CALABRIA
STRAORDINARIA

DIARY OF A
CALABRIAN
JOURNEY

THE **HISTORIC CENTRES** AND **OLD VILLAGES**

CALABRIA
STRAORDINARIA

Regione Calabria
Dipartimento Turismo,
Marketing territoriale e Mobilità

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This guide is part of a series of five *Diaries of a Calabrian journey*, each on a particular way of experiencing this region:

- **Nature reserves and parks**
- **Art and culture**
- **The historic centres and old villages**
- **The coasts and the sea**
- **Wine, food and the land**

The *Diaries* are meant to be a ready to use tool for anyone about to travel round Calabria, wanting to experience it in its fullness and complexity but, in particular, with the intention of looking at it with the eyes of a true traveller.
They are guides, full of advice and suggestions, on the physical and also mental paths that help the traveller not to miss any of the wonders in the area without stopping him/her from following their own instinct, interests and way of existence.

The word 'diary' automatically evokes a book whose pages are normally full of notes, supplemented by sketches or photos. That's why it was chosen as the metaphor for the journey and a very particular way of describing it using both words and pictures - more emotional than educational. It's an experience that purposely recalls the *Grand Tour* which, from the 18th to the early 20th centuries, included an almost compulsory trip into Calabria for European intellectuals of that time who, luckily, left an indelible trace for us in the pages of their invaluable travel diaries.

Sellia

THE **MONUMENTS** I VISIT ALL STAND OUT
AGAINST THE SKY ABOVE, THE EMPTINESS BELOW
SURROUNDED BY **RAMPARTS** AND **RAVINES**
BRINGING DIZZINESS
THE **HOUSES** HUDDLED TOGETHER INSIDE
PATROL PATHS
LIKE FRIGHTENED SHEEP
AND THE **ROOFS** OF A PINKISH OCHRE COLOUR
RESEMBLE A WARM **CLOAK**

I CONTEMPLATE THE **VALLEY** BELOW
AND THE **HILLS** THAT DESCEND
IN WAVES TO THE IONIAN SEA
FROM THE **CASTLE** WALLS

WHAT SURPRISING **URBAN DEVELOPMENT**
THESE **TOWNS** PERCHED
ON THE TOP OF THE STEEPEST PEAKS...
NO OTHER PART OF THE WORLD
HAS SUCH A HIGH NUMBER OF **VILLAGES**
SHELTERING ON THE MOUNTAINS

MARIA BRANDON-ALBINI, CALABRIA, 1957

Soriano Calabro, Cloisters of the Monastery of San Domenico

Travel notes

Calabria is studded with small centres, sometimes still proudly inhabited and, at others, abandoned by humans because of emigration or the natural calamities that have unmercifully destroyed them. These are old villages, mainly dating to the mediaeval era or relatively more recent historical periods which have, however, kept their layout and architectural features almost unchanged in time. However, even the larger places in the region, towns that have developed in the name of modernity, have been able to keep their original nuclei, guarded like precious treasure. Historic centres where more or less relevant traces, consistent with their glorious past, can be found but also traces of the normality of a daily life marked by the simplicity of a mainly peasant, craftsman or maritime culture, depending on the situation and the geographical location.

Whether these old places are on the coast, close to the sea, or in the mountains of the interior, they have always attracted the curiosity of travellers and tourists, at least those who wanted to spend more time in an atmosphere where time seems to have stood still. Those who wanted to try, albeit for a limited time, living in environments where ways of life and the consolidated habits of peoples who succeeded each other historically could be rediscovered until this magnificent 'present time' was built, always respectful of its past. The magic that pervades the evidence of 'once upon a time' is palpable in the old walls of Calabrian villages, at the meeting of streets and alleys, in the squares, the centre of life together, in the poorest constructions and the most imposing ones, in the same way, all examples of a past able to express beauty and hold a piece of that history that has passed through Calabria over the centuries.

