

13. THE ITINERARY OF THE SPIRIT

“Automobile route to abbeys and hermitages within and near the Park”

Since only a few abbeys can be visited by foot in one day, a car route is recommended for those who are interested in getting a complete picture of monasticism in the area.

The Apennines in Upper Umbria and the Marche have in fact been a favorite place for hermits for over 1000 years. Saint Romuald, Saint Peter Damian, Blessed Thomas of Costacciaro and Blessed Paul Giustiniani are just some of the most illustrious persons who have led a solitary life in these places. The pole that goes from Santa Croce di Fonte Avellana to Santa Maria di Sittia, and from Sant’Emiliano in Congiuntoli to San Girolamo di Pascelupo, is proof of the unique flourishing of a strong Christian-hermit vocation in this area, favored also by the great abundance of water, essential for the monks’ survival. The desire to devote one’s life to God and contemplation became recurrent among the members of the nobility and the wealthier classes: the Church organized them into communities with well-defined rules, which had a beneficial religious and moral influence, while from an economic perspective they made a remarkable contribution with their teaching of how to make the most of the land, cultivating it with care and diligence. Furthermore, the work of scribes, who transcribed and preserved important manuscript texts in the abbey libraries, was also fundamental for handing down Greek and Roman culture to posterity.

San Girolamo Hermitage



This hermitage is not accessible by car and can only be reached on foot, following the directions given in Route 5. Even though it cannot be visited, it is recommended that you at least see it from the village of Pascelupo. Even seeing it from a distance is worth the trip. The hermitage emerges magnificently from the steep rock overlooking the Rio Freddo ravine, inside an enchantingly scenic amphitheater, a memorable experience for every visitor.

Abbey of Santi Emiliano e Bartolomeo in Congiuntoli



An ancient Benedictine abbey located along the Arcevese road that goes from Scheggia to Sassoferrato, it rises where the Rio Freddo flows into the Sentino river, hence its name of Congiuntoli (conjunction). It is dedicated to the saints from whom it takes its name, and its construction presumably dates back to the 11th century. It seems to have been restored at the behest of Pope Celestine II in 1143. The monks who lived there were spiritual children of Saint Benedict of Nursia and professed the rule of “ora et labora” (pray and work); essentially, it was to give hospitality especially to the poor and to observe silence. The church, made from white limestone, has a very original plan, with two asymmetrical naves divided by octagonal pillars. The vast internal space is lit by pointed windows and shows traces of frescoes and the life-size reproduction of a large fresco of the *Madonna of the Milk* by the Giotto school, detached from here in the early 1900s and now at the Pinacoteca in Fabriano. Thanks to the donation in recent times by the Italian state, it was possible to do restoration work on the church, which brought successful results. Guided tours available.

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Abbey of Santa Maria di Sitria.



St. Romuald built the original hermitage in 1014. Then, in 1018-1020, he founded the monastery, of which he was particularly fond. Romuald stayed in Sitria 7 years, living in his cell, which he never left, in keeping with the ancient practice of monastic asceticism. In the next centuries, the Church assigned possessions and wealth to the Abbey of Sitria, but with these, and especially with the advent of the *commendam* system (an institution that came into use starting in the 15th century, in which the title of abbot was assigned not to a monk within the monastery, but to a prelate or an external lay person, who could then keep the surplus goods for himself), the monastery began to go into decline. The commendatory abbots lasted until the suppression ordered by Napoleon in 1810. The property of Sitria later passed into private hands. The church became a farmhouse and the baptismal font was brought to the church of Isola Fossara. The church building is made entirely from stone blocks, with a single barrel-vaulted nave; it was restored for the first time in the 16th century, and then again in 1972 by the monks of Fonte Avellana. It has a Latin cross plan and elegant, Romanesque-Gothic lines. The elevated presbytery is reached by stairs of eight steps located to the right of those entering. Under the main altar there is a Romanesque crypt, supported by a column with a late Gothic capital. The only fresco in the church is a *Crucifixion*. The travertine altar is made from a compact stone and rests on 14 small columns.

Guided tours available.

Monastery of Fonte Avellana



“Tween Italy’s two coasts cliffs arise, not far from thine own native place, and so high that thunders peal lower down; and form a lofty ridge called Càtria, beneath which a hermitage was consecrated, which is given over only to worship.”

(Dante, *Paradiso*, Canto XXI).

This monastery’s origins probably go back to about 997, when Rodolfo of Gubbio built the first humble cells. In 980 Saint Romuald took part in its founding; Saint Peter Damian took the monastic habit here in 1035 and became its prior in 1043, making Fonte Avellana a vibrant center of spiritual life in the Umbria-Marche Apennines.

Dante Alighieri was given hospitality within these walls, which were renowned for the prestigious Scriptorium, which has preserved valuable records of local historical events. In 1300 the Abbey was in vogue, but its decline had already begun by the end of the century, and continued until 1866, the year in which it was suppressed by the Savoy government. The monks returned in 1935. Countless men were elevated at the altars coming from Fonte Avellana, including 5 popes. The monastery’s architecture is rather complex, and includes a large guesthouse for visitors, the church, and the hermitage, a cloistered area for the monks. The church has a single nave with a transept, and is covered by an ogival barrel vault, with a transept and presbytery raised above the nave, to give space to the crypt below, which dates back to the time of Saint Romuald. Worthy of note are the St. Peter Damian room, the Dante Alighieri library with over 10,000 volumes, and the ancient Scriptorium. Opening onto the Romanesque-Gothic cloister are the Chapter Room and the refectory, restored in the 1700s in the Baroque style, which clashes with the austerity of the surrounding medieval complex. The monastery also holds remarkable pieces of Byzantine art and a magnificent 17th-century lectern.

Guided tours available.