

Abruzzo & Molise



Straddling the central Apennines, Abruzzo and Molise offer some of Italy's least-explored countryside. And it's this wild landscape of stark peaks, silent valleys and dark forests that's the real reason to visit. In few other regions can you find such solitude. But that's not to say that tourism has bypassed the area. It hasn't. The Parco Nazionale d'Abruzzo, Lazio e Molise attracts two million visitors annually, while further east the heavily developed Adriatic resorts swell with sun seekers every August. Inland, however, the pace is slower and the infrastructure less obtrusive.

Abruzzo and Molise boast three national parks encompassing 3350 sq km of mountainous terrain. Here a small number of wolves and bears roam free, and although you're unlikely to meet one, it adds an edge to know that you might. A vast outdoor playground, the parks are a mecca for outdoor enthusiasts with wonderful hiking, skiing and mountain-biking.

Traditionally poor and neglected, neither region is as culturally rich as its more illustrious neighbours, but there are gems to be found. The Romanesque Basilica di Santa Maria di Collemaggio in L'Aquila and the Byzantine frescoes of the Abbazia di San Vincenzo Volturno, northwest of Isernia, are both striking examples of artistic expression. Isolation has also ensured the survival of age-old customs such as Cocullo's bizarre snake-charmers' procession and the manic bull-race in Ururi. In Scanno, you can still see elderly women wearing traditional costumes.

The two regions (known collectively as the Abruzzi until they were divided in 1963) are among Italy's most earthquake-prone. Most recently, a quake in 2002 killed 29 people in the small town of San Giuliano di Puglia.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Take in the views from **Corno Grande** (p607), the Apennines' highest peak
- Walk with the wolves in the **Parco Nazionale d'Abruzzo, Lazio e Molise** (p610)
- Catch the snakes at Cocullo's **Processione dei Serpari** (p609)
- Stroll the Roman streets at **Saepinum** (p614)
- Drive the spectacular Gole di Sagittaro en route to **Scanno** (p609)



■ POPULATION: Abruzzo 1.3 million;
Molise 320,900

■ AREA: Abruzzo 10,794 sq km;
Molise 4438 sq km

ABRUZZO

Best known for its dramatic mountain scenery, Abruzzo's landscape is surprisingly diverse. There are ancient forests in the Parco Nazionale d'Abruzzo, Lazio e Molise, a vast plain extends east of Avezzano and the coastline is flat and sandy.

Many towns retain a medieval look. Chief among them, L'Aquila and Sulmona are worth visiting, while the numerous hill-top castles and isolated, sometimes abandoned, *borghi* (villages) exude a sinister charm, lending credence to Abruzzo's fame as an ancient centre of magic. Witches, wizards and snake-charmers were members of a tribe known as the Marsi, which lived around modern-day Avezzano.

L'AQUILA

pop 71,500 / elev 720m

Overshadowed by the Gran Sasso d'Italia, Abruzzo's regional capital is a city of grey stone and biting winters. It's not an especially attractive or exciting place but it's not without its charms – the Basilica di Santa Maria di Col-

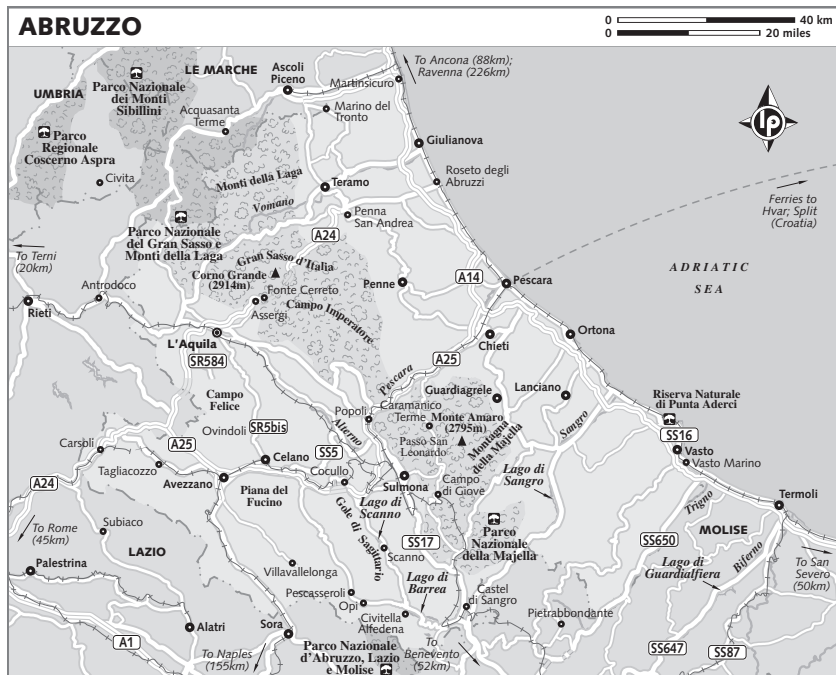
lemaggio is one of the region's most impressive buildings, it's got a mean castle and the magnificent Parco Nazionale del Gran Sasso e Monti della Laga is just down the road.

Legend has it that the city was founded by the Swabian King Frederick II and completed by his son Conrad IV in 1254. Its original citizens were drawn from 99 villages, each of which was required to build its own piazza, church and fountain. Earthquakes have destroyed most of the original churches and piazzas but a fountain, the Fontana delle 99 Cannelle, survives along with the townhall bell, which chimes 99 times every evening.

For much of its history, L'Aquila was governed by the Spanish as part of the Kingdom of Naples. It rose against Spanish rule twice in the 16th and 17th centuries but both times the city was crushed. Then, in 1703 an earthquake all but finished off the job. L'Aquila was made regional capital in 1860.

Orientation

Your best point of reference is Piazza del Duomo in the *centro storico* (historic centre). All the sights are within easy walking



distance and it's linked to the bus terminal by a 500m escalator-cum-walkway. From the piazza, the centre's main street, Corso Vittorio Emanuele runs north, while to the south its continuation, Corso Federico II, leads down to the Villa Comunale park.

L'Aquila's train station is west and downhill of the city centre. Buses 5, 8 and 11 connect the two.

Information

Duomo.net (☎ 0862 2 18 93; Via Cimino 25; per hr €2.50; 🕒 9am-10pm Mon-Sat, 4pm-10pm Sun) Internet access.

Hospital (☎ 0862 36 81; Località Coppito)

Police station (☎ 0862 43 01; Via Strinella 2)

Post office (☎ 0862 63 73 10; Piazza del Duomo 39)

Main tourist office (☎ 0862 2 23 06; Via XX Settembre 8; 🕒 9am-1pm & 3-6pm Mon-Sat, 9am-1pm Sun mid-May-mid-Sep, 9am-1pm & 3-6pm Mon-Fri, 9am-1pm Sat mid-Sep-mid-May)

