

WALKING IN ABRUZZO



About the Author

Stuart Haines is a walker, mountain lover, guidebook writer, project manager and occasional viticulturalist. His explorations of the remoter corners of central Italy began in 2004, following many years of climbing and adventuring in the Alps, North America and his native UK. Since 2007 he has been based between Bristol, England, and Casa La Rocca, the country house in the heart of Abruzzo that he renovated with his partner, Hil. The house offers self-catered accommodation for visitors to the region and is the base for Stuart's support service for walkers, cyclists and everyone who comes to discover the grandeur of Abruzzo for themselves – route advice, drop-offs and pick-ups, pack transport, overnight booking and the organic Montepulciano d'Abruzzo house wine all available under one roof – www.casalarocca.it.

WALKING IN ABRUZZO

GRAN SASSO, MAIELLA AND ABRUZZO NATIONAL PARKS, AND SIRENTE-VELINO REGIONAL PARK

by Stuart Haines

CICERONE

JUNIPER HOUSE, MURLEY MOSS,
OXENHOLME ROAD, KENDAL, CUMBRIA LA9 7RL
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Dedication

For Hil

Updates to this guide

While every effort is made by our authors to ensure the accuracy of guidebooks as they go to print, changes can occur during the lifetime of an edition. Any updates that we know of for this guide will be on the Cicerone website (www.cicerone.co.uk/978/updates), so please check before planning your trip. We also advise that you check information about such things as transport, accommodation and shops locally. Even rights of way can be altered over time.

The route maps in this guide are derived from publicly available data, databases and crowd-sourced data. As such they have not been through the detailed checking procedures that would generally be applied to a published map from an official mapping agency, although naturally we have reviewed them closely in the light of local knowledge as part of the preparation of this guide.

We are always grateful for information about any discrepancies between a guidebook and the facts on the ground, sent by email to updates@cicerone.co.uk or by post to Cicerone, Juniper House, Murley Moss, Oxenholme Road, Kendal, LA9 7RL.

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Front cover: Monte Ocre ridge looking towards Monte Cagno and Monte Sirente (Walk 37)

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Mountain safety

Every mountain walk has its dangers, and those described in this guidebook are no exception. All who walk or climb in the mountains should recognise this and take responsibility for themselves and their companions along the way. The author and publisher have made every effort to ensure that the information contained in this guide was correct when it went to press, but, except for any liability that cannot be excluded by law, they cannot accept responsibility for any loss, injury or inconvenience sustained by any person using this book.

International distress signal *(emergency only)*

Six blasts on a whistle (and flashes with a torch after dark) spaced evenly for one minute, followed by a minute's pause. Repeat until an answer is received. The response is three signals per minute followed by a minute's pause.

Helicopter rescue

The following signals are used to communicate with a helicopter:

Help needed:
raise both arms
above head to
form a 'Y'



Help not needed:
raise one arm
above head, extend
other arm downward



Emergency telephone numbers

If telephoning from the UK the dialling code is 0039

Carabinieri: tel 0165 84 22 25

Emergency Services: tel 118

Weather reports

tel 0165 44 113

www.ilmeteo.it

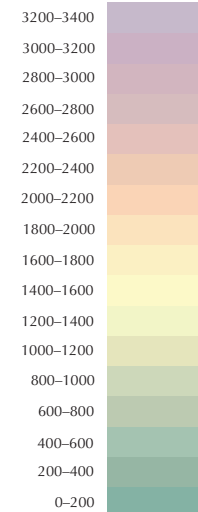
Mountain rescue can be very expensive – be adequately insured.



Symbols used on route maps

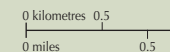
	route
	alternative route
	direction of route
	start point
	finish point
	start/finish point
	glacier
	woodland
	urban areas
	station/railway
	peak
	town/village
	rifugio/building
	campsite
	church/cross/cemetery
	castle
	pass
	bridge
	water feature
	other feature
	viewpoint
	cave
	picnic area/monument/ski lift

Relief in metres



SCALE: 1:50,000

Contour lines are drawn at 25m intervals and highlighted at 100m intervals.

