

4. VALLE DELLE PRIGIONI

“The fascination of wild, uncontaminated nature”

(TRAILS N. 232 – 279 – 231 – 296)

Lenght: 9,5 km, circular walk

Difference in elevation: 400 m

Time: 6 hours

Difficulty: EE

Drinking water available: yes (fountain near Pian di Rolla)

From Scheggia, take SS 360 to Sassoferrato through the majestic ravine of Gola del Corno. Immediately after the village of Isola Fossara, bear right towards Coldipecchio. Leave your car here and begin to walk past the old village houses until you come to Trail 232, which rises gently through clearings alternating with bushy areas of maple, field rose, hawthorn and blackthorn. The soil is rather poor and the turf often reveals the calcareous rock beneath.

Butterflies and insects of unusual shapes and colors dance around the hiker, whereas others settle on the flowers edging the path and filling the surrounding meadows. This is uncontaminated nature with rare sounds, scents and colors that give you the impression of being immersed in surroundings way out of the ordinary. However, the most impressive scene is the one which gradually opens up before your eyes: a typical, V-shaped, thickly wooded river valley. These extensive, luxuriant forests are dark green at first, turning red and gold in the autumn in contrast with the calcareous massif overhanging them.

This is the stark Valle delle Prigioni, the result of erosion by the stream of the same name cutting through. The hermits chose it for their solitary life,

as it was seen as a “prison” for the body and as an ideal place to raise the soul in sublime contemplation. The trail continues more or less on the same level, and offers a view of the valley to the left, Mt. Motette to the right and the meadows of Pian di Rolla straight ahead.

This area is known as “The Garden” as, until a few decades ago, it was cultivated by the people of the valley, whereas now it is a place of a myriad of blossoms.

After about an hour and a half (from your starting point) of easy walking you reach Fonte San Giglio, one of the most important sites for the discovery of ammonites. Continue until you reach Pian di Rolla, where you can take a break and fill up your water bottles from a large fountain. Go back the same way for about 250 m until you come to the fork with Trail 279 on the right. This path descends, sometimes a bit roughly with stretches partially blocked by brambles and broom, and continues along the right-hand side of the Fosse di Beto as far as Trail 231 from the hamlet of La Fravolosa at the bottom of the valley. The vegetation gradually becomes increasingly wild, as you plunge into the Valle delle Prigioni and descend alongside the homonymous stream on the left bank. The lush vegetation here is full of different species of trees and shrubs. Growing along the waterside are not only poplars, willows and hazels (*Corylus avellana*), but also field maples (*Acer campestre*) and downy oaks (*Quercus pubescens*). The valley slopes are covered with woods of deciduous trees, the main species of which include not only the hophornbeam (*Ostrya carpinifolia*) and the manna ash (*Fraxinus ornus*), but also the mahaleb cherry (*Prunus mahaleb*), the Italian maple (*Acer obtusatum*), Spanish broom (*Spartium junceum*), cornelian cherry (*Cornus mas*), field rose (*Rosa canina*), etc. The various species are almost magically interwoven, sometimes in strange, extravagant shapes, in order to maintain the



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balance of the phytocoenosis, even while competing for light. The presence of climbers and creepers and the bird calls and bird song conjure up the image of a wild jungle. You may also be lucky to spot the protected Turk's cap lily (*Lilium martagon*). Near a beech tree elegantly split in



Martagon lily

half, where a spring provides even more water, you can take another break. Moving on, the path continues to rise. The landscape becomes a bit rougher and harsher, but no less impressive: masses of solid limestone, fantastically sculpted over time by the erosion of water, have been shaped to form potholes, gorges, and small ravines with streams that appear and disappear into the rock. Here the trail is not well marked or easy to follow and you are advised to take great care.

As you enter this treasure trove of rare beauty, you can but admire the harshness of nature that is



Podalirio butterfly

making you breathless, until you are finally standing beneath the so-called "Devil's Shoe": a gigantic mass of solid limestone, which appears to be suspended in air and towers above the walker and the surrounding environment. You will be both amazed and reverentially fearful of such majestic,



Devil's Shoe

yet mysterious nature. All this is the result of the immense forces, which raised the sedimentary rock layers via orogenesis over 200 million years ago. These more or less rigid rocks reacted differently when they were pushed and bent until they shattered: the more malleable, such as the Scaglia Rossa pink limestone, was bent into small waves, whereas the more rigid layers, such as the

solid limestone, shaped the Apennine landscape on a grand scale to create interminable anticlines, synclines and monoclines. The route continues between alternate cascades and pools of water surrounded by rock faces, where holm oaks (*Quercus ilex*) and the by now rare laurel tree (*Laurus nobilis*) cling, together with various species of fern, including the hart's



Tunnel along the trail

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tongue fern (*Phyllitis scolopendrium*). Keep an eye open for spineless butcher's broom (*Ruscus hypoglossum*) as well. After a short walk, the trail winds its way through meadows and bushy areas, which are more typical of the Park. It comes to an end in a spur of rock that enters an approximately 30-meter long tunnel, built for the aqueduct, which you have to pass through before continuing your walk on the other side. As soon as you come out, the path is edged with small, strong shrubs, such as common cytiscus (*Cytisus sessilifolius*), bladder senna (*Colutea arborescens*), cornelian cherry, broom and common laburnum (*Laburnum anagyroides*), which combine to paint the route yellow. For those of you, who do not wish to go through the rather narrow aqueduct tunnel, follow Trail 231b, which turns off a few hundred meters before the aqueduct and runs along the right-hand side of the stream before returning to the main path at a water tank. Around a 30-minute walk takes you to a fork for Trail 296, which leads to the village of Pascelupo. After a brief tour of the village, continue towards Coldipecchio where you left your car.



Village Pascelupo