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SIENA'S PALIO

An Insider's Guide on How to Survive a 90-Second Horse Race Amidst 60,000 Crazy Italians...With No Bathroom Breaks

By Allison Nathe

Photos by Rob Maresca*



"Sei pazzo?!", I asked incredulously of my fiance, Rob. "You can't even stand to go to a movie unless the theater is absolutely empty, and you want to attend a horse race with tens of thousands of hot, sticky tourists and rabid Italian fans? *Are you crazy?!?*"

"Well," he answered calmly. "I think it would be interesting."

I never would have attended the *Palio* - arguably Italy's wackiest public event - had Rob not made it an imperative sojourn in the middle of our ten-day drive around Umbria and parts of Chianti. Foolishly thinking that drive times over the course of our trip would amount to little more than a half-hour between cities (after all, no one obeys the speed limits in Italy, and the towns all looked like a stone's throw from each other on the map), I'd planned our itinerary around a few requirements: we would see as many Umbrian medieval towns as time permitted; we would eat at both of Dario Ceccone's restaurants; we would return to Piperna in Rome for a fabulous Roman *carbonara*; and - in deference to Rob - we would experience the thrill of "the *Palio*."

By our third day, after touring yet another beautiful, picturesque, medieval town (every one of them consisting of a central cathedral, Etruscan ruins, cobblestone steps, a city wall, a Roman theater and a museum of torture), we began to lose steam and I found myself actually looking forward to the *Palio*. And on our fifth day of travel, we finally arrived at the city that hosts the event: Siena.

Some Italian cities have their moments of event-based brilliance. But Siena, with centuries in its armature to perfect the experience, does a number of things quite well:

PARKING - Just outside the city all lots are free. Tickets on the buses, which take you in to town, are one Euro each way (not too shabby), and they run constantly.

COST - Entrance to the event is also free.

LIMITATIONS - No dogs, strollers or Port-A-Potties are allowed in the arena. Rightly so; when space is limited, the last thing you want to worry about is watching where you step, to be poked mid-thigh by an overflowing baby stroller wielded like a battering ram by an irate parent, or (and I shudder just to think of it) the stench a Port-A-Potty would emit for three-plus hours in the stifling Italian summer heat.

MEDICAL AID - Assistance, should you need it, arrives within minutes. Two people right next to us fainted during the three-hour wait for the race to begin and were swiftly taken out of the square to a makeshift emergency room/tent free of charge. (Yes, state-run medical care does have its upside.)

CROWD CONTROL - During the aforementioned three-hour wait (note: some people arrive TEN hours before the race begins to stake out a claim at the coveted second-turn ringside, standing-room-only spot), the crowd is entertained by a pageantry of minstrels, flag-throwers, a parade, and a medieval bugle performance. And once the race begins the *carabinieri*, a branch of the military police, close the gates to the corral and open them just as swiftly once the race is over.



MOB CONTROL - Once the winner of the race is declared, the crowd becomes a screaming, sobbing (mostly the men) tidal wave of anger. Overcome with despair and rage, they look to make someone or something pay for their pain (and for the record, executing the horses or jockeys is not an option), so the city employs a number of burly, imposing, seasoned *Assistenze*, or “Officials,” to keep the peace..

The Officials are a squadron of 200 retired law-enforcement officers looking like elder statesmen who impressively manage to keep the peace among 60,000 visitors and inhabitants - most of whom have saved up a year’s worth of tears and expectations, only to have them dashed to the cobblestones in 90-seconds; plus the odd 55-or-so minutes of false starts and jockey shenanigans.

The vetting process for these crowd-control specialists is a stroke of genius: After all, who’s going to take a swing at someone that looks like your spry, 70-year-old grandfather; especially if he’s a barrel-chested six-feet tall, weighs two-hundred pounds and is decked out in a blue blazer, grey trousers, tie, buttoned-down shirt and loafers...in 90-degree heat?

However, even with all of these strokes of brilliance, much like the *Palio* itself there have to be some losers in the event, so file these under the “not-so-brilliant” category:

THE CAMPO - No order exists once you enter the gated corral (aka the campo) inside the city square. You can either push your way to the center (or be pushed), or line up near the entrance - at which point you will be jostled, elbowed, kneed, shoved, screamed at and cursed into damnation for all eternity.

The women are often more terrifying than the men; actually, they are Oakland Raider's linebackers *disguised* as Italian women who still take pride in cutting a *bella figura* - or at least turning a head, if only out of curiosity. Decked out in tight white jeans a size or two too small, weighted down by enough gold to incite rap-star envy, full make-up over a bronzing that's taken decades to perfect, and wearing animal-print blouses and scarves in support of their team, they link arms like a steamroller daisy-chain as they push their way through.

THE RULES - After the seventh time of hearing the announcer bellow “Oca!” (*Oca* means Goose, one of the team's mascots) as the horses lined up, I'd looked up at the sky expecting a flock of geese and a squadron of hunters to bring them down.

