

TRAVEL HISTORY CULTURE PEOPLE FOOD

ABRUZZISSIMO MAGAZINE



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ON THE COVER:

Gessopalena. Photos by Anna Lebedeva. Read the story on page 9.

LEFT:

Gessopalena. Photos by Anna Lebedeva. Read the story on page 9.

ABRUZZISSIMO MAGAZINE

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Editor's Note

We are starting the year with two new sections in the magazine: *L'Aquila 2026* and *Speaking Abruzzese*.

This year **L'Aquila** has been chosen as Italian Capital of Culture 2026. The city's historic centre ranks sixth in Italy for the number of monuments within its old walls, and yet the city remains little known outside Italy. In each issue we will talk about the city, its history, people, and distinctive culture. In this issue, we begin with Angelo De Nicola's article on what makes **L'Aquila** unique, along with an overview of the city's year-long cultural programme.

Our new column, *Speaking Abruzzese*, will explore dialect words, phrases, and the traditions behind them. One in ten Abruzzese still speaks dialect at home, so it is far from a dead language, and the success of our first ABRUZZISSIMO webinar – with more than 60 of you attending and many of you sending emails to thank us – has shown that those who love Abruzzo want to know more about the local vernacular.

The webinar also made me realise there is a desire within our community to connect beyond the PDF issues we send ten times a year. You want more frequent interaction and the chance to exchange stories and experiences with other Abruzzo-loving souls. We will do our best to make that happen.

In each issue we continue to bring you closer to the region itself. This month, we visit **Gessopalena (CH)** the town built on shining gypsum rocks, where the ruins of its historic centre have been preserved and transformed into an open-air museum.

ABRUZZISSIMO loves shining a light on local traditions that rarely reach beyond their towns, and in this issue we travel to **Scontrone (AQ)** and **Alfedena (AQ)** to explore unusual rites held in honour of the pagan goddess Dea Pomona.

As it is the Carnival time in Abruzzo, we share two traditional recipes for fried desserts (have you heard of *le loffe di Sant'Omero?*). Do you have a family recipe you would like to share? Send it to us at editor@abruzzissimo.com

Anna Lebedeva
Founder & Editor

DIGEST OF RECENT REGIONAL NEWS AND UPCOMING EVENTS FROM ABRUZZO NEWSPAPERS



MUNDA RETURNS HOME

After 16 years following the 2009 earthquake, the **Museo Nazionale d'Abruzzo (MuNDA)** returns to its home in L'Aquila's 15-century castle, Forte Spagnolo, where it was first opened in 1951. Over 7,000 people visited the museum in its first month after reopening. Partially reopened, the museum offers a modern, chronologically arranged journey through medieval to 16-century art, enriched with immersive installations and glass-printed floors mapping the city's history. Works are safeguarded by seismic and anti-vibration systems, while new technologies enhance storytelling and accessibility. The remaining collections, including archaeology and later art, will return by 2027.

ONE OF THE HOTTEST, DRIEST YEARS ON RECORD

A recent report by Cetemps, the University of L'Aquila's Centre for Climate and Environmental Studies, shows that 2025 was the fourth hottest year in Abruzzo since 1974, with temperatures averaging 1°C above the 1991–2020 reference period. Rainfall was 8% below normal, making it the 22nd driest year on record. Extremes included Campotosto at +2.0°C and Castel del Monte with 59% less rainfall.

LOVE IN THE HIGH PASTURES – WEBINAR

The first event in our ABRUZZISSIMO webinar series – *Di chi se fije?* – was a great success, with more than 60 participants exploring the rich world of Abruzzese dialects. We were especially grateful for the many messages thanking the magazine and our speaker, Barbara Summa, and sharing how much you enjoyed the session.

Our next webinar, *Romance and Rituals in the Times of Transumanza*, will take place on February 14 and will feature dialect love expressions, songs, and romantic traditions. We will be sending the link to the virtual meeting room in the coming days.

Have an idea for a session or want to collaborate as a host? Reach out to us at editor@abruzzissimo.com.



BUCCHIANICO DEMOLISHES DECADES-OLD EYESORE

Bucchianico (CH) has finally said goodbye to the notorious "Palazzaccio," a 1970s building erected on the site of the historic Palazzo Caracciolo. Intended as a hospital, it never opened and stood decaying for decades, disrupting the style of Piazza San Camillo de Lellis. A new building (rendered in the photo), designed to resemble the original Palazzo Caracciolo, will replace it and host socio-cultural and administrative offices. The project will restore the piazza's historic character, reopen views of the surrounding hills, and make it once again one of Abruzzo's most beautiful squares.

ABRUZZO EXPORTS SURGE

A recent report summarising last year's performance shows Abruzzo's exports rose 9% year-on-year, surpassing €7.8 billion and accounting for 1.6% of Italy's total. The province of L'Aquila led growth with a 51% jump, reaching €2.2 billion, largely driven by pharmaceuticals to the US, which make up 81% of its exports. While the automotive industry, once a regional export driver, has declined sharply, chemical and pharmaceutical products are now propelling Abruzzo to the top ranks nationally.



