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TRAVEL HISTORY CULTURE PEOPLE FOOD

ABRUZZISSIMO MAGAZINE

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HOLIDAY SPECIAL :

45 CHRISTMAS MARKETS AND PRESEPI IN ABRUZZO, FESTIVE RECIPES

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Villalago. Photo by Marino Baroncini. Read the story on page 5.

LEFT:

Villalago. Read the story on page 5. Photos by Anna Lebedeva.

ABRUZZISSIMO MAGAZINE

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The holiday season is fast approaching! Festive lights are already twinkling, Christmas markets have opened in many towns, and we have already had a good sprinkle of snow in the mountains. To help you make the most of this magical time, this issue of ABRUZZISSIMO includes a special supplement (free for our premium subscribers) featuring 45 of the best *mercatini di Natale* and *presepi viventi* in the region. We have also prepared a holiday guide with beautiful gifts made in Abruzzo and a special festive recipes section.

Have you visited **Villalago**? In my article on page 5, I'll take you to this fairytale-like town – just look at the cover photo made by Abruzzese photographer Marino Baroncini! Magical, isn't it? Here, you might catch sight of deer strolling peacefully through the streets and, if you are lucky, even spot a Marsican bear.

In the old days, Christmas celebrations were often accompanied by the cheerful sounds of the *calascione*, a humble string instrument popular in some mountain towns of Abruzzo. I had the privilege of meeting Flavio Camplone, the last *calascione* artisan, from **Caramanico Terme**. He also introduced me to other almost-forgotten traditional instruments (see page 12).

I'm working on editorial plans for next year and would love to hear your thoughts and ideas. If you have a couple of minutes, please take a moment to fill out this survey form.

This month, we are running a special Christmas promotion: buy a gift subscription for the Abruzzophile in your life and enjoy a €10 discount on your own subscription – whether it is a renewal or a new one. Visit our website for all the details. Feel like sending some holiday cheer our way? You can support the magazine with a holiday donation here.

The next issue of ABRUZZISSIMO will arrive in your inbox on February 5. In the meantime, I'll send you an email in January with the latest news and updates from Abruzzo.

Buon Natale!

Anna Lebedeva
Founder & Editor

Made in Abruzzo
HOLIDAY GIFT GUIDE

ABRUZZISSIMO Magazine has selected a range of unique ideas, from handmade ceramics and traditional liqueurs to gourmet foods, hand-crafted accordions, and jewellery. Whether it's a stocking filler or something more special, these gifts celebrate the best of Abruzzo.

ORGANETTO FROM TERAMO

A traditional Abruzzese *organetto* by **Della Noce**, handcrafted in **Teramo** would make for a truly special gift. Since 1925, Della Noce has been making accordions (also known as *dù bottë* in dialect) with fine materials like walnut, olive, or cherry wood. Lightweight, with bright red and blue bellows, these *organetti* are available in models for both beginners and professionals. Known worldwide for their exceptional sound and fine details, they're a real "note" above the rest! Orders can be placed online through the company's website.

ABRUZZO-INSPIRED JEWELLERY

Montaldi Gioielli has designed an Abruzzo-themed collection of 36 pendants and charms dedicated to Abruzzese emigrants around the world. Their "I Love Abruzzo" collection includes some of the region's most iconic symbols: a bulb of Sulmona's garlic, *arrosticino*, a blue heart-shaped pendant inspired by the stunning Lago di Scanno, the classic *presentosa*. The most recent addition, a suitcase charm, inscribed with "Toronto/New York," pays homage to the many emigrants who left Abruzzo for a new life across the globe. You can see the full collection on Montaldi Gioielli website.

HANDMADE CERAMICS

Patricia Fazzini's small shop in the centre of **Bisenti** is a treasure trove of hand-painted ceramic pieces created by her and her husband, Camillo. Here, you'll find lamps, plates, figurines, clocks, vases, and decorative plaques in a range of sizes to suit various budgets. A native of Castelli, a town renowned for its ceramics, Patricia embraces many traditional designs while also developing her own unique style, including some modern forms. She offers customisation in colour and design upon request and ships internationally. You can find her on Instagram and Facebook.

