



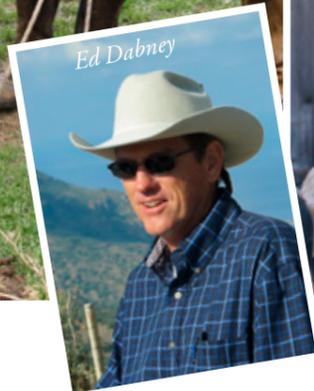
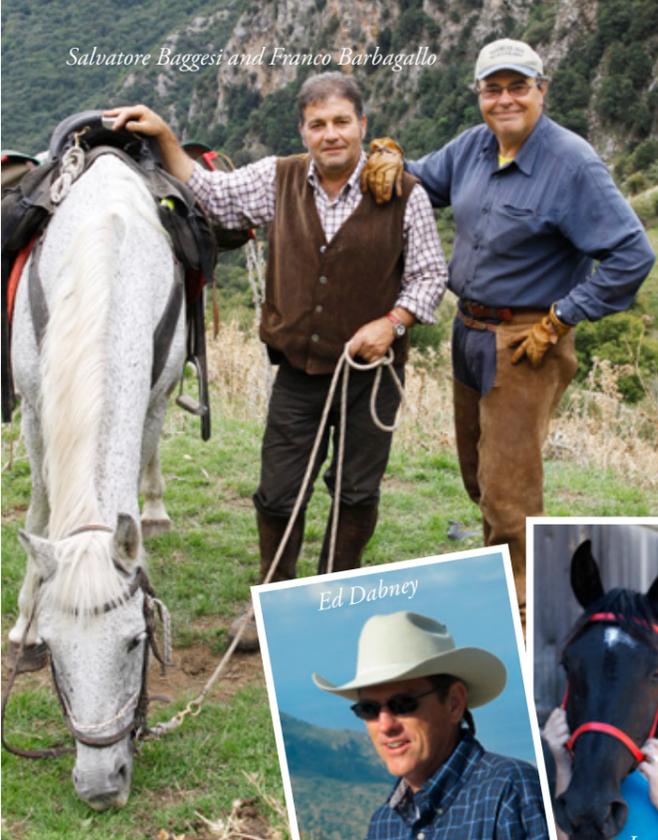
# Experience Sicily

– on horseback

The mountains extend their rolling formations all the way to the horizon. Whitewashed, historic villages climb the steep slopes. Beyond the mountains, the azure-blue sea glitters, and high in the sky a bird of prey is circling. The place is stunningly beautiful in a way that is both spectacular and idyllic.

On horseback, surrounded by pleasant company, the impressions and experiences are strengthened even further.

Salvatore Baggesi and Franco Barbagallo



Ed Dabney



Lena Holmgren



Franco Loria

Elizabeth Dabney, Deenie McKeever and Paolo Cricchio



The picturesque mountain village Castelbuono

Text and photo: Lena Holmgren  
Translator: Sverker Holmström

**Near the end of September in 2010, I went on an unforgettable riding trip in Sicily, an island with so many myths attached to it, with such a long and richly varied history. The Greeks, the Romans, the Normans, the Arabs, the Mafia and many more have left their mark on today's Sicily.**

**A motley crew**

Our group of eight riders was almost as motley as the country itself. The members of our team were Salvatore Baggesi, restaurateur and owner of a tour riding operation, photo journalist Franco Barbagallo, ex-forester Franco Loria and Salvatore Baggesi's handy man Paolo Cricchio. Other members of our group were the American cowboy Ed Dabney, his daughter Elizabeth, and their good friend and neighbour, Deenie McKeever, 74, a brave woman, brimful of energy, with her

own quarter horses back in Georgia. Ed Dabney is the reason for me being there. During the spring of 2010, Lucky Rider wrote about this professional horse trainer when he visited Sweden and presented his program for training horses, "Six Keys to Harmony". In connection with this, Ed talked about his co-operation with a tour riding operation in northern Sicily and wondered if Lucky Rider would be interested in coming along in the autumn, writing an article about it.

