

From Rionero in Vulture (Giustino Fortunato Palace) to Melfi (Episcopal Palace) via the Monticchio Lakes

An itinerary of rare beauty, linking two emblematic sites of the Vulture area — Rionero in Vulture and Melfi—and passing through the evocative Monticchio Lakes, green gems set within the crater of an extinct volcano. Stretching over 23.7 kilometres, with 990 metres of ascent and 1,060 metres of descent, and an average duration of around seven and a half hours, this demanding route is ideal for experienced hikers seeking to immerse themselves in some of the most spectacular landscapes of Basilicata. The trail alternates between paved, compacted and unpaved sections, crossing woodlands, ravines and slopes that reflect the geological and cultural history of the Vulture.

The route begins at the Giustino Fortunato Palace, in the heart of Rionero in Vulture. This elegant nineteenth-century palace, overlooking the town centre, now houses the Giustino Fortunato House Museum and the Vulture Museum—two exhibition spaces that tell the story of the area through the life of Giustino Fortunato and the geology of the volcano that shaped the surrounding landscape. Here, visitors can breathe in the cultivated and civic atmosphere that defined Fortunato's life: a Lucanian intellectual of national renown, deeply connected to this land and its people.



Figure 1. Giustino Fortunato Palace (Rionero in Vulture)

Leaving the built-up area behind, the route winds through rolling cultivated hills and the vineyards of *Aglianico del Vulture DOCG*, where the landscape continually changes colour—from the vivid greens of spring to the warm reds and golds of autumn.

After the first uphill stretches, the path enters the forests that cloak the slopes of Monte Vulture, an ancient volcano now dormant yet still alive in the fertility of its soil and the evocative power of its silhouette. Along the way, chestnut groves alternate with beech woods and open panoramic clearings, where the silence is broken only by birdsong and the whisper of the wind through the leaves.

The walk leads on to the enchanting Monticchio Lakes, two volcanic lakes—the Great Lake and the Small Lake—whose waters mirror the shifting colours of the surrounding woodland. On the shores of the Small Lake stands the ancient Abbey of Saint Michael the Archangel, founded in the Lombard period and partly hewn into the rock. Inside, medieval frescoes and ancient devotional graffiti bear witness to centuries of spiritual life. The atmosphere here feels suspended and mystical, a perfect balance between nature and faith.



Figure 2. Monticchio Lakes



Figure 3. Abbey of San Michele Arcangelo (Monticchio Lakes)

The site is also a protected nature reserve and a habitat for numerous butterfly species, including the extremely rare *Brahmaea europaea*, endemic to the Vulture region and a symbol of a unique ecosystem in Europe.

Leaving the lakes behind, the trail continues towards Melfi, climbing gently through forests and valleys. The walk alternates shaded stretches with open views, from which the outlines of villages scattered across the Vulture can be seen—Barile, Rapolla and Maschito—nestled among vineyards and rolling hills.

The atmosphere is that of an ancient and generous landscape, where nature and history merge in a timeless dialogue. The journey ends at the Episcopal Palace of Melfi, one of the most significant buildings in the historic centre. Originally constructed in the Norman period (11th-century), it underwent numerous alterations over the centuries, acquiring its present Baroque appearance in the eighteenth century. Inside are the Picture Gallery, with works ranging from Francesco da Tolentino to Cristiano Danona, the Diocesan Museum, and the Episcopal Library, which preserves valuable documents and rare sixteenth-century printed books. Today, the palace stands as a meeting point of art, faith and knowledge—an ideal conclusion to a journey that brings together volcanic nature and spiritual heritage.



Figure 4. Vescovado's Palace (Melfi)

The route from Rionero in Vulture to Melfi is a journey through history and the natural power of the Vulture: from the calm waters of the volcanic lakes to the solemnity of its ecclesiastical architecture. It is an experience of cultural and environmental trekking that captures the essence of Basilicata—the depth of its landscapes, the beauty of its stone and the spirituality that has accompanied human journeys through these ancient lands for centuries.