

THE TOWN THAT CAN'T STOP HAVING BABIES

HERE'S the mindboggling result of an incredible baby boom in this tiny Italian town, which boasts the highest fertility rate in all of Europe.

Birth control pills and even the intrauterine device (IUD) are no match for the magical air that envelops the remote town of Trinitapoli, nestled on a high plateau in southern Italy.

A whopping 2,000 babies have been born in the town of 25,000 in the past four years alone. That's one for every woman between the ages of 21 and 44.

By contrast, only one in 16 American women in that age group gave birth last year.

Trinitapoli stands out, even in a rural area that still regards large families as a Godsend. Some families boast as many as 21 children, although the average is six — still a big brood in anyone's book.

A team of doctors and scientists will move into the village this fall to study the sky-high birth rate. They hope to isolate the cause, which could lead to a miracle cure for childless couples everywhere.

"It's true that many of Trinitapoli's womenfolk appear immune to the birth control effects of the pill and the IUD, the two safest methods," says Dr. Giorgio Mendola, the team's gynecologist.

Doctors believe something in the air caused every woman aged 22 to 44 to give birth in the last four years



The Scisciolas

HE adds: "We have no idea what will turn up in the study."

"Biologists have already discovered that crops grow in profusion in this area, unlike the surrounding region which is arid and unproductive.

"We want to find out if the soil or atmosphere contains elements that we could identify and exploit."

Most townspeople don't care what's causing the baby boom, they're just content to enjoy its fruits.

Nicola Sciciolo, a builder, is called "Don Nicola" by his neighbors because he has the biggest family in town. The 60-year-old builder has 21 children ranging in age from 16 to 35.

"We tried various birth control methods, but nothing seemed to work," says Don Nicola. "The children kept coming. Now, I wouldn't have it any other way."

Mayor Arcangelo Sannicandro adds: "The people of this town regard it as their destiny to procreate."

Ironically, he and his wife are the only exceptions to the rule.

"We chose not to have children, and so far my wife has been immune to whatever is supposed to be circulating in the air," he says.