

## CHAPTER TEN

# *Nemi's Strawberry Spectacular*

## From Ancient Ships to Berry Lips

### **S**agra delle Fragole

Where: Nemi

When: First Sunday of June, with some events spanning the weekend.

Average Festival Temperatures: High 25°C (77°F), Low 14°C (57°F).

### **Nemi: A Timeless Grove of Legends and Legacy**

Nemi is a picturesque town in the Lazio region of central Italy, 30 kilometers (18 miles) southeast of Rome. Perched at an elevation of 521 meters (1,700 feet) above sea level, it overlooks the serene Lake Nemi, a volcanic crater lake nestled within the Alban Hills.

The name "Nemi" derives from the Latin word *nemus*, meaning "holy wood," reflecting the area's ancient sacred groves. In antiquity, Nemi was renowned for the Temple of Diana Nemorensis, a sanctuary dedicated to the goddess Diana.

Established around 300 BC, the temple was a significant pilgrimage site for centuries, attracting worshippers from across the Italian peninsula.

During the Roman Empire, Emperor Caligula constructed elaborate pleasure barges on Lake Nemi, possibly linked to the cult of Diana. These ships were later scuttled and remained submerged until their recovery in the early 20th century. Unfortunately, they were destroyed by fire during World War II, with remnants now displayed in the Museo delle Navi Romane in Nemi.

In the medieval period, Nemi came under the dominion of various noble families, including the Colonna, Cesarini, and Orsini. The Castello Ruspoli, dating back to the 10th century, stands as a testament to this era, dominating both the town and the surrounding landscape.

Nemi is within the Castelli Romani, a group of communes in the Alban Hills known for their natural beauty and historical significance. The town's proximity to Lake Nemi provides a unique microclimate, fostering the growth of wild strawberries for which the area is famous. The volcanic origins of the lake and surrounding hills contribute to the fertile soil and lush vegetation that characterize the region.

Nemi has a population of 1,851 residents. Despite its small size, the town attracts visitors with its rich history, scenic views, and cultural traditions. Nemi's blend of historical depth, natural beauty, and cultural heritage makes it a noteworthy destination in the Lazio region, offering insights into both ancient and medieval Italy.

## **The Strawberry Festival**

### **Sweet Delights of Nemi: The Centennial Sagra delle Fragole**

My first visit to Nemi was nothing short of enchanting. Nestled in the hills, this small town captivated me with its picturesque historic center, offering breathtaking views that swept across the sparkling waters of Lake Nemi and rolled over the lush strawberry fields beyond. As I wandered through Nemi's narrow, winding streets, I was struck by how this tiny hilltop town preserved its medieval charm while embracing its most famous modern tradition - the cultivation of its prized strawberries.

The Sagra delle Fragole has been a highlight of Nemi's calendar since 1922. This centennial celebration centers around the fragoline di bosco, small wild strawberries known for their intense flavor and aroma. While my visit coincided with the festival weekend, I discovered the celebration perfectly balances tradition with festive energy.



*Lago di Nemi*

The festival unfolds over a full weekend, with Saturday morning bringing the opening ceremony and parade. Throughout the weekend, local farms and shops transform the town into a strawberry lover's paradise, offering everything from fresh berries to homemade jams and creative strawberry-themed products. I particularly enjoyed watching local chefs demonstrate their strawberry-based recipes, sharing techniques that blend traditional and modern approaches.

The undisputed centerpiece of the festival is the Giant Strawberry Goblet, where fresh strawberries meet spumante fragolino (strawberry-flavored sparkling wine) in a massive vessel. Sampling this effervescent treat while watching traditional dancers perform in period costumes made me feel deeply connected to Nemi's rich cultural heritage. Live music fills the air throughout the town, creating a joyful atmosphere that's impossible to resist.

A more recent addition to the festival is the Flower Exhibition, which culminates in Sunday afternoon's Golden Strawberry Award ceremony. The winning florist receives a precious jewel containing a real gold-plated strawberry - a fitting tribute to the town's favorite fruit. Beyond the festival itself, I discovered Nemi offers year-round attractions that shouldn't be missed. The Diana's Mirror Museum houses fascinating artifacts from Emperor Caligula's ancient ships, once submerged in Lake Nemi. Peaceful walks with stunning views are found on the lakeside paths, with great hiking in the reserves. The local trattorias serve delicious regional specialties that showcase why this area is a food lover's paradise.

As I left Nemi, with the taste of sun-ripened strawberries still on my lips (and baskets of strawberries in the trunk) and the memory of that stunning lake view etched in my mind, I knew I'd discovered a special corner of Italy - one that I'd be eager to revisit, especially when the strawberries are in full bloom and the town comes alive with the joy of its sweetest celebration.



*The Berries of Nemi*

## Walking Tour of Nemi

### #1. Start at Piazza Umberto I

Begin your tour in the heart of Nemi at Piazza Umberto I. This charming square offers your first glimpse of Lake Nemi and is a perfect spot to orient yourself.

### #2. Palazzo Ruspoli

From the piazza, head to Palazzo Ruspoli, a 16th-century palace that now houses the town hall. Its distinctive clock tower is one of Nemi's most recognizable landmarks.

### **#3. Church of Santa Maria del Pozzo**

Walk to this 16th-century church, known for its beautiful frescoes and a well (pozzo) that gives the church its name. Legend has it that the well is connected to Lake Nemi by underground passages.



*Santa Maria del Pozzo*

### **#4. Diana's Mirror Terrace**

Walk along the lake to this viewpoint, named after the ancient Romans who called Lake Nemi "Diana's Mirror". Enjoy panoramic views of the lake and surrounding hills.

