

Central Tuscany



Buildings the colour of ripe corn, hills with gentle curves and folds, scored here and there by steep ravines, as scarred and eroded as any cowboy badlands; here in the central Tuscan countryside, especially around Le Crete with its impressionist-style landscape, beats the heart of rural Tuscany. Lofty cypresses form a dramatic border to fields speckled with sheep and, if you pass by in spring, you have the additional treat of brilliant red poppy fields, sweeping to the sun-hazed green horizon. Gentle on the eye and feet, the region is ideal family walking country – and do get a first overview on the scenic Treno Natura (Nature Train), if your visit coincides with one of the summer days when it's running.

Outstanding abbeys will satisfy ecclesiastical wonder and restorative waters harnessed by a handful of spas will satisfy other things.

Some of Tuscany's most attractive towns poke up hereabouts: steep, straggling Montepulciano and the one-time defensive bulwark of Monteriggioni with its 14 defensive towers, the pilgrim-route bastion of San Gimignano, with still more medieval towers, and Volterra, the ancient brooding successor to an Etruscan settlement, standing aloof and watching over the lunar expanses to the south.

Siena's remarkable comeback after a centuries-long 'time-out' enforced by Florence is something to see. Its glorious piazza, cobbled streets and alleys counter the lamentably overtrafficked streets of Florence and its black-and-white striped cathedral is as striking as Florence's. Capitalising on the Gothic identity that once marked it as a conquered slum within the grand duchy of Tuscany is an irony that has caused Florentine cadavers to spin in their tombs.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Climb (but don't count) the 400 steps of Siena's **Torre del Mangia** (p240), then invert those glorious views from a seat in **Piazza del Campo** (p237) with a well-earned cold beverage
- Attain Gothic enlightenment in Siena's ornate **cathedral** (p240)
- Tour the striking abbeys of Sant'Antimo and Monte Oliveto Maggiore while cruising the pastureland of **Le Crete** (p250)
- Imagine the awe of your medieval predecessors as you approach the towers of **San Gimignano** (p254)
- Let the *enoteca's* Brunello wine be your guide through Montalcino's **fortezza** (p266)
- Burn off some of those carbs as you scale the steep, beautiful streets of **Montepulciano** (p273)



SIENA

pop 54,330

The rivalry between historic adversaries Siena and Florence continues to this day, and every traveller seems to strongly identify with one over the other. It often boils down to aesthetic preference: while Florence saw its greatest flourishing during the Renaissance, Siena's enduring artistic glories are largely Gothic. Though there is also the eternal question of who has the best patron saint (Siena, obviously).

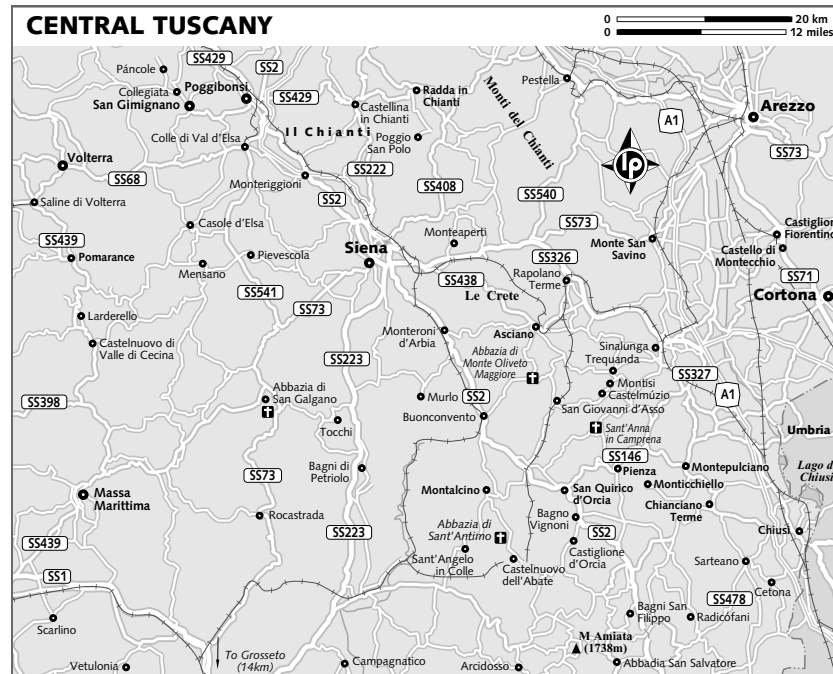
One of Italy's most enchanting cities, Siena's medieval centre bristles with majestic buildings, such as the Palazzo Comunale on Piazza del Campo, the main square, and its stupefyingly ornamented cathedral. The profusion of churches and small museums harbour a wealth of artwork, though your day can be equally effectively filled by simply wandering the snarled lanes of the historic centre, a Unesco World Heritage Site, spending a euro on admission fees or untold hours standing in queues.

Budget a couple of days to digest the city's rich treasures and exceptional cuisine, then

take advantage of its location and excellent bus connections to stage jaunts to nearby enticements such as San Gimignano and Volterra.

History

According to legend Siena was founded by Senius, son of Remus; the symbol of the wolf feeding the twins Romulus and Remus is as ubiquitous in Siena as it is in Rome. In reality, the city was probably of Etruscan origin, although it wasn't until the 1st century BC, when the Romans established a military colony here called Sena Julia, that it began to grow into a proper town. Even so, it remained a minor outpost until the arrival of the Lombards in the 6th century AD. Under them, Siena became a key point along the main route from northern Italy to Rome, the Via Francigena. The medieval town was an amalgamation of three areas (Città, Camollia and San Martino) that would come to be known as the *terzi* (thirds). The city was next under the control of local bishops before power passed to locally elected administrators, the *consoli* (consuls).



CENTRAL TUSCANY

CENTRAL TUSCANY

By the 13th century, Siena had become a wealthy trading city, producing textiles, saffron, wine, spices and wax, and its traders and bankers did deals all over Western Europe. Its rivalry with neighbouring Florence also grew proportionately, leading to numerous wars between Guelph Florence and Ghibelline Siena, each intent upon controlling ever more Tuscan territory. In 1230 Florence besieged Siena and catapulted dung and rotting donkey flesh over its walls in an inspired, medieval Mr Science attempt to spread the plague. Siena's revenge came at the Battle of Montaperti in 1260 but victory was short-lived. Nine years later the Tuscan Ghibellines were defeated by Charles of Anjou and, for almost a century, Siena was obliged to toe the Florentine line in international affairs, becoming a member of the Tuscan Guelph League (supporters of the pope).

Siena reached its peak under the republican rule of the Consiglio dei Nove (Council of Nine), an elected executive dominated by the rising mercantile class. Many of the finest buildings in the Siennese Gothic style were constructed during this period, including the cathedral, the Palazzo Comunale and the Piazza del Campo. The Siennese school of painting was born at this time, with Guido da Siena, and flowered in the early 14th century, when artists such as Duccio di Buoninsegna and Ambrogio Lorenzetti were at work.

A plague outbreak in 1348 killed two-thirds of the city's 100,000 inhabitants and led to a period of decline.

At the end of the 14th century, Siena came under the control of Milan's Visconti family, followed in the next century by the autocratic patrician Pandolfo Petrucci. Under Petrucci the city's fortunes improved, until the Holy Roman Emperor Charles V conquered it in 1555 after a two-year siege that left thousands dead. He handed the city over to Cosimo I de' Medici, who barred the inhabitants from operating banks, thus severely curtailing Siena's power.

Siena was home to St Catherine (Santa Caterina), one of Italy's most venerated saints. But saints don't make money. Siena today relies for its prosperity on tourism and the success of its Monte dei Paschi di Siena bank, founded in 1472 and now one of the city's largest employers.

Though the hapless residents that endured it may not agree, Siena's centuries-long eco-

nomic downturn in the wake of the Medici takeover was a blessing that resulted in the city's present-day, matchless allure. Its predominantly Gothic surroundings have survived largely intact as no one could be bothered to undertake (or fund) demolition or new construction. Furthermore, unlike the poundings endured by neighbouring cities in WWII, the French took Siena virtually unopposed, sparing it discernible damage.

As the population began to grow again in the years after WWII (it had dropped to 16,000 in the latter half of the 18th century), Siena was the first European city to banish motor traffic from its heart (in 1966). An overt divergence from Florence's vehicle congestion and carbon monoxide fug, strolling Siena's historic centre without fear of flatten toes or side-view mirror contusions (scooters notwithstanding) is not the least of the town's pleasures.

Orientation

Historic Siena, still largely surrounded by its medieval walls, is small and easily tackled on foot, although the way in which streets swirl in semicircles around the city's heart, Piazza del Campo (also known as 'Il Campo'), may confuse you.

The names of two of Siena's main central streets, Banchi di Sopra and Banchi di Sotto, recall its once-thriving banking activity. Another artery is Via di Città, which joins the others just behind Piazza del Campo.

From Piazza Gramsci, where most buses call, walk south along Via dei Montanini, which turns into Banchi di Sopra and leads to Piazza del Campo.

MAPS

If the complimentary tourist office map isn't adequate for you, invest in *Siena* (€5.50) by Litografia Artistica Cartografia; at a scale of 1:7000, this map comes complete with a street index.

Information

BOOKSHOPS

Book Shop (☎ 0577 22 65 94; www.bookshopsiena.com; Via San Pietro 19) And how. Run by a NYC expat, restock your suitcase library of 'traveller favourites' at this emporium of English-language books.

Libreria Senese (☎ 0577 28 08 45; Via di Città 62-6) Stocks English, French and German books and international newspapers.

EMERGENCY

Police station (☎ 0577 20 11 11; Via del Castoro)

INTERNET ACCESS

Internet Train (Via di Città 121; per hr €4; ☎ 8am-8pm Sun-Fri) A popular café with cables for laptop hook-ups.

There's another branch at Via di Pantaneto 57.

Netrunner (☎ 0577 4 49 46; www.netrunnersiena.net; Via Pantaneto 132; per hr €6; ☎ 10am-11pm Mon-Sat, 3-9pm Sun) Has a prepaid discount card scheme for regular customers.

LAUNDRY

Onda Blu (Via del Casato di Sotto 17; ☎ 8am-10pm)

Wash & Dry (Via di Pantaneto 38; ☎ 8am-10pm)

MEDICAL SERVICES

Hospital (☎ 0577 58 51 11; Viale Bracci) Just north of Siena at Le Scotte.

POST

Post office (Piazza Matteotti 1)

TELEPHONE

Telecom office (Via di Città 113) The office is unstaffed, as is the other Telecom office at Via di Pantaneto 44.

TOURIST INFORMATION

Tourist office (☎ 0577 28 05 51; www.terresiena.it; Piazza del Campo 56; ☎ 9am-7pm) Can help reserve accommodation.

Sights

PIAZZA DEL CAMPO

Resembling a colossal, medieval bathroom sink, the sloping Piazza del Campo has been Siena's civic and social centre ever since it was staked out by the Council of Nine in the mid-14th century.

The piazza was the site of a former Roman marketplace, and its pie-piece paving design is divided into nine sectors to represent the number of members of the ruling council. This is the city's primary gathering point – locals sun themselves and gossip here, while tourists parade through, awestruck, often stopping for a good sit-down and a beverage at a terrace table.

In 1346 water first bubbled forth from the **Fonte Gaia** (Happy Fountain) in the upper part of the square. The fountain's panels are reproductions; the severely weathered originals, sculpted by Jacopo della Quercia in the early 15th century, are on display in the Complesso Museale di Santa Maria della Scala (p242).

If you find the piazza irksomely congested at lunch time on a summer day, you'll need a powerful sedative to cope with the running of the Palio (see the boxed text, p246), when the astonishing crush and vigour of revellers will alarm all but the most fearless.

PALAZZO COMUNALE

At the lowest point of the square (or the tap of the aforementioned metaphorical sink), stands the spare, elegant **Palazzo Comunale**, conceived by the Council of Nine as a nerve centre for the republican government, uniting the offices and courts in one building, thus greatly reducing the symbolic and actual power of the feudal nobles.

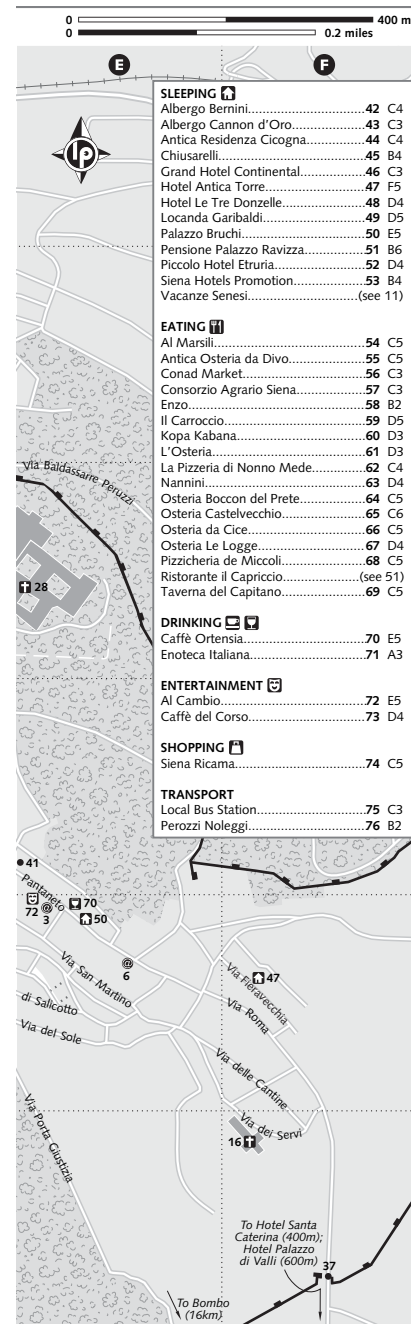
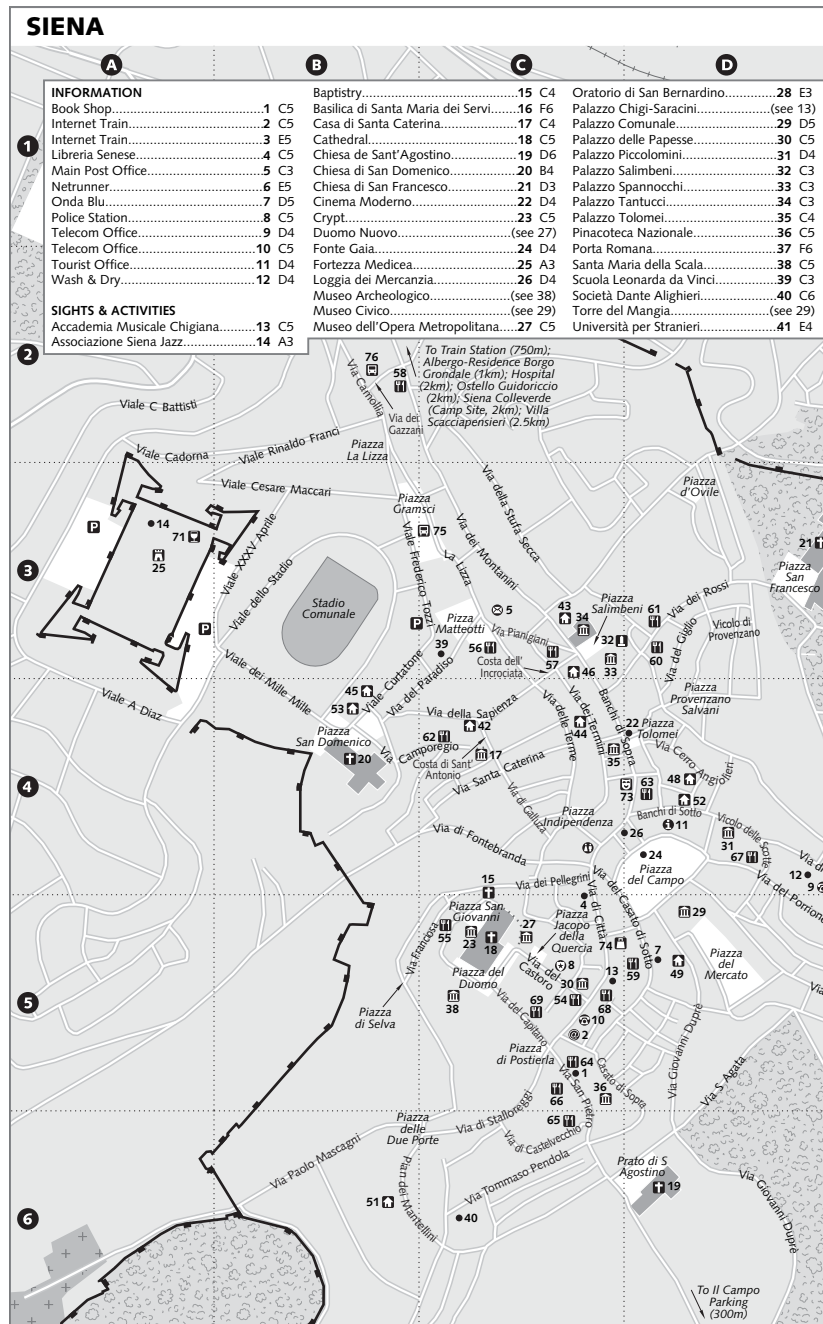
Dating from 1297, the palazzo is one of the most graceful Gothic buildings in Italy. The ground level was constructed in stone, the upper, crenulated levels in brick, with an ingeniously designed concave façade to mirror the opposing convex curve formed by the piazza. Also known as the Palazzo Pubblico, or town hall, the palazzo was purpose-built as the piazza's centrepiece, resulting in a wonderful amphitheatre effect.

The attached **Torre del Mangia** (1344), with a crown designed by painter Lippo Memmi, was designed in the veritable Siennese spirit of the era: to be bigger and better than stupid Florence's. An undisputed success, at 102m it

SAFE COMBINATIONS

Siena has a bewildering permutation of combined tickets. The distribution when we visited was as follows:

- Museo Civico and Torre del Mangia (€12)
- Museo Civico, Santa Maria della Scala and Palazzo delle Papesse (€11, valid for two days)
- Museo dell'Opera Metropolitana, crypt, Oratorio di San Bernardino, Museo Diocesano (€10 valid for three days)
- Museo Civico, Santa Maria della Scala, Palazzo delle Papesse, Museo dell'Opera Metropolitana, Battistero di San Giovanni, Museo Diocesano, Chiesa di Sant'Agostino and Oratorio di San Bernardino – the bumper bundle though not including Torre del Mangia (€17, valid for seven days)



was a remarkable engineering feat and one of the tallest nonsecretarian towers in Italy.

Entry to the palazzo's ground-floor central courtyard is free. Adjacent is the entrance to the **Museo Civico** (☎ 0577 29 22 63; adult/student €7.50/4.50, museum & tower €12; 🕒 10am-6.15pm mid-Mar-Oct, 10am-5.30pm or 6.30pm Nov-mid-Mar), with a series of rooms containing frescoes by artists of the distinctive Siennese school. These frescoes are unusual in that they were commissioned by the governing body of the city, rather than the Church, and many depict secular subjects instead of the favoured religious themes of the time. As in other great buildings of Siena and elsewhere in the province (for example the Palazzo Comunale and Collegiata in San Gimignano), the decoration here tends to be rich and full, often with a foundation of deep-blue hues on the ceiling, leaving scarcely a millimetre uncovered.

Upstairs are five rather nondescript rooms filled with equally unarresting paintings, mostly by Siennese artists of the 16th to the 18th centuries. Check out the **Sala del Risorgimento** to your left with its more impressive late-19th-century frescoes serialising key events in the campaign to unite Italy.

Next is the **Sala di Balia** (or Sala dei Priori). The 15 scenes depicted in frescoes around the walls recount episodes in the life of Pope Alexander III (the Siennese Rolando Bandinelli), including his clashes with the Holy Roman Emperor Frederick Barbarossa.

You then pass into the **Anticamera del Concistoro**, remarkable for the fresco (moved here in the 19th century) of *Santi Caterina d'Alessandria, Giovanni e Agostino* (Saints Catherine of Alexandria, John and Augustine), executed by Ambrogio Lorenzetti.

The following hall, **Sala del Concistoro**, is dominated by the allegorical ceiling frescoes of the Mannerist Domenico Beccafumi.

Back in the Anticamera del Concistoro, you pass to your right into the **Vestibolo** (Vestibule), whose star attraction is a bronze wolf, the symbol of the city. Next door in the **Anticappella** are frescoes of scenes from Greco-Roman mythology and history, while the **Cappella** (Chapel), contains a fine *Sacra Famiglia e San Leonardo* (Holy Family and St Leonardo) by Il Sodoma, and intricately carved wooden choir stalls.

The best is saved for last. From the Cappella, you emerge into the **Sala del Mappamondo** where you can admire the masterpiece of the

EXTREME PLUMBING

In 1556 Emperor Charles V apparently claimed that 'Siena is as beautiful under the ground as it is above it'. As he had spent the two previous years plundering the city and slaughtering most of its inhabitants, this observation did not go down well at the time. Yet his seemingly wacky observation had an element of truth.

Beneath Siena lies an incredible 24km network of underground tunnels and interconnecting passages dating back to the 13th century. Back then, Siena was the main city on the much-travelled route through northern Italy to Rome. As the city prospered, the shortage of water became critical.

The resulting underground tunnels were an incredible feat of engineering. Two teams of workers started from opposite directions: one some 16km away at the source of the water in the hills, the other underneath Siena. There was no communication and the only instruments the medieval builders had were plumb lines and pick axes. They also worked in the dark, apart from the flickering light of oil lamps. The tunnels were built with absolute precision, at a very low, constant gradient that kept the water flowing at a regular rate. More than 700 years later, the network of tunnels is still working, flowing into many of Siena's fountains. Water from the main tunnel is also used to cool the fridge of Nannini (see p248), the famous ice-cream and pastry shop; a fitting example of how Siena's history lives on, complementing the medieval with the modern.

entire building – Simone Martini's powerful and striking *Maestà* (Virgin Mary in Majesty) fresco, his earliest known work and one of the most important works of the Sienese school. Other large frescoes along the inside long wall depict famous Sienese victories.

The next room, the **Sala dei Nove** (or Sala della Pace), contains a three-panelled fresco series recently nominated by Francesco da Mosta as one of Italy's most interesting works of art. Painted by Ambrogio Lorenzetti, the compelling, didactic frescoes depict the *Effetti del Buon e del Cattivo Governo* (Allegories of Good and Bad Government), allegedly created as a constant reminder to those in power of the value of a committed republican government. The central Allegory fresco portrays scenes with personifications of Justice, Wisdom, Virtue and Peace, all unusually depicted as women, rendered along with scenes of criminal punishment and rewards for righteousness. Set perpendicular from the Allegory are the frescoes *Effects of Good Government* and *Effects of Bad Government*, which hold intensely contrasting scenes set in the recognisable environs of Siena; the good, a sunlit, idyllic, serene city, with joyous, dancing citizens and a countryside filled with crops; and the bad, vices, widespread crime, disease and decimation.

