



LIVING LIFE AT A HUMAN LEVEL IN THE REGION OF MOLISE

ISERNIA E LA SUA PROVINCIA

Nature, history, spirituality, archaeology, art, traditions and good cooking, together with the inhabitants' strong ancient wisdom, make the atmosphere of the pastoral world of olden days still survive, a world that sometimes can appear abandoned to the casual tourist. This ancient land, rich in stately mountains, dense forests, lakes and historic evidences is no longer isolated, but even if still little known, it is a spot that is worth discovering, where one feels well in touch with nature.

THE CHARM OF ISERNIA

Since 1970 Chief Town of the Province, Isernia combines its incomparable natural beauties with the charm of a past that is lost in antiquity. 700/800,000 years ago, a tribe of Homines Erecti, a group of hunters strenuously fighting for surviving, decided to settle in this place rich in waters and game. Here, little by little, they built up a real urban structure, overcoming many difficulties. Isernia was a fortified Samnites centre, the Italics capital and a Roman colony. The Sannio Pentro, an area depending on rural economy and easily connecting to the road network of Lazio, Campania, Costa Adriatica and Puglia, in the days of the Emperor Augustus was assigned to the 5th Roman Legion veterans. It experienced a period of decay when the Roman imperial society collapsed, then it underwent, one after the other, the Lombard, Norman and Swabian dominations. A medieval bishop see, a fief and a free city under the Kingdom of Naples, it suffered a disastrous economical situation after the unification of Italy that forced most of its inhabitants to emigrate. But just the incomes from the emigrants granted the economic recovery of Isernia that expanded and started to prosper again. Even if the Second World War too was catastrophic for the town, the election to Chief Town of the Province rewarded Isernia both for the extension of its territory and its important situation, but above all for its sacrifice for the nation's bene-

fit. Today Isernia is an interesting town that is worth getting to know, where the past and the present are blended into a harmonious whole. Besides the charming narrow streets of the old town, you shouldn't miss a visit to the pre-Roman walls, the Fontana della Fraternal built between the 13th and 14th centuries, the Cathedral rebuilt on the ruins of an ancient pagan temple, the National Museum housed in the former Convento delle Benedettine, the Romanesque Church of S. Maria Assunta and, right outside the town, the archaeological area and the Sanctuary of S. Cosma and S. Damiano.

UNTOUCHED AND PROTECTED NATURE

Visiting the region of Molise means being fond of the untouched and protected nature, with ranges of high mountains, plains and plateaux, valleys, rivers, lakes, flowers, plants and animals. It can be really exciting to live here, in the green heart of the province of Isernia! The ancient land of the Samnites is gentle, peaceful and safe, with silent breathtaking and varied landscapes: unbounded green spaces, humid mountain pasture surrounded by the peaks of the massifs of Alto Molise, ranges of fields and forests with many sheep-tracks and pleasant paths. The sheep-tracks, 111m wide, remind you of flocks, herds and the transhumance from the plain to the mountain and again to the plain, whose richness, in the past, was guarded by castles, towers and fortified "masserie". This land is so rich in historic relics and memories, still to be found and carefully preserved, that can enchant you with the charm of the ancient times.

THE SILVER FIR

Magic and stately, the silver fir forests set in Alto Molise, unfortunately cut down by the man's intervention over time, have become more and more precious: Collemeluccio, in the commune of Pescocolanciano, Montedimezzo in the commune of Vastogirardi, Capracotta, Pescopennataro and Agnone for example. The MAB (Man and Biosphere) Reserve of Collemeluccio-Montedimezzo, that also include some woodlands of the neighbouring villages, is one of the 245 Reserves established by UNESCO all over the world, aimed at protecting the interesting natural zones and studying the relationship of the man with the animals and the vegetable world. It is mainly formed of silver firs, beech trees and Turkey oaks and hosts wolves, squirrels, wild boars, hares, weasels, foxes, owls and vipers.

