



HERE SHE COMES!



La Befana Rides Again!

Now we know the real story about Father Christmas, San Nicola, and how Christmas Eve is celebrated by families in Italy. And we've learned about the Nativity scenes. So when do the gifts arrive? This message is going to cover a few Christmas markets, along with some unusual decorations, a very unusual gift possibility and the story of La Befana. So grab your broom and come along for the ride!

Christmas decorations abound in Italy and there is an abundance of Christmas markets where special foods and gifts can be bought. Decorations, of course, always include the Nativity scenes. Let's start off with the markets--after all, we need some gifts!

Candelara, (in central Italy)



Christmas Market in Bolzano

celebrates the meaning of its name—candles! Starting from the end of November, the town shuts off all lamps in the evening and lights candles instead.

Venice, of course has handmade gifts of colorful glass and lace from Burano, alongside traditional Carnival masks.

Florence has a market from the end of November to mid-December—and the market comes directly from

Germany! The stands are filled with both Florentine and German gifts and dishes. To get the flavor of this market, just [click here](#).

In **Pisa**, a market is created just for children. At the Leopolda Center, children make their own gifts.

Regardless of which city you visit, you will be overwhelmed with "Christmas."

In addition to trees and markets, some cities also have some spectacular outdoor shows. Check out this one from the town of **Como**.

Chocolate advent calendars aren't popular in Italy, but in Milan there's an event even better. Each day, in the Piazza Duomo, a new window opens in a building facing the Galleria with a musician giving a live performance. On December 24, they end this with a 24 piece orchestra playing music!

And now the story of "La Befana"

The main exchange of gifts takes place on January 6, the feast of the Epiphany, in remembrance of the Magi's visit to the baby Jesus. In Italy the children wait until Epiphany to hang their stockings and wait for their presents. La Befana, not Santa Claus, brings their gifts. Who is this wizened little creature called a witch? Here's how the story goes.

While on their way to Bethlehem to visit the baby Jesus, the three wise men stopped during their journey and asked an old woman for directions. They also told her of Jesus' birth and asked her to join them. She refused. Later a shepherd stopped by and asked her to join him in paying respect to the Baby Jesus. She refused again.



Within a few hours, she had a change of heart and wished she had gone. She arrived at the stable where Jesus was but could not find him as Joseph and Mary had left to escape execution by the King Herod. In Italian folklore, she is called Befana, an ugly witch on a broomstick. She is said to be flying around every year since, looking for the Christ Child and leaving presents at each house with children in case he is there. She slides down chimneys, and fills stockings and shoes with good gifts for good children and pieces of charcoal for the bad ones. She is the Italian equivalent of Babbo Natale and Santa Claus. Just like here, children leave food out with wine (preferably red, no milk for her) to help her on her way.

What does she look like? It's hard to tell! As you can see, everyone has a different interpretation but one thing is common to all: a kerchief, a broom and a big nose!



Italy's Got Trees!

Let's look at some very beautiful Christmas trees and a few oddball decorations, too. Trees are put up in Italy just like here. Here's a few that stand out.



Go to Turin for this one



A Cannoli Tree! Sicily for sure!



Gubbio puts up a tree on the mountain. It has 450 lights and the star can be seen from 20 miles away!



Venice's glass tree by day...



...and by night



The Pope keeps his tree simple



A salami tree? Really? Yes.



Pepperoni is not to be outdone by salami!

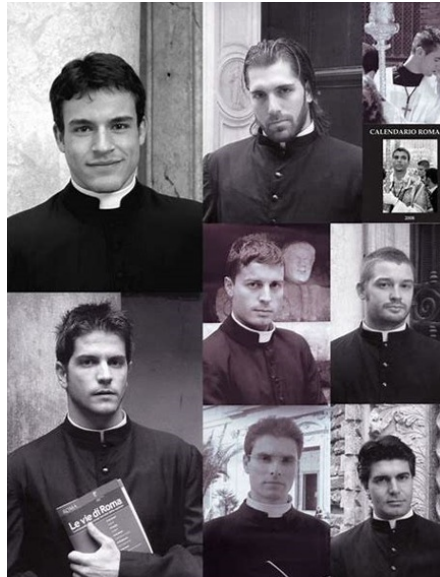


Make this one yourself. A struffoli tree.

And now for the ultimate gift from Italy.

Wow! The 12 hottest priests that make you *want to go* to confession. Yes, only Italy--the Vatican at that--can produce a calendar of the best-looking priests for a reasonable 10 euros.

Each year, a photographer by the name of Piero Pazzi releases a calendar entitled, "Calendario Romano," or as the people in Rome call it: the "Vatican beefcake calendar." The purpose of the calendar is to promote the Catholic Church and to encourage tourism to the Vatican. It can only be purchased at newsstands in Rome. And no, they're not half naked!



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