Finish the visit by doing a little backtracking and climbing the stairs to the **loggia**, which looks southeast over Piazza del Mercato and the countryside.

TORRE DEL MANGIA

Climb all 400 steps of this graceful **bell tower** (admission €7; ☎ 10am-7pm mid-Mar-Oct, to 4pm Nov-mid-Mar) for splendid views across the city. The ticket office closes 45 minutes before the tower shuts and only 30 people are allowed up at any time.

CATHEDRAL

Siena's **cathedral** (Piazza del Duomo; admission €3; ☎ 10.30am-7.30pm Mon-Sat, 1.30-6.30pm Sun Mar-Oct, 10.30am-6.30pm Mon-Sat, 1.30-5.30pm Sun Nov-Feb) is one of Italy's great Gothic structures. Building begun in 1196, and was largely completed by 1215, although work continued on features such as the apse and dome well into the 13th century.

Exterior

After the cathedral's completion, work began on changing, enlarging and embellishing the structure. The magnificent façade of white, green and red polychrome marble was begun by Giovanni Pisano – who completed only the lower section before his death – and was finished towards the end of the 14th century. The mosaics in the gables were added in the 19th century. The statues of philosophers and prophets by Giovanni Pisano, above the lower section, are copies; the originals are preserved in the adjacent Museo dell'Opera Metropolitana.

In 1339 the city's leaders launched a plan to enlarge the cathedral and create one of

Italy's largest places of worship. Known as the **Duomo Nuovo** (New Cathedral), the remains of this unrealised project are on Piazza Jacopo della Quercia, at the eastern side of the main cathedral. The daring plan, to build an immense new nave with the present cathedral becoming the transept, was scotched by the plague of 1348.

Interior

The cathedral's interior is truly stunning. Walls and pillars continue the black-and-white-stripe theme of the exterior, while the vaults are painted blue with gold stars. High along the walls of the nave is a long series of apsal busts.

After looking up, look down...and you'll see the cathedral's most precious feature – the inlaid-marble floor, decorated with 56 glorious panels, by about 40 artists over the course of 200 years (14th to 16th centuries), depicting historical and biblical subjects. The older, rectangular panels, including *Ruota della Fortuna* (Wheel of Fortune; 1372) and *Lupa senese e simboli delle città alleate* (The She-Wolf of Siena with the emblems of the confederate cities; 1373) are graffiti designs by unknown artists, both restored in 1864, created by chiselling into white marble and filling the holes with bitumen or mineral pitch. Domenico di Niccolò dei Cori was the first known artist to work on the cathedral, contributing several panels between 1413 and 1423, followed by renowned painter Domenico di Bartolo, who contributed *Imperatore Sigismundo in trono* (Emperor Sigismund Enthroned) in 1434. It wasn't until the tenures of director Alberto Aringhieri (1480-1504) and celebrated Sienese artist Domenico Beccafumi (1518-47) that the floor scheme saw swift, dramatic expansion. These later panels were done in more advanced multicoloured marble, inlaid with hexagon and rhombus frames. Unfortunately, all but a few are obscured by unsightly, protective covering, revealed only from 7 to 22 August each year.

Seek out the exquisite 13th-century marble and porphyry pulpit by Nicola Pisano, who was aided by his equally talented son, Giovanni. Intricately carved with vigorous, realistic crowd scenes, it's one of the masterpieces of Gothic sculpture. You can't inch as close as you might like as barriers keep you at a respectful distance. To shed a little light on the subject, stick coins into the machine

(€0.50 gets you a generous minute of illumination).

Other significant works of art include a bronze statue of St John the Baptist by Donatello, situated in a chapel off the north transept.

Libreria Piccolomini

Off the north aisle, the **Libreria Piccolomini** is another of the cathedral's great treasures. Pope Pius III built this compact hall to house the books of his uncle, Enea Silvio Piccolomini (see the boxed text, p271), who became Pope Pius II; only a series of huge choral tomes remains on display.

The walls of the hall have vividly coloured narrative frescoes by Bernardino Pinturicchio. They depict events in the life of Piccolomini, starting from his early days as a secretary to an Italian bishop on a mission to Basle, through to his ordination as pope and eventually his death in Ancona while trying to mount a crusade against the Turks.

In the centre of the hall is a group of statues known as the *Tre Grazie* (Three Graces), a 3rd-century Roman copy of an earlier Hellenistic work.

MUSEO DELL'OPERA METROPOLITANA

This **museum** (☎ 0577 28 30 48; Piazza del Duomo 8; admission €6; ☎ 9.30am-7pm Mar-May & Sep-Nov, to 8pm Jun-Aug, 10am-5pm Dec-Feb), also known as Museo dell'Opera del Duomo, is next to the cathedral, in what would have been the southern aisle of the nave of the Duomo Nuovo. Among its great works of art, which formerly adorned the cathedral, are the 12 statues of prophets and philosophers by Giovanni Pisano that decorated the façade. Their creator designed them to be viewed from ground level, which is why they look so distorted as they crane uncomfortably forward.

On the 1st floor is Duccio di Buoninsegna's striking early-14th-century *Maestà* (Majesty), painted on both sides as a screen for the cathedral's high altar. The front and back have now been separated and the panels depicting the Story of Christ's Passion hang opposite the *Maestà*. Duccio's narrative genius is impressive. Take the lower half of the bottom big middle panel. In one 'shot', three scenes take place: Christ preaches to the Apostles in the Garden of Gethsemane; he then asks them to wait up for him; and then is portrayed while in prayer. In the half-panel above, he is kissed

by Judas while Peter lops off a soldier's ear and the remaining Apostles flee.

To the right of the *Maestà*, a door leads into a back room with statues by Jacopo della Quercia, while on the left is a room with 19th-century illustrations of the entire collection of marble floor panels in the cathedral.

On the upper floors other artists represented include Ambrogio Lorenzetti, Simone Martini and Taddeo di Bartolo, and there's also a rich collection of tapestries and manuscripts.

For a great panoramic view – and a touch of physical exertion to counterbalance so much aesthetic exercise – haul yourself up the 131 steps that lead, via a very narrow, corkscrew stairway, to the **Panorama del Facciato** (admission €6), at the top of the façade of the putative Nuovo Duomo. A combined admission ticket for the museum and panorama costs €10 and is valid for three days.

CRYPT

Just north of the cathedral and down a flight of steps is the **crypt** (admission incl audio guide €6; ☎ 9.30am–6.30pm), a room below the cathedral's pulpit discovered in 1999 during restoration work. After a period of clean-up and study – the room had been filled to the roof with debris in the 1300s and forgotten – it was opened to the public in 2003. The walls are completely covered with *pittura a secco* ('dry painting', better known as 'mural painting'), as opposed to frescoes which are painted on wet plaster, making them more durable) dating from the 1200s. There's some 180 sq metre, depicting several biblical stories, including the Passion of Jesus and the Crucifixion.

BATTISTERO DI SAN GIOVANNI

Opposite the crypt is the **baptistry** (Baptistry of St John; Piazza San Giovanni; admission €3; ☎ 9.30am–7pm mid-Mar–Sep, 9am–6pm Oct, 10.30am–5pm Nov–mid-Mar). Its Gothic façade, although unfinished on the upper levels, is quite a remarkable extravagance in marble.

Inside, the ceiling and vaults are lavishly decorated with frescoes. The life of Jesus is portrayed in the apse of this oddly shaped rectangular baptistry. The one on the right showing Christ carrying the cross is of particular interest. If you look at the city from which it appears he and the crowd have come, it is hard to escape the feeling that among the imaginary buildings have been illustrated

Brunelleschi's dome and Giotto's Campanile in Florence. Could this be a nasty little anti-Florentine dig suggesting Siena's rival as the source of Christ's tribulations?

The centrepiece, literally and figuratively, is a marble font by Jacopo della Quercia, decorated with bronze panels in relief depicting the life of St John the Baptist. The panels, executed by several top-notch artists, include Lorenzo Ghiberti's *Baptism of Christ* and *St John in Prison*, and Donatello's *Herod's Feast*.

COMPLESSO MUSEALE DI SANTA MARIA DELLA SCALA

Originally a hospice for pilgrims and until quite recently a working hospital with almost a millennium of history, the **Santa Maria della Scala** (☎ 0577 22 48 11; Piazza del Duomo 2; admission €6; ☎ 10.30am–6.30pm Apr–Oct, to 4.30pm Nov–Mar) has as its main attraction the vivid, secular frescoes (quite a relief after so much spirituality all around town) by Domenico di Bartolo, lauding the good works of the hospital and its patrons.

Before entering the hospital proper, pass by the **Chiesa della Santissima Annunziata**, a 13th-century church remodelled two centuries later.

Turn right into the **Cappella del Manto**, decorated with frescoes; the most striking is by Beccafumi (1514) and portrays the *Meeting of St Joaquim and St Anna*, the supposed parents of the Virgin Mary.

You will pass into a long hall where, to the left, is the remarkable 14th-century **Sala del Pellegrino**, the pilgrim hall and subsequently the hospital's main ward. The bulk of its fresco series was done by di Bartolo in the 1440s. The first panel, by Il Vecchietta, depicts *gettatelli* (orphans) ascending to heaven. Taking in orphans was frequently one of the tasks of hospitals throughout Tuscany. Later panels show *balie* (wet nurses) suckling orphans and other needy children. One jolly panel depicts a doctor nodding off as his patient describes his symptoms.

Downstairs you'll find the **Fienile**, once storage space for the hospital. The original panelling of the Fonte Gaia (and a few replicas) is now housed here. Through the Fienile is the **Oratorio di Santa Caterina della Notte** (Oratory of St Catherine of the Night), a gloomy little chapel for sending up a prayer or two for the unwell upstairs.

MUSEO ARCHEOLOGICO

This **museum** (☎ 10.30am–6.30pm Apr–Oct, to 4.30pm Nov–Mar) is within Santa Maria della Scala. Most of the collection consists of pieces found near Siena, ranging from elaborate Etruscan alabaster funerary urns to gold Roman coins. In between you'll see some statuary, much of it Etruscan, a variety of household items, votive statuettes in bronze and even a pair of playing dice. The collection is well presented, and the surroundings – twisting, arched tunnels – perfectly complement it and are a cool blessing on stifling-hot summer days.

Admission to the museum is included in the price for Santa Maria della Scala.

PALAZZO DELLE PAPERESSE

Change eras with a visit to this contemporary **art gallery** (☎ 0577 2 20 71; Via di Città 126; adult/child €5/free; ☎ noon–7pm Tue–Sun) if you've had your fill of medieval religious art. The gallery houses a number of permanent pieces from the likes of Micha Ullman, Perino Vele and Antonio Catalani, mixed in with ever-changing exhibitions. The rooftop terrace has stunning views.

PALAZZO CHIGO-SARACINI

The magnificent curving Gothic façade of the **Palazzo Chigo-Saracini** (Via di Città) is in part a travesty, the result of 'restoration' in the 18th and 19th centuries to re-create the medieval feel. From the tower, which is the genuine article apart from its brick crenellations, they say a young boy with particularly good eyesight watched the Battle of Montaperti in 1260 and shouted down details of the home side's progress against the Florentines to eager crowds in the streets below.

The palazzo is the headquarters of Accademia Musicale Chigiana (see p244).

PINACOTECA NAZIONALE

This **gallery** (☎ 0577 28 11 61; Via San Pietro 29; adult/child €4/free; ☎ 8.15am–7.15pm Tue–Sat, to 1.15pm Sun, 8.30am–1.30pm Mon), within the 14th-century Palazzo Buonsignori, displays the world's greatest concentration of Gothic masterpieces from the Siene school. But the collection also demonstrates the subsequent gulf cleaved between artistic life in Siena and Florence in the 15th century. While the Renaissance flourished 70km to the north, Siena's masters and their patrons remained firmly rooted in the Byzantine and Gothic precepts that had stood them in such good stead from the early

13th century. Stock religious images and episodes predominate, typically pasted lavishly with gold and generally lacking any of the advances in painting, such as perspective, emotion or movement, that artists in Florence were exploring.

Start your tour on the 2nd floor where, in the first two rooms, you can see some of the earliest surviving pre-Gothic works from the Siene school, including pieces by Guido da Siena. Rooms 3 and 4 are given over to a few works by Duccio di Buoninsegna and his followers. The most striking exhibits in Room 3 are Simone Martini's *Madonna della Misericordia* (Madonna of Mercy), in which the Virgin Mary seems to take the whole of society protectively under her wing, and his *Madonna col Bambino* (Madonna and Child).

The two brothers Pietro and Ambrogio Lorenzetti feature in Rooms 7 and 8, while the following three rooms contain works by several artists from the early 15th century.

Rooms 12 and 13 are mostly devoted to Giovanni di Paolo; a couple of his paintings show refreshing signs of a break from strict tradition. His two versions of the *Presentazione nel Tempio* (Presentation of Jesus in the Temple) have virtually no gold and introduce new architectural themes, a hint of perspective and a discernible trace of human emotion in the characters depicted.

Down on the 1st floor, the Siene roll call continues and, although there are some exceptions, the interest starts to fade. Rooms meriting a visit include 27 to 32 and 37, which are dominated by works of the Mannerist Domenico Beccafumi and Il Sodoma. Particularly striking is Il Sodoma's *Cristo alla Colonna* (Christ Tied to the Pillar) in Room 31, where, in a particularly human touch, tears trickle down Jesus' cheeks.

CHIESA DI SANT'AGOSTINO

This 13th-century **church** (☎ 0577 38 57 86; Prato di San Agostino; admission €2.50; ☎ 11am–1.30pm & 2–5.30pm mid-Mar–Oct), a few streets south of the Pinacoteca Nazionale, was originally designed by the Dutch Vanvitelli, chief architect to the King of Naples. Its richly rococo interior dates from the 18th century, after the church had been gutted by fire. The second altar on the south aisle has a superb *Adoration of the Crucifix* by Perugino while the Piccolomini chapel's jewel is Il Sodoma's *Adoration of the Magi*.

CHIESA DI SAN DOMENICO

This imposing 13th-century Gothic church (Piazza San Domenico; ☎ 7.30am-1pm & 3-6.30pm) has been altered time and time again over the centuries.

The bare, barnlike interior is in keeping with the Dominican order's ascetic spirit. Near the entrance is the raised Cappella delle Volte, where Santa Caterina di Siena took her vows and, according to tradition, performed some of her miracles. In the chapel is a portrait of the saint painted during her lifetime.

In the Cappella di Santa Caterina, off the south aisle, are frescoes by Il Sodoma depicting events in Santa Caterina's life – and her head, in a 15th-century tabernacle above the altar. She died in Rome, where most of her body is preserved, but, in keeping with the bizarre practice of collecting relics of dead saints, her head was returned to Siena.

Another bit that managed to find its way here is her desiccated thumb, on grisly display in a small window box to the right of the chapel. Also on show is a nasty-looking chain whip with which she would apply a good flogging to herself every now and then for the well-being of the souls of the faithful.

CASA DI SANTA CATERINA

If you want more of Santa Caterina – figuratively speaking – visit Casa di Santa Caterina (☎ 0577 22 15 62; Costa di Sant'Antonio 6; admission free; ☎ 9am-6.30pm Mar-Nov, 10am-6pm Dec-Feb), where the saint was born and lived with her parents plus, says legend, 23 siblings. The rooms, converted into small chapels in the 15th century, are decorated with frescoes of her life and paintings by Siennese artists, including Il Sodoma. A crowded adjacent room contains some of St Catherine's personal effects. The lower-level bedroom, frescoed in 1893 by Alessandro Franchi, includes her untouched, nearly bare cell.

FORTEZZA MEDICEA

Northwest of the Chiesa di San Domenico, this fortress, also known as the Forte di Santa Barbara, is typical of those built in the early years of the grand duchy. The Siennese could not have been given a more obvious reminder of who was in charge than this Medici bastion, raised on the orders of Cosimo I de' Medici in 1560.

OTHER CHURCHES & PALAZZI

The 15th-century triple-arched balcony Loggia dei Mercanzia, where merchants used to plot

deals, is just northwest of Il Campo. From here, strike east along Banchi di Sotto to pass Palazzo Piccolomini, a Renaissance palazzo housing the city's archives. Further east are the 13th-century Basilica di Santa Maria dei Servi, with frescoes by Pietro Lorenzetti in a chapel off the north transept, and the 14th-century Porta Romana.

North of Loggia dei Mercanzia on Banchi di Sopra, the 13th-century Palazzo Tolomei dominates Piazza Tolomei. Further north, Piazza Salimbeni is bounded by Palazzo Tancucci, Gothic Palazzo Salimbeni (prestigious head office of Monte dei Paschi di Siena bank), and the Renaissance Palazzo Spannocchi, from where 29 finely carved busts stare down at you from beneath the eaves.

Northeast of here, along Via dei Rossi, is Chiesa di San Francesco, with its vast single nave. It's suffered over the years – from a devastating 17th-century fire and use as army barracks. Beside the church is the 15th-century Oratorio di San Bernardino (☎ 0577 28 30 48; Piazza San Francesco 9; admission €3; ☎ 10.30am-1.30pm & 3-5.30pm mid-Mar–Oct), notable for its frescoes by Il Sodoma and Beccafumi, plus a small museum of religious art.

Courses

LANGUAGE & CULTURE

Scuola Leonardo da Vinci (☎ 0577 24 90 97; www.scuolaleonardo.com; Via del Paradiso 16) A reputable Italian-language school that offers supplementary cultural and culinary lessons.

Società Dante Alighieri (☎ 0577 4 95 33; www.dantealighieri.com; Via Tommaso Pendola 37) Offers courses in Italian language and culture.

Università per Stranieri (University for Foreigners; ☎ 0577 24 01 15; www.unistrasi.it; Via di Pantaneto 45) Offers various courses in Italian language and culture.

MUSIC

Accademia Musicale Chigiana (☎ 0577 2 20 91; www.chigiana.it; Via di Città 89) Offers classical music courses every summer as well as seminars and concerts performed by visiting musicians, teachers and students as part of the Settimana Musicale Senese (opposite).

Associazione Siena Jazz (☎ 0577 27 14 01; www.sienajazz.it; Piazza Libertà) Within the Fortezza Medicea. One of Europe's foremost institutions of its type, it offers courses in jazz.

Tours

Ecco Siena (☎ 0577 4 32 73) Runs city tours for groups and individuals. Group tours (€15; Monday to Saturday,

'MOM! CATHERINE'S CONSECRATING HER VIRGINITY TO JESUS AGAIN!!'

St Catherine of Siena (1347–80), copatron saint of Italy and one of only two female Doctors of the Church, was born in Siena, the 23rd child out of 25 (her twin sister died at birth). Like a true prodigy, she had a religious fixation at a very early age. She is said to have entertained plans to impersonate a man so she could be a Dominican friar and occasionally raced out to the road to kiss the place where Dominicans had walked.

At the dubious age of seven, she consecrated her virginity to Christ, much to her family's despair. At 18 she assumed the life of a Dominican Tertiary (lay affiliate) and, as wayward teens are wont to do, chose initially to live as a recluse in the family's basement, focused on devotion and spiritual ecstasy. She was noted for her ability to fast for extended periods, living only on the Blessed Sacrament, which as nutritionists might attest, probably contributed to a delirium or two. Catherine described one such episode as a 'mystical marriage' with Jesus. Feeling a surge of humanity (or possibly boredom), she emerged from her cloistered path and began caring for the sick and poor.

Another series of visions set in Hell, Purgatory and Heaven, compelled Catherine to take her work to the next level. Though it's said she didn't actually learn to write until near the end of her life, she began an ambitious and fearless letter-writing campaign – dictating up to three letters to three secretaries simultaneously – to all variety of influential people, including lengthy correspondence with Pope Gregory XI. She beseeched royalty and religious leaders for everything from peace between Italy's republics to reform within the clergy. This go-getting, early form of activism was considered highly unusual for a woman at the time and her no-holds-barred style, sometimes scolding cardinals and queens like naughty children, was gutsy by any standard. And yet, rather than being persecuted for her insolence, she was admired, her powers of persuasion often winning the day where so many others had failed.

She is said to have experienced the stigmata, but this event was suppressed as it was considered bad form at the time to associate the stigmata with anyone but St Francis.

Acting as an ambassador to Florence, she went to Avignon and was able to convince Pope Gregory XI to bring the papacy back to Rome after a seven-pope, 73-year reign in France. A few years later she was invited to Rome by newly elected Pope Urban VI to campaign on his behalf during the pope/anti-pope struggle (the Great Western Schism) where she did her best to undo the effects that his temper and shortcomings were having on Rome. This heroic, utterly exhausting effort likely contributed to her untimely death in 1380 at the age of 33.

Catherine's abundant postmortem accolades started relatively soon after her death when Pope Pius II canonised her in 1461. More recently, Pope Paul VI bestowed Catherine with the title of Doctor of the Church in 1970 and Pope John Paul II made her one of Europe's patron saints in 1999. Additionally, despite having received no formal education, her letters (over 300 have survived) are considered to be great works of Tuscan literature.

March to October) take around two hours and leave from outside the Chiesa di San Domenico at 3pm. Reserve at Siena Hotels Promotion (p246).

Hortibus (☎ 348 910 07 83; www.hortibus.com) Leads tours of private gardens and villas around Siena every Thursday and Saturday for €25 per person or €150 per group.

Treno Natura (☎ 0577 20 74 13; www.ferroviaturistiche.it; ☎ May, early Jun, Sep & Oct) A great way to see the stunning scenery of the Crete Senese, south of Siena. The line dates back to the 19th century but trains now run exclusively for tourists and are staffed by volunteers. The route loops from Siena, through Asciano, across to the Val d'Orcia and Stazione di Monte Antico and back to Siena. Trains stop at Asciano and Monte Antico and connect with

the service from Florence. They only run for about 20 days a year so check the website or ask at the tourist office. Round-trip tickets cost €15 if you go by diesel, €25 if it's a steam train.

Festivals & Events

Settimana Musicale Senese Held in July and run by the Accademia Musicale Chigiana (opposite).

Il Palio The most spectacular event on the Siennese calendar, held in July and August each year. See the boxed text, p246.

Siena Jazz In July and August the city hosts this international festival promoted by the Associazione Siena Jazz (opposite) with concerts at the Fortezza Medicea and various sites throughout the city.

Estate Musicale Chigiana The Accademia Musicale Chigiana (p244) mounts this event in July, August and September. Concerts in the series are frequently held in the magnificent settings of the Abbazia di San Galgano (p252), about 20km southwest of the city, and Abbazia di Sant'Antimo (p269), near Montalcino. For information, call ☎ 0577 2 20 91.

Festa di Santa Cecilia In November a series of concerts and exhibitions takes place to honour Cecilia, patron saint of musicians.

