

## A Wave of Pink: Florence's International Dragon Boat Festival



Foto Facebook Dragon Boat Festival

a cura di MAGENTA FLORENCE

Every four years, rowers gather in one location to take part in a non-competitive event known as the **IBCPC Dragon Boat Festival** that commends and challenges breast cancer survivors. Marking its Italian debut, from July 6 – 8, Florence has the honor of hosting the 2018 international edition on the Arno below the Cascine Park.

This week, as the daily influx of tourists begin to line up at the Uffizi Gallery or crowd the Ponte Vecchio, the distinctive sound of a drum will ring out rhythmically from the waterfront. The cadence comes from groups of narrow yet powerful looking dragon boats that skim along the river with 22 paddlers as its human motor, many of whom are clad in pink.

Since the festival's beginning in 2005, this year marks its European premiere. It is also the first time that there will be representation from each continent. Over 120 teams — comprising women and three men — from 18 countries have signed up, spanning a diverse range of ages from 22 to 80. Festivities begin on July 6 with a "Pink Parade" beginning at the Pitti Palace at 5:30 pm and ending at Palazzo Vecchio where the opening ceremony will take place (8:30 pm).

The non-competitive races will be held on July 6 from 9 am – 6 pm and July 7 between 9 am – 5 pm, after which flowers will be scattered on the waters of the Arno to commemorate past members of each squad **FIRENZE IN ROSA**

The Dragon Boat Festival will contribute to the visibility of Florence's home team "Firenze in Rosa onlus," a diverse and phenomenal group of women. Members are both young and old, Florentine and non-Florentine; some women have recently undergone surgery, while others have been in remission for years.

Although each comes from a different background and has her own unique story, the rowers bond over their shared battles with breast cancer and a new-found love for the sport.

A relative newcomer to “Firenze in Rosa” is Ilaria Grassi, a Florence native who is excited to participate in her first Dragon Boat Festival. Two years after her operation, she has found immense joy through her experience. “One of my favorite aspects is the feeling of solidarity and unity it creates within the team,” she says.

Engaging in this activity helps the women stay active and healthy. Rowing for long periods of time can be daunting, but Grassi likes the challenge and calls it “an extreme workout. While rowing out with other cancer survivors creates a strong support network, the rowing serves as important physical rehabilitation as well. Twenty years ago, Canadian sports medicine physician Donald McKenzie discovered that dragon boat rowing served as an excellent source of post-operative rehabilitation. Not only does it provide a social support system which encourages psychological health, but the actual physical motion of paddling helps build upper body muscles. Further research has suggested the sport can actually delay or altogether prevent the onset of lymphedema — a chronic condition characterized by symptoms of swelling and fluid retention — that 30% of breast cancer survivors develop. Angela Prunecchi is a veteran of the Dragon Boat Festival, having participated in the 2014 Sarasota, Florida event. “I love rowing because I get to see the river in a new perspective,” she says. Besides her passion for water, she enjoys seeing the sun set over the Arno. Like Grassi, Prunecchi stresses the importance of women supporting women. According to her, “the team must communicate and work together in the boat or else big problems could occur.” The dragon boat originated in China 2,500 years ago. Initially made from teak wood, the craft featuring an intricately carved dragon head on the bow and a tail on the stern. The large boat holds a minimum of 20 rowers, in addition to the position of a coxswain at the head of the boat and a sweep in the back to steer.

In the 1980s and 1990s, the Hong Kong Tourist Board began publicizing the sport by actually giving dragon boats away to rowing clubs. Having always been popular in China, they did this in the hope that spreading the boats internationally would revive the ancient activity worldwide. It was not until the early 2000s that the dragon boats arrived in Italy.

The all-women “Firenze in Rosa” owe their start to one very important man: Alessandro Piccardi. Now vice president, he is responsible for creating the group in the first place. In 2003, Piccardi had seen a dragon boat team in Rome and knew immediately he wanted to make the concept a reality in Florence. In 2006, “Firenze in Rosa” was established — the second female dragon boat team in Italy after Rome and the largest in Italy.

Florence native Lucia De Ranieri holds the prestigious title of president of “Firenze in Rosa,” while also serving as the team coxswain in the front of the dragon boat. By calling out commands to the rowers while pounding on a loud drum, her role is to create a rhythm and to keep the ladies on pace.

De Ranieri has been with the “Firenze in Rosa” since 2015 and prides herself on being a part of a “town team” focused on creating personal connections and working together. At this year’s international event, the Florence team will be in the spotlight — and De Ranieri believes that hosting this edition is a great honor for the city. She clarifies that the Dragon Boat Festival is, “not a competition, but a celebration.”

#### FESTIVAL AMBASSADORS

The Dragon Boat Festival is truly a community effort since it involves many local volunteers who will be ambassadors to make participants feel at home in a foreign city and to act as facilitators if necessary.

Members of AILO (the American International League of Florence) Jocelyn Fitzgerald, Libby Cataldi and Sally Carrocino are but a few of local native English-speaking women who are actively working as ambassadors for various teams that will be part of the festivities. These ambassadors are the heart and soul of the operation and they provide not only a helping hand but a friendly face to race participants.

Ambassadors have many responsibilities which not only help the event run smoothly, but allow for friendships to grow. They provide language support for teams who do not speak Italian by translating as well as providing practical information all the way through. They are in contact with their teams three months prior to the event so that everyone feels comfortable and welcomed when they arrive.

It's not just about the women who are involved in the Dragon Boat Festival as Libby Cataldi points out, everyone knows someone, whether it's a mother, sister, wife, or daughter who have been diagnosed with breast cancer. This event provides everyone the opportunity to pay tribute to the women and families who are affected by the disease every year by celebrating survivors, remembering loved ones, and opening up the discussion about breast cancer prevention and encouraging women to get mammograms.

Come July 6, Florence will be bustling with activity with 4-5,000 extra visitors expected, in addition to the usual tourist crowds.

During the festival, these teams will be found skimming up and down the Arno River seemingly at the speed of light, celebrating their triumph over breast cancer. *(molly hamilton/additional reporting by rosanna cirigliano & olivia pugsley)*