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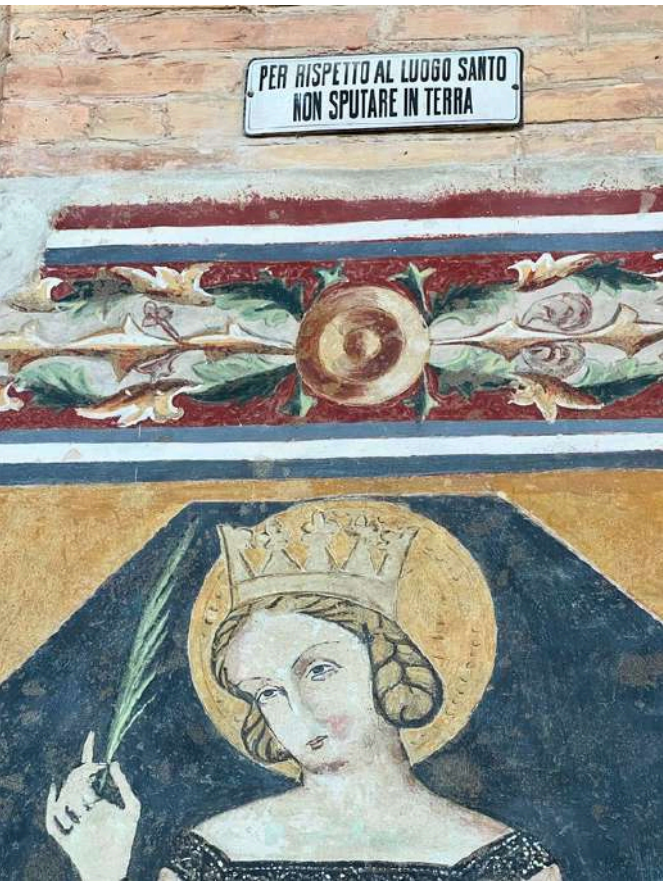
TRAVEL HISTORY CULTURE PEOPLE FOOD

# ABRUZZISSIMO MAGAZINE

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ON THE COVER:

Il Duomo di Atri, or Basilica di Santa Maria Assunta. Photo via StockAdobe. Read the story on page 15.

LEFT:

Atri. Photos by Anna Lebedeva. Read the story on page 15.

ABRUZZISSIMO MAGAZINE

www.abruzzissimo.com
editor@abruzzissimo.com

EDITOR & PUBLISHER
Anna Lebedeva
editor@abruzzissimo.com

COPY EDITOR
Linda Dini Jenkins

CONTRIBUTORS

Antonio Bini
Eleonora Moreschini
Linda Dini Jenkins
Teresa Mastrobuono
Anna Swann

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# Editor's Note

We're back from our summer break with a slightly longer issue packed with fresh stories. August has slipped away, and Abruzzo's small towns are growing quieter as families and holidaymakers head home. Yet some, held fast by the region's spell, decide to stay. That feeling is echoed in the growing interest from property buyers, with Abruzzo drawing attention from Milan and abroad. Recent statistics even place **Atri (TE)** at the top of the list (see page 3). But our focus on Atri this month isn't just because of the record property sales. With nearly three thousand years of history, remarkable landmarks and outstanding food, it's a town worth exploring. Read about it in our main feature Walking Through Time in Atri on page 15 and in our mini-guide for foodies on page 29.

In this issue, we look at the history of Campo 78 in **Sulmona (AQ)**, a prisoner-of-war camp that remained in use through both world wars. A major funding has recently been allocated to restore and redevelop the site, and we hope that it will soon be easier to visit for people from around the world.

Almost every household in Abruzzo once had a *coperta abruzzese* – a colourful traditional blanket. Many families still treasure them as keepsakes from their nonnas. What was once a thriving industry sustaining entire towns has almost vanished, with wool mills swept away by globalisation. We explore the tradition of the *coperte abruzzesi* on page 9. Do you have one passed down from your mother or grandmother? I'd love to hear from you at editor@abruzzissimo.com, as we're launching a photo project to remember the vanished industry and the family heirlooms it left behind.

