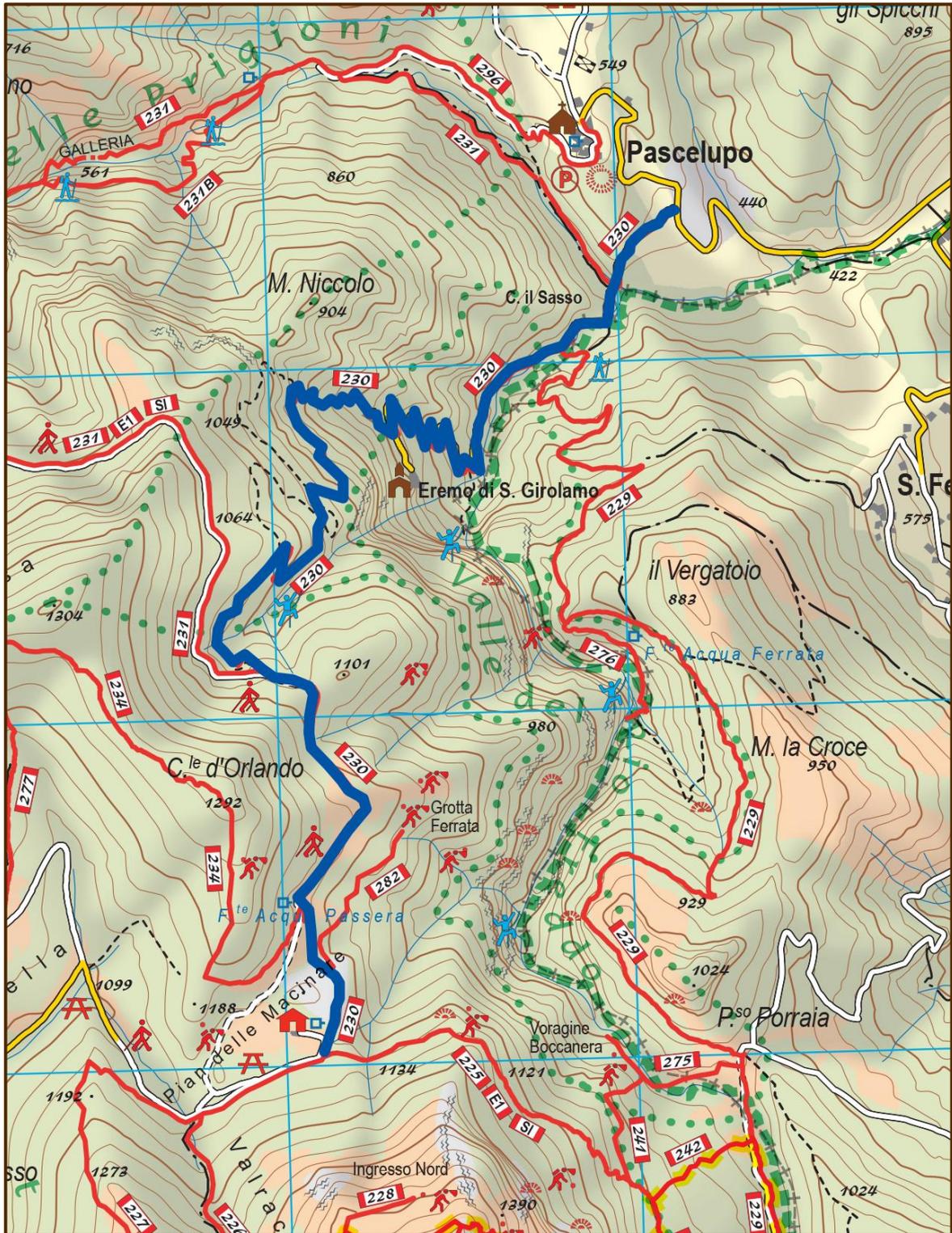


5 FROM THE HERMITAGE OF MOUNT CUCCO TO PIAN DELLE MACINARE



5. FROM THE HERMITAGE OF MOUNT CUCCO TO PIAN DELLE MACINARE

“Nature, history and spirituality”

(TRAIL N. 230)

Length: 11 km, round trip

Difference in elevation: 700 m

Time: 4 hours 30 minutes outward ascent, 3 hours return descent

Difficulty: EE

Drinking water available: yes (Acqua Passera and Pian delle Macinare)

Follow S.S. Arcevese 360 linking Scheggia with Sassoferrato and not far from Isola Fossara take the turning to Pascelupo. Park your car just below the charming medieval village and take Trail 230 to the hermitage of San Girolamo, also known as the hermitage of Monte Cucco. The route ascends as far as the hermitage, where it's a good idea to have a rest.

