

# The Sibylline Mountains

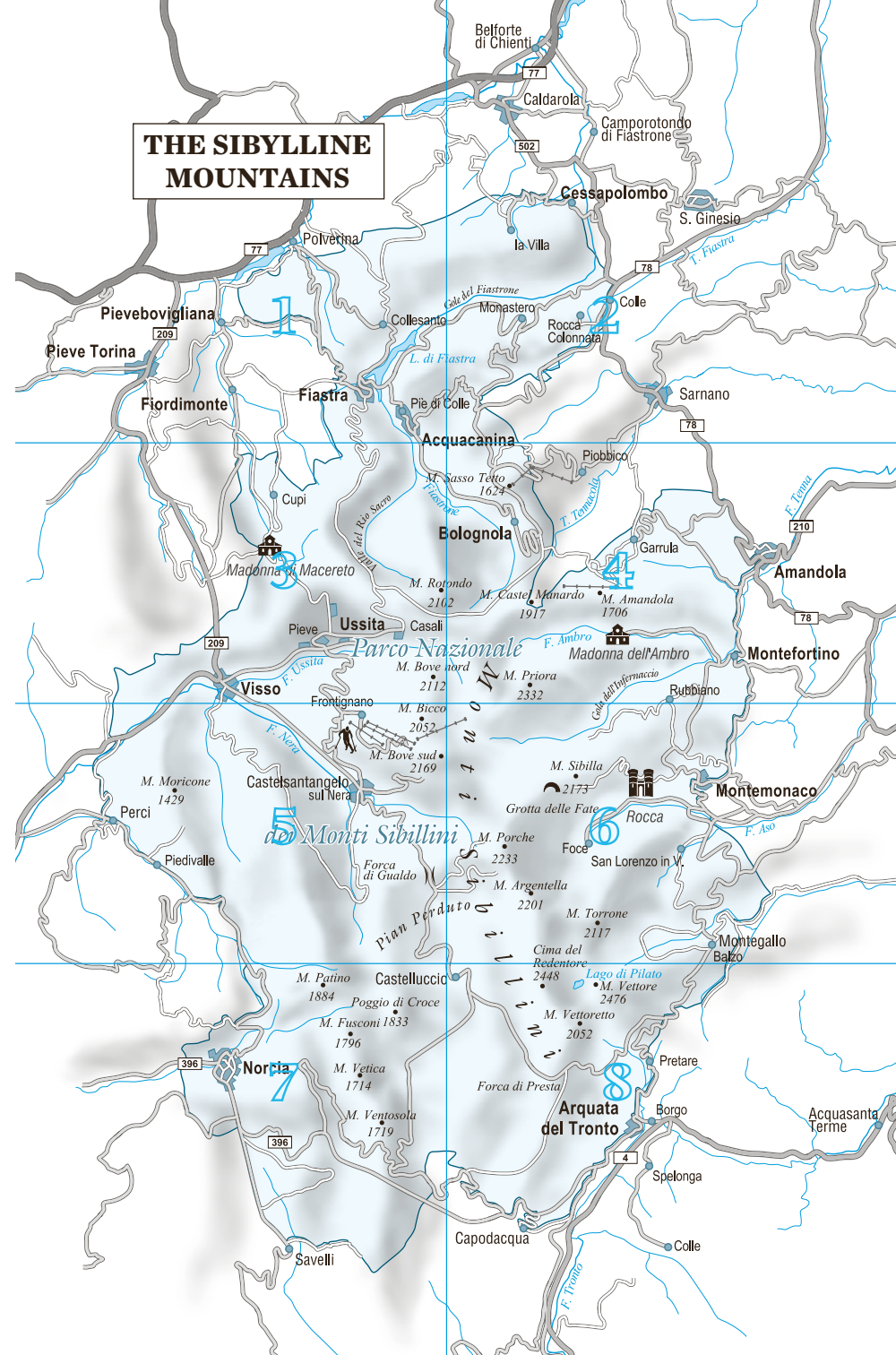
*This stretch of the Apennines, the watershed between the Tyrrhenian Sea and the Adriatic, is one of Italy's most beautiful and interesting national parks, where the mountains and valleys, scattered with eighteen tiny medieval townships, illustrate the centuries-old, often precarious existence of the inhabitants in a fragile environment and in perfect ecological balance.*