Enjoy the September issue!

**Anna Lebedeva**
**Founder & Editor**

# DIGEST OF RECENT REGIONAL NEWS AND UPCOMING EVENTS FROM ABRUZZO NEWSPAPERS

## CONTROVERSIAL GAS PROJECT AT LAKE BOMBA

The Ministry of Environment has given the green light to LnEnergy, an Italian private energy company, to tap into Italy's largest onshore undeveloped gas field beneath **Lake Bomba (CH)** in the Collesanto area. The reserves are said to match the entire Abruzzo region's yearly gas needs.

But the decision has sparked a storm: Legambiente, WWF Abruzzo, and the municipality of Paglieta condemn the move as dangerous for a seismically fragile area, recalling past rejections of the same project. LnEnergy, meanwhile, insists it's sustainable and low-emission.

## ABRUZZO STARTS TO ATTRACT TOURISTS YEAR-ROUND

Abruzzo welcomed 474,081 tourists from January to May 2025, up 5.6% from the same period in 2024, with visitors staying longer, reaching 1,370,044 nights in total, a 20.4% rise, according to the **Abruzzo Regional Tourism Report**. Growth extends beyond seaside destinations, with more visitors exploring cities, national parks, and mountain areas, reflecting a shift toward year-round tourism. New flight connections and the summer campaign are boosting arrivals, while B&Bs and other small accommodations are expanding. The report didn't include summer statistics, but it looks like Abruzzo might have had a record-breaking season.

## ATRI TOPS INTERNATIONAL BUYERS' LIST IN ABRUZZO

**Atri (TE**) is the most sought-after destination for foreign property buyers in Abruzzo, according to Gate-away.com's 2025 report. Buyers are drawn to Atri for its winding historic streets, timeless charm, and sweeping views of the Adriatic. Other rising hotspots include **Fraine (CH)**, **Castelvecchio Subequo (AQ)**, **Roccaspinalveti (CH)**, and **Penne (PE)**. Independent and country homes are the most popular, with average prices around €159,000. Buyers come mainly from the USA (27%), the UK (19%), and Germany (6%), with growing interest from Sweden, France, and the Netherlands.

## GROCERY PRICES HIGHEST IN PESCARA

Shopping is costing more, and **Pescara** leads the region in price increases, according to Federconsumatori. From 2022 to 2025, the average cost of groceries rose 18.3%, with some items up over 50%. A complete daily meal now costs €5.54 per person, up from €4.68, translating to around €660 monthly for a family of four. More than 55% of Abruzzo taxpayers earn under €20,000 annually, nearly a quarter live on less than €7,500, and the middle class is shrinking, making rising food costs increasingly unsustainable.

## ABRUZZO FEELS THE BITE OF NEW US TARIFFS

Abruzzo could take a hit from the new 15% US tariffs, with almost one in six of its exports heading across the Atlantic — well above Italy's 10% average. The region's pharmaceutical industry leads the way, making up 57% of this trade, followed by electronics, food, and machinery. In 2024, Abruzzo shipped over €1.6 billion to the US, with **L'Aquila** and **Chieti** contributing €1.13 billion and €291 million. While a big slice of Abruzzo's exports goes across the Atlantic, most of Italy's US-bound shipments come from Lombardy, Emilia-Romagna, and Tuscany.

## HONEY FESTIVAL IN TORNARECCIO

On September 27–28, **Tornareccio (CH)** transforms into a buzzing hub for *Tornareccio Regina di Miele*, a two-day festival celebrating honey and local specialties. The historic streets fill with stalls offering tastings and products crafted by local producers, from sweets and cosmetics to award-winning honeys. The town has earned the title of Abruzzo's honey capital as it is home to some of Italy's finest honey, produced by skilled local beekeepers. While there, you can explore the town's open-air gallery of beautiful bee- and honey-themed mosaics on the buildings. The full programme is available on the event's *page*.