GIFT SUBSCRIPTION

This holiday season, you can not only treat someone special to the best of Abruzzo, but you'll also unwrap a €10 discount for your own subscription (renewal or new). You will get access to our premium content, 10 past issues, and perks like occasional exclusive discounts on tours, stays, and all things Abruzzo. ABRUZZISSIMO is a reader-supported publication, so every subscription helps. You, our valued subscribers, are the backbone of this publication, fuelling our passion to bring the best of Abruzzo to your inbox. See the details on our website.

Made in Abruzzo

GOURMET CURED MEATS

Costantini Slow, based in **Mosciano Sant'Angelo**, raises *maiale nero d'Abruzzo* (black pigs), a prized heritage breed known for its creamy fat, rich in omega-3 fatty acids from their outdoor foraging. Their festive gift boxes include *pancetta*, *ventricina*, sausages, and other *salumi*, all made without preservatives, gluten, or milk powders, and seasoned only with salt and, for some products, Montepulciano d'Abruzzo wine. For a luxurious gift, you can get their whole *prosciutto*, hand-salted and aged for at least 24 months. See their full range online. For worldwide shipping contact them by phone or via email.

A HUMOROUS TRIBUTE TO ABRUZZESE ROOTS

Is there a more Abruzzese question than *Di chi si lu fije*? (Whose son are you?)? If you've ever wandered through a small village in Abruzzo, you've probably been asked this by an elderly local, who assumed you were a child of an emigrant returning to reconnect with your roots. Now, you can wear this iconic question on a custom-made T-shirt designed by **Bruno Luca**, a young artist and printmaker from **Roccaspinalveti**. He creates beautiful images inspired by Abruzzo in his small workshop ZenoR. This humorous T-shirt can be made to order—just reach out to him via his Facebook page or website to get yours!

THE "MEDICINE" YOU'LL ACTUALLY WANT TO TAKE (AND GIFT)

Scuppoz, a renowned producer of quality liquors from **Campovalano di Campli**, offers a gift box with a touch of humour. The kit includes five traditional liquors: Ratafià, Liquorice, Genziana, Star Anise, and Amaro. Inspired by the local dialect saying, where after a hearty meal, the question "*la vuoi la medicina*?" ("Do you want the medicine?") refers to a digestif, **Scuppoz** has chosen vintage 1930s small medicine bottles for their packaging, adding a nostalgic touch to the gift. The kit arrives in a beautifully crafted wooden box. They also sell other gift boxes for mixology fans. See the full range in their online shop. For worldwide shipping contact them by phone or via email.

A SWEET TASTE OF TRADITION

The Iacovanelli family has been producing honey since the 19th century, and today, **ADI Apicoltura** is a family-run business based in **Tornareccio**, known as the honey capital of Abruzzo. Recognized as a pioneer of 100% Italian organic honey, with four generations of beekeeping expertise, **ADI** cares for 2,000 beehives. Their honey gift boxes offer a range of gourmet products, including linden, rosemary, citrus, and cherry blossom honey, as well as gourmet spreads and honey infused with truffles or saffron. You can select different varieties to pack in your gift box via their online shop, making it a perfect, personalised gift. For worldwide shipping contact them by phone or via email.

CHRISTMAS

IN ABRUZZO

OUR NEW E-BOOK

AVAILABLE HERE

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TRADITIONAL FESTIVE RECIPES

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CHRISTMAS MARKETS AND PRESEPI

VILLALAGO, WHERE DEER AND BEARS ROAM FREE

Text and photos by Anna Lebedeva

Even though nearly every village in Abruzzo boasts breathtaking vistas, Villalago stands in a league of its own. Sitting on the eastern slopes of the majestic Monte Argatone, it rises above three lakes — San Domenico, San Pio, and Scanno — and gazes over the dramatic Sagittario Valley, which cuts through the mountains.

ORIGINS

"Some scholars believe that Villalago was founded around the years 1087–1094," says Simone Lupi, vice president of the local cultural association *Antico Borgo*. "At that time, Saint Dominic Abbot, a Benedictine monk, arrived in the area and established the Monastery of San Pietro de Lacu, located two kilometres north of where the town is located today. The monastery not only served as a spiritual centre but also revitalised the local economy and

Photo: a male deer known in Villalago as Giorgetto with his harem and the town on the background. Photo by Marino Baroncini

