

Day Tripping: The Haunt of a Scottish King

With its stunning views over the Apuan Alps, approximately two hours drive from Lucca, San Pellegrino in Alpe (1,525 meters) is certainly worth a trip. Covered in snow in winter, the place offers wonderful walks for trekking and is also good for horse-riding, cycling and even motorbike tours in summer and late spring (for info: www.sanpellegrino.org). San Pellegrino is a tiny village with a couple of shops, two restaurants/hotels, and a bar where you can enjoy a cappuccino with delicious slices of homemade fruit tarts. In the shops (my favourite one is at the bottom of the street) you can buy all sorts of local products: jam, honey, liquors, spelt and chestnut products, dried mushrooms, fresh *porcini* and blueberries when in season.

Going through my father's rich library, I came across a book* dated 1613 which, between legend and history, tells of the extraordinary life of San Pellegrino, which goes back as far as the VII century. The son of Romano, a Scottish king, and Plantula, at his father's death he became king but soon decided to give up his earthly fortune and look for a life of retirement and poverty, therefore, dressed as a pilgrim, he secretly left his castle at night. After forty years spent in the Holy Land, in the desert, where he repeatedly fought against the devil, he went to Egypt and then headed for Rome on a ship. In the middle of a violent storm, the work of the devil persuaded the crew to throw Pellegrino into the open sea in order to restore good weather. Using his pilgrim's staff and mantle, Pellegrino made a sail which, at a high speed, allowed him to reach Ancona.

After having visited Rome, in AD 624, he reached the Lucchese territory and soon found a dark and thick forest in what was then called Termesalone, today San Pellegrino in Alpe. This was an ideal place for one in search of solitude, and Pellegrino decided to settle there. The area was constantly hit by strong winds, covered in snow most of the year and haunted by devils.

The sanctuary



Alpi Apuane under the snow



Tempietto by Matteo Civitali with San Pellegrino and San Bianco

Pellegrino lived there fasting and fighting with the devils who, among dreadful screams and horrible visions, often covered him up with snow, almost suffocating him. Legend goes that during an argument the devil slapped Pellegrino and the hermit, who by that time must have been really fed up with the devil, slapped him back so strongly that the devil flew away and banged his head against the Apuan Alps, making a hole in what is now called Monte Forato (Perforated Mountain). Pellegrino finally won his battle against the devils and got the place rid of them. Twelve years had passed since he had arrived, and now he moved into a tiny little cave naturally carved into a tree where he lived for seven years, nourished by wild animals who came with full udders to feed him with milk. Pellegrino died there in 643, aged 97. In his honour, on that spot, the bishops of Lucca and Ravenna decided to build a chapel and a hospital for the use of pilgrims. Thanks to San Pellegrino's intercession, the sheep and cattle hosted in the hospital were never attacked by wolves and other wild beasts.

Today, inside the hospital there is the interesting *Museo Etnografico della Civiltà Contadina* (Museum of Country Life), and San Pellegrino's remains rest in the chapel with those of San Bianco, one of his followers, within a beautiful marble shrine by Matteo Civitali (1436-1502). Curiously, the border between Tuscany and Emilia Romagna cuts the sanctuary into two, therefore the busts of the Saints rest in the province of Modena and their lower parts in the province of Lucca.

**Historie delle miracolose immagini, e delle vite de' Santi, i corpi de' quali sono nella Città di Lucca (History of miraculous images, and of the lives of the Saints who are in the City of Lucca), by Cesare Franciotti, Sacerdote of the Lucchese Congregation of the Blessed Virgin, Lucca, at Ottaviano Guiduboni, MDCXIII.*

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– Photos from www.sanpellegrino.org