# DID YOU KNOW?

## THE WORLD'S LARGEST UNDERGROUND LAB BENEATH GRAN SASSO

Shielded by over 1,400 metres of mountain rock, between L'Aquila and Teramo, lies the world's largest and most advanced underground research facility: the Gran Sasso National Laboratory (LNGS).

Carved into the flank of the 10 km long *Traforo del Gran Sasso* motorway tunnel (read more about it in the July-August issue), the laboratories operate under constant rock cover to shield delicate experiments from cosmic radiation.

Funded by Italy's National Institute for Nuclear Physics (INFN), the labs were conceived in 1979 by physicist Antonino Zichichi. Excavation began in 1982, leading to the construction of three vast experimental halls, each the size of a cathedral. Inside, scientists from 30 countries work on around 20 high-precision experiments in astroparticle physics and nuclear astrophysics (solar and supernova neutrinos, dark matter particles, and rare nuclear reactions).

There are three main barrel vaulted experimental halls, each approximately 20 m wide, 18 m tall, and 100 m long. Despite the near-freezing natural temperature and high humidity of the Gran Sasso massif, the research spaces are carefully insulated and ventilated, drawing in 35,000 cubic metres of fresh air every hour.

Thanks to the low levels of natural radioactivity in the rock, this subterranean environment allows researchers to investigate phenomena otherwise impossible to detect at the surface.

For more details see the LNGS' website.

# WARTIME MEMORIES OF SULMONA'S CAMPO78

By Linda Dini Jenkins

**There are places that leave an indelible mark on a people's history and cultural memory. Located just on the outskirts of Sulmona in an area called Fonte D'Amore, the prisoner-of-war camp known as Campo78 is one such place. It lies at the foot of Mount Morrone, not far from what would later become the Gustav Line during the Second World War.**

Campo PG 78 (for *prigioneri di guerra*) was a prisoner of war camp that, at its peak, held more than 3,000 people and was in service throughout the two world wars. Its construction dates back to the early months of 1916, when it was established to house prisoners from the first World War (1915 – 1918). According to Carmine Di Benedetto, president of the *Associazione Culturale Una Foundazione per il Morrone*, it was built there because it was very far from the front lines. "When the prisoners tried to escape, it was difficult to reach their allies or rejoin their armies," he says.

Of the 108 internment camps scattered across Italy, this one in Sulmona was assigned the number 78. It was one of the largest and, during World War I, housed Hungarian prisoners who were put to work reforesting the Morrone, tending fields, and helping to rebuild wells that supplied drinking water to the former Celestinian abbey (the Abbey of Santo Spirito al Morrone) and the surrounding homes.

**Photo: Archive photo of Campo78 in Fonte D'Amore, Sulmona**

Conditions for the prisoners in that period were harsh. The Spanish flu epidemic in 1918-1920 claimed the lives of more than 400 prisoners held here — their remains now rest in a solemn ossuary within the walls of Sulmona's cemetery.

## WAR, AGAIN

After World War I, the site had various uses, but some 20 years later, Campo 78 was once again operated as a prison, this time during World War II. Between 1940 and 1943, most of those held at Fonte d'Amore were now Allied soldiers — mainly British, American, and ANZAC fighters — who had been captured in the North Africa campaigns. Rows of long, skinny barrack buildings contained bunk beds stacked three bunks high — up to 100 in each building. Despite being a prisoner-of-war camp, Campo 78 was remembered by many as one of the more decent camps in Italy. "Living conditions were better here than in many other camps," says Carmine Di Benedetto, who notes that the association has collected some letters written by former prisoners describing life inside. Rations consisted of soup and bread, with cheese and fruit (in season) provided by the locals, augmented by deliveries from the Red Cross. In the camp, there was a small library, a theatre, a band, and even a handwritten English-language newspaper produced by a group of prisoners.

Among the activities recorded in the newspaper — now faded but partially legible — was football. "There was a football pitch where they played. Some well-known English footballers were among the prisoners," continues Di Benedetto. A faint mark of a football is still visible on one of the barracks walls. There are also drawings and graffiti left by thousands of men, in some cases still bearing names, national crests, and battalion insignia.