THE MOUNTAINS OF MOLISE: OASES, RESERVES AND PARKS

The geological formation of Molise is simple: the range of the Apennines is north and south and the hills, whose side facing the Tyrrhenian Sea is like a high bastion, while the one facing the Adriatic Sea has more gentle slopes, rise along the valleys of the watercourses. Made of karstic rock, the mountains swallow up the rain water that re-emerges down below where the ground becomes impermeable. The Mainarde mountains, uncontaminated and wonderful, are part of the area of Molise included in National Park of Abruzzo, Lazio e Molise, just where the protected nature reigns, with the communes of Pizzone, Scapoli, Rocchetta al Volturno, Castel San Vincenzo and Filignano. On the ridges, in the secret mountain recesses or nearby the forests of oaks, beeches and firs (it is famous the extraordinary beech grove of Valle Fiorita!) there are packs of deer and chamois and some specimens of the Marsican brown bear. Sometimes, you can even see a golden-eagle circling high above. The Frentani, characterized by gentler mountains, lower and round shaped, seem to be the natural access from the low Abruzzo and the Southern Adriatic regions to the Protected Natural zones of the centre of the Apennines. The protected areas of this territory are all very interesting. Among them we would mention the MAB (Man and Biosphere) Reserve of Collemeluccio-Montedimezzo, the National Reserve of Pesche rich in arboreal species and especially the black pine, the Legambiente Oasis of Selva Castiglione in the commune of Carovilli, the Oasis of the Mortine, between the Mainarde and the Matese mountains, run by WWF Italy, and the Botanic Garden of Capracotta, in the province of Isernia in Alto Molise, at 1550m a.s.l., along the road leading to Prato Gentile. The Garden lies at a short distance from the splendid ski-slopes that hosted the Italian Ski Championships in 1997 and not far from the village, overlooking the Valle del Sangro and with a splendid view of the Mainarde, Maiella and the whole Molise. Extending for 10 hectares, it is one of the few examples of "natural botanic garden" in Italy, since it preserves the spontaneous endemic species of the Apennine flora in a totally natural and untouched environment. The series ends with the Mounts of Sannio, standing on the boundary with Campobasso, and the stately massif of Matese, made of calcareous rock and rich in water, that from the northern-west to the southern-east marks the boundary with the region of Campania. The massif of Matese, whose peaks rise more than 2000m high (Miletto), is mostly covered with a dense beech-wood, famous for the enormous ancient trees 550 years old in the Tre Frati area of Mount Mutria. The Oasis of Guardiaregia, the second in Italy for extension, stretched along the eastern side of the massif, is extraordinary for the richness of primroses and wild carnations, mountain orchids and violets as well as for the presence of the wild cat, the wolf and the royal kite. "The secluded wild rigour of the mountain villages" wrote Francesco Jovine, the writer of the novel "Terre del Sacramento" born in Molise, about this environment rich in big karstic plateaux, colourful high grasslands, dolinas, swallow-holes, canyons and caves, peaks 2000m high, a real geological museum in the open air. Giardino della Flora Appenninica Capracotta - tel. 0865 949210.

THE VOLTURNO CATCHMENT BASIN

The catchment basin of the Volturno River is quite interesting: thanks to its naturalistic integrity, it can boast landscapes of remarkable beauty, from the enchanting Mainarde mountains to the artificial Lake Castel San Vincenzo, from the rich beds of reeds to a big variety of animals. The water of the river flows from its calm springs, at first tumultuously, then more and more quietly towards the plain up to the surroundings of Venafro, where the Oasis of the Mortine, run by WWF Italy, lies. Between the Mainarde mountains and the Massif of Matese, the Volturno River crosses a humid area densely covered with willows, white poplars, black alders and thick beds of reeds and populated by both the sedentary and migratory avifauna, extremely appreciated by the researchers. The whole Volturno Valley produces an excellent extra-virgin oil, wine, lentils, beans, "cicerchie", onions, garlic and honey.

WINTER SPORT FACILITIES

The best equipped resorts for winter sports are Campitello Matese, in the commune of San Massimo, and Capracotta. Campitello Matese, lies at 1400m of altitude, in a natural amphitheatre overlooked by the massifs populated by wolves, birds of prey and reptiles; it is covered with snow from Autumn to late in Spring. The slopes are equipped for every sport activity and the accommodation facilities, well integrated in the environment, have made Campitello become an avant-garde resort for winter tourism. Capracotta, surrounded by vast tracts of woods and pastures, stands at 1460m of altitude between Monte Capraro, famous for its downhill ski-slopes, and Mount Campo. Both in Winter and in Summertime, Capracotta offers various opportunities to practise sport and recreational activities. In winter, the village becomes the favourite destination for cross-country ski lovers; in fact at Prato Gentile, among the woods and the clearings, there is an enchanting cross-country slope that in 1997 hosted the Cross-Country Italian Championships and in 2004 the Cross-Country Continental Cup. In Summer you can also practise horse riding, tennis, football and skating. On the first Sunday of August, the splendid clearing of Prato Gentile is crowded for the celebration of the Pezzata - a feast loved by the shepherds of the place and named after the excellent typical dish of "stewed lamb", savoured with various aromas, that is offered to visitors. When the snow does not cover the area, it is worth stopping at Staffoli, in the Commune of Agnone, in the large farm-holiday estate that offers you the opportunity of enjoying horse riding and tasting the delicious local food.