CARNIVAL IN CITTÀ SANT'ANGELO

Città Sant'Angelo (PE) is gearing up for the 28th edition of **Carnevale 'Ndirucce**, one of Abruzzo's most iconic carnival events. Running from 15–17 February 2026, the festival turns the historic centre into an open-air stage, where nine *contrade* compete with parades, street theatre, and satirical performances. This year's theme, "Facci ridere!", celebrates the liberating power of laughter, blending classic and contemporary comic characters. Read more about the famous Carnival on [ABRUZZISSIMO website](#).

In [this round-up](#) you can learn about other Carnival celebrations around the region.

DID YOU KNOW?



THE GHOSTS OF CRECCHIO CASTLE

The **Castle of Crecchio**, rising above the town in the province of Chieti, dates to the Norman–Swabian period, between the 11th and 12th centuries. Little is known about its origins, but historians believe it was built around an earlier watchtower known as the Torre dell'Ulivo, from which the original fortification developed, guarding this part of Abruzzo against incursions from the coast. Over time, additional towers, walls, and Gothic-style interiors were added, particularly during the 15th century.

Alongside its historical evolution, the castle is also known for its legends. According to one story, before the noble De Riseis family turned the fortress into a residence in the 18th century, a ruthless lord ruled the area with cruelty, executing his enemies atop the watchtower. Locals say the souls of his victims never left. Some people who have climbed the 55 stone steps leading to the ancient Torre dell'Ulivo claim to have heard muffled cries from within the walls and felt an unseen presence just behind them. Visitors have also reported the sound of heavy footsteps followed by the clinking of metal, and occasional sightings of a silent, beautiful woman moving swiftly through the upper floors. Others swear that on still nights, the shadows of the De Riseis family themselves move across the walls, repeating scenes from their earthly lives.

Since 1995, the Castle of Crecchio has housed the [Museum of Byzantine and Early Medieval Abruzzo](#). Its two floors display artefacts unearthed in the surrounding area, along with a permanent exhibition on the Etruscans in Abruzzo and a section devoted to the castle's own history.



L'AQUILA ITALIAN CAPITAL OF CULTURE 2026: A CITY OF REBIRTH AND FORGIVENESS

Angelo De Nicola (in conversation with Anna Lebedeva)

L'Aquila has always defined itself through culture, but its designation as Italian Capital of Culture 2026 arrives not as a celebration of a finished story, but as an invitation to understand a city still shaping its future.

As someone who was born in L'Aquila and has lived here all my life, I, like many other Aquilani, feel proud that my city has received the title of Italian Capital of Culture 2026. It is a recognition of the immense efforts made since the devastating earthquake of 2009, and at the same time a tremendous opportunity to show the world what L'Aquila has to offer.

What sets L'Aquila apart from other cities that have held this title? Italy is rich in beautiful cities, each with its own heritage, yet L'Aquila remains less known internationally despite its extraordinary artistic and architectural wealth. Its historic centre ranks sixth in Italy for the number of monuments within its old walls, a figure that is remarkable even by international standards and gives the city a cultural weight far greater than its visibility might suggest.

Photos: the Italian Capital of Culture inauguration event in L'Aquila. Photo courtesy of L'Aquila 2026/Facebook

REBUILT FOR THE FUTURE

The city's most distinctive trait is its almost miraculous rebirth. Its medieval centre was rebuilt after the earthquake to modern seismic standards. Seventeen years have passed since the earthquake, and the scale of what has been done is staggering. Private reconstruction is nearly complete – around 93 percent of homes have been restored.

Public reconstruction, however, lags far behind, largely due to bureaucratic hurdles and legal disputes. Only about 40 percent of public buildings have been rebuilt. Large parts remain unfinished: all the churches in the centre are still to be rebuilt, and none of the public schools in the historic core have been restored. This gap is felt deeply because a city's heart cannot truly come alive without essential services and especially schools for young people, many of whom are still in temporary modular structures.

Piazza Duomo in L'Aquila. Raboe001/CC BY-SA 3.0

NEW OPENINGS AND MISSING SPACES

The historic centre will only fully revive if it is animated – not just as a tourist attraction but as a living urban space. Ironically, the abundance of around 900 bed and breakfasts and holiday homes sometimes overshadows public reconstruction, and somewhat reduces space available for community life. L'Aquila can now host visitors seeking an authentic historic experience, but for the city itself to thrive, it needs both culture and everyday life to coexist in the same spaces. The inauguration of the Capital of Culture on January 17 had to be held at the Guardia di Finanza barracks in the outskirts, rather than in the historic centre, precisely because there are currently no suitable cultural venues for large events.

