

DESTINATIONS

Il Palio di Siena

A MEDIEVAL TRADITION STILL ALIVE

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In the mind of the casual observer, the Palio of Siena appears to be a crazy, but simple horse race. With but 3 laps around the city's shell-shaped city center, Piazza del Campo, the race itself is over in a matter of a minute or two. However, for the Sienesi the thoughts and feelings of Il Palio are with them year round, and then on display for all to see during the 4 days of the festival, held twice every summer on the 2nd of July and 16th of August. In the hearts and minds of the citizens of this small Tuscan town, the Palio is the essence of their life and over the centuries an event that has molded not only the character of this beautiful medieval city, but the people as well.

The Palio can be first documented as taking place in Siena as early as 1238, with the expectation that such horse races were being contested even prior. The word 'Palio' is derived from the Latin, "pallium" which describes a cloth, or banner of fine material such as silk and typically adorned with other artistic enhancement. In the early races (as now) this banner was awarded to the winner and thus the name associated with the banner also became attached to the race itself.

The current format of the festival and the race has been more or less the same since the early 18th century. Horses are selected at a random draw (tratta) 3 days prior to the race to represent each of the Contrada (city districts) of Siena. While only 10 of the total 17 Contrada are represented in

the race itself, deep historical alliances and long standing adversarial relationships take over among the Contrada. The leaders of each Contrada assign their selected jockey a "race strategy" which in many instances can only be confirmed once the sequence of the horses for the starting gate is revealed. This sequence is only determined minutes before the race is to begin and is delivered by the starter (mossiere) as he announces the name of each Contrada to the thousands of people in the campo. This assigns each horse and jockey their starting positions and the possible fate of the Contrada. With the random horse selections and the last minute knowledge of the starting sequence, the city and its Contradioli (Contrada members) are thus consumed with anxious thoughts as the drama plays out in the days leading up to the race and with its eventual outcome. For the Sienesi, if the "enemy" Contrada wins the race, it will provide more emotional pain than if their own horse should simply finish last.

I personally attended the Palio in Siena for the first time in 1998 and found it to be like no other event I had ever witnessed. Yes, the "anything goes" style of the race was exciting and the medieval setting of Siena and Piazza del Campo is like stepping back in time to the middle ages, but the finality of the race, the emotional state of both joy and sadness that consumes all the Sienesi was for me – Il Palio – and the reason I wanted to find a way to return, not just once, but every year.