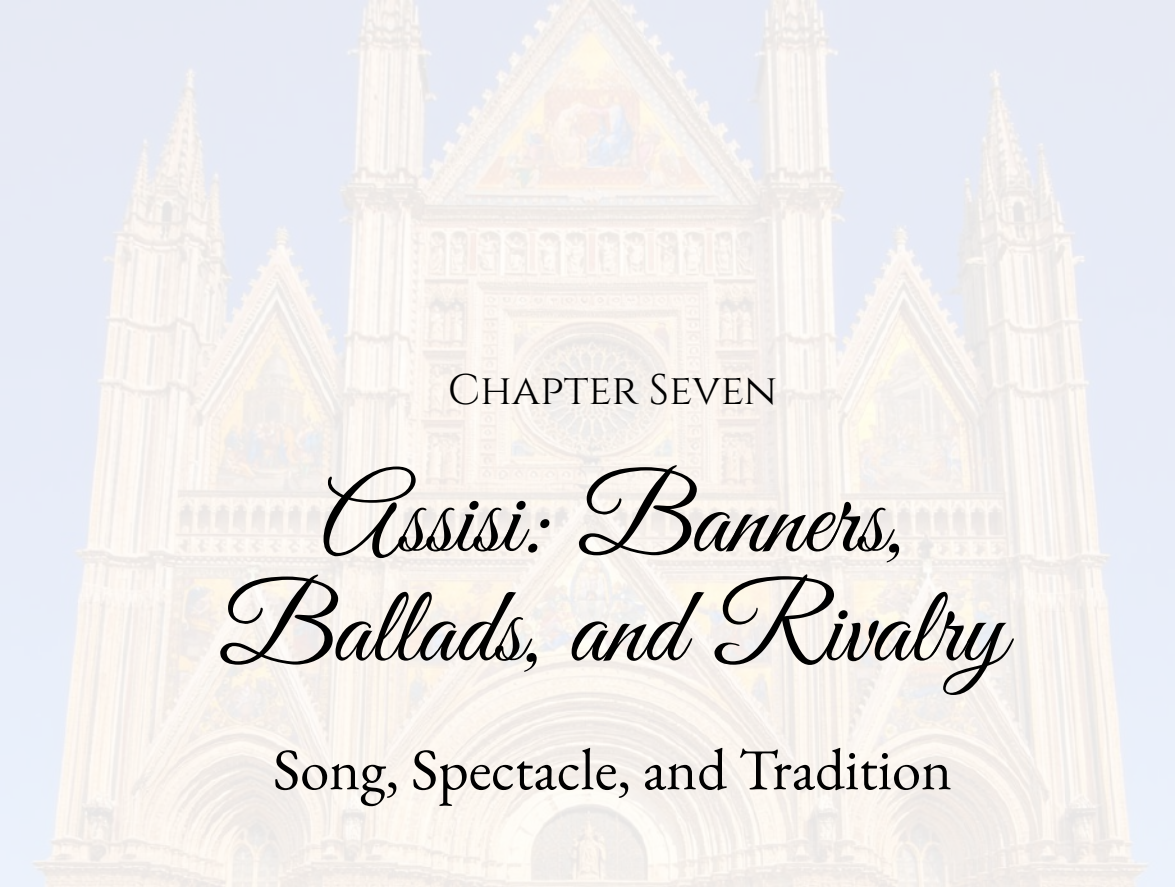




CHAPTER SEVEN

Assisi: Banners, Ballads, and Rivalry

Song, Spectacle, and Tradition

Calendimaggio di Assisi

Where: Assisi

When: Wednesday, Thursday, Friday, and Saturday after May 1.

Average Festival Temperatures: High 20°C (68°F). Low 9°C (48°F).

Event Website: <https://www.calendimaggiodiassisi.com/en/>

Assisi: The Sacred City of Saint Francis

Rising gracefully from the green slopes of Mount Subasio, Assisi feels less like a town and more like a living fresco. Pale pink limestone walls glow at sunrise, medieval towers punctuate the skyline, and narrow streets wind upward toward sacred spaces that have drawn pilgrims, poets, and dreamers for centuries. This is Assisi, one of Umbria's most evocative hill towns, where faith, history, and civic pride are woven into everyday life.

Long before Assisi became inseparable from the figure of Saint Francis, the town began as an Umbrian settlement, later shaped by Roman ambition. Known in antiquity as Asisium, it flourished as a Roman municipium, traces of which remain visible today in the Temple of Minerva, the forum, and ancient roadways embedded in the medieval fabric. After the fall of the Roman Empire, Assisi endured centuries of upheaval, emerging in the Middle Ages as a fortified commune marked by powerful families, factional rivalries, and an intense sense of local identity.