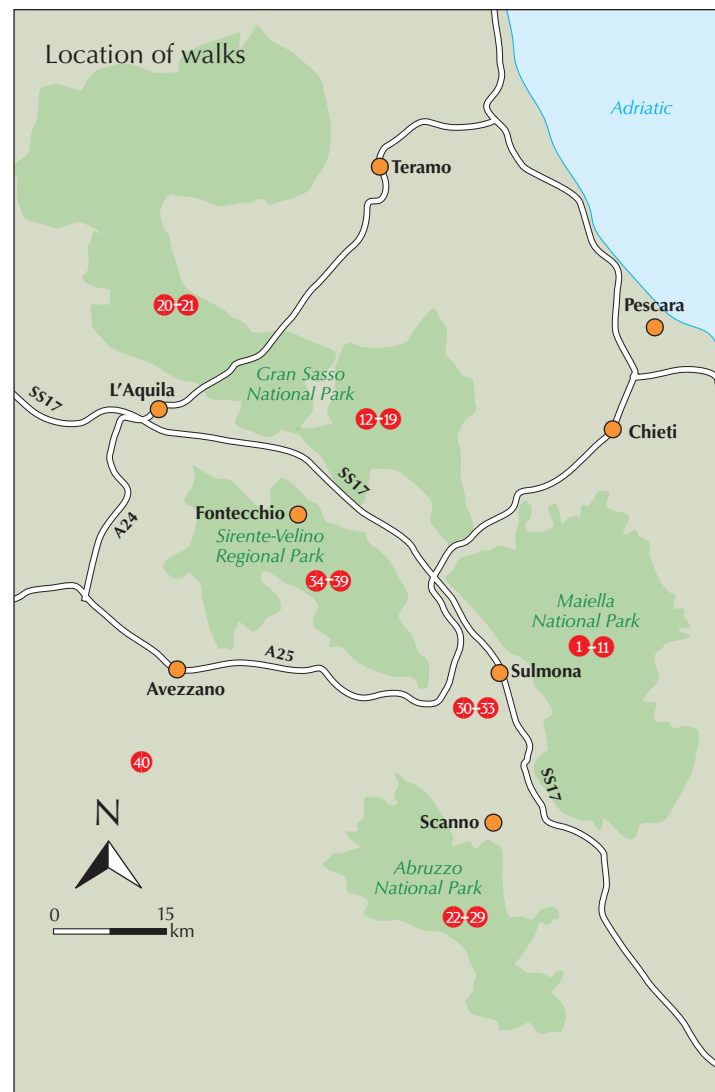


GPX files

GPX files for all routes can be downloaded for free at www.cicerone.co.uk/978/GPX.



Corno Grande group from Monte di Mezzo (Walk 20)



Entering the open valley behind Monte Ocre (Walk 37)



INTRODUCTION



Campo Imperatore from Sella di Monte Aquila (Walks 14 and 16)

It's 7.30pm. You are standing on the tower of the isolated medieval castle, Rocca Calascio, set dramatically at 1500m on a narrow ridge in the heart of Abruzzo. Fading light is softening the seemingly endless ridges, peaks and valleys that lie in every direction; the silence is underlined by occasional barking from a hamlet below.

One other building stands nearby. The beautiful octagonal church of Madonna della Pietà is isolated against the dramatic south east face of Corno Grande, the apex of the Apennines, 16km to the north and 1500m higher still.

It's early June. The day has been hot and sunny, although the hours on the trail were eased by a gentle breeze rising from the Adriatic. The air is still warm but it's time for a light sweater.

This is the centre of the Gran Sasso National Park. The peak and west flank of Corno Grande blaze in the sinking sun while the steep, stark east wall has fallen into shadow. You think about yesterday, when you stood on that summit and fed sweetcorn kernels to the choughs. You felt that you could see from one side of Italy to the other, while all the mountains of Abruzzo were ranged around.

Now, slanting rays light up the ancient village of Carapelle Calvisio, lying on a lower ridge to the south. The forest has darkened, providing a fine background to the glowing tones of the beautiful old buildings.

The peace is extraordinary and the view immense. It is easy to understand why 10th-century barons chose



Corno Piccolo from the west ridge of Corno Grande (Walk 14)

this place to raise their fortress – the highest and surely the most picturesque in Italy.

The soft clatter of an old tractor draws your gaze to the valley floor. It is moving slowly down a white lane through strips of lentil and potato fields, along the route of the famous Sentiero Italia – a footpath that runs from the Dolomites to the tip of Sicily. Not that you can imagine undertaking such a walk when there is so much to be explored in just the landscape you can see!

