

A Scenic Drive around the Sirente-Velino National Park

Although the Sirente-Velino National Park is probably the smallest in area of the National Parks of Abruzzo, it makes up in beauty for what it lacks in size. Just south of L'Aquila and bordered by the A24/A25 on three sides the park is easily accessible by car. Our visit to this exceptional park in October started from the A25, taking the turnoff for Pratola Peligna/Sulmona and initially following the signs for Raiano. After driving straight through Raiano the road takes you gradually up into the mountains affording spectacular views of the Peligna valley along the way.

As you climb into the park you enter an impressive gorge (don't forget to stop for a drink at the natural spring (from a tap) a mile or two into the park, as this is thought to bring good luck), following the signs for Castelvechio Subequo. On reaching the small mountain town of Castelvechio Subequo we took the road onto Gaglino, and from there onto the road that cuts across the 'waist' of the park heading for town of Rocca di Mezzo. As you climb higher into the park the road shows signs of the extreme conditions it has endured over the years by way of potholes and cracks to its surface, even given these blemishes it is still a reasonable mountain road to drive in the milder seasons - in winter as with all the wilder places in Abruzzo all the necessary precautions should be taken including a set of snow chains as required.

We hadn't picked the finest day for this trip, but the scenery was still magnificent as the peak of M. Sirente disappeared into a halo of grey cloud. Following the road along the side of this peak, we were warned by signs bearing the silhouettes of boars and chamois to be on the look out for the wildlife that frequents these high places - sadly on this day we were only greeted by some wandering cattle appearing out of the mists, their plaintive 'moos' echoing spookily across the valley (the previous evening on the road to L'Aquila we were brought to a halt by a family of wild boar nonchalantly crossing the road ahead of us!).

A mile or so before reaching the T-junction at Rocco di Mezzo, the landscape flattens into a large upland valley dominated by the peaks encircling it, most obvious on this day being M. Rotondo directly ahead. When we reached to the T-junction we turned left and shortly took coffee in the ski resort of Ovindoli, which was just starting to wake up in preparation for the new season.

Back on the road again, heading south and with the weather turning from spots of rain to an insistent drizzle we come upon the town of Celano, totally dominated by the massively impressive castle (even in the rain and a land of numerous castles). The castle was seriously damaged during the 1915 earthquake, and left in disrepair until 1940, finally restored to its former glory by 1960 it now houses the Marsica Religious Art Museum.

After exiting the south end of Celano, we soon pick up the A25 heading east back to our original starting point, leaving the imposing edifice of Celano castle behind.

For further information re the Sirente-Velino National Park:

www.parks.it/parco.sirente.velino/Eindex.html