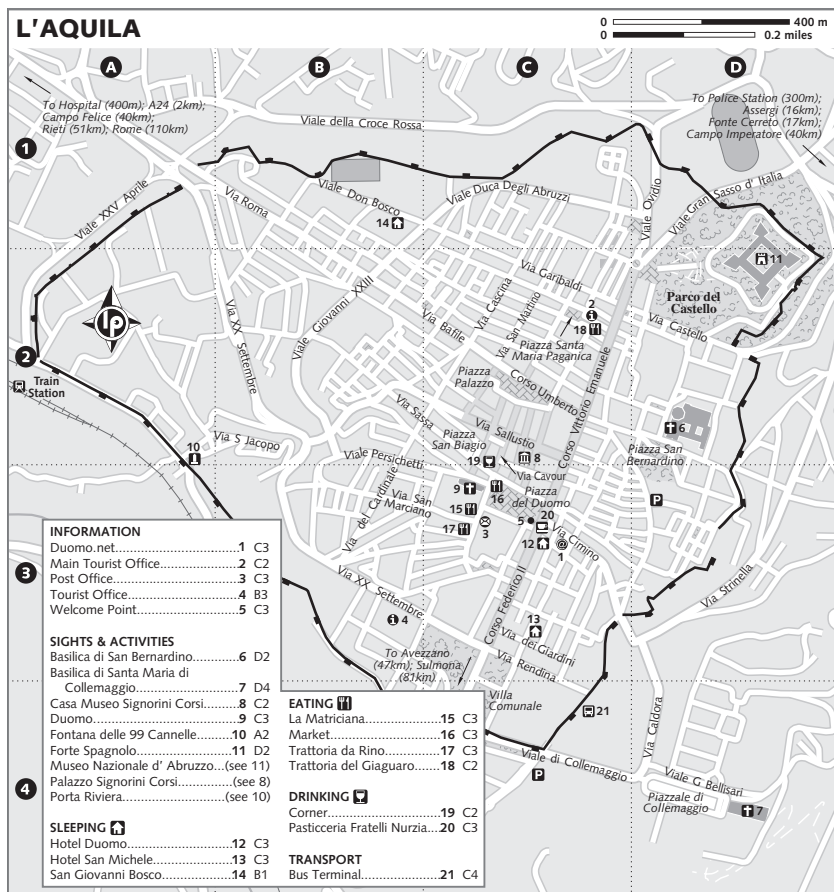
Tourist office (☎ 0862 41 08 08; Piazza Santa Maria Paganica 5; 🕒 9am-1pm & 3-6pm Mon-Sat, 9am-1pm Sun mid-May-mid-Sep, 9am-1pm & 3-6pm Mon-Fri, 9am-1pm Sat mid-Sep-mid-May)

Welcome Point (☎ 0862 2 30 21; www.centrostorico.laquila.it in Italian; Piazza del Duomo; 🕒 9am-midnight Jun-Aug, 9am-9pm Sep-May) Excellent information point; also books hotels/restaurants and arranges concert tickets.

Sights

FORTE SPAGNOLO

With the Gran Sasso d'Italia looming over, L'Aquila's 16th-century castle is a forebod-



ing sight. Known locally as the **Forte Spagnolo** (Spanish Fort), it was built after an unsuccessful rebellion against the city's Spanish rulers in 1528. The austere geometry, steep blanchéd battlements and now-empty moat were designed by the Valencian architect Pirro Luis Scrivà and commissioned by Don Pedro de Toledo, the Spanish viceroy of Naples and de facto ruler of L'Aquila.

Nowadays, the castle houses the **Museo Nazionale d'Abruzzo** (☎ 0862 63 31; Castello Cinquecentesco; admission €4; 🕒 8.30am-7.30pm Tue-Sun) and its collection of local archaeological finds and religious art. The surprise highlight is the skeleton of a million-year-old mammoth, unearthed near the city in 1954.

CHURCHES

The striking **Basilica di Santa Maria di Collemaggio** (☎ 0862 2 63 92; Piazzale di Collemaggio; 🕒 8.30am-1pm & 3-8pm Mon-Fri, 8.30am-8pm Sat & Sun) is Abruzzo's most famous church. Its square pink-and-white quilt-pattern façade is a beautiful marriage of architectural styles – the intricate rose windows are typically Gothic while the imposing central portal is pure Romanesque. In contrast to the bright exterior, the interior is gloomy and stark.

Consecrated in 1288, the basilica became an important religious centre in 1294 when Pietro del Morrone was crowned Pope Celestine V here. As founder of the Celestine order, he was canonised in 1303, seven years after his death, and his tomb lies inside the basilica.

To the north, the 15th-century **Basilica di San Bernardino** (☎ 0862 2 22 55; Piazza San Bernardino; 🕒 7am-noon & 4-6pm Mon-Sat, 4-6.30pm Sun) features a lavish three-tiered Renaissance façade and an opulent baroque interior. Of note are the detailed reliefs on San Bernardino's mausoleum. San Bernardino, originally from Siena, died in L'Aquila in 1444.

Lending its name to L'Aquila's central piazza, the **Duomo** (Piazza del Duomo; 🕒 8.30am-noon & 4.30-7pm) has suffered repeated earthquake damage since the 13th century. Today it boasts little more than an unexceptional neoclassical façade.

CASA MUSEO SIGNORINI CORSI

To see how the city's aristocracy once lived, head for the small **museum** (☎ 0862 41 09 00; Via Patini 42; adult/child €3.10/2.10; 🕒 4-7pm Tue-Fri, 10am-1pm & 4-7pm Sat & Sun) in the **Palazzo Signorini Corsi**, where you'll find the Corsi family's

considerable collection of religious art and period furniture.

FONTANA DELLE 99 CANNELLE

The city's most emblematic sight, the **Fountain of the 99 Spouts** is a misnomer – there are, in fact, only 93 spewing gargoyles. Surrounded by a wall of pink-and-white stone, the 13th-century fountain is one of the few supplies of fresh water that has proved reliable throughout the city's earthquake-prone past. The fountain lies to the west of the centre, near the **Porta Riviera**, one of the city's four medieval gates.

Festivals & Events

L'Aquila's big annual event is **La Perdonanza** (The Pardon) on 28 August. This colourful celebration goes back to 1294 when Pietro del Morrone was crowned Pope Celestine V in the Basilica di Santa Maria di Collemaggio. In an act of largesse, Celestine granted plenary indulgence to everyone present who had confessed and taken Communion. Since then, every 28 August, the pardon has been repeated.

The grand pardon is preceded by a 1000-strong costumed procession and a week of highly charged celebrations.

Sleeping

There's not a lot of good-value accommodation in L'Aquila, so make sure to book ahead.

San Giovanni Bosco (☎ 0862 6 39 31; Viale Don Bosco 6; s/d €25/45) The cheapest beds in town are at this religious complex, a short walk downhill from the historic centre. Don't expect much – just clean, basic rooms and an early night, courtesy of the 11pm curfew.

Hotel Duomo (☎ 0862 41 08 93; www.hotel-duomo.it; Via Dragonetti 6; s €55-80, d €80-90; 📍) In a discreet 18th-century *palazzo* just off Piazza del Duomo, this welcoming hotel oozes quiet style. Rooms, some of which look onto the piazza, sport a rustic-chic look with burnt-sienna floor tiles, wrought-iron bedsteads and dark-wood furniture.

Hotel San Michele (☎ 0862 42 02 60; www.stmichelehotel.it; Via dei Giardini 6; s/d incl breakfast €65/90; 📍 🚰) Another good option near the Villa Comunale park, this modern hotel boasts slick, sound-proofed rooms and stylish bathrooms – think yellow walls and eye-catching mosaic tiling. A bountiful buffet breakfast is included, but parking is not; it costs an extra €8.

Eating & Drinking

Local specialities include *maccheroni alla chitarra* (thick, homemade macaroni) and *agnello* (lamb). Fruit and veg are sold at the weekday **market** (Piazza del Duomo).

Pasticceria Fratelli Nurzia (☎ 0862 2 10 02; Piazza del Duomo 74) An elegant old café celebrated for its cakes and coffee. Speciality of the house is the *caffè Nurzia*, a delicious concoction of coffee, cream and chocolate.

Corner (Via Cavour 2; ☎ 7pm-2am) On the corner of Via Cavour and Piazza del Duomo, this is the place for an early-evening aperitif with the fashionable 30-something set.

Trattoria da Rino (☎ 0862 2 52 80; Via San Marciano 2; meals €18; ☎ Tue-Sun) With *nonna* in the kitchen and the grandkids running about, a meal here is about as close as you'll get to eating in a local home. There are no surprises on the menu, just hefty portions of warming Abruzzo classics and basic red wine.

La Matriciana (☎ 0862 2 60 65; Via Arcivescovado 5a; meals €20; ☎ Mon-Sat) A bustling trattoria with a no-frills approach and an appreciative clientele. Huge steaming bowls of pasta and filling meat dishes are the order of the day, along with robust red wine and unpretentious desserts. According to Italian custom, fish is served on Friday.