**Off the beaten track**

One of Sicily's four natural parks is called Madonie, the "Dolomites of Sicily" so called for their white carbonatic limestone. The area, consisting of 40 000 hectares, is in the province of Palermo and is dominated by mountainous terrain, but there are also forests, pastures, as well as olive groves and vineyards at

lower altitudes. Moreover, the natural park is the home of several monuments from antiquity. It was in these exciting surroundings, far away from the well beaten tracks of the tourist industry, that we spent a week on horse back. Salvatore Baggesi, or Salvo as he is called, was our experienced guide and host. He knows the mountains and the trails like the back of his hand, and he also knows the people who live here. Salvo offered us a unique possibility of getting an insight into the Sicilian way of life in these parts.

**The week starts with Six Keys**

Just outside the picturesque mountain village of Castelbouno, about ninety kilometres east of Palermo, lies Salvatore Baggesi's tour riding operation based on the agriturismo and guest ranch "l'Arione". Here most of the horses are Sicilian cross-breeds with an oriental

*We leave Castelbuono behind and head for the mighty inland of the island, the mountain chain called Madonie.*



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origin, and they are sensitive, strong, they show endurance and they are sure of foot.

For some time now, Salvo's horses are trained using Ed Dabney's horsemanship and Six Keys to Harmony, to make sure that the horses retain their keen senses and their respect for the rider's helps and wishes when it comes to riding alone or in a group. During the first day, in the arena, when we get to know the horses that have been assigned to us, we learn how to put into practise these useful exercises of leadership.

Black Marsala is to be my four legged companion, a cross-breed between an Arab and an Indigenous Sicilian horse. The horse was named after the freedom fighter Giuseppe Garibaldi's beloved retainer. According to the story, when this mare was taken ill, having reached

the age of thirty, Garibaldi was beside himself with grief. Hoping that the horse would survive, he took a large melon, scooped out its flesh, filled it with strong Marsala wine and gave it to his friend. Unfortunately, the recipe didn't work. Well, however that may be, "my" Marsala is seven years old and is very much alive. We get along very well and she loves to gallop.

#### **Taste buds win unequal battle**

Near the tour riding facilities is the Romitaggio, the Baggesi family restaurant. It has been said that the secret behind all Italian cooking is the quality of the ingredients. In the restaurant, appreciated by its customers, all the ingredients are organically grown and come absolutely fresh from the surrounding countryside. As a guest at the family restaurant, you are being

served meals that are lovingly cooked, using recipes that are typical of the region and have been handed down for generations. In the cosy restaurant, housed in a medieval monastery, we enjoy wonderful meals, all of them of at least four dishes. There is an uneven battle going on between our common sense and our taste buds and leaving anything on our plates is almost impossible.

#### **From castle to Hollys**

After breakfast on the second day, we ride into Castelbuono. The charming village dates back to the fourteenth century when the Ventimiglia family, who were both influential and horse loving, had the castle built which gave the village its name, "The good castle". Here the Ventimiglia family founded the "Academy of the Star", a high-class



*Franco Loria and Sharon passing some free-ranging cows up in the Madonie Mountain.*



*The stable at Spanish influenced Terra Vecchia.*



*A cowboy in Sicily.*



*Guide, interpreter and photo journalist Franco Barbagallo and Oliver.*

*After seven hours in the saddle we are quite a long way down the other side of the mountain*

riding-school which at the time was known all over Europe.

We ride through the medieval city centre which is well preserved. In the midst of this age-old setting, the place is seething with life in cafés, squares and narrow lanes. The past feels as alive as the exuberant present. From balconies generously adorned with flowers, children and grown-ups wave at us as our little caravan passes, clip-clopping on narrow cobble-stone alleys.

Next on the agenda, is Piano Pomo, situated a couple of kilometres on the outside of Castelbuono. Here we are met by a unique landscape, lush medieval paths reminding the visitor of trolls, and a big forest of three hundred year old Holly trees.

**Sicilian picnic for cowboys**

Next morning we make an early start.

