

There's a corner in Calabria, between Stilo and Gerace, where sea and mountains meet each other: forests and villages on the mountains are perfect look-outs on their twins on the coast. It seems that there exists a double soul in this strip of land, separated by an umbilical cord of winding streets. Looking from the top, it seems the coast lies only stone's throw from you, but you need to drive a string of curves through mountains and rivers to reach the top and get this unbelievable spectacle.

Stilo (the so-called "Sunshine Town"), where the philosopher Tommaso Campanella was born, has an unbelievable breathtaking view on the wide shimmering Ionian sea.

From the "Cattolica", a small ancient byzantine clay temple, the view is just astonishing, but if you actually want to get a bird's eye view on the coast, you need to walk and climb for about forty minutes on the rock to the Norman Temple cemetery, from where a barren, rugged landscape surely touches you deep inside. That's the place where the St. John's theorists once were. Nowadays there still lives a small monks community who still practice the ancient orthodox rite of the full immersion baptism.

Driving down the rapid descent of Stilo, you get to Monasterace Marina. It's here, between the crystal clear sea and the railway, under the overhanging view of a lighthouse, that the ruins of the Doric thriving colony of the Magna Grecia, the ancient Kaulon, have been discovered. 24 centuries of history, glory and majesty adrift at sea. This old temple was built in honour of Zeus Homarios and it's dated back to 420bc. It's particularly praiseworthy at spring time, when the blooms flourish and the scent of the Mediterranean Sea permeates the air and its silence, only occasionally broken by the train travelling to Reggio Calabria. Crossing the road, the SS106, you will find an archeological Museum. Within it, among its fascinating ruins and finds, a multicolor mosaic of a flying dragon (the oldest find in Calabria) undoubtedly stands out.

This stretch of beach boasts miles of yellow and white sand and the vivid cobalt blue water seems never-ending. Only a few kilometers to the South, within this amazing sea, the amateur scuba diver from Rome, Stefano Mariottini, found the 2 famous bronze statues of Riace, lying under the water only 300m from the shore. These two great warriors still represent the greatest set of Greek art masterpiece in Italy.

On the 24th and 25th September, at the beginning of the Ionioan Autumn, a suggestive celebration in honour of St. Cosma and Damiano, the medical miracle workers, takes place in the historical centre of Riace.

The small town of Riace, which lies about 5km from the coast, hosts the biggest multiethnic community in Calabria. Living alongside the native people, there is actually a number of immigrants and political refugees from North Africa. It's thanks to them, that from the end of the 90s there has been a town reborn and a new population and a better living have been established. Dozens of murals in the village depict this fabulous story of Calabrian life.

The village has less than 2.000 inhabitants, however, when these saints are celebrated, people flock from all over Calabria and Southern Italy, to sing and dance the local tarantella, by praying and celebrating. Devotes use to offer to the Saints statues blessed bread and blessed wax body parts e.g. heads, feet, stomachs, hands, arms, legs, etc. The day after the holy procession, the very small children gather their blessings and protections by the Saints in the Matrice Church, while their mothers sing lullabies and throw cushions, covers, candle and religious crosses onto the ground, so the festival draws to a close.

Driving back onto the SS106 you will get to the small town of Caulonia. It is built on a 300m high hill and is surrounded by impressive cliffs, locally known as "timpi". Caulonia is famous for its narrow bumpy alleyways, squares and meeting places. In the "Piazza Mese", the central square, you can see majestic palaces and the amazing Matrice Church, with its poor and bare art. It's here that you can find 16th century tomb of Giacomo Carafa attributed to Antonello Gagini.

Caulonia is rich in several churches bearing witness to the old glory of this town, such as the Rosario Church, which has an original wooden organ and a majestic wooden crucifix, dating back to the 17th and 18th century.

All what remains of the collapsed St.Zaccaria Church in the homonymous little square is a disfigured metal shield and the touching byzantine Fresco of the Christ Pantocrathor. Just three of these frescoes are left in the world and Caulonia safeguards what remains of one of them.