Trattoria del Giaguaro (☎ 0862 2 40 01; Piazza Santa Maria Paganica 4; meals €23; ☎ lunch Mon & Wed-Sun) Even on a wet Monday in March this place is packed at lunchtime. Locals come here for tried and tested staples such as *osso buco* (veal shank) and lasagne. For a meat-free

main course the grilled *scamorza* (smoked cheese) is a tasty alternative.

Getting There & Away

The best way to get to L'Aquila by public transport is by bus. **ARPA** (☎ 0862 41 28 08, in Rome 06 442 33 928; www.arpaonline.it in Italian) runs services to Rome's Stazione Tiburtina (€9.10, 1½ hours, 19 daily), Sulmona (€4.50, 1½ hours, nine daily) and Pescara (€7.50, 2½ hours, 10 daily). All buses leave from the main **bus terminal** (Viale di Collemaggio).

By car L'Aquila is 110km from Rome along the A24 autostrada. The SS17 connects with Sulmona.

PARCO NAZIONALE DEL GRAN SASSO E MONTI DELLA LAGA

About 20km northeast of L'Aquila, the Gran Sasso massif is the centrepiece of the Parco Nazionale del Gran Sasso e Monti della Laga. It's one of Italy's biggest parks and extends for 1500 sq km, spilling over into Lazio and Le Marche. The park's predominant feature is its jagged rocky landscape through which Europe's southernmost glacier, the Calderone, cuts its course. It's also a haven for wildlife – the latest reports estimate that there are 40 wolves, 350 chamois, five pairs of royal eagles and 30 peregrine falcons in the park.

For further information contact the **park office** (☎ 0862 6 05 21; www.gransassolagapark.it in Italian; Via del Convento 1; ☎ 10.30am-1pm & 4-6pm Mon-Fri) in Assergi, some 10km northeast of L'Aquila.

TAKE TO THE PISTES

Skiing in Abruzzo and Molise might lack the glamour of sashaying down the northern Alps but the sport is enthusiastically followed and there are resorts across the region.

Major areas:

- **Campo Imperatore** Twenty-two kilometres of mainly downhill pistes in the Parco Nazionale del Gran Sasso e Monti della Laga (see above).
- **Ovindoli** Abruzzo's biggest ski resort has 30km of downhill pistes and 50 of cross-country trails.
- **Campo Felice** A small resort 40km south of L'Aquila with 40km of pistes (30 downhill, 10 cross-country).
- **Pescasseroli** This popular outpost deep in the Parco Nazionale d'Abruzzo, Lazio e Molise (p610) has 30km of downhill slopes.
- **Campitello Matese** In Molise's Monti del Matese (p614), Campitello offers 40km of pistes, including 15km for cross-country.

Count on between €16.50 and €23 for a weekday ski pass, and up to €26 at the weekend.

OVID

Born into a wealthy Sulmona family in 43 BC, the young Publius Ovidius Naso was shipped off to Rome to study rhetoric and carve out a career in politics. But once in the capital he fell in with the literary set and began to write poetry. His early erotic verse, such as the *Amores* (The Loves) and *Ars Amatoria* (The Art of Love), gained him quick popularity in Roman high society.

Considered his masterpiece, *Metamorphoses* is a kind of extended cover version of a whole gamut of Greek myths, culminating in descriptions of Caesar's transformation into a star and the apotheosis of Augustus, who was ruler at the time. This last piece of sycophancy did not stop the emperor from banishing him to the Black Sea in AD 8. The reason remains a mystery, although Ovid himself alludes to a *carmen et error* (a poem and his behaviour). He died in Tomi, in modern-day Romania, 10 years later.

Nearby, Fonte Cerreto is the main access point for the Gran Sasso and Campo Imperatore (2117m), a desolate highland plain where Mussolini was briefly imprisoned in 1943. A cable car (☎ 0862 40 00 07; Tue & Thu €9, Mon, Wed & Fri €11, Sat & Sun €13; ⏰ 8.30am–5pm Mon–Fri, from 8am Sat & Sun) runs up to the Campo every 30 minutes from Fonte Cerreto. Up top, there's hiking in summer and skiing in winter – see opposite.

One of the most popular trekking routes is the surprisingly straightforward climb up **Corno Grande** (at 2912m the Apennines' highest peak). The 9km *via normale* (normal route) starts in the main parking area at Campo Imperatore and heads to the summit. The trail should be clear of snow from early June to late September/early October. If attempting the ascent, or any other serious route, arm yourself with the CAI 1:25,000 map *Gran Sasso d'Italia*.

The park has a network of *rifugi* (mountain huts) for walkers. Hotel accommodation is limited and expensive, but there is a camp site at Fonte Cerreto, **Camping Funivia del Gran Sasso** (☎ 0862 60 61 63; Fonte Cerreto; per person/tent/car €7.40/4.70/2; ⏰ mid-May–mid-Sep) and a hostel at the top of the *funivia* (cable lift), the **Ostello Campo Imperatore** (☎ 0862 40 00 11; Campo Imperatore; per person €20; ⏰ year-round).

To get to the park by public transport take bus 76 (€0.90, 20 minutes, hourly) from L'Aquila to Piazza Santa Maria Paganica, and then the M6 bus to Fonte Cerreto (€0.90, 20 minutes, 13 daily).

SULMONA

pop 25,500 / elev 400m

Hemmed in by brooding mountains, Sulmona is a prosperous little town with a charming medieval core. It's easily covered in a day although you might want to linger and use it as a base for exploring southern Abruzzo.

Despite its medieval appearance, Sulmona's origins predate the Romans. No-one is absolutely sure but tradition holds that it was founded by Solimo, a companion of Aeneas. The poet Ovid was born here in 43 BC, and in the Middle Ages it became an important commercial centre.

Much of Sulmona's modern wealth is based on the production of *confetti* – the sugar almonds presented to guests at Italian weddings – and jewellery.

Orientation

The walled *centro storico* is easy to navigate. Most sights are on or near the main street, Corso Ovidio, which runs southeast from the Villa Comunale park in the north to Piazza Garibaldi, Sulmona's main square. It's a five-minute stroll and the corso is closed to traffic outside business hours. About halfway down is Piazza XX Settembre.

The train station is about 2km northwest of the historic centre; the half-hourly bus A runs between the two.

Information

3D Sistemi (☎ 0864 21 20 47; Piazza Plebiscito 2; per 15min €1.50; ⏰ 9am–1pm & 4–7.30pm Mon–Wed, Fri & Sat) For internet access.

Council tourist office (☎ 0864 21 02 16; www.comune.sulmona.aq.it in Italian; Palazzo dell'Annunziata, Corso Ovidio; ⏰ 9am–12.30pm & 3.30–7pm)

Tourist office (☎ 0864 5 32 76; www.abruzzoturismo.it; Corso Ovidio 208; ⏰ 9am–1pm & 4–7pm Mon–Sat, 9am–1pm Sun mid-May–mid-Sep, 9am–1pm Mon–Sat & 3–6pm Mon, Wed & Fri mid-Sep–mid-May)

Sights

The most impressive of the *palazzi* on Corso Ovidio is the 16th-century **Palazzo dell'Annunziata** (Corso Ovidio), a harmonious blend

of Gothic and Renaissance architecture. Over the years it has been a hospital, pharmacy, magistrate's court and school; nowadays it houses several museums. The **Museo Civico** (☎ 0864 21 02 16; admission €1; ☹ 10am-1pm & 4-7pm Tue-Sun) has a small collection of Roman mosaics, Renaissance sculpture, coins and prints, while the **Museo in situ** (admission free; ☹ 10am-1pm Tue-Sun) displays the fascinating remains of a 1st-century BC Roman villa. Adjoining the *palazzo* is a baroque church of the same name, originally dating from 1320 but rebuilt after the 1703 earthquake.

Nearby, **Piazza XX Settembre**, with its statue of Ovid (see p607), is a popular meeting point.

