

Taking a Traditional Summer Siesta

By FRANCIS X. ROCCA in Rome

In the opening shots of Dino Risi's classic dark comedy "Il Sorpasso" (1962), the character played by Vittorio Gassman speeds his Lancia convertible through the streets of Rome, which lie utterly deserted in broad daylight. Searching in vain for an unshuttered shop, he finally discovers an open apartment window, and calls up to a stranger played by Jean-Louis Trintignant. Minutes later, the two are racing past the city's most famous landmarks, including the Spanish Steps and St. Peter's Basilica, with hardly a soul in sight.

To non-Italians, these scenes might seem mysteriously dreamlike or surrealistic. They are, in fact, a piece of documentary realism, since they take place on the national holiday of Ferragosto, Aug. 15, when Rome and other Italian cities are at their emptiest. This weekend is the great watershed between the annual "summer exodus" of vacationers, which began in late July, and their gradual re-entry, stretching out over the remainder of this month.

The transition isn't nearly as dramatic today as when Risi made his film half a century ago. According to Magda Antonioli, who teaches the economics of tourism at Milan's Bocconi University, Italians are increasingly both free and inclined to take vacations at other times of the year. And low-cost flights have made it easier than ever for foreign tourists to come here, so the historic centers of Italy's most celebrated cities never truly empty out.

Nevertheless, by mid-August a normally overstuffed, chaotic Rome has been transformed into a very different place, one that is in many respects more peaceful. You can drive through town in half the usual time, from Porta Pia to the Vatican in 20 minutes, for instance, and actually find a parking spot at the other end. Relieved of their usual stress, those cab drivers, waiters and shop clerks still on the job are friendlier and more helpful than usual, even if they'd rather be on the beach.

The custom has less charming effects, too. According to Lt. Col. Ubaldo Del Monaco of the *Carabinieri*, Italy's national gendarmerie, August is one of the "highest-risk" periods for home burglaries, which, depending on one's calculations of the relative risk to person versus property, is an incentive either to stay home or to go away. And in an annual national scandal, thousands of pet owners who can't be bothered to make vacation arrangements for their dogs and cats simply dump them by the side of the road.

Monday is a holiday in much of Europe, in observance of the feast of the Assumption, when Catholics and Eastern Orthodox Christians believe that the Virgin Mary was taken up bodily into heaven. In Italy, the day continues a tradition of pre-Christian origin later subsumed into the church calendar. Ferragosto (from the Latin *feriae Augusti*, or "August holidays") was, in ancient Roman times, a period of rest for farm workers between the summer harvests and the new planting season.

Millions of Italians now take their summer repose at resorts in the mountains or at the seaside, yet this time of year still finds many of them among the fields. In small towns across the rural south, August is the month to honor local patron saints, with religious processions and festivals featuring open-air markets and carnival rides. Every year, these events bring former residents

back from their new homes in Italy and abroad.

From Northern Europe, Australia, North America and South America, returning to an Italy that has abandoned its longtime role as an exporter of labor to become instead a draw for immigrants, these emigrants find themselves among their former compatriots, but also with recent arrivals from Eastern Europe, Africa and Asia. Once a year, during rituals that recall the ancient rhythms of preindustrial society, these isolated little towns become as cosmopolitan as any place on earth.

Bard in Translation

Hearing Shakespeare translated into a foreign tongue is a special way of appreciating the writer's greatness, since the power of his language survives even the loss of his original words. This experience can have no more delightful setting than the Globe Theatre (www.globetheatreroma.com) in Rome's elegant Villa Borghese gardens. Built in 2003 as a hypothetical reconstruction of the lost 1599 structure on the Thames, the open-roofed wooden playhouse hosts a Shakespeare series every summer. The remaining offerings this year are "Twelfth Night," Aug. 18-28; and "Richard III," Sept. 2-18.

Meeting of Friends

Every August since 1980, the Adriatic beach resort of Rimini has been the site of the Meeting for Friendship Among Peoples (www.meetingrimini.org), a weeklong cultural festival regularly attended by members of Italy's religious, political, business and intellectual elite, along with such foreign dignitaries as former British Prime Minister Tony Blair, who spoke in 2009. The gathering, which this year takes place Aug. 21-27, is run by a Catholic movement, Communion and Liberation, but discussions also cover such secular topics as renewable energy resources, health-care policy and the human genome. While only 30% of Italians still regularly attend mass, the church's influence on the nation's culture remains disproportionately strong.

*Next week,
Lennox Morrison in Paris.*