But 2026 will bring some exciting openings: the Teatro San Filippo, a former deconsecrated church in the historic centre, is scheduled to reopen this year, and the Teatro Comunale is planned to welcome audiences again by November. After a



major restoration, the Museo Nazionale d'Abruzzo (MuNDA) has finally returned to its original venue at the Forte Spagnolo.

BEYOND THE POSTCARD NARRATIVE

There is a real risk that L'Aquila as the Capital of Culture 2026 might be presented superficially, like a postcard. To avoid that, we must combine external tourism promotion with genuine local cultural growth. The city's story cannot be reduced to symbols alone; it requires engagement with its history, its art, and its living community.

For anyone wanting to understand L'Aquila as the 2026 Capital of Culture, I would start with Celestino V, because L'Aquila is his city, and La Perdonanza is its deepest legacy. It is a yearly rite born from the Bull

Basilica di Santa Maria di Collemaggio in L'Aquila

of Forgiveness he issued in 1294, granting pardon to anyone who entered the basilica with a sincere heart.

When his successor Boniface VIII tried to destroy that document, the city protected it, kept it alive, and built its future around it. From that act came trade fairs, European connections, wool and saffron routes, and the growth of a city that, in the 15th century, became second only to Naples in the Kingdom. Starting from Celestino means understanding how this community has always chosen forgiveness over power, continuity over ruin. We were reduced to rubble, almost erased, and yet today L'Aquila stands again, not perfect, but whole enough to speak to Italy and beyond.

Angelo De Nicola is a journalist and author. His latest book, The First Jubilee in History: The Perdonanza of Celestino V, has been translated into English and is available on [Amazon](#).

Read more about Pope Celestino V in the April 2025 issue of ABRUZZISSIMO available [here](#).



L'AQUILA 2026: PROGRAMME HIGHLIGHTS

L'Aquila has officially stepped into its role as Italy's Capital of Culture 2026. The programme spans 300 days and features over 300 initiatives across more than 100 locations, combining visual arts, music, theatre, dance, cinema, conferences, and workshops. Its scope reaches beyond the historic centre, drawing in neighbourhoods, surrounding towns, and inland areas while connecting cultural institutions, universities, research centres, academies, and local creative enterprises.

MODERN ART AND ARCHITECTURE

The **MAXXI L'Aquila** will be hosting a project, *Convergenze e continuità. Architetture e paesaggi urbani in Abruzzo 1930–1960*, at the restored Palazzo ONMI from June to December. The exhibition investigates modern architecture and urban landscapes in Abruzzo, intertwining the city's past with artistic production.

INTERNATIONAL EXHIBITIONS AND PROJECTS

The international festival *ItARTS – Back to L'Aquila* concludes a global tour across Asia and Europe with performances in L'Aquila at landmark venues such as the **Auditorium del Parco Renzo Piano** and the **Teatro dell'Accademia di Belle Arti**. It will bring together six Italian academies from L'Aquila, Rome, Naples, Brera, Carrara, and Ravenna.

Chinese artist Liu Bolin will create three new performative photographic works in iconic locations including the **Basilica di Santa Maria di Collemaggio** and **Rocca Calascio**.

Opening in April 2026 at **Palazzo Ardinghelli, MAXXI L'Aquila**, *Aftershock* spans five decades of work by Ai Weiwei, a Chinese contemporary artist and activist. Through film, photography, sculpture and installation, it reflects on the lasting imprint of disaster, conflict and human-made tragedy.



MAXXI L'AQUILA. Palazzo Ardinghelli

The names of many other international artists participating throughout the year will be announced soon.

HISTORIC PALAZZI

The programme also celebrates the city's rich private heritage. On the 1st Sunday of each month, dozens of noble *palazzi* and historic houses will open their doors to the public. Each date features a rotating selection of the city's most significant residences, such as **Palazzo Nardis**, **Palazzo Pica Alfieri**, **Palazzo Dragonetti**, and **Casino Branconio** will be accessible through guided tours, while others open courtyards and magnificent halls for self-guided visits, offering a clear and practical way to explore parts of the city that are rarely accessible.

URBAN SPACES

There will be many free open-air concerts, exhibitions, contemporary dance and art performances that will turn urban spaces into stages.

BEYOND THE CITY

Within the main programme, the city of **Rieti**, which was part of the province of L'Aquila until 1927, will offer its own cultural itineraries. Visitors can explore the **province of Rieti** on foot, horseback, or by bike. These routes will lead through lesser-known towns, archaeological sites, and natural landscapes.

See the full programme with the main events on the official [website L'Aquila 2026](#). The upcoming events are also published several weeks in advance on the L'Aquila [blog](#).



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GESSOPALENA, A TOWN THAT REMEMBERS

Gessopalena, a small town in the province of Chieti, commands sweeping views of the eastern slopes of the Maiella and the green stretch of the Aventino Valley. What sets the town apart is not just the views, but a choice: to let the war-shattered ruins of the old borgo remain part of its present.

As you enter Gessopalena, it greets you with wide, tidy

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Anna Lebedeva

Editor of Abruzzissimo Magazine

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