

Pistoia, Italian Book Capital 2026

Established by law No. 15 of 13 February 2020, the Italian Book Capital designation is the Ministry of Culture's principal instrument for supporting locally led programmes that promote reading while advancing social inclusion, cohesion and civic participation. It follows in the wake of the successful Italian Capital of Culture programme, launched in 2014, and even in its name echoes UNESCO's World Book Capital, awarded since 2001 to cities around the world to stimulate long-term cultural development in books, reading and publishing.

An initial appointment during the Covid period saw Chiari (Brescia) designated without a competitive process. From 2021 onwards, however, the title has been awarded annually through an open call assessed by a jury of five independent specialists, who evaluate the dossiers submitted by candidate cities. Between 2021 and 2026, the projects recommended to the Minister of Culture came from Vibo Valentia, Ivrea, Genoa, Taurianova (Reggio Calabria), Subiaco and Pistoia, judged the most convincing, mature and effective in relation to the objectives set out in the call.

The winning city receives up to €500,000, to be matched by municipal and other public-e actions set out in its bid. The programme runs over the calendar year, from 1 January to 31 December, with a short extension into the following year to complete monitoring, evaluation and both cultural and financial reporting.

Throughout the process, the city is supported by a dedicated team of young Ministry officials: from signing the agreement and refining the operational plan, to ensuring national visibility through television, conferences and seminars, and keeping the project rigorous and accountable—monitoring expenditure, adherence to agreed lines of activity, and the delivery of major events.

Pistoia holds the title for 2026, nine years after being named Italian Capital of Culture in 2017. This second success is far from accidental and, in a sense, redeems a city often portrayed as a 'minor' Tuscan player: frequently overlooked and inevitably overshadowed by the splendour of Florence or the tourist appeal of Siena, Pisa and Lucca.

A common thread links both designations: the San Giorgio Library. In 2017 it already played a central role; in 2026 it becomes the beating heart of the entire programme. Opened in 2007 in the converted historic mechanical works from which it takes its name, San Giorgio quickly revealed itself as a library of uncommon potential. It is grounded in a strong bibliographic identity and, thanks to the building's distinctive architecture, embedded within a rich 'ecosystem of services': an annual film programme, a varied offer of lifelong-learning courses, and a steady calendar of art exhibitions. Add to this initiatives for children, digital-skills training, and a host of extra-library activities—from knitting to Burraco, from dance to PlaySta-

tion—spread across more than 9,000 square metres of indoor and outdoor space.

Were this all, San Giorgio would already rank as an excellent, well-run library—one of many in Italy that compare favourably with their counterparts abroad.

What truly distinguishes it, however, is its resolutely social orientation: a daily shift from doing things ‘for’ citizens to doing them ‘with’ citizens. Services are not designed for passive users but co-produced with people who, in specific contexts, become protagonists and co-owners of the choices to be made.

This change of perspective rests on two practices: careful listening to people’s needs, and recognition of community members not merely as bearers of needs but as active resources to be mobilised in shaping responses together.

As this approach evolved from experimentation into established practice, it gave rise to the Friends of San Giorgio Association, founded in 2009. Today it brings together hundreds of residents keen to play an active role in library life. Their contribution has extended the core offer far beyond what staff alone could provide: home-library services for older readers without access to transport; stalls selling donated books; a network of free book-exchange points across the city; story-time sessions in paediatric clinics; a library service point inside the Coop supermarket in the city centre; and a particularly warm welcome for older readers through the Librobus—a nine-seater minibus that brings people to the library and takes them home again.

Alongside this runs a lively lifelong-learning programme offered entirely pro bono by local professionals—psychologists, doctors, solicitors, counsellors, and tutors in disciplines ranging from tango to origami—who donate their time so that neighbours can explore new interests and, in the process, benefit from the expertise these professionals have developed through their work and passions.

It is this ethos—of generative circulation of knowledge, civic activism and collective mobilisation around a shared project—that enabled Pistoia to prevail over other shortlisted cities (Carmagnola, Perugia, Nardò and Tito), whose proposals were themselves rich, mature and persuasive.

Pistoia’s programme sets out more than 1,500 events involving not only the city’s two libraries but also bookshops, reading groups, schools, cultural and voluntary associations, publishers, local authors, trade bodies, tour guides, and even hotels and restaurants. All are brought together under the Pistoia Pact for reading, a formal commitment to a shared purpose: promoting reading across the city. The Pact also represents a collective re-imagining of civic identity and a positive rallying point for local energies.

The city has deliberately avoided high-profile national showcases with celebrity headliners, opting instead for the quieter effectiveness of sustained, everyday programming. Audience numbers may be smaller, but the ambition is to shift local reading habits: enrolling new library members, seeding new reading groups, drawing first-time visitors to staffed service points, or using a playful reading challenge—with something as simple as breakfast at the library café as a prize—to persuade a teenager to pick up a book they might never otherwise have chosen.

This is not to say that major events are absent. Some are long-standing fixtures in the city’s cultural calendar, above all the “Dialoghi di Pistoia” festival in late May; others were created specifically for the Capital year, such as Aldo Cazzullo’s keynote lecture on Dante and Francis, which opened the programme on 10 January to a sold-out theatre.

Beyond these headline moments, which may also generate a cultural-g as a starting point for further growth in reading as a shared practice.

Among the seeds expected to prove most fruitful are €60,000 (from the €428,000 provided by the Ministry) earmarked for books for school libraries most in need of support; the installation of 30 little free-library boxes across the province; and €20,000 for books to support specific initiatives—reading groups, book-voucher prizes in numerous competitions, ‘suspended books’ in bookshops (a play of the ‘suspended coffee’), and campaigns encouraging people to choose a book as a Valentine’s gift.

Progress throughout the year can be followed on social media and at pistoia-capitaledellibro2026.it, as well as through a monthly printed magazine serving as a practical what’s-ing ecosystem to take root and, even in modest ways—and modest is enough—to make a tangible difference to the life of a courageous, generous, community-minded and curious city.

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