Imperceptibly, the far ridges turn to abstract layers of green, blue and purple, capped by the reddening sky. The peaks of the Maiella and the Abruzzo national parks, way south, grow a little larger as they become silhouettes on the horizon. Wispy cloud has gathered on the shoulders of Monte Amaro, the crown of the Maiella massif and, at 2800m, the

region's second highest point. You look away and then back – it has gone as quickly as it formed.

The Peligna basin, separating the three national parks, lies below the steep west slopes of the Maiella. It's too dark now to make out Sulmona, the main town of central Abruzzo, but tomorrow you will walk towards it. In two days' time you will arrive there, tired and a little regretful, to spend your last night before catching the train back to Rome.

A church bell tolls in Castel del Monte, a few kilometres to the north east. It's one of the highest villages in the Apennines and gateway to the magnificent mountain plain of Campo Imperatore, which you spent most of the day crossing. It has been a memorable day, with the countryside carpeted in wildflowers and populated by semi-wild horses, flocks of sheep and creamy coated, ever-watchful

Abruzzo sheep dogs. The four shepherds you greeted were the only people you met – more like a little corner of Tibet than Italy. It seemed a barren, wild place from the heights of Corno Grande, but as you wandered across the undulating pasture the early summer flora, recently emerged from beneath spring snow, was a rich surprise.

Thoughts of food and cold beer intrude on your reverie. Settling your pack for the last time, you watch the tower catch the last of the sun. In the west the long, darkening ridge of Monte Sirente, in the Sirente-Velino Regional Park, forms the final wall enclosing this secluded world of peaks and plains, hilltop villages, forests and ancient towns.

You stroll down to the cluster of stone houses and cobbled passages below. The once-abandoned hamlet is being brought quietly back to life by a few dedicated families who, with national park and regional support, are slowly renovating the tumbledown buildings. One of the first to re-open was Rifugio Rocca Calascio, where your meal, bath and bed await. Earlier you passed through the medieval village of Santo Stefano di Sessanio, now almost fully restored to its Medici heyday. Abruzzo's conservation and renewal policies are bearing remarkable fruit.

Children's laughter and the smell of pasta sauce are the only directions you need. A fox sneaking across the hillside sets the dogs off again. This

is a special place – an astounding protected landscape, criss-crossed with tracks and trails, waiting for adventurous spirits to discover it for themselves.

