



05-Mountain villages: history and nature.

Discovering the villages scattered on the mountains and in the valleys in the Locana region, gives the visitor double pleasure: the first is the route that wanders through magnificent scenery, and the second is the beauty of the villages themselves. There are about ninety villages in all, many of which are still inhabited, while others have gradually been abandoned since the beginning of the last century. In many places, such as in the large Piantonetto valley, that starts from Rosone, travelling up the mountain, the inhabitants still speak the old patuà (or patois) the dialect with a strong French Provençale influence.

Generally, these villages are composed of houses built adjoining one another, sometimes with several floors, with arched porticos or wooden balconies. They are often built around a tiny church that is opened only on the feast day of its patron saint. Many of these churches are beautifully decorated with frescoes and some of them have recently been restored and saved from ruin. Some of them, such as the church in Piandemma, are built at a certain distance from their own bell tower, a strange characteristic explained by the mountainous nature of the surrounding terrain. Those who dream of living or spending their holidays in one of these enchanting villages can ask for information from the Tourist office at Locana. They will provide information on houses for sale or for rent, while details concerning financing by the mountain community organisation can be had from the town council office or on Internet.

One of the most interesting villages is Cambrelle, which was founded at a date still unknown, but before 1600. Beginning from Locana, and crossing the bridge over the Orca river, take the road up in the direction of the Cialma alps. This walk starts at a height of 1.200 metres above sea level, as you leave the village of Porcili, where there is a wooden mountain hut. This hut shows a map of all the various tracks in the area, including the route we will be taking through the larch and chestnut woods.

The houses at Cambrelle are also built using dry stone wall techniques, and only the wealthier houses have plaster finishes decorated with frescoes. The wooden roof frames are covered with traditional “losa” or local slate tiles. The main feature is the little church of San Vito, the patron saint, protector against rifts and landslides, and a pilgrimage is held here every year in the first week in August. The village is filled again with people for the whole month of August and old mountain songs can be heard in the narrow winding streets.

Small one-roomed houses and imposing strong-houses illustrate the first stage of colonisation on the slopes and in the inner valleys of the region. To visit them you must pass through another village first, Praie. Near the church and its picturesque sloping bell tower, there is a mule track that is easy to walk, alongside a dry stone wall, that rises up the hill. At the beginning of this route is a large stone slab with incisions which are thought to date back to prehistoric times, indicating a religious or burial site. Further on you will come across some marvellous rock dwellings in the middle of a large grove with enormous chestnut trees. Among these you will find clearings where the old charcoal piles were burnt. This activity used to require continuous presence for several days at a time, which explains the shelters carved in the rock faces by the charcoal burners .

Another half-hour walk and you will come to the village of Pianit where a traditional Frank strong-house rises in the dip in the valley. This house is built with two separate twin constructions. They had two floors, and each wing had an independent entrance and small internal staircase. The other single houses were gradually built around the central nucleus, and some very interesting finds have been discovered here, including two earthenware pots walled in an internal face which was probably used for storage.

But there is more: interesting discoveries have been made at Fuère, where there is a Celtic altar, and at Vernè and Chironio, both of which boast a Roman bridge which has linked the two sides of the Vallungo stream for centuries. At Montepiano, you can see medieval furnaces, limestone quarries and an unusual flat stone that was used centuries ago to thresh barley, and that is linked with a local ancient legend.

Every single tiny village has its own individual character and in its own way tells part of the thousand-year-old story of the arduous life of the mountain people.