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LARI, A HAUNTED CASTLE AND VILLAGE WITH TALES OF WITCHCRAFT

Visit the tiny village of Lari and its majestic fortress, once the seat of the Florentine vicars, a courthouse and a prison with torture chamber. The volunteers of the Cultural Association "Il Castello" will guide you through the unsettling rooms of this ancient castle, giving you the opportunity to put yourself in the shoes of those men and women who were confined within its walls and shudder at the sight of the torture devices that were used to obtain their confessions.

The tiny hilltop village of **Lari** is located about 30 km from Pisa and is believed to have been founded

by the **Etruscans**. Most of the present day castle, situated in the centre of the village, dates back to the first half of the 17th century; however, some early documents attest to the existence of a castle at Lari long before 1200. As one of the most important military strongholds of the **Pisan Republic**, in the 13th century **Lari Castle** became the subject of dispute between Pisa and Florence and was finally captured by the latter in 1406. The Florentines turned it into the residence of the **vicars**, also featuring a court room, a prison and a torture chamber. In the 15th and 16th centuries, the defense system of the castle was reinforced and a number of rooms were beautifully frescoed probably by **Andrea da Pisa** and **Fra Bartolomeo**. The 18th century saw the enlargement of the prison, which remained in use until 1934. The Florentine vicars lived in the castle until 1848, when the vicariate was suppressed and the castle became the seat of the *pretore* (a type of magistrate). In 1991, the volunteers of the Cultural Association “Il Castello” and the **Municipality of Lari** started restoring the castle, bringing it back to its original beauty; because of their efforts and dedication, today we can visit the **court room**, the **basement** (also known as the *Inferno*), the infamous **Room of Torment**, the **chapel** and the **inner courtyard**.

The Ghost of Rosso della Paola

Lari Castle is said to be haunted by the spirit of **Giovanni Princi**, also known as **Rosso della Paola**, who was found hanging in his prison cell on the morning of December 16, 1922 after being jailed for his political views. The circumstances surrounding his death – seemingly suicide – were never made clear; however, on that morning, his body presented unequivocal marks of violence and therefore it was speculated that he had been beaten and murdered before being hanged. After the prison was closed in 1934, the former custodian and his family continued to inhabit the castle and were the first people to claim to have seen the ghost of Rosso della Paola every so often, during the night of December 15th and 16th. Many other people say they have witnessed **unexplained occurrences** inside the castle, especially the ghost of a man, wreathed in a strange mist, quickly disappearing into the darkness.

Gostanza da Libbiano, subjected to interrogation by the Holy Inquisition

Gostanza da Libbiano was arrested on a morning of November 1594; she knew the healing properties of herbs and lots of people came from everywhere to visit her. One day, a young boy she had tried to cure died and Gostanza was accused of murder and **communion with the Devil**. The woman, who was 60 years old at the time, was incarcerated, subjected to interrogation and tortured; like many other victims of the Inquisition, she ended up convincing herself and confessing that she was a Devil's disciple. The story goes that Gostanza retracted her confession only in the presence of the **General Inquisitor of Florence**, who was later asked to preside over the trial. The man carefully read and re-read the relevant documents in the case and even before the formal interrogation took place, he realized that it was all a matter of envy and spite against the woman. Therefore Gostanza was cleared of **witchcraft charges**, although she was banned from treating people and animals and banished to three miles away from her house under penalty of the whip and imprisonment. Rumour has it that she can still be seen wandering through the castle rooms, even though she didn't die within

its walls.

A visit to Lari Castle will make you think and reflect on what some people can do to others in the name of so-called “justice”; however, once you have completed the exploration, you can also take a pleasant stroll around the lovely *borgo* and enjoy the colours and views of the **Tuscan countryside**. The village has some cozy little places to eat and drink – we strongly recommend Enoteca Il Violino Rosso and La Bottega delle Specialità – Guido Meini – and is also very well known for the Martelli Pasta Factory that you can visit for free.

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