



Abruzzo Apennines

Mountains, Monasteries & Castles

*A cultural walking tour through the three National Parks of Abruzzo:
great mountain scenery, amazing cultural heritage and beautiful medieval
villages in Italy's green Heart*



TRIP NOTES 2019

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INTRODUCTION

At just a short distance from Rome, the Abruzzo is one of the most interesting areas in Italy, featuring some amazing mountain scenery, not as famous as the Dolomites further north, but with a nature so precious that the region now even boasts three main national parks and a number of regional parks. You'll find some pieces of almost pristine landscape, where even wolves, deer and brown bears still wander around. The nature here is overwhelming and well protected. During this tour you'll visit all three national parks, each very different from the other, but all equally beautiful. You will of course make some wonderful walks through all of this abundant nature, which makes you feel like you're far away from everything else.

You visit some of Italy's most beautiful national parks, among which is the Gran Sasso National Park – featuring the highest peak in the Apennines – the savage Maiella National Park, dotted with remote medieval monasteries, some of which were founded by the famous Pope Celestine V, and of course the Abruzzo National Park, one of the oldest protected landscapes in Italy.

But nature is not the only feature of this area, and we don't forget about the cultural treasures of this region either. You will walk through medieval villages scattered around the local hilltops, and past monasteries with beautiful frescos, as well as some of the beautiful little towns in this region. You spend some time in wonderful Sulmona – birthplace of the Roman writer Ovid and one of the most famous popes, Celestine V, mentioned in Dante's Divine Comedy – in amazing Scanno, favourite spot of the photographer Henri Cartier-Bresson, in the beautifully restored Santo Stefano, and in Pacentro, with its wonderful castle. This journey takes you past abandoned castles on remote mountain peaks and amazing churches in the middle of nowhere.

From Rome, the 'Eternal City', a great metropolis where thousands of years of history can be found on every corner, we journey inland into the wild mountainous area of the Abruzzo. First you travel to the wonderful city of Sulmona, an ancient Roman city, and privileged residence of many popes. From here you visit the first of the three national parks, the savage Maiella National Park, with its amazing mountains and beautiful canyons, dotted with remote medieval monasteries.

Then you travel to the Gran Sasso Park, with the highest peak in the Apennines earning it its title: the 'Big Stone'. A great roundwalk here, starting from the amazing Campo Imperatore, makes you think you're somewhere in the Himalayas. During the final few days you'll travel to the southern part of the region. First through the amazing Sagittario canyon to the beautiful old village of Scanno, then on to the Abruzzo National Park, one of the oldest protected landscapes in Italy. Here you might encounter deer, and, if you're really lucky, even a wolf or brown bear. Some relaxed walks through nature and a last great meal looking out over the great lake of Barrea are a worthy end to this trip.

The Abruzzo area, yet to be discovered by mass tourism, presents its authentic character to the traveller, who is still treated like a guest. The premises where you'll be staying are all small, genuine, family-run hotels. The tour standard is 3/4 stars.



Please note: this is a moderately easy tour which is suitable for those who have some experience of walking and a good general physical condition. Most of the walks are on good paths, some of them just recently restored by the local authorities. Average walking times: approx 5 hours each day.



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DAY BY DAY ITINERARY

Day 1 / From Rome to Sulmona

You start the tour from Rome. We meet here in the early afternoon and then we travel by private bus to the beautiful city of Sulmona—birthplace of the Roman writer Ovid and one of the most famous popes, Celestine V, mentioned by Dante in his Divine Comedy—yet virtually undiscovered by mass tourism, despite its many cultural treasures. Our hotel is in the heart of the city. We eat together in a nice local restaurant in the medieval centre and then we have time for a stroll and perhaps a 'gelato'.

Day 2 / From Sulmona to Pacentro and Caramanico Terme

This morning, after breakfast, we make a short scenic ride up to Pacentro, a very scenic medieval village on the edge of the mountain chain, dominated by the impressive towers of its medieval castle. We arrive at the higher part of the village, and we can therefore walk through the whole historic village centre downhill and perhaps have a coffee in the square. Then we continue our walk into the Maiella National Park, one of the last remaining bits of real wilderness in central Italy. We are driven into the Orta valley, which separates the two main ridges of the Maiella National Park. Our minibus takes us to Passo San Leonardo, where we start the walk to Rocca Caramanico, a small hamlet dominating the valley from its lonesome rock high above. The walk brings us along the edge of the mountain range, a scenic walk, without much climbing. After a relaxed walk we arrive at Rocca Caramanico, where we can stop for a drink, or even have something to eat at the restaurant. Then we start the descent all the way down into the valley, where we walk to Caramanico Terme, our base for the next two nights. We could also opt to relax, have a drink and board a private bus to Caramanico instead. In the evening we have dinner in a nice restaurant near the hotel, which serves some good local cuisine.