Many very different peoples have lived in these places, leaving indelible traces of their passage, enriching the land with their civilisation, which can now be traced in the façade of a building or an expression in dialect, the

San Giovanni in Fiore

colours of a fresco or a traditional costume, a musical rhythm or the skilful combination of ingredients in a traditional dish. The roots of the land lie in the rich and splendid settlements of Magna Graecia and the myth of ancient Rome but also in the Byzantine and Arab, Norman and Swabian, Angevin and Aragonese, Spanish, Bourbon and French peoples, down to the decisive passage of Garibaldi and his Thousand that was the prelude to the unity of Italy. All these peoples have in some way contributed to the creation of a melting pot of cultures that is still live in Calabria and makes it a special, unique region.

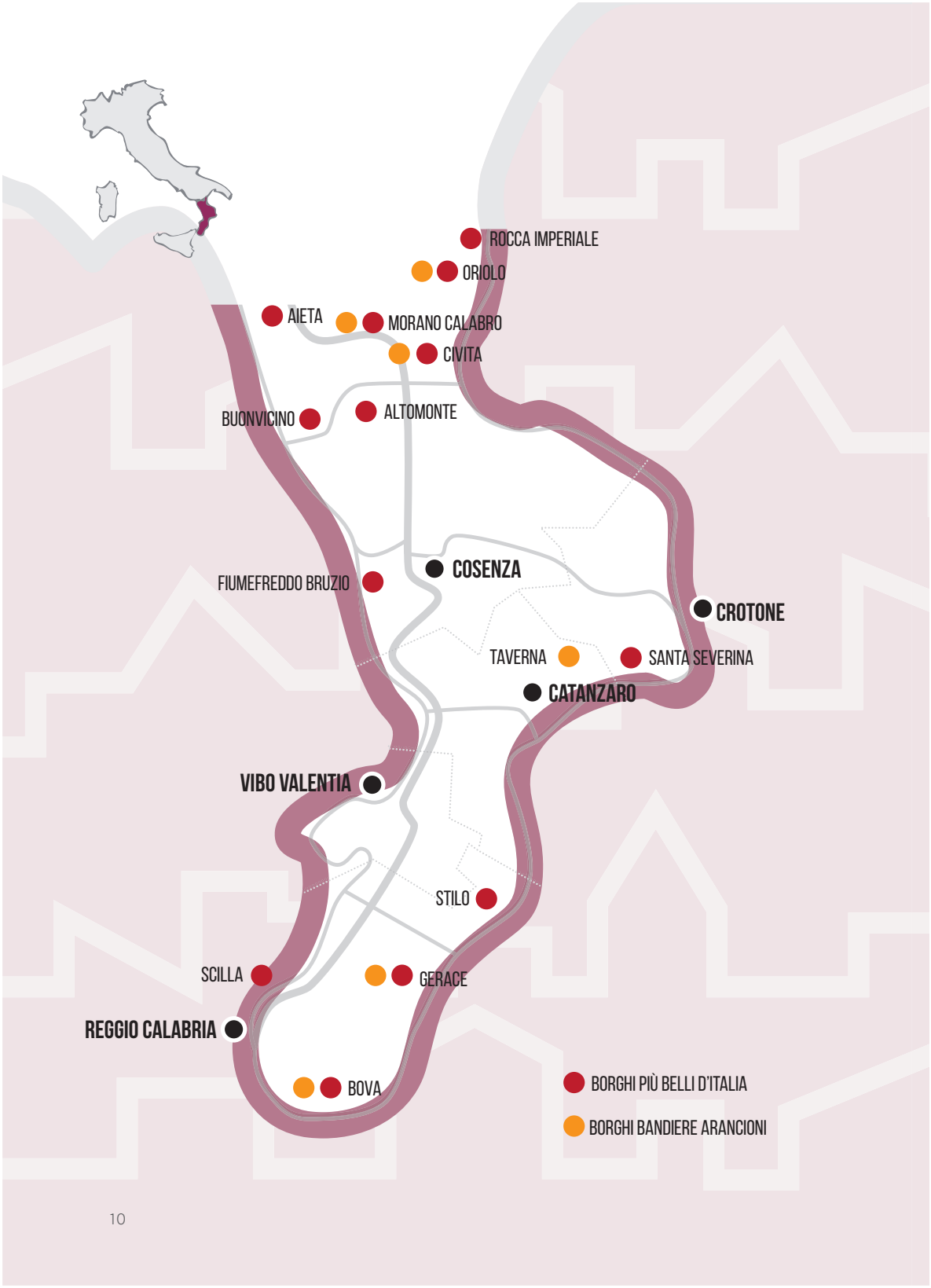
Squillace, Norman Castle

VISITS TO THE MOST BEAUTIFUL VILLAGES IN CALABRIA

When visiting Calabria, some centres are included with full rights among the excellences of the whole of Italy are worthy of special attention and are distinguished by the prestigious symbols of the '*Borghi più belli d'Italia'* (Most Beautiful Villages in Italy), the '*Bandiera Arancioni*' (Orange Flags) or '*Borghi Autentici d'Italia*' (Authentic Villages of Italy). However, these are only some of the many villages and historic centres of considerable historic-artistic and cultural interest scattered throughout Calabria. In reality, the whole of the region can be considered as a single route to cover over a number of days, from north to south or vice versa, among villages and historic centres that will leave the visitor awestruck and marvelling with points for reflection and particular suggestions to live intensely.

Civita

Altomonte, Church of S. Maria della Consolazione


ROCCA IMPERIALE
ORIOLO
AIETA
MORANO CALABRO
CIVITA
BUONVICINO
ALTOMONTE
COSENZA
FIUMEFREDDO BRUZIO
CROTONE
TAVERNA
SANTA SEVERINA
CATANZARO
VIBO VALENTIA
STILO
SCILLA
GERACE
REGGIO CALABRIA
BOVA
BORGHI PIÙ BELLI D'ITALIA
BORGHI BANDIERE ARANCIONI

THE 'BORGHI PIÙ BELLI D'ITALIA'