John Esmond Fox, writing in his memoir, *Spaghetti and Barbed Wire*, recalls, "The front of the camp was typical barracks style, with guard posts and offices . . . Now we were truly enclosed — by high walls and higher mountains, watched by armed guards in towers. There was a certain inevitability, and most of us resigned ourselves to spending the duration of the war there."

**Campo78 during World War II. Photo courtesy of *Una Fondazione per il Morrone*/Facebook**

He managed to escape the camp and was hidden by the Silvestri family in the hamlet of Cantone. In January 1944, he crossed the snow-covered Guado di Coccia and reached Casoli, where the Allies were stationed. Looking back years later, he mused, "It's strange how men from such different backgrounds — languages, beliefs, customs, races — imprisoned together by some cruel twist of fate, stripped of identity and reduced to the bare fact of their humanity, could cast aside pride and prejudice to form bonds of friendship, to find purpose and struggle against a common enemy. I believe that this is something that can only truly be experienced, sadly, under such grim circumstances. What a miracle it would be if this same camaraderie, this esprit de corps — call it what you will — could exist in everyday life. The world would be a step closer to the utopia we dream of."

## HUMANITARIAN RESISTANCE

In his book *Escape from Sulmona*, Donald I. Jones — who was himself held as a prisoner at Campo 78 — recounts his experiences of life in the camp and his eventual escape: "The camp was … surrounded by a high stone wall. As if that weren't enough, the Italian authorities had cemented shards of broken glass along the top and added two tall barbed-wire fences along the perimeter... [It] was divided into five sections: one for officers, one for sergeants, and the other three for the ranks... Thanks to the regular delivery of Red Cross parcels supplementing the [understandably] meagre Italian rations, we managed to stay in good health between October 1942 and September 1943." Jones eventually escaped the camp and, after months of wandering across Abruzzo — from the slopes of the Gran Sasso to the villages of the Tirino Valley — rejoined the Allied army.

It was from Campo 78, after the armistice of 8 September 1943, that many prisoners and others persecuted by the Fascist regime began their escape toward freedom. With the Italian government near collapse, there were rumours that the camp was about to be evacuated and, one morning, the prisoners awoke to find the Italian guards had deserted them. Prisoners in other camps had been given a "Stay put" order, but at Campo 78 it was, "Every man for himself." And so many of them fled, hoping to reach Allied lines and seeking temporary refuge in the villages of the Valle Peligna. "Families in Sulmona, Introdacqua, Pacentro and other nearby villages took in escapees, fed and clothed them, risking their lives

**Campo78 during World War II**

to help them evade recapture," says Carmine Di Benedetto. "Local partisans accompanied prisoners across the Gustav Line to join the Allied army. This clandestine effort was called here *resistenza umanitaria* — humanitarian resistance."

Once the German troops took over camp surveillance from the Italians, they quickly began reprisals and roundups against the many local civilians who helped the fugitives.

One morning in October 1943, German troops stormed the prison of the Abbey of Santo Spirito al Morrone and deported nearly 400 detainees to the Dachau concentration camp, aided by local Fascist authorities. From there, many were sent on to other Nazi camps across Europe. For the hardships it endured and the acts of courage carried out by its citizens the city of Sulmona was later awarded the Silver Medal for Military Valour by the Italian government.

## PRESERVING THE CAMP

For many years, Campo 78 stood in neglect, its barracks crumbling and overgrown. Yet the site continues to draw children and families of former prisoners from all over the world. The volunteers of the *Una Fondazione per il Morrone* guide them through the camp and those visits stir memory and emotion. "When we accompany these visitors, we get emotional hearing their stories," says Di Benedetto. One such moment unfolded recently, when the son of a former prisoner visited the camp and spoke to a local school group.