Continuing along Corso Ovidio you come to what remains of a 13th-century **aqueduct** and, beyond that, **Piazza Garibaldi**, Sulmona's grandest square. In the centre of the piazza the Renaissance **Fontana del Vecchio** (Fountain of the Old One) is said by some to depict Solimo, the founder of Sulmona. To the northeast, the 14th-century **Chiesa di San Filippo Neri** (Piazza Garibaldi; ☹ 10am-1pm & 4-7pm) boasts an impressive Gothic façade. The piazza hosts the town market every Wednesday and Saturday.

Sweet-making becomes art at the **Fabbrica Confetti Pelino**, the most famous of Sulmona's *confetti* manufacturers. See how it's done at the **Museo dell'Arte Confettiera** (☎ 0864 21 00 47; Via Stazione Introdacqua 55; admission free; ☹ 9.30am-12.30pm & 3.30-6.30pm Mon-Sat), a 1km walk from Porta Napoli, at the southern end of Corso Ovidio.

Festivals & Events

Crowds swell Piazza Garibaldi on Easter Sunday to witness the **Madonna che Scappa in Piazza** (The Madonna that Escapes to the Square), Sulmona's traditional Easter ceremony.

Summer sees further festivities as the city hosts two medieval tournaments. On the last weekend in July local horse riders gallop around Piazza Garibaldi in the **Giostra Cavalleresca di Sulmona**. Then, a week later, the competition is opened up to riders from across Europe in the **Giostra Cavalleresca d'Europa**.

Sleeping & Eating

Hotel Italia (☎/fax 0864 5 23 08; Piazza Salvatore Tommasi 3; s/d €33/54) A wonderfully ramshackle old pile, the Italia has an ageless feel about it. Creaking wooden doors open onto large rooms with rattling radiators and draughty windows, while downstairs a model of a

medieval maiden guards the reception. It's all a little rough around the edges but the location is great, the price is right and the owners are welcoming.

Albergo Ristorante Stella (☎ 0864 5 26 53; www.has.it in Italian; Via Panfilo Mazara 18; s/d €50/70) In contrast to the ancient streets outside, rooms at this bright hotel are well sized, quiet and modern. They won't win any prizes for original design but they're comfortable and good value. The ground-floor restaurant is a further plus, serving decent three-course meals for around €18.

Napul'è (☎ 0864 3 31 20; Vico delle Colle 5; pizzas from €5; ☹ Tue-Sun; ☺) No pretensions here, just genuine pizza, cold beer and ready-packaged desserts. But when you're knackered after a day in the mountains and fancy something straightforward and tasty, it'll do just fine.

our pick **Hosteria dell'Arco** (☎ 0864 21 05 53; Via M D'Eramo 20; meals €20; ☹ Tue-Sun) When you order without a menu there's always the risk of a nasty surprise at the end. Not here. Here you'll eat superb food in lovely, rustic surroundings and then get a bill that'll leave you smiling from ear to ear. The food? A fabulous antipasto buffet, hearty pastas with legumes and mushrooms, lovely grilled meat and home-made desserts.

Drinking

Gran Caffè (☎ 0864 3 30 12; Piazza XX Settembre 12-14) A trendy meeting point on a popular piazza. As you sip your aperitif, ponder Ovid's words written over the bar: '*et Venus in vinis ignis in igne fuit*' or 'Wine turns the heart to love and sparks it into fire'.

Shopping

A pack of *confetti* is the traditional Sulmona souvenir. Pick one up at **Confetteria Maria Di Vito** (☎ 0864 5 59 08; Corso Ovidio 187) along with a bar of *torrone*, a chewy nougat confection.

Getting There & Away

ARPA (☎ 0864 21 04 69; www.arpaonline.it in Italian) buses go to/from L'Aquila (€4.50, 1½ hours, nine daily), Pescara (€5.30, one hour, four daily), Scanno (€3.20, one hour, nine daily) and other nearby towns. They leave from a confusing array of points, including Villa Comunale, the train station, and beneath Ponte Capograssi. Find out which stop you need when you get your ticket from the **tobacconist** at Piazza XX Settembre 18.

Satam (☎ 0871 34 49 69) buses run to Naples (€15, 2½ hours) four times daily.

By car, Sulmona is just off the A25 autostrada. From L'Aquila, follow the SS17 south.

Trains link with L'Aquila (€3.90, one hour, 10 daily), Pescara (€3.90, 1¼ hours, 19 daily) and Rome (€8.20, 2½ hours, seven daily).

From the train station take bus A for the centre.

PARCO NAZIONALE DELLA MAJELLA

Easily accessible from Sulmona, the 750-sq-km Parco Nazionale della Majella is an area of ominous mountains and empty valleys. More than half the park is over 2000m and its highpoint, Monte Amaro (2793m), is the Apennines' second-highest peak. Among the bleak summits live some 30 wolves, 20 bears and 50 chamois.

Some 500km of paths and cycling trails crisscross the area, providing ample scope for exercise. Further details are available online at www.parcomajella.it or from information centres at **Campo di Giove** (☎ 347 134 47 93; Casa Nanni Piazza Duval 1) and **Guardiagrele** (☎ 0871 8 28 50; Piazza San Francesco). To get to Guardiagrele take an ARPA bus from Pescara (€3.50, 1¼ hours, four daily); for Campo di Giove buses depart from Sulmona (€1.50, 40 minutes, four daily).

SCANNO

pop 2100 / elev 1050m

A tangle of steep alleyways and sturdy, grey-stone houses, Scanno is Abruzzo's most photogenic hill-top village and is a popular tourist attraction. It's left to its own devices in winter, but gets very busy in summer as visitors pour in en masse to enjoy the authentic atmosphere of a remote medieval *borgo* (archaic name for small town). You would not want to miss it, though – if nothing else for the exhilarating drive up from Sulmona, through the rocky Gole di Sagittaro (Sagittarius Gorges) and past tranquil Lago di Scanno.

Long heralded as a bastion of traditionalism, Scanno was for centuries a centre of wool production and it is today one of the few places in Italy where you can see women wearing traditional dress. The costume – a long black woollen dress, a wide-sleeved bodice and a square fez behind which two plaits (*i lacci*) are tied – is said to have originated in Asia Minor. Eastern influences are also evident in locally made jewellery, another Scanno speciality.

To learn more, contact the **tourist office** (☎ 0864 7 43 17; Piazza Santa Maria della Valle 12; ☎ 9am-1pm & 4-7pm Mon-Sat, 9am-1pm Sun mid-May-Sep, 9am-1pm & 3-6pm Mon-Sat Oct-mid-May) in the village centre.

FANG-TASTIC COCULLO

A one-horse hamlet in the hills west of Sulmona, **Cocullo** is the unlikely setting for one of Italy's weirdest festivals. The **Processione dei Serpari** (Snake Charmers' Procession) is the highlight of celebrations to honour St Dominic (San Domenico), Cocullo's patron saint and protector against snakebites. Events kick off at noon on the first Thursday of May when villagers gather in the main square to adorn a statue of St Dominic with jewellery, banknotes and dozens of writhing snakes. Once snaked-up, the saint is paraded through the streets by a team of fearless *serpari*.

Despite the religious element of the festivities, its origins are said to be pagan. Before the arrival of Christianity, locals worshipped a goddess called Angizia, who supposedly had powers to cure snakebites. As Christianity spread, the ancient deities were substituted by Christian saints and St Dominic inherited Angizia's mantle.

Whatever its roots, the festival guarantees Cocullo its 15 minutes of fame each year. Thousands arrive to witness the surreal spectacle even if none follow events as closely as the villagers' themselves. Local lore holds that if the snakes twist around the saint's head it's good news for the year ahead; if they wind around the arms, it's a bad sign.

The serpents used for the festival are harmless *cervone* and *saettone*. They are caught in the surrounding countryside in late March and released back into the hills once the festivities are over.

Cocullo is accessible by ARPA bus from Sulmona (€1.50, 20 minutes, four daily) or by train from Celano (€2.30, 35 minutes, four daily). Ask at the tourist office in Sulmona (p607) for details as the usually scant services are increased for the festival.