### **#5. Strawberry Fields Viewpoint**

Climb back up into town and find a good vantage point to view the famous strawberry fields that surround Nemi. The exact location may vary, but locals can point you to the best spots.

### **#6. Temple of Diana**

While the temple itself no longer stands, you can visit the archaeological site where the famous Temple of Diana once stood. This was one of the most important sanctuaries in ancient Latium.

## #7. Nemi Castle Ruins

Conclude your tour at the ruins of Nemi's medieval castle. While little remains of the structure, the site offers stunning views over the lake and town.

### **Museo delle Navi Romane (Museum of Roman Ships)**

Consider a visit the fascinating lakeside museum. It houses artifacts recovered from two enormous ships built by Emperor Caligula and sunk in Lake Nemi. The museum tells the story of these ships and their recovery in the 1930s. This walking tour allows you to experience Nemi's rich history, from ancient Roman times through the medieval period to the present day, all while enjoying its natural beauty and famous strawberries.

## Logistics

**Train:** No direct train routes to Nemi exist. However, you can take a train from Rome's Termini Station to Velletri or Albano Laziale, which are nearby towns. Rome to Albano Laziale by Train: Trains from Roma Termini to Albano Laziale run frequently (roughly every 30 minutes), with a journey time of around 50 minutes. From Albano Laziale, COTRAL buses to Nemi take around 15–20 minutes.

**Bus:** COTRAL Bus. Direct buses run from Anagnina Metro Station (Rome's Line A) to Nemi, with a journey time of approximately 1 hour. Anagnina is about a 30-minute metro ride from the center of Rome, and the buses are a convenient option for travelers not wishing to drive.

**Car:** The most direct route is via Via Appia Nuova (SS7), passing through Albano Laziale and then taking the SP18b towards Nemi. The drive typically takes around 45 minutes to an hour, depending on traffic.

**Parking:** Nemi offers various parking areas near the town center. Since Nemi is a small town with narrow streets, it's best to park in designated areas outside the historic center and explore the town on foot.

## Restaurant Recommendations

**Il Ramo D'oro.** Address: Corso Vittorio Emanuele, 9/11-13

Il Ramo D'oro is a popular Italian restaurant in Nemi, known for its cozy atmosphere and friendly service. It offers a variety of classic Roman pasta dishes, pizzas, and Mediterranean cuisine. The restaurant is praised for its homemade pasta, especially the pappardelle with wild boar sauce. The beautiful terrace overlooking the lake provides a stunning view, making it a perfect spot for a relaxing meal.

**La Rosa.** Address: Corso Vittorio Emanuele 41

La Rosa is a charming Italian restaurant that serves traditional dishes with a focus on fresh, local ingredients. It is known for its homey atmosphere and accommodating staff. Popular dishes include pasta with mushrooms, wild boar antipasto, and homemade pasta with truffles. The restaurant also offers a delightful selection of desserts, including strawberry gelato and panna cotta.

**La Sirena del Lago.** Address: Via del Plebiscito 26

Near the lake, this restaurant offers stunning views and a menu featuring seafood and Italian cuisine. The restaurant is perfect for a scenic dining experience, with its picturesque setting and delicious seafood dishes. It's a brilliant spot to enjoy a meal with family or friends while taking in the beautiful lake views.

**Ristorante Le Scalette.** Address: Salita Garibaldi, 8

In the heart of the historic center, the restaurant features local specialties with a focus on strawberries. The restaurant is known for its cozy ambiance and excellent service. It offers a variety of dishes featuring strawberries, such as strawberry risotto and strawberry desserts. The restaurant is a must-visit for those looking to experience the local flavors of Nemi.

## Accommodation

Staying overnight is unnecessary for *sagre*. There are no hotels in Nemi. It is a tiny town. It is close enough to the other *Castelli Romani* cities that accommodations from those chapters can be used.

## Day Trip Options: Nearby Sites, Cities and Towns

**Tarquinia.** 100 km (62 miles) from Nemi. This UNESCO World Heritage site features a remarkable Etruscan necropolis with beautifully frescoed tombs. The National Etruscan Museum is housed in the 15th-century Palazzo Vitelleschi, and the medieval old town offers beautiful churches and palaces to explore.

**Subiaco.** 70 km (43 miles). Home to the *Sacro Speco* (Sacred Cave) where St. Benedict lived as a hermit, and Santa Scolastica Monastery, the oldest Benedictine monastery in the world. The medieval walled town (*borgo*) with its narrow stone streets and well-preserved historic center, features picturesque streets and stunning views.

**Sperlonga.** 120 km (75 miles) west of Nemi. A stunning, white-washed old town perched dramatically on a cliff overlooking the Tyrrhenian Sea. Visitors can enjoy beautiful beaches, explore the Archeological Museum, and visit the historic Grotto of Tiberius.

**Towns of the Castelli Romani.** 0-15 km (0-9 miles) from Nemi. The picturesque hill towns of the *Castelli Romani* include Castel Gandolfo, the Pope's summer residence overlooking Lake Albano; Frascati, famous for its historic villas and white wine; Ariccia, known for its monumental Chigi Palace and traditional *porchetta*; and Genzano di Roma, renowned for its *Infiolata* flower festival and artisanal bread. These towns, set among volcanic lakes and chestnut forests, share a rich history as ancient Roman resort towns and Renaissance noble retreats.

## **Nemi's Other Festival**

### **Festa dei Santi Filippo e Giacomo**

May 1

This religious festival honors Saints Philip and James, who are celebrated together in the Catholic tradition. The highlight of the festa patronale is a solemn procession through Nemi's streets, carrying relics and standards of the saints.

The procession begins at the Church of Santa Maria del Pozzo and winds through the historic center, accompanied by prayers, hymns, and a palpable sense of reverence and community.