From Caulonia a difficult road of 8km travelling through harsh landscapes, leads you to a small hermitage called the oaks of the Santa Maria Crocuses. Here lives a small community , a working religious community of nuns.

There is a large bright workshop , where they use ancient techniques to produce religious icons painted by hand: the team is led by Sister Renata. The paints are made with natural materials including egg and earth, on and a wooden tablet carved by the hermits.

Marvelous artistic creations using vibrant colours are worked on depicting Jesus and the Holy Family. Through these art pieces the sisters give their lives to God through their works and follow their religious path.

Another area to be discovered is that of St.Nicola's Hermitage, a solitary monastery built among the natural surroundings of St. Mario, in the heart of nature and caves. Here lives a French monk and he has lived here for 10 years in complete solitude and hermitage. His name is Frederick Vermorel. Just a few meters from the monastery, suggestive waterfalls may let you refresh yourself after a long, but charming trekking activity.

Back again to the SS106, after Caulonia Marina, you get to Roccella, a town dominated by a fascinating Norman castle, owned by the Carafas, set up high on a rocky platform and which resisted to the attacks of the blood thirsty pirate Dragut.

Going on, we come then to the next closer town, Marina di Gioiosa Jonica, where we find an ancient Greek-roman Theatre. It is situated immediately beside the railway line and is dated back to the 2nd century b.C.

There is a 16th century Aragonese tower belonging to a horseman, part of the military defense at the time of the Saracen invasions. In the upper town of Gioiosa Jonica there is also a watch tower with the name Naniglio (the sunless place), with just a sky light, punctuated with eight massive pillars.

Our last stop on the SS106 is Locri, after having passed the town of Siderno. At just 3km from the modern town, there lie archaeological excavations, being carried out with the Magna Grecia, which are now preserved into a Museum, exposing hundreds of finds

from the Greek and the Roman period, temples' ruins, furnaces, stumps of columns that would delight the most shining representatives of the "grand tour".

There is a wonderful Greek /Roman theatre from the IV century just 1 km from the archeological sight where nowadays only sheep can be seen feeding in the pastures.

This theatre built on a natural slope with steps carved in sandstone could accommodate 4500 spectators at any given time, when held and gladiators combats took place. Only 8km from Locri lies Gerace. Scholars and archaeologists have found loads of architectural masterpieces, consisting of ancient buildings, suggestive squares, 100 churches and mysterious caves, carved into the rocks and legendarily inhabited by witches and ghosts. These art jewels are all described in the famous literary work by Edward Lear "Journal of a Landscape Painter in Southern Calabria". He describes each rock, sanctuary and building where he came across during the 19th century.

From the Bishop's door you can start your tour in Gerace, enjoying the incredible view of an unspoilt horizon from the partly destroyed byzantine castle, restructured during the Norman time. Climb down from here and you will come across the square of the three churches: three temples face each other. The to-be-viewed churches are doubtless the Church of the Sacred Heart, that of San Francesco, with its gothic portals and marble alter and the orthodox marble and tile Church of San Giovannello, dated back to the 10th century.

The best thing however is being able to aimlessly wander through the narrow streets and alleyways. A craft technique was used whereby lime was thrown onto a structure of woven reeds and today some still use this technique for the creation of traditional woven baskets .

A little way out of the town, in the convent of the church of Monserrato, in tune with the roots of eastern places, lies once again a beautiful hermit: this time it's a lady, Mirella Muià, who spend her time praying in total solitude, while a warm breeze flows from the sea and wafts her vale. She prays 8 times a day, because after having worked for 20 years at the Sorbonne University in Paris, she chose to live here, in her homeland, alternating the old value of the "ora et labora" (pray and work). Her slender figure in the horizon, waving us driving the road that leads to Locri, seems to evoke the humble, spiritual origins of Calabria.