Sleeping & Eating

Accommodation is plentiful, although many places close in winter and most insist on at least half board in August and July. Book ahead for summer.

Pensione Nilde (☎ 0864 7 43 59; www.ilrifugiodel lupio.it; Viale del Lago 101; s €20-46, d €46-60, half/full board per person €50/70; ☞ year-round) About a kilometre from the village centre on the main entrance road, this modest family-run *pensione* offers straightforward, homely rooms and filling food. In August there's a minimum 10-night stay.

Pensione Grotta dei Colombi (☎ 0864 7 43 93; www.grottadeicolombi.it; Viale dei Caduti 64; s/d €35/50, half/full board per person €53/60; ☞ year-round) Sunlight streams into the spacious public rooms of this welcoming two-star on the edge of the *centro storico*. Rooms, the best of which afford views over the rocky gorge opposite, are decorated with rustic simplicity.

Trattoria Lo Sgabello (☎ 0864 74 74 76; Via dei Pescatori 45; meals €25; ☞ Thu-Tue; ☞) A lovely, light-filled trattoria just down from the medieval centre. Photos of costume-clad locals stare down on diners as they tuck into classic Abruzzese meals – think *maccheroni alla chitarra*, meaty mains and bucketloads of strong red wine.

Ristorante Gli Archetti (☎ 0864 7 46 45; Via Silla 8; meals €35; ☞ closed dinner Mon & Tue) Housed in the cellar of a Renaissance *palazzo*, this smart *osteria* (wine bar serving some food) is highly rated. Specialising in regional food, it serves a seasonal-based menu featuring dishes such as *fettuccinne allo zafferano* (ribbon pasta with saffron) and *filetto al montepulciano* (fillet steak with red wine).

Getting There & Away

ARPA (☎ 0864 21 05 32) buses connect Scanno with Sulmona (€3.20, one hour, nine daily).

Autolinee Schiappa (☎ 0864 7 43 62; www.autolinee schiappa.it) buses depart from Stazione Tiburtina in Rome for Scanno (€14.70, 2½ hours) at noon, 3pm and 5.50pm.

PARCO NAZIONALE D'ABRUZZO, LAZIO E MOLISE

Encompassing 1100 sq km of spectacular mountain scenery, the Parco Nazionale d'Abruzzo, Lazio e Molise is the oldest and most popular of Abruzzo's national parks. Up to two million people visit annually, hoping, perhaps, to catch sight of one of the 50

Marsican brown bears, 40 Apennine wolves, 600 indigenous chamois and 10 lynx that roam the highlands.

The park offers superb hiking as well as skiing, mountain-biking and other outdoor pursuits.

Orientation & Information

The park's main centre is **Pescasseroli**, an attractive village about 80km from Sulmona. For somewhere more low-key, nearby Civitella Alfedena is much less touristy.

In Pescasseroli (elevation 1167m) information is available from various offices. The most useful of them is the **tourist office** (☎ 0863 91 04 61; Via Principe di Napoli; ☞ 9am-1pm & 3-6pm Mon-Sat, 9am-1pm Sun), just to the east of the village centre. The **park information office** (☎ 0863 911 32 42; www.parcoabruzzo.it in Italian; Vico Consultore 1; ☞ 10am-1pm & 3-7pm Tue-Sun Jun-Sep, 10am-1pm & 2-5pm Tue-Sun Oct-May) has little practical information other than a *Carta Turistica* (€6) with walking routes marked and explanatory text in Italian.

There's also a **Centro di Visita** (☎ 0863 911 32 21; Viale Colli d'Oro; admission €6; ☞ 10am-1pm & 2-5pm Tue-Sun), which has a small museum and zoo.

Another useful office is **Ecotur** (☎ 0863 91 27 60; www.ecotur.org; Corso Plistia 42; ☞ 9am-1pm & 3.30-7pm), which organises guided treks, bike rides and various other excursions.

Seventeen kilometres from Pescasseroli, Civitella Alfedena (elevation 1121m) lies on the park's eastern edge above Lago di Barrea. Study up on the local flora and fauna at the **Centro Lupo** (Wolf Centre; ☎ 0864 89 01 41; museum €3; ☞ 10am-1pm & 3-7pm Tue-Sun Jun-Sep, 10am-1pm & 2-5pm Tue-Sun Oct-May). To see a couple of wolves, walk up the track by the side of the Centro Lupo to the free **Area Faunistica**.

Activities

For information on hiking in the park see boxed text, opposite.

Horse riding is a wonderful way to see the park. Between May and October, the **Centro Ippico Vallecupa** (☎ 0863 91 04 44; Via della Difesa) organises guided rides of various difficulties. A ride from Pescasseroli to Scanno will set you back €250.

For those who prefer to use their own legs, the tourist office hires out bikes from €4 per hour.

For skiing information see boxed text, p606.

STRETCH YOUR LEGS

With about 150 well-marked routes, the Parco Nazionale d'Abruzzo, Lazio e Molise is a mecca for hikers. Trails range from easy family jaunts to multiday hikes over rocky peaks and exposed highlands. The best time to go is between June and September, although access to some of the busier routes around Pescasseroli is limited in July and August. To book entry to these trails contact the park information office (opposite) in Pescasseroli or the Centro Lupo (opposite) in Civitella Alfedena.

Two of the area's most popular hikes are the climbs up Monte Amaro (2793m; route F1) and Monte Tranquillo (1841m; route C3). The former, a 2¼-hour hike, starts from a car park a few kilometres southeast of Pescasseroli (follow the SS83 for about 2km beyond Opi) and rises steeply up to the peaks where you're rewarded with stupendous views over the Valle del Sangro. There's quite a good chance of spotting a chamois on this walk.

The Monte Tranquillo route takes about 2½ hours from a starting point 3km south of Pescasseroli. If you've still got your breath at the top, you can continue northwards along the Rocca Ridge before descending down to Pescasseroli from the north. This beautiful, but challenging, 19.5km circuit takes about six or seven hours.

All routes are marked on the *Carta Turistica* (€6) available from Pescasseroli's park information office (opposite).

Sleeping & Eating

Campaggio dell'Orso (☎ 339 764 36 56; camp sites per adult/child per €8/5; ♻️ year-round) On the SS83 road into Pescasseroli, this Spartan site is about 1km south of town. It's got basic facilities (not a supermarket in sight) and tent pitches in a field by a river.

Campaggio Wolf (☎ 0864 89 03 60; Via Nazionale, Civitella Alfedena; camp sites per adult/child/tent €6/4/6; ♻️ Apr-Oct) This is a friendly camp site in Civitella Alfedena's quaint centre. It's a fairly simple place but there are games for the kids and a restaurant for parents.

Albergo La Torre (☎ 0864 89 01 21; www.albergola torre.com; Via Castello 3, Civitella Alfedena; s €25-36, d €44-55; ♻️ year-round; ♿) Run by a jovial English-speaker, this cosy hotel in Civitella Alfedena is a lovely place to return to after a day in the wilds. There are 20 spotless rooms and the food (meals around €20) is hot and fortifying.

Pensione Al Castello (☎ /fax 0863 91 07 57; Via G D'Annunzio 1, Pescasseroli; r €45-55, half board per person €40-55; ♻️ year-round) A far cry from the bland three-stars that make up much of Pescasseroli, this humble *pensione* has large, sunny rooms furnished with pleasant wooden furniture. Half board is compulsory in high season.

Pizzeria San Francisco (☎ 0863 91 06 50; Via Isonzo 1, Pescasseroli; pizzas €6) If you're not eating in your hotel, this laid-back pizzeria is a good bet. One of the few places open in deep winter, it's a modest place with wooden tables, a bustling atmosphere and great, wood-fired pizzas.

