

The Silly Season Sweeps Italy

Judith Harris (August 13, 2012)



Ferragosto – the name derives from the original Feriae Augusti summer festival proclaimed by the Emperor Augustus – is a major holiday celebrated on August 15 when all of Italy shuts down, and streets are deserted. This peak of summer holidays is what the media pros call “the silly season,” when reporters are allowed a long leash for gossip in the absence of hard news.

ROME – This peak of summer holidays is what the media pros call “the silly season,” when reporters are allowed a long leash for gossip in the absence of hard news. [Ferragosto](#) [2] – the name derives from the original Feriae Augusti summer festival proclaimed by the Emperor Augustus – is a major holiday celebrated on August 15, and falls this year on a Wednesday.

On that day all of Italy shuts down, and streets are deserted, unless one counts the hundreds of

thousands of tourists wandering the streets of the cities and seeking, without much luck, a cup of coffee. One break for them this year: Roman museums will remain open, a genuine novelty for the holiday. Otherwise, all is quiet, for, as the Romans say to justify the total shut-down, "Siamo sotto ferragosto" (We're under Ferragosto).

But fires are breaking out and wearing out the firemen. In Rome's Montemario two Romanians were arrested for arson, caught while setting fire to a sheet, which they were throwing into the undergrowth. Fires near Rome also meant that a suburban train line blocked passengers aboard it for seven hours. There is no doubt that the spate of fires is the work of pyromaniacs.

The torrid Roman heat, with day after day in the nineties, has also meant that the horses in whose carts tourists traditionally toured Rome, called "Botticelle," were ordered to stay home for two days this week after one horse collapsed from heat stroke in the middle of the street. A century-old umbrella pine was similarly suffering from the heat wave, which was formally named "Nerone" (Nero) by meteorologists, similarly keeled over in the middle of a street, terrifying passersby.

The city streets, in fact, are surprisingly crowded during this summer of serious recession, for only four out of ten Italians are taking a serious vacation break. Nevertheless, the day of Ferragosto is sacred both to the Catholic Church as the Feast of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary, and to the families who flee their overheated homes in apartment blocks for the seaside, any seaside. The economic fallout brings visitors accustomed to grander vacations to the more humble holiday spots, like our own lovely Lake Bracciano. I have always enjoyed its homespun, family-style beaches, where families arrive with food hampers, tables, chairs, cell phones, radios, fold-out bicycles, floating gadgets, and granny. Quite different from all this was the woman in a rather imposing car who stopped me on the lakefront today to ask: "Where is the bathing establishing on the seaside?" Bathing establishment? Seaside? Perhaps she took a wrong turn.

So far Premier Mario Monti has not. He offended former Premier Silvio Berlusconi by saying that the spread would have been far higher if Berlusconi had stayed on. Berlusconi, needless to say, maintains the opposite, and was offended. Monti fudged in a more or less apologetic manner. Similarly, he took issue for the first time with German Chancellor Angela Merkel, triggering a brief exchange of fire along the lines of "they always were Nazis" vs "why should we Germans pay for Italian ineptitude?" To us onlookers, the two incidents do not appear to be gaffes. Instead they suggest that Monti has gathered confidence in his own political, as well as financial, savvy, as early elections in November appear ever less likely.

During his nine months in office Monti has already survived an extraordinarily large number of votes of confidence – 34, or almost one a week. This week's accompanied the passage of spending review measures, after which Chamber and Senate shut down for the rest of summer. Whereas any formal talk of an emergency "great coalition" is still anathema here, these confidence votes were granted to Monti by just such a coalition, formed by unlikely bedfellows: Berlusconi's rightist Liberty Party (PdL), Pier Luigi Bersani's left-leaning Partito Democratico (PD) plus middle-of-the-roaders like the Catholic Pier Ferdinando Casini.

Despite their cohesion in Parliamentary votes, the stresses and strains on those parties show, and this appears to be an important reason for Monti's new-look, peacock-feather display of personal power. The in-fighting among the partners shows no sign of cooling down in the torrid meteorological and political heat. Berlusconi announced he will return to politics, then drew back, and has now said, in an interview with the French leftist newspaper Liberation, that he will return to active politics if the people demand it. What has actually been demanded was Berlusconi's presence in a Palermo court house August 13 to testify against his cohort Marcello Dell'Utri over a huge payment Berlusconi allegedly made to Dell'Utri, in what inquiring magistrates believe was a case of blackmail. Berlusconi will not, however, be able to testify in Sicily that day because he will be in France, in a villa owned by his eldest daughter, businesswoman Marina Berlusconi. Siamo sotto Ferragosto.

Just returned from a friendly visit to Vladimir Putin in Russia, Berlusconi is expected, after Ferragosto, to head for his fabulous villa at Porto Rotondo, in Sardinia. Is he worrying over the holidays about the Milan court case involving Ruby Heart-Stealer, the underage girl he is accused of seducing? No, Berlusconi told Liberation. "I've always been acquitted and will be this time too." The



case was just one more example of the political persecution of which he has been a victim, he added.

Among the other politicians, the newly scandal-plagued Roberto Formigoni of the Catholic right wing will spend the holiday in Sardinia. The increasingly agitated former magistrate Antonio Di Pietro returns to his native Molise; Di Pietro is working hard to distance himself from Bersani and the mainstream left, as if trying to out-Grillo Beppe Grillo in style and personalized appeal. Italy's most prominent gay politician, Nichi Vendola, president of the Southern Region of Apulia (Puglia), will not leave that region, where Vendola just announced his intention to run for prime minister in the next national general election. The announcement excited sufficient interest worldwide that an Indian Muslim website ran the news, adding that Vendola speaks with a lisp and wears an earring (!) The Times of India also ran a piece on Vendola's decision, see [here](#) [3].

Given this summer's air of crisis, Premier Monti has asked his entire cabinet and undersecretaries to go on holiday no more than one hour's distance from Rome, so as to be within shouting distance in case the roof falls in. Monti himself will spend a few days in a house ("the same he usually rents," his press aide specified) in Switzerland.

No such fiat limits Rome Mayor Gianni Alemanno's vacation, which will be spent in Los Angeles, while Lazio's president Renata Polverini has deserted her region's beaches, lakes and archaeological parks for the tourist port of Capalbio, in Tuscany.

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