



A view of the Santa Maria della Pietra church, near the castle of Rocca Calascio.



An elderly woman sits by the entrance of her house in Calascio.



A view shows the castle of Rocca Calascio.

Italy takes to battlements to save its dying hamlets

The streets are silent and cats hunt in abandoned houses, but the view from the battlements of Calascio's castle is spectacular-good enough perhaps to save this dying Italian hamlet. Local officials have put restoring the ruins and attracting tourists at the heart of their bid to revive the village, which has won 20 million euros (\$22 million) in EU post-pandemic funds.

Surrounded by Abruzzo's snow-capped peaks, Calascio is one of 21 dying or deserted villages awarded an equal share of a 420-million-euro pot by the Italian government. Critics question how equipped the tiny councils are to spend such vast sums of money-which translates to almost 154,000 euros per person in Calascio.

The nationwide project has soured relations in several regions between winning villages and those that have lost out, and prompted warnings over potential fraud and waste. But Calascio's mayor Paolo Baldi, a former mountain guide originally from Rome, is undaunted. "We want to bring the hamlet back to life," said Baldi, who did up one of its ruined houses in 1993 and moved in with his young family.

New life

Once a bustling and wealthy wool centre, Calascio shrunk from over 2,000

residents at the start of the 1900s to just 130 now, almost all of them elderly. In the winter months, only 70 or so people remain. Just three children have been born here in 12 years. It has no grocer's shops, school or doctor's surgery. What the hamlet does have is Rocca Calascio, an ancient castle which draws 100,000 tourists a year.

Baldi plans to spend a big chunk of the funds-just over 4.6 million euros-on restoring part of the ruins, which were damaged in a deadly earthquake in 2009. It is hoped archaeological digs will determine when the castle-originally a watchtower-was built, and reveal more about a neighboring church and graveyard, where bones come to the surface after storms.

Some funds will also go to creating jobs and attracting more tourists, with just under 7.5 million euros earmarked for a "scattered" hotel in the village's empty houses and nearly one million euros for a museum. Locals say they hope young families will move in to the area and perhaps open their own businesses. "Do you know what the biggest event was in Calascio this year? It was the birth of a baby," tobaccoist Walter Zara told AFP.

Big winner

Italy is the biggest beneficiary of the



A view shows the castle of Rocca Calascio in Calascio. — AFP photos

EU's 800-billion-euro plan to boost the bloc after the pandemic, allocated almost 200 billion euros in grants and loans. The funds for Calascio are part of a program to increase tourism in undervalued areas, notably in the poorer south, and ease pressure on hotspots like Venice.

Villages across Italy competed, with winners including Pietrabbondante in Molise, which boasts a sixth-century amphitheatre. "Italy's real wealth today

lies precisely in these small centres," Mayor Baldi says, adding that countless hilltop hamlets across the country are in a state of serious decline but could be "a driving force for the economy".

Shepherds and maggot cheese

Here, that driving force includes a sheep farming school. The plan is to teach youngsters the ancient art of pastoralism, where shepherds and their

flocks spend the warmer months on the move. Funds will also go to increasing cheese production. The region's pride is Marretto, a traditional sheep's cheese made using live maggots, which soften it with their digestive acids.

It was staple for herders who used to gather with their flocks outside the 16th-century Santa Maria della Pietra church, perched just along the ridge from the castle. Bleating livestock permitting, mass at the so-called "Shepherds' Church" was followed through a little side window.

Fermented cheese and religion may not be enough. Domenico Ciccone, 78, who began shepherding at just 10 years old, said he was not convinced it was a job that would attract many youngsters. Ciccone's son and wife pitch in with the milking, but without a new generation of pastoralists to help over the coming summer, he has been forced to sell much of his flock. "It's a tough job, you've got to like it. There's no taking time off for a party, or a Sunday, (or) if it's stormy". He also questions whether training new shepherds will help reverse the population decline, quipping that "a 20-year-old who looks after sheep all day long isn't going to have any luck with women!"—AFP



In this file photo a picture shows a red fox at the Legendia Park in Frossay, western France. — AFP

'Infurrection': Red fox terrorizes humans in US

Being outfoxed in Congress usually means losing a vote on an amended resolution or being too late for the donut line in the Senate cafeteria. So spare a thought for the politicians and staff at the US Capitol in Washington, where a highly aggressive red fox spent at least two days stalking frightened humans, including a Democratic congressman. Police officers warned Tuesday that they had received multiple reports of people "being attacked or bitten" by an aggressive canine at the seat of US democracy-in a statement first reported by none other than... Fox News.

The force quickly dispatched animal control officers to "trap and relocate" any foxes they found-and within hours they posted pictures on social media of the beast, finally taken into custody, sitting in an animal cage above the caption: "Captured." Online political magazine Punchbowl News reported that congressman Ami Bera had to be rescued by police late Monday after squaring up to a fox that had just bitten him in an "unprovoked" attack. "I didn't see it and all of a sudden I felt something lunge at the back of my leg," Bera, a physician by profession, told Punchbowl. The 57-year-old Sacramento Democrat wasn't hurt, but agreed "out of an abundance of caution" to get a series of rabies shots.