Sleeping

Vacanze Senesi (☎ 0577 4 59 00; www.vacanzesenese.it) has a representative in the tourist office who can arrange all forms of accommodation, or

you can book on its website. Ditto **Siena Hotels Promotion** (☎ 0577 28 80 84; www.hotelsiena.com; Piazza San Domenico 5; ☎ 9am-8pm Mon-Sat). You can book online, or in person near the San Domenico church. There's an in-person €2 administration charge.

Accommodation can be difficult to find in summer – and is nearly impossible during the famous twice-yearly festival, Il Palio.

BUDGET

Siena Colleverde (☎ 0577 28 00 44; Via Sciacciapersieri 47; per person/site €7.75/7.75; ☎ mid-Apr–mid-Oct; 🚗) This camp site, 2km north of the historical centre, was going through a change of ownership

when we passed by and was closed indefinitely. Call and confirm that they've reopened before arriving. To get there take bus 3 or 8 from Piazza Gramsci or Viale Tozzi.

Ostello Guidoriccio (☎ 0577 5 22 12; Via Fiorentina 89, Località Stellino; per person €14.30) All rooms are doubles at Siena's Hostelling International-affiliated youth hostel, about 2km northwest of the city centre. Regrettably, thin walls and the unremitting traffic on Via Fiorentina make for challenging sleeping conditions. Take bus 10, 15 or 35 from Piazza Gramsci, or bus 4 or 77 from the train station.

Hotel Le Tre Donzelle (☎ /fax 0577 28 03 58; Via delle Donzelle 5; s/d without bathroom €38/49, d with bathroom €60) Central, friendly and popular, this hotel was originally constructed as a tavern in the 13th century. Rooms are clean and simple and the shared bathrooms are spotless.

MIDRANGE

Albergo Cannon d'Oro (☎ 0577 4 43 21; www.cannonoro.com; Via dei Montanini 28; s €48-80, d €60-99, tr €77-128; 📍 🚗) Trim, attractive and excellent value. Don't be deterred by the golden cannon (the very one that gave the place its name) trained upon you as you debouch from a narrow alley to face the otherwise amicable reception desk. A few rooms have air-con and parking costs €15. Skip the breakfast.

Locanda Garibaldi (☎ 0577 28 42 04; Via Giovanni Dupré 18; d €75) Pro: a dozen metres from the spectacle of Piazza del Campo. Con: a dozen metres from the noise of Piazza del Campo. Rooms are big, bright, and furnished with a funky flair. The twinkly eyed, jovial host and his wife also run the well-patronised ground-floor restaurant (meals €20; closed Saturday).

Albergo Bernini (☎ 0577 28 90 47; www.albergobernini.com; Via della Sapienza 15; s with bathroom €55-78, d €75-85, d with shared bathroom €45-65; 📍) This is a welcoming, family-run hotel (owner Mauro is a professional accordion player who often squeezes his box for guests). Its simple rooms may be a hair overpriced, but the tiny terrace has lovely views of the cathedral and the Chiesa di San Domenico. For space and views, choose room 11.

Palazzo Bruchi (☎ 0577 28 73 42; www.palazzobruchi.it; Via Pantaneto 105; s €75-90, d €85-150, all incl breakfast) Seven rooms in the 'ancient and noble' Landi-Bruchi family home in central Siena. Rooms vary in quality, but the hospitality of Maria Cristina and her daughter Camilla is warmly

consistent. There's a shared kitchen and a peaceful inner-courtyard. Breakfast is served in the rooms.

Piccolo Hotel Etruria (☎ 0577 28 80 88; www.hotel.etruria.com; Via delle Donzelle 3; s/d/tr €53/86/114, s without bathroom €48) Another equally welcoming family hotel, just off Il Campo. The rooms are rather plain, with zero soundproofing, but there's a central light, airy sitting area and the location is outstanding.

our pick Antica Residenza Cicogna (☎ 0577 28 56 13; www.anticaresidenzacicogna.it in Italian; Via dei Termini 67; s/d €70/90, incl buffet breakfast; 📍 🚗) Springless beds, ornate frescoes, wi-fi and antique furniture make this central option, with a mere five rooms, justifiably popular. Class exudes from prominent elements such as the four-poster bed and the breakfast space (enormous buffet style), to subtle touches such as elaborate, thick-framed mirrors. Reception has limited core hours (8am to 1pm), so arrange your arrival in advance. Parking €15.

Hotel Antica Torre (☎ 0577 22 22 55; www.anticatorresiena.it; Via Fieravecchia 7; d €90-113; 📍) With only eight rooms, you'll need to reserve weeks in advance. This is a snug place with exposed beams and brickwork, tucked into a 16th-century tower hidden down a side street. Haul yourself to the top floor for the best views. There's also a second property, Hotel Palazzo di Valli (see below).

Chiusarelli (☎ 0577 28 05 62; www.chiusarelli.com; Viale Curtatone 15; s €70-85, d €95-125, all incl breakfast; 📍 🚗) Functioning continuously since its construction in 1870, this hotel has a pleasant, spacious breakfast room and attractive, though somewhat dark, bedrooms. The rear ones are for lovers of quiet and lucky football fans – they overlook the stadium where Siena plays home matches on alternate Sundays in season. It has a popular restaurant (meals €20) where you'll be dodging elbows to find a seat among the locals.

Albergo-Residence Borgo Grondaie (☎ 0577 33 25 39; www.borgogrondaie.com; Via delle Grondaie 15; s €85-100, d €97-145, incl breakfast; 6-person apt without breakfast €185-219; 📍 🚗 📺) A couple of kilometres north of the centre, is a former farm and olive oil producer. Rooms are simple and tasteful, with lots of terracotta and earthy colours. The exquisite apartments are in the former stables. There is a special-needs unit, saltwater pool and free bicycles for guests.

Hotel Palazzo di Valli (☎ 0577 22 61 02; Via Piccolomini 135; d €120-130; 📍) A snazzier property by the

IL PALIO

This spectacular event, held twice yearly on 2 July and 16 August, in honour of the Virgin Mary, dates back to the Middle Ages and features a series of colourful pageants, a wild horse race around Piazza del Campo and much eating, drinking and celebrating in the streets.

Il Palio is one of very few major medieval spectacles of its type in Italy that has survived through the sheer tenacity of Sieneese traditionalism. Most other displays of medieval folk tradition have in fact been brought back to life in the 20th century out of a combination of nostalgia and the urge to earn a few more tourist bucks. The Sieneese place incredible demands on the national TV network, RAI, for rights to televise the event.

Ten of Siena's 17 town districts, or *contrade*, compete for the coveted *palio*, a silk banner. Each has its own traditions, symbol and colours, and its own church and *palio* museum. As you wander the streets you'll notice the various flags and plaques delineating these quarters, each with a name and symbol relating to an animal. On the downside, competition is so fierce that fist fights sometimes break out between *contrade* and Il Palio jockeys often live in fear from rival *contrade*. Scheming rivals have been known to ambush jockeys and even drug their horses.

On festival days Piazza del Campo becomes a racetrack, with a ring of packed dirt around its perimeter. From about 5pm, representatives of each *contrada* parade in historical costume, each bearing their individual banners.

The race is run at 7.45pm in July and 7pm in August. For not much more than one exhilarating minute, the 10 horses and their bareback riders tear three times around Piazza del Campo with a speed and violence that makes your hair stand on end.

Even if a horse loses its rider it is still eligible to win and, since many riders fall each year, it is the horses in the end who are the focus of the event. There is only one rule: riders mustn't interfere with the reins of other horses.

Book well in advance for a room and join the crowds in the centre of Piazza del Campo at least four hours before the start for a good view. Surrounding streets are closed off well before the race begins, except for Via Giovanni Dupré, which stays open right up until the flag drops. If you arrive late you can try your luck reaching the Piazza via this street – but don't count on it as everyone else has the same idea. If you prefer a more comfortable seat overlooking the race from one of the buildings lining the piazza, ask in the cafés and shops. They're as rare as hen's teeth but, if you do manage to find one, expect to pay around €220 for the privilege. If you can't find a good vantage point, don't despair – the race is televised live and then repeated throughout the evening on TV.

If you happen to be in town in the few days immediately preceding the race, you may get to see the jockeys and horses trying out in Piazza del Campo – almost as good as the real thing. Between May and October, **Cinema Moderno** (☎ 0577 28 92 01; Piazza Tolomei; admission €5.50; ☎ 10am-5pm) runs a mini-epic 20-minute film of Siena and Il Palio that will take your breath away.

same people as Hotel Antica Torre. It's located 600m outside Porta Romana, with the added perk of free parking.

TOP END

Hotel Santa Caterina (☎ 0577 22 11 05; www.hscsiena.it; Via Piccolomini 7; s €85-115, d €98-175, all incl breakfast; 📍 📺) This renovated 18th-century elegant villa, just outside the city walls, is a stone's throw beyond the Porta Romana. It's a tranquil haven: its 22 rooms are tastefully furnished, the breakfast room is light and airy and there's a lovely garden with open views to the surrounding hills. Parking is €15.

Villa Scacciapensieri (☎ 0577 4 14 41; www.villascacciapensieri.it; Via Scacciapensieri 10; s €85-116, d €130-245, all incl breakfast; 📍 📺 📺) Around 2.5km north of Siena is a 19th-century villa with carved wooden ceilings, oil paintings, antiques, formal gardens and an old family chapel. There are tennis courts, bicycles to rent and wi-fi available.

Pensione Palazzo Ravizza (☎ 0577 28 04 62; www.palazzoravizza.com; Pian dei Mantellini 34; s/d/tr incl breakfast €140/180/260; 📍 📺 📺) Around 2.5km north of Siena is a 19th-century villa with carved wooden ceilings, oil paintings, antiques, formal gardens and an old family chapel. There are tennis courts, bicycles to rent and wi-fi available.

Grand Hotel Continental (☎ 0577 5 60 11; www.royaldemeure.com; Banchi di Sopra 85; s/d €295/390; 📍) Siena's only five-star hotel has taken over the gloriously ornate, richly frescoed Palazzo Gori Pannilini. If nothing else, poke your nose into the magnificent 1st-floor reception room and reward yourself with a drink in the stylish ground-floor wine bar, open to all-comers. Wi-fi in lobby only.

Eating

According to the Siene, most Tuscan cuisine has its origins here, though Tuscans elsewhere may well dispute such boasting. Among many traditional dishes are *ribollita* (a rich vegetable soup), *panzanella* (summer salad of soaked bread, basil, onion and tomatoes) and *pappardelle con sugo di lepre* (ribbon pasta moistened with hare ragù). *Panforte* (literally, 'strong bread') is a rich cake of almonds, honey and candied fruit, originally created as sustenance for Crusaders to the Holy Land.

BUDGET

Nannini (Banchi di Sopra 22) Always crowded, this is something of a Siene institution, baking its finest cakes and serving good coffee with speed and panache.

Kopa Kabana (Via dei Rossi 54) Flout the places with enviable locations and be rewarded here with absurd mountains of Siena's freshest gelato, starting at €1.70 for a small.

Conad Market (Galleria Metropolitan, Piazza Matteotti; ☎ 8.30am-8.30pm Mon-Sat, 9am-1pm & 4-8pm Sun) Self-caterers can stock up on piazza picnic nosh here.

MIDRANGE

Curpick L'Osteria (☎ 0577 28 75 92; Via dei Rossi 79/81; meals €25) We promised a local we wouldn't put this one in the book. We lied. It was just too good. Plus the place was half-filled with tourists when we visited, so it's not exactly a secret. No nonsense, but savoury dishes at prices locals will pay. Pop over to Kopa Kabana for something *dolce* afterward.

Osteria da Cice (☎ 0577 28 80 26; Via San Pietro 32; meals €25, tourist menus €12; ☎ Tue-Sun) In the hands of a friendly team, reflecting its mainly youthful clientele, this is the place for an informal, relaxed meal. The menu has plenty of vegetarian options among its *primi piatti* (first courses).

Osteria Castelvecchio (☎ 0577 4 95 86; Via di Castelvecchio 65; meals €27; ☎ Mon-Sat) Highly regarded by locals, this eatery has a couple of attractive bare-brick rooms. Rumbling tummies should opt for the constantly changing *menù degustazione* (€25). It's also a good spot for veggies, with at least four meatless dishes normally on offer.

Osteria Boccon del Prete (☎ 0577 28 03 88; Via San Pietro 17; meals €28) A small, reasonably priced, typical Siene place, offering a daily changing menu. Pumpkin soup with almonds and toasted bread, chestnut gnocchi with truffle sauce, and sirloin beef slices with roasted potatoes and olive oil are on the permanent menu. The dessert menu will annihilate all self-control, particularly the white-chocolate mousse with coffee sauce.

La Pizzeria di Nonno Mede (☎ 0577 24 79 66; Camporegio 21; meals €29) Drop a coin into the well in the floor, then dive into the €7.80 buffet lunch or choose from the exhaustive pizza menu. The reasonably priced menu has a consistent spread of Tuscan favourites and the fantastic view from the terrace is also reliably Tuscan.

Taverna del Capitano (☎ 0577 28 80 94; Via del Capitano 6-8; meals €29; ☎ Wed-Mon) A grand little spot for local food with friendly service. Specialties include *zuppa di farro* (barley soup) and *ossobuco al siene* (marrowbone stew). The tables outdoors are pleasant in summer.

Il Carroccio (☎ 0577 4 11 65; Via del Casato di Sotto 32; meals €32; ☎ closed Tue dinner & Wed) Exceptional pasta and exceptionally busy, so arrive early for lunch and call ahead for dinner. Try the *pici*, a kind of thick spaghetti typical of Siena, followed by the *tegamate di maiale* (pork with fennel seeds) and select something a little special from the long and carefully nurtured wine list. The restaurant is a member of the Slow Food Movement (see p21) – always a good sign.

Al Marsili (☎ 0577 4 71 54; Via del Castoro 3; meals €33-38; ☎ Tue-Sun) One of the city's classiest restaurants, here you'll find white-smocked waiters dishing up traditional Siene cuisine such as *pici all'aglione* (fresh Siene pasta, with a garlic and tomato sauce). The restaurant also offers more innovative dishes such as stuffed *panzerotti* with truffle.

Ristorante il Capriccio (☎ 0577 28 17 57; Pian dei Mantellini 32; meals €35-40; ☎ dinner) The restaurant of Pensione Palazzo Ravizza (opposite) offers fine cuisine and the chance to eat in its wood-paneled dining room or outside in the garden.

Antica Osteria da Divo (☎ 0577 28 43 81; Via Franciosa 29; meals €37) Here you'll find background jazz that's as smooth as the walls are rough-hewn. At the lower, cellar level you're dining amid Etruscan tombs. The inventive menu includes dishes such as rolled pork, stuffed with black cabbage and truffle, followed by girth-widening goodies such as vanilla and pistachio pie with raspberry sauce.

TOP END

Enzo (☎ 0577 28 12 77; Via Camollia 49; meals €37-40, tasting menus without wine €35-55) Classic pictures of Siena decorate the walls, while classy settings decorate the tables. A variety of tasting menus relieve one from the need to choose from the lengthy menu, while curiosities like the 'deconstructed cannoli' will keep you seated for dessert. Dinner reservations a must.

Osteria Le Logge (☎ 0577 4 80 13; osterialelogge@tin.it; Via dei Porriane 33; mains €40-45; ☎ Mon-Sat) This place changes its menu of creative Tuscan cuisine almost daily. In the downstairs dining room, once a pharmacy, bottles are arranged in cases, floor to ceiling, like books in

a library (there are over 18,000 more in the cellars so you won't go thirsty); there's also a large streetside terrace.

Drinking

Enoteca Italiana (☎ 0577 28 84 97; Fortezza Medicea; ☎ noon-1am Tue-Sat, to 8pm Sun) Within the fortress walls, the former munition cellars have been artfully transformed into a classy *enoteca* that carries over 1500 labels. The Italian wine display includes some dusty *reservas*, the oldest dating back to 1944.

Caffè Ortensia (Via di Pantaneto 95) Among several pleasantly poky bars along Via di Pantaneto, this place is small, crowded and much favoured by students, both local and visiting.

Entertainment

As elsewhere in Italy, the big dance venues are generally well outside town.

Caffè del Corso (Banchi di Sopra 25) During the day, this is the place for an espresso and croissant. At night the action moves upstairs to the moody plum-coloured music bar.

Al Cambio (Via di Pantaneto 48; ☎ closed Sun) One of the few dance spots in Siena where you can indulge in a little frenetic all-night air-punching.

Shopping

Via di Città is a chic shopping street where you can buy ceramics, food items, antiques, jewellery and so on. If you're after clothes, go window-shopping along Banchi di Sopra with its stylish boutiques and designer emporia.

Pizzicheria de Miccoli (☎ 0577 28 91 64; Via di Città 93-5) Richly scented, this is a great place to stock up on picnic fodder. Its windows are festooned with sausages, piled-up cheeses and porcini mushrooms by the sackful.

Consorzio Agrario Siena (Via Pianagini 13) A rich emporium of local food and wines.

Siena Ricama (☎ 0577 28 83 39; Via di Città 61) Promotes the crafts of Siena, in particular embroidery.

Siena's **Wednesday market** (☎ 7.30am-1pm) spreads all around Fortezza Medicea and seeps towards the Stadio Comunale. One of Tuscany's largest, it's great for foodstuffs and cheap clothing, or just aimless browsing.

Getting There & Away

BUS

The hub for buses is Piazza Gramsci. Tra-in and SITA express buses race up to Florence

(€6.50, 1¼ hours, up to 30 daily). Other regional Tra-in destinations include San Gimignano (€5.20, 1¼ hours, 10 daily either direct or changing in Poggibonsi), Montalcino (€3.20, 1½ hours, six daily), Poggibonsi (€3.60, one hour, up to 10 daily), Montepulciano (€4.50, 1¾ hours) and Colle di Val d'Elsa (€2.50, 30 minutes, hourly), with connections for Volterra. Other destinations in the Crete Senese and Chianti area include San Quirico d'Orcia (€3.20), Pienza (€3.60) and Grosseto (€6.20).

SENA buses run to/from Rome (€18, three hours, eight daily) and Milan (€25.50, 4¼ hours, three daily) and there are seven buses daily to Arezzo (€5, 1½ hours).

Both **Tra-in** (☎ 0577 20 42 46) and **Sena** (☎ 0577 28 32 03; www.sena.it) have ticket offices underneath the piazza, where there's also a left-luggage office.

CAR & MOTORCYCLE

For Florence take the SS2, the *superstrada* (expressway), or the more attractive SS222, also known as the Chiantigiana, which meanders its way through the hills of Chianti.

TRAIN

Siena isn't on a major train line and buses are generally a better alternative. By train, change at Chiusi for Rome and at Empoli for Florence. Trains arrive at Piazza F Rosselli, north of the city centre.

Getting Around

BICYCLE & SCOOTER

Perozzi Noleggi (☎ 0577 28 83 87; www.perozzi.it; Via dei Gazzani 16-18) rents mountain bikes (per day/week €10/50) and 50cc scooters (per day/week €26/150). If there's no one in the showroom, pop round the corner to Via del Romitorio 5.

BUS

Tra-in operates city bus services (€0.90). Bus 8, 9 and 10 run between the train station and Piazza Gramsci.

CAR & MOTORCYCLE

Cars are banned from the town centre, though visitors can drop off luggage at their hotel, then get out (don't forget to have reception report your licence number or risk receiving a 'souvenir' fine). Park illegally inside the city and you'll be towed away quicker than

you can yell 'Where the *&!@'s my car?' Try the large car parks at the Stadio Comunale and around the Fortezza Medicea, both just north of Piazza San Domenico, or the one at Il Campo, south of the centre, though even here locating a spot is like running the Palio.

TAXI

For a taxi, call ☎ 0577 4 92 22.

AROUND SIENA Le Crete

Southeast of Siena, this area of rolling clay hills scored by steep ravines is a feast of classic Tuscan images – bare ridges topped by a solitary cypress tree and hills silhouetted one against another as they fade into the misty distance. The area of Le Crete changes colour according to the season – from the creamy violet of ploughed clay to the green of young wheat, which then turns to gold.

Hire a car or bike in Florence or Siena and spend a few days pottering around Le Crete, a word in the Tuscan dialect meaning clay. And should your visit coincide, book your passage on the spectacular Treno Natura (p245), which runs on certain days in summer.

ASCIANO

This pretty little hamlet has a trio of small museums dedicated to Sienese art and Etruscan finds in the area. It's most easily reached along the scenic SS438 road running southeast from Siena; the occasional slow local train from Siena also passes through. Asciano is at the heart of Le Crete, so the journey there and beyond (such as south to the Abbazia di Monte Oliveto Maggiore) is a treat in itself. There's a small **tourist office** (☎ 0577 71 88 11; Corso Matteotti 78; ☎ 10.30am-1pm & 3-6pm Tue-Sat, 10.30am-1pm Sun Apr-Oct, 10.30am-1pm & 3-6pm Fri & Sat, 10.30am-1pm Sun Nov-Mar).

ABBAZIA DI MONTE OLIVETO MAGGIORE

This 14th-century **monastery** (☎ 0577 70 76 11; admission free; ☎ 9.15am-noon & 3.15-6pm Apr-Oct, to 5pm Nov-Mar) is still a retreat for around 40 monks. Though the congregation was founded in 1313 by John Tolomei, construction didn't begin on the monastery until 1393. Visitors come here for the wonderful fresco series in the Great Cloister, painted by Luca Signorelli and Il Sodoma, illustrating events in the life of the ascetic St Benedict, founder of the Benedictine order.

Signorelli, reputed to be a widely respected, kind man, had previously done minor work on the Sistine Chapel and would later produce his masterpiece *Resurrection of the Flesh* in the Chapel of San Brizio, in Orvieto's Duomo. He started work in the monastery in 1497, producing nine frescoes. In stark contrast, Il Sodoma, born Giovanni Antonio Bazzi, was purported to have been something of a character – dressing flamboyantly, keeping a 'Noah's Ark' of unusual pets, singing original ditties of dubious taste and, according to Giorgio Vasari in the book *The Lives of the Artists*, earning the moniker 'Sodoma' 'because he always surrounded himself with boys and beardless youths whom he loved beyond measure'. He added 17 frescoes, completing the series around 1505.

The fresco series wraps around the four-sided Great Cloister, illuminated naturally by an inner courtyard. To the right of the entrance, on the west wall, the fresco cycle begins with Il Sodoma's work and continues along the south wall of the cloisters. The nine frescoes by Signorelli line the east side and Il Sodoma picks up again on the northern wall. The decorations on the pillars between some of Il Sodoma's frescoes are among the earliest examples of 'grotesque' art, copied from decorations found in the then-newly excavated Domus Aurea of Nero in Rome.

