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BLU SALENTO

Guida alle coste e alle immersioni

By Genuario Belmonte and Michele Solca

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Since about 15 years Salento has firmly occupied one of the top places among tourist destinations in Italy: the geographical region (a peninsula at the bottom of Apulia) has established itself with a mix of environment and culture, with strong traditional roots and therefore good originality. Baroque architecture, food & wine and green bottle sea have played a driving role in the success of the tourist offer and represent the best memories in visitors and the expectations that promote and support the growing flow of visits to the area. The sea, and everything it offers to the sight and other senses, is certainly the fundamental element that attracts visitors from all the world.

In Blu Salento, almost 300 photographs visually accompany the reader through the four sections of the text, conceived as a presentation and a guide to the enjoyment of the Salento sea by the authors Genuario Belmonte and Michele Solca. Belmonte is a naturalist biologist serving the University of Salento since 1985, where he is responsible for the University Museum System; deals with the tourist valorization of the natural environment, organizes excursions and naturalistic explorations in Italy and abroad; he is a cave diver and the pilot of the University's scientific vessel. Coordinator of projects for the study of regional biodiversity and author of scientific articles on the biology of marine animals, he is also the author for over 25 diffusive books on the Apulian natural environment. Solca is an underwater naturalist photographer passionate about marine biology: a technical diver with great experience in photographic and research dives in all the seas of the world, several times awarded in national and international competitions; he collaborates with photographic and scientific magazines and has exhibited his own photographs in temporary and permanent personal and collective exhibitions in museums and private institutions. Scientific communicator, he has participated in various dissemination projects; he currently works at the DiSTeBA of the University of Salento and deals with photo and video surveys, underwater sampling and scientific communication within the National Biodiversity Future Center of the PNRR.

The importance of the volume focuses on the fact that over 250 km of coastline connect the land, sea and skies of Salento, offering the possibility of experiencing environments and situations that offer exciting and interesting moments, as well as countless naturalistic and cultural ideas. The environments characterizing this Salento Blu are multiple and will be described in the first part of this volume. Coasts, different types of seabed (movable bottoms, seagrass meadows, rocky and coral seabeds), emerged and submerged coastal caves and the footprint left by man will help to contextualise the activities that will be presented later: scuba diving and other ways of experience the sea, as both provide and offer closer contact with this colourful world.

In fact, scuba diving has unique characteristics compared to other experiences connected to the sea: it allows us to live a unique environment from within, with different physical laws and countless experiential stimuli which

are reflected in the passion shared by all those who approach this activity. 30 dive spots, divided into zones, will offer experiences that can satisfy both novice divers and the more experienced and demanding ones. They range from the stone forests of Torre dell'Ovo to the coral that can be appreciated in the stretch of sea between Torre Inserraglio and Gallipoli, to give way to the Capo di Leuca's sea fan and the Otranto's coral, with an eye to the caves and wrecks scattered everywhere and in the MPAs of Porto Cesareo and Torre Guaceto.

The third section of the volume focuses on different perspectives that can illuminate every facet of the Sea in Salento: there we find museums, aquariums and marine protected areas, excursions that offer engaging and varied experiences, to be carried out on foot, by boat or by kayak, to enhance (through 13 sections divided into 50 different scenarios) the entire coastline of this magnificent corner of the world. Jellyfish, centuries-old Aleppo pines, cetaceans and flamingos but also coastal towers, lighthouses, islands and canals contribute to covering the entire varied offer in terms of tourist and naturalistic ideas that this area can offer.

The last section is a focus with information sheets and photo galleries (which concern around thirty species) on the true protagonists of the underwater world, to virtually dive in the extraordinary biodiversity that animates these pages and which is studied profitably by the marine biology researchers of University of Salento. Seahorses, spirographs, sponges, marine animal forest, sea urchin, date mussels and colorful nudibranchs are the protagonists of this section, which does not forget the impact of marine litter in a dedicated paragraph.

"So here is the book of Salento above and below the surface of the sea: Belmonte and Solca take you into the water with them, away from the noises of the surface, from the telephone, from the internet, entering a bubble of amazement and serenity, without weight, enchanted by multicolored organisms and environments. It has everything in it: the smell and taste of the sea, knowledge of nature, the functioning of marine ecosystems, sustainable development, ancient history and the many ways - often little considered - of experiencing the sea above, below, and in the surrounding area. A book that surprises, for the emotion that the underwater world has always reserved for us humans, who have invented the way to return, even if for a time that is always too short, to breathe surrounded by water, but enough to make us feel part of of the Sea". (*Stefano Piraino - Direttore del Museo di Biologia marina Pietro Parenzan*)

In Blu Salento, the observation of landscapes and organisms is inevitably filtered by that great Blue which permeates our lives with an embrace, extending beyond the boundaries of the gaze, when gestures are slowed down and silence covers every action we witness, amazed...an immersive experience that offers a profound interconnection with the sea and with ourselves.

All this, in the center of the most fabled and mythical sea in the history of man: the Mediterranean Sea.

