PASSION... 

SPIRIT... 

TRADITION...

Live in Italy’s Regional Festivals

BY LORRAINE THOMPSON

All roads lead to Rome – and that’s the problem. Each summer thousands of travelers descend on the Holy City, Florence and Venice eager to experience Italy through its classical treasures. While visitors will behold magnificent art and awe-inspiring
ruins, it’s likely they’ll spend as much time in long lines, crowded cafeterias and overpriced gift shops, cheek-by-jowl with fellow sneaker-clad Americans. Take the road less traveled, advises Dan Hostetler, 53, an American executive who has lived in Milan for almost a decade: “The best way to get to know Italy is through its festivals.”

Hostetler has visited dozens of Italy’s regional feasts and shares his passion for them through a website link, www.hostetler.net/italy/italy.cfm, devoted to these uniquely Italian celebrations.

No Rotary Club weenie roast, county expo, or Ye Olde Renaissance Faire prepares the American visitor for the sights, sounds, smells and tastes of Italian festivals. As diverse as Italy’s regions themselves, *feste e sagre* – feasts and fairs – are as likely to celebrate a saint as a snail.

Many *feste* honor local madonnas and holy men – even unofficial saints like cone-headed San Cono of Teggiano, born in 1100.

When little Cono’s parents found the *regazzo* at prayer in a lighted brick oven – unscathed – they knew he was special. So do the people of Teggiano (population 8,600, with 1,500 named Cono) who honor him every June 3rd.

*Sagre* extol a region’s special foods. At Villaggio Sul Mincio’s Tortellini Festival, for example, aficionados of the stuffed pasta knot can tuck into plate after plate of distinctive tortellini served at the world’s largest table. (Read more about Italy’s Summer Festivals 2004 on page 42.)

A region’s past glories – a decisive battle, neighborhood victory, Divine Intervention – are celebrated and reenacted at festivals with an immediacy that draws in natives and visitors alike. On his first trip to the medieval town of Ivrea, Dan Hostetler was recruited by the Scorpions, a team of orange-throwers at “war” in the town’s Battle of the Oranges, fought since 1190. The native Ohioan says he spent the next five hours “costumed up and winging oranges for all I was worth.”

With the exception of a few piously penitential rites, festivals...
usually include music, dance, races, jousts, regattas, ancient competitive games and – always – food.

“All festivals, secular and religious, are tied up with food,” says Douglas Hatschek, a frequent traveler to Italy and photographer for Anne Bianchi’s critically acclaimed book, Italian Festival Foods. While religious feasts are theoretically not about food, “…after the parade is over and the saint’s statue is back in the church, everyone goes back to mamma’s to eat,” says Hatschek. And they eat the same traditional meal each year.

“Feste are meant to show off a community,” muses Hatschek. They “…give each town a chance to be that week’s regional star and have everyone else over for dinner,” he says.

Will Americans feel out of place at this dinner party? “Italy is perhaps the most pleasant place an American can go,” asserts Hatschek. “We are not really viewed as outsiders by the Italians. To some degree we are all viewed as distant cousins. All are welcome.”

A festa, cugino. See you at the feast, cousin.
# PRIMO’s PICK of Italy’s Summer Festivals 2004

## Festival Locations in Italy

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*English language link available
**Italian language only
Free fish fried in a 12 foot skillet, fireworks and fifty foot bonfires are features of this festa held annually in the “perfect miniature of a sea-faring town,” as Dickens described Camogli when he visited in 1844. Plan to arrive Friday night for the spectacular fireworks. On Saturday mingle with villagers until evening, then follow the strains of the town band to the beach and watch enormous bonfires illuminate Camogli’s ancient church and candy-colored buildings. Next day, enjoy tons (literally) of fresh fish donated by local fishermen who cook it on the beach in Italy’s largest skillet. Call ahead for notice of last-minute postponements. “That’s Italy,” sighs Hostetler.