The '*Borghi più belli d'Italia*' (Most Beautiful Villages in Italy) is an initiative promoted by the Tourism Council of the *Associazione Nazionale dei Comuni Italiani* (ANCI - National Association of Italian Municipalities) which intends to valorise the great heritage of history, art, culture, environment and traditions in small Italian centres that are mostly excluded by the flows of visitors and tourists. There are 13 municipalities in Calabria that can boast inclusion among the 'Most Beautiful Villages in Italy'. They are, from north to south: Aieta, Rocca Imperiale, Oriolo, Buonvicino, Fiumefreddo Bruzio, Morano Calabro, Civita, Altomonte, Santa Severina, Stilo, Gerace, Chianalea di Scilla and Bova.

Santa Severina

AIETA

is a village of mediaeval origin in the Upper Tyrrhenian area of Cosenza. It lies between the sea and the Pollino chain and benefits from this contrast which enables the visitor to look down on the Gulf of Policastro, as though from a balcony over the Mediterranean. Its noble palace and stone doorways carved by local workers give it a Renaissance touch rarely seen in Calabria.

ROCCA IMPERIALE

owes its name to Frederick II of Swabia who built an imposing castle there but it is also the 'lemon village' because it is surrounded by immense cultivations of the fruit. The village, at the foot of the fortress, falls away to the sea. The old village, with a mediaeval appearance, has narrow lanes and steep climbs. You can visit the Friars Minor monastery, which contains a wax museum, the Romanesque mother church, with a 13th century bell-tower, and the Rosario chapel, embellished by old sculptures.

ORIOLO

has the conformation of a fortified citadel, with an Aragonese castle, which has a square keep and cylindrical corner towers, which rises imposingly on the rock overlooking the village. It was the main centre of control of the border between Calabria and Basilicata. Following a recent restoration, the castle has been furnished and opened to visitors. The church of S. Giorgio Martire, of Norman origin and with a lovely façade of bare stone, and the 18th century palaces, which have also been restored.

BUONVICINO

rises on a rocky spur in Pollino National Park and dominates the Gulf of Policastro. It is mainly mountainous but also almost touches the *Riviera dei Cedri* on the Tyrrhenian Sea. The old village features a maze of interweaving lanes and staircases overlooked by historic palaces and old doorways.

