

# Eastern Tuscany



Don't let the brevity of this chapter fool you. Eastern Tuscany holds some cinematic oh-wow moments (both aesthetically and celluloid-ally), and with relatively few people bothering to venture beyond Arezzo's historic centre, you'll be wowed with plenty of elbowroom. With most destinations being within pasta-flinging range of the Rome–Florence rail line, access is largely uncomplicated.

The curiously sloping Piazza Grande in Arezzo's Etruscan centre – the heart of both the city and the region – and the Pieve di Santa Maria, a key example of Tuscan Romanesque construction, are just a taste of Arezzo's enticements. The city is also the perfect staging area for forays into the countryside. Nearby Cortona wrote the parchment on spectacular, hill-top eyries, offering mind-bending views over the Tuscan and Umbrian plains and beyond to Lago di Trasimeno.

Film location scouts have twice deemed the area a Tuscan superlative recently. Roberto Benigni filmed scenes of his Oscar-winning film *Life Is Beautiful* in Arezzo and Cortona, while Audrey Wells chose Cortona for some scenes from *Under the Tuscan Sun*.

The Piero della Francesca art trail arguably peaks with his fresco cycle of the *Legend of the True Cross* in Arezzo's Chiesa di San Francesco, but a definitive and enormously worthwhile build-up requires stops in the quietly satisfying towns of Sansepolcro and Monterchi.

The undeservedly obscure hill country of the Casentino is a lush forested landscape, making for a low-key drive with copious photo-ops, in between its assortment of minor castles and noteworthy monasteries, including the vast St Francis Sanctuary in Verna.

## HIGHLIGHTS

- Submit to a transcendental and/or wine-induced medieval reverie at the Giostra del Saracino in Arezzo's **Piazza Grande** (p297)
- Contemplate the idealised mathematical depiction of (or just look at) the subjects in Piero della Francesca's outstanding fresco cycle in the **Chiesa di San Francesco** (p296) in Arezzo
- Explore the back roads of the little-visited **Casentino region** (p303), including the massive **St Francis Sanctuary** (p304)
- Take the **Piero della Francesca** multicity tour (p301) from Arezzo through Monterchi to Sansepolcro
- Soak in the Etruscan heritage of **Cortona** (p305), ascending its storybook streets and enjoying the superb countryside views



## AREZZO

pop 94,700

Bombed back to the Renaissance Age during WWII, Arezzo may not be a Tuscan centre-fold, but the surviving parts of the historic centre and its ancillary attractions are worthy competition for any destination in the region. Though a day trip from Florence or Perugia is easily achieved, with both accommodations and eating value here being superior, why would you? A fine meal in one of its restaurants and an early evening wander through the charming, if architecturally scattered, centre is worth shifting your bags for a night. Furthermore, the city serves as an ideal staging area for a day trip to Sansepolcro or rallying forth to destinations in the Casentino region.

The lopsided, architectural jumble of Piazza Grande is riveting, particularly from the many restaurants and *enotecas* (wine bars) on the perimeter offering choice people watching vantage points. The renowned five-star fresco cycle by Piero della Francesca in the Chiesa di San Francesco will beguile, whether you adore art or just endure it, as

will the Romanesque epitome of Pieve di Santa Maria.

Long a vital Etruscan trading post, Arezzo later prospered immensely while part of the Roman Empire. The staunch Ghibelline city was a free republic by the 10th century and maintained a firm screw-the-Pope platform during lengthy, bloody clashes between the emperor and the papacy. The city went into a centuries-long period of decline after being swallowed whole by the swell of Guelph Florence in 1384. It was not to experience significant prosperity again until after the unification of Italy and the arrival of the railroad in 1866.

It's the birthplace of the Renaissance poet Petrarch, who popularised the sonnet format, penning his verses in both Latin and Italian, and Giorgio Vasari (p46), the prolific painter and architect whose contributions to Renaissance Florence included the Uffizi Gallery, the Palazzo dei Cavalieri and the tomb of Michelangelo in San Croce.

Another illustrious son, born in a nearby village, is comic actor and director Roberto Benigni, who created and starred in the Oscar-winning film, *Life Is Beautiful*. Locations used in the film are marked throughout Arezzo by signs featuring stills and dialogue in Italian and English.

## Orientation

From the train station on the southern edge of the city, pedestrianised, shop-lined Corso Italia, the town's main promenade, leads to the Piazza Grande, Arezzo's nucleus.

## Information

**Centro di Accoglienza Turistico** (☎ 0575 40 35 74; Via Ricasoli; ☎ 9.30am–6.30pm Jun–Oct, 10am–6pm Nov–May) An alternative tourist office. Hires out audioguides to Arezzo (adult/child per day €2.50/2) with an accompanying map.

**Eutelia** (Via Guido Monaco 61; per hr €1.50; ☎ 9am–9pm) Offers internet access & cheap international phone calls.

**Nuovo Ospedale San Donato** (☎ 0575 25 50 01; Via A de Gasperi) Hospital outside the city walls.

**Police station** (☎ 0575 31 81; Via Fra Guittone 3)

**Post office** (Via Guido Monaco 34)

**Tourist office** (☎ 0575 2 08 39; www.apr.aretzo.it; Piazza della Repubblica 28; ☎ 9am–1pm & 3–7pm Apr–Sep, 10am–1pm & 3–6pm Mon–Sat, 9am–1pm Sun Oct–Mar) Has a representative from tour operator Colori Toscani onsite who can arrange accommodation and tours free of charge.



## Sights

## CHIESA DI SAN FRANCESCO

Gracing the apse of this 14th-century church (Piazza San Francesco; ☎ 9am-6.30pm Mon-Fri, 9am-5.30pm Sat, 1-5.30pm Sun) is one of the greatest works of Italian art, Piero della Francesca's fresco cycle of the *Legend of the True Cross*. Painted between 1452 and 1466, it relates in 10 episodes the story of the cross on which Christ was crucified.

The illustration of this medieval legend, as entertaining as it is inconceivable, begins in the top right-hand corner and follows the story of the tree that Seth plants on the grave of his father, Adam, and from which, eventually, the True Cross is made. A scene on the opposite wall shows the long-lost cross

being rediscovered by Helena, mother of the emperor Constantine; behind her, the city of Jerusalem is represented by a medieval view of Arezzo. Even Khosrow, the Persian emperor accused of making off with the cross, features, ignominiously. Rarely will you get a better sense of medieval frescoes as strip cartoon, telling a tale with such vigour and sheer beauty. Likewise, art buffs will be struck by Piero's innovations with perspective and geometric perfection and the stillness he created by his lack of naturalism.

As is often the case, the mere survival of these frescos has been part extraordinary luck, part back-breaking restoration. Damage endured/eluded from fires, earthquakes and allied bombs notwithstanding, time and

## COMBINED TICKET

You can buy a combined ticket (€12) giving entry to the Piero della Francesca frescoes in the Chiesa di San Francesco, plus Museo Archeologico, Museo Statale d'Arte Medievale e Moderna and Museo di Casa Vasari, at any of the four venues.

the elements were also conspiring to sully the work. When Piero's *Dream of Constantine* was cleaned up during major restoration, the piece that was formerly thought to be 'the first realistic nocturnal scene in Italian art' turned out to be set at dawn. It was just dirty.

You can get some sense of the frescos from beyond the cordon in front of the altar, but to really appreciate them up close you need to plan ahead for a **visit with audio guide** (☎ 0575 35 27 27; www.pierodellafrancesca.it; admission €6; ☎ 9am-6.30pm Mon-Sat, 1-5pm Sun Apr-Oct, 9am-5.30pm Mon-Sat, 1-5pm Sun Nov-Mar). Since only 25 people are allowed in every half-hour, it's essential to pre-book, either by phone or at any of the sights that participate in the combined ticket scheme. The ticket office is at Piazza San Francesco 4, to the right of the church's main entrance.

