

Monte Falcone: a hike to a towering cliff by way of villages, forests and “La Fessa”

Difference in elevation: 279 meters

Time: 3.15-3.45 hours

Difficulty: Medium

This excursion follows a circular route through one of the most beautiful areas of Le Marche, allowing one to admire incomparable views from the top of the rocky spur where the towns of Montefalcone Appennino and Smerillo are situated. The natural balcony faces toward the Appennine Mountains, offering a panorama that stretches from Gran Sasso to the Sibyllines, including the Gemelli and Laga peaks, with Monte Ascensione in the foreground. Geologically, the entire area is an extensive formation composed of sandstone and sandy conglomerates which dates back to the Pleocene period. In the distant past, when the region was bathed by the sea, the towns of Penna San Giovanni, Monte San Martino and Force would have been located along the same litoral. In addition to the museums in Montefalcone and Smerillo (both of which belong to the CEA, with the latter specializing in orienteering) you can find evidence of this phenomenon by passing along the “Fessa”, a deep and narrow aperture in the rocks, rich in fossils from the Tertiary period.

Due to the elevation, which surpasses 900 meters at the highest point, the vegetation is typical of subalpine zones and mountain plains. Because of their great natural importance, the forests have been included on the list of Protected Flora Areas by the region of Le Marche. In fact, you can find a great diversity of plant species, some rare; others can be seen in the form of bushes clinging tenaciously to the vertical sides of the cliff. The entire forest extends across a surface of almost 30 hectares and is well preserved, having been spared from agricultural use by policies in favor of reforestation.

We begin the hike by walking along the medieval “Sentiero delle Ginestre”, part of which is still paved as it was in the past, and then pass in front of a large shrine topped by a stone archway. We reach the inhabited part of Montefalcone in the proximity of San Michele Arcangelo, a Romanesque style parish church whose origin can be traced to the monks of Farfa who had it built in the area previously occupied by the church of San Pietro in Porta. Continuing along the streets of the town, we come first to the Palazzo Felci, seat of the museum and the CEA. Conserved inside is a polyptych by Alemanno dated 1475 and a characteristic fifteenth-century loggia, probably part of an antique Farfensi building. We then come to a beautiful balcony located just above the sandstone cliff jutting out over an indescribable panorama with views that will remain in the visitor’s memory forever. Afterwards, we walk around the famous medieval fortress whose castle walls, along with the symbol of the falcon, form the heraldic emblem of Montefalcone. Originally erected by the Farfensi as a sentry tower, then reinforced by the Fermani in the thirteenth century, the fortress was the site of numerous tragic events, including the massacre associated with Rinaldo di Monteverde.

After we have gone beyond the pine forest of Monte Falcone, we reach the isolated fifteenth-century church of the Madonna delle Scalelle, named perhaps after the path leading there; the interior is worth a visit because it contains valuable frescos. The church is situated near the Traforo del Valico delle Scalelle, an earthwork created solely with the use of chisels, almost unique among its kind. Proceeding forward, we cross the highest point of the hike in order to arrive in the attractive town of Smerillo, whose name derives from the name for a type of falcon. There we find another marvelous belvedere, reached after passing under an ancient arch, which looks over the entire Tenna valley. From here, by means of a sort of optical

illusion, it seems almost as if one is “above” the towns of Monte San Martino and Penna San Giovanni. It is also worth visiting the fourteenth-century church of Santa Caterina d’Alessandria, likewise rich in important frescos. Within a short time, we arrive at the “Fessa”, a deep and narrow cleft caused by landslides along the face of the cliff, where one can examine the important fossil remains of the entire site. There are also hot springs and sulfur springs in the area, as well as waterfalls along the streambeds of the “Fosso Durano”.