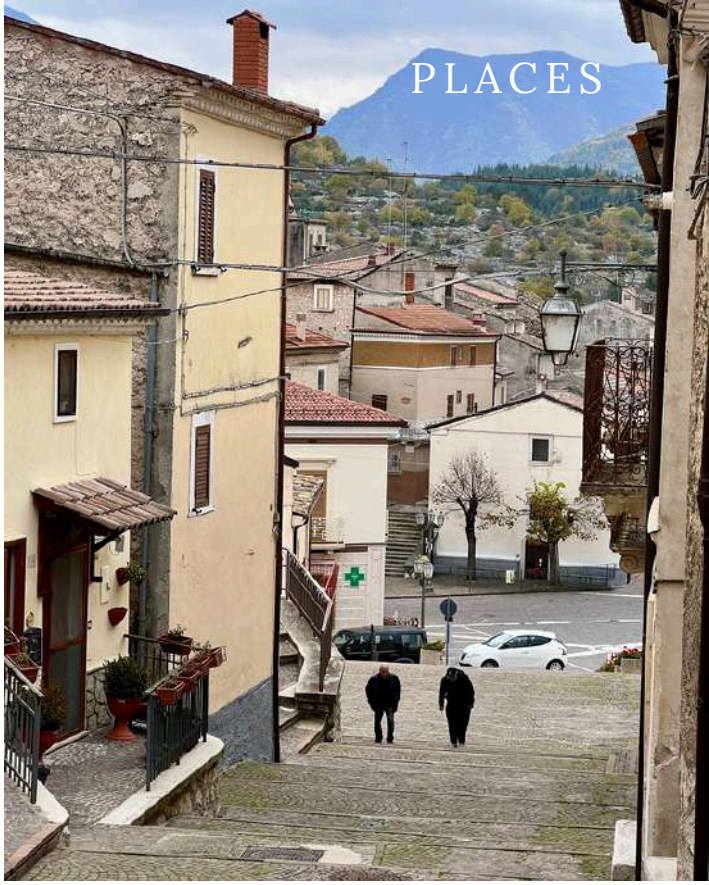
attracted families from neighbouring areas, laying the foundations for a thriving community. By the 13th century, these early settlers had begun forming the medieval village that would evolve into the heart of modern day Villalago."

Unlike many medieval settlements, the town developed a remarkable degree of autonomy. While feudal lords retained nominal ownership of the lands, Villalago's residents, led by a Camerlengo (the head of the local government), managed their own affairs, paying only a modest tax on specific properties for centuries. This independence fostered a strong sense of community and allowed the town to flourish. The 16th century chancery building where the government worked still stands in the heart of the town's old centre.

WILD NEIGHBOURS

The emigration of the 1950s and 1960s was devastating for the town as many families left in search of a better life. But there was a silver lining to this: during the years when the village stood half-empty, the depleted forests recovered, and nature

Photos: the old part of Villalago is all steps and mountain views



Photos: (from top clockwise) on the streets of Villalago; a mobile vendor on the main *piazza*

gradually overtook the fields that had been cultivated for many centuries. While the neighbouring town of Scanno saw a tourist boom in the 1970s-80s, Villalago also had a small share of visitors. It was starting to leverage its location in the vicinity of the Abruzzo, Lazio and Molise National Park. Shaping up its future as a destination for nature lovers it was setting an example of peaceful coexistence between humans and wildlife. “Over the years, we got used to Marsican bears and deer roaming the streets of Viallalago, close to the houses, drinking water from our public fountain or Lake Pio, which is only a few hundred metres from the main square,” says Simone Lupi. The town’s residents have embraced these animals, treating them more like neighbours than visitors. Even Christmas Nativities here include bears, while deer are painted on the altar of the main church.

Recently, Giorgetto, affectionately known as the King of Villalago — a magnificent male deer who has been visiting the town for years (in the photo on page 5) — caused concern when he appeared tired and limping. As in any small community where everyone looks out for one another, a few concerned locals notified the State Forestry Corps and requested a veterinarian. Thankfully, to everyone’s relief, Giorgetto seems to have recovered and has since been spotted near the town with his harem.