## PIEVE DI SANTA MARIA &amp; AROUND

This 12th-century church (Corso Italia 7; ☎ 8am-1pm & 3-7pm May-Sep, 8am-noon & 3-6pm Oct-Apr) has a magnificent Romanesque arcaded façade – reminiscent of the cathedral at Pisa writ small, yet without the glorious marble facing – where each column is different. Over the central doorway are carved reliefs representing the months of the year. The 14th-century bell tower with its 40 apertures is something of an emblem for the city. The monochrome of the interior's warm stone is relieved by Pietro Lorenzetti's fine polyptych *Madonna and Saints*, beneath the semidome of the apse.

Below the altar is a 14th-century silver bust reliquary of the city's patron saint, San Donato. Other treasures on display include a 13th-century crucifix by Margherito di Arezzo and a carved marble bas-relief of the *Adoration of the Magi*.

Opposite the church is the **Casa Museo di Ivan Bruschi** (☎ 0575 35 41 26; Corso Italia 14; admission €3; ☎ 10am-1pm & 3-7pm Tue-Sun Apr-Sep, 10am-1pm & 2-6pm Tue-Sun Oct-Mar), where you can cast an eye over the varied collection of art and antiques

amassed by the man who founded the Arezzo antiques fair.

## PIAZZA GRANDE &amp; AROUND

This cobbled piazza, the venue for the Giostra del Saracino (p298), is overlooked at its upper end by the porticoes of the **Palazzo delle Logge Vasariane**, completed in 1573. The **Palazzo della Fraternità dei Laici** with its churchlike façade, in the northwest corner, was started in 1375 in the Gothic style and finished after the onset of the Renaissance. A frenzied antiques fair (p298) is held here on the first weekend of each month.

Via dei Pileati leads to **Casa di Petrarca**, the poet's former home, which contains a small museum and the Accademia Petrarca, a library and research institute devoted primarily to Petrarca. Visits are by appointment and really only for serious Petrarch fans. Enquire at the tourist office for more details.

## CATHEDRAL &amp; AROUND

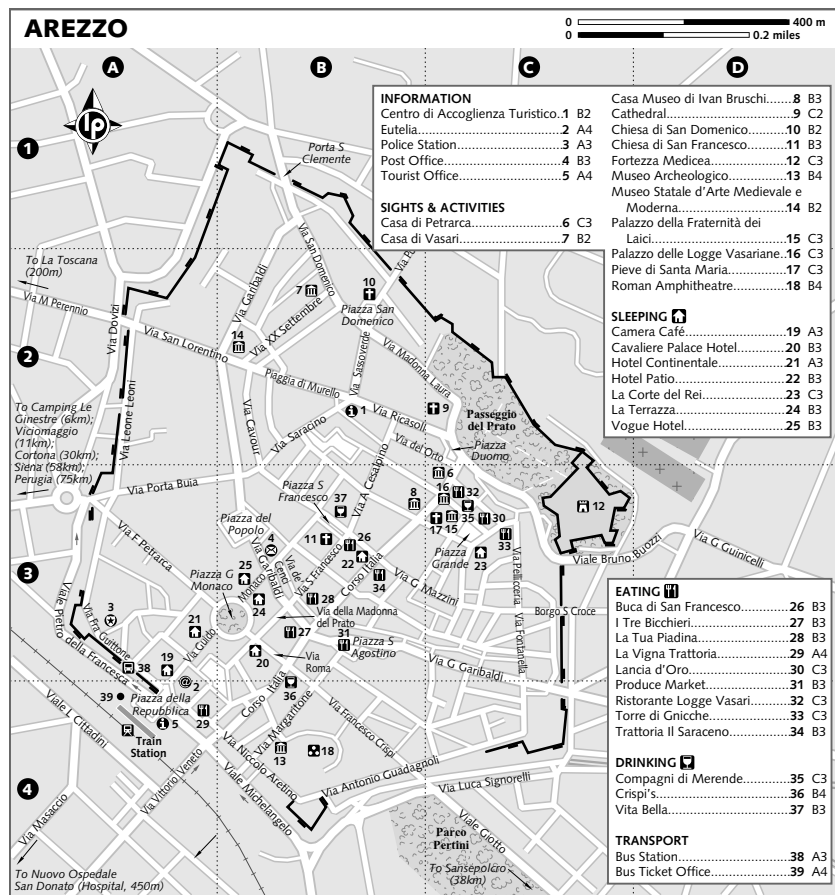
Arezzo's cathedral (Piazza Duomo; ☎ 6.30am-12.30pm & 3-6.30pm), at the top of the hill, was started in the 13th century, yet was not completed until well into the 15th century. In the northeast corner, to the left of the bulky, intricately carved main altar, there's an exquisite fresco of *Mary Magdalene* by Piero della Francesca, itself dwarfed in size but not beauty by the multiterred, rich marble reliefs of the adjoining tomb of Bishop Guido Tarlati, featuring a frieze of priests and an acolyte chanting while holding a censor, a prayer book and candles.

Off the north aisle, the Capella della Madonna del Conforto has a pair of fine glazed terracotta images from the della Robbia workshop. On the right as you enter is the tomb of Pope Gregory X, who died in Arezzo in 1276.

Up high to the southeast of the cathedral, across the peaceful gardens of the **Passaggio del Prato**, rears the **Fortezza Medicea** (admission free; ☎ 7am-8pm Apr-Oct, 7.30am-6pm Nov-Mar), completed in 1560 and offering grand views of the town and surrounding countryside.

## CHIESA DI SAN DOMENICO &amp; AROUND

The short detour to the **Chiesa di San Domenico** (Piazza San Domenico 7; ☎ 8.30am-7pm), with its unusual, asymmetrical façade, is a must. Above the main altar rears a haunting *Crucifixion*, one of Cimabue's earliest works, painted around



1265. Note too the pair of well-preserved frescoes by Spinello Aretino (1350–1410) at the western end, and, in the south aisle, a statue by the della Robbia school of San Pietro Martire with a sword cleaving his skull.

To the west, the **Casa di Vasari** (☎ 0575 40 90 40; Via XX Settembre 55; admission €2; ☎ 8.30am–7.30pm Mon & Wed–Sat, 8.30am–1.30pm Sun) was built and sumptuously decorated (overwhelmingly so in the case of the Sala del Camino, the Fireplace Room) by the architect himself – ring the bell if the door's closed.

Further west again, the **Museo Statale d'Arte Medievale e Moderna** (☎ 0575 40 90 50; Via San Lorentino 8; adult/student €10/7; ☎ 9am–7pm Tue–Sun) primarily houses works by local artists. The two small rooms on the ground floor mostly contain sculptures from local churches, while on the next floor is a display of medieval paintings, including works by Bartolomeo della Gatta and Domenico Pecori, a collection of glazed terracotta pieces by the della Robbia family, and colourful majolica plates. Upstairs, in addition to works by Luca Signorelli and several canvases on the grand scale by Vasari, the chronology continues into the 19th century.

