

# MEDIEVAL HORSE RACE ATTRACTS THOUSANDS



Most people have seen the famous scene from the Ben Hur film when Charlton Heston heroically beats the odds to conquer his opponents on horseback during one of the greatest horse racing scenes of all time. The beautiful hill town, Siena, in the heart of Tuscany actually plays the modern host to such an event. It is an absolutely unique mediaeval-style horse race in modern Italy - Palio.

The history of the event involves the abolition of bullfighting in the area in 1590, leading to the introduction of this race as a replacement shortly afterwards. Animal activists today claim that the event is just as, if not more, cruel and brutal than the bullfighting. They may have a valid point, yet the popularity of the Piazza del Campo race is undeniable.

It is far more than a mere race: it is an expression of the passion of the south European nations, particularly the Italians. It is something comparable to the bullfighting in modern Spain, along with other Spanish festivals involving donkeys and the wild hurling of tomatoes.

Eyes are glued to the action from television viewers and some 25.000 people see the action live.

It is not all about race. The build-up is considered to be as important as the action itself as many eat and drink outside the Piazza before the first horse begins to sprint. Importantly, a horse does not necessarily need a rider in order to win. The main aim is to cross the finishing line first. Rules and sportsmanship go out of the window during this truly unique expression of Mediterranean flair and passion.

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