Consorzio Campitello Matese, San Massimo, Piazza Marconi, tel. 0874 784190

Sci Club Capracotta, Pzza S.Falconi, 4 - 86082 Capracotta (IS) tel. 0865 949303.

ARCHAEOLOGICAL FINDS IN MOLISE

Just on the outskirts of Isernia, in 1979 was brought to light the Palaeolithic camp of La Pineta, surely the most ancient and richest prehistoric site in Europe with evidences of man activities going back to 730 thousand years ago; various relics are set in the Museo Nazionale della Pentria. The long history of Molise has also been marked by grottos and caves found in the mountainous area of Matese, to confirm that humans have existed in the region since prehistoric times. But the masterpiece of Molise is the Archaeological Park of Pietrabbondante, close to the ancient sheep-track Celano-Foggia, a remarkable place for both archaeological and naturalistic reasons. It consists of the remains of the ancient town of Pietrabbondante, important religious and civil center of the Pentria civilization, built by the Samnites a few decades before surrendering themselves to the Romans, with a necropolis, two temples and traces of dwellings and shops. Extremely significant are the remains of the theatre, cut out of the natural slope, with terraces formed by five flights of steps and contour benches. Further excavations are now bringing to light other precious finds among which is a big dwelling with its rooms.

Besides the remains of a big Roman amphitheatre at Larino - Piano San Leonardo, in the province of Campobasso, of particular interest is the important medieval village of Altilia, with rural houses preserving inside them the remains of the ancient Roman village of Saepinum conquered in 293 BC; you can admire the massive walls, four monumental gates, the basilica, the temple, the thermal baths, the theatre and the dwelling area.

RELIGIOSNESS OF YESTERDAY AND TODAY

The whole Molise, from the small villages surrounded by the untouched nature up to places of worship (grottos, churches and sanctuaries) is pervaded by spirituality. At the foot of Mount Patalecchia, one of the mountains of Castelpetroso, there is the neo-Gothic Sanctuary made with local stones and, in 1975, dedicated to the Madonna Addolorata, patron saint of Molise. It was built at Cesa tra Santi, a small fraction of Castelpetroso, to remind people of the apparition of the Madonna in 1888. Outside the Sanctuary, the Via Matris starts its route along the mountain up to the site of the apparition, where a bronze statute by Buratti depicts the Regal Maternity. There are also important ancient holy places, hidden in the wide and silent nature, that the Regional Administration is bringing back to light. S. Angelo in Grotte, clinging to the top of a rocky mountain opposite to Matese, 900m a.s.l., along the sheep-track connecting the Puglie and Abruzzo regions, boasts one of the most beautiful landscapes of Molise. It is worth visiting the Parish Church with its dark crypt, a precious work of art, history and faith, rich in medieval frescoes by painters from the School of Siena (end of 1300) and depicting the seven works of mercy. Just in this place, destination for visitors and pilgrims, there is the Grotta di S. Michele (800 AD), that represents the symbol of the link between man and nature, as intended by God the Creator. It consists of a hollow rock with cracks and stalactites shaped by the water descending from the green and pink rock: inside it you can see a well collecting water, a baptistery in

the shape of a cylinder and the statue of the Archangel Michael, represented as a warrior that treads on the enemy disguised as a repulsive monster. Another area rich in spirituality is the one where the Monastery of San Vincenzo al Volturno lies. It is a Benedictine historic monastery built between the 5th and the 6th centuries AD on a pre-existing Samnite settlement (6th-5th centuries BC) in the Alta Valle del Volturno, Commune of Castel San Vincenzo. Various religious celebrations and local folk festivals certify the population's strong affection for the rural culture that has ancient roots in the pagan cult, propitiatory rites and medieval holy feasts. Among them is the "Ndociata di Agnone" that consists of the passing of tens and tens of "ndocce", pieces of silver fir shaped like a halo of rays, lit and brought on the walker's shoulders along the village streets. The "ndocce" make the village become like a river of fire that at the end forms an enormous bonfire. The silver fir used for making the "ndocce" is a tree that was originally linked to the pagan rites and has now become the symbol of the Catholic celebration of Christmas. Here this resinous tree, easy to burn, is full of both material and spiritual significance.

