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The living *presepe* of Casarano

Naples is famous for its artisan crib scenes, but **Hannah Bellis** ventures beyond the city to the hill town of Casarano to discover a nativity scene with a difference...



The traditional *presepe* (top) comes to life in the living *presepe* of Casarano (bottom)



Celebratory fireworks in Sorrento's Piazza Tasso

Travel from Naples to Sorrento and you'll find a very different kind of nativity scene... The living presepe of Casorano takes place just after Christmas



The month of December brings crib scenes showing the Holy Family in the stable at the time of Jesus' birth to cities all over the world, wherever there is a Christian or Catholic faith. In Spain they are called *belens*. In France there are *santons*, in Poland *szopki*, and in Italy, they are *presepi*. No one country can claim these for their own, though one account does credit their invention to Italy, when Saint Francis of Assisi constructed a nativity scene in a cave in Greccio.

One city that would certainly try to claim them for their own is Naples, which has such a strong history of artisan presepe craftsmanship that every year one of its streets, via San Gregorio Armeno, transforms itself into a presepe street market, where the artisans bring their intricate carvings out onto the street and the place buzzes with seasonal celebrations. The largest of these figures are life size and they can cost as much as €500 each, so it seems very wrong to have them stood out in the street.

From the tiny cribs added into to shop windows to the elaborate displays that fill churches, hundreds of presepi are erected in the city in December. As well as the Holy

More than 150 costumed performers take part in the living presepe

Family, shepherds and wise men, figures of blacksmiths, traders, stall holders and craftsmen are common, representing an entire population alongside the manger scene. A new figure that has introduced itself into the Neapolitan presepe in the past 20 years is the Catalan *caganer*, a figure in a red cap relieving himself in the street. The *caganer* is supposed to bring good luck, so it is no surprise that the superstitious Neapolitans have adopted him for their own presepe.

Travel from Naples on the Circumvesuviana railway to Sorrento and you'll find a very different kind of presepe, and one that certainly won't feature the *caganer*. The living presepe of Casarlano takes place just after Christmas and continues into the early New Year, with a day or two off around Epiphany.

Casarlano is a hill village overlooking the town of Sorrento, about two and a half kilometres away. It is not usually a tourist area, but those who do visit find a quiet and traditional Italian hill



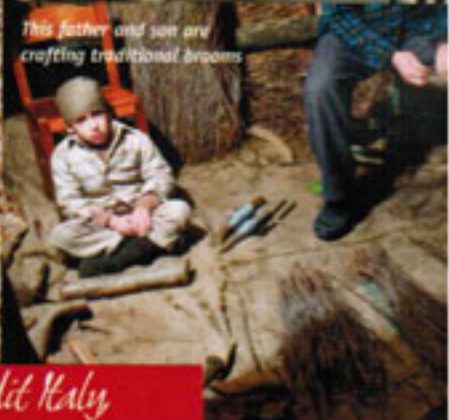
The costumes are mostly home-made, so forgive the modern footwear



Scenes from agricultural life complete the tableau



In Naples, presepe artisans make figures of all sizes



This father and son are crafting traditional brooms

No country can claim these for their own, though one account does credit Italy when Saint Francis of Assisi constructed a nativity scene in Greccio



Via San Gregorio Armeno in Naples celebrates



Jesus in this nativity scene is represented by a real baby

A village transforming itself in celebration of Christmas is quite a sight to behold and is the perfect way to embrace the festive atmosphere of Italy



There's a role for everyone



Traditional embroidery and crocheting are on show



Handcrafted presepi on display in the street



Young costumed performers re-create a family meal

➤ town, with fantastic views across Sorrento and the Bay of Naples. This year, from the 26th to the 30th December, and again on the 2nd, then the 5th to the 7th and the 11th to the 13th of January, between 6 and 8pm, visitors will find a very different place awaiting them.

The main square is transformed into an elaborate set with more than 150 costumed inhabitants. As well as the Holy Family, you'll see shepherds tending live sheep and cattle, women washing and cooking, carpenters hammering, bakers slicing loaves, children at play – a living tableau that draws visitors to the city every Christmas. With the real livestock and a real live baby Jesus, it has all the sounds and smells of a real crib scene too, something you'll never see in the figures at via San Gregorio Armeno, no matter how much you pay.

A village transforming itself in celebration of Christmas is quite a sight to behold and is the perfect way to embrace the festive atmosphere of Italy. Celebrate as the Italians do and soak up this unique bit of theatre. Whether you also choose to sample the Neapolitan Christmas meal of fried eel is entirely at your discretion... ■

GETTING THERE

➤ BY PLANE

You can fly direct to Naples Capodicino airport from many cities across the UK and Ireland, though do check carefully as some of the regional airports, such as Bristol and Birmingham, don't operate direct flights in December.

➤ BY TAXI, TRAIN AND BUS

From the airport, it is a 20-minute taxi ride to Stazione Centrale Garibaldi in Naples, where you can get a train to Sorrento station on the Circumvesuviana line for €3, which takes about 1 hour. From Sorrento you can take the local Autolinee Cooperativa bus to Casarlano for €1. There are nine buses a day.

➤ BY FOOT

It is only 2km to Casarlano from Sorrento, but as some parts of the road have no pavement, this is not recommended.