#### MUSEO ARCHEOLOGICO & ROMAN AMPHITHEATRE

The **Museo Archeologico** (☎ 0575 2 08 82; Via Margaritone 10; admission €4; ☎ 8.30am–7pm) is in a former convent overlooking the remains of the **Roman**

**amphitheatre** (admission free; ☎ 8.30am–7pm Apr–Oct, to 6pm Nov–Mar), which once seated up to 10,000 spectators. Inside, there's a sizable collection of Etruscan and Roman artefacts, including locally produced ceramics and bronzes. Among the highlights is the Cratere di Euphronios, a large 6th-century-BC Etruscan vase, decorated with vivid scenes showing Hercules in battle, and, upstairs, an exquisite tiny portrait of a bearded man executed on glass in the 3rd century AD.

#### Activities

**Alessandro Madiai** (☎ 338 6491481; torrequebrada@virgilio.it) A passionate cyclist, Alessandro runs two five-hour bicycle tours, plus overnighters, around the enchanting southern Tuscany countryside within reach of Arezzo.

**Centro di Accoglienza Turistico** (p295) Their 'Room 180' shows a 30-minute film about Arezzo (adult/child €2.50/2) in six languages on a 180-degree screen.

#### Festivals & Events

**Antiques Fair** Arezzo stages a huge and highly reputed antiques fair that pulls in over 500 exhibitors and spreads over the Piazza Grande and surrounding streets on the first Saturday and Sunday of every month.

**Arezzo Wave** (www.arezowave.com in Italian) Over six days in July, the town hosts this music festival featuring artists and bands from Italy and abroad. It occasionally includes some top international acts (bill-toppers have included the likes of Motorhead in 2005 and Sinead O'Connor in 2006).

#### GIOSTRA DEL SARACINO

With its origins back in the time of the Crusades, the 'Joust of the Saracen' is one of those grand, noisy affairs involving extravagant fancy dress and neighbourhood rivalry that Italians delight in. Like many such Tuscan folk spectacles, the tournament was revived in its present form in 1931 after long neglect. The day begins with a herald reading a proclamation, followed by a procession of precisely 311 people in 14th-century dress and 31 horses. The jousters are then blessed on the steps of the cathedral by the Bishop of Arezzo. It's the highlight of the year for the city's four Quartieri (Quarters), each of which puts forward a team of 'knights' armed with lances. In the Piazza Grande, the knights try their hand jousting at a wooden effigy, known as the 'Buratto', representing a Saracen warrior. In one hand the Buratto holds a shield, etched with various point-scores, which the knights aim for while trying to avoid being belted with the *mazzafustro* – basically three heavy leather balls on ropes – which dangle from the Buratto's other hand. The winning team takes home the coveted Golden Lance, bringing glory to their Quartiere.

Arezzo's division into Quartieri dates back to at least the 11th century, and there's still a strong sense of neighbourhood pride and loyalty, with heraldic flags fluttering from shops and homes, and communal events taking place throughout the year. The Quartieri are named after the four gates of the city, and each has its own distinctive colours. They are the centre of social and cultural life for their inhabitants, throwing dinners, running excursions and generally fostering community spirit.

**Giostra del Saracino** (opposite) Held on the second-last Sunday of June, and on the first Sunday of September.

#### Sleeping

**Camping Le Ginestre** (☎ 0575 36 35 66; www.campingleginestre.it; Via Ruscello 100; per person €8, pitch €6–13; ☎ year-round) This is the nearest camp site. From Arezzo train station, take LFI bus to Ruscello and request the camping stop.

**La Toscana** (☎/fax 0575 2 16 92; Via M Perennio 56; s/d €35/49; (P)) A little away from the action, La Toscana is a good budget choice. Its 20 rooms are clean as a new pin. There's a small garden at the rear and free off-street parking.

**La Terrazza** (☎ 0575 2 83 87; laterrazza@lycos.it; 5th fl, Via Guido Monaco 25; d with bathroom €60, s/d without bathroom €40/50) Comprised of apartments on two floors, with eight large, bright rooms and a kitchen for guest use, this place is good value. And welcoming. Alas, acoustically transparent walls mean an early morning. The complimentary breakfast features tasty homemade cakes. Go down the passage beside Blockbuster. Cash only.

**our pick Camera Café** (☎ 347 032 44 05; nicolette.borgogni@fastwebnet.it; Via Guido Monaco 92; s/d incl breakfast €40/55; ☎) Across the street from the train station, the dorm room décor here is supplemented by cushy beds, fat duvets and terraces with city views. The huge, self-serve kitchen has a gorgeous dining terrace. Some rooms have air-con.

**Hotel Continentale** (☎ 0575 2 02 51; www.hotelcontinentale.com; Piazza Guido Monaco 7; s/d €74/108; (P) ☎) A modern, central, three-star hotel, with comfy, spotless rooms. There's individual internet access in every room, a bar that tempts you to linger and a roof terrace with fine views. Valet parking is €15.

**Cavaliere Palace Hotel** (☎ 0575 2 68 36; www.cavalierehotels.com; Via della Madonna del Prato 83; s/d incl breakfast €93/135; (P) ☎) This is a reliable four-star choice, barely 200m from the station, that offers a friendly welcome. Rooms, while unexciting, are snug, well soundproofed and more than adequate. Hotel parking is €13.

**La Corte Del Re** (☎ 0575 29 67 20; www.lacortedelre.com; Via Borgunto 5; s/d €100/130; ☎) A collection of six apartments, centimetres from Piazza Grande, harmoniously blending contemporary design into elements of the historic building. The Pietro Aretino Suite has an ultra-modern bathroom that bleeds right into an Etruscan wall. Some apartments have kitchenettes and views of the square.

**Vogue Hotel** (☎ 0575 2 43 61; www.voguehotel.it; Via Guido Monaco 54; s incl breakfast €108–132, d incl breakfast €138–162; (P) ☎) Themed rooms, improbably placed showers, classic wood furniture, wall-mounted plasma TVs, ceiling frescos and the occasional wall o' Roman rock peeking through to remind you where you really are.

**Hotel Patio** (☎ 0575 40 19 62; www.hotelpatio.it; Via Cavour 23; s/d/st €130/176/224; (P) ☎) This is Arezzo's most characterful hotel, with 10 themed rooms, each dedicated to one of Bruce Chatwin's travel books. Each has original furnishings from the various countries represented, including Australia, Morocco and China. Valet parking is €18.

#### Eating

**La Tua Piadina** (☎ 0575 2 32 40; Via de' Cenci 18; snacks €3.50) A justifiably popular takeaway place hidden away down a side street, where you can get a range of hot, tasty *piadine*, the Emilia version of the wrap.

**Buca di San Francesco** (☎ 0575 2 32 71; www.bucadi-sanfrancesco.it; Via San Francesco 1; meals €23; ☎) closed Mon dinner & Tue) The walls of this arched and vaulted cellar are decorated with frescoes and copious religious art in deference to neighbouring Chiesa di San Francesco. It does three church-themed – 'friar', 'abbot' and 'prior' – and church-priced menus (€13 to €19). The congenial owner takes indecisiveness as an invitation to usurp control and design a menu for you.

**Torre di Gnicche** (☎ 0575 35 20 35; Piaggia San Martino 8; meals €25; ☎ Thu–Tue) Just off the Piazza Grande, this is a fine old traditional restaurant that offers a rich variety of antipasti. Choose from the ample range of local *pecorino* cheeses, accompanied by a choice red from its extensive wine list.

**Trattoria Il Saraceno** (☎ 0575 2 76 44; www.ilsaraceno.com; Via G Mazzini 3a; meals €25–30; ☎ Thu–Tue) With 60 years in business, this trattoria serves quality, varied Tuscan fare attracting a lunch crowd that keeps the swarm of servers dashing. The impressive wine collection is hard to miss, as it conspicuously lines the walls. Pizzas start at €5.

