

15. Orbetello Lagoon – Italy



Orbetello Lagoon is situated on the Tyrrhenian coast, 20 km north of Lago di Burano. This site includes sandy beaches, a brackish lagoon, fresh water ponds, small woodlands, pinewoods, woods of cork trees and cultivated land. The site supports more than 10,000 migratory waterbirds (amongst them hundreds of flamingos). Orbetello is now separated from the sea by two main sandbars, Gionella and Feniglia. A third sandbar stretches from the town of Orbetello, which is situated in the middle of the lagoon, extended in the form of an artificial dam (constructed in 1842) to Mt. Argentario, separating the lagoon into two basins, the lagoon of Ponente in the west and the lagoon of Levante in the east.

Because of its unique environment and strategic importance, Orbetello was conquered by the Aldobrandeschi, the Spaniards, the Austrians, the French and last by the Three Fountains Abbey. Also, Orbetello was a major commercial and trading centre of the Tyrrhenian and Mediterranean Seas. The town of Orbetello is surrounded by an ancient polygonal terrace wall and tombs have been discovered within the city and in the vicinity. On the north side of the promontory, the remains of a Roman villa –partially below sea-level– have been found.

During the 16th-18th centuries the Spaniards built the town bastions, although the old Etruscan walls are still visible, and a convict prison that connects with another prison situated at Porto Ercole on the east side of the peninsula. On Mt. Argentario, the strongly fortified house of the Passionist Order is situated. One of the city's most eminent buildings is the Cathedral, presumably built on the ruins of an Etruscan temple, which was renovated in 1375, as well as La Rocca, built in the 12th century by Pietro Farnese. Furthermore, the ancient Roman city of Cosa that was founded in 273 BC, on the land that was occupied by the Etruscan village of Vulci, can also be seen in the nearby area. Cosa is considered as the earliest Roman harbour discovered so far.

Fishermen still use the traditional nets inside the lagoon and in the three areas that connect the lagoon to the sea. Orbetello is nowadays one of the few places in Italy where bottarga (salted mullet roe) is made. It is a particularly skilful process and one of the country's best kept culinary secrets. Bottarga is used grated in pasta dishes as well as in many other traditional recipes.

In the core area of Orbetello lagoon, ecotourism and environmental education are being promoted, while in the vicinity, many locals are involved in activities related to agriculture, animal husbandry and tourism. Hunting is also permitted outside of the reserve, although under specific rules.