Total walking time: around 4,5 hours (approx. walking distance: 9,5 km). Total driving time today is around 1 hour.



Day 3 / Caramanico and the gorge of the River Orfento

Today will be dedicated to the wonderful nature of the Maiella National Park, discovering the area's biggest 'canyon', that of the River Orfento. The walking day begins straight from the hotel door. We walk to the upper end of Caramanico, and, after a short visit to the nature museum, we now walk right into the River Orfento canyon. Although the landscape is spectacular and wild, the walk is not difficult (and there are several walking options available). We will descend towards the river and then follow it all the way down through its narrow gorge. At the end of the canyon we walk through a surreal landscape of waterfalls and grottos. We have a nice picnic lunch somewhere along the river, before returning to the village of Caramanico.



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We then climb up to the old town of Caramanico and take a stroll through the historic town centre, beautifully located on the ridge above the river. The rest of the afternoon we are free to go for a stroll or have a drink. In the evening we have dinner together again.

Total walking time: around 3,5 hours (approx. walking distance: 8 km).

Day 4 / Celestine's monasteries and hermit caves

Our bus picks us up from the hotel and a scenic ride brings us to the tiny village of Decontra, where we start walking through an open landscape, dotted with several 'tholos', strange stone buildings that appear pre-historic, but were actually used by shepherds until just a few decades ago. We descend into the canyon of Santo Spirito, where we will visit the beautifully located monastery of St. Bartholomew, one of the most scenic little churches in the region. This is a good place for a first biscuit stop. From here we climb up again and walk to the Convent of Santo Spirito. The bus picks us up again and brings us to a beautiful place for lunch.

Then we travel on to yet another national park, the Gran Sasso, literally 'big stone'! We are dropped off at one of the most scenic medieval castles in the region, in Roccalascio, Italy's highest village. You take some time to wander around this scenic village, now mostly abandoned. Then we walk along one of the most scenic footpaths in Italy towards the great renaissance church of Santa Maria, and from there on to the beautiful village of Santo Stefano di Sessanio, once abandoned and now carefully restored. Here we will spend the next two nights. There is time to enjoy a drink beside the lake, before going for dinner in a nearby traditional inn.

Total walking: approx. 3,5 (5) hours (approx. walking distance: 9 (14) km). Total driving time today is around 2 hours.

Day 5 / Santo Stefano – Gran Sasso National Park – Santo Stefano

After breakfast we make a short drive to central Italy's highest mountain range, the Gran Sasso, now protected with national park status. We arrive at the foot of the mountains on the plateau known as 'Campo Imperatore' (the Field of the Emperor). Here, depending on the weather conditions, we have several options for a beautiful walk. We can opt to follow the ridge towards the highest peak, Corno Grande (2912m), or opt for a roundwalk along the vast high plain of Campo Imperatore. We have a nice scenic picnic lunch in the mountains and then walk back to the plain of Campo Imperatore, where our bus is waiting. Perhaps after a drink, we travel back along a wonderful scenic road to the beautiful village of Santo Stefano. Those who feel like it can also opt to walk all the way back to the hotel. Time to refresh and then choose where to go for a hearty meal with local specialties. You are free to make your own dinner arrangements tonight.

Total walking: approx. 4 - 5 hours (approx. walking distance: 8/10 km). Total driving time today is around 1.5 hours.

Day 6 / Into the Abruzzo National Park

Following a leisurely breakfast, we travel by private minibus to Anversa degli Abruzzi, another nice medieval town dominating the spectacular canyon of the Sagittario River. Here we have a short break and buy some picnic supplies, before our bus brings us up to the hamlet of Castrovalva, nestled on the ridge like an eagle's nest. From here we make a beautiful walk, first along the ridge through a nice open landscape of mountain meadows and forest, with spectacular views over the canyon. The walk leads us to the abandoned village of Frattura Vecchia ('old Frattura'), a very scenic spot, and continues to the charming little village of Frattura (Nuovo), with marvellous views of Lake Scanno. From here we either walk down or take the local bus down into the valley, to the village of Scanno. We have time to explore the historical heart of this village, maybe the most picturesque in the Abruzzo range, famous for the women's traditional dresses, immortalised by the photographer Cartier-Bresson back in the 1950s. After a short stroll through its characteristic streets, and maybe a drink, we continue a scenic drive to Civitella Alfedena, where we settle in at the hotel in the town centre. We have dinner in the hotel tonight.