FIUMEFREDDO BRUZIO

takes its name from the cool waters of a nearby river. Access to the historic centre is through the crenellated gate that opens onto the main square reached by bare stone alleys. The square has three monuments at the sides - the mother church of S. Michele Arcangelo, Baron Del Bianco's palace and the Gaudiosi palace. The ruins of the castle are in the upper part of the village.

MORANO CALABRO

is a village on a hill surrounded by mountains, including the Calabrian side of Mount Pollino and integrates natural and artistic beauty admirably. The houses seem to hug each other forming a dense, intricate urban layout dotted with arches, towers and buttresses. The church of S. Bernardino da Siena, in late Gothic style, is fine, a gem of 15th century monastic architecture.

CIVITA

is an Arbëreshë municipality on the *Gole del Raganello* (Raganello gorges) crossed by the neighbouring *Ponte del Diavolo* (Devil's Bridge) in Pollino Park. The village is surrounded by wooded mountains and was founded by Albanian refugees who fled there after the Turkish-Ottoman occupation of the Balkans. Its main features are narrow lanes, the old quarter of Sant'Antonio and the so-called 'talking houses'.

ALTOMONTE

has a very old urban layout which may recall that of an Arab town with narrow lanes and steep staircases that follow and cross each other. The church of the Consolazione is a very fine example of Gothic-Angevin art in Calabria. The philosopher Tommaso Campanella is celebrated with a statue recalling his stay in the Dominican monastery. There is a splendid view from the village of Mount Pollino, the Sibari plain and the Ionian Sea.

SANTA SEVERINA

mainly known for its recently-restored, imposing castle built on a rocky spur. The old Byzantine quarter, not by chance called Grecìa, is also quite special with houses partly excavated in the rock and now abandoned, a proof more than anything else of its ancient origins. Some of its monuments are also Byzantine - the baptistery and church of S. Filomena have Byzantine origins but have undergone changes and reconstructions over the centuries, like the Cathedral of S. Anastasia.

STILO

is the birthplace of Tommaso Campanella, the philosopher and Dominican monk. The old village of Stilo was the main Byzantine centre in southern Calabria, inhabited by Basilian monks who built the celebrated Cattolica, one of the most important monuments in the region, built entirely in brick with three apses and five cupolas, the centre one being higher than the other four at the corners. The beautiful Norman castle on Mount Consolino is also worth visiting.

GERACE

has a mediaeval architectural structure left more or less unchanged in time; it is deep in a natural environment of rare beauty in Aspromonte National Park. The many monuments embellishing it include the church of S. Francesco d'Assisi, the Byzantine church of S. Giovannello and, in particular, the splendid cathedral, which units a Byzantine layout with the typical features of Norman cathedrals.

CHIANALEA DI SCILLA

is a magic place, going beyond the Homeric tale which had the mythical monster Scylla ready to devour passing ships living there. The village is maritime, mainly inhabited by fishermen, with a small port and the sea that brushes the old houses one on top of another. There is still an atmosphere of long ago there and you can have an intense experience of travel with all the charm of the culture and beauty of the Mediterranean.

BOVA

has very old origins linked to the era of Greek colonisation. It lies between the sea and Aspromonte, at one of the most southerly points of Calabria, and is dominated by a typical rocky peak and the remains of a Norman castle. It's one of the most important Calabrian-Greek centres in the region. The old language of Greek origin is still spoken in the village, which can also be found in the place names, and the thousand-year-old traditions of Greek culture are still preserved.

