooler months, it is important to keep an eye on the local forecasts, be prepared for the rain and inform someone about the planned route and ETA.

## Equipment

The equipment needed to hike the Gargano is the standard equipment for walking in the mountains. Good shoes with suitable soles are essential as the terrain is often sandy and uneven, or muddy. A comfortable rucksack, a windbreaker and a water-bottle should always be taken, especially because most of the routes do not have many watering points along them.

The trails that run along the coast (i.e. the open trails) and the ones



through the Umbra Forest (i.e. shaded trails) are very different. On the former, especially in summer, a hat and suncream are vital, but one can happily walk in shorts; in the forest, the temperatures are notably cooler, with shade from the centuries-old trees, but it is often quite humid. Regardless of where one is walking, flip-flops and similar shoes should be avoided as the routes are often stony.

## Precautions and warnings

Drinking water is often hard to find along the trails described in these pages, making it good practice to always carry a reasonable amount of water in a water-bottle.

The nature of the Gargano economy means farmers are often very careful about how they protect their land. Along the paths and secondary roads one often finds 'gates', at times little more than a length of wire with some barbed wire attached, that need to be opened and closed carefully to ensure the animals cannot escape. If you come across someone, a house or a farm, the practice is to greet the person or people as this helps avoid any misunderstandings and normally means walkers can cross the land (or park their car) without causing ill-feeling.

Animal rearing is common place in these parts (often keeping animals in flocks and herds), meaning sheep dogs are also present; such animals are not like household pets in that they bark little, but can be ferocious if something or someone gets too close to the flock. Stray dogs also live on the Gargano and need to be approached with caution as, in some cases, they might attack.

Fires may only be lit in the picnic areas and other specifically designat-





ed spaces as they can – and have – cause serious damage to the maquis shrubland and forest. For litter, basic logic dictates that, if a walker was able to carry a rucksack of provisions, then once the food has been eaten, the same walker can carry the waste packaging and paper away.

## Signs

As noted, there are only a few marked routes. In the Umbra Forest, light blue paint is used, with clear, precise information boards (although even these could be maintained better). The Spinapulci woods trail is, rather strangely, only marked for half its distance (red/white paint and info boards), although the unmarked section is relatively easy to navigate. The paths to the hermitages of S. Maria di Pulsano are only a few months old, with new signs and hand-rails because of the sheer, exposed location. The *Scannamugliera* (holy steps) trail is marked in red and white, and goes from Monte Sant'Angelo to the Manfredonia plain. The walk along the hill to the Vignanotica beach is not marked specifically, but it is fairly easy as a fence runs along the side of it. The final two legs of the Via Micaelica (see *Itineraries No. 10 & 11*) are marked with yellow paint and info signs. The other itineraries are not signed.

### PARK INFORMATION

For information about the Gargano National Park, go to [www.parks.it/parco.nazionale.gargano/iti.php](http://www.parks.it/parco.nazionale.gargano/iti.php) and [www.parcogargano.gov.it](http://www.parcogargano.gov.it)

For the Umbra Forest, [www.forestaumbra.com](http://www.forestaumbra.com) is a useful resource.

For tourist information on the Gargano area, it is useful to consult the Touring Club of Italy's guidebook on 'Puglia' (part of the Green Guides collection).



# Paths in the Spinapulci woods



## Access

Drive as far as the two dirt roads that lead to the forestry barracks at Piscina Nuova, diverging from the main road (SS 89), which emerges from San Nicandro, making for Cagnano Varano and the coast, goes past the railway line and turns left. After 3.7 km you come to a road on the right (with a signpost for the ruins of the church of S. Maria al Monte), which we will visit on our way back. About 100 m further on is a second turnoff on the right, with a cave beneath some buildings. After about 50 m, on a hairpin bend to the right is the start of the footpath for the outward journey, marked by a white pillar and a sign.

## Signs

There are some notices but no painted signs going uphill (only some boulders set upright marking the way), then there are notices and signs in red and white paint from the barracks to the point of arrival.

## Journey times

To complete the whole circular route: about 2.45 hours.

*Not far from San Nicandro, dominated by the 15th-century castle built on the ruins of a Norman fort and surrounded by numerous towers, there is a pleasant walk in the dense Spinapulci woods. It follows the bottom of a valley which is first narrow then increasingly open, leading to an abandoned barracks for forestry guards. The circular route includes a descent by a valley parallel to the one taken on the outward journey, which offers the chance for a brief detour to a rugged and extremely scenic knoll.*

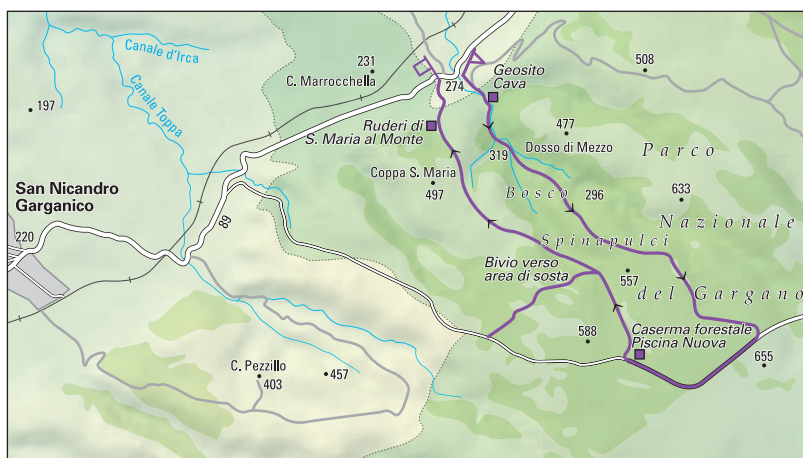
*Because of the lack of signposting in the first part care should be taken, even if the route is clear and easy to follow. Take a supply of water: there are no fountains on the way.*



## The itinerary

Leaving behind the post that marks the start of the path (about 275 m), you soon come to an abandoned quarry (indicated as a geological site). Then you walk along an easy track that runs for a short distance by the bed of a stream amid the trees, then goes along the river bank to the left (actually the right bank of the river). The trail climbs gently through the woods and follows the stream for a stretch (on left), which becomes deeper and narrower till it flows through a small ravine. Leaving this first valley,

you cross a fairly level area and then come out on the hillside onto a second valley, which you skirt by walking along the river bank on your left. As you climb, the slope grows gentler and the valley penetrates into a landscape of majestic trees. There will appear traces of a small road for vehicles that runs along the floor of the valley. Ignoring a turnoff on your right, you leave this valley by going up on the left and following a narrow road surrounded on either side by two rows of white limestone boulders, which soon leads to a paved forestry road (1.20 hours, about



590 m). Near where the road divides there are two wooden signs: the first, incorrect, points to the way from which you came as leading to the ruins of the church of S. Maria al Monte, while the second informs us that we have followed the geological route ('Geo-sito'). Still amid beautiful woodland, follow the asphalted road to the right for about 15 minutes, when you will reach a white post with signs indicating, on the right, the former forestry guards' barracks of Piscina Nuova. From this point two routes set off. On the left is a wooden path for the disabled that ends not far ahead, and on the right a second path, marked by two rows of limestone rocks and red and white painted signs, that descends roughly parallel to a clearly marked track through the woods. You can either follow the path marked by stones, ending just ahead, or the dirt track through the woods which comes to a turnoff (signs and notices) indicating a branch to the left

that leads back to the paved road and a parking area. Continuing on the right you soon come to an imposing concrete tank filled with water, which formerly supplied a fountain, now disused. This whole area has remained unfenced pasture. Horses and cows are often seen grazing amid the undergrowth and thorny scrub. Keep going down, with the woods thinning out, and on the right there appears a short rise onto a stony knoll (about 400 m) with a heavily fissured surface overlooking a beautiful landscape, open to Lake Lesina with the Tremiti islands in the background. Here be careful not to go too high up on the right but return to the marked path after admiring the view. Then continue along the track that leads to the ruins of the ancient church of S. Maria al Monte and so back to the dirt road (1 hour). From here a short stretch on the road (to the right) leads to the intersection where the itinerary began (10 minutes).