The baroque interior of the **church** adjoining the cloister is a pleasingly sober play of perspective and shape. It has further works by Il Sodoma and some wonderfully intricate marquetry choir stalls.

From the monastery, head for **San Giovanni d'Asso**, where there's an interesting 11th-century church with a Lombardic-Tuscan façade, and a picturesque hamlet with the remains of a castle. Continue on to Montisi and the pretty village of **Castelmuzio**, its entrance lined with chestnut trees, to take a look at the 16th-century **Chiesa di Santa Maria** with its Romanesque Gothic façade. Along a side road just outside Castelmuzio is the abandoned **Pieve di Santo Stefano in Cennano**, a 13th-century church.

Opened in 2001, **La Locanda della Moscadella** (☎ 0577 66 53 10; www.lamoscadella.it; Castelmuzio; d incl breakfast €120; ☎) is a former 16th-century farmhouse that has been resurrected as a secluded hotel, restaurant and wine bar with sublime views. The venue has just unveiled a new wellness centre, with sauna, Turkish bath, 'cryomassage', sun track and sea-salt treatment.

Around 2km past Castelmuzio on the road to Pienza is the 14th-century monastery of **Sant'Anna in Camprena** (☎ 0578 74 80 37), one of the settings for the film *The English Patient*, with some lovely frescoes by Il Sodoma in the **refectory** (admission free; ☎ 9.30am-12.30pm & 3-6pm mid-Mar-Oct).

The route from Monte Oliveto Maggiore to Pienza runs almost entirely along a high ridge, offering great views of Le Crete.

MONTISI

Little more than a one-street, medieval blick capping a steep hill some 20km southeast of Asciano, Montisi has an allure that speaks to a certain disposition, particularly its expat artist community. So retiring it's almost comatose, the abundance of activities in town and the surrounding area is remarkable, ranging from English movies shown every Friday at **Cinema Hall** (☎ Sep-May), to contemporary art exhibitions, to eight-day ballooning tours. Get a taste of the possibilities at www.montisi.com.

You can't miss **La Locanda di Montisi** (☎ 0577 84 59 06; www.lalocandadimontisi.it; Via Umberto I 39; s/d/tr incl breakfast €60/90/110; ☎), bang in the centre of a 200m long town. All seven rooms are warm and tastefully rustic and the most searing day can't penetrate the cool cellar cantina. Not far away is **Taverna Montisi** (☎ 0577 84 51 59; www.tavernamontisi.com; Via Umberto I 3; meals €25), with a varying menu dependent on the seasons and organic farmers in the immediate area. Roberto, the force behind the food, is something of a Montisi tourism facilitator, coordinating accommodations, cheese tastings, horseback riding, wine tours and emergency dental appointments, to name a few.

BUONCONVENTO

On first approaching Buonconvento down the SS2 highway, you could be forgiven for thinking it a large roadside rest stop. Lying perfectly flat in a rare stretch of plain, the low-slung fortified walls of this farming centre hide a quiet little town of medieval origins. One of its historical moments came when the Holy Roman Emperor Henry VII, having shortly before captured the town, died here in August 1313 and so put an end to any hopes the Empire might have had of reasserting direct control over Tuscany.

The **Museo della Mezzadria Senese** (☎ 0577 80 90 75; Via Tinaia del Taja; admission €2; ☎ 10am-6pm Tue-Sun), with its lifesize figures and antique farm tools

and machinery, offers a multimedia presentation of what life was like living off the land until quite recently.

You might want to slip into the local **Museo d'Arte Sacra** (☎ 0577 80 71 90; Via Soccini 18; adult/child €3.50/free; ☎ 10am-1pm & 3-6pm Tue-Sun Apr-Sep, 10am-1pm & 3-5pm Sat & Sun Oct-Mar). It contains religious art collected in the town and from neighbouring churches and hamlets.

Abbazia di San Galgano & Around

About 20km southwest of Siena on the SS73 is the ruined 13th-century **San Galgano abbey** (☎ 0577 75 67 00; admission free; ☎ 8am-7.30pm), one of the country's finest Gothic buildings in its day and now a ruin that still speaks strongly of its past. The monks of this former Cistercian abbey were among Tuscany's most powerful, forming the judiciary and acting as accountants for the *comuni* (municipalities) of Volterra and Siena. They presided over disputes between the cities, played a significant role in the construction of the cathedral in Siena and built themselves an opulent church.

As early as the 14th century, Sir John Hawkwood, the feared English mercenary, sacked the abbey on at least two occasions. By the 16th century the monks' wealth and importance had declined and the church had deteriorated to the point of ruin, and in 1786 the bell tower simply collapsed, as did the ceiling vaults a few years later.

The great, roofless, stone and brick monolith stands silent in the fields. Come on a rainy winter's day and you feel more like you are in France or England, surrounded by glistening green fields and confronted by this grey ruin, its style strongly reminiscent of French Gothic architecture.

Next door to the church are what remain of the monastery buildings, as well as a brief stretch of cloister housing a small **tourist office** (☎ 0577 75 67 38; ☎ 10.30am-7pm Easter-Oct).

The Accademia Musicale Chigiana in Siena sponsors concerts at the abbey during summer (see p246).

On a hill overlooking the abbey is the tiny, round Romanesque **Cappella di Monte Siepi**. This is the site of the original Cistercian settlement – from it came the impulse to build the great abbey below. Inside the chapel are badly preserved frescoes by Ambrogio Lorenzetti depicting the life of local soldier and saint, San Galgano, who had a vision of St Michael on this site and lived his last years here as a

hermit. A real-life 'sword in the stone' is under glass in the floor of the chapel, plunged there, legend has it, by San Galgano to indicate his renunciation of worldly life.

The bus service between Siena and Massa Marittima passes nearby.

BAGNI DI PETRIOLO

About halfway along the SS223 highway between Siena and Grosseto, a side road leads down to the hot sulphur springs of **Bagni di Petriolo**. Steaming spring water cascades into a few small natural basins. Anyone can come and sit in them, and there's usually a motley assortment of permanent campers making use of the natural shower.

Val d'Elsa

MONTERIGGIONI

This famous walled medieval stronghold is just off the SS2, about 12km north of Siena.

First raised in 1203 as a forward defensive position against Florence, the walls and towers today are the most complete example of such a fortified bastion in Tuscany. Seven of the 14 towers were reconstructed in the 20th century but you have to peer pretty closely to make out which ones. According to descriptions by Dante – a writer not averse to a little hyperbole – they were considerably higher when the Florentines had reason to fear them and their Siennese defenders.

Monteriggioni has real charm but it's in danger of being overherited to appeal to the tsunami of tourists that flows in each summer's day.

Hotel Monteriggioni (☎ 0577 30 50 09; www.hotelmonteriggioni.net; Via Primo Maggio 4; s/d incl breakfast €120/230; P ☎ ☎ ☎ ☎) was originally two stone houses, now fused together. The interior is lavishly decorated with antiques, apart from the sparkling-new bathrooms, and all rooms have picture-postcard views. There's the added perk of a small pool within the lovely gardens, bordered by the original city walls. The hotel is open between March and December.

our pick **Borgo Stomennano** (☎ 0577 30 40 33; www.stomennano.it; q per week €900-1000; P ☎ ☎), is a sprawling unforgettable property 2km outside Monteriggioni. This historic collection of farmhouses dating from the 1600s has been converted into apartments, furnished and decorated with an amazing collection of heirlooms dating back hundreds of years –

children under 14 are not permitted due to the delicate nature of these items. Though geared for large groups (six to 32 people) and events, couples are welcome during select periods. Self-cater or request full board. Special touches include an infinity pool, welcome bottles of wine with personalised labels and a private trail from the property through undulating fields to Monteriggioni.

Ristorante Il Pozzo (☎ 0577 30 41 27; Piazza Roma 2; meals €40; ☎ closed Sun dinner & Mon) is on the main square and passed daily by invading hordes but 'The Well' retains its individuality and character, offering delicious food, including homemade desserts such as the *dolce di ricotta* (sweet ricotta cheese) and *zuppa Inglese* (trifle with holy wine, fresh cream and melted chocolate). There's a pleasant patio for dining alfresco.

COLLE DI VAL D'ELSA

pop 20,230

All that most visitors do here is change buses for Volterra. That's a shame because Colle has long been Italy's major centre for fine glass and crystal production and, unburdened by any notable church, museum or work of art, the place has kept its character as a rural market town. The old one-street town up on its hill is fun for its own sake and for the views. Down below, the **Friday market** in and around Piazza Arnolfo is a vast bustling affair selling everything from great wheels of cheese to frilly knickers.

A **tourist office** (☎ 0577 92 13 34; Piazza Arnolfo 9; ☎ 11am-7.45pm, closed Sun afternoon) is in the main square of **Colle Bassa**, the lower town, sharing space with the bus station ticket office. Between March and October, it offers a **crystal tour** (€20) with visits to glass-blowing, shaping, cutting and engraving workshops and crystal showrooms.

NAILING THE NAIL

There are some 30 reputedly authentic nails from the one true cross around Tuscany. But Colle di Val d'Elsa's has a special distinction. Brought back from the Holy Land during the Crusades, so the story goes, it was given to a local priest, who placed it in the town's otherwise quite unremarkable cathedral. It disappeared or was stolen several times (on one occasion washed downstream by spring floods) but always made its independent way back.

Nowadays it undergoes a degree of protection worthy of Fort Knox. Under lock and key – actually four locks with four differing keys held by four different citizens – it's only allowed out of the cathedral once a year, on the second Sunday of September, when it's taken in procession around Colle Alta in, appropriately, a finely wrought crystal vessel.

The most engaging part of town is historic **Colle Alta**, perched up on a ridge. An elevator deep in the hillside eases the journey between the lower to upper sections of the city. Its **tourist office** (☎ 0577 92 91 03; proloco.colle@tin.it; Via Campana 43; ☎ 10am-1pm & 2-6pm Mon-Sat, 10am-1pm & 3-6pm Sun) is run by amiable people determined to answer any question. Park in the free lot near Porta Nova at the western end of town.

At the eastern end of Via del Castello, there's a medieval *casa torre* (tower house; No 63), birthplace of Arnolfo di Cambio, architect of Florence's Palazzo Vecchio. Piazza del Duomo, overshadowed by the cathedral's bell tower with its giant clock, is about halfway along.

Nearby are three small museums. Admission to each costs €3 or you can buy a combined ticket for €6. The **Museo Archeologico** (☎ 0577 92 29 54; Piazza Duomo 42; ☎ 10.30am-12.30pm & 4.30-7.30pm Tue-Sun May-Oct, 3.30-5.30pm Tue-Fri, 10.30am-12.30pm Sat & Sun Nov-Apr) is on the square. The **Museo Civico** and **Museo d'Arte Sacra** (☎ 0577 92 38 88; Via del Castello 31; ☎ 10am-noon & 4-7pm Tue-Sun May-Oct, 3.30-6.30pm Tue-Sun, 10am-noon Sat & Sun Nov-Apr) share premises. Most interesting is the Museo d'Arte Sacra, with some worthwhile paintings by Siennese masters.

In Colle Bassa you'll find the **Museo del Cristallo** (☎ 0577 92 41 35; www.cristallo.org; Via dei Fossi 8a; admission €3; ☎ 10am-noon & 4-7.30pm Tue-Sun Apr-Oct, 3-7pm Tue-Fri, 10am-noon & 3-7pm Sat & Sun Nov-Mar), which illustrates the history and production of crystal and displays some stunning pieces (leave your toddler at home). All descriptions are in Italian.

La Vecchia Cartiera (☎ 0577 92 11 07; cartiera@chintiturismo.it; Via Oberdan 5-9; s €60-81, d €75-121, all incl buffet breakfast; P ☎ ☎) was once just that. But The Old Papermill has been so comprehensively overhauled that you'd scarcely guess it. This hotel has all the extras and is well situated

for an overview of the town's Friday market. The multilingual owner is a charmer and the breakfast buffet more lavish than most. Parking costs €7.

Hotel Arnolfo (☎ 0577 92 20 20; www.hotelarnolfo.it; Via Campana 8; s/d incl breakfast €56/80) The only hotel in Colle Alta has 32 comfortable, sizeable rooms. A buffet breakfast is served in the warmly decorated cellar, with coffee *barista* at the ready. The hotel is closed in February.

our pick **Il Frantoio** (☎ 0577 92 36 52; www.risorante-ilfrantoio.com; Via Castello 40; meals €38) There's cheaper places in town, but this is the only place where you'll be pampered, from the complimentary champagne and small tasting appetizer to the main events of liver-filled ravioli with walnut sauce and duck (very rare) with fruit sauce, roasted potatoes and a spinach tartlet. Tears of joy have been known to accompany the chocolate cake. Set in a multiroom cellar and equipped with an original grain grinder and grape press. A fixed-price lunch menu is available.

Hourly buses run to/from Siena (€2.50, 30 minutes) and Florence (€4.70, 1¼ hours). Up to four **Compagnia Pisana Trasporti** (CPT; ☎ 800 570 530) connecting buses head west to Volterra daily, except Sunday.

CASOLE D'ELSA & AROUND

Casole d'Elsa, a quiet fortified backwater, was a key part of Siena's western defences against Volterra and Florence during the Middle Ages. Little remains to detain you but those with romantic tastes and a Swiss bank account could stick to the tiny road that winds south out of town, call by pretty hilltop **Mensano**, then swing east to **Pievescola**.

Relais La Suvera (☎ 0577 96 03 00; www.lasuvera.it; Pievescola; d incl breakfast €385-560; ☎ mid-Apr–Oct; P ☎) is a 12th-century former fortress and palace, still run by the Marchese Ricci family. The décor is heavily brocaded opulence with tapestries, dark and enroamed oil paintings, rococo mirrors and four-poster beds. There is a health centre with a Jacuzzi bubbling out of the palace's original well.

Il Colombaio (☎ 0577 94 90 02; Località Il Colombaio; meals €50-55; ☎ closed Tue lunch & Mon), opposite vineyards with a distant view of Casole, is an elegant Michelin-starred place with stained glass, paintings and a canopy of chandeliers. Set menus range from €30 to €49. It takes wine seriously – 1400 varieties at last count, including Japanese, Israeli and a Bodegas Vega Sicilia

'90 for €500. The menu includes such goodies as quail salad and *pecorino* cheese soufflé with pear slices in chestnut honey sauce. They also have apartments to rent (doubles €80).

POGGIBONSI

pop 28,700

WWII managed to take care of what little was interesting about Poggibonsi, which takes line honours as one of the ugliest places in central Tuscany. It has a distinct port town feel, minus the port – lots of people passing through, and doing so quickly. If you're travelling by bus between Florence (€4.30, 50 minutes, half-hourly) or Siena (€3.60, one hour, up to 10 daily), heading for San Gimignano or Volterra, you can't avoid the place.

There's a **tourist office** (☎ 0577 93 51 13; ☎ 9am-1pm & 3-6.30pm) outside the train station that will do an admirable job of selling the area's meagre attractions, including what's left of the village and castle of Staggia Senese, the Fortezza Medicea and some walking/biking routes.

Albergo Italia (☎ 0577 93 61 42; www.albergo-italia.it; Via Trento 36; s 35-40, d €50-60, all incl breakfast; P ☎), across the piazza from the train station, has simple, bright rooms – some with noisy terraces – with hostel-quality beds and tiny all-in-one toilet/showers. The staff are very pleasant, there's an attached café and you'll likely be allowed access to the reception computer for quick emailing.

SAN GIMIGNANO

pop 7400

As you crest the hill coming from the east, the 14 towers of this walled town look like a medieval Manhattan. And when you arrive you might well feel that half of Manhattan's population has moved in. Within easy reach of both Siena and Florence, San Gimignano is a tourist magnet. Come in winter or early spring to indulge your imagination a little; in summer you'll spend your time dodging fellow visitors. Even then though, you'll discover a different, almost peaceful San Gimignano, once the last bus has pulled out.

There's good reason for such popularity. The towers, which once numbered 72, were symbols of the power and wealth of the city's medieval families. San Gimignano delle Belle Torri (meaning 'of the Fine Towers' – though they're actually almost devoid of design and rather dull unless sheer height impresses you)

is surrounded by lush, productive land and the setting is altogether enchanting. The area around San Gimignano is famous for the cultivation of saffron; see p69.

History

Originally an Etruscan village, the town was named after the bishop of Modena, San Gimignano, who is said to have saved the city from Attila the Hun. It became a *comune* in 1199, but fought frequently with neighbouring Volterra. Internal battles between Ardighelli (Guelph) and Salvucci (Ghibelline) families over the next two centuries caused deep divisions. Most towers were built during this period – in the 13th century, one *podestà* (town chief) forbade the building of towers higher than his own 51m pile.

In 1348 plague wiped out much of the population and weakened the nobles' power, leading to the town's submission to Florence in 1353. Today, not even the plague would deter the summer swarms.

Orientation

Piazzale dei Martiri di Montemaggio, at the southern end of the town, lies just outside the medieval wall and next to the main gate, Porta San Giovanni. Via San Giovanni heads northwards to central Piazza della Cisterna and the connecting Piazza del Duomo. From here the other major thoroughfare, Via San Matteo, extends to the principal northern gate, Porta San Matteo.

Information

Lo Spuntino (☎ 0577 90 72 99; Via XX Settembre 4b; per hr €4.50; ☎ 10am-8pm Apr–Oct, 2-7pm Nov–Feb) Has a few internet points.

Post office (Piazza delle Erbe 8)

Tourist office (☎ 0577 94 00 08; www.sangimignano.com; Piazza del Duomo 1; ☎ 9am-1pm & 3-7pm Mar–Oct, 9am-1pm & 2-6pm Nov–Feb) Hires out audio guides of town (€5).

Sights

Start in triangular Piazza della Cisterna, named after the 13th-century cistern at its centre. The square is lined with houses and towers from the 13th and 14th centuries. In the Piazza del Duomo, the Collegiata (basilica) looks across to the late-13th-century **Palazzo del Podestà** and its tower, the **Torre della Rognosa**. The Palazzo Comunale, right of the basilica, is the town hall.

COLLEGIATA

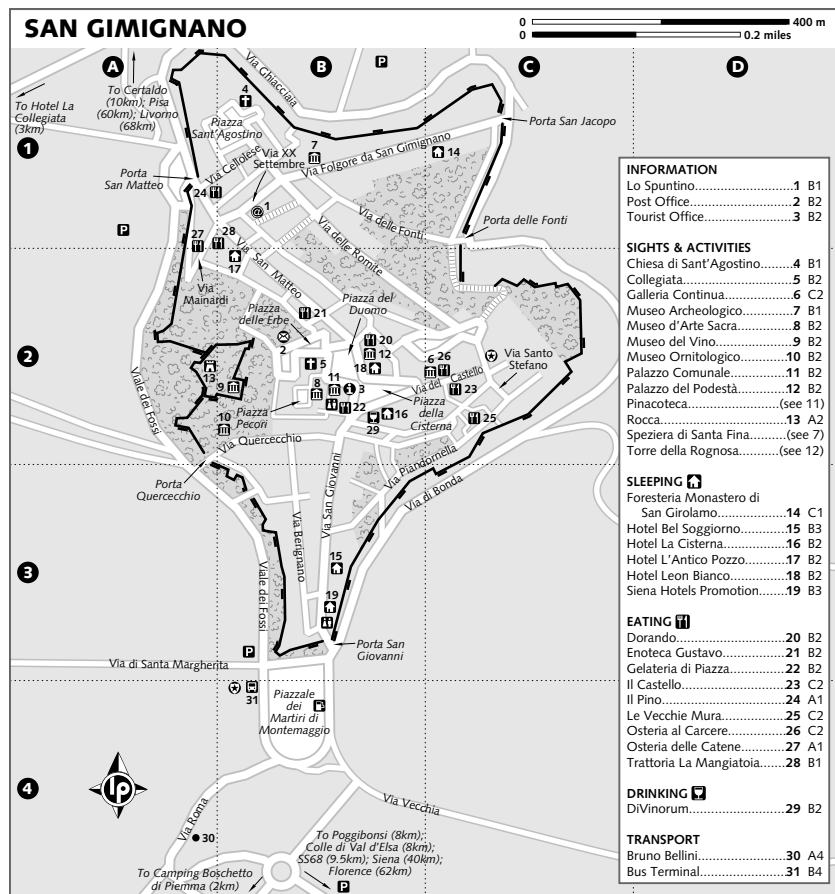
Access to the town's Romanesque **basilica** (adult/child €3.50/1.50; ☎ 9.30am-7.30pm Mon–Sat, 12.30-5pm Sun Apr–Oct, 9.30am-5pm Mon–Sat, 12.30-5pm Sun Nov–mid-Jan & Mar) is up a flight of steps from Piazza del Duomo. Its bare façade belies the remarkable 14th-century frescoes that stripe the interior walls like some vast medieval comic strip, stretching amid the black-and-white striped arches and columns that separate the three naves.

A fresco by Taddeo di Bartolo covers the upper half of the rear wall and depicts the Last Judgment, while the lower half is dominated by Benozzo Gozzoli's rendering of the martyrdom of St Sebastian. Still facing the rear wall, on the upper-left side is a fresco depicting *Paradiso* (Heaven) and on the upper-right *Inferno* (Hell). Both are by Taddeo di Bartolo, who seems to have taken particular delight in presenting the horrors of the underworld. Remember that many of the faithful in those times would have taken such images pretty much at face value.

Facing the altar, along the left (north) wall, are scenes from Genesis and the Old Testament by Bartolo di Fredi, dating from around 1367. The top row runs from the creation of the world through to the forbidden fruit scene. This in turn leads to the next level and fresco, the expulsion of Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden, which has sustained some war damage. Further scenes include Cain killing Abel, the story of Noah's ark and Joseph's coat. The last level picks up this story with the tale of Moses leading the Jews out of Egypt, and the story of Job.

On the right (south) wall are scenes from the New Testament by the school of Simone Martini, completed in 1336. Again, the frescoes are spread over three levels, starting in the six lunettes at the top. Commencing with the Annunciation, the panels proceed through episodes such as the Epiphany, the presentation of Christ in the temple and the massacre of the innocents on Herod's orders. The subsequent panels on the lower levels summarise the life and death of Christ, the Resurrection and so on. Again, some have sustained damage, but most are in good condition.

The **Cappella di Santa Fina**, off to the right, has a pair of naive and touching frescoes by Domenico Ghirlandaio depicting events in the life of the saint and a quite superb alabaster and marble altar picked out in gold.