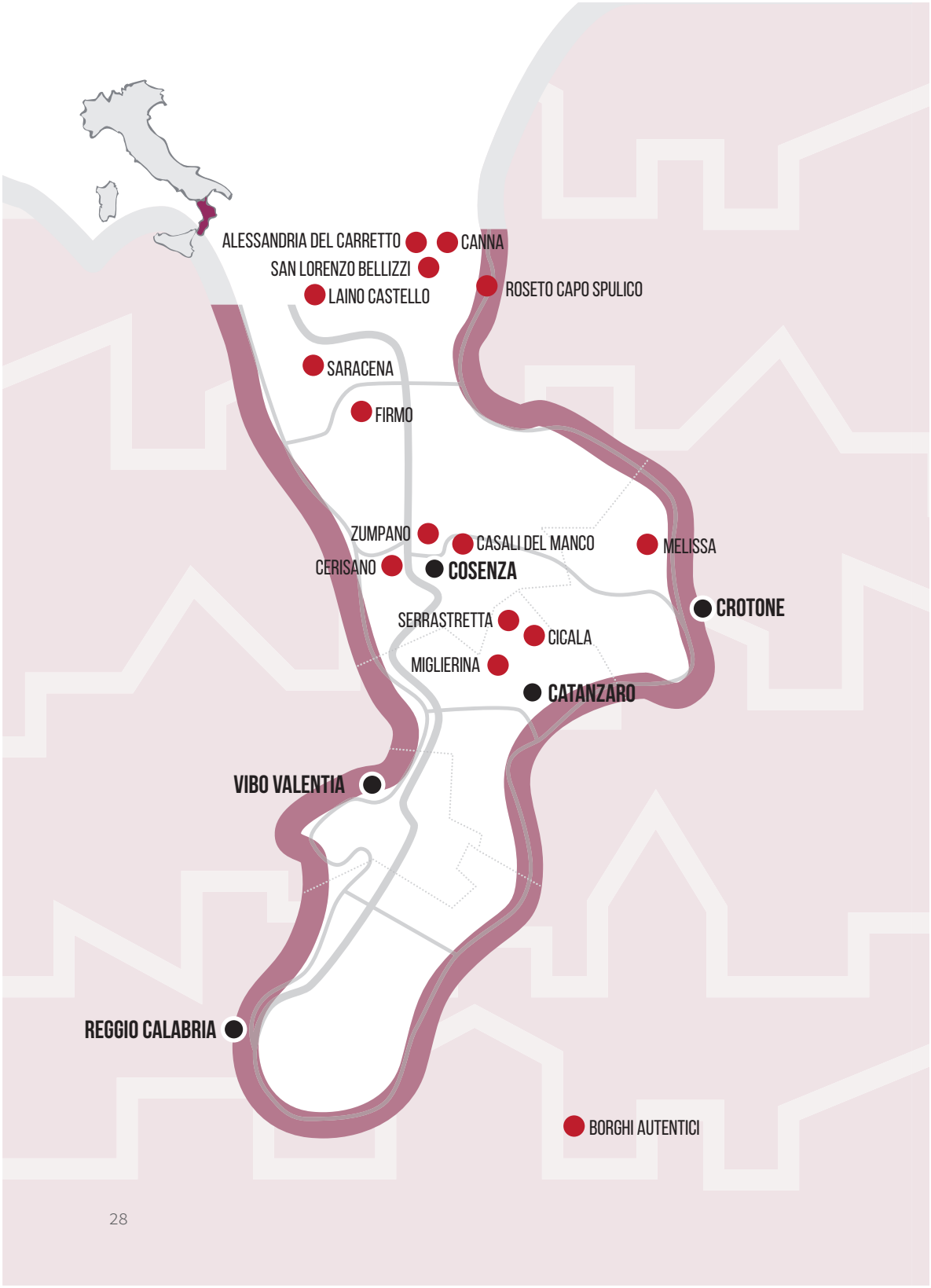
THE 'BANDIERE ARANCIONI'

The *'Bandiere Arancioni'* (Orange Flags), of the *Touring Club Italiano* are a tourism-environmental quality brand for the excellent small villages of the interior to promote the development of sustainable tourism, intended for the protection of the area and its historic, cultural and environmental heritage in addition to the authenticity of the travel experience and quality reception. In Calabria, almost all the *'Bandiere Arancioni'* are also among the 'Most Beautiful Villages in Italy' - Bova, Civita, Gerace, Morano Calabro and Oriolo; there is also Taverna.

Oriolo

TAVERNA

is mainly famous for being the birthplace of the great painter Mattia Preti, also known as the Calabrian Cavalier. Many of his works, including important ones, are preserved in the Civic Museum and two churches - S. Barbara and S. Domenico. The old Torre del Baiolardo is also worth visiting. Mancuso Village is also in the area; this typical village of Sila lies on a plateau on the edges of Sila National Park.