The thirteenth century transformed Assisi forever. The birth of Saint Francis and later Saint Clare shifted the town's destiny from military stronghold to spiritual beacon. Magnificent basilicas rose over humble stone streets, drawing pilgrims from across Europe. During the Renaissance, Assisi refined its urban beauty, adding palazzi, frescoed churches, and elegant civic spaces without losing its medieval feel. Unlike many Italian cities, Assisi remained compact and deeply rooted, preserving its layered history within walkable walls.

Today, Assisi is home to roughly twenty-eight thousand residents, a population that swells with visitors yet keeps a strong sense of community. Its geography shapes daily life. Perched above the Umbrian Valley, with sweeping views toward Perugia and Spello, the town feels both elevated and intimate. Olive groves and vineyards blanket the surrounding hills, while Mount Subasio National Park frames Assisi in a landscape of quiet beauty and seasonal color.

Calendimaggio: When the Middle Ages Return

Each spring, as winter loosens its grip on the Umbrian hills, Assisi prepares for a transformation unlike any other. Calendimaggio di Assisi transports you into a medieval world, a ritualized return to an age when honor, song, color, and civic pride shaped the rhythm of daily life. For a few extraordinary days, modern Assisi steps aside, allowing the thirteenth century to reclaim the streets.

The origins of this event stretch back to ancient seasonal celebrations marking the arrival of May. In Roman times, spring was welcomed with songs, flowers, and public rejoicing. Medieval customs absorbed these pagan traditions, transforming them into collective events focused on farming, new beginnings, and the natural patterns of agricultural life. By the Middle Ages, May festivals

had become central social events across Italy, combining music, courtship, and competition.

In Assisi, these celebrations took on a uniquely civic character. By the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, the town was divided into two rival parts, Parte de Sopra (Upper Part) and Parte de Sotto (Lower Part), each fiercely proud of its territory, families, and traditions. Calendimaggio became the perfect stage for this rivalry, transforming friendly competition into an elaborate pageant of identity and honor. Victory was not won by force, but by beauty, artistry, and collective spirit.



Medieval procession during Calendimaggio in Assisi

Over time, the festival developed into a structured competition judged on multiple elements. Medieval songs known as madrigali echo through the streets, performed live without amplification. Processions unfold in meticulous historical costume, with every fabric, color, and accessory researched to reflect the medieval period. Scenes of daily life, noble courts, and popular traditions are reenacted in public squares, turning the entire town into an open-air theater.

Calendimaggio is deeply personal for the people of Assisi. Preparation begins months in advance. Residents rehearse music, sew costumes, study historical sources, and commit themselves fully to their Parte. Families pass down participation from generation to generation, ensuring continuity and

authenticity. When the festival begins, there are no spectators among the locals, only participants.

Festival Traditions

Day One: Opening of Calendimaggio

Morning: City Awakening

Assisi begins the day in quiet anticipation. Banners of Parte de Sopra and Parte de Sotto appear from windows and balconies, transforming the town into a tapestry of medieval color. Drums echo faintly through the streets as performers and musicians gather in their respective quarters. Rehearsals take place behind closed doors, while costume details are checked and final adjustments are made.

Evening: Medieval Atmosphere and Street Performances

As night falls, Assisi comes alive with music and movement. Each Parte presents its first public performances, filling streets and squares with song, dance, and theatrical scenes inspired by medieval life. Torchlight illuminates stone walls, creating an atmosphere that feels suspended in time.

The official opening of Calendimaggio is announced in the main piazzas of the town. Civic representatives, dressed in medieval attire, read the proclamation that formally returns Assisi to its historical divisions. Trumpets sound, flags are raised, and the rivalry between the two Parte is ceremonially renewed.

Day Two: Music and Pageantry

Morning: Vocal Performances and Rehearsals

Medieval harmonies echo through Assisi's ancient stone churches as costumed singers rehearse centuries-old madrigals and ballads. Their voices rise toward painted ceilings while morning light filters through stained glass, illuminating scenes that seem suspended between the past and the present.

Afternoon: Historical Processions

The streets of Assisi transform into a living tapestry of medieval splendor. Hundreds of costumed participants parade through narrow stone lanes as each

district brings its interpretation of 14th-century life to vivid reality. Noble ladies in brocaded gowns, flag-throwers spinning silk banners overhead, drummers setting the pace. It is a magnificent parade.

