



Independent walking tour (TUS3)

The Essence of Tuscany

8-day walking tour through enchanting landscapes along the best parts of the Via Francigena, the pilgrim way to Rome, into the Val d'Orcia



TRIP NOTES

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****GENIUS LOCI TRAVEL - The Real Spirit Of Italy****



INTRODUCTION

This tour is a perfect introduction to the region and, for people who love museums, galleries and Gothic and Romanesque architecture, there is plenty to see and do. You have plenty of time to visit attractions on most of the days.

You also have the time to visit the historic towns of San Gimignano, Colle Val D'Elsa, Siena and Montepulciano, and of course all the beautiful medieval villages along the Via Francigena and in the Val d'Orcia as this tour threads together some of the most attractive towns and villages in Tuscany in an eloquent procession: Monteriggioni, admired by Dante in his Divine Comedy, San Quirico, Buonconvento, Bagno Vignoni and Pienza, arguably the most perfect Renaissance town in Tuscany. You will have the time for visits to museums and galleries to admire Gothic and Romanesque architecture as well.

However the emphasis of the tour is to enjoy the countryside, the rolling vineyards, the poppies in spring and the wild cyclamen in autumn. Most of all, many of the views have barely changed for hundreds of years. South of Siena you head off into a picturesque Tuscan landscape of gentle hills, crowned with a lonely pine or oak tree, while cypresses line the way towards distant farmhouses.

At first you walk mainly through forests and vineyards, then through the spectacular rolling hills of the Crete Senesi, with its extensive fields of wheat and sunflowers, and finally the rolling hills of the Val d'Orcia, scattered with picturesque little towns. Walking here is an unforgettable experience!

You come across one of the most beautiful abbeys in Tuscany at Monte Oliveto Maggiore. This is a typical red-brick monastery where friars of the Benedictine Order still worship. The next historical villages are Buonconvento and Montalcino, surrounded by vineyards of San Giovese grapes, for the famous Brunello wine. Then you enter the Val d'Orcia, a unique landscape scattered with wonderful little towns, such as San Quirico, Pienza and Bagno Vignoni, with its unique town square (a huge pool of healthy sulphurous water!). Your tour finishes in the town of Montepulciano where medieval architecture and vineyards fill the landscape.



Please note: This is a moderate tour which is suitable for those who have some experience of walking and a good general physical condition. Through the extensive footpath network of the area, roughly following the traces of the Via Francigena, one of Europe's most important 'highways' in medieval times, you walk from village to village, a full immersion in the world-famous Tuscan landscape.



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DAY-TO-DAY PROGRAMME

Day 1 – Arrival in Colle Val d'Elsa

Arrival in Florence and transfer to Colle Val d'Elsa (either by private taxi or public transport), where you settle in at your hotel just below the medieval town centre, known for its perfectly preserved 'tunnel' streets and its crystalware. Depending on your arrival time, you could go for a quick visit to the town centre.

Accommodation: Colle Val d'Elsa – Hotel ***

Approx. walking time: 1 h. + sightseeing time

Day 2 – Colle Val d'Elsa - Torracchia di Chiusi

The first day walk initially takes you all the way round the historical town of Colle Val D'Elsa, perhaps not as famous as other Tuscan towns, but with a very interesting town centre. Then you descend into the valley where you pick up one of the supposed routes of the ancient Via Francigena. Along this route, through a pleasant hilly landscape of vineyards and forests, you reach the small hamlet of Bibbiano. Another descent brings you down into the valley of the River Foci, which you follow for a short stretch. Then you start to climb up on a comfortable track to the beautiful agriturismo where you will spend the next two nights. Make sure you're there on time to enjoy its fabulous setting and surroundings, and perhaps its library and swimming pool too. For those who feel like it there is also a longer walking option to get here. Dinner at the private restaurant is included tonight.

Accommodation: San Gimignano - Agriturismo

Total walking distance: 14 km. Approx. walking time: 4 h. Ascent & descent: + 125 m./ - 100 m.

