August's dog days signal the season of...

Ferragosto in Italy

Italians shake their heads in bewilderment at the American concept of rest and relaxation: Memorial and Labor Day “mini vacations” that last three days? Madonna! In Italy, the typical vacation lasts three weeks – and in an unusual act of Latin solidarity, the whole country – from jet-setting Milanese executives to Sicilian day laborers – takes it together in August. The event even has it’s own word: Ferragosto – the August holiday.

Italian Ferragosto routines are sacrosanct: a national lethargy sets in towards the end of July and the country’s industrial and commercial pulse progressively slows until mid August – when all attempts at productivity are abandoned and the exodus begins.

Italians leave town. They head for family houses in ancestral villages, cabins in the mountains, hotels and inns by the seaside. They gather with extended family to cook and eat favorite seasonal dishes, drink local wines, relax and – here’s the part productivity-driven Americans don’t understand – try to spend as much time as possible dolce far niente, sweet doing nothing.

Naïve U.S. tourists with faith in the universality of America’s work-ethic insist that the August migration is a thing of the past in Italy’s big cities. Like Milan.

“Milan loses from 65% to 75% of its permanent residents,” says Dan Hostetler, an American businessman who lives in Italy. Statistics back Hostetler’s claim: www.hellomilan.it, an online guide to the city, says Milan’s “population drops from 1,400,000 to about
300,000" by August 15th, the official date of the national Ferragosto holiday.

Romans surely don’t desert Rome? “Rome is empty,” says Carolina Perrone Carry, a born-and-bred Roman musician who now lives with her American husband and two young daughters in the United States. “Entire neighborhoods are deserted.”

In the age of the Internet, the Euro and Italy’s “open-all-year international trade partnership,” as Hostetler refers to it, how is it possible that the country grinds to a halt each August?

Tradition dies hard in Italy. Ferragosto has been celebrated since early Roman times when – in a rare example of Roman egalitarianism – the entire populace, from senators to slaves, turned out for a series of important harvest festivals and feast days in late summer.

Ferragosto got its name in the 1st century CE under the rule of Caesar Augustus. At a tetchy political moment, Augustus attempted to consolidate power with a direct appeal to the common people: after the emperor was proclaimed a god, He created a new month in honor of Himself and made it a 31-day holiday – *Feriae Augusti* – Augustus’ Festivals.

Roman holidays meant free “bread and circus” – bountiful food, gory gladiator fights and other ‘games’ – for everyone. Pro-Republican nobles were apoplectic – “Through the sweetness of leisure, Augustus seduced one and all,” wrote the historian Tacitus – but the holidays were wildly popular with the common folks.

Pagan festivals continued to be celebrated in Italy, even after Christianity – with it’s holy days that honored Jesus and his mother, the Virgin Mary – was widely...
accepted. “The common people were not as concerned with dogma and theology as they were with the day-to-day events of their lives,” says Dr. Sabina Magliocco, Associate Professor of Anthropology at California State University-Northridge, and author of The Two Madonnas: The Politics of Festival in a Sardinian Community.

The church had “a penchant for layering Christian commemorations over stubbornly celebrated popular festivals,” explains Dr. Magliocco, and the people gradually came to associate the rhythms of the seasons with “the Virgin Mary and the cycle of her life and after-life. It was not a huge leap,” she adds, “for these people to imagine the August harvest — when grain is reaped and the ground is hard and dry — as a time of death.”

Since the 6th century, the faithful have commemorated the death and Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary in mid August; when the Assumption was made official Catholic doctrine in 1950, the national holiday was placed on August 15.

Today, “Ferragosto is a tradition that is celebrated by all Italians — whether they are religious or not,” claims Carry. “Everyone who can tries to take vacation between August 1 and August 20. If you have a country house, that’s where you go.” Carry remembers Ferragosto holidays spent with “parents, aunts, uncles, cousins” at a family home in Abruzzo where there was a traditional Ferragosto procession with a statue of the Virgin, music, dancing and homemade food in the village piazza.

Many Italians without familial ties to a particular town or region head for the hills — the preferred destination for “people who can’t take the heat,” says a spokesperson.

Salty breezes, emerald waters and fresh-cooked seafood await Ferragosto visitors to Porto Santo Stefano (above)

Photo credit: Italian Tourism
from Italian Tourism, an Italian-government run office in New York City. City dwellers can chill and enjoy the spectacular Alpine glamour of classic old European mountain retreats like Madonna di Campiglio, Cortina and Ortisei, or pack up their turtlenecks for summer skiing at Paso del Tonale. “Just be sure you hit the slopes before noon,” advises Italian Tourism’s spokesperson. “After that it gets mushy.”

But some like it hot, and sun-and-sand lovers head for Italy’s coasts. At the luxe former fishing villages of Portofino, Rimini and Capri visitors can channel Virna Lisi as they languidly sip icy limoncello, bake on the beach, and frug the night away at one of the areas groovy discos.

The less taut and terminally tanned will find respite from blaring boom boxes, Pucci bikinis and 70 Euro Sigerson Morrison flip-flops in Sardinia, the island that “…is still a little primitive,” according Italian Tourism’s spokesperson. Southern Sardinia’s Zilla Simius has a white sandy beach, crystalline water and is reasonably priced.

While travel guidebooks consistently warn tourists to avoid deserted Italian cities in August, some visitors may decide that when in Rome, they’ll do as a few savvy Romans do: stay put. “A few of my parents’ friends like to stay in Rome over Ferragosto,” claims Carry. “It’s the only time the city is quiet” enough to allow leisurely visits to parks, museums and usually mobbed cultural attractions.

And of course, when the streets are empty, government offices closed, and banks, bars, restaurants, supermarkets, boutiques, shops and factories shuttered, there’s plenty of time for dolce far niente. •