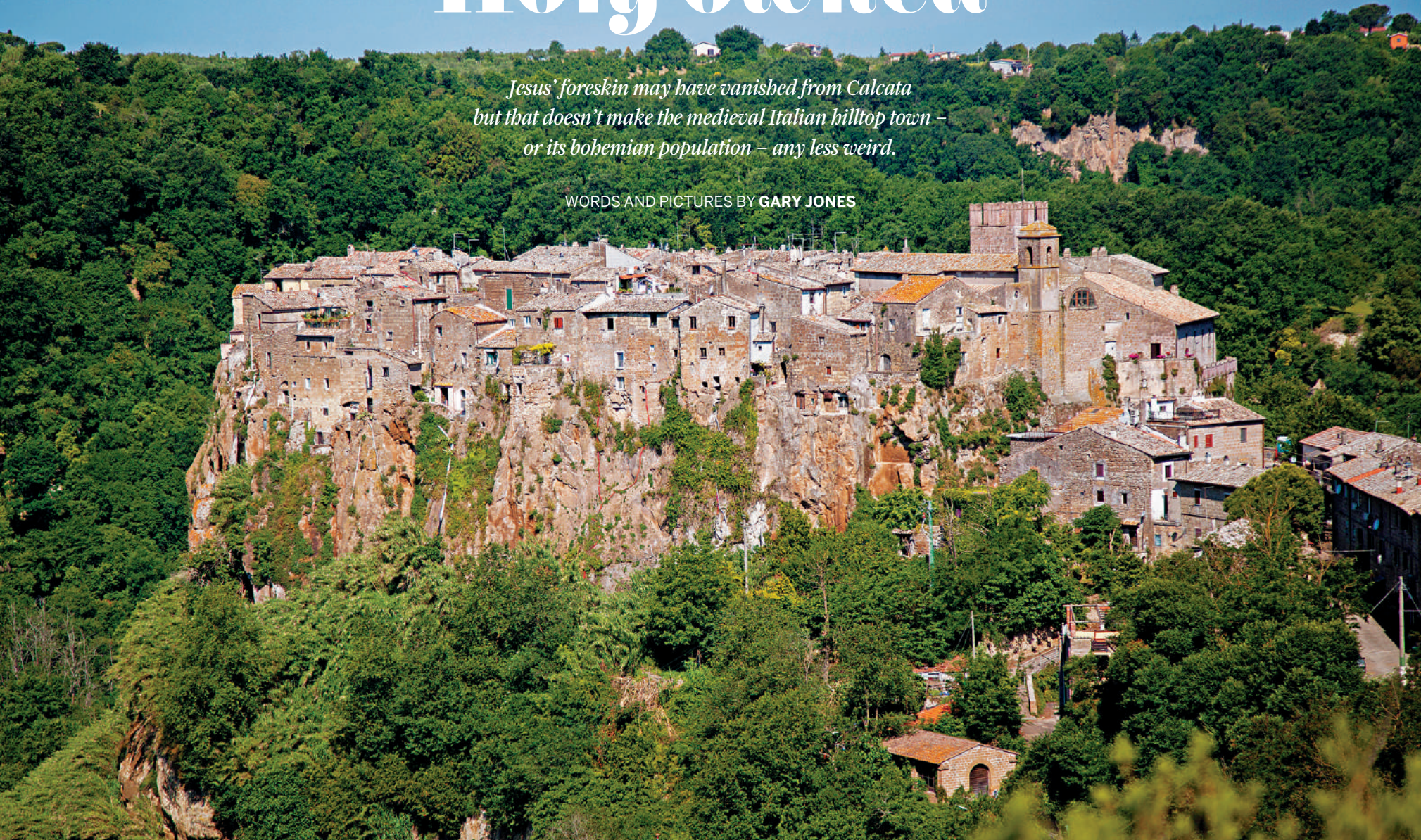


DESTINATION

Holy owned

Jesus' foreskin may have vanished from Calcata but that doesn't make the medieval Italian hilltop town – or its bohemian population – any less weird.

WORDS AND PICTURES BY GARY JONES



IMAGINE ALL THE casinos of Vegas suddenly bolted shut. How would Siem Reap fair if Angkor Wat were not just down the road, and what would become of Niagara Falls (the city) without Niagara Falls (the falls)? Imagine, then, Calcata's dilemma when the parish priest, one day in 1983, announced that the foreskin of Jesus Christ, which he had kept in a shoebox at the back of his wardrobe, had "vanished".

The *Santissimo Prepuzio*, the "blessed foreskin", had drawn pilgrims to the ancient Italian village for centuries, and the fate of the holy relic remains a mystery. Calcata, however, shrugged off the loss of the weirdest visitor attraction in the world. By the early 1980s, the picturesque hamlet, located just 50km north of Rome, was well on its way to reinvention anyway.

Calcata, historically, had been a spiritual stopover for the devout, but the hilltop community had – before misplacing its miraculous membrane – begun to embrace all things new age, welcoming bohemians,

hippies, artists and kooks. Outsiders were now calling Calcata the *paese di fricchettoni*, or the "village of freaks".

The drive from Rome today is uneventful until rounding a green-canopied bend to witness a scene straight out of *Game of Thrones*. Perched on a sheer-sided stump of volcanic rock that rises 40 metres from a forested river valley below, Calcata's tightly packed disarray of medieval houses and cave dwellings appears to have burst from the land itself.