Alas, no geese; just a rider who seemingly couldn't control his horse. My modern day solution: Why not make it interesting and have a team waiting in the wings to take the place of a rider or horse who just can't get it together? There are 17 Sienese *quarttieri* (or



quarters), and each one has a chance to participate in the *Palio*. The square is too small to accommodate all 17 horses and riders, so each year ten riders and horses participate. Whichever *contrada* (or team) did not participate in the preceding year (seven of them) is guaranteed a spot, and there's a lottery for the additional three teams. However, there is no contingency should:

- a) one of the horses gets injured or is uncontrollable before the race begins
- b) a team has committed a breach in the rules.

Maybe I'm messing with history, but honestly if you can't control your horse after ten tries, perhaps you should loose your place in the line-up because each false start adds another 10 -15 minutes to the beginning of the race. However, when I presented my theory about amending the rules to Rob's Italian teacher, he shared a bit of little-known (at least to the general populace) history behind the stops and



starts: gambling. As in, “I'll give you 500 Euros to disqualify the next start.” BANG! and they're off...all except for said jockey who's just made 500 Euros by forcing his horse



to run the wrong way. If you're one of the lucky few overlooking the starting line from a

private terrace or balcony, you'll undoubtedly see some spectators milling about the riders and horses as they jostle towards the starting line. A few quick Euro handouts and bets take place and BANG!...another false start.

THE EXODUS - Shall I start with the band of roving *vitelloni* (taken from a 1950's slang term which means "fatted calves," or on this side of the Atlantic, better translated as "momma's boys") who were targeting anyone or anything on which they could release their personal angst against the winning team? After the race is over, they sit on stoops weeping inconsolably to the *ragazze* (young women) who rub their shoulders and hold their hand, telling them it will be alright and that, yes, if only there hadn't been so many false starts tiring out the horses, their *contrada's* horse might have won.

Ah, well, there's always the next *Palio* to look forward to...

Lest you think I exaggerate the passion this race incites, we'd met a group of American teachers on a National Endowment of the Arts sabbatical a few nights later who described an incredible scene to us that occurred the night before the *Palio*:


More than a hundred fist fights had broken out between two *contrada*. Punches, blows, kicks, insults, bloody noses and an over-abundance of aftershave filled the air in what looked to become a seriously dangerous riot. Moments later, a squadron of twenty or so *carabinieri* hooked arms and began slowly moving through the brawling *contrade*, separating and pushing the angry mob like Moses parting the Red Sea: After all, no one is stupid enough to hit a military policeman, even accidentally; you hit one, you've hit the whole squadron. Not much else to do other than give up.

As the fighters retreated to their respective sides of the street, their fisticuffs turned into dueling choruses of the city's anthem - though they did replace words in the song with taunts and cheers aimed at their rivals.

RESERVATIONS REQUIRED - Practically every restaurant we tried, despite the dearth of empty tables, turned us away with the excuse that within the hour they would be full with their reservations. Either it was the lack of a Sienese scarf (we were both a little nervous to pick a *contrada* to support), or the fact we did not appear to be Italian, but customer service was not in the vocabulary that evening. We finally found a restaurateur who deigned to seat us, but then proceeded to ignore us and two other pairs of tourists for the better part of 15 minutes. We finally gave up, left four Euros on the table, and walked out. Hungry, sticky and annoyed, we made our way back to our car via the shuttle bus, and like a beacon in the distance saw "PIZZERIA" across the street. The pizzas were great, the Moretti on tap divine, and we'd managed to survive what will be our first and only time inside the campo to watch the Palio.



WHAT I WOULD DO NEXT TIME

1. Head right to the winning team's  *contrada*. In our ignorance, we avoided the victor's neighborhood fearing retribution from the rest of the city. Who knew a celebration was just around a few curves and through some porticos?

2. Do a bit more research: The days and nights leading up to the event are as intriguing as the race: giant meals serving 2500 guests are set up in each *contrada*, horses are brought into cathedrals for priests to bless each of their four legs and jockeys are threatened with Eternal Damnation should they lose, and parades fill the streets as the city prepares for the great 90-second event. We arrived at 4 PM on the day of the race and once we'd discovered the events of the previous days felt a bit cheated as if we'd arrived at the tail-end of a magnificent banquet.

3. Bring something to eat in a backpack or lunch bag: While yes, you can make reservations at the restaurants beforehand and most likely get served in a decent amount of time, by bringing along a mini-picnic you will stave off hunger and be assured that you won't pass out while you wait.

4. Consider bringing an umbrella: You can use it to create your own little bit of shade before and after the *Palio*, (never during, lest you block someone's view), and if need be it can double as a weapon of defense.

5. Buy tickets to watch the race from one of the private apartments overlooking the event: From three floors up you can experience, glass in hand, the full 90-seconds as the horses round each corner, rather than the five-second glimpses we caught from our standing position inside the campo, craning our necks as the horses stampeded by. They are very expensive (tickets start at about \$250 USD), but you are guaranteed a spot on the balcony as well as refreshments (read: wine and lots of it) and - a bathroom.

FAST FACTS

The Siena Tourist Board

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Editor's note: Another great article to read on the *Palio* is "*In Siena, Victory is Everything*," by Alan C. Miller, first published in the *Los Angeles Times* on April 30, 2006. It provides a lively introduction to the history (and modern-day shenanigans) of the event.

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