

Castles in the open air

The first stop is at the Medieval Castle of Garagnone. It was originally built during the Norman Empire right on the top of the rock and made out of the local stone so as not to stand out in the landscape and be therefore safer against attacks. At that time it was also known as "the invisible castle".

The stables were renovated and turned into (Lat.) "Domus" (Eng. manor house) at the times of the Hohenstaufens. The denomination of "manor" indicates that the castle soon became a post for controlling and administering the most thriving emperor's land of the Terra di Bari, today's province of Bari. The Terra di Bari was indeed an important farmed land with extensive grain cropland and well served by the Roman Appia way, that connected the county of Spinazzola to the county of Altamura, and other secondary paved ways leading to the Adriatic sea passing through Ruvo, Corato, Andria and Barletta.

Many historical documents confirm that Garagnone was a (Lat.) Universitas (Eng. medieval town), which probably included a number of other local settlements. The castle was partially destroyed during an earthquake in 1731.

We will then head off to the Lama reale (Eng. Royal groove/canyon), the largest and most majestic canyon of the Murgia region. Not long time ago the "Lama" was covered by wide (Ital.) perastro rock formations and was very similar to an African savannah.

In spring the blossom created such a magic flowery scenery and the air was full of pollens. Despite the land tillage over many years the tree- and shrub lands are thick with species in blossom. The scenery is still fascinating, especially when driving along the country road from Corato towards Altamura.

After a short pic-nic break, we drive south and then southwest to "San Magno" about 13 Km away from Corato, where a necropolis dating back to VII and V Sec. b.C. has been discovered.

The graves have a typical dolmen structure from the Bronze Age. In the middle of the grave there is always a rectangular, quite wide room with four large tall stones or megaliths. Copper and iron pots or fragments of them have also been found in the tombs. Not far from the necropolis in the same area there is the San Magno church dating back to XII century. The small church, made out of irregular limestone slabs and mortar, is situated in front of a yard between a gigantic old oak and a masseria built in 1812. Close to the church there is the San Magno pond, the only water collection point in the Murgia region during the short rainy season. Green frogs, newts and some other amphibians such as (Ital.) natrice and mud dwellings populate the landscape. In autumn heavy rains often cause flooding in the fields around it, whereas in summer and in droughty weather numerous species of animals can survive drinking its water.

We will now leave San Magno and continue our tour towards Castel del Monte, but first we will stop at a local masseria for some rest and refreshments.

Then, we will set off for a 90 minutes walk to our final stop at Castel del Monte. The octagonal castle erected by the Hohenstaufen Emperor Frederick II of Swabia, is made out of local stone and is still today the most mysterious building of Apulia. It was originally located near the Sancta Maria de Monte church, whose building does not exist anymore. It is unknown whether Frederick II ever saw his castle completely

built. All we know is that his descendants completed it and changed it many times. From 1277 onward his son King Manfredi renovated it and made it safer. He wanted to use the castle as a defence tower and a fortress as it use to be at the beginning of the Swabian empire, when the Castel del Monte was the centre of the political and military power on the Terra di Bari. It was at the same time a symbol of the imperial power and the important part of a greater communication network system.

In the following centuries the castle was first converted into prison, then became a secret shelter for persecuted kings, feudal lords and noblemen in wartime. In **1<95** King Ferdinand of Aragon was kept here before being crowned King of Sicily in Barletta. Castel del Monte was then annexed to the territory of the Duke of Andria, and later inherited by Consalvo of Cordova. From 1552 the Carafa family, Earls of Ruvo, owned the building.

During the pestilence of 1656 the castle was inhabited by noblemen of Andria and their families who tried to escape the infection.

At the end of the XVIII century, the castle was abandoned and devastated by fires and looting. Marbles, furniture and valuables were lost. The buildings were occupied by shepherds, brigands or refugees.

In 1876 the Castel del Monte was restored and preserved by the government of the reunited Kingdom of Italy. A century later the castle underwent further structural restoration and since 1996 it has been declared a Unesco World's heritage site.

Overview

Natural Environment: coppice woodland and pubescent oakland, scrubland, pastures, cropland, karst phenomena

Rural architecture: masserie, jazzi, trulli, dry stone walls, pools, reservoirs.

Specialities/Delicacies: Extra virgin Olive Oil "Terra di Bari" (Denomination of certified origin in Bitonto), Castel del Monte wine (Denomination of certified organ), chick peas, rapini pasta dishes, "burrata" soft cheese, "canestrato" seasoned cheese, "coratina" steak, handmade sasanello cake.

Starting point: Gravina in Puglia (recommended). Alternatively, from any other towns)

Target: teenagers and adults;

Type of activity: guided tour - Difficulty: easy

Time: 8:30am; Length of the tours: all day/half day (on demand)

Transport: 15 passenger seats mini coach