

# Northern Puglia & the Gargano Promontory



Crowning Italy's boot, the northern province of Foggia (the *capitanata*) is an attractive land of contrasting geographical bands, from the mountainous rocky spur of the Gargano Promontory to the vast flat tablelands of the Tavoliere and the gentle rolling hills of the Daunia Pre-Apennines. The Tavoliere is the wheatbowl of southern Italy, covering half of the *capitanata* in a 3000-sq-km geometric chequerboard of golden fields. Tracks across the plains bear witness to the centuries-old transhumance routes, the ancient driving trails or *tratturi* along which sheep and cattle were moved from Abruzzo to Puglia. The wheatfields surrounding the provincial capital of Foggia gently give way to the wetlands and salt works of Margherita di Savoia on the southeast coast, a region famous for its prolific birdlife.

To the west, the Tavoliere merges into the undulating foothills, shallow valleys and wooded slopes of the beautiful Daunia mountains. Here, castles and towers of the medieval hilltop towns watch over Foggia's Pre-Apennine border.

Puglia's only mountainous zone is the stunning Gargano Promontory, a blunt spur of limestone cliffs and dense forest jutting into the blue Adriatic Sea. Its landscape, flora and fauna are a geographical anomaly in Puglia's Mediterranean *mezzogiorno*, more Croatian than southern Italian. Millions of years ago the Gargano was separated from the mainland by a thin strip of ocean. Now its unique beauty and summer seaside resorts are a favourite with Italian and German tourists.

## HIGHLIGHTS

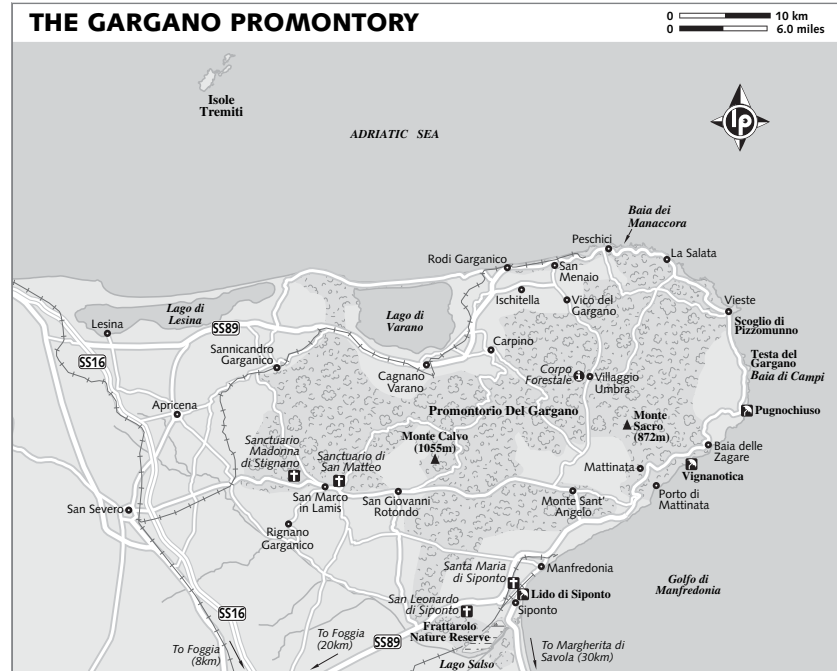
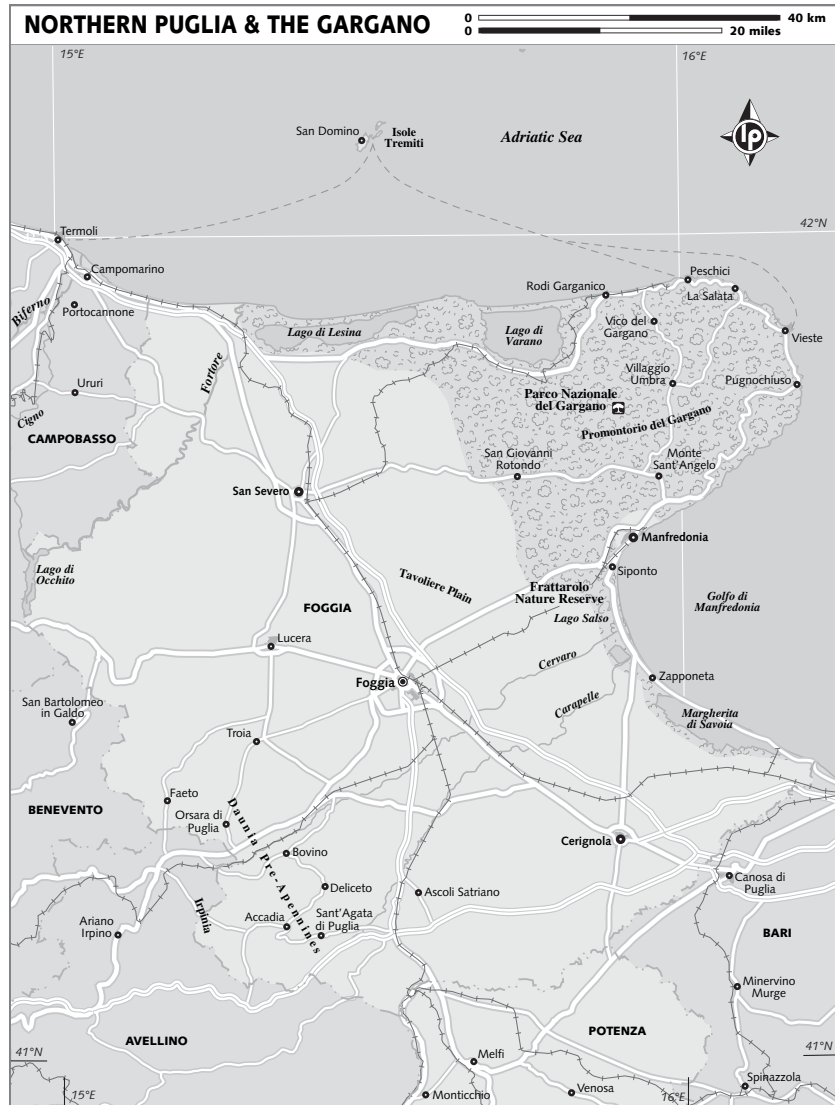
- Worship the gods of sun, sand and sea in the attractive seaside resort of **Vieste** (p88)
- Explore the dramatic coastal road between Mattinata and Peschici, stopping at a **trabucco** (boxed text, p93) for a fresh seafood lunch
- Hike or mountain bike in the uniquely Bavarian-esque **Foresta Umbra** (p87)
- Brave the pilgrims for a spiritual experience in the atmospheric **Santuario di San Michele** (p97) in Monte Sant'Angelo
- Drive through the rolling hills and medieval hilltop towns of the stunning **Daunia Pre-Apennines** (p108)
- Dive the incredibly clear blue waters of the **Isole Tremiti** (p102)