# From Ischitella to the Niuzi farmhouse



## Access

Leave the centre of Ischitella going towards Lake Varano and, just before the third hairpin bend, turn left along the paved road with a concrete wall on the left. After about 100 m turn right downhill to a spring whose waters are collected in a fountain with a large wash house supplied with water by a series of spouts. To reach the Niuzi farmhouse, you descend from Ischitella to the valley bottom and the SS 693, but instead of taking it, on the left follow the SP 51 towards Carpino for about 3.8 km until a turnoff to the left leads to the farmhouse. Reaching the house, you must ask the owners' permission if you leave your car there.

## Signs

None.

## Journey times

3 hours.

*The walk goes up from the old town of Ischitella to one of the most scenic and spectacular spots on the ridge leading into the heart of the Umbra Forest. The ascent takes us from olive groves, then through majestic forest at higher elevations, taking in two sites of great historical and archaeological importance. If you have two cars, you can leave one at the Niuzi farmhouse and walk all the way from Ischitella. Apart from the fountain at the foot of the built-up area of Ischitella and the Niuzi farmhouse, there are no fountains along the way.*





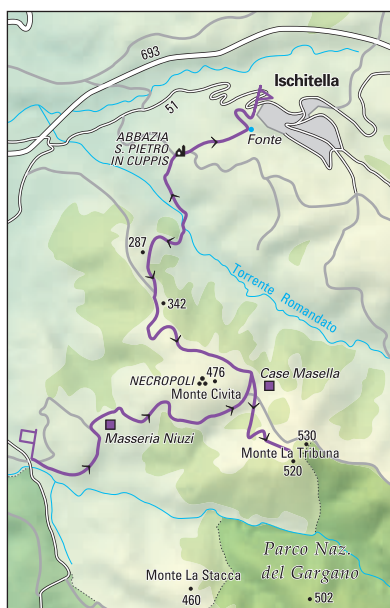
### The itinerary

This itinerary starts from the centre of Ischitella. Here the main piazza has a baronial mansion built in eighteenth-century forms, which preserves an earlier core dating from the thirteenth century. Leaving the little town and coming to a fountain (about 460 m), you then follow a partly cemented mule track that climbs to the left, skirting the fences of some houses, and then continues along the level. Where the road peters out, in front of you the old footpath continues, soon leading to an asphalted road in poor repair. Follow it to the right for just over 100 m and it brings you to the ruins of the abbey of S. Pietro in Cuppis (see the photo), mentioned in a bull of Pope Stephen IX in 1058. Unfortunately it is a ruin, but if you look in cautiously through the main door, you will see that the nave is divided into two parts by an iconostasis, a characteristic of Orthodox churches



and a clear sign of eastern influence. Opposite the church, on the left side of the road you have travelled, is the start of a path that descends steeply to the bed of the Romandato stream (45 minutes, approximately 135 m). Take this path and then follow it for a short uphill stretch: in a fine setting covered by vegetation and famous for being rich in flint nodules, be careful to identify, on the right, the path that branches off from the valley bottom and which you should follow up the hillside.

The path intersects a dirt road that runs along the hillside and later becomes an abandoned lane in a poor state, and then, after a barbed wire gate (close it behind you, about 380 m), it changes into the remains of an old asphalted road running along the north-east slope of Monte Civita. From here, amid the trees, you can see the town of Ischitella with the belt of olives at its foot and, behind it, the branches of the oak forest. The path is mostly level until you come to the locality of Case Masella (1.15 hours, about





405 m), where the view opens out towards the sea to the north and also inland. This area is very important historically because of a necropolis dating from the late fifth and early fourth century BC. Many of the graves have been explored. Typically they are small, because the dead were buried in the foetal position. This whole area is frequented by herdsmen and their livestock: cows, horses and goats. On this green, open space there is a crossroads: the road on the right goes down to the Niuzi farmhouse, while the red dirt road that rises opposite the one by which you arrived climbs to the summit of Monte La Tribuna (*pictured*). Follow it with its hairpin bend and many fences that run through the forest, up to the highest point of the road (30 minutes, 530 m). Here you have a fine panorama, taking in the houses of Vico del Gargano and to the west overlooking Lake Varano. The waters of the lake are replenished by underground springs of karstic origin and separated from

the open sea by a slender strip of land known as the 'island'. The itinerary can be prolonged quite strenuously to reach the village of Vico. From the summit of Monte La Tribuna you follow a forest road which leads past a ruined forestry workers' house and continues along the ridge until it descends to the valley floor and climbs up the opposite side to our destination. Returning to the turnoff at Case Masella, turn left (or right if you come from Ischitella) and retrace the same dirt road as you came by, which begins to descend. After walking for about 2 km, which includes a gate (be sure to close it after you), we come to the Niuzi farmhouse (30 minutes). The area surrounding the farm also bears the traces of an ancient population. Three underground complexes (one with a Greek cross plan) can be visited on request. At the farm you will find water. There is also a small kiosk bar occasionally open, usually during the hours when the nearby trap shooting range is being used.

# Old Telegraph

## Access

The Y-shaped itinerary can be accessed from three different points. From above (SS 89), coming from Vieste, after km 92 (bus stop) turn right for an asphalted forestry road. From below, coming from Vieste by SP 52, go past km 9, after the Holiday Village and Lido Zio Martino near km 10 on a curve to the left is a turnoff forming a U to the left. Again starting from Vieste and taking the SP 52, the third access point is at km 21: on the left a sign indicates the Hollywood disco, as you leave the main road to the left.

## Signs

None.

## Journey times

From km 10 of SP 52 to the Old Telegraph and back to SP 52 (21 km): 2.30 hours.



*The route winds over the slopes of the low hills overlooking one of the busiest stretches of coast in summer and enables you to observe the evolution of the forest due to the damage done by fires in the past. The countryside is partly wooded at the higher elevations, while lower down there are extensive meadows and fields with crops. Along the coast here stands the sixteenth-century Sfinale tower, built on the edge of a former marsh, and the Usmai tower, on a small promontory. This fortification is notable for its trabucco or fishing platform. In the past it was known to catch up to 10 tons of grey mullet. Be sure to take a supply of water with you.*



### The itinerary

The route begins, leaving the road (20 m) and starting to rise along a dirt trail that climbs gently, while the panorama opens out behind to reveal a broad stretch of coast. The walking is easy. Leaving a house

on the right in a scenic stretch towards the coast below, it leads to an open area, where on the right there appears a very fine dry-stone wall that has to be followed for a long stretch (*see the photo on p. 70*). The surrounding area





is pasture. On the left appear the buildings of the Iaccio Spina farmhouse and then a gate topped with barbed wire (such gates locally are called *valichi*). Be sure to close the gate after you. Now you come to an isolated house where the route forks (1.30 hours, 262 m). If you follow the paved road to the left it takes you to the foot of the Old Telegraph, where you will discover panoramic views of Vico del Gargano and soon (20 minutes) reach the SS 89. Near the Old Telegraph are the ruins of a building and a short distance away you will see an ancient stone-built oven and a tank once used for supplying fire engines with water.

If you follow the asphalted road to the right, it continues along the fence of a military area on its left, passing through a forest of conifers charred at some points by fires. The regrowth of the forest of Aleppo pine here was difficult,

partly because of the large number of livestock grazing freely. The goats, in particular, certainly hinder the harmonious regrowth of plant cover.

The asphalt road soon emerges into a more open stretch, where you can look to the left towards the panorama of the north coast of the Gargano. The trail descends gently and you should ignore all the side roads you come across to finally reach the SP 52 again, now not far from Peschici. For hikers, the most enjoyable and interesting stretch is the climb along the old dirt road, although the descent is also pleasant.

