

BLOOD AND SAND

Florence might be known as an elegant historical centre, but on one summer's day **Justin Meneguzzi** finds himself amid a gritty Renaissance battle right in its storied heart.

Photography by **Justin Meneguzzi**

Fans light flares as players fill the arena.



A modern day gladiator struts the pitch just before kick-off.



The marching band drums up a crowd on the way to Calcio Storico.

Heavily tattooed behemoths with almost uniformly shaved heads stroll onto the pitch. On top they're clad in sports jerseys, but the puffy pants ballooning around their thighs appear to have been plucked from the sixteenth century. Within minutes each beast is rolling in the dirt, competing for complete domination.

Let's turn back the clock. Not to the 1500s (that'll come later), but to this morning: a scorcher of a day in June. My partner Sarah and I flit over Florence's cobblestones, keeping to the shadows like a pair of touristic vampires. The air is so dry I can almost taste the dust swirling off the street. We're heading to Piazza della Signoria, one of the central squares, which stands in the shade of the Palazzo Vecchio, the city's imposing town hall. Michelangelo's *David* first posed here until a replica replaced his chiselled abs back in 1873, and we're hoping to take some snaps of the lad who usurped Italy's most famous derriere.

We're almost there when a trumpet shrieks through the air. We halt, trying to pinpoint the source as a second blast screeches down the street, followed by a low drum roll that purrs with anticipation. Seconds later, a full-blown parade bursts into a small square just behind us. Drummers, draped in red and white tunics with long feathers erupting from their caps, lead standard-bearers toting flags embroidered with Florence's blue fleur-de-lis. Despite their frivolous costume, they're a motley bunch – young and ageing, skinny and rotund – and all wear identical expressions of intensity that suggest an attempt to stave off heat stroke.

The parade pauses and the standard-bearers toss their banners into the air. The fabric pirouettes in unison before falling back into waiting hands. The regiment continues its dutiful march through the street, halting here and there for more flourishes. Sarah catches the glance I throw her way. *Where did they come from? Where are they going?* There's no option but to fall in line and follow.

We're not alone. The crowd swells as we stride across the city, with locals and tourists falling in step behind the band. It's a charming old-world spectacle and for a while it feels as though we've fallen back into Renaissance Italy. How cultured. At least it appears that way, right up until we hit a neon-pink barrier and ticket booth at Piazza Santa Croce, where a temporary stadium has been erected around a pitch made of sand. The band passes through the gates as though by osmosis, while a woman with a nest of frizzy black hair demands to know how many *biglietti* (tickets) we want to buy to what appears to be a gladiator-esque sporting event. Forking out extra euros for seats in the shade cast by the Basilica di Santa Croce seems too extravagant, so we opt for the cheaper option of sitting in the sun. If a replica *David* can bear posing in the Tuscan heat all day, surely we'll survive an afternoon perched on seats.

Although we don't know it yet, the colourful parade that lured us here is only the first part of the city's *Calcio Storico* (historic football) tradition. This ancient tournament takes place in June each year to celebrate Italy's second-favourite religion – sport. But the main event ain't no ordinary game of soccer. It's a bloody, brawling battlefield, where players compete for glory. And a cow.

The official rules of *Calcio Storico* were written back in 1580 – a couple of decades after the brutal Italian Wars – by Florentine count Giovanni de' Bardi. Over the course of several matches, four teams – each representing a quarter of the city – fight for possession of a ball using any means necessary. Players from the two teams competing in each game thrash each other for a gruelling 50 minutes under the belting sun. Every year athletes are injured. Some even get knocked



The aim of the game is to pin your opponent – by any means necessary.



Florence's Duomo turns to gold during a scorching sunset.

unconscious and stretchered off the pitch. On average, seven players are thumped out of each game before the final whistle, reducing each team's clout as substitutions are not allowed.

The chance to witness this carnage (and football's origins) has punters crammed into every square centimetre of space on the bleachers.

Flares fire in front of us, choking the air with the smell of sulphur and covering the pitch in hazy green smog. The marching band returns, layering drums and trumpets over the chants booming from the crowd. Finally, 54 meaty men in frilly pants – sapphire blue for team Santa Croce and emerald green for San Giovanni – square off in the dust, waiting for the screech of a whistle.

The ball vanishes from sight almost immediately, like the Snitch in a game of Quidditch. Blue and green collide as men crash together. Each player's arsenal features elements

of rugby and soccer, mashed up with martial arts. Some just kick wildly at limbs in an attempt to knock rivals to the ground.


The strategy is clear enough. If each man pins his opponent then the last remaining bloke can thrust the liberated ball between the goal posts. But it's not long until the first player – a blue Santa Croce – is carted off the field. Suddenly the blues are outmanned and the whole game goes to the dogs. Frantic scrambling takes over, mixed with cursing in Italian and lewd hand gestures. Shirtless bodies pile everywhere on the field. With the audience bellowing from each side, the scene resembles a war zone.

In a rare moment of unity two competing players beg for water from the crowd, who douse the parched men with precious aqua from their bottles. In fact, on all sides of the arena people are splashing water onto the pitch either to stifle the dust or to help save the men from dehydration.

The red and white ball reappears. One of the San Giovanni troop has been hiding it behind his back. Three Santa Croce players pounce and wrestle the man to the ground, but not before he kicks the ball across the square. A teammate catches it and lobs it neatly behind the goals

for a point. But there's no grand FIFA-style celebration. No dancing or peacocking with shirts pulled overhead. Instead, the prostrate players unpin each other, get back up, and return to the starting position to kick the ball off again from the centre.

The game continues in this manner for the full 50 minutes. It's a display of dust punctuated by the sight of a stretcher carrying off casualties. The ball disappears again, and again, before popping up from behind someone's puffy pantaloons.

Finally, three short blows on the whistle bring the contest to an end. The battle is won. The players leap up, shake hands and laugh. They look haggard, with dirt and blood mixed on their faces, but in a short time they'll be sharing a beer at the nearest bar. An oblivious white cow trots out – the prize for San Giovanni's victory. And, just like the dust hovering over the game, the crowd disperses into the city streets. 

Shirtless bodies pile everywhere on the field. With the audience bellowing from each side, the scene resembles a war zone.

GET PLANNING



GET THERE

Qatar Airways flies from Sydney to Rome via Doha from AU\$1710 return. From there it's a 1.5-hour train journey to Florence on the high-speed rail network with one-way tickets from AU\$35.

qatarairways.com
raileurope.com



STAY THERE

Tasso Hostel is a former theatre converted into a charming hostel with clean rooms, a kitchen and a spacious beer garden. It's a little off the beaten track but the surrounding leafy boulevards and the hostel's heritage make it worthwhile. Private rooms from AU\$53.

tassohostelflorence.com



GET INFORMED

There are three matches in the Calcio Storico tournament. The final is always held on 24 June, which coincides with the annual feast day celebrations of San Giovanni, otherwise known as St John the Baptist: Florence's patron saint. Tickets start at AU\$45.

visitflorence.com

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Exposure: F/2.8 1/6sec ISO: 400



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