We head for the mountains for a full days ride. Saddle bags are packed with halter-chains, camera, water bottle, a few apples, a sweater, and, to be on the safe side, rainwear. Leaving Castelbuono behind we head for the mighty inland of the island, the mountain chain called Madonie. After completing a first stage of our ride for the day, climbing forested slopes, we move on, following winding roads and cattle paths where we come across free-range cows and horses.

There are fruit-bearing trees and bushes along the roads. Juicy blackberries ripened by the abundant sun: bellissimo! Salvo tells us that he usually finds many ingredients for his kitchen when he is out riding, for instance wild asparagus and mushrooms. The park which is lovely in the fall has a flora of over two thousand species. We pass

the timber line and face steeper terrain. Relentlessly the horses keep going. At regular intervals, they are watered from big troughs. At lunchtime it is time for a break and Salvo surprises us by preparing a cowboy picnic, Sicilian style, in the middle of the breathtakingly beautiful landscape.

**Agriturismo Terra Vecchia**

Moving on, our climb leads to a plateau well suited for us when we want to go for a nice and much longed-for canter. Marsala gallops at full speed and the mountain wind caresses my face. After seven hours in the saddle we are quite a long way down the other side of the mountain. We pass a field where the air is full of fennel and come to our destination for the day, Agriturismo Terra Vecchia, a hacienda built in the Spanish tradition, with buildings pain-



Signore Mancuso



Cheese made by using ancient methods.

*The lifestyle of the Mancuso family has roots thousands of years deep. Hunting, breeding sheeps and cows, growing, gathering, nothing has changed.*

ted in soft yellowy colours. The farm is owned by a retired general and has for many years been the centre of western riding.

Next to the well-built stable the horses are hosed down and get to spend well deserved time in the pasture. Tired but happy we head for the main building. Here we are met by comfortable rooms, good food, and relaxation on the veranda as the sun goes down. Because of its strategic location in the middle of the Madonie, Terra Vecchia is the perfect place for excursions. We go to a mountain village called Polizzi Generosa, look at churches and become absorbed in history at the local archaeological museum.

**Nothing has changed**

Next day, while the other members of our group decide to ride to the neigh-

bouring village of Castellana to say hallo to the confectioner Maurizio and enjoy his irresistible pastry, Salvo and I decide to go on a spectacular ride in the opposite direction. Following a winding road, in ghostlike fog and chilly air, we make it to the top of Monte Alto. In this isolated location, at an altitude of 1819 metres above sea level, lies a monastery. It was built in the fifteenth century in honour of the Virgin Mary and twice a year pilgrims come here to worship. Miraculously, the clouds are dispersed, and we are rewarded with a mind-blowing view. Salvo tells me that on a very clear day you can see the volcano Etna and the whole of Sicily as a matter of fact.

Almost back down in the valley, following another road this time, we suddenly hear a sound reminding us of the ringing of bells. Ahead of us, on gently

rolling hills, cows, sheep and goats are grazing. It's their bells that we hear. The animals belong to a farmer called "signore" Mancuso. The lifestyle of the Mancuso family has roots thousands of years deep. Breeding sheeps and cows, hunting, growing, gathering, nothing has changed. Mancuso invites us and the rest of our group into his simple home, the others having joined us after their visit to Castellana.

A hut made of stone, logs and twigs plays an important part on the Mancuso farm. In the hut various types of cheese are made, using ancient methods which include mixing the milk from different sorts of animals. In the shade of an olive tree, feeling a strong sense of togetherness, we get to taste Mancuso delicate products, the shaggy dogs of the farm constantly watching us with curiosity from a distance.