Those who would like to do the itinerary by mountain bike are strongly recommended to go up by the asphalted road and descend along the dirt road, which is much easier for riding downhill than uphill because the surface is sometimes rather bumpy.



# Mergoli, Torre del Segnale and Vignanotica



## Access

Drive along SP 53 following the coastline, from Mattinata to Vieste, past the Baia delle Zagare. By a hairpin bend to the left an open space on the right gives access to the road closed by a bar and signposted. Just before it, the small parking area on the right-hand side of the provincial road is a good place to leave your car. If you take the opposite itinerary you start instead from Vignanotica, reached by leaving SP 53 to the right (again travelling from Mattinata to Vieste), near a series of signs indicating the beach, some camp sites and parking areas for camper vans.

## Signs

None, but the whole route is surrounded by a wooden fence, making it impossible to go astray.

## Journey times

From Mergoli to Vignanotica beach 40' (1 hour for the return journey). From Vignanotica to SP 53 about 1 hour uphill.

*There are not many other stretches of the Gargano coast where you will find no asphalted roads, tourist facilities or modern amenities, as on this itinerary halfway up between the Baia delle Zagare and the secluded Vignanotica beach. Both the cliff of this cove and the walls and cliffs of the Baia delle Zagare are part of a geological site of great scientific interest signposted by the Puglia Region. Here you can observe distinctive rock formations due to ancient stratification of a layer of continuous detritus. The walk involves no difficulties, descending from Mergoli, where you leave the paved road, as far as the pebble beach at Vignanotica. There are no drinking fountains along the route. In summer, on the beach at the end of the path a snack bar is sometimes open and inland there are several camp sites and parking areas.*



### The itinerary

Beyond the barrier that prevents access by cars from the provincial road (approximately 150 m), you walk along a narrow, rugged valley, skirting its walls of detritus, then begin to walk along the hillside, descending a slight slope through a forest of Aleppo pines. Here, in a not too distant past, resin used to be harvested from the biggest trees. The undergrowth includes the scented plants typical of the Mediterranean scrub, such as cistus, rosemary and mastic. After the first stretch of path,

behind, towards the west, the panorama opens out and takes in the Baia delle Zagare and its sea stacks (*photo at right*), while on the right (towards the sea) the pine forest is replaced by a steep olive grove stretching above the path. The work of cultivating the olive and almond trees is extremely laborious because of their position on rugged terraced slopes inaccessible to farm machinery. All the work has to be done by hand, as in the past.

Further on you come to a rest area, equipped with a table and a couple of benches on the left of the path. From here a short detour uphill, not marked and not easy to spot, leads to the ruins of the old signal tower. As you continue the route turns more sharply downhill (*see the photo above*), skirting the last stretch of olive groves, and then enters woodland and turns slightly to the left. Through the branches of the trees you will catch glimpses in the distance of the white cliffs of Vignanotica above the sea. You now reach a side road. Going down to the right, the rather steep path leads directly to the beach and the refreshment stand







in the bay (signs indicate the snack bar). If, instead, you keep going along the path that still runs gently downhill, you will come to a small camp site and the end of the road, which from the SP 53 descends into the Valle di Vignanotica. From here, turning right, a last stretch of easy path leads with steps down to the valley bottom and then opens out onto a large white pebbly beach, closed on the left by a succession of spectacular light-coloured cliffs (*photo at bottom*). This cove is also known as Baia dei Gabbiani because of the large numbers of herring gulls, especially in the evenings, that circle in the sky above their nests concealed in the most secluded part of the promontory.

The route from Mergoli to Vignanotica is also a pleasant ride by mountain bike. Obviously you should take care whenever you meet pedestrians and avoid the steep descent by the path down the hillside to the beach. The climb back to the provincial road can be done by following the asphalted road which, with some curves and hairpin beds, climbs up the Valle di Vignanotica to the intersection (approximately 120 m).





# Monte Sant'Angelo to the Vallone di Pulsano



## Access

You leave Monte Sant'Angelo following Via S. Maria di Pulsano, then leave it after about 2.5 km and follow, on the left, a turnoff with a cement surface that leads to the Vallone di Pulsano.

## Signs

None.

## Journey times

From the castle of Monte Sant'Angelo to the turnoff for the Vallone di Pulsano: about 45' min. From here to the road's end: about 1 hour. From the turnoff to the ruins of S. Barnabea and back: about 1 hour.



*The deep valleys and ravines that slope down from the Gargano plateau to the coast in the Manfredonia and Siponto areas are among the most spectacular and rewarding landscapes for hikers on the whole promontory. The views take in the Apulian coast stretching south with the salt pans of Margherita di Savoia glinting in the sun. But it is mainly the silence and the rugged scenery in these valleys that make walks in the area so fascinating. The landscape you meet on this descent may*

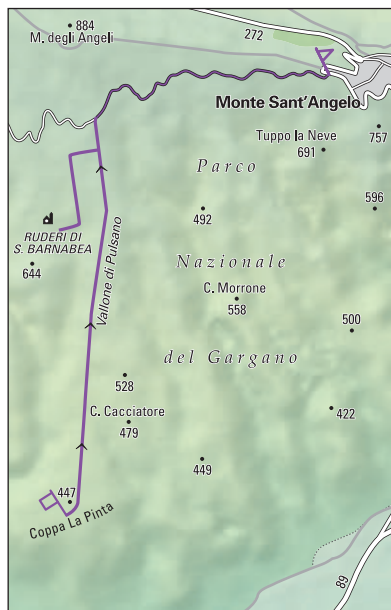


*seem monotonous at first, but then, as you keep going, it becomes clear why it pays to go on to the last strip of flat pasture before the sheer walls*

*that bound it. You can also ride the route by mountain bike, excluding the detour to the picturesque ruins of the church of S. Barnabea.*

### The itinerary

Leaving behind the car park and the castle of Monte Sant'Angelo (about 825 m), you go down two hairpin bends and then keep going straight, leaving the main road, which continues to the left. At first you walk along a narrow pavement, then on the roadside, as far as the turnoff towards the valley of Pulsano. This is easily identified as it is the only T-junction on a straight section of road (about 750 m). After some 20 meters, you will come to a turn-off from the straight stretch that you have just taken. This is a detour that runs along a dirt road on the right and leads to a house, also on



the right. If you feel inclined to press on as far as the ruins of S. Barnabea (*see photo*), you should ask permission here from the landowner, then leave the road on the left towards the ruins. They can be seen clearly on the right side of a little valley or dell. The extensive remains of the church (about 650 m) give some idea of the importance of the community of nuns that once flourished here.

Returning to the main route, which follows the course of the aqueduct (and takes you past a pumping station, which you can see on your left), you keep going down until you pass some houses on your right. Now you go through a gate and so reach the end of the road at Coppa La Pinta (about 430 m). The landscape in this stretch is mainly pasture or meadows, but there are some hillside terraces that have been laboriously built up with drystone retaining walls and planted with fruit trees (such as fig, almond, the sorb or service tree and especially olives). At this point the panorama is an open and

highly attractive landscape, with the abbey of S. Maria di Pulsano on the right and the first steep foothills in the valley of Pulsano rising like buttresses from the plain before us. In this area, during the egg-laying period, it is important not to disturb the birds nesting on the crags and cliffs. If you look carefully at the cliff face you will see traces of human presences: there are small structures, hermits' cells hewn out of the rock, cisterns to collect vital rainwater and ledges forming narrow paths that enabled the monks who colonised the area to move from one settlement to another. The power of the waters when they flow in spate through the bottom of the ravine is shown on this side by the presence of numbers of impressive boulders, precariously balanced, and the memory of awesome floods of water that swept down great rocks, especially in the 1970s, causing extensive damage and many casualties in the plain of Manfredonia at the bottom of the steep, rugged foothills.



# The hermitages of S. Maria di Pulsano



## Access

From Monte Sant'Angelo follow Via S. Maria di Pulsano until you reach the church (just under 10 km). Before arriving at the car park, on the right the course of the unfinished road leaves the avenue that goes down to the abbey. Leaving the car park, reach the entrance arch of the complex, where there are explanatory panels illustrating the trails.