Total walking time: around 4 (5,5) hours (approx. walking distance: 9 - 15 km. (Scanno)). Total driving time today is around 1 hour.



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Day 7 / The heart of the Abruzzo National Park

After a nice breakfast, we have several options for exploring the Abruzzo National Park. A number of wonderful roundwalks can be made here, ranging from easier to more difficult. A good option could be one of the most famous trails in the National Park, the Camosciara, where it's possible to see chamois wandering freely, or alternatively, the Val di Rose walk, which starts directly from Civitella. The serious hikers can opt for a challenging roundwalk to Monte Greco. If instead you want to relax we can opt for an easy walk along the lakeside and a visit to a museum dedicated to the wolf, an animal which still populates the mountains of this area. In the evening we go out for our last great meal together.

Total walking time: several options, between 2- 5,5 hours (approx. distance: 5-15 km.).

Day 8 / Departure to Rome

After breakfast this morning, your trip ends. From Civitella we transfer back to Rome by private bus. Those who want to extend their stay can either book some extra days in the Abruzzo National Park, in Sulmona, or in Rome.



LEVEL OF DIFFICULTY

Moderately easy (2/3): Mostly moderately easy walks, along well-maintained footpaths, though some have rough surfaces. On some days stretches are difficult for those suffering from vertigo (but NOT dangerous!). On these days alternative options are available. Extensions or shortcuts are also possible on most days.

Fitness: High standard of fitness is not necessary but you should be able to walk for up to 5 hours a day in hot sun on dusty or stony tracks.

ARRIVAL & DEPARTURE

Arrival: The tour starts in ROME (Centre/Train Station) where we travel on by private shuttle to SULMONA. From Rome's airports there are regular shuttle buses to the train station.

Departure: The tour ends after breakfast in CIVITELLA ALFEDENA. A private transfer brings you from here back to ROME (included), where you can easily continue your travels. In case you do not need to return to Rome, several taxi services are available to bring you directly to your next destination.



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TOUR DETAILS

ACCOMMODATION & MEALS

All nights are spent in beautiful, characteristic hotels, mostly historical buildings (generally 3-star; 4-star on some departure dates). All rooms have en-suite facilities.

Accommodation is mainly on a half-board basis. Most evening meals are included, for which we have selected the best available restaurants. On two nights you are free to choose from the wide choice of restaurants in the area. Your guide can give you good tips for these evening dinners.

Almost all (picnic) lunches are included in the tour price. On other days you are free to have your own lunch. Here you have the option of having your lunch in a nice restaurant, or purchasing your supplies for a picnic lunch.

Night 1: The first night is spent in beautiful Sulmona. Your accommodation is in the heart of the historical centre.

Night 2&3: These two nights are spent in the centre of Caramanico Terme, a spa resort in the heart of the Maiella.

Night 4& 5: These two nights are spent in the beautifully restored village of Santo Stefano di Sessania.

Nights 6&7: These nights are spent in the pretty village of Civitella Alfedena, renowned for its nature & wildlife.

N.B. On some dates we run an upgraded version of this tour, staying in luxurious 4- and 5-star hotels. Look for the 'Premiere Inns' signs. Information on request.

INCLUSIONS

- Private English-speaking tour leader for 8 days
- Accommodation: 1 night Sulmona, 2 nights Santo Stefano, 2 nights Caramanico Terme, 2 nights Civitella Alfedena, all in good 3***-hotels
- Meals: all breakfasts, 6 dinners (good restaurants!), 4 lunches
- All private & public transfers as indicated throughout the entire itinerary
- Entrance fees of all sites along the itinerary
- All special activities as outlined in the day-by-day itinerary
- Guest experts for special places
- 24/7 assistance
- Luggage transport
- All gratuities for baggage, porters & hotel service

Not Included

- Departure taxes & Visas
- Travel Insurance
- Drinks and meals not mentioned in the itinerary
- Optional additional tours or activities
- Tips
- Items of a personal nature

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