

From Acerenza (Church of Saint Vincent Ferrer) to Forenza (Cave Church of Saint Mary of the Armenians)

A journey that weaves together art, faith and archaeology, linking the Church of Saint Vincent Ferrer in Acerenza—a small Baroque gem—to the evocative Cave Church of Saint Mary of the Armenians, hidden among the hills surrounding Forenza. Covering 21.3 kilometres, with an elevation gain of 640 metres uphill and 720 metres downhill, and an average duration of around six and a half hours, the route is classified as challenging, yet it offers an experience of deep immersion in the historical and natural landscape of the Bradano area. The trail alternates paved, compacted and unpaved sections, crossing rural and wooded areas where nature intertwines with the memory of ancient monastic settlements.

The walk begins in Acerenza, one of Italy's most charming villages, dominated by its majestic Norman-Romanesque cathedral. Just outside the historic centre, along the road leading to the bishop's palace, stands the Church of Saint Vincent Ferrer, a seventeenth-century noble chapel built by the Gala family. The stone façade and the sober, intimate interior convey a sense of quiet spirituality, while the violet marble altar and the vaults decorated in pastel green lend the space a refined and harmonious elegance. From here, the route heads southwards, leaving behind the medieval walls of Acerenza and continuing through vineyards, pastures and stretches of olive groves.



Figure 1. Church of Saint Vincent Ferrer (Acerenza)

The path continues along transhumance routes and country roads, offering wide views over the valleys of the Bradano. It passes through areas of great naturalistic and historical interest, where ancient farmsteads, rural chapels and the ruins of masserie bear witness to the continuity of human presence in this area since the medieval period.

The journey ends at the Cave Church of Saint Mary of the Armenians, set in a small valley on the outskirts of Forenza. Its earliest documented reference dates back to 1196, when it is mentioned in a deed of sale for a vineyard “near the Church of Saint Mary de Armeniis”. At that time, the church had annexed to it a vineyard to the north, a vegetable garden to the east and a small plot of land, entrusted to the judge Demetrius, who served as *gubernator* until 1219, the year in which the complex was granted to the Monastery of Montevergine. From 1288 onwards, a priory is documented, initially administered by a lay oblate and, from 1306, by the monk Giovanni de Murra. The church prospered thanks to continuous donations until 1594 when, due to financial difficulties, it was gradually abandoned and finally suppressed in the seventeenth century.

The present building is the result of numerous construction phases. Archaeological investigations have revealed a three-nave layout with a central apsidal dome and two smaller lateral apses, attributable to different building periods. Originally, the entrance was located to

the west, corresponding to what is now the altar area. Traces of a fresco on the presbyterial wall attest to the presence of sacred painted decoration, possibly linked to medieval iconographic cycles. Next to the church lies a small room of uncertain function, later reused as a cemetery, with in-ground burials dating back to the fourteenth century. The oldest graves, however, predate the thirteenth-century structure, confirming the long-standing funerary vocation of the site.

Today, the Church of Saint Mary of the Armenians stands as a site of great historical and archaeological value, set within a landscape of silence and rolling hills. Its walls tell the story of the evolution of a sacred place which, between the Middle Ages and the early modern period, preserved the spirituality of monks and worshippers alike, bearing witness to the deep connection between faith, stone and the land of Lucania.

The route from Acerenza to Forenza is therefore a journey through the memory and spirituality of the Bradano area, among cave architecture, vineyards and landscapes that invite contemplation. Every step along this path brings together the quiet of nature and the strength of Basilicata's religious roots, in an itinerary that is at once discovery, meditation and storytelling.



Figure 2. Cave Church of Saint Mary of the Armenians (Forenza)