THE MONASTERY OF SAN VINCENZO AL VOLTURNO

Between the 5th and the 6th centuries AD, Paldo, Taso and Tato, three noble men from Benevento, decided to undertake an ascetic life and to found a monastery near the River Volturno, where there was the ruined oratory of San Vincenzo whose foundation is attributed to Constantine I The Great. Helped by the farmers, the monks reclaimed most of the territory and made the soil, before uncultivated, become fertile. The first building erected with bricks was the "Chiesa Sud", simply manufactured, on the late-Roman graveyard area. Between the end of the 8th and the first half of the 9th centuries, the monastery expanded and became a small village with 350 monks and vast landed properties; at the end of the 11th and the beginning of 12th centuries, San Vincenzo Nuovo was built along the right side of the River Volturno. The new monastery was a fortified complex with a church, consecrated in 1115, flanked with monastic laboratories then destroyed. After some centuries marked by ups and downs, in 1699 San Vincenzo al Volturno was annexed to the administration of Montecassino, that decreed the end of its autonomy. The buildings of the early Middle Ages were buried and abandoned. Only on 10 May 1832, a farmer from Castel S. Vincenzo by chance discovered a subterranean frescoed building (the famous "Cripta di Epifanio"), dating back to the 9th century, but only in the 20th century were they critically appreciated. During the Second World War the monastery was seriously damaged; after rebuilding, it now hosts a community of Benedictine Sisters. Laboratories of information technology focussed on the archaeology for the restoration, classification and preservation of relics are now being carried out at Castel San Vincenzo, the devoted archaeological mission of S. Vincenzo al Volturno.

THE PROVINCE OF THE TRUFFLE

The region of Alto Molise is rich in excellent products of the under-wood, among which is the truffle, the new star of the local gastronomy. It seems that the truffle of Molise, especially the black one, has contributed to the national production with a share of 40%. In the past the truffle used to be exported in more famous places, but now, known as one of the best typical local products, it has become the star of regional recipes and specialities such as salsicce (sausages), burrini (butter) and the delicious cheese stuffed with butter and truffle.

Superior, but rare, the white truffle (*Tuber magnatum Pico*) can be found in the humid interior valleys of the provinces of Isernia and Campobasso, while the black truffle (*Tuber aestivum Vitt*), also called Scorzone or l'Uncinato, grows widely in drier zones. The communes with the richest truffle production are San Pietro Avellana, included in the national Association "Città del Tartufo", and Carovilli. For more than ten years, San Pietro Avellana has been celebrating the "Sagra del Tartufo Nero" on the second Sunday of August, and the "Mostra Mercato del Tartufo Bianco" at the beginning of November, attracting tourists and connoisseurs also from the neighbouring regions. The Consorzio per la Valorizzazione del Tartufo Molisano, joint by 25 Communes of the Province of Isernia, has been established with the aim of protecting the truffle and its territory; it involves all the operators such as searchers, distributors, the companies working the truffle process, the Communes and other associations. The "Fiera Provinciale del Tartufo" will also be held on 12th and 13th August, with the aim of unifying the celebration of the truffle in the whole territory of the province.

Cuisine

What is surprising, visiting Molise every season of the year, is the rich agricultural and pastoral products such as legumes, vegetables, under-wood fruits, sheep, poultry, pigs and game, which have always been the prevalent ingredients of the local cuisine that maintains past flavours and aromas. Typical dishes, simple but tasty, are the "minestra di piccole lasagne (sagne)" made by hand with beans, aromatic herbs and hot peppers, "polenta" with pork sausages and peppers with vinegar, "fegato di vitello alla pizzaiola", "gnocchi" made with flour and potatoes (cavatelli) served with ragù made of lamb, "turcinelli arrostiti" (grilled lamb entrails) and the "sfingione", tasting alike the "pizza napoletana".

There are various dishes with kid and lamb meat (roasted, baked or cacciatore) flavoured with the "diavolillo" (red hot pepper). Among the cheese you can taste the ricotte, scamorze and mozzarella; especially renowned are the "pecorino" from Capracotta and the "cacio a cavallo della pertica" produced from cow's milk at Agnone that can be eaten fresh or mature. Pentro d'Isernia is the DOC wine that can be white, red, rosé and Red Riserva; the Biferno Rosso DOC, produced in the area of Campobasso, is a soft wine aged for 1 or up to 4 years and the Molise Greco Bianco DOC, than can be both dry or sparkling, is a delicious wine produced throughout the region.

Gettin to Isernia

By car: A1 Motorway Roma-Napoli, S. Vittore exit. **By train:** Isernia station. INFO: www.trenitalia.it or Isernia Station tel. 0865 414143. **By plane:** the nearest Airports are at Roma and Napoli.

**REGIONE MOLISE
ASSESSORATO AL TURISMO**

Via Crispi - Campobasso
Tel. 087 429515/429514

ENTE PROVINCIALE PER IL TURISMO

Via Farinacci, 9 - Isernia
Tel. 0865 414590