MUSEO D'ARTE SACRA

Across the square, the **Museo d'Arte Sacra** (☎ 0577 94 03 16; Piazza Pecori 1; adult/child €3/1.50; ☎ 9.30am-7.30pm Mon-Fri, 9.30am-5pm Sat, 12.30-5pm Sun Apr-Oct, 9.30am-5pm Mon-Sat, 12.30-5pm Sun Nov-mid-Jan & Mar) has some fine works of religious art, including a collection of medieval painted wooden statues, vestments, hangings, crosses and finely illuminated manuscripts culled, in the main, from the town's churches. Those who specialise in medieval religious objects will appreciate the items made from precious metals, including beautifully crafted chalices and thuribles (censers), as well as some exquisitely embroidered textiles. One curiosity is Sebastiano Mainardi's *Il Volto Santo Adorato* on the ground floor, where two hooded fig-

ures, looking suspiciously like KKK members, kneel at the feet of a smartly dressed Jesus on the cross.

PALAZZO COMUNALE

San Gimignano's other principal sight is this seat of secular power, which was founded in 1288, expanded in the 14th century and with a neogothic façade tacked on in the late 19th century.

From the internal courtyard climb the stairs to the **Pinacoteca** (☎ 0577 99 03 12; Piazza del Duomo; adult/child museum & tower €5/4; ☎ 9.30am-7pm Mar-Oct, 10am-5.30pm Nov-Feb).

In the main room, the **Sala di Dante**, the great poet addressed the town's council, imploring it to join a Florentine-led Guelph League. You

can't miss the *Maestà*, a masterful 1317 fresco by Lippo Memmi depicting the enthroned Virgin Mary and Christ child with angels and saints. Other frescoes portray jousts, hunting scenes, castles and other medieval goings-on.

Upstairs, the collection of medieval religious works includes a crucifix by Coppo di Marcovaldo, notable for its age (c 1261) and quality, said to be superior to those of Giotto, and a pair of remarkable *tondi* (circular paintings) by Filippino Lippi.

Also on this level, there's a small frescoed room. Opinion is divided on what these frescoes, showing wedding scenes, are all about. It all looks like great fun, with the newlyweds taking a bath together and then hopping into the sack.

Climb up the palazzo's **Torre Grossa** for a spectacular view of the town and surrounding countryside.

MUSEO DEL VINO

In an unmarked gallery just outside the town's fortress is San Gimignano's **wine museum** (☎ 0577 94 12 67; Parco della Rocca; admission free; ☎ 11.30am-6.30pm Thu-Mon, 3-6.30pm Wed Mar-Oct). A sommelier is on hand to lead an informed – and paying – tasting of some of the choice local white wines. This is a one-man show – when the sommelier is sick or on holiday, the place unceremoniously shuts.

MUSEO ARCHEOLOGICO & SPEZIERA DI SANTA FINA

There are actually two **museums** (☎ 0577 94 03 48; Via Folgore da San Gimignano 11; adult/child both museums €3.50/2.50; ☎ 11am-5.30pm mid-Mar-Dec) and a gallery in this complex. The Speziera section includes ceramic and glass storage vessels from the 16th-century Speziera di Santa Fina, a reconstructed 16th-century pharmacy and herb garden. Many are beautifully painted and still contain curative concoctions. Follow your nose to the side room in Gallery 7, called 'the kitchen', which is filled with herbs and spices used for elixirs. All descriptions are in Italian.

Beyond is a small archaeological museum divided into Etruscan/Roman and medieval sections with exhibits found locally.

The museum also houses a good modern art gallery that in itself merits a visit. Permanent works include the distinctive swirly abstracts of Renato Guttuso and some excellent oils on canvas by Raffaele de Grada.

MONEYSAVERS

If you're an assiduous sightseer, two combined tickets may be worth your while. One (adult/child €7.50/5.50) gives admission to the Palazzo Comunale and its Museo Civico, the archaeological museum, Torre Grossa and some secondary sights. The other (adult/child €5.50/2.50) gets you into the Collegiata and nearby Museo d'Arte Sacra.

OTHER SIGHTS

Just west of the Piazza del Duomo, the **Rocca** is the crumbling shell of the town's fortress with great views across the valley, a small playground – and not much else.

Due south of the fort is the **Museo Ornitologico** (☎ 0577 94 13 88; Via Quercecchio; adult/child €1.50/1; ☎ 11am-5.30pm Apr-Sep). Its mournful collection of stuffed birds dates back to 1886 and certainly looks it.

At the northern end of the town is the **Chiesa di Sant'Agostino** (Piazza Sant'Agostino; ☎ 7am-noon & 3-7pm Apr-Oct, 7am-noon & 3-6pm Nov-Mar), which has a Benozzo Gozzoli fresco cycle in the apse depicting the life of St Augustine.

Housed in the city's old theatre, **Galleria Continua** (☎ 0577 94 31 34; www.galleriacontinua.com; Via del Castello 11; admission free; ☎ 2-7pm Tue-Sat) shows its collection of contemporary art by famous artists at virtually every major international art fair. It rarely represents Italian artists, so why they've kept this peculiar location in San Gimignano is something of a mystery. Or maybe it's a trend. The new gallery is in Beijing. Exhibitions change approximately every two months.

Tours

If you'd prefer to sip your Vernaccia di San Gimignano on the spot, the tourist office organises vineyard visits (€26). Two-hour tours leave at 11am on Tuesday and 5pm on Thursday from June to October. Advance reservations are essential.

Sleeping

In high summer San Gimignano can be as unpromising for accommodation as Christmas Eve in Bethlehem. But a couple of organisations will help to find you a roof.

Siena Hotels Promotion (☎ 0577 94 08 09; www.hotelsiena.com; Via San Giovanni 125; ☎ closed Tue & Thu mornings & Sun) will book hotels and some very

affordable *affittacamere* (rooms for rent) via its website or for callers-in (€2 surcharge for the latter). The tourist office, for its part, will reserve a wider range of *affittacamere* and also *agriturismi* (tourism accommodation on farms) if you call by in person.

BUDGET

Camping Boschetto di Piemina (☎ 0577 94 03 52; www.boschettopiemina.it; per car/rent/person €3.30/7.30/9.30; ☒ Easter-Oct) Located at Santa Lucia, 2km south of town, this is the nearest camp site. Buses stop right outside.

Foresteria Monastero di San Girolamo (☎ 0577 94 05 73; monasterosangimignano@gmail.com; Via Folgore da San Gimignano 26-32; per person €25; ☐) Run by friendly Benedictine nuns, this is an excel-

lent budget choice with basic but spacious, comfortable rooms with bathrooms, sleeping two to five people. Breakfast is €3. Ring ahead as it is perpetually booked. If you don't have a reservation, arrive between 9am and 12.30pm or between 3pm and 5.45pm and ring the monastery bell (not the Foresteria one, which is never answered).

MIDRANGE

Two highly recommended hotels flank Piazza della Cisterna, the main square. In both, you pay a little more for superb views.

Hotel La Cisterna (☎ 0577 94 03 28; www.hotelcisterna.it; Piazza della Cisterna 24; s €60-78, d €85-95, tr €110-128, all incl breakfast; ☒ ☐) Located in a splendid 14th-century building with vaulted

ceilings and modest chandeliers. Be sure to request a room with a view of the square or the valley or risk getting one facing a dull courtyard. Nearly 100 years in business, it offers truly 21st-century comfort in quiet, spacious rooms.

Hotel Leon Bianco (☎ 0577 94 12 94; www.leonbianco.com; Piazza della Cisterna 13; s €65-80, d €85-140, tr €110-150, all incl breakfast; ☒ ☐) Faces Hotel La Cisterna across the square and also occupies a 14th-century mansion. This smoothly run hotel is equally welcoming and friendly with a ground-floor abundance of plants, pretty inner courtyard, breakfast patio, billiard table and fitness room. Wi-fi (extra charge) is available in common spaces.

Hotel Bel Soggiorno (☎ 0577 94 03 75; www.hotelbelsoggiorno.it; Via San Giovanni 91; d incl breakfast €90-130; ☒ ☐) With an upbeat décor, every room here is different, but each has lots of colour. Try to go for one with a countryside view. The restaurant (meals €40, set menus €38) has received rave reviews from readers. The hotel is closed in January and February.

Hotel L'Antico Pozzo (☎ 0577 94 20 14; www.anticopozzo.com; Via San Matteo 87; s €80-100, d €110-135, tr €145-160, all incl breakfast; ☒ ☐) Named after the old, softly illuminated *pozzo* (well), just off the lobby. Each room has its own personality, with thick stone walls, high ceilings, wrought-iron beds, frescoes, antique prints and peach-coloured walls. Room 20 has a magnificent domed ceiling. The hotel is closed the first two weeks of November and all of January. Wi-fi is €3 per hour.

TOP END

Hotel La Collegiata (☎ 0577 94 32 01; www.lacollegiata.it; Località Strada 27; s €120-180, d €210-345; ☐ ☒ ☒) A serious money-no-object place, you'll need a car to get here as it's outside town. A former Franciscan convent, its formal gardens are magnificent and are surrounded by parkland, while the rooms are conservative yet elegant.

Eating BUDGET

Enoteca Gustavo (☎ 0577 94 00 57; Via San Matteo 29; snacks & wine from €2.50) There isn't much elbow space inside, so go for one of the outside tables if you can. Snacks include bruschetta and a plate of cheese with honey to go with your choice from the impressive selection of wines.

Gelateria di Piazza (☎ 0577 94 22 44; Piazza della Cisterna 4; ☒ Mar-mid-Nov) As the pictures around the wall attest, many celebrities have closed their lips around one of Gelateria di Piazza's rich ice creams ('all the family thought the ice cream was delicious' attested one Tony Blair). Master Sergio uses only the choicest ingredients: pistachios from Sicily and cocoa from Venezuela. There's a variant based on Vernaccia, the local wine, and, if you want to be more adventurous, saffron cream.

Each Thursday morning there's a **produce market** (Piazza della Cisterna & Piazza del Duomo).

MIDRANGE

Le Vecchie Mura (☎ 0577 94 02 70; www.vecchiemura.it; Via Piandornella 15; meals €30; ☒ dinner Wed-Mon) This is a wonderful spot, especially if you snap up a terrace table on a warm summer's night. The food competes with the phenomenal view of rolling green hills and the wine list has more than a dozen varieties of Vernaccia di San Gimignano. Choose from a delicious selection of *primi piatti*, such as *gnocchi con tartufo e formaggio* (gnocchi with truffles and cheese), and you can't go wrong with the perfectly prepared beef options. Book ahead to guarantee that panorama.

Osteria al Carcere (☎ 0577 94 19 05; Via del Castello 5; soups €8, meals €30-35; ☒ closed Thu lunch & Wed) A fine *osteria* that offers great food at moderate prices. The reassuringly brief menu has a half-dozen soups, including *zuppa di farro e fagioli* (local grain and white bean soup) and creative flashes like *tachina al pistacchio e arance* (turkey with pistachios and orange sauce).

Osteria delle Catene (☎ 0577 94 19 66; osteriadellecatene.osteria@tin.it; Via Mainardi 18; menu degustazione €13-31, meals €33-38; ☒ closed Wed & mid-Dec-Feb) The windows are plastered with the guidebook accolades it has justifiably received. The brick-barrelled interior is softly lit while the menu is heavy on strong meats – hare, boar, duck and rabbit. Alongside many Tuscan stalwarts and saffron experimentation such as the *zuppa medievale*, there's the *spaghetti dell'Ostria* (spaghetti with zucchini, sausages and chilli pepper in puréed sauce) and a small, but sublime carrot and leek soufflé.

Il Castello (☎ 0577 94 08 78; enotecailcastello@iol.it; Via del Castello 20; meals €35; ☒ Mar-mid-Jan) Both wine bar and restaurant, this place has a delightful patio with views and an all-brick, glass-domed courtyard. Most dishes are macho-meaty, like the frighteningly large *bistecca alla fiorentina*

CHEAPER THAN WATER

It's true, a glass of house wine in an Italian restaurant will usually undercut the price of a bottle of water. You really have no choice but to imbibe. Since you're saving all that money, you'll be able to splash out and order a special glass now and again. Save those occasions for the following top drops.

'It kisses, licks, bites, thrusts and stings.' That's how Michelangelo, clearly drawing upon the purple end of his palate, described **San Gimignano's Vernaccia** white wine. Smooth and aromatic with a slightly bitter aftertaste and pale golden yellow in colour, it was Italy's first DOC wine and the second white to be awarded DOCG (see p74). But these are only its most recent accolades. It's been around, though scarcely unsung, for centuries. Dante in his *Divine Comedy* banished Pope Martin IV to purgatory because of it, Boccaccio fantasised about flowing streams of cool Vernaccia, Pope Paul III reputedly bathed in it and the ever-demure St Catherine of Siena used it as medicine.

Vino Nobile di Montepulciano dates back to 1350, and is noted in documents illustrating the terms and conditions governing trade and the exportation of area wines in the Politian Archives. Pope Paul III – presumably after towelling off from a good soak in Vernaccia – gushed about this red in his late 16th-century poem 'Bacchus in Tuscany', and Francesco Redi described it as the 'king of all wines' in his 1685 poem 'Bacco in Toscana'. It was granted the description of 'nobile' in the second half of the 18th century, about the same time that Voltaire was dropping the name in his 1759 novel *Candide*. More recent admirers have included the American presidents Martin Van Buren and Thomas Jefferson. Currently some 250,000 cases of *Vino Nobile di Montepulciano* are produced each year, more than might be deemed 'nobile', but still few enough to make a bottle a special occasion.

Brunello di Montalcino ranks among the world's top wines. Collectors pay hundreds of dollars for a respectable bottle at auction. The price tag skyrockets into the thousands for select bottles from the 1940s and a bottle of the Biondi-Santi 1955 Brunello, voted as one of the top dozen wines of the century, could put a small nation's budget into a deficit. 'Brunello' is the name used for a handful of mutations of the sangiovese grape found around Montalcino, the result of horticultural tinkering by Clemente Santi and his grandson, Ferruccio Biondi-Santi, in the mid-19th century. Brunello almost immediately developed an exalted reputation, its grapes coming from select boutique vineyards, creating a product known for its borderline outlandish exclusivity and price as much as for its extraordinary quality. It was the first wine appellation in Italy to be granted the coveted DOCG ranking in 1970. Total annual Brunello production, grown from grapes almost entirely within a 26-sq-km radius around Montalcino, is about 350,000 cases – not even equal to a medium-sized winery.

(grilled T-bone steak) and *cinghiale alla sangimignanese con polenta* (wild boar with polenta and tomato salad), though there's less macho fallbacks like the *pennette* with broccoli, wild mushrooms and saffron.

Trattoria La Mangiatoia (☎ 0577 94 15 28; Via Mainardi 5; meals €36-40; ☞ Wed-Mon Feb-Oct) A highly regarded trattoria serving tempting, regional fare like the small, but tasty *saccottini di pecorino al tartufo* (ravioli filled with potatoes and *pecorino* cheese with truffle sauce). With candles flickering and classical music in the background, share it with that special someone. Or hold hands after dark on the delightful summer patio.

Our pick **Il Pino** (☎ 0577 94 04 15; Via Cellolese 8-10; meals €37-42; ☞ Fri-Wed) The atmosphere here is spruce, vaulted and airy. Service is friendly and attentive and the menu, which includes several truffle-based specialities, is a winner. The *raviolone di pecorino delle crete con lingua stufata e carote e porri all'aneto* (sheep's milk cheese ravioli with stewed meat, carrots and leeks) may be the most singular pasta adventure in Tuscany. The desserts, all con-

fectioned on the premises, are dinner's final temptation.

Dorando (☎ 0577 94 18 62; www.ristorantedorando.it; Vicolo dell'Oro 2; mains €55-60; ☞ daily Easter-Oct, Tue-Sun Oct-Easter) Recognised by the Slow Food Movement, Dorando runs a classic five-course menu with dishes based on authentic Etruscan recipes such as carrot dumplings with zucchini, and *pecorino* blue cheese with a purée of shallots. The atmosphere is swanky yet cool, with intimate corners and works of art.

Drinking

DiVinorum (Piazza della Cisterna 30; ☞ 11am-midnight daily Mar-Oct, Fri-Sun Nov-Feb) Housed in cavernous former stables is this cool wine bar run by local lads. In summer, sip your drink on the tiny outdoor terrace with stunning valley views.

Getting There & Around

BUS

Buses arrive in Piazzale dei Martiri di Montemaggio, beside Porta San Giovanni. Services run to/from Florence (€5.90, 1¼ hours, 12 daily) and Siena (€5.20, one to 1½ hours, 10

ROSSELLA BRACALI

Rossella Bracali works at Galleria Continua (p257).

Since most of your artists are non-Italian you could be located anywhere, so why San Gimignano? Why not in San Gimignano? Why not in a town with such a long tradition of art? Galleria Continua was founded in 1990 by Mario Cristiani, Lorenzo Fiaschi and Maurizio Rigillo with the intention – evident in the name – to give continuity to contemporary art in a landscape rich with the signs of ancient art. The gallery seeks to act as a bridge between past and present, looking for connections between current Italian research and the language of the international circuit, by bringing important but lesser known artists into Italy and by helping and promoting young Italian artists abroad.

On the subject of 'eccentric' locations, what made you choose Beijing as the location for your new gallery? Our first contact with Chinese culture was during the solo exhibition Field of Synergy (2000) by Chen Zhen, a Chinese artist living in Paris since 1986. Subsequently, we decided to open a gallery in China because we were completely fascinated by what we saw and experienced during our first visit to Beijing in April 2004, when we participated in the first international contemporary art fair and visited the incredible 798 Art Zone. We felt the desire to be there while many things are happening in the art scene. Many galleries opened in Beijing because they were working with Chinese artists, but what we want to do is exactly the opposite: show Western artists in China. In this way we would like to open an exchange that will let the West get closer to China.

We know Giovanni Ozzola is from Florence, do you represent any other Tuscan artists? We have had other Italian artists that have a relationship with Tuscany: Luca Pancrazi was born at Figline Valdarno near Florence, Loris Cecchini lives and works from Prato and Beijing.

Considering that you represent a number of major artists ranging from high-concept to formal works, other than fame, is there a relationship to the variety of artists that you represent? The high quality of their research and work but primarily the passion of artists such as Daniel Buren, Anish Kapoor, Ilya Kabakov, Mona Hatoum to exhibit in such 'eccentric' galleries!

DETOUR: SAN GIMIGNANO TO VOLTERRA

Instead of driving the heavily trafficked SS68 between San Gimignano and Volterra, choose this back route that passes through some stunning countryside and potential picnic areas. Turn left out of the San Gimignano car park (just outside Porta San Giovanni). At 2.3km, just past Hotel San Michele, turn left again at the signposted roundabout heading for Montaione and Gambassi. Carry on along this road through green rolling valleys, wooded areas and vineyards. At 6.8km, beyond the turn, take a left (signed 'Volterra 15km', though it's actually 22km, but who's counting?). After around 10km – 10 actual kilometres – turn right onto the SS68 for the final stretch into town.

daily). A few are direct but most require a change at Poggibonsi. The tourist office carries timetables.

For Volterra (€4.30, 1½ hours, four daily except Sunday), you need to change in Colle di Val d'Elsa, and maybe also in Poggibonsi, which has the closest train station.

CAR & MOTORCYCLE

From Florence or Siena, take the SS2 to Poggibonsi, then the SS68 via Colle di Val d'Elsa. From Volterra, take the SS68 east and follow the turn-off signs north to San Gimignano.

There are car parks (per hour €2 or per day €5 to €15) outside the city walls, and beside and below Porta San Giovanni. There's free parking in the new parts of town, just north-west of the old centre, but this is quite a hike and competition is fierce.

Bruno Bellini (☎ 0577 94 02 01; www.bellinibruno.com; Via Roma 41) rents mountain bikes (per day €15) and scooters (per day from €31).

VOLTERRA

pop 11,400

A nippy 29km drive from San Gimignano, Volterra's well-preserved medieval ramparts give the windswept town a proud, forbidding air – particularly if you're trying to drive up to your hotel to drop off your luggage (forget it). Where San Gimignano has its towers, Volterra has its modest archaeological sites,

more-extensive network of mysterious alleys to explore and higher calf-blasting stone stairways to scale – all that and slightly more elbowroom. The surrounding gentle Tuscan countryside provides the perfect contrast.

People looking for that perfect alabaster figurine for their garden, or simply wanting to see alabaster artists in action, will have plenty of shops to choose from and the local collection of Etruscan artefacts is arguably unmatched.

History

The Etruscan settlement of Velathri was an important trading centre and senior partner of the Dodecapolis. It is believed that as many as 25,000 people lived here in its Etruscan heyday. Partly because of the surrounding inhospitable terrain, the city was among the last to succumb to Rome – it was absorbed into the Roman confederation around 260 BC and renamed Volaterrae.

The bulk of the old city was raised in the 12th and 13th centuries under a fiercely independent free *comune*. The city first entered into Florence's orbit in 1361, but it was some time before Florence took full control. When this domination was first threatened, Lorenzo Il Magnifico made one of his few big mistakes and created lasting enemies in the people of Volterra; in 1472 he marched in and ruthlessly snuffed out every vestige of potential opposition to direct Florentine rule.

Since Etruscan times, Volterra has been a centre of alabaster extraction and workmanship. During the Middle Ages, its quarries lay fallow for several centuries until their soft, semitransparent, easily worked stone again became a popular material for sculpture during the Renaissance.

Orientation

Whichever of the four main gates you use to enter Volterra, the road will lead you to central Piazza dei Priori.

Information

Web & Wine (p265) also has web access.

Enjoy Café (Piazza Martiri della Libertà 3; per hr €3) Has wi-fi and a loaner laptop for those not packing wi-fi-capable devices.

Post office (Piazza dei Priori)

Tourist office (☎ 0588 8 72 57; www.volterratour.it; Piazza dei Priori 19-20; ☞ 10am-1pm & 2-6pm) Offers

a free hotel-booking service and rents out a good town audio guide (€5).

Sights

PIAZZA DEI PRIORI & AROUND

Piazza dei Priori is ringed by austere medieval mansions. The 13th-century **Palazzo dei Priori** (Piazza dei Priori; admission €1; ☎ 10.30am-5.30pm mid-Mar–Oct, 10am-5pm Sat & Sun Nov–mid-Mar), the oldest seat of local government in Tuscany, is believed to have been a model for Florence's Palazzo Vecchio. Highlights are a fresco of the Crucifixion by Piero Francesco Fiorentino on the staircase, the magnificent cross-vaulted council hall and a small antechamber on the 1st floor giving a bird's-eye view of the piazza below.

The **Palazzo Pretorio** is from the same era. From it thrusts the **Torre del Porcellino** (Piglet's Tower), so named because of the wild boar protruding from its upper section.

The **cathedral** (Piazza San Giovanni; ☎ 8am-12.30pm & 3-6pm) was built in the 12th and 13th centuries. Highlights include a small fresco, the *Procession of the Magi* by Benozzo Gozzoli, behind a terracotta nativity group tucked

COMBINED TICKETS

An €8 ticket covers visits to the Museo Etrusco Guarnacci, the Pinacoteca Comunale and the Museo Diocesano d'Arte Sacra. A similar €2 ticket allows entry to both the Roman theatre and the seriously dilapidated Etruscan necropolis within the Parco Archeologico.

away in the oratory at the beginning of the north aisle. An exquisite 15th-century alabaster tabernacle by Mino da Fiesole rises above the high altar. Laterally and overhead, the black-and-white marble banding and Renaissance coffered ceiling, gilded and gleaming, both make their mark.

