

From Forenza (Church of Saint Nicholas and Mary Most Holy) to Ripacandida (Church of Our Lady of Mount Carmel) via the Cave Church of Saint Mary of the Armenians

An itinerary that crosses the sacred history and landscape of the Vulture area, linking two of the most important spiritual sites in Basilicata: the Church of Saint Nicholas and Mary Most Holy in Forenza and the Church of Our Lady of Mount Carmel in Ripacandida. Covering 19.4 kilometres, with an elevation gain of 370 metres uphill and 650 metres downhill, and an average walking time of around five and a half hours, this demanding route is ideal for those seeking a cultural and spiritual trekking experience, immersed in nature and the ancient memory of the land. The trail alternates paved, compacted and dirt sections, following a route of extraordinary scenic variety that brings together hills, valleys, woodlands and cultivated expanses, in a constant dialogue between the spirituality of the sites and the power of the landscape.

The walk begins in the centre of Forenza, at the Church of Saint Nicholas and Mary Most Holy. Inside the church is preserved a canvas depicting Saint Mary of the Armenians and an eighteenth-century statue of Saint Anthony, crafted by the Neapolitan master silversmith Francesco Manzone.



Figure 1. Church of Saint Nicholas and Mary Most Holy (Forenza)

Leaving the church behind, the route heads south-west, crossing unspoilt rural landscapes dotted with stone *masserie*, olive groves and rows of vines. In its initial sections, the path follows ancient farm tracks that once linked the places of worship scattered across the countryside, bearing witness to the dense network of local spirituality that has long characterised this area. Halfway along the walk, one reaches one of the most evocative and mysterious sites of the Vulture region: the Cave Church of Saint Mary of the Armenians, hewn into the rock and set within a landscape of profound tranquillity. Dating back to the Early Middle Ages, this extraordinary place of worship bears witness to the presence of Eastern monks—probably Armenian or Basilian—who arrived in Basilicata between the eighth and ninth centuries. The interior, simple and intimate, preserves votive frescoes and early medieval niches recalling Byzantine iconography. Surrounded by vegetation and volcanic outcrops, the site invites pause and silence: here, time seems suspended, and the bond between faith and nature reveals itself in its most primal form.

From the rock-cut site, the path continues downhill, crossing a landscape that alternates cultivated valleys and small woodland areas, until reaching the slopes of Ripacandida, one of the most charming villages of the Vulture area.

The journey ends at the Church of Saint Mary of Mount Carmel, a place of deep local devotion. Built before the earthquake of 1694 and later rebuilt by the Baffari family—as attested by the coat of arms on the entrance portal—it stands on the site of Ripacandida's former cemetery, now transformed into a public park. No longer used for religious services, the church preserves

an exquisite decorative programme by a Lucanian artist active in the first half of the eighteenth century, with frescoes depicting the Resurrection, Our Lady of Mount Carmel, the Holy Trinity, the Twelve Apostles, and Saints Donato the Bishop and Donatello. A small jewel of art and devotion, it tells the story of the village's religious and artistic memory.



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

The route from Forenza to Ripacandida, passing through the Cave Church of Saint Mary of the Armenians, is far more than a hiking trail: it is a journey of the soul, a path between faith and landscape, art and silence, where every step reconnects the traveller with the deep roots of Basilicata. It is an experience that invites reflection, slowness and the discovery of the spirituality of the Vulture area, within a landscape that continues to preserve-intact-the ancient breath of the land.



Figure 3. Church of Saint Mary of Mount Carmel (Ripacandida)