The Sibyllines National Park, which protects one of the most important mountain systems of Europe, is situated partly in the Marche region and partly in Umbria. At least 20 of the mountains are more than 2000m high. With a series of limestone peaks and deep ravines, lush forests and alpine meadows, gullies, waterfalls and rushing streams, it is a natural paradise with something to interest everyone: botanists, climbers and skiers, birdwatchers, free-flyers, artists and photographers, and some well-signposted trails provide itineraries for ramblers, trekkers and mountain bikers. The institution of protective measures has brought a certain degree of prosperity, and besides wildlife, several varieties of orchard fruits (notably the *mela rosa* apple, so called not for the colour, which is green and red, but for its aroma of roses) and farm animals (such as the *sopravvissana* sheep) have been preserved from extinction and their production much intensified. Demand for the tasty Castelluccio lentils, or the local truffles, is now worldwide.



## HISTORY OF THE MOUNTAINS

Inhabited since the Neolithic era, these mountains offered refuge to the Sabines, the Umbrians and the Picenes; at the same time, they constituted a barrier between east and west; they were a source of timber, resin and furs; a place to pasture flocks and herds in security on lush upland meadows, for the production of formidable cheeses; while the woods supplied forage for pigs, resulting in excellent hams, salami and sausage. People thought of the Sibyllines as the dwelling place of witches, demons, necromancers and fairies, and in particular of the Sibyl herself, a wise woman who lived in a cave close to the summit of Mount Sibilla, and who could sometimes be persuaded



## APPIGNANO DEL TRONTO

Built, according to legend, by a Roman family after the Social War (*see p. 165*), Appignano (*map B, D3*) was an important stronghold of Ascoli during the Middle Ages and the wars with Fermo. It was destroyed several times but always rebuilt, because of its strategic position on a tributary of the Tronto. In the course of time it became a place of refuge for exiles from Ascoli. Most of the inhabitants are farmers (this area is renowned for wine and olive oil) and many of the women are expert lace-makers. In the southeast corner of the medieval centre, at the foot of Via Roma, the main street, is the church of **San Michele Arcangelo**, built by masons from Lombardy in the 15th century. Over the main altar is a panel painting by Vincenzo Pagani of the *Madonna*, signed and dated 1539. Continuing along Via Roma, you reach **Piazza Umberto**, the main square, with the lovely 15th-century Palazzo Comunale and the church of San Giovanni Battista (14th century), with an imposing Gothic façade and a Renaissance-style portal with a rose-window above it; there are two similar doors on the sides, and a 14th-century bell-tower at the back. The nave and aisles are divided by polygonal pilasters and Romanesque arches. On the south wall is a panel painting by Simone De Magistris of the *Pentecost*, signed and dated 1589.

## MANFRED OF HOHENSTAUFEN, KING OF SICILY

Manfred of Hohenstaufen (1232–66), the last and best-loved son of Frederick II, was born illegitimate (his father married his mother on her deathbed). He has the distinction of having been excommunicated three times, by three different popes; Dante places him just outside Purgatory: before he can enter, he must spend 30 years on the doorstep for every year he was excommunicated. Cultivated and debonair, he inherited his father's talents for music, poetry and diplomacy. Frederick had proclaimed him prince of Taranto before his death in 1250, declaring that the crown of Sicily should go to his own half-brother, the German King Conrad IV. The Kingdom of Sicily was huge, comprising the island itself as well as Naples, southern Italy and numerous overseas possessions, and it was in turmoil. Manfred set to work subduing the rebel cities, first for his uncle and later for his uncle's son Conradin. When in 1258 Manfred heard a false report that the boy-king was dead, he went to Palermo and had himself crowned, refusing to abdicate when the truth came out. In 1263, the new pope, Urban IV, assigned Sicily to his own kinsman, Charles of Anjou, who descended into Italy with an army of 30,000. Manfred's luck had turned: he was defeated at Benevento later that year. His wife Helena was thrown into a dungeon where she died five years later, and poor Conradin was beheaded in the market square of Naples.