*1819 metres above sea level, on the top of Monte Alto, lies an old monastery. It was built in the fifteenth century in honour of the Virgin Mary and twice a year pilgrims come here to worship. One of the days Salvatore and I rode up to this beautiful and isolated place.*



*Here an exquisite five-course meal and first class wine from local grapes awaits us*

#### **Establish a co-operation**

The next few days our adventure continues and we enjoy the same fantastic atmosphere. Luckily, there are no mishaps, apart from a road that is almost impassable and a horse accidentally treading on some barbed wire. But when this happens Franco Loria is there like a shot, fixing things with his pliers and his machete. The ex-forester keeps a generous supply of tools and necessities in his saddle bags. Franco Barbagallo, our highly competent guide and interpreter, is a living encyclopaedia. Using a language rich in nuances and full of facts, he tells us about Sicilian nature, culture and architecture. For many years he worked all over the world as a professional photo journalist. But now Franco tells us that he has grown a bit tired of that and wants to be a riding guide instead.

Franco, Ed and Salvo have all gotten to know each other riding here in Sicily and in Wyoming, USA. Now they are establishing a tour riding operation. Franco Loria and Paolo Cricchio, a very passionate twenty-two year old rider, are also part of this team.

#### **A bit like Lady and the Tramp**

At the end of the week we are a happy and closely united group dismounting from our horses at Abbazia Anastasia, a monastery from the twelfth century, belonging to the order of St. Benedict, nowadays a wine-producer. Right next to it, is the five star hotel the Relais Anastasia. A patchwork of sloping vineyards surrounding the beautiful group of buildings. This will be our home for the next forty eight hours. After a long day in the saddle, the feeling of dipping your dishevelled hair, sweaty

from the helmet, into the hotel's luxurious pool is indescribable. Shortly before nine in the evening, refreshed and all dressed up, we leave our keys at the reception and cross a magically lit inner courtyard, before we come to the impressive restaurant. Here an exquisite five-course meal and first class wine from local grapes awaits us. The meal is accompanied by good musicians, the only thing missing is Lady and the Tramp. We are all in high spirits and we laugh, tell each other exciting stories, and sing and dance spontaneously. In the pasture in the valley below us, our four-legged friends are strolling under a starlit sky. From the Relais Anastasia, our horses take us over a ridge and down to the sea. Near the idyllic coastal town of Cefalù whose medieval buildings reach all the way to the water's edge, we go

for a swim, riding the horses into the water, and enjoy the delicacies of the sea at a simple beach restaurant called "La Volpe in Bikini".

#### **"It's soul and spirit"**

And then it's time so say good bye to incomparable Madonie. Even though Manna is supposed to be falling from the sky, going back to Castelbuono we pass an area, said to be the only one in the world, where manna actually is grown. Manna is a sweetish lymph extracted from the flowering Ash, used for cooking and also within the pharmaceutical industry. After giving Marsala a big hug, the time has come for the last common gastronomic experience at the Romitaggio restaurant. It's a bit sad, really. With tears in her eyes, Deenie McKeever sums up the week.

"What we have experienced is not only amazing views and fantastic food. It's much bigger than that, it is soul and spirit. With their hospitality and their generous ways, the people here have shared with us their heritage, their families and their culture. They gave us the opportunity to breathe in the atmosphere, they made us part of their lives. Totally unbelievable! Of course the horses have a lot to do with what happened. Horses always bring out the best in us."

Well, this is exactly how I feel. I will always have very fond memories of this trip and my fabulous time in Sicily. For more info: [www.eddabney.com](http://www.eddabney.com), [www.francoarbagallo.com](http://www.francoarbagallo.com)

#### **Agriturismo Arione**

For some months now, Salvatore Baggesi has rented the tour riding facility Agri-

*turismo Arione, situated a few miles to the west of Castelbuono. Together with his family and co-workers Salvo is going to develop the riding activities there and arrange tours into the three natural parks Madonie, Nebrodi and Etna. The tour rides will be designed in different ways, and will vary in length, and when it comes to the standard of comfort, they will range from luxury (as in this article) to camping.*

#### **Greenways Travel**

Swedish Mary Tjärn Wright, representing Greenways Travel, spent twenty-four hours together with us in the mountains. Mary started her successful travel agency in 1997, and today offers a great number of riding trips to many different countries. Starting in February 2011, she will be offering riding tours to Arione in Sicily. For more info: [www.greenways.se](http://www.greenways.se).