Evening: Theatrical Scenes

Piazzas become open-air theaters as darkness falls and torches illuminate impromptu stages. Watch historical vignettes unfold against the backdrop of medieval facades. Scenes of courtly love, merchant negotiations, and noble rivalries play out where they might have happened centuries ago. The energy builds as rival districts showcase their dramatic talents, each performance judged by the roaring approval of the crowd.

Day Three: Judgment and Victory

Morning: Final Performances

The competition reaches its crescendo as each Parte delivers its ultimate artistic statement. Musicians, singers, and actors pour their hearts into these last moments before the judges, with centuries of neighborhood pride hanging in the balance. The tension is palpable. You can feel it ripple through the crowd as each group takes the stage, determined to claim the coveted Palio for their district.

Evening: Proclamation of the Winning Parte

The moment arrives with all the gravity of a papal decree. Judges ascend the platform in solemn procession, the crowd falling silent as centuries of tradition demand. When the verdict rings out across the piazza, half of Assisi erupts in jubilation while the other half plans next year's comeback. The winning Parte hoists the precious Palio high above the crowd, their victory songs echoing off stone walls as spontaneous celebrations spill into every corner of the medieval city.

Walking Tour of Assisi

#1. Basilica di Santa Chiara

Begin at the Basilica of Saint Clare, an easy starting point for visitors arriving by car or bus. Built of distinctive pink and white striped stone, the basilica rises

dramatically above the lower town, its façade glowing warmly in the Umbrian sun. Step inside and the atmosphere shifts immediately to one of quiet reverence. Soft light filters through the windows, illuminating the simple interior where the crucifix that spoke to Saint Francis hangs above the altar.

Before leaving, descend to the crypt where Saint Clare herself rests. Pilgrims and visitors often pause here in silent prayer, creating a deeply moving moment of reflection within one of Assisi's most sacred spaces.



Basilica di Santa Chiara

#2. Via San Rufino

From the basilica, follow Via San Rufino as it winds gently uphill through the heart of old Assisi. This atmospheric street connects the sacred and civic sides of town, passing beneath stone archways and alongside medieval houses whose shutters open to reveal glimpses of daily life. Small shops tucked into ancient doorways invite browsing, while quiet corners offer benches for catching your breath and absorbing the timeless rhythm of this remarkable place.

#3. Cathedral of San Rufino

At the top of the street is the Cathedral of San Rufino, honoring the patron saint and martyr of Assisi. Its Romanesque facade ranks among Umbria's finest, carved with intricate symbolic figures, mythical beasts, and geometric patterns that reward close inspection. Inside, the simple baptismal font holds extraordinary significance: this is where both Saint Francis and Saint Clare were baptized,

anchoring Assisi's sacred identity centuries before pilgrims from around the world would walk these stones.



Cathedral of San Rufino

#4. Church of Santa Maria Maggiore and the Tomb of Saint Carlo Acutis

Follow the lane downhill a short distance to the Church of Santa Maria Maggiore, one of the oldest churches in Assisi and now home to one of the most visited tombs in Italy. Within the Sanctuary of the Spoliation, a side chapel built on the very spot where Saint Francis renounced his worldly possessions, rests the body of Saint Carlo Acutis, canonized in 2025 as the first millennial saint of the Catholic Church. He was fifteen years old when he died of leukemia in 2006, and it was his wish to be buried in Assisi, the city he loved above all others.

Behind the glass of his tomb, he rests dressed simply in jeans and a sweatshirt, exactly as those who knew him remember him. Carlo spent his brief life cataloguing Eucharistic miracles from around the world and building a website to share them, calling the internet his highway to heaven. The church draws pilgrims from every corner of the world, and the atmosphere inside is one of genuine stillness and devotion.

#5. Temple of Minerva

Dominating one side of the Piazza del Comune, the Temple of Minerva stands as one of the best-preserved Roman structures in Italy. Six towering Corinthian columns from the first century BC support a classical pediment, later

absorbed into a Christian church. Walk closer and you can trace the architectural conversation between pagan Rome and medieval Christianity, each era leaving its mark on the stone. It's a reminder that Assisi's history runs far deeper than its famous saint.



Temple of Minerva

#6. Piazza del Comune

The Piazza del Comune is the civic center of Assisi since Roman times. Medieval palaces frame the square on three sides; their stone facades weathered by centuries. Cafes spill onto the pavement, offering front-row seats to daily life in the piazza where townspeople have gathered for two thousand years. Order an espresso, claim a sunny table, and watch as locals greet each other, tourists consult maps, and street musicians fill the air with song.