**our pick Ristorante Logge Vasari** (☎ 0575 30 03 33; www.cittadiarezzo.com/loggevasari; Via Vasari 19; meals €30–35; ☎ Wed–Mon) This restaurant has a terrace fronting Piazza Grande, two pleasant interior rooms and class that defies stereotypically dire 'piazza cuisine'. The *menu degustazione* (€40,

including wine) is a parade of flavours and interesting flourishes to local dishes. Let your server choose the wine – he'll be right.

**La Vigna Trattoria** (☎ 0575 35 1994; Via Spinello 27; meals €30-35; ☹ Thu-Tue) Choose your meat, then watch it sizzle on the giant, open fireplace. Apart from possibly the bread, vegetarians will have little choice here. Less zealous carnivores are able to choose from the short pizza menu and a selection of homemade desserts.

**Lancia d'Oro** (☎ 0575 2 10 33; Piazza Grande 18-19; meals €45; ☹ closed Sun evening & Mon) A sophisticated place with fresh flowers on the tables where your order is supplemented by excellent snacks and tibbits that arrive unannounced. There's a jolly, waggish waiter, while the interior, painted with swags and green-and-white stripes, is like dining in a marquee. It is run by two brothers who also run Logge Vasari (p299), and has a terrace under the loggia that looks down over Piazza Grande.

**Tre Bicchieri** (☎ 0575 2 65 57; Piazzetta Sopra I Ponti 3-5; meals €50-55; ☹ Tue-Thu) An upscale restaurant in a little square off Corso Italia, serving, among a range of innovative options, dishes such as roast quail in Chianti and creative fresh pasta options.

A veritable produce melee erupts at **Piazza Sant'Agostino's market** each Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday.

## Drinking

**Compagni di Merende** (☎ 0575 182 23 68; Logge Vasari 16) A friendly, unassuming little wine bar with an unparalleled position, tucked under the loggia overlooking Piazza Grande. Enjoy a plate of cheese or cold cuts, or simply a restorative glass of wine.

**Vita Bella** (Piazza San Francesco 22) Opposite the Chiesa di San Francesco, Vita Bella is an agreeable place with wrought-iron chairs where you can sip a Negroni and watch the world go by.

**Crispi's** (☎ 0575 2 28 73; Via Francesco Crispi 10/12) This is a restaurant (pizzas from around €5.50) that, from 10.30pm, converts into a pub, where you can have an evening tippale among a primarily young crowd.

## Getting There & Away

Services from the bus station at Piazza della Repubblica include Cortona (€2.80, one hour, more than 10 daily), Sansepolcro (€3.30, one hour, seven daily) and Siena (€5, 1½ hours,

seven daily). For Florence, you're better off hopping on the train.

Arezzo is on the Florence–Rome train line, with frequent services to Rome (€20.50, two hours) and Florence (€10.10, 1½ hours). Trains call by Cortona (€2.20, 20 minutes, hourly).

Arezzo is a few kilometres east of the A1, and the SS73 heads east to Sansepolcro.

## NORTHEAST OF AREZZO

In addition to being low-key, agreeable walled cities, Monterchi and Sansepolcro are irresistible enticements for Piero della Francesca enthusiasts. Both are easy day trips from Arezzo.

### Monterchi & Anghiari

Visit tiny Monterchi to see Piero della Francesca's renowned fresco **Madonna del Parto** (☎ 0575 7 07 13; Via della Reglia 1; adult/child €3.10/free; ☹ 9am-1pm & 2-7pm Tue-Fri, 9am-7pm Sat & Sun Apr-Sep, to 5pm Oct-Mar). Painted in just seven days, the Pregnant Madonna is considered one of the key works of 15th-century Italian art and the only known representation from the period. The fresco depicts two angels pulling back tabernacle flaps, presenting the Pregnant Madonna to a group of believers, thus associating her (a mortal) with God, a sacred no-no in the 15th-century. As such, the church routinely destroyed such images, this being one of the few to survive. To the untrained eye, the gloomy look on her face suggests profound ninth-month misery, but experts assert that this is a pensive moment, as the Madonna, regarding her stomach, reflects on looming motherhood and the impact her child will have on the world.

A sensitive touch: pregnant women get free admission. There are also free medieval music recitals at 9pm on Wednesdays from June to August. Parking can be a problem since there's no special provision.

A few kilometres north of Monterchi and the SS73 lies the pretty medieval village of Anghiari, which is worth a brief stop-off to meander along its narrow twisting lanes.

Some 17km north of Anghiari is **Caprese Michelangelo**, birthplace of the great artist. Within the town's castle is the **Museo Michelangelo** (☎ 0575 79 37 76; Via Capoluogo 1; adult/child €4/3; ☹ 11am-6pm, Sat & Sun Jun-Sep, 10am-6pm Mon-Fri Oct-May), a rather lifeless affair devoted to the man and his works.

### DETOUR: PIERO DELLA FRANCESCA TRAIL

The so-called 'Piero della Francesca trail' makes for a pleasant day trip, taking in the Valtiberina (High Tiber Valley) during the easy, if somewhat lacklustre, drive from Arezzo to Sansepolcro and Monterchi.

Though many details about his life are hazy, it is believed that della Francesca was born around 1420 in Sansepolcro to a privileged family, his father being a successful tanner and shoe-maker, allowing him to receive a good education and indulge in the study of painting with Sieneese-trained artists in the area. He spent the bulk of his productive life in Arezzo, though he also worked in Rimini, Ferrara and Rome, returning to Sansepolcro in his twilight years where he died on 12 October 1492, the same day that Columbus arrived in the New World.

By 1439 he was already in Florence where he worked with Domenico Veneziano on frescoes for the hospital of Santa Maria Nuova, while establishing valuable contacts and exposing himself to the influential works of Donatello, Brunelleschi, Masaccio and Fra Angelico.

Considering his frequent movements, it is believed that he never belonged to any one workshop, choosing to work and evolve on his own, making no effort to conform to contemporary trends or styles. Piero's growing distinction revolved around his use of perspective and his skill with backgrounds, creating an overall, salient 'serene humanism'. He cultivated his methods of applied geometry and mathematical foreshortening for all objects on the canvas at a level previously unknown, never mind unachievable, to most painters. He eventually ditched painting altogether to write several treatises on the subject, most notably *De Prospectiva Pingendi* (On Perspective in Painting). Though it has never been confirmed, it is believed that della Francesca lost his sight near the end of his life.

His most celebrated works include *Flagellazione di Cristo* (The Flagellation) on display in the Galleria Nazionale della Marche in Urbino, dubbed 'the greatest small painting in the world', the *Madonna del Parto* in Monterchi, *Resurrezione* (The Resurrection) in Sansepolcro, and the renowned *Legend of the True Cross* in Arezzo's Chiesa di San Francesco (p296).

John Pope-Hennessy's book *The Piero della Francesca Trail* (1993) is an interesting source of information on the painter and the region.

## Sansepolcro

pop 16,000

A prototypical Tuscan walled town dating from AD 1000, traversable on foot in three hasty minutes if necessary, Sansepolcro is best known as the probable birthplace of Piero della Francesca (see boxed text above). While the surrounding industrial sprawl won't dislodge many jaws, the town's medieval heart, a Roman settlement designed like a *castrum* (military defensive position), is pleasing.

Reaching its current size in the 15th century and walled in the 16th century, the historic centre is tightly packed with stone structures abutting somewhat less historic structures in a pleasant jumble, with delightfully anorexic streets where one guidebook writer's carelessly parked car can cause a traffic jam in seconds.

Sansepolcro's light tourist scene is largely attributed to its thin public transport connections – only accessible by bus from Arezzo or the agonisingly slow train from Perugia – meaning an overnight will tickle your Tuscan escapism.

