

THRILL OF THE CHASE

The build-up to Siena's Palio is just as exciting as the big race

A GRANDSTAND seat, an invitation to a horse blessing, a private visit to a *contrada* museum and the chance to attend a pre-race banquet.

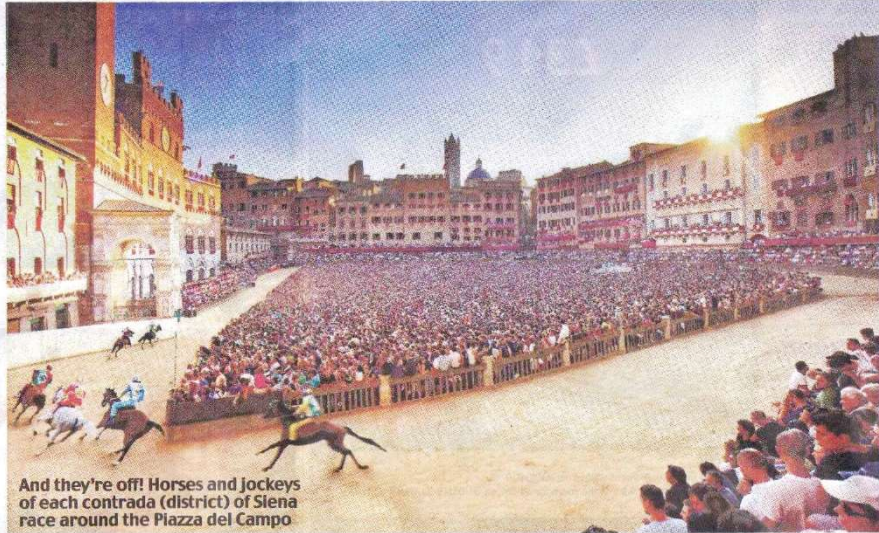
These are all on the menu as I arrive in Siena to immerse myself in the Quattro Giorni del Palio di Siena — the four days running up to and including Siena's bareback horse race.

It's been the heartbeat of this Italian city for centuries and sits at the centre of its culture and history.

So many visitors come only for the actual day of the Palio — but they are missing out.

I am here with Hedonistic Hiking, which has the knowledge and contacts to make this week unforgettable. First, I am introduced to Alexandra, who proudly shows us round the Museum of the Contrada of the Chiocciola (snail).

There are 17 districts in Siena, each known as a *contrada*, and they compete against each other in the Palio twice a year, in July and August. Each has



And they're off! Horses and jockeys of each *contrada* (district) of Siena race around the Piazza del Campo

Picture: MAURIZIO RELLINI / CORNISE IMAGES

its own traditions, church, museum and fountain.

Each *contrada* has a name — sometimes it's a type of creature, sometimes not. There are Pantera (panther), Lupa (she-wolf) and Nicchio (seashell), to

name but a few. Alexandra regales us with anecdotes about the history of the *contrada* Chiocciola while showing us medieval costumes, old photographs and Palio banners.

I join the crowds in the Piazza del Campo to see the horses being allocated to the various *contrade*.

Half the population of Siena seems to be here, and the crowds are noisy, but when the announcements are made,

you can hear a pin drop.

The atmosphere intensifies as the day of the race approaches. Locals are out and about sporting the colours of their *contrada* by wearing scarves around their necks or attached to their bags.

FOR a break from all the pre-race fervour, we take a look around the private art collection of the Monte dei Paschi, one of the oldest banks in the world, which is only open to the public once a year.

To get away from the heat, we venture into the nearby countryside to hike and enjoy a picnic of local produce.

We also visit Podere Patrignone, an *agriturismo* (a farm offering local food and accommodation), where we learn to make pasta and then sample the fruits of our labour.

On our return to the city, we watch the penultimate trial race, then set off to the pre-race dinner of the *contrada* Valdimontone, where we sit at trestle tables positioned outside in the street.

There are more than 1,500 of us munching away amid the drumming, flag waving and singing of *contrada* songs. I decide to cheer for Valdimontone, as they have given us such a good time.

The day of the Palio dawns and those of us who are not too delicate from the previous night's partying venture down to the Piazza del Campo to watch the Bishop of Siena leading Mass in the

chapel for the jockeys who are riding that day.

After that, it's off to the outdoor blessing of the horse of the *contrada* Oca (goose). Many *contrade* bless their horses inside, so this is a chance to join in with the locals.

It's taken very seriously and, if you make the mistake of talking while it is going on, be warned: you're in danger of being lynched.

Finally, we take our seats for the race. Some locals have camped out all day in the heat to get a good spot.

It's preceded by a parade, with *contrada* members dressed in medieval costumes, waving flags and beating drums.

The race consists of three laps around the edge of the Campo. The winner is the first *contrada* whose horse completes the course, with or without the rider. They win the silk banner, or Palio, after which the race is named.

We watch carefully as the competition starts, but it's over before we know it. After all the waiting, it's a blur of hooves, dust and noise — but what an experience!

The winning jockey is dragged from his horse and carried aloft on people's shoulders. The cheers of the winning *contrada*, Onda (wave), are tremendous.

Later, we dine in the Campo amid their ecstatic celebrations.

As for the members of the other *contrade*, they sink away to lick their wounds — and, no doubt, to start planning their strategy for the next year.

JANE KEIGHTLEY

TRAVEL FACTS

HEDONISTIC Hiking (hedonistichiking.com, 01858 565148) offers its six-night Palio Of Siena holiday from £2,637 pp, full-board, including activities; travel August 12 to 18, 2019. Ryanair flies to Pisa from £34 return (ryanair.com).

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Deals of the week...

SAVE £678 PRIVATE PARADISE
CHAPWANI, a mile offshore from Zanzibar, is a private island with ten ocean-front rooms and one villa. Book 14 nights between June 16 and July 14 with i-escape (i-escape.com, 020 811 3413) from £1,219 pp, based on two sharing a double, half-board.

SAVE £523 SKI SAVER
IGLU Ski (igluski.com, 020 3811 6381) is offering seven nights catered in Val Thorens in the French Alps from £519, based on two sharing. Chalet Poire has seven bedrooms, a Jacuzzi and a gym. Book for travel on February 2, flights included.