Bloodlust sated

"I expect to get attacked if I go on Fox News, I don't expect to get attacked by a fox," he told Punchbowl. Ximena Bustillo, a Congress reporter for Politico, said she was bitten on the ankle from behind as she was leaving the complex. "I'm from Idaho. I know to not try and pet it!" she tweeted. Witnesses flooded social media with sightings, with several reporting seeing it munching on a squirrel or merely enjoying the sun-its bloodlust apparently sated-in the Senate gardens.

Fifteen months after a violent mob stormed the Capitol to disrupt the certification of last presidential election, one wag even referred to the ongoing animal threat as an "infurrection." Inside the Capitol, reporters spent the weekly leaders' press conferences in a breathless interrogation about possible action on the four-legged menace. Top Republican Mitch McConnell ignored the inquiries, but Iowa's intrepid two-term senator Joni Ernst was proud to report that she had spotted the animal, without revealing how close the encounter was.

Red foxes-the most common of several North American species-are regularly found in towns and cities but tend to avoid people, according to the city environmental department. They typically eat insects, small birds, squirrels and rabbits, and are not known for their predilection for legislators or their intimidated staffers.

The species has thrived during the pandemic, according to wildlife experts in the nation's capital. "Less ambient noise, less traffic, less interference... right now, life is better for them," Bill McShea, a wildlife ecologist with the Smithsonian National Zoo, told DCist magazine. "If there's an upside to COVID, it's on the wildlife."—AFP

Russian cinema in turmoil as Hollywood pulls out

After years spent translating Hollywood films, Russian Mila Grekova was suddenly thrown out of work after Moscow's military intervention in Ukraine. Five Hollywood giants-Disney, Warner Bros, Universal, Sony Pictures and Paramount-have all stopped releasing new films there, leaving Russian cinemas bereft of the latest blockbusters. But it has not made Grekova turn against President Vladimir Putin. "It's the West that I hate today and not Putin," the 56-year-old said.

"Bollywood may replace Hollywood in Russia, but it's too late for me to learn Hindi," she said, referring to India's refusal to condemn Moscow or join in with sanctions. Russia's film industry has been thrown into turmoil by the fighting in Ukraine just as it was beginning to recover from the pandemic. And like in many sectors hit by sanctions, the film industry is turning away from the West, looking inward to its own movies or east to Asia. Russians are avid cinema-goers with the highest number of admission in Europe, 145.7 million last year, according to the European Audiovisual Observatory. Many flock to see Hollywood films, which are often dubbed instead of being shown with subtitles.

Looking to Asia

Before Hollywood's withdrawal, Russian company Mosfilm-Master was dubbing around 10 foreign films a month,

mostly from English. "Now we have lost two thirds" of business, the company's director Yevgeny Belin told AFP in its high-tech dubbing studio in Moscow. "During the pandemic, we had films but no cinemas open. Today, we have our cinemas but no films," he said.



Olga Zinyakova, 37, the president of Karo - one of Russia's leading cinema chains, poses during an AFP interview in a screening room of the Oktyabr cinema in Moscow.

Russia's National Association of Cinema Owners said last month that cinemas risk losing up to 80 percent of their revenue. Looking to adapt, Mosfilm-Master is on the hunt for translators from Korean and Mandarin, even though Belin said he "doubts that Asian films work for Russians" because of cultural differences. "Westerners are closer to us," said the 70-year-old, who has spent three decades in dubbing.

Olga Zinyakova, the president of Karo, one of Russia's leading cinema chains, said she is confident the industry can rebuild. "The situation is extremely difficult but not catastrophic," the 37-

year-old said. "Since the arrival of Hollywood in post-Soviet Russia 30 years ago, we have gone through a lot of crises: political, economic and the pandemic," she said, surrounded by empty seats in Moscow's Oktyabr cinema, home to Europe's largest screening room with 1,500 places.

Russian identity

Since the conflict began on February 24, the number of tickets sold in Karo's 35 cinemas has fallen by 70 percent, Zinyakova said. The Russian government has promised major financial support and tax breaks to film production and cinemas, as it looks to replace Hollywood films with more homegrown fare. "Russians will explore themselves more deeply," said Zinyakova, pointing to the success of Russian films from the 1990s like the cult movie "Brat" ("Brother") which is screening again in several Moscow cinemas.

Zinyakova is also preparing to include more Asian and Latin American films among upcoming releases. "And when Hollywood comes back, the Russian market and viewers will no longer be the same," she said. Pavel Doreuli, a 44-year-old sound designer who works on around 15 Russian films a year, said it was no surprise that Hollywood has pulled out of Russia.

"World cinema has been hostage to big politics for years," he said, saying major film festivals like Cannes and Berlin were no longer about art, but about promoting "certain values". Still, Doreuli said it would be a shame for Russia to be cut off from world cinema, pointing to the exclusion of official Russian delegations from this year's Cannes film festival. "If they are excluded from international festivals, Russians will give up on arthouse cinema that offers a different vision of the world, which is so precious today," he said. — AFP



Men walk past film posters in a hallway of the Oktyabr cinema in Moscow.



A view of the grounds of the Russian studios Mosfilm in Moscow.