

WHAT TO DO AND WHERE TO GO

(a few itineraries to whet your appetite - thanks to Vieri!)

In Florence

Unusual and exceptional experiences:

Biblioteca Laurenziana (San Lorenzo)

Opificio delle Pietre Dure **

Museo del Duomo **

Museo Bardini **

Museo Stibbert

Museo della Storia delle Scienze

Special things to do in and near Florence

Take a walk or two...

Get into town early, explore the small streets and listen to the sound of your steps on the cobblestones: have you read Irving Stone's "The Agony and the Ecstasy"? You'll get a feeling of the atmosphere of the old Renaissance town by walking in the narrow streets of the 'centro' when nobody is around, particularly in the oldest parts of town. The area I like the best is in the triangle formed by the Duomo, Palazzo Vecchio and the Bargello. Dante's house is somehow in the middle of this triangle. Although Dante never lived there, extensive restoration completed in March 2005 makes it a place to visit to understand how people lived in the late middle-ages. Nearby is the little church of Santa Margherita, also known as Beatrice's church. Folco Portinari's governess and Beatrice's nanny, Monna Tessa, is buried in this church.

If you would rather take a scenic walk on the hills overlooking Florence, take bus 13 to Piazzale Michelangelo. From the Piazzale, walk to the church of San Miniato. Visit the church and enjoy the fantastic view (better seen in the morning, with the sun behind you): on a clear day you can see the far away Alpi Apuane, the marble mountains above Carrara where most of the marble of our statues comes from. Or go there late in the afternoon, to enjoy watching the sun set behind the 'Ponte Vecchio'. From San Miniato, go left on the Viale dei Colli until you reach via San Leonardo; then right on that narrow old street where high walls protect the privacy of some of the most beautiful villas of Florence. Walk into Forte Belvedere and to the terrace on the top; from there the main buildings of Florence will seem close enough to touch. Then walk into town either going down the Costa San Giorgio to the Ponte Vecchio or, if the path is open, into the Boboli Garden to Pitti Palace.

Off the beaten track

Besides the most famous museums, like the Uffizi and the Accademia, where crowds of people push you around, in Florence we have many smaller places, not included in the typical tour, where art can be admired at ease. Among these, the Horne Foundation, a representation of a Renaissance house; the Monastero di San Marco, with its monks' cells frescoed by Beato Angelico; the Monastero di San Salvi, with paintings by Rosso Fiorentino and Pontormo and the beautiful Last Supper by Andrea del Sarto; the Museo Stibbert with a unique collection of antique armours; the Museo di Storia della Scienza, exhibiting scientific



instruments used by Galileo, Paolo Toscanelli, etc; La Specola, the museum of natural sciences and a private Medici collection of plant and animals of all kinds and the outstanding collection of wax anatomical models by the Neapolitan artist Zummo, at the beginning of the 1700's.

The Region of Tuscany

History – Heritage - Culture

Tuscany is the largest region of peninsular Italy. It was once Etruria, the land to which a people (the Etruscans) of mysterious origin came nearly thirty centuries ago. Experts in crafts and trade by land and sea, the Etrurians set up a league of cities, such as Volterra, some of which have continued as cities ever since. Etruria was absorbed into the Roman culture, became Tuscia, then Toscana (Tuscany). From the remote era of Etruscan civilization, which gave the region its name, to the splendors of the Renaissance and later periods, Tuscany has played a consistent and determining role in the modeling of Western Civilization. The most significant and culturally rich period of Tuscan history is generally dated from the end of the 13th century up to and including the entire 16th century.

'A little farther afield in Tuscany'

As you ride around, follow your instincts and pay a short visit to any of the small towns that you see on the top of the hills and you'll discover your personal little treasure.

The Mugello

North of Florence take a drive in the Mugello. The Mugello was the birthplace of many exceptional artists (Giotto, Beato Angelico, Andrea del Castagno). This is also where the Medici family originally came from. The easiest way to visit Mugello is going north (direction Bologna) on the A1. Exit at Barberino and drive towards Scarperia. There is a large artificial lake, a water reservoir for Florence, which has now become an important recreational area. Shortly after passing the dam, you will see to the right the Villa di Cafaggiolo, one of the main Medici residences before they moved to Florence. Just before San Piero a Sieve, if you are interested in golfing, go see Poggio dei Medici, one of the most beautiful courses in Europe. Scarperia is worth a stop. It is a fortified town built by the Republic of Florence in the early 1400's as part of a network of fortifications meant to protect roads and traders. Knives and blades of various kinds from Scarperia are very famous and are still produced by local artisans in the old traditional way.

