

TOUR CODE

OATL



TUSCANY & LIGURIA

Hill Towns & Coastal Villages

13 days

Updated 1/21/2011

Day 1 *Arrival in Florence*

Today we arrive in Florence.

Florence is a vivid, busy, absorbing city. Set in the foothills of the Apuane Alps in the valley of the River Arno which flows through its precincts, Florence is surrounded by hills stitched with rows of ancient olive trees and vineyards, umbrella pines and dark, sharp cypresses. There are few cities in the world that offer such a density of cultural treasures in such a lovely setting.

Overnight in Florence. Meal plan: Dinner, if required.

Day 2 *Florence: City Tour*

This morning, we enjoy a guided tour of Florence. We begin with the Accademia, which was Europe's first academy of drawing and today houses a superb art collection, including Michelangelo's David, probably the most famous statue in the world. We then proceed to the cathedral of Santa Maria del Fiore (Duomo), complete with its magnificent red dome. Upon its completion in 1436, the dome was hailed as the greatest architectural achievement of its day. The cupola's diameter is greater than that of St Peter's in Rome and the nave is the third largest in Christendom. Even today its brilliant engineering is not fully understood.

We continue along the pedestrian mall to the Piazza della Signoria, where we pause to admire Florence's city hall, the Palazzo Vecchio, and the sculptures that surround it. These were commissioned by the ruling Medici family and executed by some of the greatest of the Renaissance sculptors.

We walk to the Ponte Vecchio, the oldest bridge in Florence and the only one in the city to survive World War II. The Ponte Vecchio was built in 1345 and used to be lined with butcher shops, which have now been replaced by rows of gold and silver shops on both sides. At the Piazza Santa Croce, we stop to admire the facade of the Franciscan church of the same name. We see the tombs of Michelangelo and Galileo Galilei and chapels covered in frescoes by Giotto.

Overnight in Florence. Meal plan: Breakfast and dinner.

Day 3 *Florence - Greve-in-Chianti - Radda*

This morning we drive south into the area between Florence and Siena known as Chianti, a name which dates back to Etruscan times. At Parco San Michele, we begin a four hour walk.

Parco San Michele is a tiny enclave including a villa and chapel. The views from here across the diversity of the Chianti landscape are impressive; we begin our walk today at the highest point in the area -- 892 m (2,925 feet). Along the way,

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we pass vineyards where Chianti grapes are tended and a little stone village called Canonica. Much of this land is given over to viticulture, but there are also fields of wheat and barley speckled with the vermilion of a thousand poppy flowers in May and June. The path is often lined with banks of wild flowers: red valerian, vetch, asphodels and cyclamen. There is also the occasional orchid.

Greve is one of the largest towns in the Chianti region (pop 12,500), located just to the south of Florence in the heart of one of Italy's most important wine regions: Chianti Classico. The sign on the vintner's denomination is the "Gallo Nero", the black rooster, an ancient symbol of the Florentine army. Chianti wines are straight-forward and robust, made following traditional methods formulated in the 19th century, using mainly canaiolo, sangiovese, nero and malvasia grapes. The town of Greve has a beautiful little funnel-shaped, asymmetrical piazza where there is a variety of specialty shops selling fine fabrics, wines and locally cured meats along its porticoed perimeter.

We continue to Radda, a village situated on a little hill separating the Val di Pesa from the Val d'Arbia. In the 1400s it was made into a florentine fortress and subsequently it became chief town of the Chianti league. The ruins of the ancient defensive walls and look-out towers are all that remains of that period.

DAY SUMMARY: 3.5-4 hours of walking, mostly downhill, mostly on a secondary, little-used gravel road. Change in altitude from top to bottom, 500 m (1,650 ft) over approximately 10 km (6.25 miles) total. If you choose to opt out of today's walk, you might travel with the vehicle and meet the group in Greve.

Overnight in Radda. Meal plan: Breakfast and dinner.

Day 4 ***Radda-in-Chianti***

Today we enjoy walks in the region of Radda, often on a forested ridges in the middle of the Chianti hills. Alternating between forests and fields, the path is often scented with the wild herbs that grow along the margins of our trail: savoury, marjoram, wild basil and fennel. Birdsong of the European goldfinch and blackbirds sometimes accompany our walking. Otherwise, there is silence and the wind in the oaks.

Today we embark on a two and a half hour walk into the valley north of Radda, up to the little village of Volpaia where we stop for lunch (hopefully al fresco - included today). In the afternoon, we follow a different route through the countryside back to Radda. Total walking today will be about five hours, broken by a lunch break in Volpaia. We return to Radda in the mid-afternoon.

DAY SUMMARY: 2.5 hours each way, approximately, for a total of 5 hours walking, downhill and uphill in about equal measure, broken by lunch in Volpaia. Conditions vary from asphalt road for the first and last kilometre, to dirt paths through sloping fields, to country lanes, to little-used country gravel roads. Change in altitude approximately 250 m (825 ft), but this is done four times. Total distance: approx 14 km (8.75 miles). Varying between shaded forest and open fields.

