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Carnevale Di Viareggio – An Alternative to Venice?

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Carnevale di Viareggio: FOLK ART ON A GIANT SCALE

Poor Burlamacco! The clown character symbolizing the world's most outsized Mardi Gras celebration is unknown outside Italy, and more's the pity. The Carnevale di Viareggio is more accessible, family-friendly, and human-dimensional than its better-known counterparts — Carnevale di Venezia, Carnevale di Rio, and Mardi Gras in New Orleans.

Viareggio is an Italian seaside resort on the Mediterranean. This Tuscan town (population 60,000) erupts into a fantastic display of gigantic floats parading through the city center five times during the month of February. Two of the parades are in the evening, with fireworks at the conclusion of the cavalcade for added excitement. Dates to remember for the 2017 Carnevale di Viareggio: February 5, 12, 18, 26, and 28.



CARNEVALE DI VIAREGGIO PARADES

The parades are the (very large) tip of a festive iceberg that includes neighborhood street fairs, all-night balls, cultural happenings for adults and children, special art exhibits, museum openings, musical and theatrical events, workshops introducing the art of paper mâché, a marathon, and a soccer tournament.

This celebration has been held since 1873 when locals decided to mark Mardi Gras by parading some colorful horse-drawn carriages through the center of town. About a quarter century later the route was shifted from via Regia to its current location, la Passeggiata al Mare, a 1.5-mile route beside the sea. This wider road made larger floats possible, and the event began to draw local attention. In 1954, the parade was broadcast on national television, and visitors from all over Italy began arriving.



Burlamacco is a pastiche of famous figures from Italy's *commedia dell'arte* and was created in 1930 by local artist Uberto Bonetti to represent Carnevale in Viareggio. Being Italian, the clown is often depicted in the company of Ondina, a curvaceous bathing beauty evoking Viareggio as a summer destination. The event Burlamacco is unique for a variety of reasons, encompassing size, substance, spectacle, site, and satire:

SIZE

Carnevale di Viareggio's decorated platforms can be more than 60 feet high, 32 feet wide, and 50 feet long, and weigh up to 40 tons. The only limit on their size is the width of the streets they navigate – and Viareggio's streets were designed without overhead wires specifically to accommodate huge floats.

SUBSTANCE

The basic material used to construct the floats is *carta a calco*, i.e., paper mâché, consisting of strips of newspaper bound with a natural "glue" of water and flour. This light, flexible, and inexpensive substance is what makes the huge dimensions feasible.; it was developed by Antonio D'Arliano, an artist from Viareggio, in 1925. It imparts an artisanal flavor, as do the many hand-held mechanics for the giant figures on the floats – rolling eyes, turning heads, and similar moving parts. Although technology is used for many elements,



Carnevale officials explain that the old-fashioned mechanics are part of the attraction and a big crowd-pleaser.

SPECTACLE

The gigantic size of the largest floats can accommodate many dozens of performers. Up to 250 locals dance on and around the most significant ones in costumes. They commit to attending rehearsals and all five parades, performing carefully choreographed "shows" set to music. Viva Las Vegas!

SITE

Since 2001, all the floats for Carnevale have been constructed at the Citadella, a purpose-built location just outside center-city Viareggio. The Citadella encompasses laboratories and 16 hangers where the volunteers develop and

assemble the floats. They also house the documentary archives, and two museums, one focused on the magic of paper mâché (Museo della Cartapesta) and the other on prize-winning art with a Carnevale theme (Museo Arte Contemporanea Carnevalotto). The museums are open to visitors; the hangers are generally off-limits in the final frenetic weeks before Carnevale, but sometimes visits are possible if arranged ahead of time.



SATIRE

Since Viareggio's Carnevale has always been an event for public amusement, from the beginning, its floats carried messages about public issues. Back in 1899, a display made fun of a secret treaty Italy had signed. In 1912 another criticized Italian foreign policy. The force of these political statements was such that the event was censored during Mussolini's reign. That kind of censorship no longer exists, but, because the parade is televised, designers must submit their ideas in advance to avoid unintended gaffes and ensure reasonable good taste. Religion is usually but not always avoided.



Today Italian politicians are more insulted if they *aren't* caricatured in Viareggio than if they are. Climate change, immigration, Europe's fortunes, and international politics are all fair game. One limitation is logistical: float planning begins in June for the following February's parade. So current events can invalidate a concept conceived months earlier.

For Carnevale 2017, one float designer was extraordinarily prescient. In June 2016 Umberto Cinquini conceived a theme with Donald Trump commanding a Los Vegas-style saloon, populated by gun-happy cowboys and pubescent cheerleaders. His vision became the most topical float of Viareggio 2017.

His is one of nine floats competing for first prize in category one. Four smaller, but still extravagant, floats contend for first prize in category two. There are prizes also for group and individual paper mâché creations. These are paper figures that may be 10 feet high, thematically linked. The "individual" category is a training ground for would-be float designers, who are often the offspring of parents or relatives who have practiced this art for decades.

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The parades and street fairs are free, but season subscriptions are available for those who want bleacher seats for all five parades. Each year 30,000 subscriptions are sold: in a town of 60,000, this illustrates the extent of local pride. Physical attendance depends mainly on the weather, from about 200,000 to 600,000 or more in recent years (not counting television and media viewership). There is an Italian saying: "*A Carnevale, ogni scherzo vale.*" Anything goes during Carnival . . . except bad weather in Viareggio.

If you plan to visit the Carnevale di Viareggio, make sure you **make your hotel reservation well in advance!**

Click here for more information about [Carnevale in Viareggio!](#)

Carnevale di Viareggio – Written by [Claudia Flisi](#) for [EuropeUpClose.com](#). Photos by [Claudia Flisi](#) and [Fondazione Carnevale di Viareggio](#).



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