Just west of the cathedral is the 13th-century **baptistry** with a small marble font by Andrea Sansovino. On the west side of Piazza San Giovanni, the porticoed **Ospedale di Santa Maria Maddalena** was once a foundlings hospital. Nearby, the **Museo Diocesano d'Arte Sacra** (☎ 0588 8 62 90; Via Roma 1; ☎ 9am-1pm & 3-6pm mid-Mar–Oct, 9am-1pm Nov–mid-Mar) merits a peek

for its collection of ecclesiastical vestments, gold reliquaries and works by Andrea della Robbia and Rosso Fiorentino.

The **Pinacoteca Comunale** (☎ 0588 8 75 80; Via dei Sarti 1; ☎ 9am-7pm mid-Mar–Oct, 8.30am-1.45pm Nov–mid-Mar), in the Palazzo Minucci Solaini, houses a modest collection of local, Siennese and Florentine art. A scholarly highlight is Rosso Fiorentino's *Deposition*, due to its emotional content and similarities with the works of Goya. It is considered Fiorentino's masterpiece, straddling late-Renaissance and Mannerism.

ECOMUSEO DELL'ALABASTRO

As befits a town that has hewn the precious rock from nearby quarries since Etruscan times, Volterra has its own **alabaster museum** (☎ 0588 8 75 80; Via dei Sarti 1; admission €3; ☎ 11am-5pm mid-Mar–Oct, 9am-1.30pm Sat & Sun Nov–mid-Mar), which shares the same building as the Pinacoteca. On the ground floor are contemporary creations, including a finely chiselled mandolin and a bizarre fried egg, while on the two upper floors are choice examples from Etruscan times onwards and a re-created artisan's workshop. From the top-floor windows, there are gorgeous views of the surrounding countryside.

MUSEO ETRUSCO GUARNACCI

In terms of content, this **museum** (☎ 0588 8 63 47; Via Don Minzoni 15; adult/student €8/5; ☎ 9am-7pm mid-Mar–Oct, 8.30am-1.45pm Nov–mid-Mar) is one of Italy's finest Etruscan museums. Much of the collection is displayed in the old-style didactic manner – badly labelled, mostly in Italian, and stuffy – though some exhibits on the upper levels have been artfully enriched. The multilingual audio guide (€3) is worth the investment for much-needed descriptions and to boost the overall pep factor.

All exhibits were unearthed locally. They include a vast collection of some 600 funerary urns carved mainly from alabaster and tufa and displayed according to subject and period. The tiny casket-shaped urns typically have human figures lying in repose on the top with a scene captured on the front, often military in theme. Be selective; they all start to look the same after a while. The best examples (those dating from later periods) are on the 2nd and 3rd floors.

Original touches are the *Ombra della Sera* bronze *ex voto*, a strange, elongated nude

figure that would fit harmoniously in any museum of modern art, and the urn of the Sposi, a terracotta rendering of an elderly couple, their wrinkled features depicted in portrait fashion rather than the usual stylised manner.

FORTEZZA MEDICEA & PARCO ARCHEOLOGICO

The 14th-century **Fortezza Medicea**, later altered by Lorenzo II Magnifico, is nowadays a prison (admission one felony).

To its west is the pleasant **Parco Archeologico** (☎ 8.30am-8pm May-Sep, to-5pm Oct-Apr), site of the ancient Acropolis (open 10.30am to 5.30pm mid-March to October). Little of archaeological interest has survived, apart from a few battered Etruscan tombs, but the park has swings and things for kids, and it's a good place for a picnic.

OTHER SIGHTS

On the city's northern edge is a **Roman theatre** (☎ 10.30am-5.30pm mid-Mar–Oct, 10am-4pm Sat & Sun Nov–mid-Mar), a well-preserved complex, complete with a Roman bath house.

Le Balze, a deep, eroded limestone ravine about 2km northwest of the city centre, has claimed several churches since the Middle Ages as the buildings tumbled into its deep gullies. A 14th-century **monastery**, perched near the precipice, seems perilously close to continuing the tradition. To get there, head out through Porta San Francesco, the city's northwestern gate, along Via San Lino and follow its continuation, Borgo Santo Stefano, then Borgo San Giusto.

Festivals & Events

On the third and fourth Sundays of August, the citizens of Volterra roll back the calendar some 600 years, take to the streets in period costume and celebrate **Volterra A.D. 1398** with gusto and all the fun of a medieval fayre.

Sleeping

Camping Le Balze (☎ 0588 8 78 80; Via di Mandringa 15; per car/tent/person €3/7/8; ☎ Easter-Oct; 🚰) The closest camp site to town, has a pool, new bathrooms and sits right on Le Balze. Buses depart for Piazza Martiri every hour.

Seminario di Sant'Andrea (☎ 0588 8 60 28; semv escovile@diocesivolterra.it; Viale Vittorio Veneto 2; d €36, d with shared bathroom €28; 📍) Still an active church retreat, this is a peaceful, if a mite dilapidated,



VOLTERRA BY DAY, FROGS & SALAMANDERS BY NIGHT

ourpick Agriturismo San Lorenzo (☎ 0588 3 90 80; www.agriturismosanlorenzo.it; B&B d €85, apt without breakfast €90-110; 🍷) This giddy-fusion of sustainable tourism, countryside vistas, mod cons and wonderful food is an easy 3km outside Volterra on the road to Siena. See our special agriturismo section for more detail (p316).

place with vaulted ceilings and 20 large, clean rooms. Open to all comers, it's a mere 600m or so from Piazza dei Priori, has free parking and makes an excellent budget choice. Breakfast is €3.

Albergo Villa Nencini (☎ 0588 8 63 86; www.villanencini.it; Borgo Santo Stefano 55; s €60, d €68-83, all incl breakfast; 🍷 🍷) This is a tranquil family hotel, a mere 200m beyond Porta San Francesco yet a world away from the town's summer bustle. Choose the original 17th-century mansion or the recently constructed new wing. The grounds are shady, the views across the valley are magnificent and, with access to its restaurant and impressive collection of wines, you're fully self-sufficient.

Appartamenti L'Etrusca (☎ 0588 8 40 73; letrusca@libero.it; Via Porta all'Arco 37-41; apt for 1/2/3 persons €40/70/80) Unlike most such rental companies, this place is happy to take you in for even a single night. The exterior of this late Renaissance building gives no hint of all the mod cons within.

Albergo Nazionale (☎ 0588 8 62 84; www.hotelnazionale-volterra.com; Via dei Marchesi 11; s €59, d €78-83, tr €94-98, all incl buffet breakfast) DH Lawrence once stayed in this late-19th-century hotel. Rooms vary in size and style and some have balconies; Room 403, with a pair of them, is your best option. Meals in its summertime restaurant are simple, solid and uncomplicated; the reception desk betrays the same qualities.

ourpick Albergo Etruria (☎ 0588 8 73 77; www.albergoetruria.it; Via Giacomo Matteotti 32; s €60-70, d €80-90, all incl breakfast; 🍷) This is a good value, cosy hotel, realised by two friendly English-speaking ladies. There's a self-catering kitchen and, of all things, an ice machine! Look for the remains of an Etruscan wall upstairs and savour the fine views from the roof garden – a genuine garden with lawns and bushes. The hotel is closed in January.

Hotel La Locanda (☎ 0588 8 15 47; www.hotel-lalocanda.com; Via Guarnacci 24-28; s €70-92, d €85-115; 🍷) This is well worth flexing your credit card for. In a former nunnery, there is nothing austere about its classy rooms, most with a choice of massage shower or whirlpool. A suite with sauna will cost you a cool €250 and a handicapped-equipped double is €80 to €105.

Park Hotel Le Fonti (☎ 0588 8 52 19; www.parkhotellefonti.com; Via Fontecorrenti 8; s €85-125, d €110-165; 🍷 🍷 🍷) Abundant mod cons punctuate this four-star option, about 15 minutes' walk from the centre. Money that might have gone to making the rooms a bit fancier has been lavished all over the public areas, with classy furniture, plants, art, wi-fi and diversions such as the alabaster chessboard. The onsite restaurant (meals €45) is an all-swank affair with 200 types of wine.

Eating

Pizzeria da Nanni (☎ 0588 8 40 47; Via delle Pregioni 40; pizzas €5.80-7.50; 🍷 Mon-Sat) This is a hole-in-the-wall-plus – the plus being the excellent pizzas that Nanni spatulas from his oven, while sustaining a vivid line of backchat, notably with his long-suffering wife.

Il Porcellino (☎ 0588 8 63 92; Via delle Prigioni 10; meals €22-26; 🍷 Wed-Mon) Despite its dangerous proximity to Piazza dei Priori and its tourist beacon, post-sized menu, this place dishes out decent meals at very reasonable prices. The menu includes game dishes, seafood and some surprises, like boar with olives. A variety of set menus go for €13 to €23.

Osteria Il Ponte San Lorenzo (☎ 0588 4 41 60; Via Massetana, San Lorenzo; pizzas from €4.50, meals €24; 🍷 Wed-Mon) Around 15km out of town, you can get superb, home-style cooking and ambitious set menus (€25 to €40) at this rustic restaurant. Take the SS439 road south, heading towards Pomarance. About 3km beyond Saline di Volterra you enter San Lorenzo; the osteria is the highlight of this tiny, blink-and-you'll-miss-it village. They have a few rooms (singles/doubles €35/60, includes breakfast) if you're too bloated to drive back to Volterra.

Trattoria il Poggio (☎ 0588 8 52 57; Via Porta all'Arco 7; meals €28; 🍷 Wed-Mon) A popular restaurant where the cheery waitresses bustle around and find time to chat with the regulars between dashes to the electric dumbwaiter raising food from the subterranean kitchen. There's a good set menu, an outdoor terrace and rich dishes such as scampi and rocket, or ravioli

with asparagus and ham in a parmesan cream sauce.

Trattoria del Sacco Fiorentino (☎ 0588 8 85 37; Piazza XX Settembre 18; meals €28-32, menù degustazione €23-30; 🍷 Thu-Tue) A great little vaulted trattoria that serves up imaginative dishes with a happy selection of local wines. Try the *piccione al vino santo e radicchio rosso* (pigeon baked with red radicchio and holy wine) or the mouthwatering gnocchi with baby veg.

Osteria dei Poeti (☎ 0588 8 60 29; Via Giacomo Matteotti 55; meals €30, tourist menus €12; 🍷 Fri-Wed) Get here right at midday, before the business lunchers fill the last seat. Equally hectic at dinner, typical Tuscan fare is served to a backdrop of pleasing mellow brickwork and golden arches. The *antipasto del poeta*, a rich assortment of canapés, cheeses and cold cuts, is an unexpected delight, and the veal is a juicy good value. Wine pours are generous, possibly to dull the sting of the frosty service.

ourpick Ristorante Don Beta (☎ 0588 8 67 30; Via Giacomo Matteotti 39; meals €30-35, menus €13-18; 🍷 closed Mon Oct-Apr) With four truffle-based *primi piatti*, and five *secondi* enhanced by their fragrance, this is the place to sample the prized fungus, which abounds – in so far as it abounds anywhere – in the woods around Volterra. Do check on the prices first, though they are generally reasonable. Alternatively, choose the local *ciandoli alle noci*, little, spring-shaped whorls of curly pasta in a walnut sauce.

Drinking

Web & Wine (☎ 0588 8 15 31; Via Porta all'Arco 11-13; 🍷 8.30am-1am Mar-Jan, closed Thu) This is one of those splendid places that defy guidebook characterisation. It's at once internet point (web access per hour €4), a stylish *enoteca* (with a good selection of tipples), a snack stop and a hip designer café (it's not every day you step across a glass floor, revealing under-lit Etruscan remains and a 5m-deep Renaissance grain silo). Surf your way through a creamy cappuccino while checking your in-box.

Quovadis (☎ 0588 8 00 33; Via Lungo Le Mura del Mandorlo 18) If you can't survive without a shot of the dark nectar, this is the only place for miles around where you can get draught Guinness (pint €5). The garden is pleasant on hot summer nights and rumour has it there's even an Irish owner somewhere in the background.

Getting There & Away

The tourist office carries bus and train timetables.

BUS

The bus terminal is on Piazza Martiri della Libertà. **CPT** (☎ 0588 8 61 86) buses connect the town with Saline (€1.70, 20 minutes, frequent) and its train station. From Saline, 9km southwest, there are bus connections for Pisa (direct €4.80, two hours, or change at Pontedera €3.35) and Cecina (€3.35), to where there's also a train link. Buy tickets in the *tabacchi* shops, as buying on the bus is more expensive.

For San Gimignano (€4.35, 1½ hours), Siena (€4.50, 1½ hours) and Florence (€7, two hours), change at Colle di Val d'Elsa (€2.40, 50 minutes), to where there are four runs daily from Volterra, except on Sunday. The rare, direct run to Florence from Volterra is €7.10.

Other buses head south in the direction of Massa Marittima but only go as far as Pomarance (€2.30, 12 daily) and Castelnuovo di Valle di Cecina (€3.40, 10 daily).

CAR & MOTORCYCLE

By car, take the SS68, which runs between Cecina and Colle di Val d'Elsa. A couple of back routes to San Gimignano are signposted north off the SS68.

Driving and parking inside the walled town are more or less prohibited. Park in one of the designated parking areas around the circumference, most of which are free. There's a four-level paying underground car park beneath Piazza Martiri della Libertà.

TRAIN

From the small train station in Saline, you can catch a train to Cecina on the coast and change to the Rome-Pisa line.

SOUTH OF VOLTEIRA

If you have a car and want to head for Massa Marittima (a worthwhile objective – see p282), the ride south from Volterra is very scenic.

The SS68 drops away to the southwest from Volterra towards Cecina. At Saline di Volterra, the SS439 intersects the SS68 on its way from Lucca, south towards Massa Marittima. **Saline di Volterra** takes its name from the nearby salt mines; a source of wealth in the 19th century.

The lunar-landscape ride south passes through **Pomarance**, an industrial town. To the south, take the hilly road for **Larderello**, Italy's most important boric acid producer. The road out of here winds its way south to Massa.

SOUTH OF SIENA

You may already have had a taste of the gentle, seductively undulating countryside of Le Crete. For a while, similar countryside persists as you roam south amid the classic Tuscan landscape of rolling hills of hay topped with a huddle of cypress trees. Gradually the landscape gives way to more unruly territory. This part of the province offers everything: the haughty hill-top medieval wine centres of Montalcino and Montepulciano; hot sulphurous baths in spa towns such as Bagno Vignoni; the Romanesque splendour of the Abbazia di Sant'Antimo; and the Renaissance grace of Pienza, an early example of idealised town planning.

Montalcino

pop 5100

Formerly known as 'the Republic of Siena in Montalcino', the last wily holdout against Florence, even after Siena had fallen, these days Montalcino is a retiring hill town overlooking the Orcia valley. While this is a perfectly nice place to wander and bulk up your calf muscles while climbing inhumanly steep 'streets', the real attraction is its internationally coveted wine, Brunello (see the boxed text, p258). You can also savour unpedigreed, more modest but very palatable local reds such as Rosso di Montalcino.

Plenty of *enoteche* around town allow you to taste and buy Brunello (a bottle costs a minimum of €20; we did say it was special!) and restaurant servers will impudently assume you mean Brunello when you ask for a 'glass of red', because why else would you be in Montalcino? Glasses start at €5, while a bottle from an excellent year comes with a price tag of well over the €105 mark. Beware rash, dismissive ordering of any Brunello; a bottle from the 1940s (€5000) will double the price of your month in Tuscany with the pop of a cork. There's no need to labour over prices however, as all Brunello is made to strict standards and any bottle will invariably be memorable.

INFORMATION

Essepi Informatica (☎ 0577 84 61 05; Via Mazzini 30; per hr €6) Head here for internet access.

Tourist office (☎ 0577 84 93 31; www.prolocomontalcino.it in Italian; Costa del Municipio 1; ☎ 10am-1pm & 2-5.40pm)

SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES

If you purchase a combined ticket (€6), it will give you entry to Montalcino's principal sights, the *fortezza* and the Museo Civico e Diocesano d'Arte Sacra.

The **fortezza** (☎ 0577 84 92 11; Piazzale Fortezza; courtyard free, ramparts adult/child €3.50/1.50; ☎ 9am-8pm Apr-Oct, 10am-6pm Nov-Mar), an imposing 14th-century fortress that was later expanded under the Medici dukes, dominates the town from a high point at its southern end. You can sample and buy local wines in the *enoteca* (p268) inside and also climb up to the fort's ramparts (though the view is almost as magnificent from the courtyard). Buy a ticket at the bar.

The **Museo Civico e Diocesano d'Arte Sacra** (☎ 0577 84 60 14; Via Ricasoli 31; adult/child €4.50/3; ☎ 10am-1pm & 2-5.50pm Tue-Sun), in the former convent of the neighbouring **Chiesa di Sant'Agostino**, contains an important collection of religious art from the town and surrounding region. Jewels include a triptych by Duccio di Buoninsegna and a *Madonna with Child* by Simone Martini. Other artists represented include the Lorenzetti brothers, Giovanni di Paolo and Sano di Pietro and the museum has a fine collection of painted wooden sculptures by the Siennese school.

The **cathedral**, alas, is an ugly 19th-century neoclassical travesty of what was once a fine Romanesque church.

If you want to visit **vineyards** in the Montalcino area, the tourist office can provide you with a list of 183 producers (many smaller ones have little more than a hectare or two of land). It can also advise on which vineyards are open to the public and those that have an English speaker to help you.

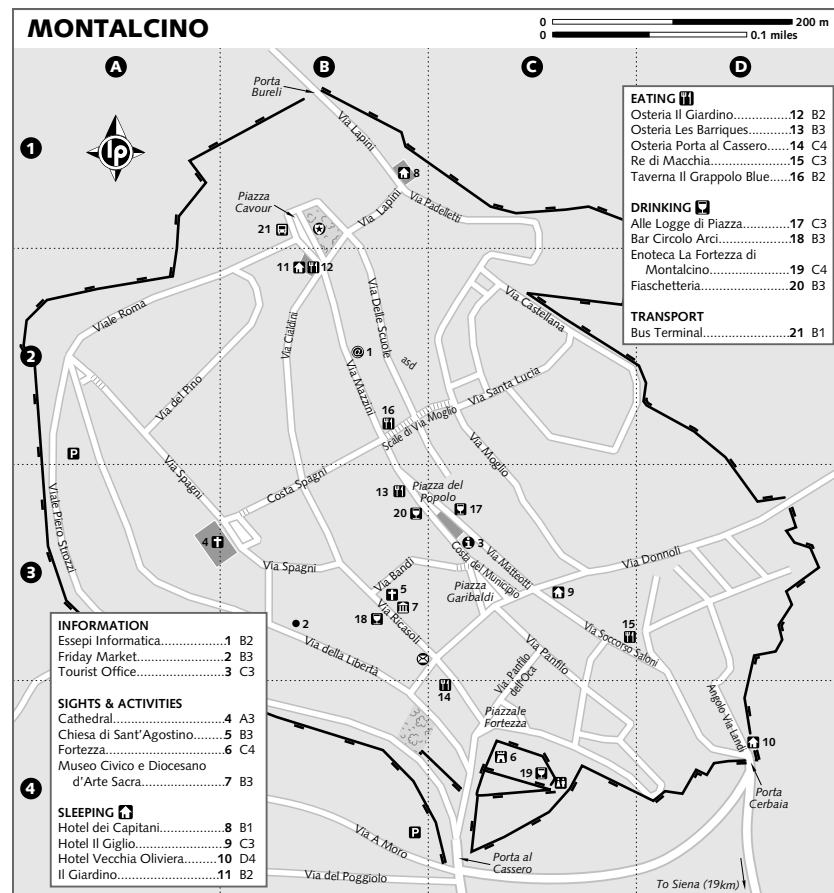
If you're a jazz-loving oenophile, you'll savour the annual **Jazz & Wine festival**, held in the second and third weeks of July and attracting national and international acts.

There's a vigorous **Friday market** on and around Via della Libertà.

SLEEPING

Both Il Giardino and Il Giglio have restaurants that are well worth a visit.

Il Giardino (☎/fax 0577 84 82 57; Piazza Cavour 4; s €40-53, d €53) An excellent-value, family-run,



friendly, two-star hotel overlooking Piazza Cavour.

Hotel Il Giglio (☎ 0577 84 81 67; www.gigliohotel.com; Via Lapini 6; s/d/tr €70/100/115, annexe s/d €50/70, apt 2-4 people €90-110; P) Montalcino's oldest hotel, recently and substantially renovated, is another family concern. Rooms have comfortable wrought-iron beds – each gilded with a painted *giglio* (lily) – and all doubles have panoramic views. Il Giglio also has a small annexe just up the street and a couple of apartments. Room 1 has an enormous terrace that comes at no extra cost.

Hotel dei Capitani (☎ 0577 84 72 27; www.deicapitani.it; Via Lapini 6; s/d incl breakfast €100/115; ☎ P) Set in a 15th-century building, rooms vary greatly, ranging from superspacious to small with a

view, so take a look first. There's a pretty terrace with a pool to splash around in.

Hotel Vecchia Oliviera (☎ 0577 84 60 28; www.vecchiaoliviera.com; Angolo Via Landi 1; d incl breakfast €150-175; P) Just beside the Porta Cerbaia, this is a former olive mill, tastefully restored with earthy colours and terracotta tiles. Tranquil – it's at the very limit of the town – each of its rooms is individually decorated. The back patio has stunning views. Wi-fi costs extra.

EATING

Osteria Porta al Cassero (☎ 0577 84 71 96; Via Ricasoli 32; meals €24; ☎ Thu-Tue) A simple place selling hearty peasant-style fare such as bean and vegetable soup, and Tuscan pork sausage with white beans.

JENA PATTERSON

Born and raised abroad, American Jena Patterson has made Montalcino, home since 2001. A impassioned Brunello educator/promoter, she has worked for producer Ciacchi Piccolomini d'Aragona, wine shop Enoteca La Fortezza and is currently with wine estate Poggio Antico.

How long have you been living in Italy and why Montalcino? I had been working in the restaurant business in New York and realised that it was the wine part of my job that really excited me. On a vacation with my sisters to Tuscany we had planned to visit great wine country but were torn between the Vino Nobile di Montepulciano and the Brunello di Montalcino. In the end, having met a Montalcino producer at a wine tasting at the restaurant, I came to visit his estate and was offered a job.