**Festa di San Fortunato, Feast of Saint Fortunato**

Where: Camogli  
When: the second weekend in May, May 8-9 this year.  
Info: www.camogli.it.*

**Corsa dei Ceri, Race of the Candles**

Where: Gubbio  
When: May 15; Hostetler’s advice: “Get there on May 14 or before.  
Info: www.gubbio.com/ceri/index.html*

Men carry 900 pound “candles” and run a ritualized – and muscular – 2½ mile endurance race in memory of Gubbio’s beloved patron, Saint Ubaldo, who saved the town from Barbarossa’s pillages in 1154. The ceraioli – candle bearers – wear the traditional yellow, blue and black garments of Saint Ubaldo, Saint George and Saint Anthony and reenact centuries-old rites and ceremonies throughout the day. Remember to wear comfortable clothes and walking shoes as you will be part of a friendly moving crowd of townspeople, costumed officials, drummers, trumpeters and honor guards on foot and horseback.

**Luminara e Regatta di San Ranieri, Candles and Regatta of Saint Ranier**

Where: Pisa  
When: June 16-17, but Hostetler urges travelers to arrive a day early  
Info: www.comune.pisa.it/turismo/manifestazionistoriche/luminara-gb.htm*

Spend an evening in medieval Pisa with streets and buildings lit entirely by candlelight. In remembrance of San Ranieri, a likeable 12th century playboy-turned-preacher, Pisans extinguish electrical street lights along the banks of the Arno and illuminate the city’s buildings with 70,000 lighted candles. Stunning fireworks follow. Next day, teams from Pisa’s four historic quarters vie for supremacy in a regatta on the Arno. The losers get a live goose.
Bagpipes in Italy? Ma si!

Bagpipes were the instrument of the Roman infantry—trumpets heralded the cavalry—and the pipes have been made in the village of Scapoli under the shadow of Molise’s Mainarde Mountains for centuries. The festa, a three-day combination jam session/artisanal instrument market, features hundreds of bagpipes.

**Festa della Zampogna
Bagpipe Festival**

Where: Scapoli  
When: The last weekend in July  
Info: [www.zampogna.org](http://www.zampogna.org)

Nola goes for baroque with 200 foot “lilies”: According to a 4th century legend, when Nola’s Bishop Paolino miraculously returned from Moorish slavery he was greeted by parishioners who joyfully waved gigli—lilies. Modern Nola’s San Paolino procession features eight colossal “lilies”—transubstantiated during Italy’s Counter-Reformation into rococo towers each of which support papier mâché flowers, statues of saints and a loud, live band. Come watch brawny paranze—crews—shoulder the massive 2-5 ton gigli, dance and perform amazing gymnastic movements. (Read about Williamsburg’s Giglio Festival, page 47)

**Festa del Giglio
Festival of the Lily**

Where: Nola  
When: first Sunday after June 22nd, June 27th this year.  
Info: [www.netway.it/%7edefabio/nola2.htm](http://www.netway.it/%7edefabio/nola2.htm)
virtuoso pipers from all over the world. Be sure to sample the town’s ewe’s milk cheese, black truffles and sausage.

**Festa del Grano**
Grain Festival

Where: Jelsi  
When: July 26  
Info: www.jelsi.com**

A life-size Roman temple made entirely of wheat sheaves was one of the *traglie* – allegorical displays – seen recently at Jelsi’s annual Grain Festival. Handcrafted of freshly scythed wheat, the *traglie* are paraded through town on ox-drawn carts in celebration of Saint Anna who miraculously spared Jelsi from a devastating earthquake in 1805. Great local wine and food is sold by regionally costumed villagers.

**Giostra dell’Orso**
Tournament of the Bear

Where: Pistoia  
When: July 25  
Info: www.comune.pistoia.it/museibiblioteche/attivita_culturali/giostra.htm**

Pistoiesi attempt to settle 700 year-old grudges each year in a joust that pits horsemen from the town’s rival quarters against each other. Clad in neighborhood standards – White Deer, Green Dragon, Golden Lion and White Griffin – the riders careen around the piazza and attempt to strike down an emblematic bear with lances. Undoubtedly a more bloodless form of conflict resolution than that practiced by Pistoia’s feuding Bianchi and Neri factions in 1300, this hair-raising contest will nevertheless send a frisson through the most jaded traveler.