## OFFIDA & ENVIRONS

Offida (pop. 5,150; *map B, D2*), with its old ivory houses and churches, stands on a crest between the valleys of the Tesino and the Tronto; it, too, is one of Italy's 'Beautiful Villages' and is the most important centre in Italy for the production of hand-made



OFFIDA  
Lace tatting.

lace. Most of the women and many of the men are expert in this craft, learning when little more than toddlers; you can see them inside half-closed doorways, or sitting out in the street, adroitly tumbling the tiny spindles (sometimes as many as 120) on the round pillows which serve as the support. You will also see people making simple, comfortable kitchen chairs. Many of the inhabitants are farmers, famous for their wines, and there is also an industrial area (furniture, building materials) in the new town, at the foot of the old. The name of the town could derive from the Greek *ophys*, snake, because a huge golden serpent is said to live in a cave deep below the main street.

In the northeast corner of the old city, at the foot of the castle (15th century, Baccio Pontelli), is a wide panoramic square, **Piazzale delle Merlettaie**, with a bronze monument showing three generations of lace-makers (1983, Aldo Sergiacomi). From here **Corso Serpente Aureo**, the main street, leads southwest; one of the little streets to the left, Via Ischia, leads to the **Museo Aldo Sergiacomi** (T: 338 424 0410, [www.museosergiacomi.it](http://www.museosergiacomi.it)), the studio of the sculptor (1912–94), restored by his widow and opened as a museum, with four rooms arranged exactly the way Sergiacomi wished, with sketches, casts and photographs of the works he created here.

## PIAZZA DEL POPOLO

Following the Corso, you reach the central Piazza del Popolo, unusual because triangular, with what is surely the most beautiful Town Hall in the region, the **Palazzo Comunale** (12th–13th centuries), built of pale blond brick, with a high portico sur-

Pope Leo's death, and remained lords of the city until 1631, when Urbino passed to the papacy. In the 18th century, with the Albani family, some repairs and reconstruction were carried out, respecting the Renaissance aspect given to the town by Federico, but in 1797 Napoleon's troops occupied the city, including it in the Republic of Rome. After many years of quarrels over Urbino between France and the Papal States, in 1860 it was taken by General Cialdini of Piedmont, and a year later became part of the new Kingdom of Italy.

Well known in the past for its potteries (particularly in the 16th century), Urbino's economy is now based mainly on tourism, and on the presence of its university.

### APPROACHES

The best approach to the walled city is from the enormous parking area called **Borgo Mercatale**, once the market (*map 3; there is a convenient left-luggage office, T: 0722 2196; stairs and lifts*). The magnificent **ramp**, designed by Francesco di Giorgio Martini, leads to Corso Garibaldi, passing by the Neoclassical Teatro Raffaele Sanzio (1853, Vincenzo Ghinelli; *T: 0722 2281*). From there you continue up to Piazza Rinascimento and the great castle of Duke Federico, the **Palazzo Ducale**, built in the 15th century by various architects: the Florentines Maso di Bartolomeo and Luca della Robbia, and Luciano Laurana, Francesco di Giorgio Martini and Girolamo Genga. Described as a 'city in the form of a palace', it is particularly impressive for the series of handsome doorways and fireplaces. In many places you will see the initials 'F.C.' and 'F.D.', indicating 'Federico Conte' and 'Federico Duca'. The western façade, called the *Facciata dei Torricini*, with its two slender cusped towers and airy loggias, is perhaps the best-known image of the Marche region. Laurana designed it to look towards Florence, capital of culture and emblem of the Renaissance. The palace now houses the principal museums of Urbino.

## GALLERIA NAZIONALE DELLE MARCHE

The vast Galleria Nazionale delle Marche (*open Tues–Sun 8.30–7.15, Mon 8.30–2; closed 25 Dec and 1 Jan; last tickets 90mins before closing; café and bookshop; T: 0722 2760, [www.palazzoducalaurbino.it](http://www.palazzoducalaurbino.it)*) is one of the most important in Italy, both for the number of works on display and for their quality. It is reached by Laurana's splendid staircase, in the apartments opening onto the loggia around the lovely golden-hued *cour d'honneur*, with its rigorous geometry.

#### (A) Appartamento della Jole:

Contains many sculptures and 15th-century furniture. Some rooms were frescoed with figures of warriors by Giovanni Boccati. Federico's room, with the *Alcova*, was decorated in tempera by

Bartolomeo Corradini, 'Fra' Carnevale' (1459–60); there are several works by Antonio Alberti da Ferrara.

