

Mary Hoffman

Palio diary 2009

This was the second Palio race I've ever watched live and I kept a diary of the week I spent in Siena, which culminated in the race.

Sunday May 31st (prologue to the Palio)

Valdimontone is the last contrada to be named at the "Estrazione." Seven contrade run by right because they were not in the last Palio di Provenzano:

Chiocciola = Snail

Civetta = Owl

Oca = Goose

Drago = Dragon

Tartuca = Tortoise

Lupa = She-wolf

Onda = Wave

Three are chosen by lot on the last Sunday in May:

Pantera = Panther

Istrice = Porcupine

Valdimontone = Ram

I text my friend Graziella, saying " Non posso crederlo! Montone corre!"

26th June

We arrive at Santa Chiara at 7.30pm after a delayed flight and head out for dinner at Da Gano. Afterwards we go down to the campo and get an ice cream from Brivido (= shiver). There is a violet sky and a fingernail moon. The dirt is down and the lights are on, the campo full of people and an air of anticipation.

27th June

A grey day and a bad forecast. We go shopping at the big supermarket and have a late lunch followed by a siesta. Thunderstorm. I text Graziella and get a message back to say all is OK with the Cena tickets and also the palco! This means I have a seat in the Montone stand! Prosecco and pistachios. Large dinner of pasta and vegetables and tartufo. Early night.

28th June

In spite of the bad forecast, we have a sunny day at the pool right through to 6pm when the thunder comes. We go back to the house for an early-ish supper but the storm soon clears and we have evening sunshine. The plan is to get up early for the Tratta tomorrow and have breakfast in the campo but only if it isn't raining. We make mushroom risotto with courgette flowers and some seafood for the boys. Pudding is a blackberry tart and cream.

Stevie sees a red squirrel running across the path from right to left and shows it to us. These last two nights there are supposed to have been "moonlight races" in the campo – actually at about dawn – but we haven't been keen to get up that early!

29th June

By a heroic effort we are out of the house by 7.30am and in the square by 8 – breakfastless. We think we have missed the Batterie, since there is a big load of nothing happening but at 9.30am, we realise that in fact they are just starting. Seven horses run in the first battery, which is fast and furious, with three jockeys coming off. Seven and eight in the second and third batteries, with no falls, Then eight in the fourth and one jockey off.

The fifth is the battery "de recupero" and has six horses we have had before. A very knowledgeable man in the campo tells us that a/ number 11 won the last Palio and b/ the decision about the final ten and the "Tratta" when horses are assigned to contrade won't be till about 1pm (It is now 10.30), so we go off in search of breakfast. Very welcome juices, brioche and coffee had in a café at the foot of the Duomo, the campo cafés being all packed away till lunchtime.

We do some desultory wandering and buy me a hat plus an apron and an olive wood spoon and a wooden box of dice. Then to lunch at La Mangia in the campo, where the Tratta is being drawn. Terrific excitement from Drago, Istrice and Pantera who have drawn the best horses (past winners). Civetta and Tartuca also pretty happy.

No big cheer goes up from Montone but we have number 23, Ilon, who won the first batteria "scosso," being one of the horses to shed his jockey. Then back home and down to the pool for a swim. The thunderstorm holds off just long enough. Stevie makes supper of spiedini for the boys and pancakes for the girls, with potato and peas and courgettes and we all eat peaches afterwards.

30th June

The morning "Prova" is delayed until 11am (last night's having been cancelled owing to the heavy rain). I get up early and go down to the shop for today's newspaper. The Corriere di Siena, with its Corriere del Palio inside, has magnificent coverage. We find wall to wall Palio coverage on Canale 3 too on the TV, where they are perfecting their rain commentary à la Wimbledon. Stevie and I go to the Duomo, the Maestà in

the Duomo museum, and the Palazzo Pubblico, while the others stay and watch TV coverage. Civetta wins the Prova after three false starts.

After lunch we go down to the pool but the thunder comes back and soon brings the rain with it. No further word from Graziella. Lupa win the evening Prova, which we watch on TV. Montone run a good race and I'm impressed by our jockey - Bighino.

I have had numerous work e-mails: France has offered for Troubadour, Emma wants chapterhead suggestions for City of Ships (already sent), Ros has additional bits of artwork and notes for The Great Big Book of Families, two magazines have confirmed receipt of e-mails about columns I'm doing for them and a fellow writer wants my blog details as she thinks she isn't posting often enough.

Graziella texts to say I am her guest for the Palio! I can't believe it. I e-mail the Guardian Travel Editor to see if she'd like a piece.

I make stuffed aubergines and the boys have Italian sausages. Bex has found vegetarian panna cotta for us all. I have finished my dreadful John Grisham (The Appeal) and started on Pascal Mercier's Night Train to Lisbon – much better; it reminds me of Sostiene Perera. Only one mosquito bite so far.