ALESSANDRIA DEL CARRETTO
CANNA
SAN LORENZO BELLIZZI
LAINO CASTELLO
ROSETO CAPO SPULICO
SARACENA
FIRMO
ZUMPANO
CASALI DEL MANCO
MELISSA
CERISANO
COSENZA
CROTONE
SERRASTRETTA
CICALA
MIGLIERINA
CATANZARO
VIBO VALENTIA
REGGIO CALABRIA
BORGHI AUTENTICI

THE 'BORGHI AUTENTICI D'ITALIA'

The *'Borghi Autentici d'Italia'* (Authentic Villages of Italy) are promoted by the association of the same name as places to live, support and preserve. They form a network between areas and the communities which decide to put their resources at stake in a sustainable, fair development model that respects places and people and is attentive to the valorisation of local identities. There are 14 municipalities in Calabria that can call themselves 'Authentic Villages of Italy'. They are, north to south: Laino Castello, Saracena, Firmo, Canna, Roseto Capo Spulico, Alessandria del Carretto, San Lorenzo Bellizzi, Cerisano, Casali del Manco, Zumpano, Melissa, Cicala, Serrastretta and Miglierina.

Laino Castello

Laino Castello

Saracena

Firmo, Skanderbeg statue

Laino Castello is a welcoming, modern village, easy to reach on the *Autostrada del Mediterraneo*. However, the old village it takes its name from lies nearby in a panoramic position with a view of the Pollino chain, the first villages of Basilicata and the beautiful surrounding countryside. The old village, still well-preserved, is now uninhabited but work is being done to restore it and valorise for tourism.

Saracena is an old village hanging to the slopes of the Orsomarso mountains in the Pollino chain. Its urban layout stands out because of the complex maze of lanes of Arab-like conception and the houses with the traditional external stairs. The municipal art gallery and the Sacred Art Museum can be visited in the historic centre, which is studded with many religious buildings.

Firmo is one of the most important villages of Albanian culture in Calabria. Here, you can hear Arbëreshë spoken in the streets and also attend Greek-Byzantine church services. In May, during the 'Vallie festival', the old Albanian costume can be seen worn by

women from the village who dance and chant songs in Arbëreshë.

Canna is a mediaeval village surrounded by extensive old olive groves and the dense Commaroso wood. It has a typically 17th century urban layout with Renaissance, Baroque and neo-classical elements, evidence of the great skill of the local craftsmen who created them. The nearby Santa Maria degli Antropici convent, surrounded by centuries-old oak trees, can be visited.

Canna

Roseto Capo Spulico is a small village overlooking the Ionian Sea which still preserves a lovely historic centre with the remains of the old fortification. However, the true gem of Roseto is by the sea, near to *Strada Statale 106 ionica* (Ionian State Road 106), the beautiful Frederician castle, restored and well-preserved, which can also be visited inside, built on a rocky spur overlooking the sea. There is a curious rock formation which rises from the sea opposite the castle called the 'anvil stone' because of its shape.

Roseto Capo Spulico

Alessandria del Carretto

San Lorenzo Bellizzi

Alessandria del Carretto is the highest village in the Pollino chain. It's typical with its houses in local grey stone. Every year in May there is the traditional festival for the 'tree ritual' made famous by the documentary *'I dimenticati'* (The Forgotten) by Vittorio De Seta.

San Lorenzo Bellizzi is in the heart of the Pollino National Park. The village has traditional houses built with bare stone and is well-preserved and valorises a splendid natural scenario. The Timpa di San Lorenda, a great rocky crest which overlooks the village, can be seen

from here. The evocative Gole del Raganello (Raganello gorges) are also part of this area.

Cerisano is a very attractive tourist village, presumably founded by the Oenotrians and already known in Greek times. It's surrounded by chestnut and beechwoods and has an interesting historic centre at the feet of the old Sersale Palace. There are lots of churches with the patron saint's church of San Lorenzo Martire standing out.

