

The tribal horse race that turns Siena into a frenzied, partying mass of humanity is one of the great Tuscan experiences, says **Charlotte Ross**

**B** EING the first guest to check in to a new hotel is a risk. I've been to hotels during "soft launch" periods before and found doorknobs missing, wires protruding from walls and rooms fragrant with fresh paint. In a beautiful New York hotel I swam in a dreamlike sunken pool – after picking my way through a room full of saws, bricks and loose carpentry.

But bumping up the track towards Monastero dell'Ombrone, a tiny 11th-century village set in wooded countryside outside Siena, I had an ominous feeling. A rumble began to build until we turned the corner to meet several diggers, tractors and trucks, swarming with heavily sweating workmen.

Further up the hill our car stopped in front of the arched stone entrance to Castel Monastero, beyond which were visible pallets of bricks, flapping plastic sheets and a kind of orchestrated chaos involving smartly dressed Italians ordering around hordes of bare-chested men pushing wheelbarrows of cement.

We were ushered by sharp-suited, beautiful staff into the bar – which smelt faintly of fresh paint – and furnished with drinks and lunch, while we waited for our room to be finished. I pictured our bath being installed while we sipped, the bed assembled as we nibbled at mozzarella salad.

Yet before long we were pacing cool corridors paved with rose terracotta tiles towards the heavy wooden door of room 19. Inside was a thick walled, white-painted, wooden-shuttered haven – from the building work outside and, by the end of the day, the sky-splitting lightning and torrential rain that had marred the Tuscan summer, delaying the completion of our idyll.

That first evening's storm had the effect of washing away the newness and the dust from this 76-room rural retreat. The next morning we flung open our shutters onto a peaceful bricked courtyard, sun-dappled and laid out with cream linen parasols. In less than a day the chaos had been replaced with a pleasing sense of order.

The weather was fine, too, good enough to merit a dip in one of the three elegant black-and-white marble swimming baths set behind the fortified main building along a lavender-scented walkway. As I spread my towel out on a new sunlounger, feet sinking into grass apparently just laid, I was struck by the notion that elves had been in the night and fixed everything.

Perhaps they had, because it was 2 July, the day of the Palio, Siena's fiercely tribal horse race, and the real reason for my visit. Not only would we witness the race first hand, we had prime seats overlooking Piazza del Campo, the near perfectly preserved medieval square where the action takes place.

So several hours later, memories of the previous day's building site fast fading, I was standing in the window of a cool, frescoed apartment, champagne in one hand, canapé in the other, while the parade of flag-waving locals began below. Scanning the packed square, it was hard to spot a better vantage point.

Many prefer to be in the heart of the beast, among the mass of humanity that gathers from midday in the central piazza. But there are disadvantages –



## POWER OF THE PALIO

not least that you must go without proper food, drink or toilet facilities for up to nine hours. I was more than happy with our privileged position and constant supply of ham, olives and wine.

Below, the procession unfolded. First came horsemen, red plumes aflutter and swords glinting as they trotted solemnly at first, then broke into a fierce gallop, weapons brandished aggressively.

Next came the brightly costumed representatives of each contrada – the city's districts competing in the race – then flag bearers leaping and tossing their coloured silk penants high into the air with astonishing expertise. The palio, a painted silk banner awarded to the winning contrada, was borne almost biblically on a cart pulled by lumbering

white oxen. Finally came the beautiful young horses. Super-sleek, nervy and nimble, they are the focus of the Palio; it is the horse that is blessed in church before the race, and the horse that "wins" it, not the rider.

This ritual took hours, and by the time the horses were ridden bareback into the square by the silk pyjama-clad jockeys – tough nuts considered little more than hired mercenaries by the Siene – the sun was starting to fade.

What happens next is incomprehensible to most outsiders but it amounts to a period when the riders jockey for position at the starting line, resulting in false starts and much jeering from the crowd. Then, suddenly, the race is on, and the riders tear around the packed-

mud track, wielding their whips – made from dried ox penis – on both horse and other riders.

The race is fraught with danger – both horses and jockeys can be badly injured or killed, which is why the next race, in a fortnight, will be governed by stricter rules. It's over in a flash – 90 seconds on average. This year, no one is hurt. The crowd erupts from the central enclosure onto the racetrack as each local finds his contrada's horse and makes off to celebrate or commiserate in night-long street parties.

Wandering through the twisting cobbled streets afterwards, we were passed by groups of men high on triumph and local wine. We may have been witnessing a display of plain old drunken machismo but it was much more romantic to feel we were part of a centuries-old, bacchanalian ritual.

Back at Castel Monastero, all was peaceful, bar the odd downpour and thunder clap. But the storms just added

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to the strange drama of the place. Swallows circle wildly around, dipping and diving into the courtyard where we ate our dinner one night, candles flickering in the blue dusk. Through every window is a view of unspoilt woodland and in the solid stone walls a sense of history. There are tall arched windows, stepped stone walkways, heavy dark beams. In the day, the sound of cicadas and bird-song fills the air and butterflies flock around fragrant plants. Time does not so much stand still here as transport you back several centuries.

Of course, none of this rustic simplicity comes cheap – there's a lot of Russian and German money out here. A spa modelled on Harrods Urban Retreat will be finished next month, incorporating a VIP area where Premier League footballers and their cohorts won't feel out of place.

The fine dining restaurant has a menu by Gordon Ramsay – he is also hosting a Tuscan cookery programme there – and although a meal will cost upwards of €100 per person before wine, the food I tried was imaginative and beautifully prepared.

I left Castel Monastero with regret. I could have stayed for days, cocooned in thick cream drapery, fluffy towels and deep roll-top baths. Oh to be rich ...



**New dawn:** the luxurious Castel Monastero, in the hills near Siena, has spectacular views and a Gordon Ramsay restaurant

### WAY TO GO

#### THE FLIGHT

Meridiana flies daily from Gatwick to Florence, £160 return, [www.meridiana.it](http://www.meridiana.it)

#### THE HOTEL

Castel Monastero is 20 minutes' drive from Siena or an hour from Florence airport. Classic rooms from €392 B&B, [www.castelmonastero.com](http://www.castelmonastero.com)

#### THE PALIO

The next Palio takes place on 16 August. [www.ilpalio.org](http://www.ilpalio.org)

#### THE OFFER

Italia Collection offers three nights at Castel Monastero from £1,745 pp B&B, return flights to Pisa, Group A car hire, private transfer from Castel Monastero to Siena on the day of the Palio, reserved window seat on the San Martino Curve, champagne cocktail during the Palio and a gourmet dinner on the eve of the Palio at the Castel Monastero restaurant from a menu created by Gordon Ramsay. Italia Collection, [www.italia-holidays.co.uk](http://www.italia-holidays.co.uk)