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# Fortean Traveller



## 122. Magical Heights: San Marino, San Leo and Count Cagliostro

In early April 2019, **ROB GANDY** travelled with his wife Margaret to the Emilia-Romagna region of Italy and San Marino, ahead of a trip to Rome. He was not looking to find anything fortean – but something fortean found him...



ABOVE: A view of the forbidding Fortress of San Leo, where Cagliostro was imprisoned until his death in 1795.

Marino, through wonderful countryside. It is considered one of Italy's most beautiful villages, and was capital of the Italian kingdom between 961 and 963. According to legend, San Leo was founded by Leo, another stone-cutter from Dalmatia and friend of the aforementioned Marinus (before they both became saints), in order to spread the word of God. The village's cobbled square is flanked by a ninth-century parish church and a Romanesque cathedral, home to centuries' worth of art.

Dominating the village is the large and spectacular fortress that sits atop the ancient Mons Feretrius at an elevation of 2,000ft (600m) above sea level. San Leo was always valued for its strategic situation, overlooking and helping to control the Val Marecchia. The current fortress was primarily built by the famous Sienese architect and engineer Francesco di Giorgio Martini in the late 1470s, and, with its squat round towers giving a sense of impenetrability, is one of the best examples of his ideas put into practice. He was the author of "a treatise on civil and military architecture" which inaugurated a new era in fortification, and was much admired by Leonardo Da Vinci. The fortress employs the natural cliff face, bulwarks, corbels and machicolations (floor openings between the supporting corbels of a battlement, through which stones could be dropped on attackers at the base of a defensive wall), along with innovative elbow-shaped walls (as opposed to the largely circular design previously used). Control of San Leo moved from the Byzantines to the Lombards and on to the Papacy, largely due to events elsewhere rather than the fortress itself falling into enemy hands. Indeed, one of the only times it was taken by force involved an intrepid raid in 1441, when enemy soldiers scaled the mountain during the night and took the Malastas by surprise. Machiavelli called this crag-top fortress Italy's finest military redoubt, while Dante drew inspiration from the castle

**S**an Marino is the capital of the Republic of San Marino, a small independent country surrounded by Italian territory. Football fans will be aware of it because its team is often considered to be the worst national side in the history of the sport; up to 2014 it had only ever won one match of 155 played, conceding 667 goals (and scoring just 23) in the process.<sup>1</sup> In fairness, it should also be mentioned that San Marino scored the second fastest goal in FIFA World Cup qualification history, against England (!) on 17 November 1993 (8.3 seconds) before going on to lose 7-1. While the lower reaches of the Republic are typically urban, the city itself sits atop rugged Mount Titano, with its mediaeval old town and cobbled streets. There are three towers along its eastern ridge, which formed part of the city's

### *His séances were the rage of fashionable Paris society*

ancient defensive system and are celebrated on the country's flag and coat of arms. The first, Guaita, was constructed in the 11<sup>th</sup> century and was famous for being impenetrable, which greatly discouraged attacks on the city. At 2,477ft (755m) above sea level, there are fantastic views in all directions: the Adriatic to the east at Rimini and the Apennines to the west. Legend has it that the city was founded by the Dalmatian stone-cutter Saint Marinus and several Christian refugees in the year 301 and became a centre for Christian refugees

fleeing Roman persecution.

The city is clearly something of a tourist centre, as witnessed by the number of school and coach parties clambering up and down its steep streets and along the path connecting the towers. It is certainly a 'must visit' location if you are in this neck of the woods, and though it's not a particularly fortean destination, there are several fortean-themed attractions, with a heavy reliance on waxworks: two torture-related museums (I didn't expect the San Marino Inquisition), a *Museum of Curiosities*, and the *Museum of Vampires and Werewolves!*<sup>2</sup> Exactly why the city should find itself host to such curiosa I cannot say.

We had a spare day before setting off for Rome, so my friends and colleagues, Alberto and Pietro, suggested they take us to San Leo, a little over 13 miles (21.5 km) from San

for parts of Purgatory in *The Divine Comedy*.

It was upon arrival at the entrance of the fortress that things got distinctly for aen: there before us was a sign referring to Alessandro Count Cagliostro. Cagliostro was renowned as an alchemist, occultist, and magician who claimed to be capable of psychic healing and scrying, although many viewed him as a charlatan and adventurer. His life is shrouded in rumour, propaganda and mysticism; it was only after his arrest for possible participation in the 'Affair of the Diamond Necklace', a plot that defamed Queen Marie Antoinette and paved the way for the French revolution,<sup>3</sup> that it was established he was born Giuseppe Balsamo in Palermo, Sicily, in 1743. He was the son of poor parents, but his grandfather and uncles ensured that he received a solid education. After a series of minor crimes, he escaped from Sicily and travelled through a range of countries around the Mediterranean and Middle East, making a living by various (and often nefarious) means. He married Lorenza Seraphina Feliciani in 1768 and assumed the title of count, before travelling to London and then on to the major European cities, selling elixirs of youth and love powders. His reputation as an alchemist and healer gained him access to the most important courts, where he befriended prominent personalities such as Schiller and Goethe. His séances were the rage of fashionable society in Paris by 1785, when he became embroiled in the 'Affair'. This resulted in nine months in the Bastille prison, banishment from France and a return to England.