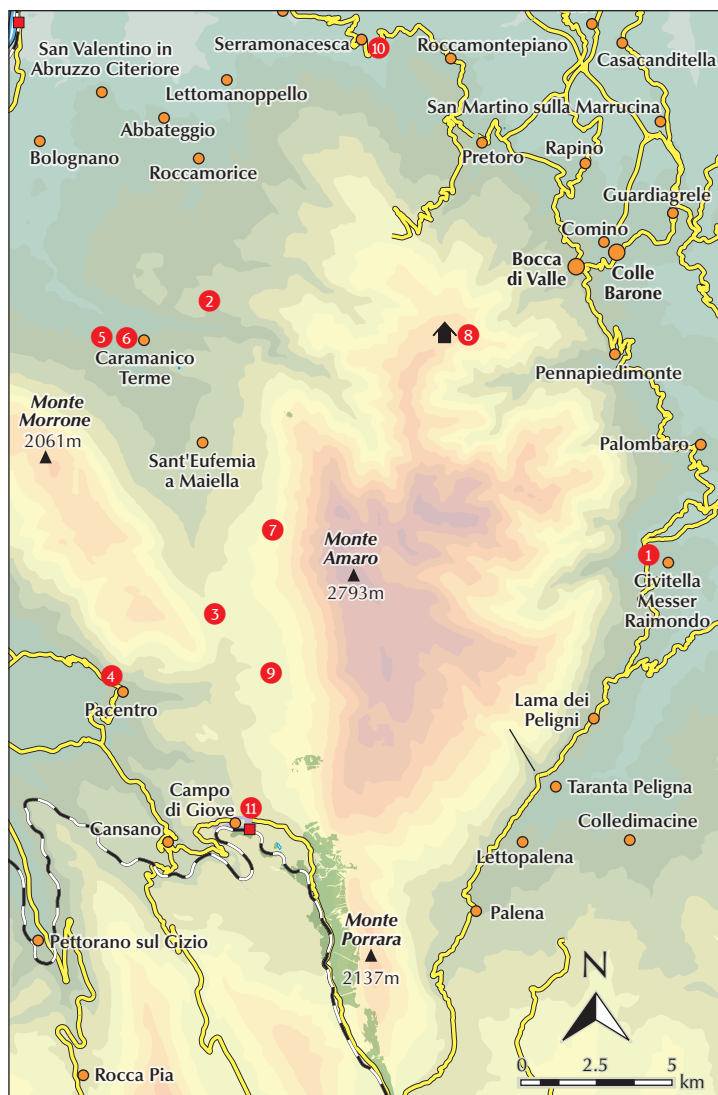
ABRUZZO

Despite its central location and close proximity to Rome, Abruzzo is one of Italy's least known and populated regions – a spectacular and harmonious blend of snowy mountains, grassy plains and forested canyons; of hillside olive groves, vineyards and long sandy beaches. Its natural riches are protected in three national parks, one regional park and many smaller reserves. Thousands of years of history are reflected in a multitude of abandoned castles, hilltop villages and ancient farmsteads; religious dedication echoed in splendid abbeys, silent churches and remote hermitages.

It's a wonderful place to get to know. The Abruzzesi are resourceful, respectful and welcoming people – with a sure view of their global future but a firm sense of their history and tradition. Neither northern nor southern, the spirit of Abruzzo is its own.

The wild and high Apennine ridges form the grain of the land. Two thirds of the area is mountainous and one third is protected. The claim to be the greenest region in Europe is well founded.

Ancient sheep droves run hundreds of kilometres from the coastal



WALK 1

Fara San Martino gorge and Val Serviera

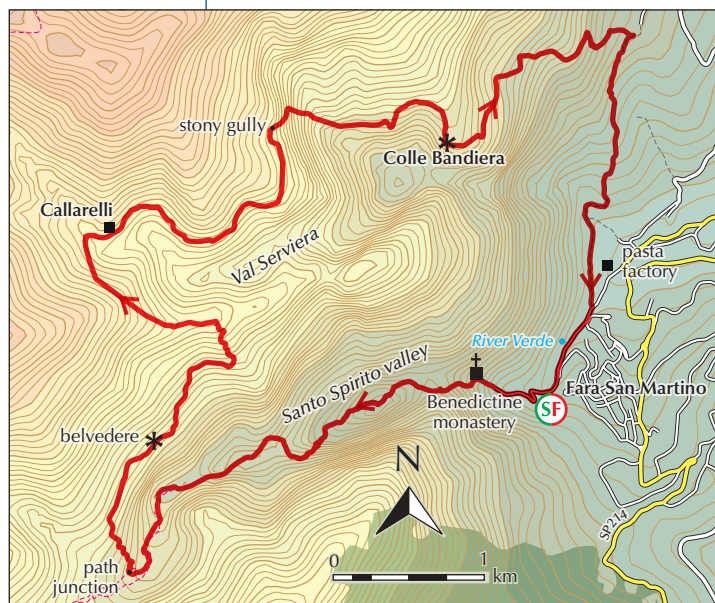
Start/finish	Car park for Fara San Martino gorge (42.087945, 14.198860)
Distance	16.5km
Total ascent/descent	2100m
Difficulty	3 (route snowbound from about November to Easter)
Walking time	7hr 30min (5hr if you retrace your steps from the high point)
High/low points	1675m/398m
Map	Majella – Carta Escursionistica (1:25,000)
Access	Fara San Martino is tucked under the steep east flank of the Maiella, at the outlet of the gorge. Reach it from the south via the SS84 along the foot of the massif through the villages of Palena and Lama dei Peligni. About 2km beyond Lama, at Corpi Santi, turn left onto the SP214 and follow signs for Fara, 4km further on. From the north, either take the SP214 from Pennapiedimonte via Palombaro or, from Guardiagrele, turn right off the SS81 at Piano Aventino, just north of Casoli, and follow signs for Fara which is 7km away.
Parking	Arriving from the south, the road descending to the village swings sharply right at a bar on the left. Turn left at this bend and follow an unsealed road, signposted 'gole', for about 150 metres to a parking area before the entrance to the gorge.

A long day out exploring two spectacular and wild gorges on the eastern flank of the Maiella massif. The village of Fara San Martino, where the route starts and ends, is a famous centre of pasta production. From there the route squeezes through the narrow entrance of the silent Santo Spirito valley, then zig-zags steeply up its north-western side to the crest, before dipping gently down the other side into the even wilder Val Serviera. The return is via the Colle Bandiera overlooking Fara, with a 3km wander along lanes to regain the start point.