## ORIENTATION

Via Matteotti connects Piazza Torre di Berta and Piazza Fra Luca Pacioli, with the Duomo, Civic Museum and the Palazzo delle Laudi.

## INFORMATION

The newly enlarged **tourist office** (☎ 0575 74 05 36; info@sansepolcro@apt.arezzo.it; Via Matteotti 8; ☹ 9.30am-1pm & 3-6pm Apr-Sep, 9.30am-12.30pm & 3.30-5.30pm Mon-Sat, 9.30am-12.30pm Sun Oct-Mar) is packed with multilingual information.

## SIGHTS

The **Museo Civico** (☎ 0575 73 22 18; www.sansepolcro.net in Italian; Via Aggiunti 65; adult/child €6/3; ☹ 9.30am-1.30pm & 2.30-7pm Jun-Sep, 9.30am-1pm & 2.30-6pm Oct-May) features a couple of Piero della Francesca's masterpieces. In the *Resurrezione* (Resurrection), the newly risen Christ stares out at the viewer, banner in hand like a triumphant warrior, while his guards slumber. In the splendid *Madonna della Misericordia* polyptych, the Virgin spreads her protective cloak over the painting's benefactors.

There are also works by distinguished Piero protégées Luca Signorelli, Pontormo, Raffaellino dal Colle and Santi di Tito, whose *Riposo Durante la Fuga in Egitto* (Rest During the Flight into Egypt) portrays the Holy Family in a tender and humanistic light.

Upstairs there's a display of 14th- and 15th-century frescoes, including a haunting portrait of St Sebastian, while the basement holds a small gathering of archaeological finds and ecclesiastical knick-knackery.

About 150m eastwards is the **Aboca museum** (☎ 0575 73 35 89; Via Aggiunti 75; adult/child €8/4; ☎ 10am-1pm & 3-7pm Tue-Sun Apr-Sep, 10am-1pm & 2.30-6pm Oct-Mar), dedicated to the history of pharmacy and herbal medicine, with a re-creation of a 17th-century laboratory. Given the high ticket price, it's likely to appeal only to those with a specialist interest in things alternative and pharmaceutical.

Just south of the tourist office is the newly renovated **cathedral**. Its most celebrated treasure is the *Volto Santo* (Holy Visage), a striking wooden crucifix with a wide-eyed Christ, dating back to AD 950 and one of only three in the world. Also gawk-worthy are frescoes by Bartolomeo della Gatta and a polyptych by Matteo di Giovanni.

The **Museo della Vetra Antica** (☎ 0575 74 07 82; Via Giovanni Buitoni 9; adult/child €1.50/1), in San Giovanni church (1126), holds several modest stained-glass exhibits wholly eclipsed by a gigantic *Last Supper*, composed of 25 stained-glass panels, measuring 8.48m long by 4.58m high in total, fashioned by Cecilia Caselli-Moretti.

Step into any church with open doors, as they're all lovely, but make a point of calling at **San Antonio church** (nr Via San Antonio and Via del Campaccio) which has a magnificent processional banner with paintings on two sides by Luca Signorelli.

On the second Sunday in September, the **Palio della Balestra**, a crossbow contest, pits costumed archers from Gubbio against Sansepolcro's best.

#### SLEEPING & EATING

**Orfeo** (☎ 0575 74 22 87; fax 0575 74 22 87; Viale Armando Diaz 12; s/d/tr incl breakfast €35/60/75) An unremarkable, but decent budget option just outside the old town's western gate.

**our pick** **Locanda Giglio** (☎ 0575 74 20 33; Via L Paciolli 60; s/d/tr incl buffet breakfast €50/75/100; ☎ ☎) and **Ristorante Fiorentino** (meals €25-30) This exceptionally friendly place has been in the same family for four generations. The four hotel rooms, with their oak floors, underfloor lighting and period furniture recovered from the family loft, have been imaginatively renovated by daughter Alessia, an architect/sommelier (see interview below). Request 'La Torre', with a lovely low bed and the best view. Dad, Alessio, still runs the restaurant with panache. The pasta's homemade, and the imaginative menu changes with the seasons (Alessio tells you with pride that there'll never be a freezer in his kitchen).

Also consider **Albergo da Ventura** (☎ 0575 74 25 60; www.albergodaventura.it; Via Niccolò Aggiunti 30; s/d incl breakfast €40/60) with five modern, cream-coloured rooms and a restaurant downstairs

(meals €29) or **Casa Mila** (☎ 0575 73 34 77; www.casamila.it; Via della Firenzuola 49; s/d €55/70) with both apartments and B&B rooms and a three-day minimum stay during high-season.

#### GETTING THERE & AWAY

SITA buses link Sansepolcro with Arezzo (€3.30, one hour, 20 daily) and several trains leave daily to Perugia (€3.95, 1¼ hours) where you can change to Rome (2¾ hours).

#### THE CASENTINO REGION

A tour through the remote forest and farming region of Casentino takes you through a little-visited area that boasts a couple of still active monasteries and some wonderful walking in the Parco Nazionale delle Foreste Casentinesi, Monte Falterona e Campigna.

**La Ferroviaria Italiana** (LFI; ☎ 0575 3 98 81; www.lfi.it in Italian), a private train line, runs from Arezzo, following the upper reaches of the River Arno, and serves towns and villages as far as Stia. The rest of the region is only practicably accessible with your own transport, for which we describe a one-day circuit.

#### Parco Nazionale delle Foreste Casentinesi, Monte Falterona e Campigna

This **national park** (www.parcoforestecasentinesi.it) goes over both sides of the Tuscany–Emilia-Romagna border, taking in some of the most scenic stretches of the Apennines. The Tuscan part is gentler than the Emilian side.

One of the highest peaks, **Monte Falterona** (1654m), marks the source of the Arno. Apart from the human population, including the inhabitants of two monasteries, the park is also home to a rich assortment of wildlife, including foxes, wolves, deer and wild boar, plus nearly 100 bird species. The dense forests are a cool summer refuge, ideal for walking and also escaping the maddening crowds. The Grande Escursione Appenninica (GEA) trekking trail passes through here, and myriad walking paths crisscross the park.

From Arezzo take the SS71 northwards through Bibbiena and on up to **Badia Prataglia**, a pleasant little mountain village in the Alpe di Serra, near the border with Emilia-Romagna. Its **visitors centre** (☎ 0575 55 94 77; www.badiaprataglia.com in Italian; ☎ 9am-12.30pm & 3.30-6pm Tue-Sun Jun-Sep, 9am-12.30pm Tue-Sat, 9am-12.30pm & 3.30-6pm Sun Oct-May) carries a wealth of information about the park, including two useful titles in English: *The National Park of the Casentino*

*Forests: Where the Trees Touch the Sky* (€12) and *The National Park of the Forests of Casentino, Monte Falterona and Campigna* (€7.50). There's a free leaflet in Italian detailing nine short, signed nature walks within the park. For more strenuous hiking, pick up the *Carta Excursionista, Parco Nazionale delle Foreste Casentinesi, Monte Falterona e Campigna* map (€8.25) at 1:25,000, which features more than 800km of trails.

#### Camaldoli

From Badia Prataglia, go back along the SS71, then turn right after 3.5km to head for Camaldoli and its **monastery** (☎ 0575 55 60 12; www.camaldoli.it; ☎ 8.30am-12.30pm & 2.30-6.30pm). The monks managed the forests that still stand around the monastery, and developed all sorts of medicinal and herbal products. You're free to wander about the place and visit the **Antica Farmacia** (☎ 9am-12.30pm & 2.30-6pm). The monks still make all manner of products, including liqueurs, honey, perfumes and chocolate. If the monastery's closed, the bar of the Albergo Camaldoli opposite sells some of its products, which are also available in other towns in the region, including Arezzo.