AMARENA AND THE CUBS

Four years ago, Villalgo was delighted to welcome new “wild neighbours.” A female Marsican bear, affectionately called Amarena, began frequenting the town with her four cubs – an unprecedented sight in the history of the national park,

where bears typically have just one or two cubs. They peacefully strolled on the central piazza and climbed the town's trees to gorge on juicy cherries and apples, while adoring locals watched from a safe distance. The news about the bear family spread quickly across social media, attracting droves of tourists, photographers, and videographers to Villalago. To protect the wellbeing of the animals, the mayor had to close several roads in the town. While the tourist crowds proved overwhelming and potentially dangerous for the wildlife, the attention brought the village international fame and gave a significant boost to the local economy. "In these years, the town has made remarkable progress in terms of tourism. In 2019, there were only three B&Bs, but now there we have 12, and the hotel located in the main square has also reopened," says Lupi and adds that it is a well-functioning community with many services, not only for visitors: "Despite having a population of just 450 residents, we have a pharmacy, a doctor, nurses, and even a small electronics factory where some young people from Villalago work."

DELICATE BALANCE

Amarena, the beloved Marsican bear, was tragically killed a year ago while roaming in a different area (read more here), but Villalago still remembers her: at the town's entrance, a mural was created honouring Amarena and her cubs,

The mural in Villalago depicting Amarena and her four cubs

while more than 60 fruit trees — apple, pear, cherry — have been planted on a mountain slope outside the town to provide a food source for the bears in the coming years.

As Giorgetto continues to reign over the cobbled streets and Amarena's story draws nature lovers from afar, Villalago shows how, by protecting their heritage and environment, small towns in Abruzzo can create something extraordinary. The growing attention has provided much-needed support for the local economy, helping the town to sustain its small community. Yet, this harmony is not without challenges; the influx of visitors, drawn by the town's natural wonders, raises questions about how to embrace tourism without disturbing the delicate balance of wildlife that defines Villalago's charm.

WHAT TO DO AND SEE IN VILLALAGO

EXPLORE THE OLD TOWN

From Piazza Celestino Lupi, a long sweeping stairway will take you to the oldest part of the town to see its narrow streets, arches, tiny *piazze*, medieval towers, and ancient churches. On the right side, just above the main piazza, stands the **Chiesa della Madonna di Loreto**, built in the 14th century. The minor altar, on the right, is dedicated to Saint Dominic, with a relic that is believed to be a fragment of his wooden bed (*giaciglio*). To see the 16th century municipality, the town's first, climb more steps along Via R. Galante (on Google maps it is marked as "**Vecchio municipio**").

On Via Giuseppe Gentile, you can see a beautiful old arch immortalised in one of M.C. Escher's lithographs (enter **Arco di Escher** in Google Maps to find it). The renowned Dutch graphic artist visited Villalago in 1929-30 and drew a lot of inspiration from its architecture.

On Via V.Buccini, tucked away between houses, stands the ancient **Chiesetta di San Michele Arcangelo** (use Google maps if you can't locate it). One of the town's oldest churches, it was built in the 11th century by the Lombards and, above the portal, has the original lunette featuring Christ Pantocrator with the "Book of Life."

Be sure to stop by the Torre Civica, a medieval tower, and enjoy the stunning view from its small belvedere. From here, you can take in the breathtaking panorama of Lake San Domenico, the Sagittario Valley, and the surrounding majestic mountains.

WATCH DEER

If you arrive in Villalago early morning or at sunset on a weekday when it is quieter, you are likely to spot deer on the outskirts of the town or on the shores of **Lake Pio**. They are also often seen in the small park on Via Roma, at the *Monumento ai Caduti* memorial, or in the meadows below the town. Remember, they are wild animals, so it is important to keep a safe distance and avoid feeding them.

VISIT THE MUSEUMS

The cultural association *Antico Borgo* manages several fascinating museums. The **Museo delle Acque** showcases the traditional trades and crafts of the past that were closely tied to the lakes and the River Sagittario. The **Casa Rurale** in the medieval tower offers a recreated 19th-century peasant house complete with a kitchen, bedroom, and wood-fired bread oven, providing insight into the daily life of Villalago's past inhabitants. An 11th-century, fully functioning water mill, **Antico Mulino ad Acqua**, is another major attraction, drawing many visitors each year. The association also manages a library with over 6,000 volumes. The museums are open daily during the summer months. In the off-season, please contact the association via their Facebook page or at 0039 347 8430181 (address: Via di Paolo Fiorino, 13).

Photos: (from top) Chiesa della Madonna di Loreto; Arco di Escher

Photos: (above) a medieval tower; the view from the tower with Lake San Domenico at a distance

ENJOY LOCAL FESTIVALS

On January 21, Villalago celebrates San Domenico Abate with *fanoglie*, big bonfires lit to the sound of church bells in several squares around the town. Following the Vespers and a blessing by the parish priest, the community gathers around the flames to celebrate with families and neighbours. There is also a grand *fanoglia* lit on the town's main square for the visitors on January 22.

