

USSITA

Altitude: 730 m

Population: 440

Location

A many centred settlement, made up of scattered hamlets along the valley, springing up from the slopes of Mt Bove.

Origins of the name

The name Ussita is derived from exitus, which means uscita or exit, in reference to its position as a gateway to an Apennine mountain pass.

According to other theories it is linked to the Sannite tribes from the north, the Ussiti, who fled to these mountains after being defeated by the Romans at Terni. A further theory holds that the name comes from the river which shares the town's name.

Historical interest

Man has certainly been present in the Ussita valley since very ancient times. Pre-Roman tombs dug up during work on the piazza dei Cavallari testify to this as well as archaeological finds in the Panico valley. However the first historical references worthy of note are from the 12th century, when the villas which made up the Comune of Visso formed the guaita di Uxitaie. After the destruction of the Castello di Macereto (1313) and that of Pietralata, the population of Ussita, feeling threatened by the neighbouring towns and wanting to claim a certain amount of autonomy from Visso, built a castle on the central high ground. Construction of the surrounding walls began in 1382 and followed the shape of a trapeze; there was also a dense network of roads branching out from the five entrances, linking the central fortification with the villas at the bottom of the valley and the mountain pastures. The people were devoted above all to agriculture and livestock. But they were also skilled in trades involving metalwork and construction (builders and carpenters). In 1460 the art of working with wool developed, and at the same time began the slow ruin of the fortress due to the decline of the Varano family, opposition from Visso, population decline and the Black Death which afflicted the valley from 1456 to 1498.

The long battle to obtain council autonomy, undertaken in 1815 and maintained mainly by Bartolomeo Gasparri, was finally achieved in 1913 with a law that constituted the two free councils of Ussita and Castelsantangelo sul Nera.

Itinerary

Leaving from the piazza the route descends, hugging the Ussita stream. At the bottom of the road, instead of crossing the bridge, pass by the wooden fence and follow the entire length of the path that follows the river. Cross the river and head on to the locality of Sasso (1), (705 m), which is situated along a narrow road with various houses characterised by their stone arched windows and doors, among which is one of special interest from the 14th century with a pointed arch door and a mullioned window. In the centre of the hamlet is the small church of S. Lucia (2), romanesque in style, built in the 1200s and enlarged in the 1400s; within, along the single nave, is a painting of Santa Lucia from the 17th century and frescos (unfortunately in deteriorated condition) from the 15th century, attributable to the school of painting of Paolo of Visso. About three hundred metres after Sasso, take the road which climbs up to the left and leads to the hamlet of

Pieve (3) (740 m) where the church of S. Maria Assunta (4) is located. Built in the 1300s, in gothic style, on the foundations of an ancient religious building, it constituted the centre of religious and civil affairs for Ussita. Along its facade is an arched door, supported by two small columns, a central rose window, two spired windows and a sequence of arches in grey stone. Within the single-naved church are a series of paintings attributed to the group of Paolo of Visso, among which is a votive fresco of the Madonna, another fresco of the Crucifix and Madonna, attributed to the school of Mevalesi, a baptismal font dating from 1390 in grey limestone and, on the right hand wall of the presbytery, a small ciborium sculpted out of marble dating from the second half of the 1400s. Behind the main altar is an important oil painting by Camillo and Fabio Angelucci of Mevale, depicting the Assumption. At the centre of the church is a small chapel with a crucifix from the 1700s on a painted cross. Outside, head left and next to the Carabinieri barracks, follow the descent which leads to the town hall (5). Built between 1927-29 by architect Sneider from Rome, it has been completely restored after being damaged by an earthquake. Inside is a water-based painting from the 15th century depicting a Crucifix with the Madonna and St John on either side, which came from the church of S. Scolastica di Capovallazza, and two frescos from the 1400s, from the church of S. Lucia di Sasso, both attributed to Paolo of Visso. In one is pictured a hexagonal gothic frame, while in the other the Madonna appears with semi-nude Baby, in her lap. In the council meeting room there are four large oil paintings from the 1700s, by unknown artists, showing episodes in the life of Moses, which came from Castello di Beldiletto, an ancient residence of the noble Varano family. In the council archive are housed the acts of the Guaita of 1354 and seven letters signed by Pope Pio X to Cardinal Gasparri. From the entrance of the council offices go down to the stone-based crucifix and turn left into via Roma, which passes between houses and leads to the hamlet of Vallazza (6). Close to the small convent and the adjacent road, it is possible to see, on the right, an important example of an original rural residence from the 1400s. Turning back, a few tens of metres from the convent, on the left, is a beautiful 15th century house and other buildings from the 1400s retraceable to the original structure of the Vallazza villa. Reach the little church of S. Antonio da Padova (7) with a beautiful travertine entrance and spiralled columns. Completely restored in 1927, within is a carved altar, from the 1600s, and a small painting of the Madonna, a copy of the Sassoferrato. On the right, along the Ussita river, is a typical stone building, once the residence of an ancient **gualtiera**. Across the bridge is an tarmac road, from where one can easily return to the start of the walk, or extend the route, taking a path that leads to the hill of Fantellino (8). Here it is possible to see the site of the castle and rediscover the signs of the ancient splendour of this settlement.