Continue for a further 1.5km, then turn right and follow signs to the more interesting **Eremo di Camaldoli**. Apparently, Conte Maldolo gave the land for this isolated retreat to St Romualdo in 1012. From the name of the count came that of the location, and around 1023 Romualdo set about building the monastery that became home to the Camaldolesi, an ascetic branch of the Benedictines and a powerful force in medieval Tuscany. You can visit his wood-panelled cell, the model for 20 small, tiled houses that are the cells of today's resident Benedictine monks.

Retrace your route for 600m, then turn right at the point signed Pratovecchio, which is reached after 16km. The drive itself is a delight, the lush forest and superb views easily compensating for the energy exerted coping with the bends.

#### Pratovecchio & Around

Pratovecchio itself is of little interest apart from its porticoed Piazza Garibaldi. The LFI private train line runs through here, with regular trains connecting Arezzo (via Bibbiena and Poppi) with Stia.

Just west of town you can make a detour to follow signs to the attractively sited Romanesque

#### THE FAMILY BUSINESS

**Name?** Alessia Uccellini

**Where are you from?** Sansepolcro, Tuscany, Italy

**How do you earn your crust?** I work in my family's restaurant (above) in Sansepolcro.

**You are an architect, sommelier and Master in tourism? What keeps you in Sansepolcro?** After a pilgrimage all over Italy – Florence, Verona, Rome and Bologna – my family restaurant keeps me in Sansepolcro. There was a time in which the family's 200-year-old restaurant and hotel had to be divided between my father's relatives and so we had to decide whether to sell the business or to keep it going. So I decided to save the family business and leave my work as an architect. But the two jobs are not so far apart. Next year I am taking a university course about the space of the kitchen from the campfire right up to the modern open space and food design.

**Where do you see yourself in 20 years?** All over Italy and the world writing books about the history of kitchens, food design and working for my restaurant.

**What is your favourite place in Tuscany and why?** First and foremost is Sansepolcro, of course, the reason that keeps me home. My second choice is Florence because I lived there when I was at university. Third is Isola d'Elba because I like the sea.

**Pieve di Romena**, then on between the fields to **Castello di Romena**. This crumbling, mainly 13th-century castle, closed indefinitely for safety reasons, has known better days. Erected around AD 1000 on the site of an Etruscan settlement, it was in its heyday an enormous complex surrounded by three sets of defensive walls. Dante, says legend, got his inspiration for the Circles of Hell from observing the castle's prison tower at the heart of its concentric defensive walls. An unfriendly overabundance of 'private property' signs discourages exploration around the castle, but leg-stretching can be done on the hiking trail leading from the car park down into the valley.

Take the SS310 down the valley to Poppi, then on to Bibbiena.

### Poppi & Bibbiena

The most striking town of the Casentino region is Poppi, perched on a hill in the Arno plain. It's topped by the gaunt, commanding presence of the **Castello dei Conti Guidi** (☎ 0575 52 05 16; www.buoncontino.com in Italian; Piazza Repubblica 1; adult/child incl audioguide €6/5; ☎ 10am-6.30pm Jul-Oct), built by the same counts who raised the Castello di Romena.

Interior attractions include a small 'ancient prison', a fairytale courtyard, stone staircase and balcony, the Sala della Feste with its restored medieval frescoes and the internationally acclaimed library, containing hundreds of medieval texts and manuscripts. The main attraction, however, is the chapel on the 2nd floor, with frescoes by Taddeo Gaddi. The scene of *Herod's Feast* shows Salome apparently clicking her fingers as she dances, accompanied by a lute player, while John the Baptist's headless corpse lies slumped in the corner.

Poppi is home to **Casa Ombuto** (www.italiancookingcourse.com), which hosts week-long, highly reputed (and highly priced), all-inclusive cooking courses.

Bibbiena has reasonable transport links to the national park. Buses depart from the train station to both Camaldoli (€1.70, seven daily Monday to Saturday) and Verna (€2.30, four daily), each taking around 45 minutes.

### Santuario di San Francesco (Verna)

This Franciscan monastic complex is 23km east of Bibbiena in Verna. Of more interest than the Camaldoli monastery to many modern pilgrims, it's where St Francis of Assisi is

said to have received the stigmata, and, in a sense, it's closer to the essence of the saint than Assisi itself.

By car, follow signs just outside Verna for the **sanctuary** (☎ 0575 53 41; www.santuariodellaverna.com; ☎ 6.30am-8.30pm) or take the mildly taxing, but agreeable 30-minute uphill hike from the visitor centre in the city. The Chiesa Maggiore (also known as the Basilica) has some remarkable glazed ceramics by Andrea della Robbia. Here, you will also discover reliquaries containing items associated with the saint, including his clothing that is stained with blood from stigmatic wounds and the whip with which he used to impose a little self-discipline.

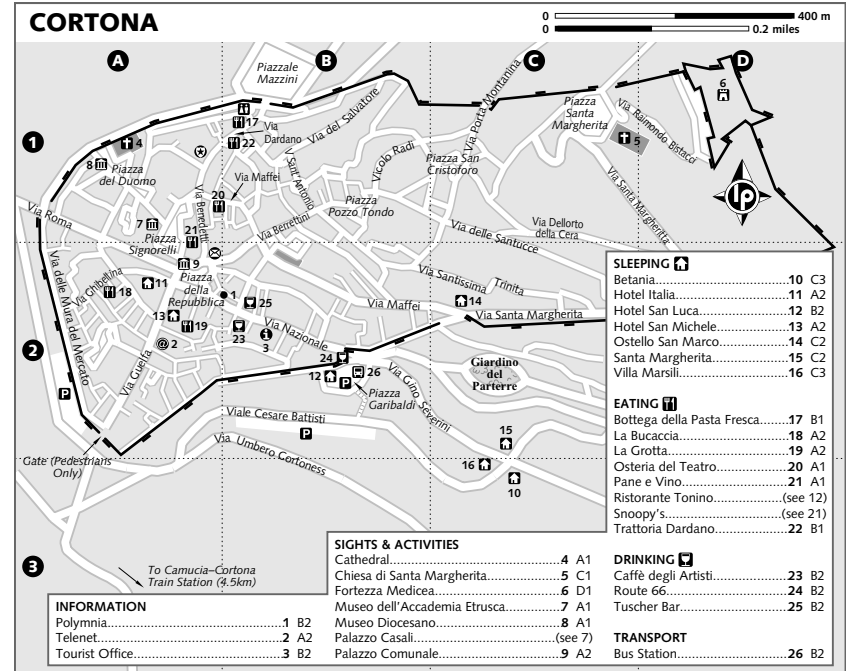
Beside the Basilica entrance is the **Cappella della Pietà**. From it, the **Corridoio delle Stimmate**, painted with frescoes recounting the saint's life, leads to a cluster of chapels, with a short detour to the cave and the unforgiving slab of rock that St Francis called a 'bed'. At the core of the sanctuary, is the **Cappella delle Stimmate**, beautifully decorated with terracotta works by Luca and Andrea della Robbia. Allow at least an hour to lose yourself in the sanctuary's seemingly endless series of halls, courtyards, frescoes, nooks and lengthy, unsigned dead ends.

### SOUTH OF AREZZO Castiglion Fiorentino

This commanding hillside village merits a quick stop off on the route between Arezzo and Cortona. Fought over throughout the Middle Ages for its strategic position, it finally fell to Florentine rule in 1384.