Overnight in Radda. Meal plan: Breakfast and lunch.

Day 5 ***Radda-in-Chianti - Pienza***

This morning we drive to the tiny town of Pienza.

Pienza was originally named Cortignano, but Pope Pius II, who had been born in this tiny village, decided to rework it on a monumental scale. He spent huge sums to erect several significant structures: a cathedral, a town hall, and a palace for himself and others for his cardinals -- including one for the infamous Rodrigo Borgia, who later became the most corrupt

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Pope Alexander VI. Here building was completed in three years, but nothing more was undertaken thereafter and so the result is quite remarkable: a miniature setting with a piazza dominated by some truly major edifices. We can visit the residence of the former pope in the Palazzo Piccolomini, along with the duomo that has one of the region's first Renaissance facades.

Overnight in Pienza. Meal plan: Breakfast and dinner.

Day 6 *Pienza - Bagno Vignoni - Pienza*

Today we have a 3.5 hour walk from Pienza to Bagno Vignoni. This is an area of cultivated grapes and olives, and maybe soon to be cultivated fields (durum semolina wheat, used in making pasta, will be planted in the third week of October for harvest next July).

After lunch in Bagno Vignoni, we walk for two hours along a gentle country backroad to San Quirico d'Orcia. Along our path we come across paving stones from Roman roads that passed this way. This is an area alive with game: we may startle a pheasant or partridge out of a hedgerow as we walk.

We take the local bus from San Quirico d'Orcia back to Pienza. Tonight, treat yourself to some of the wines for which the area is justly famous, such as the Brunellos, thought by some to be Italy's finest reds.

DAY SUMMARY: Pienza to Bagno Vignoni: 3.5 to 4 hours. The path varies between dirt path across sloping fields, to little-used country lanes and gravel backroads. Change in altitude is approximately 250 m (825 feet), from the top of one side of a valley down to the bottom then up eventually to Bagno Vignoni. Distance: 10 km (6.25 miles). Bagno Vignoni to San Quirico d'Orcia --2 hours along a little-used gravel road that slopes quite steeply upward for the first third, and then gently downward the last two thirds. Change in altitude is about 150 m (495 ft). Distance: 4 km (2.5 miles).

Overnight in Pienza. Meal plan: Breakfast and lunch.

Day 7 *Pienza - Montepulciano - Pienza*

This morning we set out on a four hour walk from Pienza to Montepulciano. After about two hours, we break this walk in the little medieval village of Montecchiello. Arriving in time for lunch in Montepulciano, there will be time to explore the labyrinthine streets of this, the highest of southern Tuscany's hill towns at 600 m (1,980 ft) above sea level. Again the theme of oak forests and wild flowers spread across folding hills is pervasive. While you are here, you may want to sample some of Montepulciano's famous Vino Nobile wines.

Later in the afternoon, we travel by local bus back to Pienza.

DAY SUMMARY: 4 hours. The path is a little-used gravel backroad that follows the undulating contours of the countryside. Change in altitude involves a gradual descent from Pienza, situated at 500m (1,650 ft), into the valley, at about 250m (825 ft), then back up to the town of Monticchiello at 535m (1,765 ft). From here it is down again to about 250m again and back up to Montepulciano at 605m (1,997 ft). So average change in altitude is about 250m x four. Distance: 12.5 km (7.8 miles).

Overnight in Pienza. Meal plan: Breakfast and dinner.

Day 8 *Pienza - Siena*

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Our journey continues with a drive to Siena, via a visit to the impressive 14th century Benedictine abbey of Monte Olivetto Maggiore en route.

The Abbey of Monte Oliveto Maggiore is one of the greatest monastic monuments of the early Renaissance period. In 1313, a Sienese noble man, Giovanni Tolomei, founded the abbey after he was struck blind and subsequently received visions of the Virgin. The order he founded became known as the Olivetans, or white Benedictines. A testament to the remarkable influence and power that this monastery came to have is the art to be found inside; most notably, a fresco cycle in 36 scenes depicting the life of St Benedict. Another great treasure is found in the church: The choir stalls are decorated with inlaid wood in a series of marvellous Renaissance tromp l'oeil scenes.

From the abbey, our minivan takes us up to the start point of our three hour walk at the hilltop village of Chiusure. Shortly after the village we have an excellent view across the Crete cliff and rippling valleys to the abbey we have just left. We continue through copses, with meadows stretching out on either side, through the shade of an oak forest, across a bridge over a little stream to arrive at the beautiful and diminutive walled town of Buonconvento.

Later we continue by road to Siena.

DAY SUMMARY: 3.5 hours walking. The path begins at the hill town of Chiusure and follows a gravel backroad downwards and then back up again. The trail leaves the road and then plunges into woods along a dirt trail, opening again onto a high ridge. Eventually, this dirt trail joins another gravel backroad and descends to Buonconvento. Change in altitude is about 350 m (1155 ft). Distance: 7.5 km (4.7 miles).