He shared how, after escaping in September 1943, his father was helped by a shepherd who gave him food and civilian clothes. “Now, every year on the 8th of September, the day of the armistice, the family honours that event by eating tomatoes and grapes — the food the shepherd gave his father, which helped him survive.”

In 2020, Campo78 was demilitarised as a prison camp and transferred from Defence Ministry control to the municipality of Sulmona. €950,000 have been allocated for a project to restore and redevelop the site, transforming it into a museum dedicated to prisoner-of-war and internment camps — a memorial park that will be accessible and open to visitors. “Currently, one of the barracks with the historic graffiti has already been restored,” explains Di Benedetto. “Several others remain in a state of disrepair and are structurally unsafe. Our association continues calling to move ahead with the restoration.”

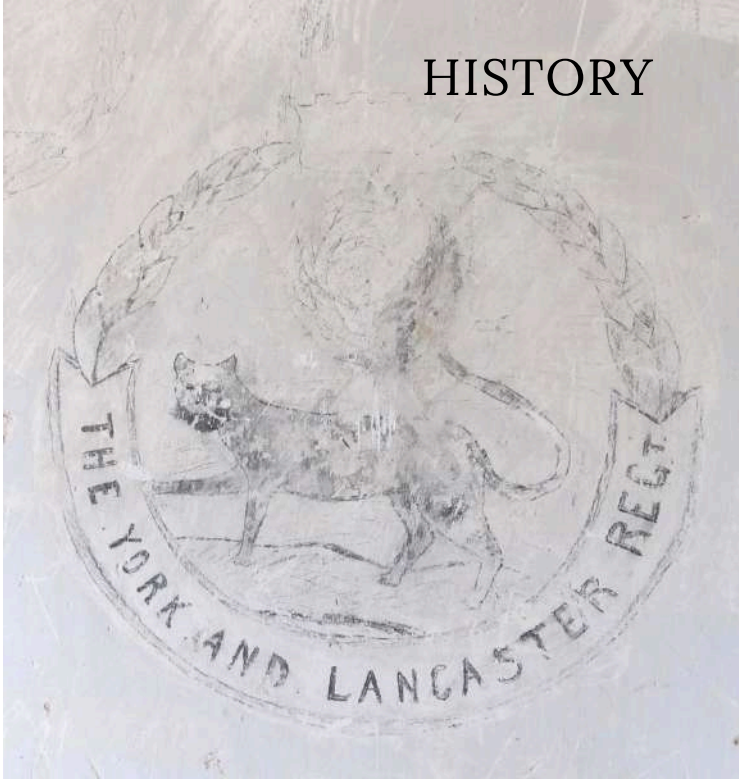
Many, many stories have come out of the Campo 78 chapter of World War II, including a video from American television (A&E in 2019) which provides interviews of some of the British and Commonwealth survivors, as well as an Italian woman who helped to shelter them.

**IF YOU GO**

Guided visits to Campo 78 in English can be arranged through the Comune di Sulmona or by sending a WhatsApp message (please, no calls) to Carmine Di Benedetto at 0039 3404741106. Be sure to allow plenty of time in advance to organise your visit. Follow *Una Foundazione per il Morrone* on Facebook for updates.

Every April, the *Associazione Culturale Il Sentiero della Libertà – Freedom Trail* organises a three-day trek along a 60-kilometre route through the Majella mountains. The trail follows the historic escape route taken by thousands of Allied prisoners and Italians after the armistice of 8 September 1943. You can take part in the organised group walk or explore the Freedom Trail independently (see description and technical details here).

**Photos: (from top) graffiti on the walls in the camp; some of the barracks today. Photos by Linda Dini Jenkins**





# THE WOVEN HERITAGE OF COPERTE ABRUZZESI

**I discovered my first traditional blanket made in Abruzzo, *coperta abruzzese*, in my grandmother's house. It was folded away in a chest, a heavy blanket with its design mirrored on both sides. This chance encounter became the starting point for my thesis at the Accademia Costume e Moda in Rome, and for a small clothing collection I later created using old *coperte abruzzesi* that I found in markets, shops, and private homes.**

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