Above the main Piazza del Municipio and at the highest point of the old town, is the **Pinacoteca** (☎ 0575 65 74 66; Via del Cassero; adult/child €3/2; ☎ 10am-12.30pm & 4-6.30pm Tue-Sun), whose paintings include works by Taddeo Gaddi. Nearby, the **Museo Archeologico** (☎ 0575 65 94 57; Via del Tribunale 8; www.iccc-cf.it; admission €3; ☎ 10am-12.30pm & 4-6.30pm Tue-Sun Apr-Oct, 10am-12.30pm & 3.30-6pm Tue-Sun Nov-Mar) has a small collection of local finds. A combined ticket giving access to both costs €5/3 per adult/child.

A few kilometres further south along the road to Cortona, you can't miss the **Castello di Montecchio**, a formidable redoubt that Florence gave to the English mercenary Sir John Hawkwood (c1320-94) in return for his military services. You can see the knight's portrait in the Duomo (see p105) in Florence. The



privately owned castle is presently closed to visitors.

### Cortona

pop 22,600

With a layout indicative of someone spilling a bucket of 'Etruscan town' down a hillside, rooms with a view are the rule, not the exception in Cortona. A small settlement when the Etruscans moved in during the 8th century BC, it later became a Roman town. In the late 14th century Fra Angelico lived and worked here, and fellow artists Luca Signorelli (1450-1523) and Pietro da Cortona (1596-1669) were both born within its walls.

Avid fans of the film *Under the Tuscan Sun*, adapted from the book by Frances Mayes, will know that Cortona served as a location for shooting. Though don't go looking to reenact the *Dolce Vita* homage, fountain frolicking bit...The fountain, built especially for shooting, flowed only for the scene and is now dry.

The town, with its steep captivating streets, twisting off at mirthfully impossible angles, can be easily seen in a few hours, though over-

nights will be treated to sensational dusk and dawn views over Val de Chiana, as far as Lago di Trasimeno.

### ORIENTATION

Piazza Garibaldi, on the southern edge of the walled city, is where buses arrive. From it, there are sensational views across the plain to Lago di Trasimeno. From the piazzale, walk straight up Via Nazionale – about the only flat street in the whole town – to Piazza della Repubblica, the main square.

### INFORMATION

**Telenet** (☎ 0575 60 10 96; Via Guelfa 25; internet per hr €3.50; ☎ 9am-10pm May-Sep, 9am-8pm Mon-Sat Oct-Apr) A phone/internet shop.

**Tourist office** (☎ 0575 63 03 52; Via Nazionale 42; ☎ 9am-1pm & 3-7pm Mon-Sat, 9am-1pm Sun May-Sep, 9am-1pm & 3-6pm Mon-Fri, 9am-1pm Sat Oct-Apr)

### SIGHTS

#### Piazza della Repubblica & Piazza Signorelli

Brooding over lopsided Piazza della Repubblica is the **Palazzo Comunale**, built in the 13th

century, renovated in the 16th, and once again in the 19th. To the north is attractive Piazza Signorelli and, on its north side, 13th-century **Palazzo Casali**, whose rather plain façade was added in the 17th century.

Inside the palace is the **Museo dell'Accademia Etrusca** (☎ 0575 63 04 15; Piazza Signorelli 9; adult/child €7/4; ☹ 10am-7pm Apr-Oct, 10am-5pm Tue-Sun Nov-Mar), with an eclectic array of art and antiquities, including Etruscan bronzes, medieval paintings and 18th-century furniture. One of the most intriguing pieces is an elaborate 2nd-century-BC bronze Etruscan oil lamp, decorated with satyrs, sirens and a Gorgon's head, weighing in at a hefty 55kg. The Medici Room contains a pair of early-18th-century globes of heaven and earth, where the cartographer takes artistic licence portraying the 'Isola di California' floating free from the western coast of America. A transitory Egyptian collection featuring a couple of mummies rounds out the ground floor. Upstairs you can see material recently excavated from local Etruscan tombs and the 18th-century library containing some 10,000 volumes, covering a range of subjects from theology to science. Save the vast new basement exhibit, the pride of the museum, for last. Well-executed displays of Etruscan and Roman ruins, archaeological models, jewellery, bronze accoutrements, pottery and mosaics are enriched by multimedia presentations describing all. Book in advance for a guided tour of the museum in English (€5, minimum six people) and three Etruscan tombs (adult/child with guide €10.50/7.75) in the surrounding countryside. Combined tours of both cost €15/9.50.

### Piazza del Duomo

Little is left of the original Romanesque character of the **cathedral** (Piazza del Duomo), northwest of Piazza Signorelli. It was completely rebuilt late in the Renaissance and again, indifferently, in the 18th century. Its true wealth lies in the riches within the **Museo Diocesano** (☎ 0575 62830; Piazza del Duomo 1; adult/child €5/3; ☹ 10am-7pm Apr-Oct, 10am-5pm Nov-Mar) in the former church of Gesù.

Room 1 has a remarkable Roman sarcophagus decorated with a frenzied battle scene between Dionysus and the Amazons. Here and continuing into the adjoining Room 4 are paintings by Luca Signorelli, including his *Compianto sul Cristo Morto* (Grief over the Dead Christ; 1502), a masterpiece of colour,

composition and pathos. In Room 3 there's a moving *Crucifixion* by Pietro Lorenzetti, and the star work of the collection: Fra Angelico's *Annunciazione* (Annunciation; 1436), one of the most recognisable images of Renaissance art that by its sheer luminosity leaves all the surrounding works in the shade. Also by Fra Angelico and almost as moving is his exquisite *Madonna*. Downstairs the Oratorio is decorated with biblical frescoes by Vasari's workshop.

### Chiesa di Santa Margherita & Fortezza

Scale the steep, quiet labyrinth of cobbled lanes in the eastern part of town to the largely 19th-century **Chiesa di Santa Margherita** (Piazza Santa Margherita; ☹ 7.30am-noon & 3-7pm Apr-Oct, 8.30am-noon & 3-6pm Oct-Apr) where the remains of Saint Margaret, the patron saint of Cortona, are on display in an ornate, 14th-century, glass-sided tomb above the main altar.

A sinner-to-saint story if there ever was one, St Margaret's early life as a mistress and mother to an illegitimate son was transformed after arriving in Cortona. After a few regrettable false-starts with local dreamboats, she found her Franciscan groove. Margaret formed her own congregation, opened a hospital, received ecstasy-charged messages from heaven, prophesied the date of her death and surrounded herself with the poor, ill, reformed, pious and penitent. She was canonized in 1728 by Pope Benedict XIII.

It's a stiff climb, but it's worth pushing even further uphill to the forbidding **Fortezza Medicea** (☎ 0575 63 04 15; adult/child €3/1.50; ☹ 10am-1.30pm & 2.30-6pm Apr-Oct). This is Cortona's highest point, with stupendous views over the surrounding countryside.

### ACTIVITIES

The tourist office can provide a comprehensive list of nearby excursions, bicycle hire and walks, including those led by **Cortona Wellness** (☎ 0575 60 31 36; www.cortonawellness.com in Italian) who organise guided four- to five-hour hikes (per group €30) for groups of two or more in the spectacular countryside around Cortona.

Films are shown at **Giardino del Parterre** in English every Wednesday night.

### COURSES

**Polymnia** (☎ 0575 61 25 82; www.polymnia.net; Vicolo Boni 18), A.K.A. Koine, offers group as well as

one-on-one Italian language courses and related cultural and social activities for non-native speakers.

