

TRACKS ON THE ROCK

The tour starts off at the section of the Alta Murgia park known as "Sant'Elia" and characterized by limestone sites covered by steppe and guarigue thick vegetation. The area is particularly interesting because of the great number of the Naumanni falcons' examples living in the area.

The first stop is at the sinkhole "Pulo di Altamura", located 480 m above the sea level and the most important doline of karst origin in the Murgia area. The Pulo has two deep grooves with steep slopes dotted with caves, which were inhabited by prehistoric men almost 5000 years ago.

The doline is a kind of natural karst amphitheatre with a diameter of 550 m and a depth of 100 m. Its round shape is due to the underground water karst erosion that after millions of years caused the upland surface to blow into a depression.

The indigenous flora and the fauna are highly protected in the area. Tourist visits are not allowed during the reproduction periods of some endangered species of falcons e.g. ravens and lannerets.

The itinerary moves along the Northeast edge of the doline up to the Lamalunga cave, where the Man of Altamura was found, and back.

After a packed lunch break and a tour at the XIX century Lamalunga Masseria, visitors can access the "Man of Altamura" Information Centre and have a virtual tour of the archaeological site where the archaic Man was found. The human skeleton dating back to about 150 thousand years ago is a unique discovery in the area because of its integrity and conservation state.

Itinerary Overview

Natural environment: rocky and stony pastures, scrubland, steppe vegetation, cropland, karst phenomena.

Palaeontology : Man of Altamura, Pulo of Altamura .

Architecture: dry stone rural masonry constructions e.g. masserie, jazzi, trulli, walls and "specchie" tombs.

Specialities & Delicacies: roast and stewed sheep meat, dairy, bread of Altamura, red lentils of Altamura, almond cakes, Padre Peppe walnuts based liqueur.

Start/Arrival: Gravina in Puglia (recommended). Alternatively, any other towns in the National park area.

Target: teenagers (over 13 years)

Itinerary: guided tour; Difficulty: sightseeing

Time: 8.30 a.m.

Length of the tour: all day/ half day (on demand)

Transport: 15 passenger seats mini coach

Alternative Itinerary (A)

An alternative itinerary offers a full tour of the doline starting with a walk along the Northeast edge up to the Lamalunga cave and walking on along the Southwest edge of the karst depression back to the starting point.

After lunching at a local agritourist masseria we drive up to the "Cava Pontrelli", a dismantled lime quarry located 5 km away from Altamura on the way to Santeramo, where dinosaurs' footprints were discovered by chance in 1999.

The footprints are dating back to the Cretaceous period between 70 and 75 millions of years ago and are located over an area of 12.000 sq m. There are about 30 thousands footprints of different diameters (between 5/6 and 50/45 cm) belonging to dinosaurs up to 10 meters tall.

According to palaeontologists the footprints were left by five different species of two- and four-legged herbivorous dinosaurs that slowly moved about on the ground, which suggest that

they used to live in the area rather than migrating or escaping from natural disasters. The tracks were left in the muddy ground probably covered by moist seaweeds. It is thought that the long sedimentation on the surface and the creation of rock layers is responsible for preserving the shape and the depth of the original footprints.

Following this important discovery researchers have claimed that at that time, over 70 millions years ago, the Apulian region must have been very different from what palaeontologists had always thought. Indeed, it could not have been partially immersed in sea water with only a few islands because that would not have made life on land possible. Dinosaurs and prehistoric species must have needed the mainland and thick vegetation for their survival and reproduction.

Alternative Itinerary B

Once we get to the Pulo of Altamura doline and have a short visit, we offer an alternative itinerary to the "Bosco La mena", a piece of woodland about two kilometres long and located between Quasano and the Mercadante Forest. There are a few interesting oak tree species on site such as pubescent oaks (Ital. Roverella), some sporadic examples of thorny oaks (Ital. quercia spinosa - Lat. Quercus coccifera L. or Quercus calliprinos) and the Ital. "perazzo" trees.

Two unique Apulian flower and plant species growing in this section of the park are the wild orchid "offside of Matera" and the Apulian "gigaro".

La Mena woodland is a protected area because it constitutes the natural habitat for the reproduction of woodland and song bird species such as buzzards, golden orioles, woodlarks, red and grey shrikes, nightingales and Sardinian whitethroats.

There are also other species such as the green lizards, common turtles, Kotschy's geckos, vipers and colubers.

In the area there is a necropolis called after the "La Mena" area and characterized by a number of barrows or "specchie" in the local language. These are mounds of limestone slabs piled up randomly over prehistoric graves making up a circle with a diameter of 4 - 8,50 metres and usually indicated by four medium sized stone blocks.

These constructions prove the presence of prehistoric men in this area since X-IV century BC. Another amazing example of the Apulian prehistory in this section of the National Park is "Pozzi di Rota" (Eng. wheeled potholes). The prehistoric Apulian farmers and shepherds seem to have adapted the natural landscape to thrive on this bare land by building massive stone wheels in two depressions which worked as natural basins for water storage and collection during the rainy seasons.

Itinerary Overview

Natural environment: stony pastures, coppice woodland, oak wood, scrubland, steppe vegetation, cropland, karst phenomena.

Palaeontology | Archaeology : Man of Altamura, Pulo of Altamura, necropolis "La mena", "Pozzi di Rota" (Eng. wheeled potholes).

Architecture: dry stone rural constructions e.g. masserie, jazzi, trulli, walls, "specchie"

Specialities & Delicacies: cheese made of sheep milk, bread of Altamura, stew of sheep and wild weeds and herbs or "pecora a la rezzaula", Padre Peppe walnuts based liqueur.

Start/Arrival: Gravina in Puglia (recommended). Alternatively, any other towns in the National park area.

Target: teenagers 13 years and over

Itinerary: guided tour; Difficulty: easy

Time: 8.30 a.m.

Length of the tour: all day/ half day (on demand)

Transport: 15 passenger seats mini coach