



Information about the mountain

Name of the mountain	Gran Sasso
Country	Italy
Region	Abruzzo
Altitude	2.912
Surface area	33.995 ha
Surface of protected area	143.311 ha
Name of local organization in charge of management	Gran Sasso and Laga Mountains National Park
Number of municipalities	44 <i>Municipalities of L'Aquila Province:</i> Barete, Barisciano, Cagnano Amiterno, Calascio, Campotosto, Capestrano, Capitignano, Carapelle Calvisio, Castel del Monte, Castelveccchio Calvisio, L'Aquila, Montereale, Ofena, Pizzoli, Santo Stefano di Sessanio, Villa Santa Lucia degli Abruzzi <i>Municipalities of Teramo Province:</i> Arsita, Campi, Castelli, Civitella del Tronto, Cortino, Crognaleto, Fano Adriano, Isola del Gran Sasso d'Italia, Montorio al Vomano, Pietracamela, Rocca Santa Maria, Torricella Sicura, Tossicia, Valle Castellana. <i>Municipalities of Pescara Province:</i> Brittoli, Bussi sul Tirino, Carpineto della Nora, Castiglione a Casauria, Civitella Casanova, Corvara, Farindola, Montebello di Bertona, Pescosansonesco, Villa Celiera <i>Municipalities of Rieti Province:</i> Amatrice, Accumoli <i>Municipalities of Ascoli Piceno Province:</i> Acquasanta Terme, Arquata del Tronto
Institutional recognition	National Park Establishment - National Law 394/91 Sites of Community Importance (SIC) - Eu Habitat Directive n. 43/1992 Special Protection Area (SPA) - Eu Birds Directive n. 409/1979 The Most Beautiful Villages of Italy - Castel del Monte, Castelli, Navelli, Pietracamela, Santo Stefano di Sessanio Ospitalità Italiana brand – 21 certified companies in the Gran Sasso area in 2013



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Project details

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Mauro Forconi - Photographer

Gran Sasso

A trip through the high mists
of Abruzzo's rooftop: dramatic natural
beauty and the age-old culture
of the shepherds

Gran Sasso d'Italia, the highest peak in the Apennines mountain range, is also the location of the Calderone, the southernmost glacier in Europe. It's home to an extraordinary variety of plants and animal species. It also maintains a striking balance between the pristine and protected natural areas and the age-old human culture. Walking the mesh of villages dotted around the countryside, a traveller can enjoy the architectural might of churches, castles and mansions, precious works of art, countless examples of craftsmanship, ancient rural traditions, and authentic gastronomy. Traces of the past are everywhere, but one image lingers in the mind: the shepherds and their white flocks pasturing on the emerald green grass of the "Little Tibet" Campo Imperatore, the largest plateau in the Apennines.



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Proud Local People

Nature forged a bond with the ancient peoples. They belong to the mountain, and proudly so. The Gran Sasso's rugged environment moulded their culture, driving them to live side by side with the spirituality of Nature. The rockiness of the region forged the character of its dwellers, so that it's easy to imagine a parallel between the mountain, grand and pure, and its inhabitants' dignity and tenacity. The people are characteristically detached and wary, and yet extremely kind to anyone who gains their trust and generosity—and so is the mountain itself, concealing its beauty until you approach its intimidating profile.

Reputation

The Gran Sasso has been widely renowned since the mid-16th century. The first climb to the summit of the Corno Grande, led by Captain De Marchi, paved the way for the exploration of the higher peaks. Only later, at the end of the eighteenth century, people started appreciating the mountain for its touristic potential. During these years, the enthusiastic members of the Club Alpino Italiano in Rome launched a remarkable project of environmental revaluation. The ambitious project succeeded, and the Gran Sasso became one of the most important hiking and climbing destinations in the Appennines mountain range.