Day 3 – Roundwalk to San Gimignano

After breakfast you begin your walk to San Gimignano, straight from the agriturismo. First you make your way up along the ridge to the hamlets of Ciuciano and San Donato, going past several old 'pievi' (countryside churches) and villas and often with wonderful views of the San Gimignano skyline. This wonderful medieval town – sometimes referred to as having the only "skyscrapers" in Tuscany – is an absolute must, with picturesque vineyards and olive and cypress groves on either side. You have some time to explore this little romantic town with its medieval towers, of which there were once 52 (there are now less than a dozen) – wealthy, prominent families would use the height of these towers to distinguish themselves, but the towers also had a practical use in alerting the inhabitants of this walled town of approaching friends and foes. Do make a nice stroll around its impressive town walls. Then you follow the Via Francigena back to your agriturismo: first to the convent of Monte Oliveto, located on a wide ridge, then down to a small stream, which you have to cross, before you climb back up to your agriturismo. In the evening you have another nice meal at the agriturismo.

Accommodation: San Gimignano - Agriturismo

Total walking distance: 16 km. Approx. walking time: 5 h. Ascent & descent: +/- 250 m.

Day 4 – Walk to Monteriggioni

Today you leave the agriturismo and head for Monteriggioni, described as a crown in the landscape by Dante. The walk first brings you down into the river valley, and then, more or less following the Foci, you reach one of the most wonderful Romanesque churches in Tuscany, la Badia a Conèo. The next stop is Quartaia, followed by Gracciano, once one of the most important wheat towns in Tuscany. Another short stretch brings you to the Badia ad Isola, once an important stop on the medieval Via Francigena, and a very intriguing building. The final destination for today is Monteriggioni, where you'll have time for a drink in the square. Then you are picked up by your taxi and transferred to Siena, where you settle in at your centrally located hotel, just a few minutes away from the famous



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'Piazza del Campo'. In the evening you can take a nice stroll into town to have dinner in one of the many nice restaurants, or sip a drink in the 'Piazza del Campo'.

Accommodation: Siena – Hotel ***

Total walking distance: 20 km. Approx. walking time: 5,5 h. Ascent & descent: +/- 100 m.

Optional extra day: Siena

Take your time to explore Siena, one of Italy's most beautiful medieval towns. Its heart is the perfect, shell-shaped Piazza del Campo, scene of the Palio, with the Palazzo Pubblico and the nearby Duomo of black-and-white marble. Enough to see and do for a day...

Accommodation: Siena – Hotel ***

Day 5 – Walk to Monte Oliveto Maggiore

Today you first make a short train journey to Asciano, a beautiful, yet relatively unknown walled town. From here you start your walk in a southern direction. You cross the fascinating hilly region known as the *Crete Senesi*, a fascinating area of odd-shaped clay hills. In the afternoon you reach the monastery of Monte Oliveto Maggiore, built in the 14th century by the Olivetan monks. Surrounded by a forest of cypresses, this building is famous throughout the world for the frescoes in the courtyard painted by the 15th-century painters Signorelli and Sodoma. The library and church of the convent are architectural masterpieces too. The walk is relatively short so there is time to visit both the charming village of Asciano and the monastery itself. Then you walk the last short stretch and settle in a nearby charming hotel. In the evening you dine at the restaurant on the premises of the hotel.

Accommodation: Asciano – Hotel ***

Total walking distance: 12 km. Approx. walking time: 3-4 h. Ascent & descent: + 100 m./- 25 m.

Day 6 – From Monte Oliveto to Buonconvento

Past the monastery of Monte Oliveto you first walk uphill to the small village of Chiusure, in a commanding position on a ridge, with great views of the monastery and the whole *'Crete Senesi'* area. Then you continue mostly downhill to the walled medieval town Buonconvento. Crossing olive tree fields along woodland tracks and so-called *'strade bianche'* ('white' gravel roads), you reach this small town, where Emperor Henry VII died in 1313. From here you can either walk or take the bus to Montepulciano, where you stay for the next two nights.

Accommodation: Montepulciano – Hotel ***

Total walking distance: 12 km. Approx. walking time: 3-4 h. Ascent & descent: + 25 m./- 150 m.

Day 7 – From Montepulciano to Pienza

You walk down the medieval alleys of Montepulciano to the impressive Chiesa di San Biagio, a 16th-century church nestled on the edge of the village walls, overlooking the winding valley below. From here you commence the walk into the picturesque valley and through vineyards and olive groves, past pastel-coloured villas and across rolling hills. This is a morning of delightful Tuscan scenery, enjoyed and experienced at its best - on foot. You then reach the peaceful village of Montichiello, where you can enjoy a flavoursome lunch under the welcome shade of creeping grapevines with a stunning view out over Montichiello's ancient village gateway. After lunch you can either continue the walk to the wonderful Renaissance town of Pienza or take a short bus ride back to Montepulciano for a sightseeing tour of its labyrinthine maze of alleyways and imposing defensive walls as well as a shopping tour in its classy boutiques.

