

Weddings Irish style, Autumn 2005

DRAMA AT ABRUZZO.

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It is eight o'clock on a hazy Saturday May morning in Loreto Aprutino, a medieval hilltop village in the Abruzzo, one of the most beautiful, wild and unspoilt regions of Italy. As the mist rises from olive groves in the surrounding countryside and the birds sing, the sound of bells ringing out from the steeples of the ancient church of San Pietro heralds the start of the day for one Irish couple, a very special and long awaited event. Preparations have already begun in the nearby Castello, an historic building crowning the top of the village now a luxurious four-star hotel, where the couple has been staying. Twenty minutes away in the seaside city of Pescara, two locals are gathering rose petals, sugared almonds and rice, which they will arrange, in the Italian tradition, in the shape of a heart on the threshold of the church later that afternoon. As the temperatures rise, emotions are running high. This is the appointed wedding day of Niall Heffernan and Barbara O'Sullivan who have flown in from Dublin with their family and guests to tie the knot in this quite, picturesque village nestling in the foothills of the snow-silvered Apennine Mountains. They are not alone; choosing to marry abroad rather than in Ireland is part of a growing trend and last year more than 800 Irish couples exchanged vows in Italy. Many, like Niall and Barbara, are opting for less well-trodden tourist destinations and alternatives to Rome, where accommodation can be very expensive. Last year in July, the pair took a weekend off to make their first visit to Italy, to explore the Abruzzo and look at potential churches and venues. The welcome and hospitality they received reinforced their decision to marry there and the advance reconnoiter is something they'd heartily advise other couples to do.

Italian movie

That afternoon in a scene straight out of an Italian movie, the Bride's arrival left the wedding guests wide eyed. Walking with her father down from the Castello along the narrow cobbled street to the church, she was followed by a colourful, smiling, entourage, by her Bridesmaids dressed in red silk and a troupe in medieval velvets brandishing flying standards. Bugles and drums thumped a rousing accompaniment to the procession. After the ceremony conducted by Don Fulvio Di Fulvio, his first English Mass in 20 years, the couple were showered with rice, rose leaves and sugared almonds, Italian style, before returning to the entrance of the Castello where the group from the nearby village of Lanciano, famous for its annual September Mastrogiurato Pageant, mounted a gripping acrobatic performance of flag throwing dating back to the 15th century. Locals looked on in delight, one declaring it the most beautiful wedding she had ever seen. A Champagne reception took place beside the pool in the afternoon sunshine, and the party then repaired to the Castle (Castello) where in its medieval entrance hall, long linen covered tables groaned with a stunning variety of buffet dishes, a foretaste of what was to come. Abruzzo may be famous for its long-standing traditions, but its gastronomic reputation based on regional specialties is a particular source of pride. The banquet that followed was spread out over five courses, beginning with a risotto of clams and courgettes, followed by pasta with ricotta and tomatoes. A lemon sorbet encased in a frozen fresh lemon provided an interlude before the main course of fillet of beef, roasted peppers, potatoes and a salad. Dessert consisted of a fresh fruit salad, then homemade ice cream climaxing with a magnificent traditional Italian wedding cake. In a final flourish, guests were given little memento bags of confetti, which are sugared almonds, as gifts. Dancing in the great hall continued for many hours afterwards. "It all feels like a dream", said the radiant Bride and indeed for all those who attended there was something particularly magical about the day, from Barbara's dramatic arrival at the church and the sudden shafts of sunlight that pierced its mullioned windows to the last strains of music as the night waned and the happy couple drifted among their guests. The following morning they left for their honeymoon on the Amalfi coast and Sicily while most of their family and guests stayed on for a short break.

FACTFILE:

Barbara & Niall's wedding and pre-wedding trip was organised by Paola Shanahan.... Paola runs an Irish Italian company organising weddings and holidays in the Abruzzo as well as Rome, Venice, Tuscany and other Italian regions. Pescara-born Paola, who has the added advantage of being a qualified chef, is married to an Irish man and has been living in Ireland for 13 years, so is familiar with both Irish and Italian customs and cuisine. Her portfolio of destinations are chosen to suit different budgets and tastes.