



Fast-paced Palio

Luca Venturi captures the excitement, energy and rivalry of the famous Palio horse race, held in the centre of the ancient city of Siena.

About Luca

Luca Venturi is an award-winning photographer based in Siena, Italy (pictured below at the Palio, with his arm outstretched). His work has been showcased in international exhibitions, and he is the founder and Art Director of the Siena International Photo Awards (www.sipacontest.com) and the annual Siena Photo Festival (www.artphototravel.it), held in Siena in October.



CLAUDIO GIOVANNINI

Can you explain the background to the Palio, and its importance to the residents of Siena?

The 'Palio di Siena' is one of the world's most exciting horse races. It is celebrated twice a year in Siena's historic square, the Piazza del Campo, on 2 July and 16 August, in honour of the religious holidays – the Visitation and the Ascension of the Virgin Mary, Lady and Patron Protector of the City. Held almost uninterrupted since the days of the medieval Republic of Siena, it is a centuries-old race between the various *contrada* (districts) of the city in which ten horses, each representing a particular district, are ridden bareback at breakneck speed around the Piazza del Campo, surrounded by ancient buildings and cheered on by a passionate crowd of locals and tourists.

The horses are selected and allocated by lot just three days before the race, and there are only six trials beforehand. The responsibility for choosing and paying a jockey lies within each *contrada*.

Above EOS 5D Mark III, EF 16-35mm f2.8L II USM lens at 16mm, 1/125 second at f5, ISO 320.

Home district

Luca is a resident of the 'Dragon' *contrada*. Fortunately for him when he photographed the Palio in July this year, it was the district of the winning horse, so he was able to capture the wild celebrations of the jockey and residents of the *contrada*.



The Palio is more than a simple horse race. It is the culmination of ongoing rivalry and competition between the *contradas*. Although the race itself lasts for little more than a minute, the ceremony surrounding the event includes the blessing of the horses, with each horse led into a church to be blessed by a priest on the afternoon of the race. The night before the event, the citizens of each *contrada* gather for a feast, stoking the excitement and promoting community spirit. Siena's entire year revolves around these races; young drummers prepare and practise their rhythms, while flag-bearers rehearse all around the city.

My photo story is about an authentic moment in time – which feels like you are suddenly part of a medieval spectacle. I've tried to convey a real slice of city life that manifests itself through

Clockwise from top left EOS 5D Mark III, EF 16-35mm f2.8L II USM lens at 16mm, 1/400 second at f8, ISO 200.

EOS 5D Mark III, EF 24-70mm f2.8L II USM lens at 24mm, 1/400 second at f8, ISO 800.

EOS 7D, EF 70-200mm f2.8L II USM lens at 125mm, 1/40 second at f7.1, ISO 100.

EOS 5D Mark III, EF 16-35mm f2.8L II USM lens at 16mm, 1/160 second at f6.3, ISO 250.

EOS 5D Mark III, EF 24-70mm f2.8L II USM lens at 61mm, 1/400 second at f16, ISO 400.

EOS 5D Mark III, EF 16-35mm f2.8L II USM lens at 16mm, 1/60 second at f22, ISO 200.

a multitude of intense and diverse feelings – anxiety, trepidation, anticipation, joy, fear and anger punctuate the lives of the inhabitants in these four days of the festival.

How did you manage to obtain such close access to photograph the Palio?

I was born in the city of Siena, where I still live. The Palio is an event that only people who were born and have lived in this Tuscan city can fully understand. For this reason, and thanks to my knowledge of the city and the format of the festival, I was able to reach places usually impenetrable to tourists and photographers, to capture the scene from unusual viewpoints.

My photo story transmits the emotion, the pathos and the atmosphere of the celebration. I have been able to live and take part in the



life of the contrada from the inside – to capture the atmosphere of the dinners that take place every evening in the streets of the district (usually only reserved for members of the contradas); to follow one of the horses returning to the barn after the trials; to attend the rite of the blessing of the horse and follow the comparsa (contrada members dressed in Medieval costumes) along the streets of their neighbourhood during the parade to Piazza del Campo.

I had the advantage of being able to gain access to the stable of my contrada, and to the lane in front of it, where the horse is looked after by the veterinary, the blacksmith, and a few other attendants. It was also an advantage that I didn't need to establish a relationship with the other members of my contrada in order to photograph the action. I already knew them. It

Top EOS 5D Mark III, EF 16-35mm f2.8L II USM lens at 21mm, 1/160 second at f3.5, ISO 320.

Above left EOS 5D Mark III, EF 16-35mm f2.8L II USM lens at 34mm, 1/80 second at f2.8, ISO 2000.

Above right EOS 5D Mark III, EF 16-35mm f2.8L II USM lens at 35mm, 1/125 second at f4, ISO 2000.

was easy for me to melt into the scene without disturbing them. If I had not known them, they wouldn't have allowed me to take pictures in these surroundings. It is important to establish good relations with people and this often requires a lot of time. I was lucky that I did not have this problem, allowing me a wonderful opportunity to shoot interesting pictures.

Is this the first time you have photographed the Palio behind the scenes in this way?