The building stands on the eastern side of the Mount Cucco massif at a height of 661 m. The hermitage nestles at the base of an amphitheater of calcareous rock with caves in the craggy rock face. The buildings rise on a spur overlooking the valley of the Rio Freddo and it is no surprise these places have inspired the desire for solitary contemplation, in view of the perfect harmony between the rugged, majestic, natural scenery and the complex of medieval cells dug into the rock and surrounded by beech and chestnut woods. The difficult access was not an obstacle. On the contrary, it was an invitation to the monks seeking a secluded spot. The architecture enables us to date the building back to about the 11th century: the imposing building consists of three large, stone nuclei with a barrel vault and a tall, central tower. All the stone windows, internal doors and niches are typical of the Romanesque style. The legal, historic and canonical founder of



the hermitage was the Blessed Paul Giustiniani who, with the permission of Pope Leo X, founded the first hermitage of the Camaldolese Congregation of Monte Corona here in 1521. From then on until the beginning of the 19th century, the hermitage was a major cultural center until its decline. It was closed in 1974 and fell into a state of complete ruin until 1981, when restoration work began. In 1992, it was officially reopened by the Camaldolese monk hermits of Mount Corona who, according to the rules of their order, do not live together except for community prayers or meals together. The Camaldolese rule also forbids the presence of strangers inside the hermitage. Individual guests are accepted, but only for periods of spiritual retreat.

After a break to admire this place in religious, meditative silence, turn back a few meters and take the steep path uphill once again. In fact, the route winds its way through a wood in a series of tortuous bends in an attempt to ease the considerable gradient that has to be overcome. You'll see various types of vegetation as you reach different heights. There are some particularly interesting groups of linden trees (*Tilia platylos*) near the hermitage, which could be the remains of much larger, ancient forests of special phytogeographical value. They could, however, have been introduced by the monks. The same

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territory, belongs to the “Native Men of Costacciaro” Agricultural Society (see insert below).

goes for the extremely beautiful chestnut plantation with its centuries-old trees, also lying close to the hermitage. Even though these species were probably reintroduced, they nevertheless help enrich the diversity of the vegetation. The presence of the chestnut denotes a typically acid soil, uncommon in a place where the ground is mainly limestone. If you continue this difficult, yet pleasant route, you plunge into a wood consisting mainly of hornbeam and manna ash, often accompanied by examples of holm oaks (*Quercus ilex*) clinging in the rockiest areas, where no other plant could live, proof of the gradual change from an acid to a limey soil. The undergrowth is damp and features butcher's broom (*Ruscus aculeatus*), cyclamen (*Cyclamen repandum*) and numerous species of ferns, including the rare hart's tongue (*Phyllitis scolopendrium*). The trail continues to rise up the valley and gradually fades into the beech grove. The appearance of this species, which is generally found above 900 m, gives a clear idea of the height you have reached. At about 925 m, the path becomes easier and smoother for roughly 1 km and then continues to rise. It finally comes out of the wood into the open and on to green meadows. From here, continue left along the road that goes from Pian di Spilli to Pian delle Macinare. Col d'Orlando towers to the right with its splendid beech forest, whereas further on to the left, a short sheep track leads to the entrance of the Ferrata Cave, an example of the widespread karst formation, which has created not only the well-known Mt. Cucco Cave, but also other caves of varying depths throughout the Park. At the junction with Trail 234 leading to the top of Col d'Orlando, your route moves away from the vehicular road and continues left. At this point, you can fill up with water from the karst spring of Acqua Passera. You are nearly in sight of the meadows full of flowers, which open up before hikers: you have come to Pian delle Macinare. Here, you'll find the Mainardi refuge hut, where you can get something to eat (check opening times before you start, as it depends on the time of year). The building, like the entire surrounding

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THE "NATIVE MEN OF COSTACCIARO" AGRICULTURAL SOCIETY

If Mt. Cucco and its massif have been saved from environmental destruction, whereas other places not so far away have succumbed, this is due mainly to the Native Men of Costacciaro Agricultural Society, an exemplary case of collective ownership of environmental resources, whose long-sighted management since the Middle Ages has regulated these resources so as not to compromise their conservation.

About the second half of the 13th century, the population of Costacciaro consisted mainly of shepherds, woodcutters and charcoal burners, owners only of their sweat and hard labor, squeezed between the two main powers of the time, the noble Guelfoni of Costacciaro and the monks of Avellana from the Abbey of Sant'Andrea dell'Isola dei Figli di Manfredino (also in Costacciaro). At the time, some of them were accused of trespassing, as they had peacefully led some of their goats to graze at the Benedictine abbey. They were reported and tried in court in Gubbio by the ecclesiastical authorities. After evidence was given and discussions held, the accused were the unexpected winners of the court case: in fact, they managed to prove that for several decades, if not for centuries, they had let their flocks graze peacefully and they used to chop wood and cultivate cereals in a few poor flat areas in the mountains.

After this episode, all the men from Costacciaro ("*Universitas Hominum*") grouped together and signed a social agreement known as the *Università degli Uomini Originari di Costacciaro* (Native Men of Costacciaro Agricultural Society). Their immense collective effort enabled them to throw off the yoke of the various powers in the area. Over the years, they acquired three mountains (as shown by a manuscript owned by the University, dating back to the year 1339): *Mount Cucco*, *Por(r)ino* (now named *Le Gronde*) and *Ranco Giovanello*. These three mountains, became a symbol of pride, freedom and independence, and continue to figure on the banner of the University and of the Municipality of Costacciaro. The Agricultural Society still continues to administer the resources of the mountain with criteria of environmental sustainability, and allocates any management profits to actions that benefit the Costacciaro community. In Monte Cucco Park there are also other agricultural communities that are smaller, but with purposes similar to that of Costacciaro: the "Consorzio Possidenti Isola Fossara" and the "Comunanza delle famiglie di Campitello" ("Isola Fossara Landowners' Consortium" and the "Society of the Families of Campitello").