## Signs

For the paths to the two religious complexes, there are notices and signs in red and white paint. For the unfinished road, there are no signs but it is clear and easy to follow. The detour to Tomaiolo follows a fairly conspicuous path.

## Journey times

From the abbey to the hermitage of S. Nicola and return 40 min. From the abbey to the hermitage of S. Margherita and return 30 min. From S. Maria di Pulsano to the end of the road about 1 hour.

*The abbey of S. Maria di Pulsano is set in one of the most isolated and spectacular parts of Gargano, overlooking the plain of Manfredonia and the sea. The church and complex have a long history, which probably began in the sixth century due to St. Gregory the Great. The whole surrounding area attracted many monks and hermits. Following the havoc wrought by a Saracen raid, the abbey was rebuilt in the twelfth century by a pilgrim to the shrine of St. Michael, who later became a saint with the name of St. John of Matera. The Discalced (barefooted) order, inspired by the Benedictines and receiving*





*important influences from Eastern monasticism, proved a great success and some forty monasteries were built under its authority.*

*Starting from the abbey church, with its presbytery (or chancel) set within a natural cave, some short walks take you into the awesome gorges surrounding the abbey.*

*Here numerous hermitages and buildings testify to the centuries-old presence of hermits and monks in this almost inaccessible part of the world. To follow the two paths recently laid out to the hermitages it is advisable to wear shoes suitable for walking on steep, craggy rocks. Avoid these two paths in wet weather. The third route follows a road meant to lead all the way to the plain of Manfredonia, but never completed.*

### The itinerary

The descent from the abbey of S. Maria di Pulsano (*in the photo*; about 485 m) to the so-called 'hermitage of S. Nicola' – not in fact a hermitage but a monastery – has recently been fitted with handrails and iron handholds that make it easier to go down and come back up again. The path descends on the side of the valley of Monteleone and Matino. If you look carefully, you will see that at many points the steps in the rock were hewn by hand. The complex at the end of the descent consists of various chambers: the main one is partly cut out of the rock and has trac-





es of frescoes. One of the figures, dressed as a monk, is traditionally identified as St. Nicholas. In the chamber next to it you will see the remains of a fireplace and a window overlooking the valley below. To reach the hermitage of S. Margherita, leave the abbey in the opposite direction, following the signs that lead through a gate (remember to close it after you). After a rocky slope you will come out over the valley below, then a short stretch of path on the hillside (ignore the detour to the right that goes down the hill) takes you to the building. This 'hermitage' was also actually a small monastery, which had its greatest development in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. It was partly hewn out of the cliff face and partly built, and is a typical example of the rock-built complexes in the area, with one part dedicated to worship and another to everyday labour.

The route of the unfinished road continues gently down the sides of the steep valley and reaches a stream that flows down from near Tomaiole through the Valle Marittima, densely wooded with holm oaks. (On this stretch a path turns off to the right of the road and climbs up towards the village, set at an elevation of about 535 m). The road ends in front of a rock face. It was intended to bore a tunnel through it, but the work was never undertaken.

After reaching the end of the road we are exactly opposite the abbey complex of S. Maria di Pulsano at slightly below it (at an elevation about 415 m).



### A BRIDGE BETWEEN EAST AND WEST

Today the abbey of S. Maria di Pulsano is the home to a monastic community that, since 1997, has taken responsibility for its restoration and the effort to restore to life one of the key centres of religious activity in the Gargano. Here, in keeping with the monastic rule, the two Latin and Byzantine traditions live together in a community of faith, as sanctioned in the tradition by St. Gregory the Great. Among the traces of the importance of relations with the East, the church contains an altar of the Byzantine type, namely square (consecrated in 1177) and nearly all the modern sacred images that adorn the interior (*in the photo*) are clearly Orthodox in inspiration. In the hours of the liturgies, the Latin and Byzantine offices are both represented, so that at 6 every morning the 'listening hour' and the *Orthros* are celebrated at the same time, and at 6.30 in the evening this twofold office and synthesis are repeated.

# The Scala Santa, Monte Sant'Angelo to the plain



## Access

From above, access to the path, recently signposted, is found at the end of Via S. Antonio Abate, on the left of SS 272, which leads to the shrine of Monte Sant'Angelo (sign indicating the Gargano National Park Authority). After reaching the end of the road, which slopes down steeply, you will see on the right a white post with a big sign illustrating the route at an elevation of about 720 m. From below, instead, descending from Monte Sant'Angelo along the curves of SP 55, once you reach the plain you have to turn right and, after a few meters, right again into the little hamlet of Macchia (municipal sign) following Via Scannamugliera, where you soon come to the red and white signs of the route (about 160 m).

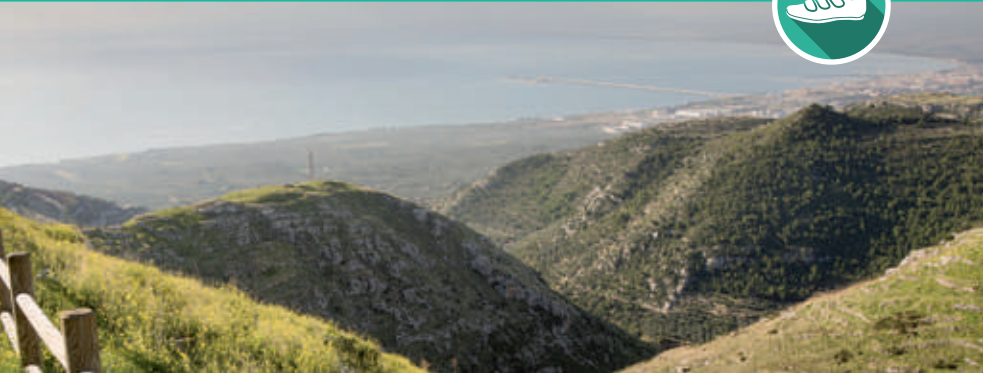
## Signs

Wooden signs and red and white painted signs.

## Journey times

Downhill about 1 hour 45 min; uphill 2 hours 30 min.

*To the pilgrims who once came from all over the Christian world, the shrine of San Michele at Monte Sant'Angelo was the destination they sought and yearned to reach, led by deep faith and determination. The completion of the long journey, amid hardships and dangers, filled them with joy. The last difficulty they had to cope with, after weeks or months of travelling through Europe and Italy, was the climb up from the coast to Monte Sant'Angelo. One of the busiest roads leading to the complex started from the foot of the hills near Madonna delle Grazie (at the hamlet called Macchia), then climbed along the rocky cliffs between the Valle del Galluccio and the Valle Vignanotica. The road was always very busy with travellers and pilgrims flocking to the shrine, and only began to decline in the second half of the twentieth*



century. The long climb – a kind of representation of the ascent of the faithful toward their heavenly goal – is marked by the labours of countless believers. At many points steps have been hewn out of the bare rock and supports provided for people and animals. Along the way you can also see the traces and ruins of monasteries and churches carved out of the rock. The route can be travelled uphill or downhill, the latter being of course far less strenuous. For this reason, in the description of the Scala Santa (in the photo at right), which in the popular tradition bears the rather sinister name of Scannamugliera, the path is starting from above and ending on the plain covered with olive trees not far from the sea. Along this route there are no supplies of water and no shade.