**Festa di San Rocco**
Feast of Saint Rocco

Where: Gioiosa Ionica  
When: August 16 for the saint’s day; the last Thursday through the last Sunday of the month for more festivities  
Info: Ufficio Informazione ed Accoglienza Turistica, Via Matteotti, 90, 89044 Locri, Reggio Calabria, Italia  
Telephone: 0964/29600**

The *festa* that goes on and on and on begins August 16th with spiritual devotions to Saint Rocco. Earthier observances start Thursday, August 26th and build to an all-night party on Saturday, fueled by massive quantities of food, excellent local wine, wild tambourines and uninhibited tarantella dances. Revelers stagger home at dawn or go right to 8:00 a.m. mass at San Rocco’s, then head for an all-day-into-evening parade with more food, wine, tambourines and tarantellas. Well worth the trip to Italy’s “toe” – and the hangover.
I Mandonnari
Street Artists Celebration of the Sacred and the Profane

Where: Grazie di Curtatone
When: August 13-16
Info: www.comunitadelgarda.it/lategarda/giubileo/beatavergine.htm * and www.festivals.com/04-april/streetpainting/history.cfm *

A holy pilgrimage and the world’s largest pork sausage coexist harmoniously at this festa. For over 600 years pilgrims have journeyed each August to the Basilica of Maria delle Grazie to offer petitions, thanks and praise. Since 1972 they have been joined by a handful of itinerant street painters, the Madonnari, who turn the sidewalks and roads into canvases for their religious art. Thousands come to pray, sing, eat, drink, watch international artists explore the Madonnari’s medium and yes, ogle the biggest salame on the planet.

Sagra dei Osei
Festival of the Birds

Where: Sacile
When: The first weekend after Ferragosto (August 15), August 21-22 this year.
“‘There’s a lot going on,” says Hostetler. “Be there on the 20th.”
Info: www.edit2000.com/sacile/manin.html*

Birds have ruled this rialto for seven centuries. Then, as now, buyers and bird fanciers converge from all over the globe in Sacile’s marketplace. Stalls sell handcrafts, regional foods, fine local wines and, of course, birds of every size and color. Don’t miss the bird-calling competition Sunday morning.
Visit Williamsburg’s Giglio Festival

In the hazy July sun a crowd surrounds the 120 men who strain to balance a 3½ ton, 70 foot high baroque tower that bears a statue of a 4th century saint and a nine piece Italian band. The men’s leader signals, the band strikes up and the entire mass of exuberant, perspiring humanity sways down the streets of Williamsburg, Brooklyn towards the Church of Our Lady of Mount Carmel.

This cinematic spectacle, the annual Williamsburg Giglio Festival, recalls the story of San Paolino’s triumphant return to Nola, Italy, when the faithful greeted him by waving gigli – lilies. Today, Nola still celebrates San Paolino’s feast with lilies – now morphed into massive rococo processional pillars. (Read about Nola’s festival in Primo’s Pick of Italy’s Summer Festivals 2004, page 42) When Nolani immigrants settled in Williamsburg at the turn of the last century, they brought their customs, their saint – and their giglio – with them.

Williamsburg’s festival is a community effort, but on festa days the spotlight shines on the testosterone-charged paranza – the crew of men who lift and carry the giglio on their shoulders. Each man has strong ties to community and church and most have practiced and prepared for this event since childhood.

Their leader, Joseph Peluso, 54, worked his way through the traditional ranks – lifter, lieutenant, apprentice capo, capo – to the coveted and powerful position of #1 capo, the man who controls with a word, gesture or sheer charisma, the paranza.

Sal Mazzatenda, a lifter, was encouraged by his Nolani grandfather to carry the children’s giglio when the boy was 7. Thirty-three years later, Mazzatenda has a “permanent lump” on his shoulder as testimony to his devotion to the tradition.

Nowadays not all lifters descend from Nolani immigrants. “No problem,” says Mazzatenda, “even if you’re from Milan or Rome,” or don’t hail from Italy at all. Because on festival days, declares Mazzatenda, “everybody is Italian.”