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The Thrill of the Chase





Having failed on previous occasions to see the actual races, **Jane Keightley** finally experiences all the pride and pageantry of Palio week in Siena...



Clockwise from top left: the race doesn't last long but there are thrills aplenty; snails (chioccioline) at the museum; panforte di Siena; the Palio flag; the chief bell-ringer; the pre-race dinner; there was time too to enjoy the beauty of the city; the after-race celebrations

Images by Jane Keightley

This was far from the first time I had visited Siena, but never before had I actually been there to experience the Palio. On one occasion I had arrived in town the day after, so I had experienced the euphoria of the winning *contrada*, but not the races themselves. This time, however, I was going to experience the full *Quattro giorni del Palio*, the four days running up to the event. Hedonistic Hiking, who organises this week, promised total immersion in the Palio experience – and that is precisely what I got.

On the first evening we met Alexandra, who showed us round her Contrada museum. Almost bursting with pride she explained the history of the Chiocciola (Snail) contrada and showed off the Palio banners they had won in previous races. As I walked around taking in all the history and traditions, I realised that this week was going to be a totally unique experience.

The next chance we got to join in with the build-up to the race was to go down to the Campo to see the horses being allocated to the various *contrade*. Half the population of Siena seemed to be there and it was hot, noisy and crowded, but as soon as the announcements were made the whole of the Campo was silent.

THE STREETS OF SIENA

In between joining in with all the events I loved to wander around the streets of Siena and feel the rising excitement of the locals, for whom this is one of the highlights of the year. They were all out and about, showing off the colours of their particular contrada by wearing a scarf around their neck or fastened to their bag. Eager tourists wanting to join in with the fun swarmed around the various stalls that sold Palio merchandise, trying to decide which contrada to cheer for so they could buy the right scarf.

Some days we escaped the hustle and bustle of Siena to hike through the Tuscan countryside, and on one occasion we visited an *agriturismo*, Podere Patrignone, where we learned to make pasta. However, the main focus for me was to make the most



of the whole Palio experience and I spent a lot of my time just walking around, exploring the city.

The night before the Palio every contrada has an open-air party and we were lucky enough to attend the dinner of the Valdimontone contrada. Sitting on the streets of Siena on a summer's evening, being wine and dined amongst a crowd of over 1,500 guests is an experience that will stick in my mind for ever. Add plenty of banging of drums and flag-waving and the singing of contrada songs and you can imagine what a great evening it was. I decided that I was going to cheer for Valdimontone the next day as they had given us such a good time.

PALIO DAY

Palio day dawned and the ones amongst us who were not too hungover from the previous night's celebrations wandered down to

THE CONTRADE OF SIENA

AQUILA EAGLE	NICCHIO SHELL
BRUCO CATERPILLAR	OCA GOOSE
CHIOCCIOLA SNAIL	ONDA WAVE
CIVETTA OWL	PANTERA PANTHER
DRAGO DRAGON	SELVA FOREST
GIRAFFA GIRAFFE	TARTUCA TORTOISE
ISTRICE PORCUPINE	TORRE TOWER
LEOCORNO UNICORN	VALDIMONTONE
LUPA SHE-WOLF	VALLEY OF THE RAM

DISCOVER ITALIA!



As quickly as it started it was finished. Ninety seconds of dust and galloping hooves and the cheers of nearly the whole population of Siena





Clockwise from top left: Expectant crowds before the event; the process of choosing the horses; the blessing of the horses; cleaning the track before the race

THE HISTORY OF THE PALIO

The Palio is a bareback race and bitterly contested competition between the various *contrade*, or districts, of Siena in Tuscany. It is held in the Campo, the beautiful shell-shaped piazza in the centre of Siena. Horses and jockeys run three laps around the ring of soil placed on the outer perimeter of the Campo. The origins of this unique spectacle go back to the 13th century when a horse race and a feast were held to give thanks to the Madonna for Siena's victory at the Battle of Montaperti in 1260. The first Palio on record was in 1310 but the race has changed a great deal over the centuries.

It is often assumed that there have always been only the 17 *contrade* that take part in the Palio now. However, back in the early 13th century there were 80 of these districts. Following the Black Death in 1348 some of them disappeared while others were incorporated into neighbouring districts until eventually there were just 42. As time went on they were reduced further still until, in 1729, the number was fixed at 17, as it remains to this day. The *contrade* all have a special name and their own heraldic symbol and colours. In some cases they have traditional allies and enemies.

THE TWO PALIOS

There are actually two Palios. The first is held on the 2nd of July and the second on the 16th of August. Ten out of the 17 *contrade* take part in each as there is no room for any more than that. Seven are guaranteed a place if they missed the July race the previous year and the other three are drawn by lots.

A week before the race the perimeters of the Campo are covered with earth, "*La terra in piazza*", to create the track. Three days before the race there is a public draw to assign horses to each *contrada* and once allotted they cannot be changed. The horses are then led to special stalls in their *contrada* and are placed under 24-hour surveillance to prevent doping.

On the day of the race the horse and jockey are blessed in the relevant *contrada* church. The race is preceded by a grand procession with *contrada* members dressed in medieval costumes waving flags and beating drums. Once the race is over – it only lasts 90 seconds – the celebrations begin. The silk banner that is the prize is called the *palio* and is where the name of the race comes from. Since 1970 the banner for the August palio has been designed by leading Italian artists but it always has to bear an image of the Madonna. This much-coveted banner is paraded around the streets with great pride by the winners. Celebrations continue most of the night and after a few weeks a special celebration dinner is held by the winning *contrada*, with their horse being the guest of honour.

the Campo to watch the Bishop of Siena leading Mass in the chapel in the piazza for the jockeys who were riding that day.