Legends and Myths

The legend goes like this: Maja, one of the Pleiades, had a son—"the Giant". When the Giant was wounded in a fight, his mother consulted an oracle for a way to save his life. The only medicine who could cure the Giant, the oracle said, was a herb that grew on a steep mountain beyond the sea. After a long trip, mother and son reached the Gran Sasso. The journey, however, was for naught: the Giant, exhausted, died on the mountain. Since then, the Gran Sasso has the shape of a sleeping giant. The Maiella, the mountain close by, took its name from the anguished Maja, forever watching over her dead son. The sound of the wind, they say, still carries her desperate wailing.

Power of Inspiration

For centuries, Gran Sasso inspired musicians, painters, poets and writers. In 1903, the famous Italian poet Gabriele D'Annunzio dedicated one of his most famous poems to the shepherds and their ancient seasonal migrations. The uncontaminated landscapes, the medieval castles and the ancient villages provided unique sets for movies such as "The name of the Rose" with Sean Connery and "Lady Hawke" with Michelle Pfeiffer. The austere and awe-inspiring summits have been for thousands of years a source of religious inspiration and spiritual meditation, a sacred place in which man has sought closeness to the divinity.

Mediterranean Cultural Identity

This region has deep, ancient links to Mediterranean culture. Food is a real highlight: traditional methods of preparation and unique local products are staples of the Gran Sasso's cuisine. But food is not the sole connection of this area to Mediterranean history. One example amongst many is the "Celestinian Forgiveness" celebration. In 1294, Pope Celestine V issued a Bill that granted plenary indulgence to anyone who entered the Church of S. Maria of Collemaggio. This event has been celebrated every summer in L'Aquila since that time. To this day, the entire city takes part in the costumed celebration, that is currently awaiting approval as a UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity.

Picturesque Landscape

Gran Sasso stands out in the surrounding landscape and dominates the pastures of Campo Imperatore. It offers a magnificent view, with beautiful contrasts between the green slopes on one side and the steep barren cliffs on the other. The small lakes of Racollo and Pietranzoni mirror the splendid sight of the massif, while the light of dawn and sunset color the rocky walls of a pink shade. In spring, the plateaus are an explosion of color: red poppies, fields of bright green grass and white lentil crops. In autumn, the beech woods turn yellow and then red. The Navelli plateau explodes with lilac saffron flowers. When the snow falls in winter, the ancient villages look like paintings.

Sustainability and Anthropogenic Environment

The Gran Sasso is the heart of the environmentally protected Gran Sasso and Monti della Laga National Park, one of the foremost and largest in Italy. The park spans three regions (Abruzzo, Lazio and Marche) and five provinces (L'Aquila, Teramo, Pescara, Ascoli Piceno and Rieti). Any activity that impacts the natural environment across the Park area is tightly regulated and sometimes, especially in the case of traditional and sustainable agriculture or farming, actively encouraged. The entire area is a laboratory of sorts, a broad experiment that explores non-destructive forms of relationship between nature and human culture.

Particular Ecosystem

On the Gran Sasso, two biogeographical environments co-exist: the Euro-Siberian and the Mediterranean. This peculiar environment, combined with the lithological diversity of the mountain and the high altitude, gives rise to a highly valuable ecosystem. The biodiversity of the mountain has been recognised by the institution of the Gran Sasso National Park, one of the largest in Italy. Well over two thousands species of plants live in this area, including orchids and carnivorous plants. That's more than one third of Italy's floristic heritage. The diverse fauna includes golden eagles, appennine chamoises, wolves, deers, and no less than fourteen species of amphibians.

Historic Places

People have been living in the Gran Sasso area for millennia, leaving traces of settlements that date all the way from the Neolithic Age till the Renaissance. Besides the valuable isolated archaeological sites and buildings, the mountain is studded with charming antique villages. Some are perched on the high cliff dominating the valley, like the suggestive hamlet of Santo Stefano di Sessanio or the formidable bulk of Rocca Calascio. Others occupy the grassy lower slopes, like Ofena, known as the "Oven of Abruzzo". Major towns and smaller villages are dotted with strikingly beautiful monuments—from urban cathedrals and castles to parish churches, hermitages and mills.