#7. Rocca Maggiore

Rocca Maggiore rises above Assisi at the highest point of the town, its massive stone walls dominating the skyline. The fortress was rebuilt in the fourteenth century as a symbol of papal authority over the city after periods of rebellion. Its commanding position made it both a defensive stronghold and a clear statement of power. From the ramparts, sweeping views open in every direction.

The layout of Assisi becomes clear from this vantage point, with medieval streets cascading down the hillside and the town unfolding into its upper and lower sections.

#8. Basilica of Saint Francis of Assisi

The Basilica of Saint Francis stands at the western edge of Assisi's historic center and serves as the town's principal pilgrimage church. More than a single structure, the complex consists of two churches built one above the other, creating one of the most remarkable artistic and architectural achievements of medieval Europe.

The Lower Basilica forms the oldest part of the complex. Entered through a Gothic portal, the interior is dimly lit and contemplative, with soft light revealing deep blues, rich reds, and gold accents across its vaulted ceilings and chapels. The atmosphere is intimate and solemn. Frescoes by some of the most important artists of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries decorate the walls, including works by Cimabue, Pietro Lorenzetti, and Simone Martini. Their paintings depict scenes from the life of Christ and the early Franciscan movement with striking emotional depth.

Beneath the Lower Basilica lies the crypt of Saint Francis. The saint's tomb rests within a simple stone chamber where pilgrims from around the world gather in quiet reflection and prayer. The space is intentionally restrained, allowing the focus to remain on the profound spiritual legacy of the founder of the Franciscan Order.

Above this contemplative church rises the Upper Basilica, where the atmosphere changes dramatically. Tall Gothic windows fill the interior with light, illuminating the famous fresco cycle attributed to Giotto and his workshop. These scenes unfold along the nave like a visual narrative of the life of Saint Francis. Among the most memorable episodes are Francis renouncing his family's wealth before the bishop, preaching to the birds in joyful harmony with nature, and receiving the stigmata on Mount La Verna. Giotto's storytelling, emotion, and sense of movement marked a turning point in Western art.

The soaring vaults above are painted in deep celestial blue and decorated with golden stars, enhancing the luminous quality of the space. The contrast between the darker, contemplative Lower Basilica and the radiant Upper Basilica creates a powerful artistic and spiritual progression within the same monument. Behind

the basilica, a broad terrace opens toward the Umbrian valley. From this vantage point, sweeping views stretch across olive groves, fields, and distant hills, offering a final moment of quiet reflection in one of Assisi's most inspiring settings.

Logistics

Train: Assisi is well connected by regional train service. Arrive at Assisi Station, in the lower town of Santa Maria degli Angeli (5 kilometers, 3 miles from the center of Assisi). From the station, frequent local buses run uphill to the historic center, stopping near the Basilica of Saint Clare and Piazza del Comune.

Bus: Local buses connect the Assisi train station in the valley with Santa Maria degli Angeli and the historic center throughout the day. The regional bus network in Umbria is operated by Busitalia (www.fsbusitalia.it/it/umbria). It provides reliable connections between major cities such as Perugia, Assisi, Gubbio, Spoleto, and Orvieto, as well as service to many smaller towns throughout the region.

Car: Driving into Assisi requires planning. Much of the historic center is a restricted-traffic zone. Visitors should park outside the walls and continue on foot or by bus. Recommended parking areas include the lots near Porta Nuova and Porta Mojano, both within walking distance of Saint Clare and the lower town entrances.

Parking: Paid parking is available at designated lots outside the restricted area. Starting your visit at Saint Clare allows for easier access and a natural walking route through town.

Restaurant Recommendations

Ristorante Bar San Francesco. Via San Francesco, 52

A surprisingly excellent choice directly facing the piazza near the Basilica of Saint Francis, recommended by our local guide despite its prime, highly visible location. We began with a generous plate of local Umbrian cheeses served with fresh fruit, followed by a comforting bowl of traditional Umbrian bean and vegetable soup, while my husband opted for a well-prepared panino.

The flavors were authentic and satisfying, proving that a restaurant with a view can still deliver quality. One side functions as a bar and pastry counter, making it equally suitable for a quick coffee and cornetto before exploring the basilica or for a relaxed lunch between festival events.

Ristorante Il Vicoletto. Via Macelli Vecchi, 1

A refined yet welcoming restaurant tucked into a quiet corner of the historic center. The menu focuses on Umbrian classics with a creative touch, including handmade pasta, seasonal vegetables, and excellent meat dishes. A strong wine list makes this an ideal choice for a relaxed evening after festival events.