Entrance to the fortress-like village is via an arched stone gate and narrow passageway, meaning no cars inside. The track zigs and then zags and the story of Calcata and the redeemer's foreskin begins here, in the 16th century, in a dank cave-cum-barn halfway up the cobbled incline.

According to folklore, a German mercenary, wounded during the 1527 Sack of Rome, was captured near Calcata and imprisoned in the cave. The soldier's swag contained a silver reliquary, which he hid under cattle dung and straw, and was

unable to recover before his release and subsequent death from injuries. The reliquary was only discovered 30 years later, but placed Calcata firmly on the path of righteousness.

The passageway opens onto a compact, sun-bleached piazza that – this being a Saturday afternoon – buzzes with day-trippers from the Italian capital. Stalls punt cracked-turquoise jewellery and flower-child trinkets. A two-man band tunes up and teens scoff gelato on the steps of the Chiesa del Santissimo Nome di Gesù ("the Church of the Most Holy Name of Jesus"), from which the relic would once be paraded each year on January 1, the Day of the Holy Circumcision.

Someone, somewhere, is torturing *O Sole Mio* on a trumpet, and though I cannot get a signal on my phone, I can buy a "teleportation hat" in the magic shop.

There are no hotels in the village but I've booked a sight-unseen room in a private home. The owner calls her cliff-edge dwelling *L'isola Che Non C'era* ("The island

that wasn't there"). It has three for-rent bedrooms, including the Room of the Witch Nilde (with faux cobwebs and Halloween décor) and the Refuge of Tinkerbell and Peter Pan (brighter, with woodland murals).

Disconcertingly, I've been allocated the Room of the Fairy Nimir, and a crude painting of a winged, raven-haired and ample-bosomed sylph hangs over my bed.

In 2007, *The New York Times* argued that Calcata "may be the grooviest village in Italy". After dark, however, when the city dwellers have tootled home, there is something satisfyingly creepy about this languorous corner of Lazio. With only about 60 permanent residents (including a kohl-eyed sexagenarian Egyptologist who lives in a cave with her crows), Calcata is like a film set for a disturbing fairy tale.

Think of the vengeful Pied Piper of legend, luring youngsters away from their families, never to be seen again. The truth is nearly as strange: once upon a time, Calcata's residents did disappear – and not just the children, but all of them!



Clockwise from left: Calcata town; musicians play in the main square; throne sculptures in the square; the Caffè Kafir is a self-made shrine to its owner, actor Gianni Macchia; Pancho Garrison, a Texan who runs a cave restaurant; ancient houses in the village.



Calcata's 20th-century reinvention began with the devastating Messina earthquake of 1908. In the decades that followed, communities across Italy were surveyed for their vulnerability to destructive acts of God, and Calcata was deemed unsafe in 1935. A new town, Calcata Nuova, would be built nearby.

New housing wasn't actually ready until the late 1960s, and abandoned Calcata Vecchia ("Old Calcata") soon attracted the interest of the counterculture movement, with hippies and slackers squatting in empty properties before purchasing them for a song. When the condemnation order was eventually lifted, the new residents – both Italian and foreign – found they had their very own bohemian village.

Calcata is humming again come Sunday afternoon, another batch of visitors

browsing its galleries and dining in the handful of restaurants. One popular eatery is Grotta dei Germogli ("sprout cave"), run by 66-year-old Pancho Garrison, a sprightly and sprite-like former dancer from Texas who arrived in Rome in 1976 and "kept falling in love." Garrison discovered Calcata in the early 1980s.

The pre-Roman Faliscans used the hilltop as a sacred ritual site for a reason, the American argues, and a mysterious energy emanates from the stump.

"I'm amazed at the people who are drawn here," says Garrison, who serves outlandish Italian-inspired fusion dishes. "I don't think anyone is normal – we're all crazy, or at least different. The people here want a place where their craziness can come out."

One of Calcata's most flamboyant personalities must be 70-something Italian actor Gianni Macchia, whose coffee shop-cum-bar is a shrine to ... well, to Gianni Macchia, its interior a dense collage of photos, newspaper cuttings and mementos of a busy career in racy B-movies such as *Love Me, Baby, Love Me!*, *When Love is Lust* and *A Wrong Way to Love*.

Macchia on this day is in Rome, but that's OK because I've soon seen quite enough of him. Here he is with Bianca Jagger; on a motorbike; pouting; stripped to the waist; grappling with a female co-star in the rain; wearing only a codpiece ... Which kind of brings us back to the foreskin.

The general belief is that, back in 1983, the *Santissimo Prepuzio* was secreted away

to the Vatican. Though the holy relic had remained in Calcata for most of the 20th century, in 1900, Pope Leo XIII – concerned that it might inspire "an irreverent curiosity" – had announced that anyone who spoke of it would be excommunicated. In Calcata, at least, he was largely ignored.

Heading back to L'isola Che Non C'era, I buy wine from a sweet but doddering old gent who fills bottles from a polyethylene drum, smashing in new stoppers with a mallet. Soon the cheap plonk will do its trick, a full moon will illuminate the valley and the missing offcut of Christ will be forgotten.

In the Room of the Fairy Nimir, I'll sleep soundly under the gaze of a schoolboy-fantasy female, content that such a joyfully odd place as Calcata exists. And all is well with the cosmos. ■

