



19

18TH-CENTURY ROYAL PALACE AT CASERTA WITH THE PARK, THE AQUEDUCT OF VANVITELLI AND THE SAN LEUCIO COMPLEX

“The park itself [...] is a macroscopic fantasy, where everything seems just a little bigger than is right; this perturbs the imagination, which in the Baroque period was called wonder.”

Viaggio in Italia, Guido Piovene

The Royal Palace of Caserta is the result of the ambition of Charles of Bourbon, King of Naples, who in the middle of the 16th century did not want to be second to Louis XVI with his Versailles, believing he deserved an even more splendid residence in which to enclose his ego. The architect commissioned with the project was Luigi Vanvitelli, who needed an area of 47,000 square metres to create 120 hectares of park, 1200 rooms, 1742 windows and 34 staircases, immortalised in countless films (including *Star Wars. Episodio I*). The Aqueduct Carolino was built especially for the park. It carried and still carries water from the sources of the Taburno, in the province of Benevento, for 38 kilometres, with a channel of 1.20 m by 1.70 m which mostly runs underground. According to Ferdinand IV's wishes, in 1778 the Royal Colony of San Leucio was created in Caserta, a prototype of an ideal city with a special status based on merit, equality and respect.



CULTURAL HERITAGE
UNESCO DOSSIER: 549
PLACE OF INSCRIPTION: NAPLES, ITALY
DATE OF INSCRIPTION: 1997

CRITERIA FOR SELECTION: The monumental complex of Caserta is a grandiose example of 18th century town planning, implemented by the Bourbon following the Vitruvian principles of solidity, functionality and beauty. San Leucio is an ideal city, built in harmony with the environment and linked to the production of silk. Together with the Aqueduct Carolino, they are evidence of the artistic and engineering creativity of the period.





“The country round Caserta is completely flat and the fields are worked on till they are as smooth and tidy as garden beds. All of them are planted with poplars on which vines are trained, yet in spite of the shadow they cast, the soil beneath them produces the most perfect crops. How will they look later, when spring is come, in all its power.”

The Caserta landscape, a feast of beauty for the eyes, made a very great impression on the German poet Goethe. You will only need a short itinerary to have your fill: you will visit places that human genius has made immortal.

From Caserta, go east, in the direction of **1 San Leucio**. Here, at the end of the 18th century, an ideal community came into being, founded around the silk industry. It was made up of 17 families, for a total of 214 inhabitants. Workers were entitled to a house and free education for their children: according to some academics, it was the first experiment of real socialism. The factory can be visited today and still produces very fine fabrics, such as the silks shown off all over the world, from the Vatican to the Italian President's residence, and including the flags of the White House and of Buckingham Palace. After the visit, continue towards **2 Casertavecchia**, the original nucleus of the city of Caserta: in 861,

Casam Hirtam was a Longobard “village in the uplands”. Standing at 400 m above sea level, on the slopes of the Tifatini Mountains, the village is a maze-like tangle of houses and ancient manors, dominated by the splendid bell-tower of the **Cathedral**, inaugurated in 1153 in a Romanesque style mixed with Arab-Normal elements, and what remains of the **Castle**, from where to enjoy a fantastic view. Now travel in a south-eastern direction, towards **3 Maddaloni**. The pharaonic project for the Palace of Caserta needed water, a huge amount, and not only for the many fountains, but also to supply the new city. In this regard, Charles of Bourbon thought of building a new aqueduct and the result was once again of epic proportions.

The **Aqueduct Carolino**, which still carries water from the sources of the Taburno, in the province of Benevento, could deceive the majority, as it looks more like a Roman aqueduct but it is from the 18th century (1753-59). Even though much of it runs underground, along the road that leads to Starza, near Maddaloni, the Longano and Garzano mountains are connected by 529 m of arches, almost 60 m high: seeing them pop out from the road is impressive. To admire them from top to bottom, follow the directions to the **4 Sanctuary of San Michele and Santa Maria del Monte**: you can park here and contemplate the sanctuary in all its gigantic splendour; it is better to come in the afternoon to avoid seeing it against the light.



THE ROYAL PARK

“All around, the Old Wood extends like a small city wall [...] The Palace is far away, it can only just be glimpsed above the tree tops, yet Mario feels its presence behind him, as he always had as long as he lived there.”

Dove sei stata, Giusi Marchetta

The stretch of water and greenery that moves away from the Palace of Caserta is much longer than can be perceived. Despite being far away, just like the character in *Dove sei stata*, you will feel its presence, as though to protect your experience. Half a day will suffice to appreciate the spectacle

of an extraordinary play of nature and artifice in front of the palace, created by the aesthetic vision of Vanvitelli and sleepless King Charles. After the Italian Garden, the Water Way is a long pond decorated with foundations and groups of sculptures inspired by classical mythology, each one more fascinating than the last. After you pass the Fountain of Ceres, the walk comes to an end at the Grand Waterfall, where the Fountain of Diana and Actaeon portrays Diana surprised as she bathes by Actaeon who is then turned into a stag. In the English Garden, the rigorous symmetry of Vanvitelli gives way to the fanciful interweaving of paths, plants and woods conceived by the botanist John Graefer from 1786. Revel in the Bath of Venus, the Cryptic portico and the swan lake, but the real gem is peace, the gift of a lush nature.