The full route is demanding with a lot of ascent but highly rewarding, offering wonderful and contrasting views in the remote beauty of the national park and a good chance to see chamois and golden eagles. If you prefer not to do it all, returning through the Santo Spirito valley from the path junction, the belvedere or the high point makes a very fine day in its own right.

Walk ahead between cliffs into the tight entrance of the gorge. Squeeze through – you'll easily be able, in places, to touch both sides at once.

The eastern flank of the **Maiella massif** rises impressively above rolling hills just 25km from the Adriatic Sea. From the 2700m high, lunar-like plateau of Monte Amaro, deep gorges have been incised into



The entrance to Fara San Martino gorge

the mountainside, cutting down through the layers of limestone to form narrow, twisting, isolated worlds overlooked by dominating cliffs.

The passage opens into a secret world, enclosed on three sides – the **Santo Spirito valley**. ▶ The path leads up and into the wider gorge. Walk through the impressive valley, climbing steadily and sometimes steeply between the towering walls, for about 4km. Pass two picnic spots with fountains (often dry) and notice the changing flora as height is gained.

Towards the end the forest thickens and a **path junction** with a picnic table is reached. The left fork (do not follow this) carries on along the valley bottom, from here on called the Valle di Macchia Lunga, and eventually leads into the high mountain corrie of Valle Cannella and to Rifugio Manzini.

Instead, take the path on the right for Val Serviera. It twists steeply up through deep fallen leaves of the

The excavations in the wider gorge beyond are of an old Benedictine monastery, which gave rise to the founding of Fara.

A small deviation leads to a fountain 30 metres away.

The authorities permit only experienced climbers to explore the canyon – its vertical cascades can be descended only with double abseil ropes.

beech forest. At half-height the path trends right, leaving the trees and continuing to a tremendous **belvedere**. Enjoy the level going and fine views down to where you recently passed. After 1km the climb recommences, with the path zig-zagging steeply up to the left. ◀ Trudge on and up to reach the crest between the valleys.

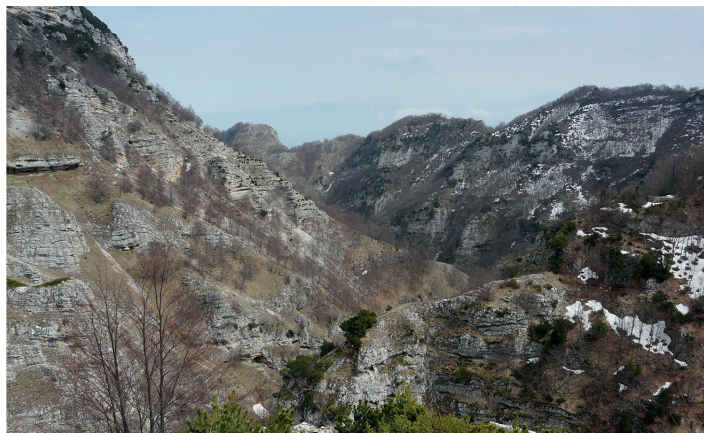
Turn left along the open ridge for 300 metres or so to reach the day's high point where the path slants obviously rightwards on the other side and back into trees. (Don't be tempted to go right too soon.) Descend gently into the **Val Serviera**, leaving the forest again and emerging onto a grassy promontory – a favoured haunt of a group of chamois (*camoscia*). Carefully locate the way off the far side and go down a short rocky gully to the river. Hop across on boulders and climb briefly up to a shepherds' hovel called **Callarelli**, 'restored' somewhat by the national park.

From Callarelli, follow the level path east (right) which contours high across the grassy slopes and ledges of the left side of the valley. The views into the gorge are breathtaking. The valley deepens and narrows as the canyon develops. ◀ To avoid being drawn in, the path turns left to climb briefly and steeply over a wooded shoulder into the adjacent sub-valley.

From the shoulder, descend through trees to emerge at the top of a large **stony gully**. Snow can linger here throughout the spring but a little should present no difficulty. Descend the gully to the grassy pasture. The path levels and leads south east towards the cross on **Colle Bandiera**, overlooking the entrance to the Val Serviera. Shepherds' caves are prominent across the hillside. Ignoring paths to the left, walk up to the cross.

The **panorama** is huge, with views back into the massif and across to Lago San Angelo, and hilltop villages scattered across the undulating countryside to the sea. Fara lies over 700m below.

Descend from the cross to join the path on the edge of the gorge. Follow it leftwards (don't be tempted



down right – a track that leads only to more shepherds' caves). Pass a fountain and, swinging further left, begin the steady, long descent to the foot of the mountain. The good path leads north east – taking you disappointingly away from the village.

