

TRAVEL HISTORY CULTURE PEOPLE FOOD

ABRUZZISSIMO MAGAZINE



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ON THE COVER:

Casalincontrada. Photo by Anna Lebedeva. Read the story on page 12.

LEFT:

Casalincontrada. Photo by Anna Lebedeva. Read the story on page 12.

ABRUZZISSIMO MAGAZINE

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*Periodico diffuso in via telematica non
soggetto a registrazione ai sensi degli
artt. 3 e 3 bis della legge n. 103 del 16
luglio 2012.*

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Editor's Note

Summer flew by, and ABRUZZISSIMO is back after a long break. I stepped away for a few months to work on a new publishing project – you, my readers, will be the first to hear about it soon – but for now, I'm glad to be writing to you again. It was a hard summer for Abruzzo: hailstorms, relentless heatwaves, and one wildfire after another, and autumn can't come soon enough.

This issue leans into the season's shift. My story goes inside the workshop of one of the very few *materassai* left in the region, still hand-making the *materasso di lana* in **Raiano (AQ)** – the wool mattress that generations here slept on.

September's cooler temperatures are perfect for a walk around **Casalincontrada (CH)** to see the *case di terra*, the earthen houses that dot the surrounding countryside. Built from raw earth, they hold a steady temperature year-round, and after decades of neglect they're drawing fresh interest. Read the full story on page 12.

There's also a change I'm glad to introduce. The People section has always been about foreigners who made Abruzzo their home – but their stories are only half the picture. So from this issue, we'll cover both. We begin with Liberata, who ran an escape line in **Abbateggio (PE)** during the Second World War, and her American granddaughter, who is returning to turn that history into a documentary.

Finally, a reminder that ABRUZZISSIMO is reader-supported. Subscriptions and donations are what keep it alive, so if you can, please consider a [premium subscription](#) or a [donation](#).

It's good to be back. I hope this issue finds you well, and that autumn is kind to us all.

Enjoy the September issue!

Anna Lebedeva
Founder & Editor

DIGEST OF RECENT REGIONAL NEWS AND UPCOMING EVENTS FROM ABRUZZO NEWSPAPERS



TOURISM IS BOOMING

Abruzzo is outpacing Italy's tourism boom, and its mountain towns are leading the charge. In the first half of 2026, arrivals climbed 7.2% and overnight stays 7.7% against a year earlier. The real surprise: visits to small villages surged 10.9%, as travellers head for backroads, borghi and inland trails. The figures, released by the Ministry of Tourism, point to a region winning over people who want somewhere real—the kind of tourism Italy is keen to spread around.

ABRUZZO'S YOUNG ARE LEAVING

Abruzzo is losing its young people, and the numbers are stark. Over the past decade the region shed 34,235 residents aged 15 to 34—a 12.1% drop, according to CGIA Mestre, with L'Aquila hit hardest. The drain is regional and national at once: between 2002 and 2024, nearly a million under-35s left the South for the Centre-North, and of the net loss in the 25–34 bracket, some 270,000 held a degree. Abruzzo shares in that exodus. Politicians of every stripe will read these figures to suit themselves—but the plainer truth resists spin: the will to stay isn't missing, only the housing, jobs, and services that would make it possible.

THE RETIREES' FAVOURITE

Abruzzo has become the top Italian destination for foreign pensioners drawn by the country's 7% flat tax on overseas income. Ministry of Economy figures, presented to parliament, show 221 retirees have settled here under the scheme—ahead of Puglia, Sicily and Sardinia. Together those four southern regions account for over three-quarters of all foreign retirees using the incentive, which lets newcomers who move to southern towns of under 30,000 people pay a flat 7% for up to nine years.



THE MAYOR'S PETROL

As petrol tops €2 across Italy, in the mountain town of **Valle Castellana (TE)** the municipality sells petrol and diesel almost at cost, 10 to 20 cents below what drivers pay elsewhere. Locals call it "la benzina del sindaco" — the mayor's petrol.

The town hall bought the pump four years ago when the owner wanted to close it — the paperwork took roughly two years, partly because there was no precedent in Italy. It sells petrol and diesel with almost no margin, a saving of 10 to 20 cents a litre against the private pumps. As word spread, drivers began coming from across the Teramo province: turnover rose to around €500,000 a year, up from €75,000. "Now other towns are calling me, wanting to know whether they could try the same thing," says mayor Camillo D'Angelo.

