

Ancient games

ILSE VAN DEN BERG EXPERIENCED THE THRILL OF WITNESSING ONE OF THE OLDEST, MOST ATTENDED, AND MOST DANGEROUS HORSE RACES IN THE WORLD IN THE HEART OF TUSCANY: THE PALIO DI SIENA



It was roughly 39 degrees outside and our little Fiat 500's air-con couldn't really be classified as, well, air-con. Let's just say the AC button served as a kind of 'NOS' button instead. While going uphill, I would push the button, which would result in an exponential gain in speed, shooting us from 60 km/h to a whopping 65 km/h.

Finally, we found a parking spot and made our way along the cobbled road, gawking at all the flags of the various *contrade* (districts) of Siena draped from historic buildings. There was a palpable excitement in the air as we heard the crowd of roughly 50 000 people singing as one man.

In the average Sienese's diary, there are two dates on the calendar that you dare not miss (apart from Christmas, Easter and perhaps the papal inauguration, that is). Indeed, everything in this superbly preserved medieval town near

the centre of Italy revolves around its last remaining ancient game, 'Palio di Siena' (the Palio horse race of Siena), which takes place twice each summer.

Now, I'm not talking J&B Met here, folks. First of all, a big part of Palio has to do with the traditions and parades that take place days before the actual race. The horses are even taken into the church to be blessed by the priest. In fact, the lead-up to the race may be just as important, if not more, than the race itself.

Second, at Palio there are no rules except for one: the first horse over the finish line wins – with or without its jockey. I'm talking a 90-second untamed bareback horse race. Three intense ear-deafening laps around the Piazza del Campo. Men, women and children proudly donning their *contrade* colours; waving, whistling, cheering and swearing. And just like that, it's over. Sure, this is all fun and games. For the locals of the city, however, this is also about pride and honour.

As we drove off the following day, all I kept thinking was that next time I attend this extravaganza, I won't be watching the show from behind the stands. No, no. I'll be immersed in the action, breathing the dust from the front row with a specific *contrade* flag draped over my shoulders. Heck, I may even go as far as learning an Italian song or two... 🍷