But it was involvement in Masonic circles that was key to his ultimate demise. In 1776 'Joseph Cagliostro' was admitted as a Freemason of the Esperance Lodge No 289 in Gerrard Street, Soho, London. He then took the Rite of Misraïm, which was filled with alchemical, occult and Egyptian references. Between 1767 and 1775 he received the *Arcana Arcanorum*, which are three very high hermetic degrees, from the brother of the national Grand Master of Neapolitan Masonry and in 1788 introduced them into the Rite of Misraïm.<sup>4</sup> By founding a Lodge dedicated to Egyptian Rites and assuming the title of 'Gran Cofto

d'Egitto' he was seen as openly challenging the Church.

On a visit to Rome in 1789 he met two people who were spies of the Inquisition (some accounts suggest his wife betrayed him, denouncing him as a heretic, magician and Freemason). He was arrested and imprisoned in the Castel Sant'Angelo, before being tried for heresy and sedition and sentenced to death in 1790. His Masonic manuscripts, regalia and instruments were publicly destroyed in Rome's Piazza della Minerva. However, Cagliostro publicly renounced the principles of his professed doctrine, and was pardoned by Pope Pius VI, who commuted the sentence to life imprisonment in the fortress at San Leo, from which it was considered to be impossible to escape.

I had been completely unaware of the connection between Cagliostro and San Leo, but taking it as an example of for aen serendipity, explored the history and specific locations involved. Initially, Cagliostro was housed in the Treasury vault, the bleakest part of the entire fortress, varying between extremes of cold and damp and hot and humid. It took its name from the tradition that it was where the Dukes of Urbino

kept their treasure during the numerous and repeated assaults on the castle. The soldiers on duty day and night were ordered not to talk to the prisoner, who had also been banned from using paper, pen and ink. Access to the fortress was constantly monitored and all foreigners banned. But there were rumours that some of Cagliostro's supporters were plotting his escape, and therefore Count Semproni, the man in charge, decided to transfer him to the 'Pozzetto' cell, located in the central part of the keep, which he considered even safer and stronger than the Treasury. ('Pozzetto' means a 'manhole' or 'shaft' to a sewer, which gives some idea of the conditions). Cagliostro's imprisonment lasted more than four years, and documents concerning his treatment, based on humanitarian principles, are preserved in the Pesaro State Archive.

The 'Pozzetto' was of narrow dimensions, being only three metres square. The only exterior opening was a small window, fitted with three rows of gratings, which overlooked the parish church and cathedral – Cagliostro's only view of the outside world. There was also a small slit window

that looked onto the staircase, which guards could use to check on him. Otherwise, the only way into (or out of) the cell was through a trap door in the ceiling, which connected with the guardhouse, immediately above. The prisoner was lowered into the cell through this hatch, as was his food. Supervision by the guards was continuous. Indeed, they could keep Cagliostro under watch without themselves being seen, which was important to them as they feared his gaze, by which they might be hypnotised and induced into freeing him. Occasionally, they would descend into the cell to carry out periodical inspections of the room and prisoner.

Although many other prisoners were housed in the 'Pozzetto' over the years, it is not surprising that it is commonly referred to as 'Cagliostro's Cell'. And it was on 26 August 1795, now seriously ill, that he died due to a stroke. The death certificate is preserved in the parish archive of San Leo and was written in Latin by the Archpriest Luigi Marini:

*Giuseppe Balsamo, nicknamed Count of Cagliostro, of Palermo, baptised but incredulous, heretic, famous for his bad name, after having spread the emphatic doctrine of Egyptian Freemasonry to various European countries, to which he gained an infinite number of followers with subtle deceptions, he ran into various vicissitudes, which he did not escape without damage, by virtue of his cunning and skill; finally by sentence of the Holy Inquisition relegated to perpetual prison in the fortress of this city, with the hope that he repented, having endured with the same firmness and obstinacy the hardships of the prison for four years, four months, five days, caught by a sudden stroke, of a perfidious mind and a wicked heart such as he was, not having given the least sign of repentance, he died without mourning, outside the Communion of Saint M. Church, at the age of fifty-two, two months and eighteen days. Born unhappy, the more unhappy he lived, very unhappy he died on 26 August of the aforementioned year at approximately 22.45. On this occasion a public prayer was called, if ever the merciful God turned his gaze to the work of his hands. As a heretic, excommunicated, an impenitent sinner, he is denied burial according to the ecclesiastical rite.*



BELOW: Cagliostro holds one of his magical séances for the fashionable citizens of pre-revolutionary Paris.