ANCIENT KILNS UNDER PINETO

The region's heritage authorities have announced what they have learned about a Roman kiln unearthed at the coastal town of **Pineto (TE)**: it most likely fired amphorae for shipping the prized local Atrian wine some two thousand years ago. The kiln came to light during work on a gas pipeline along viale delle Rose last year and has yielded amphora fragments, stoppers, bricks, a coin and even a bronze fishing hook. It served the trade of Atri, the Roman town on the hills above. Pineto now plans to protect and open it to the public.



GRAPE FESTIVALS SEASON BEGINS

Despite a difficult season of hail, drought, and poor yields, Abruzzo is celebrating its grape-harvest traditions with sagre and festivals throughout the month. **Atri (TE)** kicks things off on September 6 with a grape festival that coincides with a lively organetto festa. From September 11 to 13, **Mosciano Sant'Angelo (TE)** hosts its much-loved grape festival, where you can meet local winemakers. And on September 20, **Città Sant'Angelo (PE)** holds the 39^a Sagra dell'Uva, featuring a blessing of the tractors and harvest and a parade of wine-themed allegorical floats that's always a great show. See more details via the organisers' pages linked here.

DID YOU KNOW?



WHEN ORTUCCHIO WAS AN ISLAND

Castello Piccolomini, in the small town of **Ortucchio (AQ)**, was one of only two castles in Italy you could enter directly by water. The other is Sirmione, on Lake Garda. Until the 19th century the fortress stood in Lake Fucino — once the third-largest lake in Italy — surrounded by a moat fed by the lake itself, with boats mooring at a dock inside the walls.

The castle owed this distinction to a remarkable setting. Depending on the water level, the whole town of Ortucchio was sometimes an island, sometimes a peninsula — rather like Mont Saint-Michel — and its very name may come from the Latin *Ortus aquarum*, "risen from the waters." When Lake Fucino was drained in 1878, the castle was left standing on dry land, still reached by its drawbridge, looking out today over the fertile Fucino plain.

The Renaissance fortress dates to 1488, when Antonio Todeschini Piccolomini rebuilt it after an earlier medieval stronghold was destroyed by Napoleone Orsini. The oldest surviving part is the battlemented keep. Damaged by the 1915 earthquake and restored in the 1970s, the castle is now a national monument.

It also carries a legend: on quiet nights, the ghost of the "Pale Virgin" is said to appear on the tower. The daughter of a lord of Ortucchio, she fell in love with a young fisherman but was forced to marry the lord of Celano. Heartbroken, she leapt from a window to her death, while her beloved was killed in an ambush laid by her father.

Castello Piccolomini di Ortucchio is open to visitors every day in September.



EDWARD LEAR, THE NONSENSE POET WHO PAINTED ABRUZZO

By Antonio Bini

To most English readers, Edward Lear is the man who wrote "The Owl and the Pussycat" and a whole genre of glorious nonsense – the limericks of *A Book of Nonsense*. Few realise that Lear thought of himself not as a poet but as a landscape painter, as the inscription on his gravestone in San Remo attests. And in some of his finest work he painted in Abruzzo.

For most of the 18th century, European travellers, writers, artists, poets, musicians, and archaeologists were drawn to Italy. Young aristocrats – the English above all – set off on the Grand Tour, a significant stage in their education, following a fixed circuit that always led to Rome. Abruzzo was left off the map as it had few carriage roads, a fearsome reputation for brigantaggio – the banditry that made the interior genuinely dangerous – and a landscape of harsh peaks and cold winters that deterred all but the determined.

The Romantic movement changed the region's fortunes. Where the 18th century had prized order and classical ruins, the 19th prized wildness, solitude, and the emotional bond between people and nature. Travellers began to trickle in and Lear was among the most important, and the most observant.

Photo: Lake Fucino, illustration by Edward Lear

THE ILLUSTRATED EXCURSIONS

Lear arrived in Rome in 1837 and lived in Italy for much of his life. His curiosity about Abruzzo, according to his biographer Peter Levi, was first stirred in Rome itself, by the *zampognari* (bagpipers), the shepherd-musicians who came down to the city from the mountains each Christmas. He liked the idea that these herdsmen crossed the land freely, ignoring borders, and he was eager to trace the paths they followed back into the mountains.

