

## **BIVONGI IN THE HEART OF CALABRIA**

The Stilaro byzantine Valley is the district situated on the Ionian side of the region at the north-eastern tip of the province belonging to Reggio Calabria. It's crossed in all its length by the Stilaro river and is formed by three municipalities: Stilo, Pazzano and Bivongi, of great interest for tourists and with a remarkable artistic heritage. The bewildering view, the beauty of the landscape and the severe medieval urban structure testify to a deeply leamed civilization throughout the territory.

The castles, the byzantine monasteries, the churches, all speak of a past rich in deep social changes with an intense religious and artistic life. Important artistic, religious, gastronomic and sporting events are held in the territory throughout the year with a rich and well organized programme which draws the attention of visitors.

Bivongi rised at 270 metres above sea level, 15 Km from the Jonic SS.106, on the slopes of Mount Consolino where the Stilaro river flows into the Melodari and Pardalà torrents.

The village was famous for its flourishing production of silk, metalworks and stonecraft, as well as for the production of electric energy. In the territory there are many molybdenum mines.

You should see the church of "San Giovanni Decollato" (11<sup>th</sup> century), now become the Sanctuary of Maria SS. Mamma Nostra, and don't miss the Basilica of Saint John Theristis (11<sup>th</sup> century), just outside the built-in area, a true and proper masterpiece of Byzantine-Norman art. You should discover the paths across the picturesque historical centre between the labyrinth of allies and the myriad of steps which reach the tall stone buildings thickly set together.

Finally, you must have a very interesting walk along the Stilaro river or a visit to the wine lodges in the historical centre. Remember Saint John Theristis celebration on the 24<sup>th</sup> February and the Mamma Nostra (Our Mother) celebration on the second Sunday in September. Even Easter is a good period because you'll be able to live usually both, Catholic and Orthodox one.

## **OTHER CHARACTERISTICS AND ACTIVITIES**

Bivongi is a quaint little village and its history is linked to ancient greek monasteries. The inhabitants of the village originate from the "Magno-Greco" civilization. "Bòybukes" is the ancient name of Bivongi which means "breeding place of silkworms".

A fascinating aspect of this village is its ancient centre with its narrow streets, like old Siena, and houses attached to each other even if on different sides, like old Florence.

The beauty of nature is reavealed here by the river Stilaro and the river Melodari. It's possible to have an enjoyable holiday throughout the year because you can follow many itineraries such as visiting stone or marble quarries, mountain sports such as rock climbing, trekking, cave exploration, botanical excursions, naturalistic walks, or you can also walk through the historical centre and visit religious monuments.

The rich mineral resources, the ironworks, the tanneries, the oil press, are all testimonies of the past but they are now once again alive due to the industrial archaeological "Ecomuseum" which is the first museum of this kind in the Region.

Bivongi rised in about the 10<sup>th</sup> century how is documented in ancient papers found in the Vaticano's Bibliotecary and that speak of our byzantine origins. Before arriving to Bivongi's village, there's a bridge with a road that brings to the holy greek-orthodox monastery "Saint John Theristis", but you first pass by the rests of an old convent called "Apostoli". That's from where, for 7 centuries a monk would come down to Bivongi every year and collect the "Decima", a kind of tax for Serra San Bruno. All this would take life in the historical Centre of Bivongi in the area called for this reason: "Badia", from "Abate" that means "Abbot" in English. There were at least 30 monasteries in the Stilaro Valley but the Normans destroyed all of them enter 13<sup>th</sup> century.

Tommaso Martini was a famous painter and portraitist from Bivongi during Neapolitans 7<sup>th</sup> century. He was one of the best artists that the famous Francesco Solimena brought up and became a brilliant portraitist in the neapolitan court of nobles. He left Bivongi for Naples when he was still a young kid because his brother wanted him to become a priest and study theology. But he soon discovered that his greatest love was the art of painting. Most of his great paintings went lost but you can find some of them in Naples, Guardavalle, Rieti and private museums of London.

Walking up the Stilaro river you can reach the locality "Bagni di Guida", an old health S.p.A and also a hydroelectric power plant which was one of the oldest in Italy. Bivongi was famous for the production of electric energy in 1914 because the other villages still had to use gas for their illumination. Just think that the first Hydroelectric power plant was built in England on the Wey river in 1881, and ours only 33 years later in a small calabrian village.

The "Marmarico" is the highest natural waterfall of Italy with its 120 metres and if you climb up to the second floor, you may not believe your eyes!

Who loves nature will never forget them after diving in the pond at the bottom. Since the first years of 1940, the mining and metallurgical activity was a lot consisting, therefore like can be stated from the presence of old ironworks dislocated in our zone. The "mulinu of hurnu" linked them 13th century and has been originally constructed from the Cistercensi, which managed the Saint Certosa of Serra San Bruno by now after to have overwhelmed the Certosini. Main scope of the construction of the flour mill was the crushing of the mineral, extracted from a mine that moreover is found on the other side of the river, in the near zone called "Argentera".

## **MUNICIPALITY OF PAZZANO**

It rises 410 metres above the sea level at 2 Km from Stilo in the gorge formed by Mount Consolino and Mount Stella. Its origins are due to the presence of the iron fields which are supposed to have been exploited since the Magna Grecia age.

It was quite certainly the main mine centre of the Kingdom of Naples.

You should go for a walk on the peak of Mount Stella from where one may admire, in the direction of Pazzano just below the sheer precipice, an evocative panorm.

Don't miss the "Confrunta" on the second Sunday in August. On the eve of the previous Saturday, the wooden statue of the Saviour is taken from the church of the village to the chapel of the miners at the bottom of the valley. On Sunday morning the deeply evocative and moving ceremony takes place along the way back to the village.

## **MUNICIPALITY OF STILO**

Because of its historical and cultural assets, Stilo is among the most interesting sites in Calabria. It is situated 14 Km from Monasterace Marina, 400 metres above sea level, along the SS. 110.

Its medieval set up makes all the historical centre extremely interesting, and it's the birth-place of the great philosopher "Tommaso Campanella".

You can't miss the Cathedral with its beautiful portal, the church of Saint Francesco (18th century), a splendid example of Calabrian eighteenth century architecture, the church of Saint John with its enormous facade and the two bell-towers.

And then you still can appreciate the Stefanina doorway; the fountain of "the dolphins"; the Cattolica, a small Byzantine temple of the 10<sup>th</sup> century and emblem of the village; the small church of Saint Nicholas from Tolentino.

We still have to discover the small church below the Cathedral, the hermitic grottoes partially frescoed, the Castle built by Ruggero II the Norman which may be reached on the top of Mount Consolino, from where you can have a suggestive panorama... the palaces of the aristocracy.

If you're planning a visit of Stilo, don't forget the best appointments: the religious ceremonies of the Holy Week and the Easter procession, the big bonfire on the 8<sup>th</sup> of December, the municipal library with its collection of incunabula and writs of the 16<sup>th</sup> century.

**For any information about the Byzantine valley of Italy, useful to find even Hotels, Restaurants, B&B, Excursions, Tourist guides and sightseeing, you can contact Mr. Francesco Passarelli (English language).**

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