Getting There & Away

Pescasseroli, Civitella Alfedena and the other villages in the national park are linked by five daily **ARPA** (☎ 0864 21 04 96; www.arpaonline.it) buses to Avezzano (€4.60, 1½ hours), from where you can change for L'Aquila, Pescara and Rome; and buses to Castel di Sangro (€3.50, 1¼ hours) for connections to Sulmona and Naples. Between mid-June and mid-September, three daily ARPA buses run between Stazione Tiburtina in Rome and Pescasseroli. Tickets, available on the bus, cost €11.30.

PESCARA

pop 122,500

Abruzzo's largest city, Pescara is a heavily developed seaside resort and an important transport hub. It's not an unpleasant place, but unless you're coming for the 16km of sandy beaches there's not a great deal to do.

On the cultural front, the big drawcard is the international **jazz festival** (☎ 085 692 00 57; www.pescarajazz.com), held in mid-July at the Teatro D'Annunzio.

Orientation & Information

From the train and intercity bus stations on Piazzale della Repubblica, the beach is a short walk down Corso Umberto I.

The **tourist office** (☎ 085 42 90 01; www.abruz zoturismo.it; Corso Vittorio Emanuele II 301; ♻️ 8am-8pm Mon-Fri) is just off Piazzale della Repubblica. Look for the large Abruzzo Promozione Turismo logo.

Sights

Pescara was heavily bombed during WWII and much of the city centre was reduced to rubble. In what's left of the historic town, there are a couple of museums worth a quick look: the **Museo delle Genti d'Abruzzo** (☎ 085 428 35 17; Via delle Caserme 22; admission €5; 🕒 9am-1pm Mon, Wed, Fri & Sat, 3.30-6pm Tue & Thu, 4-7pm Sun), which tells the story of local peasant culture, and the **Museo Casa Natale Gabriele D'Annunzio** (☎ 0865 6 03 91; Corso Manthonè 116; admission €2; 🕒 9am-1pm Mon-Sat, to 12.30pm Sun), the birthplace of controversial fascist poet Gabriele D'Annunzio.

Near the seafront, the **Museo d'Arte Moderna Vittoria Colonna** (☎ 085 428 37 59; Piazza Primo Maggiore; admission free; 🕒 9am-1pm & 3.30-8.30pm Mon-Sat, 9am-1pm & 4-8pm Sun) boasts a Picasso and Miró among its small collection of modern art.

Sleeping & Eating

our pick **B&B Villa del Pavone** (☎ 085 421 17 70; www.villadelpavone.it; Via Pizzoferrato 30; d €60-80) On a quiet residential street about 300m from the train station, this gorgeous B&B is a home away from home. A model of old-fashioned pride, it's laden with gleaming antiques and chi-chi knick-knacks while, outside, the surrounding garden is a picture. There are three bright guestrooms, each of which has its own terrace and bathroom.

Hotel Alba (☎ 085 38 91 45; www.hotelalba.pescara.it; Via Michelangelo Forti 14; s/d €60/90; 🍷) A business-like three-star, the Alba provides anonymous comfort and a central location. Rooms vary but the best sport polished wood, firm beds and plenty of sunlight. There's satellite TV and some bathrooms have the added interest of a mirrored ceiling. Parking costs €8.

Pinguino (☎ 085 6 28 69; Corso Manthonè 36; pizzas from €4, meals about €20) One of the more interesting eateries in what's left of Pescara's *centro storico*, Pinguino specialises in wacky pizza toppings. Purists will pale at the thought of pizzas topped with *baccalà e peperone* (salted cod and pepper), *limone* (lemon) or *noci e pere* (walnuts and pears) but, hey, it makes a change.

La Vongola (☎ 085 37 42 36; Lungomare G Matteotti 54; meals €30) The best of the seafront restaurants, La Vongola is worth a splurge. You'll not eat better seafood in Pescara (or desserts for that matter), the sun-lit dining room is stylish without being overbearing, and the service is courteous. There's also a pretty good regional wine list.

Getting There & Away

AIR

Pescara airport (PSR; ☎ 899 130 310; www.abruzzo-airport.it) is 3km out of town and easily reached by bus 38 (€0.90, 20 minutes, every 15 minutes) from Corso Vittorio Emanuele II in front of the train station. **Ryanair** (www.ryanair.com) operates a daily flight to and from London Stansted.

BOAT

Between early June and September, a daily jetfoil runs to Croatia's island of Hvar and onto Split (Spalato in Italian). One-way tickets for the 4¾-hour journey cost between €69 and €89. For information, contact **Agenzia Sanmar** (☎ 0854510873; www.sanmar.it; Lungomare Giovanni XXIII Papa 1) at the port.

BUS

ARPA (www.arpaonline.it in Italian) buses leave from Piazzale della Repubblica. There are services to L'Aquila (€7.50, 2½ hours, 10 daily), Sulmona (€5.30, one hour, four daily) and many other destinations around Abruzzo. Buses also run to Naples (€20, 4½ hours, four daily) and to Stazione Tiburtina (€16, 2¾ hours, nine daily) in Rome. Timetables are posted at the **ticket office** (☎ 085 421 50 99) on the piazza.

CAR & MOTORCYCLE

Heading along the coast, you can choose between the A14 or the toll-free SS16; the latter hugs the coast more closely but is considerably slower. Both the A25 and SS5 lead towards Rome, L'Aquila and Sulmona.

TRAIN

Pescara is on the main east coast line. There are direct trains to Ancona (€12, 1¾ hours, 26 daily), Bari (€22.50, three hours, 19 daily), Rome (€11.70, 3½ hours, six daily) and Sulmona (€3.90, 1¼ hours, 19 daily).

AROUND PESCARA

A windy hill-top town 18km south of Pescara, **Chieti** is home to two fascinating archaeological museums. In the Villa Comunale park the **Museo Archeologico Nazionale** (☎ 0871 33 16 68; adult/child €4/2; 🕒 9am-8pm Tue-Sun) displays a comprehensive collection of local finds, including a huge marble sculpture of Hercules and, upstairs, the 6th-century *Warrior of Capestrano*.

Nearby is the **Complesso Archeologico la Civitella** (☎ 0871 6 31 37; adult/child €4/2; 🕒 9am-7.30pm Tue-Sun), a modern museum built round a Roman amphitheatre. Here you'll find weapons and pottery dating back to the Iron Age.

Chieti's **tourist office** (☎ 0871 6 36 40; Via Spaventa 29; 🕒 9am-1pm Mon-Fri & 3-6pm Mon, Tue & Thu) can provide accommodation lists for the town and surrounding area.

Regular buses (€0.90, 40 minutes, every 20 minutes) link Chieti with Pescara.

VASTO

pop 37,700 / elev 144m

Not far from the border with Molise, Vasto is a lively, hill-top town with an atmospheric medieval quarter and some great sea views. Two kilometres downhill is the popular resort of **Vasto Marina**, a strip of hotels, restaurants and camp sites fronting a long sandy beach.

Much of Vasto's *centro storico* dates from the 15th century, a golden period in which the city was known as 'the Athens of the Abruzzi'.

Orientation & Information

The *centro storico* lies to the east of Corso Garibaldi, Vasto's main street. An imposing landmark, the 15th-century Castello Caldoso dominates Piazza Rossetti.

The **tourist office** (☎ 0873 36 73 12; Piazza del Popolo 18; 🕒 9am-1pm & 4-7pm Mon-Sat, 9am-1pm Sun May-Sep, 9am-1pm & 3-6pm Mon-Fri Oct-Apr) is a short walk east of Piazza Rossetti.

Sights & Activities

From Piazza Rossetti, Corso de Parma leads down to Piazza del Popolo and the 13th-century **Cattedrale di San Giuseppe** (☎ 0873 36 71 93; Via Buonconsiglio 12; 🕒 8.30am-noon & 4.30-7pm), a lovely low-key example of Romanesque architecture. Nearby, the Renaissance **Palazzo d'Avalos** houses the **Museo Civico Archaeologica** (☎ 0873 36 77 73; Piazza del Popolo; admission €1.50; 🕒 9.30am-noon & 4.30-7pm Tue-Sun) with its eclectic collection of ancient bronzes, glasswork and paintings, as well as two other museums – the **Pinacoteca Comunale** (Town Picture Gallery; admission free) and the **Museo del Costume** (Costume Museum; admission €1.50).

