

ATTICO ROSA

The best of Calabria

Excursions

GERACE

A City of history and Cultural



Only 45 Km from Gioia Tauro

The Name

Comes from the Greek jerax, “sparrow-hawk”, in memory of the bird of prey which, according to legend, had shown the inhabitants of Locri the place in which to rebuild the town, where they would be protected from the raiding Saracens.

Others believe the explanation of the place-name comes from the ancient Byzantine name, Aghia (Santa) Ciriaca, or the words jerà akis, “sacred peak”.

History

- **8th-7th cent. BC**, once the Greek settlers from the area of Locri, had founded the polis of Locri, Epizephiri, on the Ionian coast (which was to rise to its apex of glory in the 5th cent. BC), they are thought to have also built a small settlement on the cliff where the town of Gerace was later to rise.
- **7th-8th cent. AD**, Locri is abandoned by its inhabitants, with the result that a settlement is built in a higher, safer place known to the Byzantines as Santa Ciriaca. The name of the kàstron appears for the first time in 787.
- **10th cent.**, the Byzantine fortress resists repeated attacks by the Arabs, and only in 986 does it fall into the latter’s hands.
- **1045**, the Cathedral of Greek rite is consecrated. In 1059, Gerace is conquered by Roberto il Guiscardo and passes under Norman rule during which time it knows a period of great prosperity. In spite of the Norman pro-Latin policies, the Greek rite is only to be abolished in 1480.

• **12th-17th cent.**, the town passes from the Normans into the hands of the Angioini family, followed by the Aragonesi family. Home of one of the oldest dioceses in Calabria, Gerace is a strong spiritual and cultural center in this period, although always subject to fief.

In 1348 it becomes a territory belonging to the family of counts, Angioini (its first count is Enrico Caracciolo), and it then becomes a marquisate under the Aragonesi family (the first marquis is Tommaso Caracciolo; in 1502 it passes into the hands of Consalvo de Aragona) and finally in 1609 it rises to the rank of Principality under Giovan Francesco Grimaldi.

• **in 1806**, when the feudal system is abolished by the French, Gerace becomes the chief town of the surrounding neighborhoods and remains so under the Bourbons.

• **in 1847**, five young leaders of the Carbonaro movement, who conspired against the Bourbon power, are executed.

A long history chiselled in stone, from Byzantine churches to Moorish mullioned windows

This ancient town rises between the Serre and Aspromont among the silvery, sparkling olive trees with a glimpse of the bright blue Ionian Sea in the distance.

The fascination of Gerace does not wear thin after you have seen its incredible concentration of artistic churches and buildings, but continues through its narrow streets, into its tiny squares, its archways, its underpasses, its richly engraved doorways, in the surviving, dome-shaped, wood ovens for baking bread and in its walls packed with history, to give some extremely beautiful glimpses and surprises here and then, such as the Moorish mullioned windows of the so-called “Catalan house” or the potters’ workshops hewn in the rock in the Borgo district. Let your whims lead you to wander at will among the most important monuments, and let your gaze suggest the way, just as one echo answers another.

The Cathedral, for example, is of rare beauty which makes it one of the most important works of art in southern Italy. Consecrated according to tradition in 1045 and re-consecrated in 1222 in the presence of Frederick the Second, like so many monuments its fascination lies in its tormented life history: from being re-built, from changes in style and rite, from neglect and from collapsing due to either earthquake or flood, it appears before us as the emblem of the south, imbued with greatness and misery (if we think of the clamorous pillaging it has been subjected to). Inside, a double row of valuable marble columns from the temples of Magna Grecia divide it into three naves. Its pure, essential, primitive style lies somewhere between the Romanesque and the Norman (the latter is clearly visible in the apse).

The glowing Baroque of seventeenth-century Gerace, which can be glimpsed only in its altars, exploded in the magnificent high altar and in the triumphal arch of the Church of St. Francis, the remainder of which is a majestic Gothic building of 1252 with a splendid Arabic-Norman portal. Of the adjoining convent, founded by a companion of St. Francis, there remains only the well and a part of the cloisters. The oriental light of Byzantium, on the other hand, emanates from the Church of St. Giovannello, a small mediaeval building (10th cent.) with only one nave, which evokes a subdued, austere spirituality when compared with the magnificence of the Cathedral.

And Byzantium can also be seen in the fading frescoes, the single nave architecture, the mixed burials in the tombs of the Church of the Annunziatella, built at the same

time as the church of St. Giovannello, but already crumbling at the beginning of the 16th century.

During the episcopate of Barlaam 2nd, the Monastery of St. Anna (1344) was built together with its adjoining Church . The latter has a richly decorated Baroque altar and an altar-piece by the school of Mattia Preti. The Cappuccini Convent, built in the first half of the 16th century, stretches over 1,200 sq. m. and has a Baroque façade (1722) and splendid walnut altars with handmade marquetry (1720).

The Church of St. Maria del Mastro, on the other hand, speaks eloquently of its Hellenic influence, and is a superb building with a Byzantine outlay (a Greek inscription dates it back to 1084), even though it was built after the Normans consolidated their power.

Finally, the Castle, now in ruins. It can be reached by walking up from the Church of St. Francis or from the streets running alongside the Cathedral and crossing the “Baglio”, a small open space with a view across the valley. Built by the Byzantines on pre-existing structures (it already existed in 950, when they captured Gerace), its fortifications encircled the cliff. The earthquake of 1783 delivered it the final blow.

Local Products

This is the famous Greek wine of Gerace, made from Greek grapes. It is amber yellow, liqueur-like (17 degrees) and produced in limited quantities in the area of Bianco, 20 km from Gerace.

It was offered by the Greeks, together with honey, as a sign of hospitality.

Local dishes

Even the desserts in Gerace are Baroque: rafioli are made of sponge-cake covered with cream, sugar and egg whites poured over as a decoration.