### The itinerary

Leaving behind the clearing on the asphalt road, you briefly skirt a wire fence by a meadow and go through a gate with barbed wire. From here on we follow the historical path, with steps hewn out of the rock to facilitate the pas-

sage of pilgrims and pack animals. You go past a water treatment plant (on the right), then the trail runs along the right side of a rocky ridge and is sheltered by a fence on the lower side (*photo below*). After a stretch halfway up the hillside, a short level trail





leads to a new section of the hillside, with on the right a signposted turnoff (*photo opposite page*) that goes all the way down to the valley bottom and leads to the same destination. But you should continue along the left-hand path, which is more interesting and scenic. Looking towards the valley bottom to the right you can see the centuries of labour that have transformed the land by creating a myriad of terraces, where fruit trees and olives have been planted. By now you will have come out onto a broad plateau, where the marked path is blocked by a gate. This is not, unfortunately, a normal gate to prevent cattle from straying. It is often padlocked and homemade signs state we have reached a dead end. This closure is illegal, so climb over the gate and keep following the red and white signs along a broad level, passing a pair of pylons on your

right. Go down to the left of the level, on the edge of the valley, where on the other side you will see the hairpin bends of the road winding up to Monte Sant'Angelo. The trail takes a spectacular right-hand curve carved on a flat rock, then an S-shaped stretch of path, entirely carved out of the limestone.

This locality is called Iazzo Ognissanti (about 410 m). It owes its name to a rock church with two entrances and a series of frescoes. It is difficult to view it because the ancient structure is used for storing hay. Passing by the ancient place of worship, the trail continues down the hillside until it reaches a dirt road.

This takes us into the valley to our right with a hairpin bend and then descends, after a stretch on the left side of the valley, as far as the *Scannamugliera* route, which leads to Macchia.



# Umbra Forest: from the Visitor Centre to Regresso

## Access

If you start from Monte Sant'Angelo, first follow SS 272 towards San Giovanni Rotondo, then on the right SS 528 in the direction of the Umbra Forest. Finally, at the turnoff with SP 52bis, keep going on the right towards Vieste. A little way further brings you to the Visitor Centre. If you come from Vieste, first follow SS 89 in the direction of Peschici, then turn left and follow SP 52bis towards the Umbra Forest. Just after the open space with the bar and signs on the left for the lake, you come to the Visitor Centre.

## Signs

Wooden panels and yellow markings on the trees. The numbers next to the names of the routes are those found on the hiking map supplied by the Visitor Centre.

## Journey times

For the round trip: 3.30 hours.



*The Umbra Forest is one of the biggest broadleaf forests in Europe and the largest in Italy. It covers a huge area (more than 10,000 hectares) in the central part of the promontory, sloping down from an elevation of over 800 meters to just over 150. Its name is generally held to come from the Latin umbra (meaning 'shadow', probably with overtones of threatening, dangerous), but it may actually be from imbra (i.e. 'water'), standing for the great wood to the peoples that migrated across the Adriatic Sea. After the establishment of the Kingdom of Italy (1861), the forest was put up for auction for its timber, but this*







*attempt came to nothing and since 1886 it has been the inalienable heritage of the State. In the great woodland area, reserves have been set aside for various purposes: there are integral zones, meaning areas where nothing can be touched, areas of limited protection (as at Falascone), where the effects of human intervention can be*

*studied, and finally repopulation areas for the preservation of animal species such as mouflon and deer. Many routes lead through the Umbra Forest. They make for easy walking and are clearly signposted, but be careful not to get lost in the dense vegetation, especially in bad weather or fog. The two routes presented here both start from the Visitor Centre in the heart of the forest, not far from the bar and restaurant, which are open in summer (walks accompanied by a guide start from it in fine weather and you can also rent mountain bikes). There are no water supplies along the routes.*







### The itinerary

Leaving behind the Visitor Centre, continue along the road towards Vieste for a short distance until you reach a clearing with the refreshment facilities on the left. Turn right and follow the broad path leading to the little pool



known as the Umbra small lake (*photo above; Itinerary No. 7, at 777 m*). This is a flooded hollow and a key resource for animals living in the forest. It is actually difficult for them to find surface water due to the extensive karstic fissuring of the ground. Walk around the shore of the pool to the right and then, following the marked route (*Itinerary No. 9*), go through the woods as far as a turnoff. To the right the path leads towards Falascone, while continuing to the left you should follow the signs towards Murgia (*Itinerary No. 9*). A fence often runs along the side of the path, making it easier to follow.

At a second fork in the path, leave the trail on the right, taking the left-hand branch. After another solitary stretch you will come to another fork in the road. Continuing to the right you reach the Murgia barracks (about 776 m) and then the asphalted Umbra-Iacotenente



road. This part of the route (leading back to the starting point along the asphalted stretch to the left) can also be travelled by bike. The footpath, however, continues to follow a short stretch of the asphalted road to the right, then leaves it on the left and follows the path towards the Dispensa picnic area (*Itinerary No. 14*). It runs along a ridge and then leads down into the woods. Along this stretch, you will come on the right to a short detour leading to the funnel-shaped mouth of the Grava di Coppa delle Stelle, one of the many caves in this area.

On reaching the parking area (approximately 562 m), it is worth taking a look at the majestic beech tree not far from the road and surrounded by the remains of a wooden fence. It is some 6 m in circumference and over 40 m high.

To return to the starting point, taking care because of the traffic,

follow the asphalted Vieste-Umbra Forest road to the left for about 500 meters uphill as far as a very battered sign that indicates to the right the start of the direct route to Regresso, meaning the refreshment points (*Itinerary No. 5*). Follow this route up through the spectacular and almost completely wild beech forest, where in summer the hammering of woodpeckers can be heard as they search for insects in the bark of the trees.

You now come to a turnoff where a short detour on the left leads down to the entrance of the Grava di Monte Ceraso (*see photo below*), another immense ponor (a cavity or sinkhole). You can look inside its first vertical shaft.

After a last uphill stretch through the woods you reach the itinerary equipped for the disabled (passing it on your left) and finally reach your starting point in the area with the café.



# Umbra Forest: from the Visitor Centre to Falascone



## Access

If you start from Monte Sant'Angelo, first take SS 272 towards San Giovanni Rotondo, then turn right into SS 528 in the direction of the Umbra Forest, and finally, at the junction with SP 52bis turn right towards Vieste. A short stretch brings you to the Visitor Centre. If you start from Vieste, first follow SS 89 towards Peschici, then turn left and follow SP 52bis towards the Umbra Forest. Just after the open space with the café and the signs on the left for the lake you will come to the Visitor Centre.

## Signs

Wooden panels and yellow marks on the trees.

## Journey time

For the round trip: 1.15 hours.

*A short and easy route running through one of the most popular stretches of the great Umbra Forest, it perfectly conveys the atmosphere and sense of awe aroused by this solemn, striking setting. The circular route leads to the Falascone rest area (on the road that goes from Monte Sant'Angelo to the Umbra Forest before reaching the crossroads for Vieste or Vico del Gargano), then returns to the point of departure by a different path. There is no water along the route, so it is a good idea to take some.*





## VISITOR CENTRE

The Visitor Centre of the Umbra Forest is managed by the Ecogargano cooperative (tel. 3498508133, 3472302660, [www.ecogargano.it](http://www.ecogargano.it)).

It organises guided tours, rents mountain bikes and runs the natural history museum annex, as well as the Visitor Centre of the Park of Gargano at the castle of Monte Sant'Angelo.





### The itinerary

Starting from the Visitor Centre, continue along the previous route around the Umbra small lake (about 777 m) to the first turnoff (where you keep left) and then at the next crossroads go towards the Murgia barracks. Here you have to turn right, following the marked path as far as the Nature Reserve of Falascone and its picnic area (*Itinerary No. 8*).

The route is almost completely level. Beeches (*see photo below*), which make up much of the forest cover, alternate here and there with yew trees and maples, while the undergrowth consists largely of holly (*see photo above*), butcher's broom and bracken. Once you reach the Falascone parking area (about 751 m), walk back for a short distance following the path by which you came, then turn left (*Itinerary No. 7*).

A stretch between dolines (sink-



holes) and karstic hollows leads to the crossroads near the Umbra small lake, where we passed previously. Then, following the path taken on the outward journey, you reach the asphalted Vieste-Umbra Forest road and the café not far from the Visitor Centre.