Vasto Marina's beach is the centre of summer activity. To escape the worst of the hordes head north up the SS16 to the beautiful **Riserva Naturale di Punta Aderci**, a 285-hectare area of uncontaminated rocky coastline.

Sleeping & Eating

The tourist office can provide accommodation lists.

Hotel San Marco (☎ 0873 6 05 37; www.hotelsanmarcovasto.com; Via Madonna dell'Asilo 4; s €35-50, d €55-80; 🕒 year-round; 🍴) Snazzed up since our last visit, this friendly two-star hotel is excellent value for money. Just off Corso Garibaldi, it has slick modern rooms with sharp black furniture and trendy bathrooms. Downstairs, the restaurant serves excellent food for about €25 a meal.

Hostaria del Pavone (☎ 0873 6 02 27; Via Barbarotta; meals €30; 🕒 Wed-Mon) With its brick barrel-vaulted ceiling and nautical knick-knacks, this highly regarded restaurant is a great place for top-notch seafood. The menu varies, but staples include *brodetto alla vastese*, Vasto's signature fish soup, and delicious salt-baked sea bass.

Getting There & Away

By car Vasto is on the A14 autostrada and the SS16, both of which run up the Adriatic coast.

The train station (Vasto-San Salvo) is about 2km south of Vasto Marina. Regional trains run to Pescara (€3.90, one hour, 10 daily) and Termoli (€2.20, 1¼ hours, 12 daily). From the station take bus 1 or 4 for Vasto Marina and the town centre.

MOLISE

Lacking the grandeur of its northern neighbour, Molise invariably suffers comparison with Abruzzo. However, the lack of a slick tourist infrastructure and the raw, forgotten countryside ensure a gritty authenticity, so often missing in more-celebrated areas.

Life in Molise goes back to prehistoric times. Excavations in Isernia have unearthed the oldest human settlement in Europe – a 700,000-year-old village, which makes the Samnite village at Pietrabbondante and the Roman ruins at Saepinum seem positively modern. The Abbazia di San Vincenzo al Volturno is famous for its Byzantine frescoes, while the Monti del Matese provide good skiing, hiking and cycling. On the coast the beach resort of Termoli is a jumping-off point for the Isole Tremiti (see p684).

To get the best out of Molise, you really need your own transport.

CAMPOBASSO

pop 51,400 / elev 701m

Molise's regional capital and main transport hub, Campobasso is generally overlooked by travellers. Uninspiring and modern, it boasts little of interest other than a pocket-sized *centro storico*, a church or two and a small archaeology museum.

There's a **tourist office** (☎ 0874 41 56 62; Piazza della Vittoria 14; ☹ 8am-2pm Mon-Sat) west of Piazza Vittorio Emanuele II which can provide information on the city and surrounding province.

In the *centro storico*, the Romanesque churches of **San Bartolomeo** (Salita San Bartolomeo) and **San Giorgio** (☎ 0874 31 14 24; Viale della Rimembranza; ☹ by appointment) are fine examples of their genre. At the top of the hill, the **castle**, now a military weather station, is striking from a distance but less impressive close up. More worthwhile is the small **Museo Sannitico** (Sannite Museum; ☎ 0874 41 22 65; Via Chiarizia 12; admission free; ☹ 8.30am-6pm) with artefacts from local archaeological sites.

If in town, grab a bite at **Trattoria Concetta** (☎ 0874 31 13 78; Via Larino 7; meals €23; ☹ Mon-Fri),

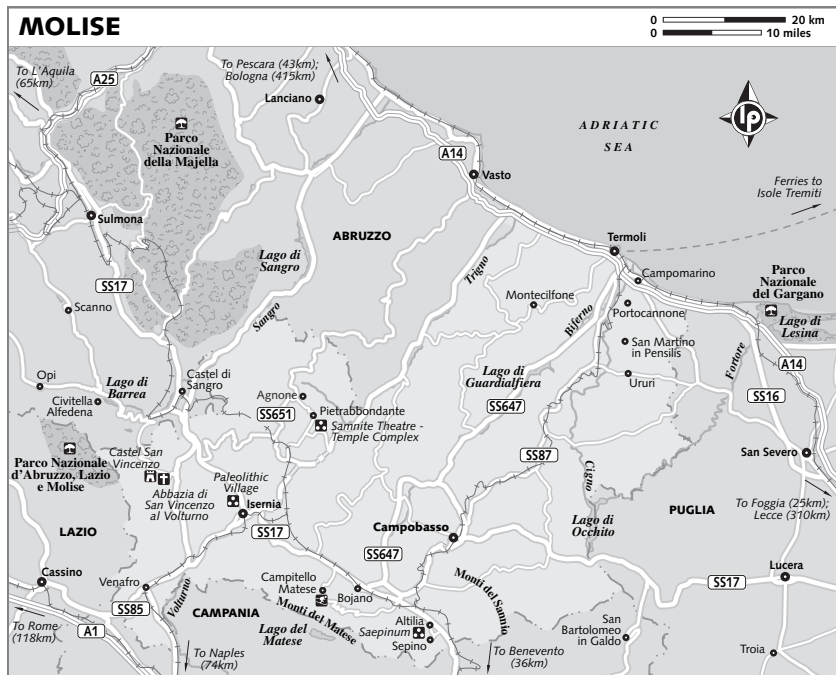
a delightful family-run trattoria serving delicious homemade pasta and superb meat dishes.

Trasporti Molise (☎ 0874 49 30 80; www.molise-trasporti.it) has buses to Rome (€11.90, three hours, seven daily). Otherwise there are trains to Isernia (€2.80, one hour, 16 daily), Termoli (€4.05, 1¼ hours, eight daily) and Naples (€9.40, three hours, four daily).

AROUND CAMPOBASSO

A tough destination to get to without wheels, the Roman ruins of **Saepinum** (admission free) are among the best preserved and least visited in the country. Saepinum was an unimportant provincial town that quietly went about its business until sacked by Arab invaders in the 9th century. The walled town retains three of its four original gates and its two main roads, the *cardus maximus* and the *decumanus*. Highlights include the forum, basilica and theatre.

To reach Saepinum from Campobasso you can either take the daily **Larivera** (☎ 0874 6 47 44; www.lariverabus.it) bus to Altilia (€1.20, one hour), right beside the site, or a train



to Sepino (€1.60, 25 minutes, three daily), a 3km walk away.

Looming over the ruins are the **Monti del Matese** (Matese Mountains). The small town of **Bojano** is the starting point for various walks in the wooded hills, while further uphill the resort of **Campitello Matese** (elevation 1430m) is well equipped for summer and winter sports (see p606). You can hire mountain bikes and ski equipment from **Galeassi Sport** (☎ 0874 78 41 80).

Of the resort's hotels, the best is the **Rifugio Jezza** (☎ 0874 78 41 88; half/full board per person €45/50; ☞ year-round) with bright, warm rooms and a rustic restaurant.

From Campobasso regular trains connect with Bojano (€1.60, 30 minutes, 10 daily). **Autolinee Micone** (☎ 0874 78 01 20) runs a daily bus up to Campitello Matese (one hour).

ISERNIA

pop 21,600 / elev 423m

Like many towns in central Italy, Isernia has suffered repeated earthquake damage over the years. There's little left of the town's *centro storico* and the modern centre is a drab, workaday place. The one reason to stop by is to visit the site of Europe's oldest human settlement, a 700,000-year-old village unearthed by road workers in 1979. Work on the site is ongoing, although you can visit by calling the **site office** (☎ 0865 41 35 26; Contrada Ramiera Vecchia 1, località La Pineta; ☞ 9am-5pm Mon-Fri).

If you don't make it to the site, the **Museo Santa Maria delle Monache** (☎ 0865 41 05 00; Corso Marcelli 48; admission €2; ☞ 8.30am-7.30pm) is the next best thing. Exhibits include piles of elephant and rhino bones, fossils and stone tools.