# THE GARGANO PROMONTORY

The Gargano Promontory (Promontorio del Gargano) is one of the most beautiful areas in southern Italy, rising from the sea to tower

1000m above Puglia's flat tablelands. Characterised by white limestone cliffs, calcareous grottoes, a crystal-clear green sea and ancient forests, the 'spur' of the Italian boot has more in common with Dalmatia than the rest of Italy. A winding drive along the coastal road affords breathtaking views of the Adriatic Sea and the secluded sandy coves and long beaches



that attract summer sun-worshippers to its attractive seaside towns, especially Vieste and Peschici.

The peninsula is also a place of creeping urbanisation, which was thankfully halted in 1991 by the creation of the Parco Nazionale del Gargano, which encompasses the entire promontory and its island off-shoots, the Isole Tremiti. Aside from its magnificent display of flora and fauna in the primeval forests of Quarto, Spigno and Umbra, and its whitewashed coastal towns, the park takes in the no-holds-barred miracle town of San Giovanni Rotondo and the historic pilgrimage destination of Monte Sant'Angelo. Outside the summer tourist season the Gargano is a quiet and tranquil nature retreat.

## FORESTA UMBRA

Although the Parco Nazionale del Gargano takes in most of the peninsula, only a small portion of this, the Foresta Umbra (Forest of Shadows), is truly wild. The forest is the last remnant of Puglia's ancient forests, and shades the peaks of the promontory's mountainous interior with a blanket of Aleppo

pinus, oak and beech. Rare orchids, fantastic birdlife, and endemic fauna and flora define this geographical island. Hikers and mountain bikers will find plenty of well-marked trails within the forest's 15,000 hectares, and there are several picnic areas.

At the Villaggio Umbra, in the heart of the forest, the **Corpo Forestale dello Stato** (☎ 0884 56 54 44; admission €1.20; ☎ 9am-7pm Apr-Oct) runs a visitor centre housing a small museum and nature centre. Here you can see photographs of the Gargano's endemic plant life and over 200 stuffed animals. Hikers can pick up a *Carta dei Sentieri*, a handy map with pictures of the park's flora and fauna and a description of 15 hiking trails (in English and Italian).

Specialist tour operators within the Gargano Promontory also organise excursions in the Foresta Umbra and throughout the Gargano. **Explora Gargano** (☎ 340 713 68 64; www.exploragargano.it; Via Santa Maria di Merino 62, Vieste; ☎ 9.30am-12.30pm & 6-10.30pm May-Sep) offers mountain-biking and hiking tours and quad-bike and jeep safaris. **Gargano Bike Holidays** (☎ 339 717 53 34; www.garganobike.com; Località Defensola, Vieste; ☎ 4-7pm) offer specialist mountain-biking