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WALKING IN SHEPHERDS' STEPS

By Anna Lebedeva

A new six-day walking itinerary, *La Via del Tratturo*, connects Abruzzo and Molise. Although still in the early stages of development, the walk offers an exciting opportunity for hikers to follow shepherds' trails and learn about the ancient tradition of transhumance.



An Abruzzese shepherd with his flock

For centuries in autumn, herders took part in transhumance, a seasonal droving of livestock, moving their large sheep flocks from Abruzzo to the plains of *Tavoliere delle Puglie*. They followed the network of tracks covering the regions. In spring, they went back following the same roads. The main route, *il Regio tratturo*, or *Tratturo Magno*, ran from the city of L'Aquila to Foggia. Its width was well defined: 60 Neapolitan steps, an equivalent of 110 metres. Although local shepherds do not do transhumance any-

more, the trails still exist and, last year, a group of hiking tour guides created *La Via del Tratturo*, a 112km multiday walking itinerary from Pescasseroli in Abruzzo to Campobasso in Molise for the outdoor enthusiasts who want to discover the world of transhumant trails.

"Last year, while walking for a week on the ancient track from Pescasseroli to Campobasso, I realized the potential of this route and put the wheels in motion," says Luca Gianotti, the project's coordinator. "My

30 years of experience as a walking tour guide and creator of six other trails gave me the necessary tools and strategies for getting the project off the ground.”

CENTURIES-OLD TRADITION

Harsh winters of the Abruzzo’s mountains and the torrid summers in the plains of Apulia forced the shepherds to move their flocks, so the sheep had grass to graze on all year around and produce quality wool, milk, and meat. In autumn, on September 29 – the day dedicated to St. Michael, protector of shepherds – the flocks began to move towards Apulia and return to Abruzzo at the beginning of summer. It took about fifteen days to arrive to the destination. Boys as young as 8 years old joined their fathers to learn the skills necessary for *transumanza*.

Ancient Romans started the tradition of seasonal droving of flocks from the high

On the trail

mountains of Abruzzo to the plains of Apulia and it brought riches to the Empire’s treasury.

It was revived in 1447 when Alfonso the Magnanimous, King of Naples, established the customs house in Foggia and created a thriving herding industry based on the production of wool. By King’s order, the plains of *Tavoliere delle Puglie* were reserved for transhumant shepherds in winter and cultivated by local farmers in summer. In some years, up to five million sheep were moved, so customs duties represented an important source of revenue for the Kingdom of Naples.

The last transhumant herders walked the transhumance tracks in the 1960s.

WALKING THE TRAIL

La Via del Tratturo runs through some of the most beautiful towns of Abruzzo and Molise, along mountain trails, dirt tracks, and secondary paved roads with little or no traffic. It is



walkable all year round, with the highest point at an altitude of 1200 metres and is suitable for any fitness level, although longer legs of the journey are more arduous.

So far only the first two parts of the itinerary, in the Abruzzo National Park, have been marked with white and red signs and the letters "RT" (*Regio Tratturo*). Before setting off you will need to download GPS tracks from the dedicated [website](#).

"We have launched a volunteering campaign to mark the trail and are hoping to finish the job in May," explains Luca Gianotti. "But we would still recommend using the GPS tracks as it normally takes a few years to adjust the route and add waymarks. In the next four years we hope to finish the part of the walk from Campobasso to Apulia." All information about the walk is available in Italian only but Luca says they would be happy if someone helped them to translate the website into English.

You can tackle separate legs of the itinerary as one-day hikes, if you are not ready to go on a six-day adventure. It is necessary to book your overnight stays before setting off. On the website you will find a list of recommended B&Bs, and there are other options available if you do your own research.

The tour company [La Compagnia dei Cammini](#) organises a few small groups to walk *La Via del Tratturo* throughout the year.

THE ITINERARY

If you are planning to do the full itinerary, take a small stamp book at the starting point in Pescasseroli. At the end of each leg, you



Civitella Alfedena

can get it stamped and receive a certificate of completion in Campobasso to frame and proudly display on a wall in your house.

DAY 1: PESCASSEROLI TO VILLETTA BARREA

Distance: 19,5 km, takes six hours. 580m ascent, 700m descent.

On this leg of the hike, you will walk in a pine forest and easy ancient mule tracks, through the small towns of Opi and Civitella Alfedena where you can visit a wolf reserve.

DAY 2: VILLETTA BARREA TO VILLA SCONTRONE

Distance: 17 km, takes five hours. 380m ascent, 450m descent.

You will walk along the Sangro River towards Lake Barrea. Make sure to stop in the town of Barrea to see the medieval castle and enjoy the panoramic views over the lake from above. A few kilometres outside of the town you will see an 18th-century boundary stone with a carved cross marking the ancient trail.

DAY 3: VILLA SCONTRONE TO AGRITURISMO "IL TRATTURO"

Distance: 23,5 km, takes seven hours.
800 m ascent, 600m descent.

Walking on secondary paved roads you will reach an abandoned building where once was the *Taverna della Zittola*. Here shepherds used to stop to rest, eat, and exchange goods while their flocks grazed in the surrounding meadows.

DAY 4: AGRITURISMO "IL TRATTURO" TO CIVITANOVA DEL SANNIO

Distance: 18,5 km, takes six hours. 500m ascent, 660m descent.

This leg of the trail is especially beautiful in late spring when the meadows are covered with blooming wild orchids. In the village of Pescolanciano you can see an ancient drinking fountain where sheep quenched their thirst.

Below: Taverna della Zittola; right: 18th-century boundary stone outside Barrea

DAY 5: CIVITANOVA DEL SANNIO TO CASTROPIGNANO

Distance: 16 km, takes five hours. 530m ascent, 500m descent.

An easy part of the trail that will take you to the small sleepy towns of Duronia, Faito, and Castropignano with its magnificent *d'Evoli Castle*.

DAY 6: CASTROPIGNANO TO CAMPOBASSO

Distance: 17 km, takes five hours. 560m ascent, 460m descent.

You will cross the River Biferno and see several transhumant churches and arrive to the north of Campobasso where you can hop on a bus to visit the city centre.

For the full itinerary go to *La Via del Tratturo* [website](#). A detailed guidebook (in Italian) for the route will be published this month, available from the Ediciclo Editore [website](#).

All photos by La Via del Tratturo.

