



THE LOVE ITALY GUIDE N. 002

Ferragosto

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The word looks like it means "iron August," but it comes from the Latin *Feriae Augusti* - the rest, or holiday, of Augustus. The first Roman emperor formalized it in 18 BC, folding older late-summer harvest festivals into a stretch of paid rest for laborers and farm animals alike. Two thousand years later the date still empties Italian cities and fills the beaches, which is exactly why it earns a place here as Guide 002 in The Love Italy Guide series.

Where the Word Comes From

Ferragosto is a contraction of *Feriae Augusti*, the "festivals of Augustus," a period of rest the emperor established in 18 BC to follow the agricultural labor of the summer. It absorbed earlier Roman celebrations such as the *Consualia*, which honored *Consus*, a god associated with the stored harvest. In the original Roman calendar the holidays ran across much of August, with workers offering greetings to their employers

in exchange for a bonus - a custom that, in some tellings, survived in one form or another for centuries.

The date landed firmly on 15 August later, when the Catholic Church aligned the celebration with the Feast of the Assumption of Mary - the Assunzione - which marks the belief that the Virgin Mary was taken bodily into heaven. Today the two occasions sit on the same day: a civic summer holiday layered over a major religious feast.

How Italians Actually Spend the Day

For most Italians, Ferragosto means one thing: getting out of the city. Families head to the coast, the mountains, or the countryside, often for a long lunch or a grill with friends. The phrase "gita fuori porta" - a trip just outside the town gates - captures the spirit, and the beach on 15 August is generally shoulder-to-shoulder. In many towns the celebrations spill into fireworks, patron-saint processions, sagre (food festivals), and open-air concerts.

Because the holiday falls in the middle of the traditional vacation month, it frequently anchors a much longer break. Plenty of Italians take the surrounding week - or the whole of August - off, and it is common for shops, restaurants, and workshops in cities like Rome, Milan, and Turin to close with a handwritten "chiuso per ferie" sign in the window.

The Fascist-Era Day Trips

One reason Ferragosto became a mass travel day traces to the 1930s. Under the Fascist regime, state organizations arranged the "Treni popolari di Ferragosto" - heavily discounted popular trains - so that working families who could not afford a real vacation could take a day at the sea or in the hills on and around 15 August. Fares were offered at reduced rates for round trips of varying distances, which put the coast within reach for city dwellers who had never seen it.

It is also commonly said that this initiative helped cement the modern habit of the Ferragosto excursion and even influenced dishes eaten on the road, since travelers packed food to bring along. Whatever the exact chain of cause and effect, the mid-century push turned a religious feast and an ancient rest day into a national moment of movement.

What This Means for Visitors

If you are traveling in Italy in mid-August, plan around the closures rather than being caught out by them. In the big cities, expect many family-run restaurants, bakeries, pharmacies, and small businesses to shut for the day or longer, while transport can run on a reduced holiday timetable. Coastal towns, lake resorts, and mountain villages, by contrast, tend to be at their busiest and liveliest.

Our practical advice: book restaurants and accommodation well ahead, check opening hours before you set out, and either lean into the beach-town energy or use the emptied cities to your advantage - major museums and monuments often stay open, and the usual crowds and traffic thin out considerably.

Regional Traditions and Food

There is no single national Ferragosto dish, but regions keep their own customs. In parts of Rome and Lazio, pollo con i peperoni - chicken braised with peppers - is a classic holiday plate, while grilled meats, cold pasta salads, watermelon, and anything portable for a picnic show up across the country. In Tuscany and elsewhere, roast pigeon has an older association with the day, though it is far less common now.

The feast also drives some of Italy's most striking local events. Siena runs the second of its two annual Palio horse races on 16 August, tied to the Assumption, and towns up and down the peninsula hold their own processions, illuminations, and fireworks the night of the 15th.

Myths Worth Retiring

Myth: Ferragosto is purely a Catholic holiday. In reality its roots are Roman and imperial, predating the Christian feast by centuries. The Assumption was later aligned to the same date, so the day carries both an ancient civic origin and a religious one.

Myth: The whole country simply shuts down and nothing happens. Cities do quiet down and many businesses close, but resorts, beaches, and festival towns are at peak activity, and major cultural sites frequently stay open. It is a day of movement, not stillness.

Myth: "Ferragosto" means "iron August." The resemblance to ferro (iron) is a coincidence of sound. The name descends from the Latin Feriae Augusti, the holidays of the emperor Augustus.

Frequently Asked Questions

Is Ferragosto a public holiday across all of Italy?

Yes. 15 August is a national public holiday observed throughout the country, with public offices, banks, and many businesses closed. It is one of Italy's fixed civic holidays and coincides with the Feast of the Assumption.

Should we avoid visiting Italy during Ferragosto?

Not necessarily - it just calls for a plan. If you want beaches and festivals, this is the liveliest week to have them; if you prefer emptier cities and shorter museum lines, the exodus works in your favor. Book ahead and confirm opening hours, and you can make the day work either way.

What do people typically eat on Ferragosto?

There is no one national dish, but grilled and picnic food dominates. Regional favorites include Rome's pollo con i peperoni, cold pasta, roast meats, and watermelon, usually eaten outdoors at a long lunch with family and friends.