### FESTIVALS & EVENTS

**Giostra dell'Archidado** A full week of merriment in May or June (the date varies to coincide with Ascension day), with trumpeting, parading and neighbourhood rivalry, culminating in a crossbow competition first held in the Middle Ages. Among other festivities, contestants from the city's traditional neighbourhoods dress up in medieval garb to compete for the *verretta d'oro* (golden arrow).

**Mostra Antiquaria** Every year for about a week from late August into the first days of September, Cortona hosts one of Italy's main antique fairs.

**Sagra del Fungo Porcino** Held in mid-August this is a similar celebration to the Steak Festival, honouring this delectable variety of mushroom.

**Sagra della Bistecca** (Steak Festival) Held on 14 and 15 August this is a gastronomic celebration, when Giardino del Parterre becomes one vast open-air grill.

### SLEEPING

**Ostello San Marco** (☎ 0575 60 13 92; ostellocortona@libero.it; Via Maffei 57; dm/d €13/34, incl breakfast) An HI-affiliated youth hostel a short, steep walk east of Piazza Garibaldi, this budget option is a run-down, ill-cared-for place, despite its impressive premises.

**Santa Margherita** (☎ 0575 63 03 36; comunita.cortona@smr.it; Via Cesare Battisti 15; s/d/tr/q €32/46/56/76) Run by sweet, obliging nuns from the religious institute, the cloister-quality rooms here are clean, though it's hard to be sure with the 40-watt light bulbs used throughout. This is a popular place, so call ahead (with Italian phrasebook at the ready).

**Betania** (☎ 0575 63 04 23; www.casaperferiebetania.com; Via Severini 50; s/with/without bathroom €38/32, d/with/without bathroom €48/44) Across the road and in the same religious spirit of Santa Margherita. A gated, beautiful, tree-lined entrance, large garden, great views and onsite church give the area a distinct monastic feel. They do dinner for €14. Off-street parking is €25 per day, though the street is just fine.

**Hotel Italia** (☎ 0575 63 02 54; www.planhotel.com/italia; Via Ghibellina 5/7; s/d/tr €79/105/135, incl breakfast; ☹ ☹ ☹) Italia is in a 17th-century palazzo just off Piazza della Repubblica. Standard rooms have traditional cross-beamed ceilings and are decorated in warm orange tones, while each of the unique superior rooms features giant bathtubs. Views are breathtaking from the roof-level breakfast room. Oriental mas-

sages, wi-fi and mountain bike hire are also available.

**Hotel San Luca** (☎ 0575 63 04 60; www.sanluccacortona.com; Piazza Garibaldi 2; s/d incl breakfast €85/120; ☹ ☹ ☹) Handy for the bus stop and its proximity to free parking, San Luca also has an upscale restaurant, Tonino. Rooms are generally satisfactory, some with magnificent panoramic views, though lightly peppered with minor maintenance issues.

**Hotel San Michele** (☎ 0575 60 43 48; www.hotelsanmichele.net; Via Guelfa 15; s €99, d €109-120, incl breakfast; ☹ closed Jan-mid-Mar; ☹ ☹ ☹) This is Cortona's finest hotel. Primarily Renaissance, but with elements dating from the 12th century and modifications over subsequent centuries, it's like a little history of Cortona in stone. Rooms are airy, spacious and exquisitely furnished. Parking is €20.

**Villa Marsili** (☎ 0575 605 252; www.villamarsili.net; Via Cesare Battisti 13; s/d incl breakfast €110/180; ☹ closed Nov-Feb; ☹ ☹ ☹) Complimentary drinks each evening, frescoes on the walls and ceiling, sparingly, but elegantly antique-furnished rooms with all mod cons and wi-fi in case you want to email your friends to crow. The walk into town is a 15-minute uphill puff. Parking is €12 per night.

### EATING

**Pane e Vino** (☎ 0575 63 10 10; Piazza Signorelli 27; snacks €6; ☹ dinner only Tue-Sun) This is a hugely popular dining hall in the centre of town. For a quick snack of regional specialities, go for the *piatto del cacciatore*, the hunter's platter of wild boar, deer, goose and turkey. There are more than 500 wines to choose from and most of the pasta is homemade.

**La Grotta** (☎ 0575 63 02 71; Piazzetta Baldi 3; meals €18-25; ☹ Wed-Mon) At the end of a blind alley just off Piazza della Repubblica, this is a rock-reliable choice, though the service (and opening hours) can be a little haphazard. Twin-roomed and intimate, it has all the virtues of a traditional trattoria. If you go for strong flavours, begin with the melted *scrota* smoked cheese with either porcini mushrooms or black truffles.

**Trattoria Dardano** (☎ 0575 60 19 44; Via Dardano 24; meals €24; ☹ Thu-Tue) Dardano is just one of half a dozen reliable, no-nonsense trattorie that line Via Dardano.

**Ristorante Tonino** (☎ 0575 63 05 00; Piazza Garibaldi 1; meals €30-35; ☹ closed Mon dinner & Tue) Tonino has magnificent views as far as Lago di Trasimeno



from its summer terrace, and specialises in antipasti. Try the *ravioli al tartufo e pecorino* (ravioli with truffles and *pecorino* cheese).

**La Bucaccia** (☎ 0575 606 039; www.labucaccia.it; Via Ghibellina 17; meals €33) Etruscan cellar ambiance with appropriate ornamentation: wine racks, grape press, tiny wine barrels, cheese wheels and an Etruscan cistern displayed under floor glass. The service is indisputably warm, but agonising slow, even for Italy.

**Osteria del Teatro** (☎ 0575 63 05 56; www.osteria-del-teatro.it; Via Maffei 2; meals €40; ☞ Thu-Tue) Friendly service, fresh flowers on every table and a liberal meting of truffle shavings awaits diners here. Featured in nearly every Italian gastronomic guide, its walls are clad with photos of actors who have dined here. In summer try the *ravioli ai fiori di zucca* (pumpkin-flower ravioli). Watch your head when the unwieldy phallus of a pepperpot is heaved out for random seasoning.

Self-caterers should stock up at **Bottega della Pasta Fresca** (Via Dardano 29), a glorious little hole-in-the-wall shop that makes its own pasta. There's a Saturday market, including farmers' products, in Piazza Signorelli.

#### GELATERIE

**Snoopy's** (Piazza Signorelli 29) Gelato is served in generous portions here, starting at €1.50 for a small.

#### DRINKING

**Tuscher Bar** (☎ 0575 6 20 53; Via Nazionale 43; ☞ closed Mon) This is a stylish place where you can enjoy a coffee or cocktail, and it also does good light lunches.

**Caffè degli Artisti** (☎ 0575 60 12 37; Via Nazionale 18) Across the road and in the same vein, this place also has a long menu of typical Italian food and pours a decent pint of Guinness.

**Route 66** (☎ 0575 6 27 27; Via Nazionale 78) Just off Piazza Garibaldi, offering ultra-modern décor, lung-vibrating music, hypnotic lights and fru-fru drinks.

#### GETTING THERE & AROUND

From the bus station at Piazza Garibaldi, LFI buses connect the town with Arezzo (€2.60, one hour, more than 10 daily), via Castiglion Fiorentino.

Shuttle buses (€1, 15 minutes) run at least hourly to Camucia–Cortona train station, on the main Rome–Florence line. Destinations include Arezzo (€2.20, 20 minutes, hourly), Florence (€6.70, 1½ hours, hourly), Rome (€9.40, 2¼ hours, every two hours) and Perugia (€2.80, 40 minutes, over 12 daily).

The tourist office has timetables and sells both bus and train tickets.

By car, the city is on the north–south SS71 that runs to Arezzo. It's also close to the SS75 that connects Perugia to the A1.