Accommodation: Montepulciano - Hotel***

Total walking distance: 14 km. Approx. walking time: 4-5 h. Ascent & descent: + 250 m./- 350 m.



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Day 8 – Departure

End of the tour. From Montepulciano it's easy to return to either Rome or Florence.

TOUR DETAILS

ACCOMMODATION & MEALS

All nights are spent in beautiful, characteristic family-run hotels (generally 3-star; 4/5-star on request) and beautiful *agriturismos*. All rooms have en-suite facilities.

Most accommodations are on a **B&B** basis. Only on nights 2 & 3 at the agriturismo and night 5 at the hotel near the monastery of Monte Oliveto are you on a half-board basis; the other nights you will be free to make your own dinner arrangements. You can either eat at the premises of the hotel (on some occasions) or choose from the wide choice of restaurants in the area. Your accommodation holder can give you good tips.

No picnic lunches are included in the tour price, but these can be prepared for you by the accommodation holders, or materials for picnics can be purchased in the villages where you'll be staying. On some occasions you have the option of having your lunch in a restaurant along the way.

UPGRADE/CHANGES IN ACCOMMODATION

It is possible to upgrade this tour, staying in more luxurious 4-star hotels (except for the agriturismo in San Gimignano which is already 4-star level). Accommodation in San Quirico or Pienza is also available as alternative to the hotel in Montepulciano.

LEVEL OF DIFFICULTY

Moderately easy (2-3): Mostly easy walks, though some include walking uphill, sometimes on paths with rough surfaces. On some days extensions or shortcuts are possible.

Fitness: High standard of fitness is not necessary but you should be able to walk for up to 5 hours a day in hot sun on dusty or stony tracks.

N.B. During summer the difficulty of this tour definitely increases due to the heat. We therefore advise against booking this tour during the period between about 14th July and 20th August.

FOOTPATHS & WAYMARKING

Footpaths: Most paths are relatively well maintained; on many occasions you'll follow so-called *strade bianche* (unsurfaced roads), easy to follow and very unlikely to be overgrown (*we continuously check our routes – please help us by providing your feedback on the quality of the paths*).

Waymarking: A large part of the route is waymarked, but at certain places we have found more interesting routes than the waymarked ones; therefore you should follow the route descriptions provided together with the maps. With these you will always be able to find your route.



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INCLUDED

- 1 night Hotel in Colle Val d'Elsa*** - BB
- 2 nights Agriturismo near San Gimignano*** - HB
- 1 night in Siena*** - BB
- 1 night in Monte Oliveto – HB
- 2 nights in Montepulciano*** - BB
- Extensive route notes, with description of the route & tourist information
- Maps at 1 : 25.000 scale
- 24/7 assistance
- Luggage transport
- Private transfers as specified

NOT INCLUDED

- Departure taxes
- Visa & travel Insurance
- Drinks and meals not mentioned in the itinerary
- Optional additional tours or activities
- Tips & Items of personal nature

ARRIVAL & DEPARTURE

Arrival: The tour starts in COLLE VAL D'ELSA, linked to FLORENCE by a frequent bus service. A taxi pick-up service can be arranged from either Florence (hotel, airport or train station), or Pisa (airport).

Departure: The tour ends after breakfast in MONTEPULCIANO. By local bus you reach one of the nearest train stations (Montepulciano and Chiusi), where you can find regular trains to both Rome and Florence. Upon request a taxi service is available to bring you directly to your next destination.

TOUR VARIATIONS

In any of the accommodations 'en route' extra nights are available. Especially an extra night in Siena is highly recommended. At the beginning or the end of the tour you can also visit Florence. Also in ROME several good accommodations are available. Details and prices on request. The tour can also be extended with a few days at a beautiful agriturismo for some relaxation in the countryside. Several superb accommodations are available. Details & prices on request.

Longer and shorter versions of this tour are also available. Prices on request. Why not check out our Cinque Terre tours as well?

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