

the *naked truth*

A unique festival in a small Sicilian town described by *Fabrizio Fiorenzano*



Pictures by Fabrizio Fiorenzano

TALIANS are well aware that Sicily is the region where religious festivals are events of deep devotion and fascinating spectacle. Each year, dozens of events are organised all over the region, but some of them deserve closer inspection because of their fascinating and unusual nature.

One such event takes place in Militello in Val di Catania, a small town with a population of 10,000, standing on a hill 48 km from Catania, and numbered among the sites protected by UNESCO. It is thought that its name derives from 'Militum Tellus' (Land of the Soldiers) and dates from the time when the Romans, under the leadership of Marcus Marcellus, were preparing their assault on Syracuse. In September each year, the town organises an extraordinary festival, religious but also secular. In Militello, the relationship with religion also manifests itself in rivalry among local factions. While on 18th August one part of the town celebrates its devotion to Jesus Christ, on 8th September another part sets about demonstrating its obedience to the Madonna della Stella.

The origins of this festival date back to the 16th century. Legend has it that the Virgin used to protect the town from earthquakes and drought and the inhabitants would gather together in prayer to offer thanks. Over the centuries this tradition has been handed down from generation to generation, still retaining its original spirit of devotion.



UNDER LOCK AND KEY

All year the statue of the Madonna is kept in a crypt under the vast Marian Sanctuary, completed in 1741, and only brought out on the day of the festival. To open the crypt, three keys are required – one is held by church, one by the mayor and the third by the commanding officer of the Carabinieri. Outside the Sanctuary, thousands of people await the appearance of the huge throne which, as well as bearing the sacred statue, with its golden crown, jewels and priceless necklace, also has a place for the parish priest.

This event marks the start of the festival, and also the outbreak of an apocalypse. The earth is shaken by thousands of fireworks and explosions and many people fall to their knees, their hands over their ears to block out the deafening din. The most devout begin to weep, to cry out and to pray, while the sky above is full of smoke and clouds of confetti.

The most eagerly-awaited part of the festival, although upsetting for many onlookers, comes when amid all the shouting and explosions in the square in front of the church, many babies are brought in front of the statue of the Madonna. Then, despite the babies' tears and terrified faces, their parents proceed to undress them. Once they are completely naked, they are lifted into the air and displayed to the shouting masses. It is a surreal scene which many tourists

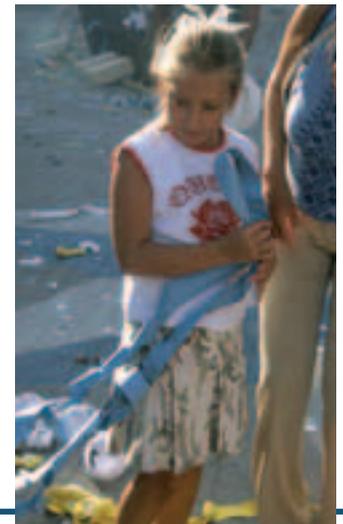




It should be noted that the festival also contains many profane elements, such as the rivalry with the other faction which, less than a month before, displayed its devotion to Jesus Christ in a similar way. It is a competi-

tion which is judged by who can create the most confusion, perform the best dances and set off the most deafening fireworks.

There are few other places in the world which can stage such an event and, when it reaches its end, there remains a feeling of chaos. Noise, shouting, weeping, music... these are the essential elements of something which is not always easy to understand but which offer an insight into the deeply-rooted traditions of Sicily, a wonderful region which always provides excitement and emotions which probably cannot be matched in any other part of the world. **1207**



find difficult to comprehend. The church square is packed with photographers and TV cameramen, jostling with each other to get a close-up of the scene and preserve it for posterity. It is an extraordinary sight and even though it takes place every year it is both fascinating and frightening. These tiny, bewildered and frightened babies, unable to understand what is happening, and why they have been undressed, melt the hearts of the astonished yet transfixed onlookers, taking in this extraordinary image without saying a word.

For the most devout of the parents, this action of undressing their babies and presenting their clothes to the Virgin represents the entrusting of the baby's life to the protection of Mary. The clothes are later recovered on payment of an offering of money and the babies are dressed again and handed back to their families.

GOOD LUCK GUARANTEED

The parents are happy for their infants to undergo this ritual since they believe that in this way good health and fortune will accompany them throughout their lives and they will avoid suffering the misfortunes which Fate might have in store.

After this first phase of the festival, the immense throne is carried on the shoulders of dozens of men, followed by a picturesque band of musicians playing wind instruments and drums. The long, noisy procession stops several times on its route, and dancing and singing break out. Amid all this confusion, several people are taken ill and have to be carried away.

The townsfolk follow the procession until it reaches the Town Hall square, where the throne is placed on a cart for the solemn Mass of the 'Secondi Vespri' which is a request for help but also an act of thanksgiving, praise, adoration and contemplation. This takes place before the mayor and all the town's most important political figures.

LIBERATION DAY

In the eyes of the most avid participants, it is possible to see a sense of liberation, brought about by an outpouring of the repression and tensions which have dogged them during the year. These are people who probably don't have much, but for whom their religion is their strength.

Every year, many tourists come to Militello to witness the events of 8th September, which must be viewed with a critical eye without pretending to fully understand what it means.

details

information



Comune di Militello: www.comune.militello-in-val-di-catania.ct.it/
Militello.info www.militello.info

getting there

The quickest way to reach **Militello in Val di Catania** is by car, although it is also accessible by train or bus.



BY CAR: From Catania: **Autostrada A19 Catania** - Palermo, Gerbini exit, Via Bivio Iannarello



BY TRAIN: **Catania - Caltagirone - Gela line.**
Information Office **Tel. (+39) 095 531625**



BY BUS: **Autolinee Interbus (Tel. (+39) 095 532716)** in 1 hour 20 minutes from the **Sais-Interbus terminus in Piazza Giovanni XXIII, Catania (FS-Trenitalia Station).**

Agenzia di Catania - **Tel. (+39) 095 811746**
Agenzia di Militello - **Tel. (+39) 095 655361**

where to stay



B&B: Via Roma, 151 - Tel.: (+39)095 655647. Near 'Monte Calvario' (the town's viewpoint) and close to the old centre.
www.militello.info/Info/MI_BedBreak.htm