



**SURROUNDED BY A GREEN FRAME OF HIGH MOUNTAINS,
THE TOWN IS MIRRORED IN ITS BEAUTIFUL LAKE**

PIANA DEGLI ALBANESI

The most important Albanian settlement in Sicily that, after five centuries from its foundation, wholly preserves its ethnic-linguistic identity

Piana degli Albanesi is a small mountain resort in the Province of Palermo, whose magnificent naturalistic environment and typical mild Mediterranean climate create an ideal peaceful and serene oasis. Its natural setting is rich and composed and includes the lake, the mountains and the typical rural quarters. To the south-east, immersed in the greenness, there is the artificial lake formed by damming the course of the Belice Destro river, in 1923.

HISTORICAL AND INTERESTING PLACES

Because of its cultural, historical and environmental peculiarities, Piana degli Albanesi is a unique example in the variety of Sicilian panoramas. In fact, architecture is the evidence of history and Piana presents itself as a mixture of Baroque and Byzantine styles.

It seems that the Albanian founders of Piana, after nearly a century of residence in the place, lived in houses built according to medieval architectural style rather than the one of the sixteenth century, as proved by the presence of

stone arches and barrel vaults. After abandoning the Byzantine style, they were influenced by the architectural-urbanistic features of Monreale. Between the end of 1500 and the first half of 1600, Piana degli Albanesi was overwhelmed by the strong artistic personality of Pietro Novelli from Monreale, who left his stylistic imprint in churches, fountains, palaces and even in the setting of the town centre.

MONASTERO DEI PADRI BASILIANI (SKLIZZA)

In this monastery, situated in a panoramic spot over the town, you can admire some wonderful mosaic works by a local artist. From here, it is also worth having a look at the valley below.

CATTEDRALE DI SAN DEMETRIO

The Cathedral dedicated to San Demetrio of Thessalonica, is a building dating from the late fifteenth century, which preserves some important frescoes by Pietro Novelli. The most ancient one is the icon of the Mother of God with the Christ (1500). Evident the presence of two cultures in this place of worship, so that you can attend the liturgy in Greek-Byzantine rite

CHIESA DI SAN GIORGIO

San Giorgio, built in 1495, is the most ancient church of Piana degli Albanesi. It preserves some remarkable frescoes by Pietro Novelli.

CHIESA DELLA MADONNA ODIGITRIA

The church is the only architectural work by Pietro Novelli at Piana degli Albanesi. Its nave is divided from the two aisles by four pillars which support the octagonal dome with a small lantern. It preserves a picture of the Virgin Odigitria that was brought here by the refugees during their flight from Albania.

ANCIENT AND MODERN ICONS

Also modern painters of icons, whose works can be admired in the churches of Piana, draw inspiration from the Byzantine art and, after a few centuries, keep alive a tradition that is still rooted in the community of the town. These skilful iconographers are accurate interpreters of techniques, style, use of materials as well as the position of the figures, the symbolic gestures and the choice of colours, according to every detail established for centuries about this kind of art. The excellence of their icons comes from their ancient taste and from the elegance of their execution.

POPOLAZIONE LOCALE - TRADIZIONI - TOPONOMASTICA

The foundation of Piana degli Albanesi goes back to the end of the 15th century when, after the invasion of the Balkan Peninsula by the Ottoman Turks, many groups of Albanian refugees fled to the nearby coast of southern Italy, where they settled and founded new rural structures.

When they arrived at Piana degli Albanesi, they had already chosen and acquired the fiefs of the depopulated land of Merco and Dingoli where they established and built their own identity.

Some legends were also invented and handed down: imaginary, religious and profane stories linked to special places, like caves or simple stones, to make familiar the territory of their new life.

There is a legend about a stone, situated at the foot of Mount Pizzutta, near the rural Odigitria, with a track left by the painting of the Virgin Odigitria, brought by refugees from Albania. This track was considered as a good omen by all the people that established their residence in that place. So the children were told to put their eye and their ear on a small hollow in the stone, so that they could see the places their ancestors had left and to hear their Albanian brothers' voices. These are the signs of the historical memories of Piana and its territory, which melt with religious traditions celebrated during weddings and festivities of Albanian origin. To be mentioned the Epiphany, celebrated according to the Byzantine rite, and Easter, when people, dressed with the typical costumes embroidered with gold and silver, gather in the main street overlooked by the Churches of Santa Maria Odigitria, San Giorgio and San Demetrio.