The descent is steady until, with relief, the path turns sharp right and, after a final swing northwards, turns right (east) again to continue down to end at a white 4x4 track. (If you reach a first small building before the sharp right turn, you have missed it. Retrace your steps for about 30 metres to find it.)

Turn right on the track towards Fara, about 3km away, and walk back along lanes, in places tarmacked and in others not, following occasional signposts marked 'G3'. In general, keep near to the foot of the mountain and pass behind the Di Cecco **pasta factory**, always heading towards Fara.

Rivers flowing through the gorges or springing from their mouths powered small industries in the settlements along the foot of the escarpment. In Fara San Martino the waters of the Verde river, which springs between the village and the mountain, gave rise to

Val Serviera at Easter

pasta production. Several firms were established and, today, the output of the enormous De Cecco factory can be found in delicatessens around the world.

At one point walk alongside the river that flows from Val Serviera. The final stretch arrives at the bottom of **Fara San Martino**.

Turn right onto the main road, pass an old factory and fork right into a small park lying in the rising valley between the village and mountain. ◀ The source of the River Verde, springing from the foot of the mountain, makes an interesting pause. The last stretch up to the car park is on tiresome unsealed roads, but is soon over. Take a left turn to regain the track driven down at the start of the day for the easiest approach.

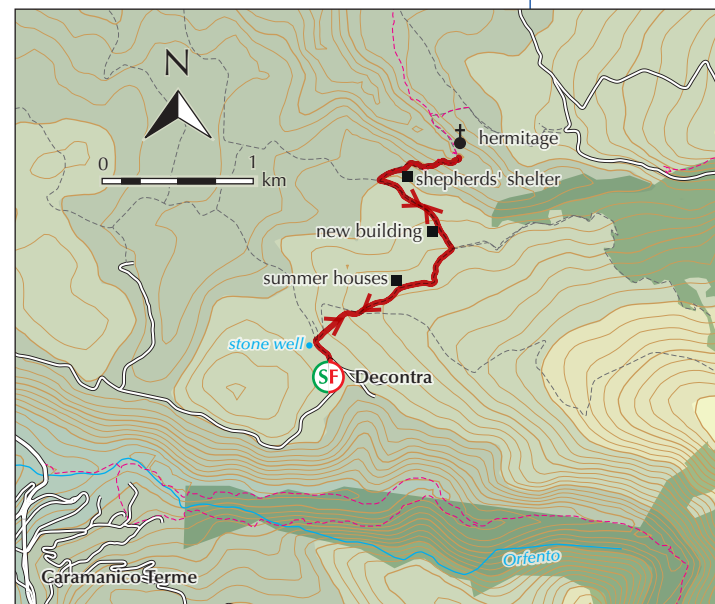
In the park are archaeological remains of early waterworks, mills and generators.

WALK 2

The hermitage of San Bartolomeo di Legio

Start/finish	Decontra, in the north of the Maiella National Park (42.169530, 14.028257)
Distance	5.5km
Total ascent/descent	280m
Difficulty	1 (route may be snowbound in the winter months)
Walking time	2hr 30min
High/low points	876m/684m
Map	Majella – Carta Escursionistica (1:25,000)
Access	Decontra is about 3km north east of Caramanico Terme, the main town in the central valley of the Maiella. Take the SR487 from the north or south to Caramanico. (For further details see Appendix B.)
Parking	Shortly after entering the village (just beyond ‘Il Cervo’ restaurant) the road swings left, passing a church on the right. After 200 metres the road turns right in a hairpin. Park here in a sensible spot. Alternatively, park near the stone well.

The small mountain village of Decontra lies high above the northern slopes of the wonderful Orfento valley, plunging deeply from the slopes of the Amaro massif. This gentle uphill stroll crosses the stony meadows and young woodlands of the northern Maiella foothills, followed by a steep descent into the narrow valley sheltering the centuries-old hermitage built almost imperceptibly into the cliffs of the far bank. The route offers fine views towards the sea and the Gran Sasso range and presents a quiet insight into the life of the people who lived here in times past. Return to Decontra by retracing your steps, admiring fine examples of Maiellan ‘stone beehives’ along the way.



Walk north west along an unsealed white track that leaves the hairpin bend (there is likely to be a signpost for the hermitage) and in 200 metres reach a crossroads with a superb **stone well** in the field on the left.