Colle Val d'Elsa, Volterra, Larderello

Take the major highway towards Siena and get off at **Colle Val d'Elsa nord**. The ancient village, at the top of the hill, is very picturesque and has been beautifully restored. Today 'Colle' is one of the most important crystal-producing centers in Italy, an activity which started way back in the 14th century. The main town, at the bottom of the valley, is not very attractive but blown-glass and crystal factories, large and small, make exquisite products, from table glasses to bottles, vases, etc. Also, ceramics is another typical artisan product.

Once in Colle, **Volterra** is only 30 kilometers away. Volterra, the Etruscan Velhatri, renamed by the Latins Volaterrae (flying earth, because of the strong winds), was one of the twelve Lucumonie, the capitals of the Etruscan kingdom: the hills around

Volterra were rich in minerals (they are still referred to as Colline Metallifere), and the Etruscans mined and worked the metals. Another typical artisan craft of Volterra is alabaster, quarried just outside the city from Etruscan and Roman times. It comes in many colors and is worked into wonderful vases, bowls, figures and statues. It is easy to visit a number of showrooms and small factories in and just outside the city.

South of the city is the **Valle del Diavolo** ('Valley of the Devil'). As you look south from Volterra you see enormous columns of steam rising from the other side of the valley. What you are looking at is **Larderello** (from the name of Mr. Larderel, a French engineer who, in around 1850, conceived the idea of employing these natural steam jets for civil use). Driving in the area gives you a taste of a ride through a description of Dante's gateway to the Inferno (hell) ..an experience worth trying.

Vinci, Artimino, Poggio a Caiano

West of Florence, within the 25-mile range, **Vinci** (the birth place of Leonardo) is worth visiting, There is a very entertaining museum with full-size, working models of all Leonardo's inventions. The area is very beautiful; and the Medici were particularly fond of it, as witnessed by the fact that four of their major villas were built in the area. Among these, Cerreto and Vitolini. The one I recommend seeing is **Artimino**, also known as the villa with hundred chimneys. It was used as a hunting lodge, and the chimneys were necessary because of the cold winds blowing in the area. There are two good restaurants: Mastro Pignatta, very near the villa, where the stables used to be. The other, Delfina, is in the nearby small village and is probably the better of the two. As you drive down hill going north towards Prato, you'll see signs to some Etruscan tombs. Frankly, there are much better Etruscan tombs than these elsewhere in Tuscany. But if you are fond of Medici Villas, one of the most famous and beautiful is in the village of **Poggio a Caiano**, at the foot of the hill.

Siena, Monte Riggione, sunset at San Gimignano

The idea is to leave fairly early in the morning.

A 'walk about' **Siena** (it is all up and down with the exception of Piazza del Campo)

Lunch 'wherever' in Siena and then on to Monteriggione (a totally walled fortress-town just north of Siena) for coffee, ice cream and a moment to look at Tuscan panoramas

The last stop is San Gimignano (white wine and snacks) to see the famous 'tower city' and watch the sunset over Tuscany.

MONTERIGGIONE

On the summit of a hill, Monteriggione stands with its perfectly conserved surrounding walls. The fortress was built in 1203 by Siena as an outpost against [Firenze](#).

SAN GIMIGNANO

San Gimignano first developed as an agricultural market town. As a symbol of the town's power, tall towers and tower-houses were erected by the local aristocracy - in the 14th century there were 72, of which 13 are still standing. Tall towers and tower houses were also part of Florence in the same period. The town is one of the best examples of medieval Tuscan urban design. San Gimignano is well-known for the production of wine Vernaccia. This is one of the most well-known white wines in Italy and has ancient origins dating back to the 13th century.

South of Siena

The area south of Siena is well worth visiting. It is a bit off the major tourist 'beaten track', and many of the small towns and cities which were important centers in the Middle Ages have remained, for all intents and purposes, intact. This is an area rich in towns, panoramas, works of art and also magnificent wines and traditional foods and artisan products... and there is never enough time to taste it all or see everything there is to see! Obviously, one day is not enough, but you can always go back for more!

Buonconvento – a must stop

This town is unusual in that you will see a real 'mix' of architecture – the town itself is predominately of medieval and Renaissance buildings to which has been added 'liberty' small villas and buildings of the early twentieth century. This melange of antique and 'modern' is particularly evident in the Museum of Sacred Art (an extravagant 'liberty' epoch building which houses a permanent exhibit of paintings of the Madonna and other religious objects of the Senese school from the 1200's to the 1500's).

Montalcino - Montalcino is the 'home' of the exceptional 'brunello' wine and of the less famous (expensive) but basically equally good 'rosso di Montalcino'. The hills and valleys surrounding the town are carpeted in vineyards. They once were covered with woodlands and forests. In the town museum, Museo Civico e Diocesano holds an important collection of religious statues in wood. There is also an interesting museum of glass and wine bottles and containers at the famous 'Castello Banfi' just outside the walls...worth a visit and some wine tasting. Close by you can see the Abbey of Saint Antimo which according to legend was founded by Charlemagne in the 8th century and is still in perfect condition. (Don't forget to buy a few bottles of wine from this area!)