Lear made his Abruzzo journeys in the summers of 1843 and 1844, travelling with his friend Charles Knight, and in 1846 he published the *Illustrated Excursions in Italy*, two volumes of tinted lithographs, made from his own sketches, with a preface insisting he had kept "a close fidelity to the originals." It is, as the Grand Tour scholar Attilio Brilli has noted, the first detailed description and pictorial record of Abruzzo's itineraries, landscapes, and towns.

THE ROUTE

A tireless traveller, Lear preferred to venture into the lesser-known Italy, favouring the mountain and hill villages, moving on horseback, on a donkey, or on foot along the mule tracks. His book lets you follow the itinerary almost village by village. Leaving the outskirts of Rome, Lear went by way of Frascati, Galliciano, and Guadagnolo to Carsoli, then to Tagliacozzo and down toward the great basin of Lake Fucino – Avezzano, Luco dei Marsi, Trasacco, Celano. From there he crossed to Goriano Sicolì, Raiano, and Sulmona, then through Corfinio and Popoli to Chieti and the coast at Pescara, turning inland again through Penne and the mountain villages – Calascio, Santo Stefano di Sessanio, Barisciano – to L'Aquila, before continuing toward Antrodoco and Cittaducale. Many of the places he drew can still be found, and several of the palazzi where he was a guest are worth seeing even from the outside, for their architecture and their history.

One of Lear's subjects has since vanished from the earth. He sketched the shores of Lake Fucino, then



Edward Lear, 1866

the third-largest lake in Italy, filling a wide basin in the western mountains. In the 1870s the banker-prince Alessandro Torlonia completed a vast engineering project that drained the lake entirely, converting its bed into one of Italy's most fertile agricultural plains. Today his illustrations preserve a landscape no living person has seen.

THE LANDSCAPE AND THE PEOPLE

Lear's drawings convey his fascination with Abruzzo, though not without evident Romantic touches. He let the natural setting dominate – the vast sweep of hills, mountains, and Lake Fucino – and set the villages carefully within it, seeking the harmony of built and natural. The people are always there: women in local costume, farmers, shepherds, small figures that complete the scene rather than command it.

Lear's fascination with the mountain musicians runs through the whole account. These were the *zampognari* and the *pifferari*, players of the shrill *piffero*, a folk oboe. His interest went beyond the picturesque: at the end of his Abruzzo account he added, as an appendix, a transcription of a tune he had heard again and again in the mountains. Because the tradition was oral and the shepherds could not write it down, this is very likely the earliest surviving record of the Abruzzese pipers' music.

A BOOK WORTH READING

His prose is clear, quick, and unusually frank — free of the polite conventions that stiffen so many travel accounts of the period, which lets a reader drop straight into the life of the time. Lear was genuinely enchanted by the country; he could also be blunt about the poverty and squalor he found in the houses of some of his hosts, and that honest double vision is part of what keeps the book alive. When he later travelled in Calabria, he found himself missing the hospitality of Abruzzo.

Sulmona, illustration by Edward Lear

Abruzzo even slipped into his nonsense. One of the limericks in *A Book of Nonsense* runs:

*There was an Old Man of th' Abruzzi,
So blind that he couldn't his foot see;
When they said, "That's your toe,"
He replied, "Is it so?"
That doubtful Old Man of th' Abruzzi.*

Abruzzo has not entirely forgotten Edward Lear: Sulmona and Anversa degli Abruzzi have both named streets in his honour. Yet although the *Illustrated Excursions* has been translated into Italian, very few people in the region have read it. I invite you to read it — in English (available for free download [online](#)) or in Italian — and to hold the landscape of nearly two centuries ago against the one that exists today, measuring all that has changed, and all that endures as it was in Lear's time.

Antonio Bini is the author of several books on the history and traditions of Abruzzo and a regular contributor to ABRUZZISSIMO Magazine.



TRADITION



IL MATERASSAIO AND THE KING OF MATTRESSES

Text and photos by Anna

In rural households in Abruzzo, a materasso di lana was a luxury. If looked after, it lasted a lifetime and beyond. It was not furniture so much as patrimony: it entered a household with the bride, as part of her corredo, and it was still there when her children married.

Not everyone could have one, as wool was expensive. The families who didn't have sheep and couldn't afford to buy one slept on mattresses stuffed with dried maize husks or straw, which had to be emptied and refilled

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Anna Lebedeva

Editor of Abruzzissimo Magazine

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