The *Festa Patronale di San Domenico Abate* is celebrated on August 21-22. Pilgrims from the town of Fornelli (in Molise) embark on a three-day journey to reach Villalago, where they are warmly welcomed by the local community. The festival commemorates the canonization of Saint Dominic, and the arrival of the pilgrims is a moving occasion, marked by traditional songs and prayers. As bells ring out, the pilgrims enter the church on their knees, singing devotional hymns.

Another big festival, *La Rievocazione del Matrimonio Antico Villalaghese* (the Re-enactment of the Ancient Villalaghese Wedding) takes place in August. Local couples dressed in traditional costumes walk in a procession through the historic centre that culminates in a final festive dance in the central piazza.

On the first Saturday of September, a night-time solemn torchlit procession walks along the town's streets in honour of the Madonna Addolorata.

For more details about the festivals and events check out the ProLoco page.

WALK TO LAGO DI SAN DOMENICO FOR A PICNIC

While most tourists try to find a parking spot on an anxiety-inducing narrow road beside Lake San Domenico, you can park in Villalago and take the trail from **Piazzetta Arapezzana**. The walk takes about 30 minutes, leading you through a forest down to the lake, with several observation points offering breathtaking vistas. After visiting the hermitage (for more, see below), you can grab a coffee at **Il Chioschetto San Domenico** and enjoy a picnic at one of the tables in the shade of the trees, watching ducks paddle gently in the lake.

EREMO DI SAN DOMENICO

The Hermitage of San Domenico has a long and evolving history, closely tied to the landscape and the lives of those who tended to it. Tradition holds that Saint Dominic of Sora, a Benedictine monk, lived in a limestone cave here around the year 1000. Initially residing at the nearby monastery of San Pietro de Lacu, now lost, he eventually moved to this secluded location.

Known for his miracles, Saint Dominic is said to have tamed a wolf that had taken a child and cured a girl bitten by a snake in the nearby town of Cocullo (to this day, a procession in his honour takes place there, featuring his statue draped with live snakes). The cave where he dwelled became a sacred site, and the hermitage was constructed in the 15th century as devotion to the saint grew, but it wasn't until the 17th century that the sanctuary began to take on its present form.

The hermitage has undergone several transformations over the centuries. Before the construction of the dam in 1928, it was accessible by a medieval bridge. The dam, built to create an artificial lake for the Anversa degli Abruzzi hydroelectric plant, necessitated significant changes. Portions of the original site were submerged, and the surrounding landscape was altered. A new faux-medieval stone bridge replaced the old structure (it is still visible under the modern bridge), and the hermitage's façade was redesigned to accommodate its new setting.

A small community of hermits lived at the sanctuary over the centuries. By the 19th century, they lived under a simple rule, dedicating their lives to prayer, solitude, and the upkeep of the site. Their days were structured around pious routines, including reciting the rosary and caring for the hermitage's cave, portico, and church. A small garden provided sustenance and added a touch of greenery to the otherwise stark landscape. The hermits were also responsible for welcoming numerous pilgrims.

The sanctuary's interior underwent changes as well. The original 18th-century paintings in the portico, which depicted scenes from the saint's life, were replaced in 1938 by the current paintings.

Inside the church, to the left of the altar, up a steep set of steps, is a cave that is believed to have been Saint Dominic's original cell and can still be visited today.

Photos: (below) Eremo di San Domenico; Saint Dominic's cell

THE LAST CALASCIONE MAKER OF CARAMANICO TERME

By Anna Lebedeva

An artisan in Caramanico Terme (PE) restores and crafts almost-forgotten instruments that harken back to older generations. His work ensures that the sounds of Abruzzo's musical heritage live on. I went to meet him to learn about the rare craft.

Flavio Camplone is 86 years old, yet he climbs the steep steps as quickly as I do, even though I am a good few decades younger. We are in Caramanico Terme, heading to the small house that his father bought in 1950 and where Flavio now has his workshop. Chisels, pieces of wood, plastic pipes, and scraps of leather fill up a tiny space beside the house. This is where Flavio makes traditional instruments that older generations of Abruzzese people fondly remember from their youth:

Flavio Camplone holding a *calascione* he made

lor certainly came in handy, as some of the instruments, despite their seeming simplicity,

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