# From the Tavoliere to San Giovanni Rotondo



*Today as in the past, walkers who head to the Gargano have to cross the Tavoliere or tableland. The two routes to Monte Sant'Angelo, the 'Way of the Archangel' identified by the CAI and the path 'With Wings on Your Feet' described by Angela Maria Seracchioli in her guide book (Con le ali ai piedi, published by Terre di Mezzo) intersect at the old station of San Marco in Lamis, at the foot of the broad Valle di Stignano, which climbs up from the plain to San Marco in Lamis.*

## Access

The railway station, on the San Severo-Calenella line of the Ferrovie del Gargano, is 43 meters above sea level and derelict. Buses from San Severo to San Marco in Lamis stop about 500 m further south, at the junction between the SS 272 and the provincial road for Apricena.

## Signs

Some yellow signs and some notices.

## Journey times

About 6 hours.

## The itinerary

From the station of San Marco in Lamis, where notices and yellow signs welcome walkers, you follow a small road that has been damaged by floods. It is flanked by a guard rail running along a ditch. The path to the north (on the left of hikers) is dominated by the Torrione di Castelpagano, a medieval fortress enlarged by the Holy Roman Emperor Frederick II. After his death it was occupied by the Arab sol-



diers of his bodyguard. At the crossroads turn left, leaving the asphalt for a dirt road that climbs through a hollow and passes in front of the Colantuono farmhouse (*see photo*). This can be reached by a short detour to buy cheese and ricotta. Go straight on along the path indicated by the increasingly infrequent yellow signs. It climbs up to a small hollow that was struck by a landslide in 2014. Here ignore the yellow trail marker high up at the left (it will lead you astray). Cross the stream and continue by the path that goes up amid oaks and olives. Reaching a small plateau, you turn left, go through an olive grove and then along a first dirt road. Continue along the path (more yellow signs) as far as a second road. Follow

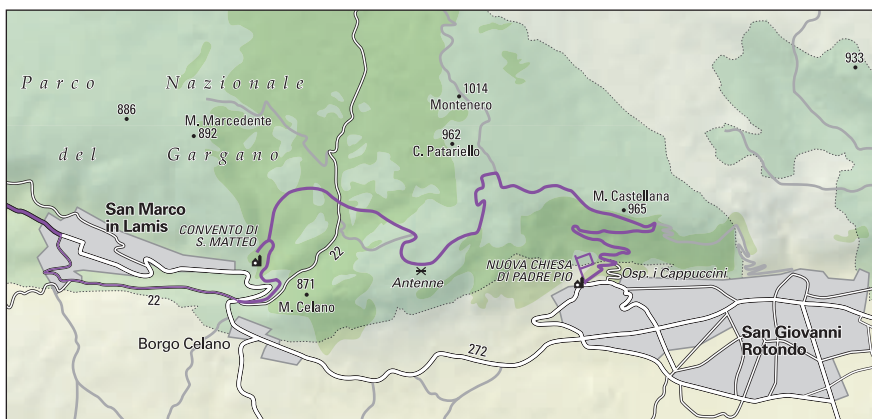
it left up the hill, skirt the quarry and so reach the square before the shrine of S. Maria di Stignano (1.30 hours, 256 m). This is an ancient hospice for pilgrims that was enlarged after being visited in 1216 by St. Francis. It has an attractive cloister and interiors and is currently being restored. The church has a rectangular facade in the characteristic style of Abruzzo and is open. Further down there is a staging post that is open for most of the year. Between the shrine of Stignano and the monastery of S. Matteo, the Way of the Archangel climbs up the mountainside on steep paths only partially marked. It continues along a limestone ridge where orientation is even more complicated. The path we recommend runs for about 5 km





along the main road (SS 272), where you need to be careful of the traffic. San Marco in Lamis lies 586 meters above sea level and the climb to the shrine of S. Maria di Stignano takes an hour and a half. On reaching the built-up area you come to Piazza Gramsci, then turn right past the church of S. Maria Addolorata and continue down Viale Dante Alighieri and Via Amendola. By the cemetery turn left into Via Ferrarello and climb up to the main road for Rignano Garganico. Follow it to the left (further yellow signs), cross the road and follow the narrow road across the hillside to the Franciscan monastery of S. Matteo (30 minutes, 695 m), one of the most important in the Gargano. It is another hospice for pilgrims that was turned into a monastery after the year one thousand. It has belonged variously to the Benedictines, the Cistercians and the Friars Minor. The church, the wooden choir and the cloister are worth seeing. Here, too, there are rooms to accommodate pilgrims. Continue by going back to the first curve on the right. Before reaching the two restaurants walk up to the

gravel-surfaced car park through a gate and then follow a path in the woods indicated by the infrequent red trail signs: it leads from the provincial road to San Marco in Lamis at Cagnano Varano. The path starts again to the left of a picnic area through the woods to an asphalted road. Take this as far as you come to the TV repeaters at an elevation of 917 m. Here the path becomes a dirt road. Follow it along a level, then keep going slightly uphill on the plateau of Coppa l'Arena. This has views of Monte Sant'Angelo, the Tavoliere and the sea, then reach a T-junction, the highest point of this stage (1.30 hours, 971 m). Turn right to the municipal Montenero road, running across the hillside with an asphalted picnic area. At the next crossroads, turn right and go down to San Giovanni Rotondo. The scenic hairpin bends in Via Valle Scura lead to the upper part of the town, at the intersection of Via Pietrelcina and Via Padre Pio, opposite the hospital (Casa Sollievo della Sofferenza). A flight of steps leads to the modern church of Padre Pio, designed by Renzo Piano (1.30 hours, 650 m).





# From San Giovanni Rotondo to Monte Sant'Angelo

## Access

This walk begins in the old town, at the east end of San Giovanni Rotondo, at an elevation of 567 m. To get here from the modern church and the hospital, visiting the historic convent of Santa Maria delle Grazie on the way, is a half-hour walk.

## Signs

Some yellow signs and some notices.

## Tempi di percorrenza

About 6.30 hours.



*The long and beautiful stage to the shrine of the Archangel Michael leads through the first part of the solemn plateau of Lake Sant'Egidio, then for a stretch through a magnificent oak forest and along limestone ridges and valleys with views of the Gulf of Manfredonia.*

## The itinerary

You leave the centre of San Giovanni Rotondo (*photo at right*) heading east, reach the cemetery and continue along SS 272 in the direction of Monte Sant'Angelo. Leaving the provincial road on the left for Cagnano Varano and Carpino, continue briefly along the state highway, then turn left onto a broad dirt track with no notices but marked by white and red signs. The route goes past several houses and stables, then continues through olive





groves and stone walls. Passing the barely visible ruins of the church of S. Egidio, you go down to the right along a stony stretch and reach some farmhouses with a view of SS 272. At a turnoff you come to an asphalted path again and follow it to the left, away from the highway and along the dried up bed of Lake Sant'Egidio (463 m). The track, pleasant and solitary, skirts some fields, leaving behind a derelict hotel complex on the right. It bends

to the right and comes to a turn-off with a panel, at the east end of the plain. To the left, a charming cart track leads to the ruins of the church of St. Nicola in Pantano, surrounded by the steep woods of the hill of Corniello and flanked by an abandoned farmhouse (2.30 hours, 518 m). After the ruins of the church, you will come to a dirt road that leads through a dense forest of evergreen holm oaks and then to the deep valley of the Frat-





ta. Walk along its bank to the right of the river, partly supported by a fence. At the turnoff (the sign is clear but small, so look out for it), you turn right and start to climb up the hillside in the woods. Where the valley widens it crosses a secondary ridge, goes through a first barbed wire cattle gate (be sure to close it after you) and then a second one. Although some signs warn against entering, the path of the Way of the Archangel, indicated by white and red signs, continues beyond the gate. It crosses a grassy hollow and climbs beyond through meadows to another cart track. Following this to the right you come to a gate which

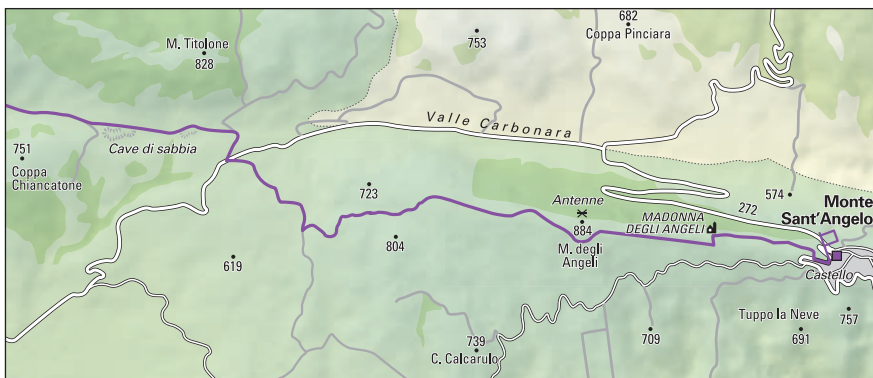
leads out of the private property. Alternatively you can go around the fence on the left and reach the path signposted at the last gate.