“THE ONLY CONDITION FOR THE CUSTODIANS AND FAMILIES LIKE HIS, WAS [...] TO BE INVISIBLE TO TOURISTS. ALL OF THEM, ADULTS AND CHILDREN ALIKE, WERE ASKED NOT FOR RESPECT, BUT SYMBIOSIS WITH THE MONUMENT BY VANVITELLI: THEY HAD TO FEEL THEY WERE PART OF THE WORK, MERGING IN WITH THE FOUNTAINS, THE STATUES AND THE BRIDGES OF THE CASTELLUCCIA.”

It is unlikely that you will have the Palace of Caserta to yourselves, like Mario, the main character of *Dove sei stata* by Giusi Marchetta, but your visit will also take you into symbiosis with the monument by Vanvitelli, a splendid universe which can light up eyes of all ages. Begin by recalling the history of the palace, that of a king who was so proud of himself that he wanted a home that could compete with Versailles. When you cross the threshold, you will be in the **1 Staircase of Honour**, where musicians would perform in concerts to welcome the royal family. The decoration of the room is a small handbook of symbolism: the statues of two lions represent the strength of

reason opposed to that of weapons, while the three sculptures at the back evoke royal majesty, merit and truth, the three virtues that every sovereign worthy of their name should have. After climbing the two flights of stairs, you reach the first floor, where the eyes can really begin to take it all in. You will pass through the **2 Upper Vestibule** which, similarly to the lower one, is the point where the corridors of the *piano nobile* meet. It is surrounded by 24 Ionic columns and opens to the east on to the **3 Palatine Chapel**, with a rectangular plan and surmounted by a semi-circular apse. The **apartments** begin immediately on the left. The first are the antechambers, reserved for the halberdiers and bodyguards, then there is a space dedicated to a great personality of the past, **4 Alexander's Room**, known as “of the kiss on the hand” due to the painting by Mariano Rossi which depicts the marriage between Alexander the Great and Roxana (have fun trying to find the couple in the painting). From here, continuing on the left, the **5 Rooms of the Four Seasons** begin (the Reception Room, the Drawing Room, the Dining Room and the Fumoir), each containing frescoes dedicated to a season: try to recognise all of them. Carrying on, you will enter small studies and large bedrooms adorned with the silk of San Leucio, furnished in the neo-classical style and full of frescoes. The **6 Palatine Library**, which includes two reading rooms and three for consultation, as well as thousands of books and several globes scattered around on the floor. On the other side, look for the **7 Throne Room**, the largest of all, which will leave everyone of all ages gawping at the ceiling, walls and floors, “troubled” by the marvellous decorations in gold: a primordial beauty, yet Baroque and ornamentally generous. Before running around in the **8 Royal Gardens**, have a rest at the Palace's café.



CASERTA in books

Reading suggestions to discover the *Palace of Caserta*, *San Leucio* and the *Aqueduct Carolino*.

- **Italian Journey**, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1816-17). The fascinating reportage of the Grand Tour that Goethe made between 1786 and 1788 is a journey through the art, culture and beauties of the Italian panoramas.
- **Viaggio in Italia**, Guido Piovene (1957). Piovene travelled through Italy for three years to write this unique and highly detailed reportage, considered a classic of Italian travel literature. From the Alps to Sicily, including via the

Palace of Caserta, the author invites us to discover the wonders of Italy.

- **Dove sei stata**, Giusi Marchetta (2019). This is the story of Mario, the son of the guardian of the park of the Palace of Caserta, who after many years returns to his childhood home; here he finds all his memories, in particular of his mother Anna, who left without any explanation. It is in the park itself that the hero will look for his answers.

- **San Leucio. La dimora più amata da Ferdinando di Borbone**, Vega de Martini (2020). The story of Ferdinand's dream and of the utopian society of San Leucio, in a book that is essential for anyone who wants to know more about this subject.

- **Ragazze perbene**, Olga Campofreda (2023). Having run away from the well-known story and the strict stage of provincial life, Clara chooses the metropolitan anonymity of a global city, London. It will be her cousin's wedding that takes her back to Caserta, where the life she ran away from, its doubles and fragile destinies, await her, but also the mysterious disappearance of the bride-to-be.

Children's books:

- **GUL: il cuore delle cose**, Maicol & Mirco (2020). A cartoon story from the mordant pencils of Maicol & Mirco, set in the Palace of Caserta.