Casali del Manco is the result of the recent union of several municipalities - Casole Bruzio, Pedace, Serra Pedace, Spezzano Piccolo and Trenta, all in the pre-Sila area. They can be visited with special attention to their mediaeval layout. A large part of the Sila National Park and Mount Botte Donato, the highest peak of the Sila plateau, with winter sports facilities and a ski-lift, lie within their area.

Casali del Manco, Sila steam train

Zumpano is at the feet of the Sila National Park and borders with the Cosenza area. It has a lovely historic centre which still preserves interesting noble palaces, including the Ritacca-Valentini palace which currently houses the town hall. The village also has a splendid altarpiece by Bartolomeo Vivarini in the mother church of S. Giorgio.

In spring, the area around **Melissa** looks like an uninterrupted line of vines - this is the wine village. The historic centre, which extends

Zumpano

Serrastretta

Cicala

Melissa

along a hill, still preserves the ruins of the old castle. There are many panoramic points where you can see not only the vineyards but also the Ionian Sea and the hills of the *Marchesato* (roughly the province of Crotone). You can also visit the photographic museum dedicated to the great Ernesto Treccani, who was deeply fond of Melissa and photographed and painted the people and places for a long time.

Cicala is a typical village that extends along a mountain crest just outside the Sila National Park. The land around the village is covered by large green wooded areas and chestnut groves which were the basis of the local economy, through the production and processing of chestnuts, for many years. The characteristic festival of San Giacomo, patron saint of the village, is held on 25 July.

Serrastretta can be reached by some roads that may look like a long tunnel in summer with an arch made of dense tree branches. The village is surrounded by woods and, in particular, an immense, well-cared for beechwood which grows along the edges of the village. It is one of the few villages

that still conserves the great tradition of handcrafting wood, with a special preference for chair-making. To note is one of the most attractive Calabrian museums of peasant culture which turns into a living museum each year in August with the portrayal of the life of the peasants and their ancient crafts.

Miglierina lies in a magnificent position between the Gulfs of Squillace and Lamezia Terme, dominating the splendid valley of the River Amato. The old mills built on the river have been restored recently and the mule tracks reinstated to give access to these important items of industrial archaeology. The village is welcoming and well-preserved. The beautiful church of S. Maria del Principio, with a main façade richly decorated with stuccoes and enriched with sacred statues, is worth visiting.

Miglierina, Church of S. Maria del Principio

MINORITY LANGUAGE VILLAGES

Some villages are still especially alive with the three minority languages spoken in Calabria. The most numerous are the Albanian or, better, Arbëreshë villages of **Lungro**, site of the Eparchy, where there is also the bishop of their Greek-Orthodox church, **Civita**, **Firmo**, **San Demetrio Corone**, **Santa Sofia D'Epiro**, **Carfizzi**,

San Demetrio Corone, Church of Sant'Adriano

San Nicola dall'Alto, **Caraffa di Catanzaro** and **Vena di Maida**. There are the Occitans of **Guardia Piemontese**, the most important centre where this minority survives, and **San Sisto dei Valdesi**, whose names come from the diaspora of the Waldensians from Piedmont and Liguria, who found refuge here from the persecutions in their places of origin. The Calabrian Greeks of **Bova,** but also **Bova Marina**, **Roghudi**, **Gallicianò**, **Roccaforte del Greco** and **Condofuri**, are concentrated in the southern part of Aspromonte and still speak the old language of Greek and Byzantine origin. These places are like treasure chests where the old, precious traditions of these peoples, notably the linguistic ones, are jealously conserved.