THE TRADITION OF LACE

In the past, the pillow lace with threads of gold and silver was made at Piana degli Albanesi, as well as the hems called "Kurore" that used to adorn the skirts of the costumes. Today the lace is still skilfully executed, but the traditional costumes are embroidered in gold by loom.

INTERESTING SURROUNDINGS

SERRE DELLA PIZZUTA

The natural reserve “Serre della Pizzuta”, in the district of Piana degli Albanesi, was founded on 28th December 1998, entrusted to the Azienda Foreste Demaniali of Sicily Region and managed by the Ispettorato Ripartimentale delle Foreste of Palermo who takes care of its protection and use.

The peculiarity of this area is the climate: humid masses of water are pushed upward and, due to the decrease of temperature, give rise to orographic precipitations. The reserve is named after the highest mountain (1333m above sea level) going back to the Mesozoic Age. The different shapes of their peaks, together with the hollows that recall the dolines, are the result of karst process caused by the effect of the atmospheric agents on carbonate rocks. We can admire the Grotta dello Zubbione and the fascinating Grotta del Garrone with their incredible stalagmites and stalactites. In the reserve there are lots of interesting herbaceous plants, like the rare Sicilian “orchidea terricola” as well as various wild animals like foxes, wild cats, martens, hedgehogs, Bonelli eagles, ravens and kestrels. In the undergrowth we can hear the song of the nightingale and the night owl.

LAKE PIANA DEGLI ALBANESI

Lake Piana degli Albanesi, for its landscape and tourist resources, is an important naturalistic area of about 310 hectares and one of the symbols of Piana degli Albanesi itself. It is an artificial lake, created after the construction of a dam on the River Hone (local name of the river Belice Destro), whose water is still used for agricultural, hydroelectric and drinking purposes.

The lake is surrounded by a small mountain chain made of calcareous rocks, whose highest peaks are Mount Maganoce, Kumeta and Pizzuta. Along its shores you can see the marshy vegetation with the “tigeto” and the “scirpeto”, and nearby there are rich pastures with perpetual graminaceous plants.

Not far from the various streams flowing into the lake, red and white willows grow, while black poplars create small woods, together with the tamarisks and the pine of Aleppo. It's also possible to find small holly plants. Lots of water birds are guests of the lake, specially in wintertime. In fact the mild climate creates the ideal habitat for coots, cormorants and ducks, pochards, shovellers, whistle ducks, mallards and, during the spring migration, also pintails, garganeys and teals.

On the western shore of Lake Piana there is a stony and gravelly spot, commonly called "spiaggetta", equipped to host hikers and swimmers. Here you can practice canoeing and, in winter, several rowing companies practise here their training activities for the coming season.

LA NECROPOLI PALEOCRISTIANA OF CONTRADA S. AGATA

A few kilometres from Piana, in Contrada S. Agata, the remains of an early Christian necropolis of late Roman age, evidence of ancient and modern cultural richness of the area, were brought to light in 1988.

Cuisine

The local cuisine offers dishes and typical sweets of Sicilian tradition. Among the most tasty ones, we recommend the cannoli, the gnocchi, the cuccia and, of course, the soups with legumes and various vegetables like the groshët with broad-beans, chickpeas and beans. Excellent products come from the various local farms: udhosë and gjizë (cheese and ricotta), meat of very good quality, including the tasty pork sausage (likenka) seasoned with salt, pepper and fennel seeds (farë mbrai). The sausage qualities are enhanced by a side dish of fried wild cavoletti with garlic and oil.

The cannolo is a sweet from Piana, well-known all over the world. Its cooking secret depends on the wafer (shkorça) made with flour, wine, lard and salt; it is stuffed with sprinkled sweetened ricotta and chocolate flakes. Not to be missed the “sagra del cannolo” at Carnival.

Getting to Piana degli Albanesi

By car: Palermo-Sciacca Motorway, exit at km 20. Then go along the junction leading into the town. An alternative route is the one that from Palermo goes through Altofonte, then along the SP 5 up to the town.

**By bus: There are daily services, at any time, from the Central Station of Palermo
(Piana degli Albanesi-Palermo / Palermo-Piana degli Albanesi)**

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di Sara Cusenza**