ABOVE LEFT: The wooden bed in the "Pozzetto", the small cell in which Cagliostro spent his final years. ABOVE RIGHT: The small internal window looking down into the cell; guards could observe their prisoner while avoiding his 'hypnotic' gaze. BELOW: Rob (left), wife Margaret and friends Alberto and Pietro with San Leo Fortress behind.

The corpse is buried right on the extreme point of the mountain that looks to the west, almost at the same distance between the two forts... commonly called the Palazzetto and the Casino, on the ground of the Reverend Camera Apostolica on the 28th at 18.15.

It is not possible to access the Treasury vault, which is down some steep steps, but you can look inside through the gate and see that it would not be a pleasant place in which to be incarcerated. (It appeared that people had tossed money in through the gate on to the floor for some reason). When I walked around the 'Pozzetto' cell there was only a simple wooden bed, with a few flowers on it. The light from the window was good, but it was easy to imagine how dark, cold and claustrophobic it would be at night, particularly in winter. You might be wondering how I managed to get into the cell: was I lowered down by a rope, or is there now a ladder from the guardhouse? Neither: there is a doorway to the cell, but this was created in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, long after Cagliostro's death.

Interestingly, the fortress appears to be important to the Italian Masonic lodges, presumably because of the Cagliostro connection. In one part of the museum there were exhibits of Masonic aprons and other items, and there were many photos of high-ranking Masonic personnel.

Admission to the fortress and museum is only six euros, and represents excellent value.



## It was easy to imagine how claustrophobic it would be

There are stunning views in all directions, and if you look over the side in some places there is a sheer drop. While people like me will make a beeline for the Cagliostro-related areas, there is much else to see, including exhibits on the history of the fortress, guns and weapons, and a 'celle di punizione' or torture dungeon, which includes some pretty horrible ways to inflict pain – racks, wheels, gibbets, and lots of sharp things. To complement the dungeon there is an upstairs exhibition of other forms of punishment,

including a large barrel placed over people who had been found guilty of drunkenness and from which only the head and feet protruded; this acted as a form of stocks, as the occupant was pelted with vegetables as he ran around trying to avoid them. There might be an element of the macabre in several of the exhibits, but San Leo knows how to have a good time, holding seasons of events and various festivals, which bring in locals and tourists alike.

But they never forget old Cagliostro, and hold the *AlchimiAlchimie* each year in late August where they celebrate him with an array of performance and other events which culminate in a magnificent fireworks display from the fortress.<sup>5</sup>

### VISITING THE REGION

We really enjoyed our trip to the fortress, and I was pleased

to have found so much of fortean interest. If you fancy visiting San Leo and San Marino then the nearest main airport is Bologna, whence you can get buses or hire a car (if you like driving around hairpin bends). If you are feeling particularly energetic and have the right kind of bike, then why not take the *Visita a Cagliostro* bicycle route?<sup>6</sup> Or perhaps just a part of it, as the whole itinerary is a 65 mile (105km) round trip. It sets out from Rimini towards San Salvatore and Ospedaletto, climbing up to Faetano, Montegiardino and Fiorentino (at 1,900ft/580m) before sweeping down to Castello di Montemaggio (800ft/244m) and climbing back up to San Leo. This is not for the faint-hearted.

### NOTES

- 1 [www.complex.com/sports/2014/10/9-reasons-why-san-marino-worst-football-team-all-time/](http://www.complex.com/sports/2014/10/9-reasons-why-san-marino-worst-football-team-all-time/)
- 1 [www.thetorturemuseum.it/](http://www.thetorturemuseum.it/); [www.museodelleceresmi.com/](http://www.museodelleceresmi.com/); [www.museodellecuriosita.sm/](http://www.museodellecuriosita.sm/); [www.museodeivampiri.com/](http://www.museodeivampiri.com/)
- 3 <http://en.chateaus Versailles.fr/discover/history/key-dates/affair-diamond-necklace-1784-1785>
- 4 [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rite\\_ofcagliostro.html](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rite_ofcagliostro.html)
- 5 <http://www.san-leo.it/events/san-leo/2019/alchimiAlchimie-2019.html>
- 6 <https://www.terrabici.com/routes/cagliostro-visit-san-leo>

◆ **ROB GANDY** is a visiting professor at the Liverpool Business School, John Moores University and a regular contributor to FT.