We now continue along a beautiful and solitary dirt road that on the right hugs the grassy valley of San Simeone, where some small stone buildings can be seen. The charming, peaceful path leads through another barbed wire fence. On the right a big sand pit can be seen. After passing it, the dirt road turns right and then climbs gently up to return to SS 272 in a large grassy dell (1.30 hours).

To the left the road descends into the Carbonara valley. Almost opposite the dirt road you arrived by, some signs indicate another track that climbs gently up huge slopes of grass and stones. Here the signposts reappear and the yellow lettering of the itinerary 'Con le ali ai piedi', which runs along the main road to this point. On reaching a crossroads, turn left uphill, go through another gate, close it behind you and continue along this solitary and fascinating path.

The path leads through some belts of woodland separated by small grassy hollows, up through the





magnificent holm oaks to reach the ridge of Cima della Costa. This gives a view to the right (south) of the Gulf of Manfredonia and the salt pans of Margherita di Savoia, and to the left the rugged and wooded summits reaching an elevation of about 1000 m, beyond which stretches the Umbra Forest. Towards your left (north), the ridge descends with sheer rock walls. The cart track leads to the right, overlooking Manfredonia and the deep valley of Pulsano. It then skirts a large ridge 820 m above sea level before turning back to the left until it brings you to some repeater towers surrounded by a fence. The

path continues with a long straight stretch in the direction of Monte Sant'Angelo, which here reveals its less elegant side.

The cart track descends slightly, climbs again and flanks a patchy reforestation of pines surrounding the church of S. Maria degli Angeli, which tradition holds was built at the order of Saint Francis. It can be reached by a short detour. A stretch of asphalt leads to a large car park. Go past it, along the imposing walls of the castle and so down through the old town to the entrance of the shrine of S. Michele Arcangelo (*in the photo, the cave*; 2 hours, 796 m).







**A CLOSER LOOK**



# The history of the Gargano

According to historians, the peninsula was probably named after a very ancient divinity worshipped in many parts of the Mediterranean – called Gargano – whose name was associated with caves. In Antiquity, various writers associated the god with the figure of Hercules. People began to settle here a very long time ago. Several large Palaeolithic settlements have been found, like the one at Grotta Paglicci (at Rignano Garganico), where a huge number of artefacts were discovered as well as graffiti and rock art. Later, during the transition to the Neolithic, the tribes who lived in the Gargano came into contact with the world of Ancient Greece, as we know from the pottery found in grave goods from this period. The Daunian culture left important traces in the Gargano peninsula, like steles and, more particularly, burials dating from the Iron Age, but later the largest settlements closest to the sea became Hellenised. The Romans came to the peninsula during the wars with the Samnites, in the 4th century BC. They colonised villages in the area from Siponto to Vieste and from Rodi



Garganico to Mattinata. Christianity developed fast in the Gargano. Its main focus was the cult of the Archangel St Michael, and the pilgrimage to the shrine at Monte Sant'Angelo is supposed to have persuaded the Lombards to convert to Christianity. In fact, the final section of the *Via Sacra Longobardorum* (Lombard Holy Way), undertaken by pilgrims, nobles and kings, linked Benevento, seat of the Lombard Duchy of Benevento, to Monte Sant'Angelo. Along the Gargano coast, Saracen raids became the norm but, in the 11th century, Byzantine domination gave a new boost to towns situated on the sea. It was the Normans who drove out the Byzantines, during their conquest of the whole of the South of Italy. After that, the Swabians committed themselves to building or upgrading the forts and castles in the area. The Angevins officially formalised the network of Apulian *tratturi* (drove roads), while the Bourbons devoted greater attention to developing the towns and the countryside (where, for a long time, they dominated the large farming estates and the transhumance). The Unification of Italy did not bring much change to the Gargano landscape. Development in the modern sense of the word didn't reach the towns of the Gargano until after WWII, when its Golden Age began.





# The Gargano National Park

The remarkable biodiversity of the Gargano peninsula has been protected since the Gargano National Park was created in 1995. The park, stretching for 121,000 hectares across land belonging to 18 municipalities, is managed by the park authority, based in Monte Sant'Angelo. It includes much of the coast, the highest part of the peninsula, two-thirds of Lake Lesina and Lake Varano, the wetland south of Manfredonia and 8 other nature reserves managed by the Italian Corpo Forestale. The enormous variety of the landscape here dates back to the time when the mountains were coming into being. When the Apennines were being created, Gargano was just an island, separated from the mainland by sea, and only became joined to the rest of Apulia at a later date. The fact that the Gargano was once an island ac-

## ENTE PARCO NAZIONALE DEL GARGANO

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71037 Monte Sant'Angelo (FG)  
Tel. 0884568911, 0884568928,  
800530552



counts for its many natural specialities and the variety of environments that can be found a short distance from each other, culminating in the flat, rounded summit of Mount Calvo, 1,065 m high. Whereas down at sea level the landscape changes continuously – from sandy bays to high cliffs of rock, and the lakes on the north coast –, the hilly hinterland comprises one of Italy's most important green areas, the dense Umbra Forest, consisting mainly of pine and beech trees. Spring, and early summer until late June, is the best time to come and visit the park ([www.parcogargano.it](http://www.parcogargano.it)). At this time of year, if you go with an expert, you can see some of the 80 orchid species recorded here. There are five Visitor Centres: the castle at Monte Sant'Angelo, San Marco in Lamis, San Nicandro, Manfredonia (the Lake Salso Reser-

ve) and Lake Lesina. In 1989 the Tremiti Island Marine Nature Reserve was created to safeguard this unique environment. The marine park is managed directly by the Gargano National Park. The environment of the Tremiti Islands is very special: famous for the pristine beauty of the sea around them, the islands lie about 12 miles north of the Gargano peninsula and can be seen all along the north coast. The three largest islands are San Domino, San Nicola and Caprara. Their total surface area amounts to less than 3 sq. km, but their combined perimeter amounts to 20 km.





