

Puglia 1: Gargano self-guided walk 8 days / 7 nights.

The Gargano is a mountainous peninsula in the north of Puglia, the 'spur' on the boot of Italy, an expansive promontory covered by one of Italy's oldest national parks. It is surrounded by sparkling waters, white limestone cliffs and pretty fishing villages and towns. With its strategic position, Gargano has a rich history. It has been inhabited since Neolithic times and has towns that were founded by the ancient Greeks and Romans. However, it was under Norman rule during the Crusades that Gargano reached its greatest glory when the sanctuary of Monte San Michele (centred around a cave on the southern side of the promontory where an apparition of St Michael occurred in the 5th century AD) became one of the most important pilgrim destinations in the Middle Ages.

The tour starts with a transfer from the nearby town of Foggia, which is connected to Rome by regular trains. You'll be met here and driven up to a small town perched on the western end of the Gargano peninsula. The first three walks follow the route of a Medieval pilgrim trail, the Sacred Lombard Trail with wide views south over the Adriatic coast, staying in two very buzzy and interesting pilgrim towns along the way. You pass through rolling farmlands with expansive views south over the flat plains and the coast of northern Puglia.

The next two walks skirt around the edge of the Foresta Umbra, an ancient beech forest that was recently World Heritage listed by UNESCO following the Trail of the Pilgrims of St Michael. The last walk is a spectacular descent down to the sea, finishing at the dramatically located town of Vieste, where you'll spend the final two nights.

On the morning of your free day in Vieste, we will book a private boat to take you for a tour exploring the bays and grottoes of some of the most beautiful natural coastline in southern Italy (subject to weather conditions). The afternoon is free. The following morning you will be transferred back to Foggia railway station, a one-hour drive away.

The walks:

The walks are long, contemplative rambles through beautiful countryside and forests. They cover a range of terrain, following well-marked trails through rolling farmlands and woodlands for the first three days. The next two days take you through beautiful beech forests. The last walk is an easy descent down a wide trail with spectacular views over the Adriatic Coast. The itinerary mostly follows marked, unsealed country lanes. There are some sections of asphalt going into and out of the towns. There is a short but steep descent down into a gully and climb back up again at the beginning on the walk on Day 4. This is categorised as a Grade 4 walk (please click here for details).

The accommodation:

The accommodation is a mix of well-located hotels. On Days 1, 2 and 3 you stay in excellent 4-star hotels (each with a swimming pool); on Days 4 and 5 you stay in two very comfortable, family-run 'agriturismos' while, for your last two nights in Vieste, Days 6 and 7, you stay in a very comfortable hotel in the centre of town.

The food and wine:

Pugliese cuisine is simple, rustic and cheerful, based on the abundance of its fertile plains and coast line. As Italy's wheat belt, pasta and a variety of excellent breads are pillars of Pugliese diet, as is olive oil (Puglia has over 50 million olive trees, some over 2000 years old). Although wine-making in Puglia stretches back to the ancient Greeks, for a long time Puglia was a source of robust red wine sent north to cut the pallid wines of Tuscany and Piedmont. In recent times the industry has been revolutionised and Puglia now produces some excellent reds (Primitivo and Negroamaro), whites (Fiano and Vermentino) and some very good roses. You'll experience the whole range on this walk.

Inclusions:

- Pick up at the beginning and drop-off at the end at Foggia railway station
- Seven nights' accommodation
- Seven breakfasts and seven dinners (3 courses)
- Reading lists and historical and cultural notes
- Maps and detailed walking instructions
- Daily transfers of baggage between hotels
- 24-hour backup from local manager

The Puglia 1: Gargano self-guided walk itinerary:

Day 1:

Foggia is the main city in northern Puglia, a three-hour train ride from Rome. You will be transferred from here to a small town on the southern end of the Gargano Peninsula (a 40-minute drive) where you will spend the first night.

Day 2:

The first walk takes you up to the top of the peninsula. You then follow a marked medieval pilgrim path through rolling farmlands with spectacular views south across the plains to the northern coast of the Adriatic and the town where you will stay the night. Although with an ancient historic centre, the town has become a modern pilgrim site, being the home and resting place of Padre Pio (1887 to 1968) the most beloved of modern Italian saints. It also is famous for its giant modern church designed Renzo Piano to accommodate the faithful. (12 kms, 3.5 hrs)

Day 3:

Today you pick up the Lombard pilgrim trail again and continue along the peninsula, passing through beautiful farmlands to one of the most important medieval sanctuaries in southern Italy. Although dating from the 5th century, it was the Normans, on their way to Jerusalem in the 11th century, who placed the site on the map. Along the way you have more spectacular views south over the coast. It is a long but very satisfying walk through forests and farmlands (which can be shortened by 8 kms). (23 kms, 6 hrs)

Day 4:

The walk today picks up another pilgrim route (dedicated to St Michael) which you follow through the Foresta Umbra (an ancient beech forest which was recently listed with UNESCO) to a beautiful 'agriturismo' that sits under Monte Sacro, the 'sacred mountain'. The walk starts by dipping down into a gully and climbing up the other side before winding its way along mostly unsealed country lanes to your accommodation. The agriturismo is family-run, serves fine food and has a swimming pool. Another long but rewarding day. (17 kms, 4.5 hrs)

Day 5:

Today starts with a visit to the top of Monte Sacro to the ruins of a Benedictine monastery founded by the Byzantines in the 7th century. The path then follows unsealed country lanes through the Foresta Umbra to another charming, family-run agriturismo, an ancient 'masseria' which has been in the same family for four generations. (15 kms, 4 hours)

Day 6:

Leaving your accommodation, you walk down a wide path with views over the coast, before descending to the sea. The last stretch is a walk along a long sand beach to Vieste, a very attractive town on a promontory wedged between two extended beaches. (12 kms, 3 hrs)

Day 7:

Free day in Vieste. We have booked a private boat to take you for a morning tour along the spectacular rocky shoreline to explore the grottoes and bays of one of southern Italy's most spectacular coasts (subject to the weather conditions). You'll have the chance to have a swim before heading back to town. The afternoon is free.

Day 8:

This morning, you will have a private transfer from Vieste to Foggia railway station (1 hour), from where you can take trains west to Rome or south to Bari.