Bagno Vignoni –another 'must' stop

A natural thermal spring with legendary 'magical properties', so much so that the Medici family, Lorenzo in particular, visited to take the waters and ease the 'gout'. The town is exceptional as its main piazza is a large rectangular pool where until not many years ago people took 'baths'! Today it is just a totally original 'heart' of the town. However, thermal baths are still available in a five-star hotel right there.

Pienza – a total must !!!

Enea Silvio Piccolomini (Pope Pius II) wanted his own city. Pienza was to be built 'ex novo' as the 'perfect city', a commission given to Bernardo Rossellino in the 1300's. The space available was not extensive so the architect resorted to a few tricks of perspective to make the central piazza (Piazza Pio) seem more spacious. The entire city is a jewel of 'urban panning' at its best. In the Bishop's palace and the Diocese museum there is a collection of works by the most famous painters of the 1300's. Don't pass up buying the very special 'pecorino' (sheep cheese) which is very famous and cured in saffron.

A day in Chianti – Greve, Radda in Chianti – visit a couple of wineries and explore

Chianti lies between two important cities, [Firenze](#) and Siena. Chianti has always been a wine-producing area (there is evidence of viticultural activity right back in Etruscan times). Running through this historic territory is the Via Chiantigiana, which joins [Firenze](#) and Siena. Off this main route there are innumerable roads (both asphalt and dirt roads) leading to ancient parish churches, castles, and farms.

After crossing the river Greve at Ponte di Rimaggio, you arrive at **Greve in Chianti**. It developed as a market village because of its position at the crossroads of two main routes. Not far south there is **Radda in Chianti**, which today is the headquarters

of the Consorzio del Chianti Gallo Nero. The history of this village has been documented since 1984 by the Centro Studi Storici Chiantigiani at the Fattoria di Vignale.

To the south-west of Radda is the village of **Castellina**, which occupies a kind of panoramic balcony over Chianti, positioned on a high hill at the center of three valleys. Its medieval structure is intact both in the center and in the buildings dotted around the surrounding countryside.

A visit to the famous **Castello di Brolio** to the south of Gaiole is a must; a Florentine outpost in the territory of Siena, in the past it was the scene of conflict between the two cities. Since the first half of the nineteenth century it has been the property of the Ricasoli family and is one of the largest wine estates in the Chianti area.

Lucca and its villas

Lucca is also called the 'city of the hundred churches'. The very distinctive Piazza del Mercato, which is oval-shaped because it was built over an ancient Roman amphitheatre, is circled by an uninterrupted ring of houses. The only access to the piazza is by four pedestrian entrances.

Places of interest in the area around Lucca include the famous Ville Lucchese, which were built between the 16th and the 18th centuries on hilltops, mainly in proximity to the supplies of water that were needed for the spectacular fountains in their gardens. The countryside around Lucca produces a high-quality (and world famous) olive oil.

THE MAREMMA AND THE SEA

Maremma amara - bitter Maremma. This is how a traditional Tuscan song describes the area in the province of Grosseto that makes up the southernmost part of the region. For centuries it was plagued by malaria and had a standard of living that was close to bare survival. In The Divine Comedy (Canto 13 of the Inferno), Dante wrote: "Non han si aspri sterpi né si folti quelle fiere selvagge che in odio hanno tra Cecina e Corneto i luoghi colti". This can be paraphrased as follows: the wild beasts that find no home in the cultivated fields between Cecina and Corneto find refuge in the thick, harsh bush of the Maremma. But this is perhaps what makes the area so uniquely beautiful. Wind, sea, mountains, and sun seem to combine to give this zone a real sense of wildness. The Maremma is one of the least populated areas of Italy, with large stretches of land left undisturbed for the flora and fauna, which seem, even beyond its boundaries, to be a natural extension of the Parco dell'Uccellina.

The Province of Grosseto

There have been many Etruscan finds of great cultural and historical significance in the Maremma. These historical riches, together with the beauty of the countryside, the folk culture, and the food and wine, have all contributed to the great development of the area in recent years. Places like Scarlino, Gavorrano, Ravi, and Buriano seem to take you all the way back to the Dark Ages. Vetulonia, together with Roselle, reveal some of the most visible traces of Etruscan presence in this region. In its time, Vetulonia was extremely prosperous because it was able to exploit the nearby mines at Massa Marittima, and it also had a thriving maritime trade. Take the day to drive to and through the 'high' Maremma stopping at Massa Marittima, Scarlino (DON'T MISS IT) and a walk on the beach somewhere along the way. It is a very special part of Tuscany.