Where did you come from and was the transition to Italy difficult? While I am American by passport, I was born and raised overseas due to my father's work. I consider New York City my 'home back home' as it's where I lived last and where I still have family. My love affair with this place has endured many things including cultural blunders and professional mishaps due to having been raised with a different set of standards and values. The inequality of the sexes both in the workplace and at home perseveres in this remote part of Tuscany. The first two years were particularly trying because of difficulties with the language, which at best was very good for a tourist but not for a working professional.

How much wine do you drink in an average week? Be honest. First, we must distinguish between tasting wine for work (spitting it out) and drinking wine for pleasure. In an average work day I taste/spit about a glass worth of various wines. In an average week of dining with friends, 90% of whom are in the wine business, I probably drink about two to three bottles of wine. One thing's for sure though, for me and many in this profession, after a long day of tastings and talking about wine all you really want is a nice cold beer.

How do you respond to people who say 'Wow, you're living my dream!' My answer is this: be careful about moving to your paradise. Once you do, it will no longer be your paradise. It can certainly be an improvement on your quality of life for the natural beauty, art, food, wine, the space and atmosphere for cultivating close relationships...the general rhythm of the Italian way of life. It's a wonderful place to live, it's home, but unless you have some place to go back to, Tuscany will no longer be your getaway.

Florence or Siena? Grosseto! OK, it might lack culturally compared to the art centres of Tuscany but it's got better shopping for my budget and it's less touristy.

What single word best describes the Tuscan lifestyle? Passion.

Our pick Taverna Il Grappolo Blu (☎ 0577 84 71 50; Scale di Via Moglio 1; meals €28) Does ingenious things with local ingredients – try the juicy *coniglio al Brunello* (rabbit cooked in Brunello wine). We did. And we still remember that evening fondly. Non-Brunello-enriched options are scant – which may be local law – so save your server the disquiet and just stick with the theme.

Osteria Il Giardino (☎ 0577 84 90 76; Piazza Cavour 1; meals €30; ☹ closed Wed) All light wood and arches, this place has a good selection of traditional dishes, including *risotto al radicchio rosso*, *Brunello e pecorino* (risotto with red chicory, Brunello wine and pecorino cheese) and wild boar.

Osteria Les Barriques (☎ 0577 84 84 11; Piazza del Popolo 20-22; meals €30-34) Beyond the impulse-buy *enoteca*, lined floor to ceiling with a dizzying selection of bottles, is a newly minted, full

restaurant. If you don't fancy a full meal, the menu includes bruschetta, *crostini* (toasted bread brushed with olive oil) and at least five different salads.

Re di Macchia (☎ 0577 84 61 16; Via Soccorso Saloni 21; meals €32, menus €19; ☹ Fri-Wed) This is a very agreeable small restaurant run by an enterprising young couple. Roberta selects the freshest of ingredients and the wine cellar is impressive; to sample a variety, try Antonio's personal selection of four wines (€15), each to accompany a course.

DRINKING

We make no apologies for the disproportionate number of recommended drinking dens in this very wine-oriented town!

Enoteca La Fortezza di Montalcino (☎ 0577 84 92 11; Piazzale Fortezza; wine by the glass from €4) Within the

fort itself, this *enoteca* is perfect for trying out one of countless varieties of Brunello, buying a bottle and/or climbing up onto the ramparts. It also puts on informal tastings, accompanied by delectable nibbles.

Fiascherteria (Piazza del Popolo 6) A fine tiled old café full of crusty locals, this is the perfect place for putting the world to rights over a bottle of wine.

Alle Logge di Piazza (Piazza del Popolo 1; ☹ closed Wed Sep-Mar & all Jan) Across the square, this is brighter and more consciously modern. Wine selection changes constantly, while the light menu doesn't. Staff shake cocktails something fierce; the choice is almost as long as the wine list. Happy hour is 7pm to 9pm.

Bar Circolo Arci (Via Ricasoli 2) Defying the local *enoteche* trend, this is a run-of-the-mill bar, complete with pool table, where local pensioners play cards and shamelessly flirt with the lovely staff. Housed within 16th-century Palazzo Pieri, it has a lovely cobbled courtyard.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

The **bus terminal** is on Piazza Cavour. Regular Tra-in buses run to/from Siena (€3.20, 1½ hours, six daily).

Abbazia di Sant'Antimo

This beautiful isolated Romanesque church (☎ 0577 83 56 59; admission free; ☹ 10.30am-12.30pm & 3-6.30pm Mon-Sat, 9am-10.30am & 3-6pm Sun) is best visited in the morning, when the sun, streaming through the east windows, creates an almost surreal atmosphere. At night too, it's impressive, lit up like a beacon. Set in a broad valley, just below the village of **Castelnuovo dell'Abate**, its architecture is clearly influenced by northern European versions of Romanesque architecture, especially that of the Cistercians.

Tradition tells that Charlemagne founded the original monastery here in 781. In subsequent centuries, the Benedictine monks became among the most powerful feudal landlords in southern Tuscany, until they came into conflict with Siena in the 13th century. Until the mid-1990s, the church and abbey lay pretty much abandoned. Then a body of monks moved in and supervised restoration work. There are regular daily prayers and Mass in the church, which are open to the public. This is a worthwhile exercise as the monks sing Gregorian chants. If you can't make it, they can sell you the CD.

The exterior, built in pale travertine stone, is simple but for the stone carvings, which include various fantastical animals, set in the bell tower and apsidal chapels. Inside study the capitals of the columns lining the nave, especially the one representing Daniel in the lion's den (second on the right as you enter). Below it is a particularly intense polychrome 13th-century Madonna and Child and there's a haunting 12th-century Christ on the Cross above the main altar.

Concerts are sometimes held here as part of Siena's Estate Musicale Chigiana (see p246).

Locanda Sant'Antimo (☎ 0577 83 56 15; www.locandasantantimo.it; Via Bassomondo 8; meals €14-18), less than 1km away at Castelnuovo dell'Abate, serves solid traditional cooking. A three-course, fixed menu with wine and coffee is a mere €15. Should you wish to catch the early morning light over the abbey, there are four rooms (single/double €50/70).

Agriturismo Aiole (☎ 0577 88 74 54; www.agriturismo-aiole.com; Strada Provinciale 22 della Grossola; d/tr incl breakfast €70/90; ☹), 8km southeast of the abbey and 900m down a signed dirt road, is a fabulous place to stop for one day – or five. Family-friendly, it's in a restored 19th-century farmhouse with knockout views, a pool and a children's playground. There's a kitchen available for groups or save yourself the bother and enjoy your hostess's dinner (€25, reserve in advance).

Three buses a day run from Montalcino (€1.20) to Castelnuovo dell'Abate, from where it's a short walk to the church.

You may want to consider an alternative lunch or dinner excursion west from Castelnuovo dell'Abate along a dirt road to **Sant'Angelo in Colle**. The views from the village are wonderful. You can eat excellent home-cooked food at **Trattoria Il Pozzo** (☎ 0577 84 40 15; meals €22), in the middle of Sant'Angelo, just off the square.

San Quirico d'Orcia

Fortified. Compact. Medieval. San Quirico has the usual Tuscan adjectives and few singular attractions, unless a tranquil, good-value stopover sounds attractive, in which case you've got yourself a winner. A one-time pilgrim pitstop on the Via Francigena, it's now an atypical stopover, just off the SS2 at a crossroads between Montalcino and Pienza. Its Romanesque **Collegiata** is notable for its unusual three doorways, decorated with

bizarre stone carvings. Inside is a triptych by Sano di Pietro.

Just off Piazza della Libertà, the main square, the **Horti Leononi** are lovely formal Italian Renaissance gardens with clipped and cropped geometrical boxwood hedges.

The **tourist office** (☎ 0577 89 72 11; www.comune.sanquirico.it in Italian; Via Dante Alighieri 33a; ☹ 10am-1pm & 3-6pm Mon-Fri, 10am-1pm & 2-5pm Sat & Sun Easter-Dec) also acts as the information office for the Parco Artistico Naturale e Culturale della Val d'Orcia.

The harmonious Val d'Orcia, a land of flat, chalky plains and gentle conical hills, is the latest Italian area to be declared a Unesco World Heritage Site. The equally recent **Parco Artistico Naturale e Culturale della Val d'Orcia** (www.parcodellavalldorcias.com), with its headquarters located in San Quirico d'Orcia, protects this legacy.

Affittacamere L'Orcia (☎ 0577 89 76 77; Via Dante Alighieri 49; s/d €30/50), right in the centre of town, has a pleasantly old-fashioned Spartan feel about it, complete with drapes and religious pictures. In this case, no-frills also means no one in reception. Call ahead to arrange your arrival.

Alternatively, you can do all-frills for a comparative bargain at **Palazzo del Capitano** (☎ 0577 89 90 28; www.palazzodelcapitano.com; Via Poliziano 18; d incl breakfast €120-230; ☐ ☹ ☎), in a beautifully restored army captain's home, dating from 1400. All rooms are classically and individually decorated and the huge garden invites sustained repose.

Trattoria Al Vecchio Forno (☎ 0577 89 73 80; Via Piazzola 8; meals €30; ☹ Thu-Tue) is a sister venture of Palazzo del Capitano, with equal attention to quality. Enjoy the intimate dining room with its mellow brick arches or savour the lovely mature garden. Famed for its roasts and grills, it also simmers a mean *pollo al Brunello* (chicken in a Brunello wine sauce). Just order the bottle, their glass pours are light.

REMOTENESS HAS ITS PRIVILEGES

our pick **Le Case** (☎ 0577 88 89 83; www.agri.turismolecase.com; Strada Provinciale 323; s/d/tr incl breakfast €40/70/80) Just 1km south of Castiglione d'Orcia, this is one of the best-value *agriturismi* we've seen. See our special *agriturismi* section for more detail (p311).

Inside **Bar Centrale** (Piazza della Libertà 6) the local menfolk play cards and knock back grappa, while the outside terrace is more popular with the younger ice-cream-and-cola set.

There's a magnificent small **cheese shop** (Via Dante Alighieri 113b), an outlet for the Fattoria Pianporcino cheesemakers, where you can pick up the renowned *pecorino di Pienza* and other richly aromaed delights.

Bagno Vignoni

About 5km from San Quirico along the SS2 towards Rome, this tiny spa town dates back to Roman times and was later a popular overnight stop for pilgrims eager to soothe weary limbs. The hot sulphurous water bubbles up into a picturesque pool, built by the Medici and surrounded by mellow stone buildings. Some 36 springs cook at up to 51°C and collect in the pool, although in winter the water is considerably cooler.

You can't dunk yourself in the pool. To take to the waters, dive into nearby Hotel Postia Marcucci's open-air **Piscina Val di Sole** (day ticket adult/child €12/8).

You can dip your fingers into the hot-water streams trickling through **Il Parco dei Mulini di Bagno Vignoni**, just above the entrance to the hotel, and read at length about how the two vast cubs hewn into the rock were once holding tanks for water-driven windmills below.

Albergo Le Terme (☎ 0577 88 71 50; www.albergo.letterme.it; s/d €68/116; ☹ closed Dec; ☐ ☹ ☎) is sumptuous, with lots of shiny wood and plush fabrics. This 15th-century building (the top floors were added in the mid-20th century) was built by Rossellino for Pope Pius II, who used it as a summerhouse. Ask for a room at the front with views of the pool. Meals at their new restaurant are €25.

Osteria del Leone (☎ 0577 88 73 00; Piazza del Moretto 28; meals €29; ☹ Tue-Sun) is a pleasantly lit rustic building with a heavy-beamed ceiling, back a block from the pool. You can eat solid Tuscan country fare, such as *coniglio con pere e mandorle tostate* (rabbit cooked with pears and almonds).

Bagni San Filippo

Those who prefer free hot-water frolics could press on about 15km south along the SS2 to Bagni San Filippo. Just uphill from Hotel le Terme, the village's only hotel, follow a sign, 'Fosso Bianco', down a lane for about 150m

THE NOTORIOUS P-I-U-S

Let's be honest, there's been a lot of popes over time and not all of them have been newsworthy, or even popeworthy for that matter. Pope Pius II (1405-64) was both. Born Enea Silvio Piccolomini, the man was everywhere, evidenced by how many times we drop his name in this chapter alone. He was a tireless traveller, writer of erotic and comic stories, poet laureate, diplomat, bishop, exhaustive autobiographer (13 volumes!) and medieval urban-planning trend-setter. And most of that occurred before he was even pope! His early 'faults' in life being no secret, that he redressed his motivations and developed into such a distinguished and likable leader is particularly estimable. Noted above all for being 'human', an elusive papacy trait apparently, he's also remembered for his tireless diplomacy, even in the face of uncooperative leaders and insurmountable odds.

to a bridge and a set of hot tumbling **cascaades** where you can enjoy a relaxing soak. It's a pleasant if slightly whiffy spot for a picnic – and best in winter, when the hotel's closed and the water pressure greater.

Pienza

pop 2230

If the primary road to Montepulciano didn't pass right through town, little Pienza might not inspire people to take their foot off the accelerator. Fortunately it does, so pull over and take a few hours to absorb its few, but compelling attractions. Or stay longer and benefit from its great-value food and accommodation. Self-caterers will love (or loathe) that virtually all shops here are geared towards connoisseurs – cheese, meats and preserves are top choice and top price.

Urban-planning geeks will get a wicked buzz from Pienza's Renaissance town blueprint, instigated by Pope Pius II in an effort to jazz up his birthplace. He secured the services of architect Bernardo Rossellino, who applied the principles of his mentor, Leon Battista Alberti. The result was the superb Piazza Pio II and the surrounding buildings.

INFORMATION

Internet Café (Via della Balzello 2; per hr €5; ☹ 9am-12.30pm & 2.30-7pm) Has internet points and wi-fi.

Tourist office (☎ 0578 74 99 05; Corso Il Rossellino; ☹ 10am-1pm & 3-7pm) Within the Museo Diocesano.

SIGHTS

Stand in Piazza Pio II and spin 360 degrees. You have just taken in Pienza's major monuments. Gems of the Renaissance and all constructed in a mere three years between 1459 and 1462, they're all grouped around Piazza Pio II.

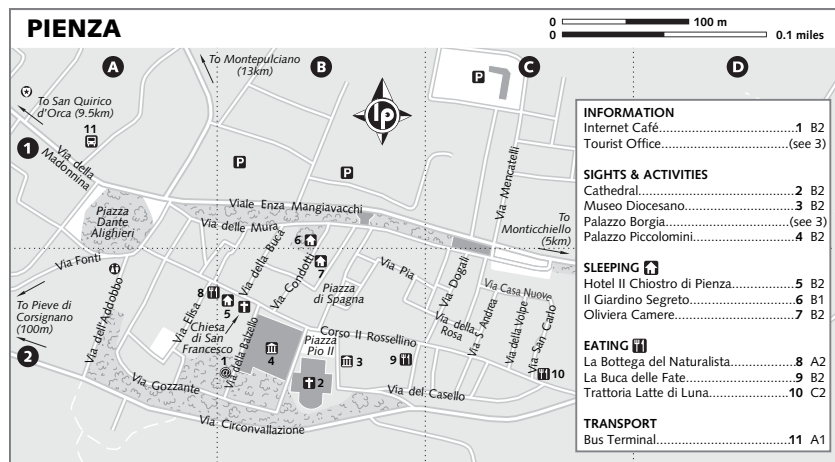
The square was designed by Bernardo Rossellino, who left nothing to chance. The space available to him was limited so, to increase the sense of perspective and dignity of the great edifices that would grace the square, he set the Palazzo Borgia and Palazzo Piccolomini off at angles to the cathedral.

The **cathedral** (☹ 8.30am-1pm & 2.15-7pm) was built on the site of the Romanesque Chiesa di Santa Maria, of which little remains. The Renaissance façade, in travertine stone, is of clear Albertian inspiration.

The interior of the building, a strange mix of Gothic and Renaissance, contains a collection of five altarpieces painted by Siennese artists of the period, as well as a superb marble tabernacle by Rossellino. The papal bull of 1462 forbade any changes to the church, so revel in the thought that views are virtually the same now as they were for visitors in the Middle Ages.

Perhaps the most bizarre aspect of the building is the state of collapse of the transept and apse. Built on dodgy ground, the top end of the church seems to be breaking off. The huge cracks in the wall and floor are matched by the crazy downwards slant of this part of the church floor. Various attempts to prop it all up have failed to solve the problem, as is quite clear from the major cracking in the walls and floor.

The **Palazzo Piccolomini** (☎ 0578 74 85 03; adult/child 30-min guided tour €7/5; ☹ 10am-12.30pm & 3-6pm Tue-Sun), to your right as you face the cathedral, was the pope's residence and is considered Rossellino's masterpiece. Built on the site of former Piccolomini family houses, the building demonstrates some indebtedness on Rossellino's part to Alberti, whose Palazzo Rucellai in Florence it appears in part to emulate.



Inside is a fine courtyard, from where stairs lead you up into the papal apartments, now filled with an assortment of period furnishings, minor art and the like. To the rear, a three-level loggia offers a spectacular panorama over the Val d'Orcia below.

To the left of the cathedral is the **Palazzo Borgia** (also known as Palazzo Vescovile), built by Cardinal Borgia, later Pope Alexander VI, and containing the **Museo Diocesano** (☎ 0578 74 99 05; Corso Il Rossellino 30; adult/child €4.10/2.60; ☎ 10am-1pm & 3-7pm Wed-Mon mid-Mar-Oct, Sat & Sun only Nov-mid-Mar), which has an intriguing miscellany of artworks, illuminated manuscripts, tapestries and miniatures.

Make time to visit the Romanesque **Pieve di Corsignano**, leaving Pienza by taking Via Fonti from Piazza Dante Alighieri. This church dates from the 10th century and boasts a strange circular bell tower. There are no fixed visiting times but it is usually open between Easter and November.

SLEEPING & EATING

Oliviera Camere (☎ 0578 74 82 74, 338 952 04 59; www.nautilus-mp.com/oliviera; Via Condotti 4b; s/d incl breakfast €30/50, apt without breakfast d/q €60/70) Once an olive oil mill and squeezed into a side street, this place represents excellent value. Its four rooms are simple, but fresh and attractive. There are also three larger studio apartments.

Il Giardino Segreto (☎ 0578 60 44 52; www.ilgiardinossegreto.toscana.nu; Via Condotti 13; d €62, apt €67-115, all incl breakfast) Across the road and a slight step up in quality, the collection of quiet doubles

and apartments here have the added perk of a lovely, enclosed garden.

Hotel Il Chiostro di Pienza (☎ 0578 74 84 00; www.relaisilchiostrodipienza.com; Corso Il Rossellino 26; r incl breakfast €160-290; ☎ closed Jan-mid-Mar; ☎) Come here to wallow in luxury – and history; it occupies the former convent and cloister of the adjacent Chiesa di San Francesco. The décor is refreshingly unfussy and the manicured gardens have views and definite romantic appeal. Access to internet points and wi-fi (common areas only) included.

La Buca delle Fate (☎ 0578 74 82 72; Corso Il Rossellino 38a; meals €20; ☎ closed Mon & 15-30 Jun) Despite its dress-for-dinner appearance, this eatery is one for euro-economisers. There are no surprises on the tiny menu but the standard is high for the price. Save room for the desert trolley.

Trattoria Latte di Luna (☎ 0578 74 86 06; Via San Carlo 6; meals €25; ☎ Wed-Mon) On a kind of square where the street splits off from Corso Il Rossellino, this trattoria has a lovely terrace with plenty of shady umbrellas and a flirtatious, talking bird providing comic relief. Try the *anatra arrosto alle olive* (roast duck with olives) topped off with homemade hazelnut ice cream.

Bottega del Naturalista (Corso Il Rossellino 16) Almost a monument in its own right, this pungent *bottega* has a truly mouthwatering choice of cheeses, from fresh to well-aged and smelly, from the classic *pecorino di Pienza* to ones lightly infused with peppers or truffles.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Up to six buses run on weekdays between Siena and Pienza (€3.50, 1¼ hours) and nine to/from Montepulciano. The bus terminal is just off Piazza Dante Alighieri. Buy tickets at the nearby bar.

Montepulciano pop 14,100

After a day of walking through Montepulciano, you'll acquire a newfound appreciation for the term 'hotel restaurant', as any other option will mean climbing another hill. This reclaimed narrow ridge of volcanic rock will push your quadriceps to the failure-point. When it happens, collapse against a centuries-old stone wall, drink in the views over the Valdichiana countryside, then fall into the nearest cantina and treat yourself to a generous pour of the highly reputed *Vino Nobile*.

A late-Etruscan fort was the first in a series of settlements here. During the Middle Ages, it was a constant bone of contention between Florence and Siena, until in 1404 Florence won the day. And so the Marzocco, or lion of Florence, came to replace the she-wolf of Siena as the city's symbol, atop a column just off Piazza Savonarola. The new administration introduced a fresh architectural style as Michelozzo, Sangallo il Vecchio and others were invited in to do some innovative spring cleaning, imparting a fresh wind of Renaissance vigour to this Gothic stronghold. That intriguing mix alone makes this town worth the sustained leg cramps.

ORIENTATION

The town sheers off to left and right from the main street, which rises equally steeply

DETOUR: MONTICCHIELLO

From Pienza main junction (northern gate) take the minor road south out of town signposted to San Lorenzo Nuovo and Monticchiello. Follow this road as it wiggles through green valleys and farmland. At 6.2km, just after you cross a small bridge, take the left turn signposted to Monticchiello. At the 11km junction, turn right and continue for 500m until you reach the car park.

Don the best arch-support at your disposal and take an hour to wander around this pretty medieval village, stopping for an ice cream at Bar La Guardiola just outside the main gate or, better yet, a memorable meal at **Ristorante La Porta** (☎ 0578 75 51 63; www.osterialaporta.it; Via del Piano 3; meals €30) on its terrace with unspeakable views of Val d'Orcia.

Monticchiello is home to the internationally celebrated **Teatro Povero** (Poor Theatre; www.teatropovero.it), staging plays spotlighting the area's peasant, sharecropping history. It also has a wonderfully sophisticated interactive theatre museum.

When you leave, turn left and follow the signs to Montepulciano.

southwards from Porta al Prato to the Piazza Grande and fortress beyond. The 750m walk may leave you breathless but, bordered by the town's finest buildings, it's well worth the exercise.