Overnight in Siena. Meal plan: Breakfast and dinner.

Day 9 <i>Siena: Town Tour</i>


This morning we have a guided tour of the city's most important sights. Siena is often referred to as the "Queen of the Hill Towns." It is truly graceful, built of red brick and somehow held like a fly in amber in the medieval period of the 13th century, when most of the buildings we see today were erected. Siena is not a large town; the population is about 60,000 and cars are not allowed in the city centre.

The town conforms beautifully to the topography. Its most lovely piazza is the central Piazza del Campo; divided into nine sections and shaped like a seashell. At the bottom of the piazza stands the magnificent Palazzo Pubblico. This medieval building has served as the town hall for almost seven hundred years. Part of the Palazzo contains an outstanding museum with remarkable works of art by Simone Martini and the Lorenzetti brothers, representing the pinnacle of achievement in the scenic artistic style.

Up the winding streets from the Campo we find the massive green, pink and white marble courses of the Duomo. In the beginning of the 14th century, Siena undertook a project to enlarge the Cathedral and turn the existing building into a transept for a monster church that would make Florence's unfinished Duomo seem small. It was never completed, however; the Plague of 1348, which wiped out two thirds of Siena's population, saw to that. From the Duomo, with its dark, vaulting interior and floors covered with intricate biblical scenes executed in marble, we walk to the lighter, airier church of San Domenico where the head of St Catherine of Siena is interred (her body lies in Rome).

The afternoon is free to explore Siena on your own. A fun activity for the afternoon / evening is to participate in an optional Tuscan cooking class. Details can be provided by your Tour Leader upon arrival in Florence, but generally courses are about 3-4 hours in duration and culminate in dining upon the fruits of your labour. Your Tour Leader can book in advance and payment can be made locally.

Overnight in Siena. Meal plan: Breakfast.

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Day 10 *Siena - San Gimignano - Pisa - Lerici*

An early start today takes us to the town of San Gimignano, within easy reach of Siena (by road). It is known widely as the setting for EM Forster's novel, "Where Angels Fear to Tread" and is often referred to as Italy's "Medieval Manhattan" because of the towers delineating its skyline. Its towers, of which there are 14 standing today of an original 72, were common in the period when allegiances to either the papacy or the holy Roman emperor divided almost every community, causing disastrous civil upheaval. Where in other centres towers were eventually torn down for various reasons, the many towers of San Gimignano have survived.

We walk along the main pedestrian street (there are no cars in town) to the Piazza del Pozzo with its central well. Nearby is the Collegiata, San Gimignano's main church, which is like an illustrated book within: almost every surface is covered with superb 14th century frescoes. In a side chapel, where the town's patroness Santa Fina is interred, there is an exquisite 16th century renaissance cycle by Domenico Ghirlandaio.

We continue to Pisa where we visit the Duomo church, the Baptistry, the Campo Santo Cemetery, a jewel of early gothic architecture, the grounds of which are said to be sewn with earth from the Holy Land. And the centrepiece of Pisa, of course, is the gravity-defying "Leaning Tower." We will take time to view and photograph the tower from the outside (to climb the tower requires advance reservations and a considerable amount of time to queue for entry; time constraints make this impractical for our tour).

Continue to Lerici.

Overnight in Lerici. Meal plan: Breakfast and dinner.

Day 11 *Cinque Terre Walk*

Today we visit the spectacular Cinque Terre, one of the finest walks in all of Europe.

We board a ferry to Riomaggiore, the first of the five villages comprising the Cinque Terre. This spectacular section of the Italian Riviera is considered to rival the Amalfi Coast near Naples for its stunning views and gorgeous sunsets. From Riomaggiore we take an easy half hour walk on the Via D'Amore (lover's Walk) to Manarola. The next section (about 1 hour) takes us to Corniglia. All the way we are walking an ancient footpath that hugs the cliff side overlooking the Ligurian Sea.

After lunch in charming Vernazza (included today), we continue by train to Monterosso Al Mare, thus named for the red colour of the area. Here we find a large statue carved into the cliffs and a lovely beach.

Return by train to Lerici.

DAY SUMMARY: This day is in three sections, with the last part of the trail a narrow dirt path, rocky at times, with roots underfoot. It climbs and descends constantly. About half of this path is in the shade of olive trees. Change in altitude (only really applicable on last part of the walk): 300 m (990 ft). Total distance: 11 km (7 miles).

Overnight in Lerici. Meal plan: Breakfast and dinner.

Day 12 *Lerici - Florence*

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Today we travel back to Florence by train. Balance of the day at leisure until our farewell dinner.

Overnight in Florence. Meal plan: Breakfast and dinner.

Day 13 ***Departure***

Departure from Florence.

BUON VIAGGIO! Meal plan: Breakfast.

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