# The tratturi, motorways of the past

The Apulian landscape has been profoundly marked by the extensive, far-reaching network of *tratturi*, the drove roads used for centuries for moving livestock to and from their traditional grazing land at each change of season. Despite the barrier of hills separating the Gargano from the plain, the peninsula was accessed by a *tratturo* which, when it reached the Gargano, branched out into smaller drove roads. The *tratturo* between Foggia and Campolato is about 35 km long. It starts south of Foggia at a monument commemorating the importance of the transhumance routes (*Epitaffio*), situated at the point where two fundamental routes converge. *Tratturi* ran between L'Aquila and Foggia (about 240 km), Celano and Foggia (just over 200 km) and between Foggia and Ofanto, for just under 50 km. It is clear that these transhumance routes influenced and profoundly altered the landscape of the Capitanata area. The *tratturo* leading towards the rocky Gargano leads through magnificent scenery and is marked, if you look carefully,



by *masserie* (fortified farms), dry stone walls and chapels built specifically to serve this communication route. The drove road between Foggia and Campolato has been described by historians and people who used to administer the *tratturi* network, for example, the *compassatore* (a technical expert of the time) Antonio Michele in 1686. Along the route we encounter ruined and abandoned houses and inns, even a small rock-cut church, containing crude graffiti left by shepherds from the Abruzzi. From the age of 10, they were expected to accompany the flocks and herds. The graffiti record their age and their pangs of nostalgia during what they regarded as a form of long exile on the Apulian plain, far away from their homes and families. The route ends at Masseria Signoritti, where ramifications led off – and still do – towards the most interesting places in the mountains (like Pulsano Abbey or Monte Sant’Angelo). One of the easiest and most fascinating of them is the detour that leads from the old drove road to the modern section of the pilgrim route dedicated to St Michael. Michele Pesante, someone who has been interested in the *tratturi* since he was a boy, describes the magic of these old ways of communication: “Along the *tratturi* you reach places which would otherwise be inaccessible, you experience strange emotions, novel sensations which have been erased by modern technological civilisation. These routes explore the wildlife, tourism, religion and spirituality of a hidden side of the Capitanata, a little-known side of Apulia.” Aspects of the area that deserve to be remembered, rediscovered and integrated within the larger network of slow, historic routes which criss-cross the Gargano peninsula.







## Pilgrims in the Gargano

The mediaeval route linking Europe and Rome to ports in Apulia where pilgrims could embark for the Holy Land – now known by the name of ‘Southern Via Francigena’ – runs south from Benevento along two main routes. The first follows a Roman road, the Appian Way, while the second followed the line of another section of the Appian Way built by Trajan, overlooking the Apulian plain at Troia. Today, as in the past, the most direct way to reach the Gargano is to turn off the Via Appia Traiana at Troia, skirt Foggia and head on down towards Manfredonia. Before reaching the town founded by Manfred, just before the town of Siponto on the modern SS 89 road from Foggia, you see the complex of San Leonardo (*see photo above*), formerly the seat of Teutonic knights who ran a hospice beside the church for wayfarers. Having been a pilgrimage site for centuries,



the shrine of San Michele has been undergoing a revival as a destination for wayfarers and pilgrims on foot. Not only people following the routes associated with St Michael starting in northern and western Europe, but also religious routes within the peninsula itself. Having fallen into decline after 1964, in 1995 the pilgrimages to celebrate the festival of St Michael on 29 September were started up again. They begin in Vieste at dead of night. From here, having crossed the old town centre, the *sammëkalérë* are transferred by bus to a place called Tacca del Lupo, where the pilgrimage on foot begins in earnest. It follows an old transhumance route once used by shepherds who used to bring their herds down to winter around Vieste. The pilgrims delight in singing traditional songs and hymns dedicat-

ed to the Archangel Michael. Beyond Masseria Rignanese, a long, steep climb eventually leads to the ridge of Monte Sant'Angelo, and then down to the dark cave of the shrine itself. The route of this traditional pilgrimage, the total length of which is almost 40 km (a two-day walk), has been rediscovered and relaunched by the Vieste WWF park authority, with the collaboration of the Sovereign Order of Pilgrims of St Michael. The route is as follows: Vieste, the Tacca del Lupo Valley, Simone Park, Piscina della Signora, Masseria Rignanese, Puntone della Giumenta, the Carbonara Valley and, finally, the town of Monte Sant'Angelo.

The route back from Monte Sant'Angelo can be divided into three sections: from the sanctuary church of S. Michele to Mount Sacro (18 km, about a 7-hour walk with a drop in height of about 800 m), from Mount Sacro to San Salvatore (17 km, about a 6-hour walk with a drop in height of 400 m) and finally from San Salvatore to Vieste (11 km, about a 4-hour walk with a drop in height of 200 m).



## The target: Monte Sant'Angelo

“The focal point of the cult of the Archangel in the West.” This definition by the 19th-century historian Ferdinand Gregorovius brings home the huge importance of the shrine at Monte Sant'Angelo very well. The history of the shrine, which has been a key pilgrimage site for 15 centuries, runs parallel to that of the great ways of communication which crossed Italy from the north down to Rome and from there to the coasts of Apulia. One of them, which runs close to the line of the Roman Appian Way as far as Benevento and proceeds from there along the same route as the Via Appia Traiana, has now been chosen as the main route for the southern branch of the Via Francigena. Michael, the archangel cited so often in the Bible along with Gabriel and Raphael, had several roles: messenger of God, protector of the Church, warrior and commander of the heavenly host. The cult of St Michael first appeared in





Asia Minor, where the saint was worshipped as a gifted preacher and doctor – often in places famed for their hot springs with a reputation as centres of healing – and then shifted into the heart of the Empire, to Constantinople. From the capital of the Eastern Empire, it followed the main lines of communication across Greece and the Balkans, across the Adriatic into Apulia, where it reached Monte Sant’Angelo in the 5th century. An anonymous document of the 7th century mentions three apparitions of Michael in the Gargano, supposedly in 490, 492 and 493. As well as the three apparitions, it claims that the saint helped the Lombards in their war against the Byzantines in 650, describes the harsh, wild environment where the apparitions took place, a number of miracles and, lastly, gives a record of pilgrimages made by people of high rank. Set in the heart of a wild area of woodland and rocks, at the





centre of the shrine, was a natural cave which, in the past, housed a tiny, miracle-working spring. During their push into the South of Italy, the Lombards, who founded the Duchy of Benevento in 570, reached the Gargano. Here they began to worship St Michael (perhaps because of similarities between the soldier Archangel and their own ancient, warlike gods). As a result, the Archangel Michael became the 'national' patron saint of the Lombard tribes and a number of other shrines dedicated to the saint were built, based on this model, all set in places which the power of Nature is very tangible. In 708, some monks came to the Gargano and removed a few shreds of the silk cape of the Archangel, which was worshipped as a relic. They also took some shards of rock from the holy cave, and took them to the new sanctuary church of Mont-Saint-Michel, which had just been built far away on the northern coast of France. In the 10th century, another sanctuary church was built: the Sacra di San Michele, perched high on a cliff overlooking the mouth of the Susa Valley, in north-west Italy, about half-way between the North Sea and the Gargano, marking one of the stops on the 'Way of St Michael'. This pilgrimage route was followed by large numbers of believers, as we know from the hundreds of inscriptions in Latin characters and even runes on the walls of the shrine at Monte Sant'Angelo,

which have been studied by scholars. The number of pilgrims increased even more as Norman soldiers began to travel from northern Europe to Apulia, before setting sail for Constantinople and the Christian lands across the sea, in the Holy Land.

As in any other self-respecting rock-cut sanctuary, after the effort of climbing all the way from the Apulian plain up to the town at the top, at Monte Sant'Angelo, a long staircase leads from the imposing entrance to the shrine, a marvellous example of mediaeval architecture (*see photo below*), down to the cave.

The close relations between Apulia and the East can be seen in the doorway leading from here into the cave. In fact, the doors cast in 1076 are a masterpiece of craftsmanship from Constantinople. Inside the cave, the arches rest against the dark rock ceiling and altars from different periods testify to the long history of the cult of the great prince of the heavenly host. In the 9th century, a monk named Bernardo described his long journey from Apulia to the 'Saracen land' of Bari (seat of a Muslim emirate at that time) and on to the Gates of Jerusalem. Talking about Monte Sant'Angelo, the monk says that it contained many altars, was tended by a large community of friars, contained an image of the Archangel and could seat about 60 people. Although not many visitors opt to visit the museum, it is interesting to venture down into the levels below the shrine. Here, as in the area above the church and beside the monumental staircase, the walls are covered with votive inscriptions. Four of them have been identified as ancient Nordic runic inscriptions and refer to a visit by some pilgrims called Hereberecht, Herraed, Wigfuss and Leofwini. Here, displayed among the foundations of the sanctuary church are statues, tombstones and ornaments which have been removed from the church above over the centuries.





























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