



THE LOVE ITALY GUIDE N. 002

Ferragosto

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On 18 BC, the emperor Augustus declared a stretch of late-summer rest days he called the *Feriae Augusti*, the "festivals of Augustus" - and more than two thousand years later, Italians still take his holiday, now folded into 15 August. That single day has become the pivot of the entire Italian summer: shops shutter, cities empty, and beaches fill from Liguria to Sicily. This is Guide 002 in The Love Italy Guide series.

The Emperor Who Invented a Long Weekend

The word Ferragosto comes directly from the Latin *Feriae Augusti*, the "rest days of Augustus." Augustus introduced the period in 18 BC to give workers a break after the long labour of the harvest, linking it to older Roman festivals such as the *Consualia*, which honoured *Consus*, a god associated with the storing of grain. Originally the celebrations ran across much of August, and the holiday was a moment when even draft animals were released from work and decorated with flowers.

The fixed date of 15 August came much later. The Catholic Church settled the Feast of the Assumption of Mary on that day, and over the centuries the ancient pagan rest period and the religious feast merged into the single national holiday Italians observe now. This is why Ferragosto carries both a beach-and-barbecue mood and, in many towns, a solemn church procession on the very same afternoon.

What Actually Happens on 15 August

Ferragosto is a full public holiday across Italy, which means most shops, offices, banks, and many restaurants close. The classic way to spend it is the *gita fuori porta* - a trip just outside town - or a long lunch that stretches into the evening. For families this often means a large outdoor meal, and grilling is common enough that "Ferragosto" and barbecue are nearly synonymous in casual speech.

In the religious calendar the day is the Assumption of Mary, and towns hold Masses, processions, and firework displays in her honour. Some celebrations are genuinely spectacular local traditions: Siena runs its second Palio horse race of the year on 16 August, and coastal and lakeside towns light the night sky with fireworks over the water.

The Great August Shutdown

Ferragosto anchors a much wider phenomenon: much of Italy effectively pauses for a large part of August, and the days around the 15th are the peak. Family-run shops, trattorias, and even some pharmacies hang a *chiuso per ferie* ("closed for holidays") sign, sometimes for two or three weeks. In big cities such as Rome and Milan, whole neighbourhoods can feel deserted as residents head for the coast or the mountains.

For a traveller this is a double-edged thing. Museums and major tourist sites in the cities usually stay open, and the streets are quieter than at almost any other time of year. But local, non-touristy businesses may be closed, public transport can run on a holiday timetable, and coastal resorts, by contrast, are at their most crowded and expensive.

Food, the Real Centre of the Day

Ferragosto lunch is the heart of the holiday, and the menu shifts by region. In Rome, tradition points to *pollo con i peperoni* - chicken braised with bell peppers - a dish historically eaten at this time of year. Elsewhere the table leans on whatever is easy to cook outdoors or in advance: grilled meats, cold pasta salads, watermelon, and plenty of wine.

One event stands out. The town of Sagra culture means countless local food festivals cluster around mid-August, but the most famous single tradition is arguably the Ferragosto feast itself as a communal act - long tables, extended family, and a meal that is meant to last for hours rather than minutes.

Practical Advice for Visitors

If you are in Italy on 15 August, plan the day around the closures rather than fighting them. Book restaurants ahead, since the ones that do open fill quickly, and stock up on groceries the day before. Confirm transport times in advance, as trains, buses, and metro lines frequently switch to a reduced holiday schedule.

Our advice is to lean into the mood instead of resisting it. A city like Rome or Florence on Ferragosto morning, with its emptied streets and open monuments, offers a version of Italy few visitors ever see. If you want the beach, accept that you will share it - and book accommodation on the coast well in advance, because prices peak and rooms sell out around this date.

Myths Worth Retiring

Myth: Ferragosto is purely a religious holiday. In fact its roots are pre-Christian and imperial - Augustus created the rest period nearly two millennia before it was tied to the Feast of the Assumption. The religious and secular strands run side by side today.

Myth: Everything in Italy is closed and travel is pointless. Major museums, monuments, and tourist-facing businesses in the big cities generally stay open, and the reduced crowds can make it one of the calmer times to see a famous site. It is local, everyday businesses that shut.

Myth: Ferragosto is just one day off. Officially it is 15 August, but in practice it marks the crest of a weeks-long holiday season when a large share of the country takes its annual leave.

Frequently Asked Questions

Is Ferragosto a good or bad time to visit Italy?

It depends on what you want. Cities are quiet and their major sights stay open, which many travellers love, but coastal resorts are packed and pricey, and many small local businesses close. With a little planning around closures and transport, it can be a fine time to travel.

Why do so many Italian shops close in August?

August is the traditional month for annual leave in Italy, and Ferragosto on the 15th is its peak. Many family-run businesses close for one to three weeks - you will see *chiuso per ferie* signs - so both owners and staff can take their holiday together, usually at the sea or in the mountains.

What do Italians actually eat on Ferragosto?

There is no single national dish, but the day centres on a long, shared meal. Grilled meats, cold pasta salads, and watermelon are common, and in Rome *pollo con i peperoni* - chicken with peppers - is the classic Ferragosto plate. The point is less the specific food than the hours spent at the table with family.