1st July

Dawns bright and sunny. Chiocciola wins the 4th Prova, after two false starts. Fedora Saura (Drago's mount) is a real nightmare, putting itself side on to the other horses and frisking about and barging. Istrice's Elisir is not much better. They are the two favourites. Montone comes second. At this stage the jockeys all seem amiable and chatty with one another.

I go down to the shop after the Prova and find they have run out of Corriere di Siena – disastro! Will have to find one later. It's going to be a hot day but we hope not building up to thunderstorms as we have the street dinner tonight.

It stays hot and sunny for the morning, which we spend by the pool. But by 3-4pm we are hearing thunder again. "Drums?" asks Stevie hopefully, but it's thunder all right.

A text from Graziella saying we won't meet before the contrada supper but that's OK. I've paid the Professor for the flat and just need money for the dinner tickets now. We've booked the Guidiriccio restaurant for "dopo Palio."

I manage to pick up a Corriere di Siena in town and we watch the Prova Generale on TV before setting out for the contrada. Lupa wins. We arrive in Montone and go to see our horse, Ilon. He is looking good but the sky is not. All the tables are set out

with bottles of wine and water and paper cloths but soon the thunder comes and the rain with it. I get a text to say that Civetta have had to scratch because their horse, Iesael, has a lesion on its back leg. So only nine horses tomorrow,

A posse of waiters rush out with plastic covers and the dinner is delayed from 8.30 to 10.15pm. In all this time we haven't found Graziella among the umbrellas but Bex and Toby find a bar and bring us Camparis and crisps – very welcome! Eventually I find her and we have a most emotional hug. I gather from the torrent of her heavily Tuscan-accented Italian that she has been very touched by my letter about the loss of her husband,

She gives us our tickets in the main street but won't accept any money and can't sit with us. I also get my ticket for the Palio, which is also as her guest. We sit with Antonio and Maria, Natalina and Manlio on the left and an Australian couple, Camillo and Marcia on the right. We have panzanella followed by risotto that has some pancetta in it so Bex and I can't have that. But then a lovely spinach lasagne. The boys have to eat our meat course as well as theirs so just as well there's a long gap till pudding, which is a huge chocolate profiterole with chocolate cream in it!

The wine flows freely (Castello San Sano) and our jockey, Valter Pusceddu, known as Bighino, makes a nice short speech. Our Priore is a woman, Anna Carli, which is still unusual. We totter back home at 1am.

Thursday 2nd July

The big day! After last night's storms we wonder if the Provaccia will be held but it is and Chiocciola win. I get a text to say that Civetta are so gutted about the vets' decision to withdraw their horse that they won't perform their sbandierata in the Corteo Storico! We spend some time at the pool and I have my last swim of the holiday. Then, after a siesta, I head out for town and the Contrada blessing.

It is as moving as last time. A high wind has sprung up and spooks Ilon a bit by knocking over some trestles from last night. A little rain. I watch the sbandierata outside the church and then follow the comparsa down to the Via Roma.

Two people crying "Viva Montone" from a doorway turn out to be Bex and Toby! They have ordered pizza and I join them for an espresso. Then we set off for the Campo.

I can't get into my seat in the "palco" till 4.30pm and neither it nor the seats are numbered. But the man in charge produces a cushion from a sack with a flourish and puts it in the place he assures me is number 28.

There is occasional mortar fire to scare away the birds. At five to five the sweepers clean up the track and people are encouraged to get into their palchi but the stands are far from full. There are five Montonaioli in the front row and I am up in the third. Two Lupas come and sit next to me. 5.15pm and the carabinieri gallop with their swords out.. My stand is filling up, mainly with Montonaioli but some Lupas and Tartucas.

At 5.20pm there is a huge mortar shot and then the campanile bell starts ringing. There's a wonderful Charles Ives effect of the single bell tolling its "rintocchi", the Palio band playing and the drummers of each contrada. Poor Civetta are there but of course only with their parade horse. They don't perform the sbandierata, in protest at not being allowed to run.

Fedora Saura is typically sideways for Drago. Lupa has very sexy alfieri, one blonde, one brunette. Giove Deus is a bit out of control and goes right through the Tartucas and Dragos. Onda have only the parade horse: no Insomma. Istrice's horse is ahead of Pantera's.

Valdimontone enter the campo at 6.20pm, looking good. There are about 50,000 people in the campo. Of the non-competing contrade. Selva have the most amazing patterned tights. The Palio is hoisted into place. The first false start is at 8pm. Oca is always out of place. We don't get another start till 8.44 and that is false too. The third is two minutes later.

But at 8.50pm we are away. Tartuca wins.

We all meet up in Guidoriccio's for a really good meal "dopo Palio." There are a few tortoisises at the next table but we order a bottle of prosecco and drown our disappointment.

Montone must wait for the next Palio for a chance to win.