As the day went on the tension and excitement mounted, and after lunch we went to watch the outdoor blessing of the Goose *contrada*. Many *contrade* bless their horse indoors, in their local chapel, so this gave us the ideal opportunity to join in with the locals – but woe betide any visitor who doesn't take it seriously and who dares to talk during the ceremony!

GRANDSTAND SEATS

Finally, it was time to sit down and watch the race. We were very thankful to have grandstand seats. Many people had camped out in the centre of the Campo all day in the heat to reserve themselves a good position. After nearly four hours of processions, drum-banging and flag-waving, it was finally time for the race to begin.

After a few minutes of the horses jostling about to get their place, they were off. Then as quickly as it started it was finished, in ninety seconds of dust and galloping hooves and the cheers of nearly the whole population of Siena. In front of us the winning jockey was dragged from his horse and carried aloft on people's shoulders. The cheers were tremendous from the victorious Onda supporters but the other *contrade* and their supporters didn't hang about long before they disappeared to lick their wounds and start planning for next year. ➤

GETTING THERE

➤ If you travel with Hedonistic Hiking they pick up and drop off at Pisa airport. Otherwise there are good links from Pisa and Florence by train and bus links from Florence. Travelling by car is simple from Florence, on a fast four-lane highway. Travelling directly by car from Pisa to Siena is not quite as easy but not too problematic. www.hedonistichiking.com

WHERE TO EAT AND STAY

BAR IL PALIO

Piazza del Campo, 46-49

☎ +39 0577 282055

Our meeting point for the week and a great place to people-watch. It has a superb position in the Campo. It was in front of here that we watched the Palio.

TRE CRISTI

Vicolo di Provenzano, 1/7

☎ +39 0577 280608

info@tre cristi.siena.com

www.trecristi.com

A Sienese institution since 1830, this is the traditional restaurant of the Giraffe Contrada. A place to visit for a great fish and seafood menu and smart surroundings. It can be quite expensive but is very good for a special meal.

PALAZZO RAVIZZA

Pian del Mantellini, 34

☎ +39 0577 280462

bureau@palazzoravizza.it

www.palazzoravizza.it

Situated in an old palazzo, this hotel is not very far from the historic centre of Siena yet has wonderful views of the surrounding countryside as well. The bedrooms are beautifully decorated. Mine even had a frescoed ceiling.



So many visitors only come for the actual race and do not get the chance to join in with the locals, who are making the most of the occasion





Clockwise from top left: Chianina bulls pulling the Palio flag; children from different contrade watching the race together; pre-race procession; the flag of Onda, this year's winner; at the museum of the Snail contrada

Dining in the Campo that night amongst the celebrations that went well on into the night was so much fun. So many visitors only come for the actual race and do not get the chance to join in with the locals, who are making the most of one of their most important occasions.

This being a trip hosted by Hedonistic Hiking, on our last day in Siena, we went for a gentle hike along the banks of the River Merse in the Tuscan countryside. It was a great way to relax after the excitement and tensions of the previous day.

While enjoying the walk, I reflected on how the week had brought the history, the culture and spirit of Siena alive to me. It is a week I will never forget. ■

FIND OUT MORE

► Jane Keightley was in Siena as a guest of Hedonistic Hiking
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 ITALY ☎ +39 333 319 4203

WHAT TO SEE AND DO

PIAZZA DEL CAMPO

Il Campo, 53100 Siena

The shell-shaped piazza that is the centre of Siena was completed in 1340 and all manner of activities have taken place here, including boxing matches, bullfights and even executions. The Campo is home to the Fonte Gaia – the Fountain of Joy. But the one here is actually a 19th-century copy of the original fountain. The original is in the Maria della Scala museum (see below).

THE PALAZZO PUBBLICO AND

Piazza del Campo

Occupying almost of the whole of the south side of the Campo, the Palazzo Pubblico is a monumental Gothic building constructed in the late 13th century as the seat of the Sienese government. Today it is still home to the city authorities but it also houses the Museo Civico, which is full of wonderful art treasures.

THE TORRE DEL MANGIA

Piazza del Campo

Soaring above the Palazzo Pubblico is the Torre del Mangia, where a climb of over 400 steps rewards you with magnificent views of Siena and the surrounding countryside.

THE DUOMO

THE BAPTISTERY AND

THE MUSEO DELL'OPERA DEL DUOMO

Piazza Duomo, 8

☎ +39 0577 283048

operaduomo@operaduomo.siena.it

www.operaduomo.siena.it

The Duomo is one of the most ornate in Italy and well worth spending a few hours exploring. Also visit the Baptistery and the Museo to get the full Duomo experience.

THE OSPEDALE DI SANTA MARIA DELLA SCALA

Piazza del Duomo, 1

☎ +39 0577 534504

www.santamariadellascala.com

Stretched in front of the Duomo this was once the city's hospital. It was one of the first in Europe and was still treating patients right up until the 1980s. Now it is a fascinating museum complex – and one not to be missed.

BASILICA DI SAN DOMENICO

Piazza San Domenico, 1

☎ +39 0577 280462

basilicacateriniana@gmail.com

Perched on a steep escarpment, this enormous brick church was built by the Dominicans. It is vast and empty inside and most visitors come to see holy relics, mainly the preserved head of St Catherine. Other cases contain one of her fingers and the whip with which she is said to have flagellated herself.