INFORMATION

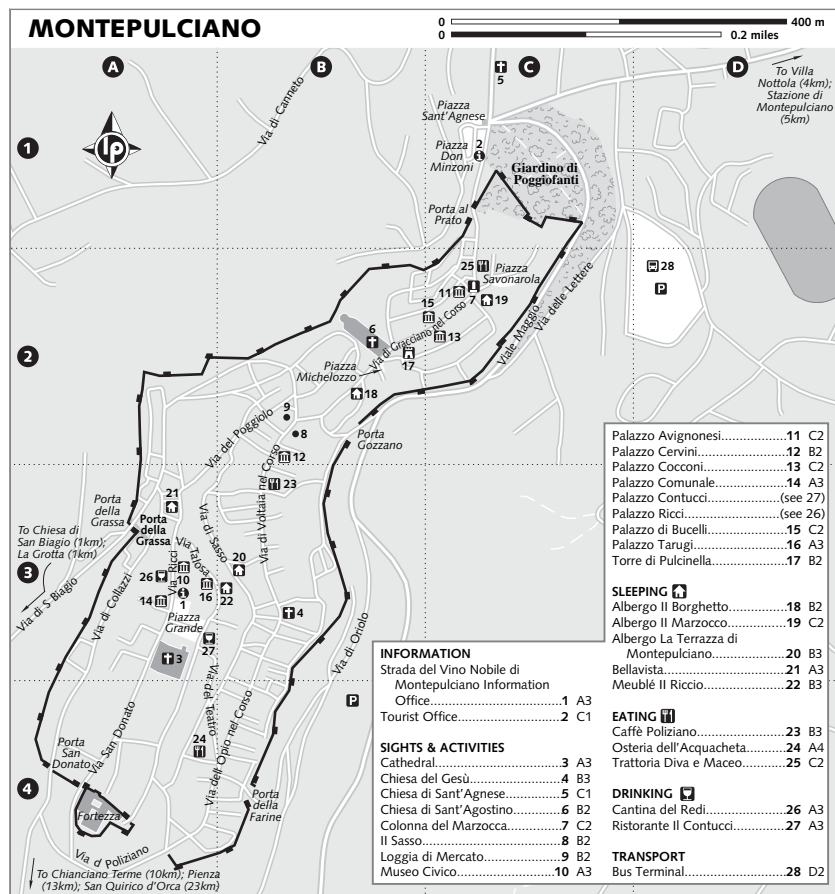
Strada del Vino Nobile di Montepulciano Information Office (☎ 0578 71 74 84; www.stradavinonobile.it; Piazza Grande 7; ☎ 10am-1pm & 3-7pm Mon-Sat) Can book accommodation. Among other activities, it arranges cooking courses, slow food tours, wine tastings, bike rentals and unstrenuous country walks, culminating in lunch. **Tourist office** (☎ 0578 75 73 41; www.prolocomontepulciano.it; Piazza Don Minzoni; ☎ 9.30am-12.30pm & 3-7pm Easter-Jul, Sep & Oct, 9.30am-8pm Aug, 9.30am-12.30pm Mon-Sat & 3-6pm Sun Nov-Easter) This large and friendly resource can reserve accommodation without charge. It has internet points (per hour €3.50), sells local bus and train tickets, and rents bikes and scooters.

SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES

Most of the main sights are clustered around Piazza Grande, although the town's streets harbour a wealth of palazzi, fine buildings and churches.

The **Chiesa di Sant'Agnese**, with its beelike banding around the façade, lies just outside the city walls. The original church was built in the early 14th century but this version was the result of a remake by Antonio da Sangallo il Vecchio in 1511. He may also have restructured the medieval gate leading into the city proper, the **Porta al Prato**.

From the gate, walk southwards along Via di Gracciano nel Corso. At the upper end of Piazza Savonarola is the **Colonna del Marzocco**, erected in 1511 to confirm Montepulciano's allegiance to Florence. The splendid stone



lion, squat as a pussycat atop this column is, in fact, a copy; the original is in the town's Museo Civico.

The late-Renaissance **Palazzo Avignonesi** by Giacomo da Vignola is at No 91. Several mansions line Via di Gracciano nel Corso, including the **Palazzo di Bucelli** at No 73, the lower courses of whose façade are recycled Etruscan and Latin inscriptions and reliefs. Sangallo also designed **Palazzo Cocconi** at No 70.

Continuing up Via di Gracciano nel Corso, you'll find Michelozzo's **Chiesa di Sant'Agostino** (Piazza Michelozzo; ☎ 9am-noon & 3-6pm) with its lunette above the entrance holding a terracotta Madonna and Child, John the Baptist and St Augustine. Opposite, **Torre di Pulcinella**, a medieval tower house, is topped by the town clock

and the hunched figure of Pulcinella (Punch of Punch and Judy fame), which strikes the hours.

Keep ascending the hill and turn right at the **Loggia di Mercato**, first left into Via del Poggio, then left again into Via Ricci. In the Renaissance **Palazzo Ricci** is Cantina del Redi (p276), a cavernous warren of ancient wine cellars that you can wander through, ending up at the wine-tasting room and shop.

The town's **Museo Civico** (☎ 0578 71 73 00; Via Ricci 10; adult/child €4.15/2.60; ☎ 10am-7pm Tue-Sun Aug, 10am-1pm & 3-6pm Tue-Sun Sep-Jul) is opposite in the Gothic Palazzo Neri-Orselli. The small collection features terracotta reliefs by the della Robbia family and some Gothic and Renaissance paintings.

Overlooking Piazza Grande, the town's highest point, is the **Palazzo Comunale** (admission free; ☎ 9am-1.30pm Mon-Sat). Built in the 13th-century Gothic style and remodelled in the 15th century by Michelozzo, it still functions as the town hall. From the top of its **tower** (entry on 2nd fl; admission €1.60; ☎ Apr-Oct) on a clear day, you can see as far as the Monti Sibillini to the east and the Gran Sasso to the southeast.

Opposite is the **Palazzo Contucci**, and its extensive wine cellar, Ristorante Il Contucci, open for visiting and sampling (see p276).

Palazzo Tarugi, attributed to Giacomo da Vignola, is beside a well, surmounted by a particularly genial pair of lions.

The beautiful 16th-century **cathedral** (Piazza Grande; ☎ 9am-noon & 4-6pm) has an unfinished façade. Above the high altar is a lovely triptych by Taddeo da Bartolo depicting the Assumption.

If you take the low road from Piazza Michelozzi and follow Via di Voltaia nel Corso, you pass first, on your left at No 21, the Renaissance **Palazzo Cervini**, built for Cardinal Marcello Cervini, the future Pope Marcellus II. The unusual U-shape at the front – most palazzi have austere, straight fronts – also incorporates a courtyard into the façade design and appears to have been another Sangallo creation. A few blocks further along on the left, is the **Chiesa del Gesù**, bleak brick outside and elaborately Baroque within.

To the west and prominent in the valley below is domed **Chiesa di San Biagio** (Via di San Biagio; ☎ 9am-12.30pm & 3-7pm, to 6pm winter), a fine Renaissance church built by Antonio da Sangallo the Elder which was undergoing major restoration when we last passed. Its highlight is an impressive marble altarpiece.

COURSES

Il Sasso (☎ 0578 75 83 11; www.ilsasso.com; Via di Gracciano nel Corso 2) Italian language courses for non-native speakers.

FESTIVALS & EVENTS

Bravio delle Botti takes place on the last Sunday in August, when Montepulciano's eight rival *contrade* (districts) continue a centuries-long spirit of fervent neighbourhood competition – like Siena's Palio, this is a key component of local social life – by racing unwieldy giant barrels in two-person teams up the steep streets to Piazza Grande. The Bravio was contested as a frenzied horse race until the 17th century.

The less perilous barrel challenge began in 1974. There's copious ancillary flag waving, Medieval dress-up and general merriment.

SLEEPING

Our pick Bellavista (☎ 347 823 23 14; bellavista@bcamp.com; Via Ricci 25; d €56-70; (P)) At the budget end, this is an excellent choice, where nearly all of its 10 high-ceiling, double rooms have fantastic views – room 6 has a private terrace. Some rooms have refrigerators and all have great beds. No-one lives here so phone ahead in order to be met and given a key (if you've omitted this stage, there's a phone in the entrance lobby from where you can call).

Villa Nottola (☎ 0578 70 78 13; www.villanottola.com; Loc Nottola 15; d €75-110, ste €110-130; (P) (B)) Four kilometres east of Montepulciano, this massive complex has standard rooms, apartments, wine-tasting room, cellar and a giant pool. The buffet breakfast is generous and the onsite Tuscan restaurant (meals €30 to €35; open Wednesday to Monday) cooks up handmade pasta. Follow the signs for 'ospital' out of Montepulciano, turn left after the hospital and the entrance is on the right.

Albergo Il Marzocco (☎ 0578 75 72 62; www.albergoilmarzocco.it; Piazza Savonarola 18; s/d incl breakfast €60/95; (P)) Run as a hotel by the same family for over a century, the rooms in this fabulous 16th-century building are large, comfortable and well furnished. Those with a balcony and views come at no extra cost.

Albergo La Terrazza di Montepulciano (☎ 0578 75 74 40; Via Pié al Sasso 16; s/d/tr €72/95/118, all incl breakfast; (P)) Exuberant and talkative, you'll be charmed by the owner before you even see one of his 10 large rooms or his pride-and-joy breakfast terrace. A self-catering kitchen is available.

Meublè Il Riccio (☎ 0578 75 77 13; www.ilriccio.net; Via Talosa 21; s/d €80/100; (P) (B) (W)) This gorgeous tiny hotel, with only six bedrooms, occupies a Renaissance palazzo just off Piazza Grande. It has large rooms, antiques, a solarium, a porticoed courtyard and a terrace bar for your glass of *vino* with a view.

Albergo Il Borghetto (☎ 0578 75 75 35; www.ilborghetto.it; Via Borgo Buio 7; s/d €93/105; (P)) It may look like every other 15th-century building on this street but once inside, this place is a gem, packed with antiques – including Napoleonic-era beds. There's even a tunnel, leading to the house across the street. The hotel is normally closed from mid-January to February.

EATING

Osteria dell'Acquacheta (☎ 0578 75 84 43; Via del Teatro 22; meals €15-20; ☹ Wed-Mon) This is a small eatery with the look and feel of a country trattoria. The food is excellent and mainly meaty, ranging from *misto di salami Toscani* (a variety of Tuscan sausages and salamis) to huge steaks.

Trattoria Diva e Maceo (☎ 0578 71 69 51; Via di Gracciano nel Corso 90; meals €24-28; ☹ Wed-Mon) An uncomplicated place, Trattoria Diva e Maceo is popular with the locals and carries a good selection of local wines. You can feast on Tuscan cuisine like *tagliatelle al tartufo* (tagliatelle with truffles) in simple surroundings.

Caffè Poliziano (☎ 0578 75 86 15; Via di Voltaia nel Corso 27; meals €24) Established as a café in 1868, Poliziano has had a chequered past – at times café-cabaret, minicinema, grocery store and, once again since 1990, an elegant café, lovingly restored to its original form by the current owners. Plan carefully to win a seat on one of the tiny, precipitous balcony tables with expansive views.

La Grotta (☎ 0578 75 74 79; ristorante.lagrotta@tiscali.it; Via di San Biagio 2; meals €45-55; ☹ Thu-Tue) Opposite the church of San Biagio, La Grotta is Montepulciano's finest restaurant. Inside this 15th-century building the dining is appropriately elegant while the tables in the garden are tempting for a summer lunch.

DRINKING

There are plenty of places, including several long-established cantinas, where you can whet your palate on the local red, Vino Nobile.

Cantina del Redi (Via Ricci 19; ☹ 10.30am-1pm & 3-7pm) 'No smoking. No microphones. Do not shout out. No dogs. No trash. Do not touch the casks' is the notice that welcomes you. This place doubles as a cool wine cellar that is free to tour.

Ristorante Il Contucci (☎ 0578 75 70 06; www.ristoranteilcantuccio.com; Palazzo Contucci, Piazza Grande; ☹ 8am-12.30pm & 2.30-6.30pm) Vintners since Renaissance times, this is another active cellar where you can sample a drop of the local wine. The owner is a great character and will give you a personal tour, tasting and photo session. The restaurant (meals €30 to €35; open Tuesday to Sunday) is also cellar-fabulous.

GETTING THERE & AROUND

Tra-in runs eight buses daily between Montepulciano and Siena (€4.50, 1¼ hours) via

Pienza. Regular LFI buses connect with Chiusi (€2.20, 50 minutes, half-hourly) and continue to Chiusi-Chianciano Terme train station.

There are three services daily to/from Florence (€8) and two to/from Arezzo (€3.70; change at Bettolle). Buses leave from the terminal shared with car park No 5, outside the Porta al Prato at the northern end of town.

Chiusi-Chianciano Terme, 18km southeast and on the main Rome-Florence line, is the most convenient train station (rather than Stazione di Montepulciano, which has very infrequent services).

By car, take the Chianciano Terme exit from the A1 and follow the SS146. Cars are banned from the town centre, but many hotels can issue on-the-spot parking permits, valid for their immediate vicinities, saving guests the death march up the hill with their bags. There are car parks near the Porta al Prato, from where minibuses weave their way to Piazza Grande.

Chianciano Terme

pop 7230

You could skip Chianciano Terme, a short trip south from Montepulciano, unless you think a local spa-water treatment for your liver is in order. The town has a small medieval core, which seems to recoil at all the surrounding development. Given its proximity to Montepulciano, however, it could make a good base with its some 250 hotels catering to spa guests. Most are fairly bland and modern, yet reasonable. However, be prepared for half or full board as, strangely, there are precious few bars and restaurants in town.

Chiusi

pop 8800

One of the most important of the 12 cities of the Etruscan League, Chiusi was once powerful enough to attack Rome, under the leadership of the Etruscan king Porsenna. These days it's a fairly sleepy country town but well worth dropping into. The **tourist office** (☎ 0578 22 76 67; prolocochiusi@bcc.tin.it; ☹ 10am-noon & 3-6pm Jun-Aug, 10am-noon Sep-May) is on central Piazza Carlo Baldini.

SIGHTS

Chiusi's main attractions are the **Etruscan tombs** dotted around the surrounding countryside. Unfortunately, almost all are in such a serious state of disrepair that they are closed. Guided

visits (€2, 11am and 4pm March to October, 11am and 2.30pm November to February) to the two accessible tombs, Tomba della Scimmia (the best) and Tomba del Leone, about 3km from town, leave from the **Museo Archeologico Nazionale** (☎ 0578 2 01 77; Via Porsenna 93; adult/child €4/free; ☹ 9am-8pm). You'll need your own transport. The museum itself has a fair collection of artefacts from local tombs that are well displayed and documented in English.

The Romanesque **cathedral**, reworked in the 19th century, holds little interest, although the adjacent **Museo della Cattedrale** (☎ 0578 22 64 90; Piazza Duomo; adult/child €2/€0.50; ☹ 9.30am-12.45pm & 4.30-7pm Jun-mid-Oct, 9.30am-12.45pm Mon-Sat, 10am-12.45pm & 4.30-7pm Sun mid-Oct-May) has an important collection of psalm books.

Beneath the Piazza del Duomo is the **Labirinto di Porsenna**, a series of tunnels dating back to Etruscan times that formed part of the town's water-supply system. A section can be visited with a guide (€3; buy your ticket at the Museo della Cattedrale).

A combined ticket giving entry to both the cathedral and Labirinto di Porsenna costs €4 and there are guide sheets in English.

You can also visit several Christian **catacombs** (admission €5; ☹ guided tours 11am & 5pm Jun-mid-Oct, 11am Mon-Sat, 11am & 4pm Sun mid-Oct-May), 2km from Chiusi. Tours leave from the Museo della Cattedrale, where you buy your ticket.

SLEEPING & EATING

Albergo La Sfinge (☎ 0578 2 01 57; www.albergolasfinge.com; Via Marconi 2; s/d €52/77; ☹ closed Feb; ☹) Just within the confines of Chiusi's historical centre, the clean, attractive rooms here have wrought-iron bedsteads. Some rooms come with a balcony and a few have great views. Room 12 manages both.

THE TOMB OF THE INFERNAL CHARIOT

In 2003 archaeologists excavating an intact 4th-century-BC tomb in the necropolis of Pianacce, just outside Sarteano on the road to Cetona (signposted 'tombe etrusche delle Pianacce'), discovered a unique fresco, its colours still as bright as the day they were applied. On the walls surrounding the alabaster sarcophagus, a demonic figure with wild flowing russet hair drives a chariot pulled by a pair of lions and two griffins. Fabulous monsters – a three-headed snake and a huge seahorse – rear up and two male figures, 'perhaps a father and son as their distinct age difference shows', have an affectionate moment.

The deceased had chosen his last resting place well, with its commanding views over the Val di Chiana, and it's worth the short diversion for the panorama alone. Tours cost €5 and are only possible on Saturdays. Reserve through the Archaeological Civic Museum in Sarteano.

La Solita Zuppa (☎ 0578 2 10 06; Via Porsenna 21; meals €30-34; ☹ Wed-Mon) A predominantly Tuscan-based menu with a wide range of soup options is this restaurant's forte. The food is wholesome and cooked to perfection, and the owners make you feel like a long-lost friend.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Chiusi is just off the A1. Its train station, in the valley below the town, is on the main Rome-Florence line.

Sarteano & Cetona

Heading into this quiet rural territory, you sense that you have left the last of the tour buses well and truly behind. Sarteano and Cetona, delightful little medieval towns amid gentle countryside, are well worth a wander, perhaps extending to a hike up Monte Cetona (1145m), which overlooks Cetona. Pick up Touring Club Italiano's detailed walking map *Cetona* (€1) at 1:15,000 from the town's **tourist office** (☎ 0578 23 91 43; www.cetona.org; ☹ 10am-noon & 5-7pm mid-Jun-mid-Sep, 9am-12.30pm Sat mid-Sep-mid-Jun) on Cetona's Piazza Garibaldi.

Four buses a day go to both towns from Montepulciano and seven from Chiusi.

SARTEANO

Sarteano, topped by a brooding castle, made international headlines not too long ago (see the boxed text, below). Its **tourist office** (☎ 0578 26 92 04; turismo@comune.sarteano.siena.it; ☹ 9.30am-12.30pm & 3.30-7.30pm Aug-mid-Sep, 10am-noon Wed-Mon Jun-Jul, 10am-noon Sat & Sun mid-Sep-May) is at Corso Garibaldi 9. The **Archaeological Civic Museum** (☎ 0578 26 92 61; Via Roma 24; admission adult/child €2.50/2) is a few steps away on the ground floor of Palazzo Gabrielli, displaying a modest collection of local artefacts ranging from the Bronze Age to late-Roman.

YOU'LL NEVER LOOK AT A SIENESE PIG THE SAME WAY AGAIN

our pick **Agriturismo La Silva** (☎ 0564 95 06 03; www.agriturismolasilva.it; per person incl breakfast €42-60; 🚗 🚲) Situated 3km outside of Seggiano (near Castiglione d'Orcia), is this transformed farmhouse with a celebrated fixation with *suino cinto senese* (a black and white pig native to central Tuscany). See our special agriturismo section for more detail (p315).

At the well-equipped camp site of **Parco Campeggio delle Piscine** (☎ 0578 2 69 71; www.parco.dellepiscine.it; Via Campo dei Fiori 30; per person/tent/car €14/14/6.50; 🗓 Apr-Sep; 🚗 🚲) guests can luxuriate in the warm mineral waters of three pools including the large Piscina Bagno Santo, which is also open to noncampers (€12 to €15).

CETONA

Just off Piazza Garibaldi, the main square, cavellike **Cantina la Frasca** (Via Roma 13; 🗓 Thu-Tue) sells its own oil, wine and *pecorino* cheese, straight from the farm, and is a pleasant spot for a snack.

La Frateria di Padre Eligio (☎ 0578 23 82 61; www.lafrateria.it; Via di San Francesco; s €140-160, d €220-240, both incl breakfast) is for those seeking a special retreat. Up a signed lane ('Mondox la Frateria Conv S Francesco') 1km from Cetona on the road to Sarteano, this former convent dating from 1212 has been lovingly restored and converted into a top-class seven-room hotel and gourmet restaurant (meals €88, open Monday to Wednesday, closed January to mid-February), where you can expect an eight-course dining experience of world-class standing.

More modestly, you'll sleep like a top after a day's walking at **La Coccia** (☎ 0578 23 79 31; www.ostellocetona.it in Italian; Via San Sebastiano 18; dm/d €12/26; 🗓 year-round), Cetona's smart new HI-affiliated youth hostel, and eat well on one of the two floors of **Osteria Vecchia** (☎ 0578 23 90 40; Via Cherubini 11; meals €30; 🗓 Wed-Mon), just off Piazza Garibaldi. The *spaghetti dell'osteria* is a spicy little number and the meat dishes, such as roast pork and Chianina steak, are cooked to perfection.

Abbadia San Salvatore & Around

On your travels in this part of Tuscany you'd have to be short-sighted not to notice the vil-

lage of **Radicofani**, 17km southwest of Sarteano on the SS478 – or, more precisely, its **rocca** (fortezza; adult/child €3/2; 🗓 10am-7pm May-Oct, 10am-6pm Fri-Sun Nov-Apr). Built high on a blanchmange-shaped hill, it's an impressive sight from any approach, and the views from its ramparts are stunning. It now houses a small **museum** devoted to medieval times.

La Torre (☎ 0578 5 59 43; Via G Matteotti 7; d incl breakfast €60) is the only place to stay in town. Don't be put off by the bland red-brick exterior. The rooms, with balconies, are good value and the restaurant is always full of locals here for the appetising wild boar and other homemade fare.

Eighteen kilometres further southwest is **Abbadia San Salvatore**, a largely ugly mining town that grew rapidly and tastelessly from the late 19th century. It does have a couple of saving graces, however. The old town, a sombre stone affair entered off Piazzale XX Settembre, is curious enough, although perhaps not really worth an excursion on its own. Its small **tourist office** (☎ 0577 77 58 11; 🗓 9am-1pm & 4-7pm Mon-Sat) operates from Via Adua 25.

The **Abbazia di San Salvatore** (☎ 0577 77 80 83; abbasansalvatore@virgilio.it; Piazzale Michelangelo 8; 🗓 7am-5pm Mon-Sat, 10.30am-6pm Sun Apr-Oct, 7am-5pm Mon-Sat, to 5pm Sun Nov-Mar) was founded in 743 by the Lombard Erfo. It eventually passed into the hands of Cistercian monks, who still occupy it today. Little remains of the monastery, but the church more than compensates. Built in the 11th century and Romanesque in style, it was reconstructed in the late 16th century, when the whole area from the transept to the apse was raised and adorned with broad, frescoed arches that give the impression of walking into a tunnel. Best of all, however, is the 8th-century Lombard crypt, a remarkable stone forest of 36 columns.

The town lies in the shadow of **Monte Amiata** (1738m) and serves as a base for local holiday-makers getting in a little skiing, snow permitting, in winter or some walking in summer. You can, for instance, walk right around the mountain following a 30km-trail known as the **Anello della Montagna**. The path is signposted and the tourist office has maps that also cover other walks in the surrounding area.

There are many hotels in Abbadia San Salvatore and others in towns dotted about the broad expanse of the mountain, so you shouldn't have too much trouble finding a place to stay.

From Siena, two RAMA buses (€4.60, 1½ hours) call by the abbey daily.

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