I have covered the Palio so intensively only once before, in July 2014 (the images taken using an EOS 7D were shot on this occasion). Similarly, the race was also won by my district, The Dragon. I organise 'The Palio is Life', small group photo tours, and this usually prevents me from covering



the race in any great detail myself. I was lucky that I decided to skip the tour this time.

Describe your shooting schedule – from the feast to the race itself.

I didn't have a particular schedule. I wanted to live the feast just like a contradiuolo, doing exactly the same things as I would have done if I hadn't had my camera with me. I was confident that events and people around me would help tell the story I had in mind.

During the four days of the celebration, the Palio has several main events to follow – the trials, the blessing of the horse, the Prova Generale dinner, and the race – but I knew that it would also be interesting to observe everyone around me, their expressions and their emotions. The more I was immersed in their passion and

Clockwise from top left EOS 5D Mark III, EF 16-35mm f2.8L II USM lens at 16mm, 1/60 second at f7.1, ISO 250.

Same camera and lens at 16mm, 1/100 second at f22, ISO 2000.

Same camera and lens at 35mm, 1/60 second at f18, ISO 250.

Same camera and lens at 16mm, 1/25 second at f5.6, ISO 3200.

Same camera and lens at 35mm, 1/250 second at f11, ISO 160.

Same camera and lens at 16mm, 1/60 second at f4, ISO 6400.

energy, the more likely I would be able to capture interesting images.

How did you decide what to cover?

Siena is a small city and all the celebrations are held in the historic city centre. You can reach everything within a few minutes. As many rituals are the same for each contrada, you can follow just one of them at a time. I was interested in telling a story about what was happening only in my contrada – and I was lucky as on this occasion it was the winning contrada.

Were you shooting as a freelance or were you commissioned? What was your aim?

I shot as a freelancer and without any particular business purpose, as my aim was only to capture the emotions of the feast through unusual images



– expressive more than aesthetic – focusing on the people, the horse and the jockey.

What are the particular challenges involved in photographing the Palio?

First of all, you have to understand the feast and the multitude of feelings, such as anxiety, fear, joy, trepidation and anger. This is the main challenge. The Palio is a celebration that is really difficult to understand in every detail. And it is difficult to capture interesting pictures if you are not able to figure out the emotions of people around you.

What camera/s and lenses did you use to photograph this event and why?

I used an EOS 5D Mark III with an EF 16-35mm f2.8L II USM or the EF 24-70mm f2.8L II USM

Clockwise from top left
 EOS 5D Mark III, EF 16-35mm f2.8L II USM lens at 16mm, 1/80 second at f9, ISO 1600.
 Same camera and lens at 16mm, 1/125 second at f2.8, ISO 320.
 Same camera and lens at 17mm, 1/60 second at f2.8, ISO 1250.
 Same camera and lens at 32mm, 1/80 second at f2.8, ISO 1250.
 Same camera and lens at 35mm, 1/200 second at f4, ISO 2000.
 Same camera and lens at 29mm, 1/100 second at f2.8, ISO 2000.

lens. This is my preferred equipment as I like to be enveloped within the scene. In my opinion, nothing is more powerful than being in just the same position as your subject. I love it.

What camera settings did you use and why?

I usually set my camera to aperture-priority (Av) mode because it allows me a variety of creative choices. However, for this story I decided to configure my camera's settings in shutter-priority. Why? Because by being in control of the shutter speed I was able to capture images that were not always absolutely clear and sharp. That might sound the opposite of what you would normally want to achieve, but I was looking for images where the composition and the scene had more impact than the detail and sharpness. For this reason, I didn't worry when I had to set

my camera to a high ISO value – in any case the EOS 5D Mark III produces wonderful, high quality images, even at high ISO settings.

I always shoot RAW files. Image information is not compressed and you can produce higher quality images, as well as correct problem images that you would otherwise not be able to recover if you had taken them in JPEG format.

Can you give any tips on using the panning technique?

I often use the panning technique when photographing the race trials. Panning gives more dynamism, emphasising the speed. I also use this technique when I want to capture the subject in an unusual way, but it is not easy to shoot a good panning image. You have to use your experience to select the best shutter speed for that specific

Top EOS 5D Mark III, EF 24-70mm f2.8L II USM lens at 24mm, 1/320 second at f3.5, ISO 200.

Above left Same camera and lens at 70mm, 1/320 second at f6.3, ISO 1250.

Above right Same camera and lens at 41mm, 1/200 second at f4.5, ISO 3200.

Kit bag

EOS 5D Mark III
 EF 16-35mm f2.8L II USM lens
 EF 24-70mm f2.8L II USM lens

situation. Even if you fire off a load of images, you still need a bit of luck to capture a good panning shot. As well as at least part of the subject being in sharp focus, as with any image it also needs to be well-composed.

You first need to make sure that you have secured a wide variety of truly wonderful images for your story before trying to capture any using the panning technique.

Describe your workflow

For this project, except for the bare minimum of changes using Lightroom, I didn't rely on making any alterations to my images during post-production. My aim was to let the picture do the talking, without any kind of other support or help. I focused my attention only on the scene and the composition.