

# Back to their roots

## *Basilicata*

Residents of rural Italy have been branching out in search of brighter prospects for decades but one small town has made its age-old tradition a draw for those who have flown the nest – and for other places like it.

WRITER  
Laura Rysman

PHOTOGRAPHY  
Emanuele Camerini

It is mid-afternoon in the southern Italian mountain town of Satriano di Lucania when the forest begins, unmistakably, to walk. More than 100 trees are advancing through the narrow streets and every one is obscured by a teepee made from ivy vines, leaving visible only human arms and feet – a primitive disguise bonding people and nature that’s known in this town as the *rumita*, or “hermit”.

An ancestral tradition dating back to at least medieval times, the figure of the *rumita* is said to have emerged from a solitary lair in the wilderness, disguised by ivy leaves, to visit homes and receive food or small change in return for a blessing. Today, thanks to a new generation’s efforts, the *rumita* festival has evolved. Tree people still roam the streets every last Sunday of the carnival season but they’re now followed by a boisterous afternoon march of an entire copse of trees, with hundreds on hand to watch the arboreal ambulation.

In Italy, and especially in southern regions such as Basilicata, small towns have been haemorrhaging their younger residents for more than a century, as they emigrated to big cities or abroad in search of opportunity. Quirks and traditions that celebrate the identities of rural communities have been abandoned or forgotten. But Satriano, with just one pizzeria and about 2,000 inhabitants, is bringing back its tradition to help foster a sense of community and connect with the area’s roots.

Though the *rumita*’s origins have been lost to time, the revised format of the walking forest celebrates its 10th anniversary this year. The idea was hatched by a group of friends whose creative vision has helped to make Satriano a buoyant carnival destination. The new format features 131 people in tree costumes marching to represent the 131 municipalities of Basilicata. The idea of sustainability



is central to proceedings and so is the use of biodegradable and recycled materials in the costumes and the event’s trappings.

“I’m a custodian of traditions, like everyone here,” says Rocco Perrone, motioning to an extended group of friends, musicians and performers beside the procession. Perrone has made his love of Satriano a political pursuit, running for mayor at the age of 30 and, since 2019, serving as councillor for “traditions and the sense of community”.

For the walking forest, revellers and Perrone’s pals play accordions and tambourines; others wear bear costumes in fake fur. Some are dressed as woodland sprites and pour red wine into the mouths of tree people through their foliage. They sing raucous folk songs and wave leafy sceptres in the air – occasionally brushing them on a doorway or a child’s head to bestow good fortune.

“When the day comes that our group of friends is no longer leading this carnival, someone from the next generation will step up,” says Perrone. “We’ve created an example for young people here and for other towns to follow. We’re imagining a future for centuries-old traditions – and the town we love.” — Ⓜ

Visitors play accordions and tambourines; others wear bear costumes. Some pour red wine into the mouths of tree people