Lungro, Cathedral

Guardia Piemontese, Porta del Sangue

Gallicianò, Byzantine Church

VILLAGES OF THE SACRED LIFE

There are many centres in Calabria with such a strong religious calling that the visitor is offered a 'path for the soul' dotted with sacred placed where the ecclesiastic cultural assets are admired not only by believers but anyone who has an internal sense of beauty. A religious itinerary must touch **Cerchiara di Calabria** and the Santuario di S. Maria delle Armi, **Corigliano**

Rossano Corigliano, Patirion

Petilia Policastro, Sanctuary of the Santa Spina

Gimigliano, Little church of the Madonna di Porto

Rossano with the Patirion, the *Codex Purpureus Rossanensis* and the Madonna Achiropita, **Paola** and the Santuario di San Francesco, **San Giovanni in Fiore**, the Badia Florence and the abbot Gioacchino, **Petilia Policastro** and the Santuario della Sacra Spina, **Gimigliano** and the Minor Basilica of Madonna di Porto, **Serra San Bruno**, the Certosa (Carthusian monastery) and St Bruno of Cologne, and **San Luca** and the Santuario della Madonna di Polsi.

San Luca, Polsi Sanctuary

Paola, Sanctuary of San Francesco di Paola

Serra S. Bruno, the Carthusian monastery

CASSANO ALLO IONIO
SAN MARCO ARGENTANO
LONGOBUCCO
STRONGOLI
COSENZA
CACCURI
CROTONE
CROPANI
TIRIOLO
CATANZARO
SQUILLACE
VIBO VALENTIA
TROPEA
SORIANO CALABRO
MILETO
BADOLATO
SIDERNO
REGGIO CALABRIA
FERRUZZANO
MOTTA SAN GIOVANNI
PALIZZI
PENTEDATTILO
BORGHI DI INTERESSE
STORICO-ARTISTICO

OTHER HISTORICALLY-ARTISTICALLY INTERESTING VILLAGES

There are many other old villages in Calabria that can be discovered or rediscovered because of their singular and extraordinarily involving historic-artistic features: **Cassano allo Ionio** with the ancient Magna Graecian city of Sybaris, which has

Belcastro

Amantea

left prominent traces in the archaeological park of the same name, **San Marco Argentano** with Santa Maria della Matina, the most beautiful Calabrian monument from the Gothic period and a splendid Norman tower, **Longobucco**, at the centre of Greek Sila, with its notable historic centre and the most important museum of traditional fabrics from Sila, and **Caccuri** with its suggestive mediaeval castle on a tuff rock, and the church of S. Maria della Riforma, in Baroque style and with important wooden statues inside. The prestigious *Premio Letterario Caccuri* (Caccuri Literary Prize) is held in this village; **Strongoli**, a sort of terrace over the Marchesato, with a beautiful mediaeval castle and the Archaeological Area of old Petelia, **Cropani**, with the church of S. Maria dell'Assunta, where the inside holds many and important works of Santanna, **Squillace**, the birthplace of Marco Aurelio Cassiodoro, dominated by a Norman castle, **Tiriolo**, the town between two seas where both the Ionian and Tyrrhenian Seas can be seen, just by turning your head, **Badolato** with a typical historic centre overlooking the Ionian Sea and its many churches, including S. Maria degli Angeli which contains wooden works by Friar Diego da Careri, **Soriano Calabro**, with one of the largest Dominican monasteries in

Cropani

Caccuri, Castle

Strongoli

Stilo

Mileto, Cathedral

the south and the imposing Calabrian Library, **Tropea**, with the most important historic centre on the sea in Calabria, the church of S. Maria dell'Isola and the splendid cathedral, **Mileto**, the old capital of the Normans in Calabria, with important works of the period housed in the National Museum, **Siderno**, with a Baroque-style historic centre and modern tourist-seaside town on the Ionian Sea, **Ferruzzano**, now known as the village of the old *palmenti* (fermentation tanks) excavated in the rock, **Palizzi**, at the foot of an enormous monolith with the Renaissance castle at its

Palizzi

top, **Pentedattilo**, a ghost village, but rediscovered for tourist purposes, dominated by the characteristic, and unique, hand-shaped rock, and **Motta San Giovanni**, with the castle of Byzantine origin overlooking the Strait of Messina.

Tiriolo

San Marco Argentano

Badolato

All the beautiful places indicated here in the form of simple notes make Calabrian historic centres and old villages a travel experience that should be locked in our memories, part of our ideal travel log.

a space to fill

This small space is intended for notes and personal impressions of those who, not being content with the tales of others, want to experience the places and feelings they may trigger in first person.

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