Isernia's **tourist office** (☎ 0865 39 92; 6th fl, Palazzo della Regione, Via Farinacci 9; ☞ 8am-2pm Mon-Sat) has plenty of dusty brochures but little practical information.

If you have to stay the night, the friendly **Hotel Sayonara** (☎ 0865 5 09 92; www.sayonara.is.it; Via G Berta 131; s/d €55/85) has modern, three-star rooms and an unpretentious restaurant. Call ahead for a room, as they are often taken by business travellers.

On the main drag of the *centro storico* **O'Pizzaiuolo** (☎ 0865 41 27 76; Corso Marcelli 214; pizzas from €3.50) is a local favourite, not only for its delicious pizzas but also for its original pastas and tavern-style setting. Meals cost around €18.

Trasporti Molise (☎ 0874 49 30 80; www.molise-trasporti.it) runs buses to Campobasso (€2.85,

50 minutes, eight daily) and Termoli (€6.40, 1¼ hours, three daily). Trains connect Isernia with Sulmona (€6.90, 2¼ hours, three daily), Campobasso (€2.80, one hour, 16 daily), Naples (€5.75, 1¼ hours, seven daily) and Rome (€10.15, two hours, five daily).

AROUND ISERNIA

The hills around Isernia are peppered with interest. About 26km northeast of town, outside Pietrabbondante, the remains of a 2nd-century BC **Sannite theatre-temple complex** (☎ 0865 7 61 29; admission €2; ☞ 8.15am-7pm Mon-Sat) are worth a look.

Further on, Agnone is famous for its bells. For more than 1000 years, this hill-top town has been producing church bells for some of Italy's most famous churches, including St Peter's Basilica in Rome. Learn all about it at the **Museo Storico della Campana** (☎ 0865 7 82 35; Via F D'Onofrio 14; adult/child €4.50/2.50; ☞ guided tours 11am, noon, 4pm & 6pm daily).

From Isernia, **SATI** (☎ 0874 60 52 20) buses serve Pietrabbondante (€1.50, 35 minutes, nine daily) and Agnone (€2.05, one hour, nine daily).

A 30km-drive northwest of Isernia, near Castel San Vincenzo, the **Abbazia di San Vincenzo al Volturno** (☎ 0865 95 52 46; admission free; ☞ by appointment only) is famous for its cycle of 9th-century frescoes by Epifanio (824-842). The abbey, one of the foremost monastic and cultural centres in 9th-century Europe, is now home to a community of American nuns.

Larivera (☎ 0874 6 47 44; www.lariverabus.it) buses run between Isernia and Castel San Vincenzo (€1.50, 45 minutes, eight daily), a 1km walk from the abbey.

TERMOLI

pop 31,200

Despite its touristy trattorias and a brace of blousy bars, Molise's top beach resort retains a low-key charm. At the eastern end of the seafont, the pretty *borgo antico* (old town) juts out to sea atop a natural pier, dividing the sandy beach from Termoli's small harbour. From the port, year-round ferries sail for the Isole Tremiti.

The town's most famous landmark, Frederick II's 13th-century **castle** (☎ 0875 71 23 54; ☞ on request) guards entry to the tiny *borgo*, a tangle of narrow streets, medieval houses and souvenir shops. From the castle, follow the road up and you come to Piazza Duomo

and the 12th-century **cathedral** (☎ 0875 70 63 59; Piazza Duomo; ☞ on request), a fine example of Puglian-Romanesque architecture.

The helpful **tourist office** (☎ 0875 70 39 13; Piazza Bega 42; ☞ 8am-2pm Mon-Fri & 4.45-6.30pm Tue, Thu & Fri, 3-6.30pm Mon & Wed, 8am-12.45pm Sat) is tucked away in a car park behind a small shopping gallery, 100m east of the train station.

Sleeping & Eating

Coppola Villaggio Camping Azzurra (☎ 0875 5 24 04; www.camping.it/molise/azzurra; SS16 Europa 2; camp sites per adult/child/tent €9/6.50/19, bungalows €65-130) Termoli's only camp site is a modern, beachfront affair just outside town on the SS16 coastal road (also known as Europa 2). As well as tent pitches there are some four-person bungalows available.

Pensione Osteria San Giorgio (☎ 0875 70 43 84; Corso Fratelli Brigida 20-22; s/d €42/62; ☞ year-round; ☞) Right in the heart of the action, this modest *pensione* has 10 clean, uncluttered rooms above a bustling *osteria* (meals about €20). It's good value but can get noisy in summer. Rates fall by up to €10 in the low season.

Hotel Meridiano (☎ 0875 70 59 46; www.hotelmeridiano.com; Lungomare Cristoforo Colombo 524; s/d €68/110; ☞ year-round; (P)) This concrete seafront pile does not impress on first sight but, inside, the rooms are bright and spacious. The best ones face seawards offering lovely views of the *borgo*.

ourpick Ristorante Da Nicolino (☎ 0875 70 68 04; Via Roma 3; meals €30; ☞ Fri-Wed; ☞) There are no signs outside this discreet fish restaurant but once you've found it you'll not forget it. The seafood is superb. If you're really hungry go for the *brodetto di pesce* (fish soup, €20), a meal in itself. If not, the *calamari ripieno* (stuffed squid) followed by *rigatoni con scampi* (pasta with scampi) should keep you going.

Getting There & Away

BOAT

Termoli is the only port with year-round ferries to the Isole Tremiti (p684). **Tirrenia Navigazione** (☎ 0875 70 53 43; Porto Termoli) runs a ferry from Termoli at 9am every day except Tuesday and Saturday, when it sails at 8am; return times vary from month to month.

Other companies operating out of the port are **Navigazione Libera del Golfo** (☎ 0875 70 48 59; www.navlib.it) and **Adriatic Shipping Lines** (☎ 0875 70 51 98).

Buy tickets (€33.40 for a high-season return) at the port.

BUS

Termoli's intercity bus station is beside Via Martiri della Resistenza. **SATI buses** (☎ 0874 6 50 50) link Termoli with Campobasso (€3.20, 1¼ hours, hourly) and Pescara (€4.90, 1¼ hours, three daily). **Trasporti Molise** (☎ 0875 70 39 37) serves Isernia (€6.35, 1¼ hours, three daily) and **Cerella** (☎ 0873 39 11 68) runs buses to Rome (€15, three hours, one daily) and Naples (€13, three hours, two daily).

CAR & MOTORCYCLE

Termoli is on the A14 and SS16, which follow the coast north to Pescara and south to Bari. The SS87 links Termoli with Campobasso.

TRAIN

Trains serve Bologna (€35, 5¼ hours, 10 daily), Lecce (€32, five hours, eight daily) and stations along the Adriatic coast.

ALBANIAN TOWNS

Several villages to the south of Termoli form an Albanian enclave that dates back to the 15th century. These include **Campomarino**, **Portocannone**, **San Martino in Pensilis** and **Ururi**. Although the inhabitants shrugged off their Orthodox religion in the 18th century, they still use a version of Albanian that's incomprehensible to outsiders. However, it's for their *carressi* (chariot races) that the villages are best known. Each year Ururi (3 May), Portocannone (the Monday after Whit Sunday) and San Martino in Pensilis (30 April) stage a no-holds-barred **chariot race**. The chariots (more like carts) are pulled by bulls and hurtle round a traditional course urged on by villagers on horseback.

In the case of Ururi, three teams take to the 4km course to compete for the honour of carrying the relics of the Santa Croce (Holy Cross) through the village. The night before the race all the cart drivers, bulls and the horse riders are blessed by the local priest.

SATI buses connect Termoli with Portocannone (€1.10, 20 minutes, 14 daily), San Martino in Pensilis (€1.10, 25 minutes, 10 daily) and Ururi (€1.50, 35 minutes, four daily).

To get to Campomarino from Termoli take one of the frequent Larivera buses (€1.10, 20 minutes, hourly).

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