Trattoria Pallotta. Via San Rufino, 6

A historic trattoria near the cathedral that feels deeply rooted in Assisi. Expect traditional Umbrian cuisine served generously, with dishes such as strangozzi pasta, roasted meats, and local legumes. Perfect for lunch during the walking tour or an early dinner before evening performances.

Day Trips: Nearby Sites, Cities, and Towns

Monte Subasio National Park. Just above Assisi, Monte Subasio offers a dramatic natural escape without ever leaving the town limits far behind. Marked trails lead through forests, wildflower meadows, and open ridgelines with sweeping views across the Umbrian Valley. It is ideal for gentle hikes, picnics, and moments of quiet reflection, especially in spring and early summer.

Bastia Umbra. 5 kilometers (3 miles) east of Assisi. Bastia Umbra offers a refreshing contrast to Umbria's hilltop medieval towns. Set on the valley floor, this working town pulses with everyday Italian life. The historic center clusters around the Church of Santa Croce, whose thirteenth-century tower rises above a tangle of narrow streets and small piazzas where locals gather for morning coffee and afternoon gelato. What makes Bastia worth a visit is its authenticity. The Thursday morning market fills the streets with vendors selling fresh produce, local cheeses, and household goods, drawing shoppers from surrounding villages.

Terme di Santo Raggio. About 5 kilometers (3 miles). Just outside Assisi, the Terme di Santo Raggio are among the region's oldest thermal sites, known since the 2nd century BC. Fed by over thirty-five mineral springs rising from Colle

Moiano, the waters have long been valued for treatments related to the digestive system, liver, and biliary tract. The serene countryside setting provides a peaceful counterpoint to Assisi's spiritual intensity, offering visitors a restorative pause amid olive groves and gentle hills. It is an ideal nearby escape for travelers seeking wellness rooted in ancient traditions.

Assisi Festivals and Sagre Throughout the Year

Assisi and its festivals are included in several chapters of this guide, including:

Chapter 20. FestaFusion Assisi August

Chapter 26. Frantoio Aperti

Chapter 35. Immersion Experience Pilgrimage

Chapter 36. Easter in Assisi

Settimana Santa and Easter Celebrations

March or April

Holy Week unfolds with reverence in Assisi, where processions move slowly through candlelit streets and ancient churches fill with sacred music. Confraternities carry statues of Christ and the Virgin through the quiet medieval lanes, creating a deeply moving atmosphere of reflection. Easter Sunday brings joyful celebration to Piazza del Comune and the basilicas, marking the renewal of spring in a setting where faith and history remain closely intertwined. Bells ring across the hilltop town, and the terraces overlooking the Umbrian valley feel especially alive with the promise of the season.

Assisi Pax Mundi (Peace Festival)

September

Concerts, cultural encounters, and moments of reflection unfold across Assisi during this international celebration dedicated to peace and dialogue among peoples. Performances in historic churches and piazzas bring together artists from around the world in tribute to the message of Saint Francis. Lectures, prayer

gatherings, and cultural events create opportunities for visitors and residents alike to reflect on themes of unity and reconciliation. The atmosphere throughout the town feels both thoughtful and hopeful, echoing Assisi's long standing identity as a place of peace.

Festa di San Francesco

October 3 to 4

Assisi honors its most beloved son, Saint Francis, with solemn ceremonies and joyful celebrations marking his feast day. Pilgrims gather from across Italy and around the world for religious services at the Basilica of Saint Francis, while the lighting of the great votive lamp symbolizes unity and peace. A different Italian region each year offers the oil for the lamp, reinforcing the saint's enduring message of fraternity and devotion.

Throughout the town, the atmosphere becomes both reverent and celebratory. Processions wind through the medieval streets as clergy, civic leaders, and residents dressed in historic costumes accompany banners and musical ensembles toward the basilica. Bells ring from ancient towers, choirs and bands fill the piazzas with sacred and traditional music, and evening illuminations cast a warm glow across Assisi's stone facades. The blend of ceremony, pageantry, and heartfelt devotion creates an experience that is at once deeply spiritual and richly rooted in local tradition.

Natale ad Assisi (Christmas in Assisi)

December 8 to January 6

The town glows with soft winter light as Christmas transforms Assisi into one of Umbria's most atmospheric holiday destinations. Nativity scenes appear in churches, caves, and medieval streets, honoring the tradition begun by Saint Francis in nearby Greccio. Concerts, markets, and midnight Mass at the basilicas create a season that feels both intimate and deeply spiritual, drawing visitors seeking a quieter, more contemplative Christmas.