

In Italy, San Marino stays true

15 August 2012 | By Andy Jarosz

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The three towers of San Marino have become the country's most popular symbols. (Ken Scicluna/AWL/Getty)

From the top of Cesta Tower – the highest point in San Marino -- you can see the entire country spreading out below. Dominating the historic heart of San Marino, the stone government buildings of Old Town cling to the side of a hill, which rises sharply from the surrounding plateau.

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Despite Old Town's congested, narrow streets, there are no traffic lights anywhere in San Marino. Instead, the civil police— who have almost no crime to contend with -- keep themselves busy patrolling the major road junctions in their bright yellow and blue uniforms. As one of the world's smallest countries, with a population of under 32,000, San Marino occupies an area only one-third the size of Washington DC, and you are never more than four kilometres from the Italian border.

San Marino's status as a republic goes back to 301AD, making it the world's oldest, when the rocky land was given to the stone cutter Marinus by the local nobility as a present for his charitable acts to the community. Despite occasional army invasions led by power-hungry bishops, San Marino has largely preserved its autonomy throughout the last 1,700 years by consistently backing the winning side in the many power struggles between its warring neighbours. The foundation of Italy in 1861 formally recognised San Marino's status and ended all threats to its sovereignty.

San Marino's economy relied heavily on agriculture until the 1950s, when travellers began flocking to the stylish Italian resorts that were being developed along the Adriatic coast near Rimini. As a result of this tourism boom, visitors also began taking day trips to San Marino, curious to see the little hilltop nation that is visible on a clear day from much of the coastline.

Since San Marino is surrounded on all sides by Italy, the influence of Italian culture is very strong. Italian is the official language and locals travel freely to and from Italy for social events, leisure excursions and even to commute to work. Sports fans cheer for Italy in major international soccer tournaments (their own team, which they take pride in, has only won one competitive match since 1990). The Sammarinese even use different words when speaking about their Italian neighbours (*forestieri*) and other foreigners (*stranieri*).

Yet a distinct Sammarinese culture still survives, often just below the surface. The use of the San Marino dialect, for example, has declined in the last 50 years, but recent attempts to revive it have been championed by Francesco “Checco” Guidi, a popular Sammarinese poet. As he recites his poems celebrating the local traditions and culture, he often uses a dialect that may leave most Italians (and many young Sammarinese) scratching their heads in bewilderment.

The Italian influence is understandably strong in the local cuisine, but there are also a handful of distinctly Sammarinese dishes. Fava bean soup is especially popular in the cool winter months, while rabbit stew flavoured with fennel is a year-round favourite. *Cacciatello* is the most typical Sammarinese dessert; a cake made with a rich mix of eggs, dough, lemon and vanilla – and with San Marino enjoying the highest life expectancy for males of any nation in the world, perhaps their diet deserves a closer look.

In other oddities, San Marino's carefully preserved political system has a unique twist – it has two heads of state. On more than one foreign trip, the dual role has led to embarrassment and a rushed search for a spare chair when only one place has been prepared.

The Captains Regent (the Sammarinese term for the two heads of state) serve a six month term and cannot hold the position again for a further three years. During their time in office they cannot drive a car -- the use of a chauffeur is mandatory even for short journeys – and this pampering comes to a sudden end as they enjoy no ceremonial titles or official privileges once their term is completed.

Visitors to San Marino can enter the [Parliament Building](#) and see the lavishly decorated Great and General Council Hall, the name of the debating chamber where the Captains Regent and the other 58 elected representatives meet each month. When the government is not sitting, the room is also used as a venue for civil weddings.

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Another popular attraction for visitors is the [State Post Office](#), where staff will place a colourful stamp in visitors' passports as evidence of their visit to the world's smallest republic. The [three towers of San Marino](#), named Guaita, Cesta and Montale, have become the country's most popular symbols and many visitors make their way up the cobblestones to these medieval fortifications to enjoy splendid views across the country and surrounding Italian landscape.

Most restaurants in San Marino cater specifically to tourists, and Russian menus are on display in many establishments. The increase in inexpensive flights between Russia and the holiday town of Rimini has led to a rapid increase in Russian visitors to San Marino. But there are a handful of restaurants that locals and forestieri frequent. One such place is [Cantina di Bacco](#) in the heart of Old Town, where owner Luigi Monetta serves up local favourites such as black risotto, along with a selection of Sammarinese wines like the fruity red Brugneto. Another favourite is [Il Piccolo](#), a short distance from the Old Town, which is renowned for the quality of its seafood.

San Marino may be one of the world's smallest nations, but for those who take the time to look, it is much more than a place to add another stamp to the passport.

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