#### (B) Appartamento dei Melaranci:

Contains 14th-century works, includ-

## GALLERIA NAZIONALE DELLE MARCHE



- |   |                                |      |                             |
|---|--------------------------------|------|-----------------------------|
| A | Appartamento della Jole        | Di   | Studiolo                    |
| B | Appartamento dei Melaranci     | Dii  | Camera da Letto             |
| C | Appartamento degli Ospiti      | Diii | Sala degli Angeli           |
| D | Appartamento del Duca Federico | E    | Appartamento della Duchessa |
|   |                                | F    | Sala del Trono              |

ing a splendid polyptych by Giovanni Baronzio of the *Madonna and Child with Saints and Stories of the Life of Christ* (1345), and a painted Crucifix by the Maestro di Verucchio.

#### (C) Appartamento degli Ospiti:

Includes a room stuccoed by Federico Brandani, representing the emblems of the Montefeltro and Della Rovere families. There are 15th-century wooden sculptures, a hoard of 103 15th-century gold coins found in Mondavio, and paintings by Carlo and Vittore Crivelli, Giovanni Bellini and Alvise Vivarini.

#### (D) Appartamento del Duca

**Federico:** The most precious works of art are housed here. In the Sala delle Udienze, with lavish decoration in carved and inlaid marble, where

Federico held his audiences, is the famous **Flagellation by Piero della Francesca**, painted on poplar wood, where the refined perspective acquires an allegorical significance: the human figures, indifferent to the torture taking place behind them, seem less vital than the architectural lines of the city where the scene takes place. Also by Piero is the enigmatic **Senigallia Madonna**, where the solemn, colossal Christ Child appears to accept His future sacrifice, symbolised by the coral necklace around His throat and the white rose in His left hand. Calm and silent, His mother supports Him as if she were an element of the architecture. The scene is imbued with impending tragedy; the only lighter touch is given by the basket of nappies on the shelf in the background.





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# Planning your Trip

## WHEN TO GO

The the best time for the wildflowers in the Sibylline Mountains is **spring**. It is also the season for *bianchetto* truffles at Fossombrone, black truffles at Acqualagna. There are also particularly impressive Easter celebrations at Cantiano and Sassoferrato; fire-works at Ripatransone; the Frog Race at Fermignano and a St George's Day procession (23 April) at Porto San Giorgio. In May, special events in Camerino (sword race), Sarnano (antiques exhibition), Cagli (9 May, procession for the patron St Gerontius), Jesi (*palio* contest for St Florian) and Monterubbiano (ancient Picene celebration).

Most of the historical pageants and firework displays take place in **summer**. The hottest month is July, when the sunflowers are in bloom and the wheat is harvested. For Corpus Christi (June), the streets are covered with flower-petal designs at Castelraimondo, Amandola and Servigliano. There is a *palio* contest for St John the Baptist at Fabriano (24 June); Maiolo celebrates its bread (end of June); and opera festivals at Macerata (July) and Pesaro (Aug). Treia organises a match of the traditional game of *pallone al bracciale*.

**Autumn** is the season for the kite-flying contest at Urbino and for the procession for the Madonna at Macerata, with offerings of wheat and flowers. October is the month for celebrating truffles: at Apecchio, Sant'Agata Feltria and Acqualagna. The grape harvest and wine-making are celebrated at Camerano, Loro Piceno, Rosora, Cupramontana, San Marcello and Corinaldo.

**Winter** is a pleasant time to visit the Marche, but it can be rainy and cold, with snowstorms in Jan–Feb. The rainiest month is November. Ancona celebrates chestnuts and wine; pit-matured cheese is presented at Novafeltria and Talamello; and truffles again at Acqualagna. In December there are *tableaux vivants* of the Nativity at Acquasanta Terme, Genga, Treia and Porto San Giorgio. Loreto celebrates the arrival of the Holy House. The *Befana*, a friendly witch, the Italian version of Santa Claus, makes her appearance at Urbania for the Epiphany.

## USEFUL WEBSITES

Beautiful Villages: [www.borghitalia.it](http://www.borghitalia.it)

Castles and fortresses: [www.incastro.marche.it](http://www.incastro.marche.it)

Children: [www.marcheforkids.com](http://www.marcheforkids.com)

Exhibitions in Italy: [www.artonline.it](http://www.artonline.it)

Food: [www.slowfood.com](http://www.slowfood.com) (ethically-produced food)

General: [www.turismo.marche.it](http://www.turismo.marche.it) (very informative about everything); [www.youpiceno.it](http://www.youpiceno.it) (a very informative link on the southern part of the region)



