



Independent walking tour (TUS4)

Walking the Val d'Orcia

7-day walking tour through enchanting landscapes along the medieval pilgrim way from Canterbury to Rome, into the amazing Val d'Orcia



TRIP NOTES

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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.

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 Siena

Arrival in Siena, where you settle in at your centrally located hotel, just a few minutes away from the famous '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 ***

Optional extra day: Siena

Take your time to explore Siena, one of Italy's most beautiful medieval cities. Its heart is the perfect, shell-shaped Piazza del Campo, scene of the Palio, where you find the Palazzo Pubblico, with its pictures and frescoes including Lorenzetti's 'Allegory of Good and Bad Government'. There is also the medieval black-and-white marble Duomo, built in 1196-1216, with the remarkable Libreria Piccolomini, decorated by Pinturicchio. You could also see the Museo dell'Opera with Duccio's Maestà, the list goes on and on.

Accommodation: Siena – Hotel ***

Day 2 – 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 h. Ascent & descent: + 100 m./- 25 m.

Day 3 – 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 a wonderful view of the monastery and the whole *Crete Senesi* area. Then you continue your walk, mostly downhill, to Buonconvento, another walled medieval town. Crossing olive tree fields along woodland tracks and so-called '*strade bianche*' ('white' gravel roads), you will eventually reach this small town, where Emperor Henry VII died in 1313. From here you have the possibility of either continuing the walk or taking the bus to San Quirico (or Montepulciano – in case you opt for the 8-day tour), where you stay for the next two nights.

Accommodation: San Quirico – Hotel ***

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

Day 4 – Roundwalk Bagno Vignoni

You first make an easy stroll along another '*strada bianca*' to the wonderful Ripa d'Orcia, a small fortified village in a strategic position above the River Orcia. On the other side of the river lies the castle of Rocca d'Orcia and Monte Amiata, a former volcano, symbol of southern Tuscany and important today for its thermal water. You then walk along the banks of the Orcia and reach Bagno Vignoni, which was built in the 13th century to allow Lorenzo de' Medici and various popes to relax in healthy thermal water. This little village is very peculiar. Indeed, instead of the usual central square, there is a large thermal pool! Especially on cooler days, the effect of the rising steam is



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incredible. Then you can either take a bus back to San Quirico or walk up the gravel road and past the hamlet of Vignoni to return to San Quirico.

Accommodation: San Quirico – Hotel ***

Total walking distance: 8 km. Approx. walking time: 2,5 h. Ascent & descent: + 75 m./- 50 m.

Optional extra day: Roundwalk Montalcino – Sant'Antimo

This walk starts from Montalcino, the highest and one of the most scenic villages of the area. It takes you partly through the vineyards, and partly through the more forested landscape south of Montalcino. The goal of the walk is to reach the stunning Abbey of Sant'Antimo (Abbazia di Sant'Antimo), "one of the finest Romanesque religious buildings in Italy." The church dates from the 12th century and is built in a picture-perfect setting, in a large valley with views of the hill town Castelnuovo dell'Abate, rolling hills covered in olive groves and vineyards, and wild forests.

Accommodation: San Quirico – Hotel ***

Total walking distance: 12,5 km. Approx. walking time: 3,5-4 h. Ascent & descent: + 150 m./- 350 m.

Day 5 – Walk to Pienza

Today you walk from San Quirico to Pienza, a small, perfectly laid-out Renaissance town. You leave San Quirico in an eastern direction through the medieval town gate. The route mainly follows so-called *strade bianche* through the archetypal Tuscan landscape. Around lunchtime you reach the wonderful Renaissance town of Pienza, where you have time to look around and perhaps visit the beautiful museum, inside the Palace of Pope Pius II. Pienza is often described as the "ideal city" or the "utopian city". It is certainly one of the best planned Renaissance towns, where a model of ideal living and government was attempted. It represented the utopia of the "*civitas*", based on the concept of a town able to satisfy the needs of a peaceful and hardworking population. Pienza's location in the centre of the Val d'Orcia, a wonderfully harmonious valley, helps the town to embody the fundamental principle that humanistic architecture attempted to create: a balanced relationship between Man and Nature. After your visit you take the local bus to Montepulciano, where you settle in at a nice welcoming hotel, just below the main square.

Accommodation: Montepulciano – Hotel ***

Total walking distance: 8 km. Approx. walking time: 2,5 h. Ascent & descent: + 75 m./- 50 m.

Day 6 – From Montepulciano to Pienza

After breakfast 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 join the locals on a short local bus ride back to Montepulciano and enjoy a sightseeing tour of its labyrinthine maze of alleyways and imposing defensive walls. The rest of the afternoon you are free to explore and perhaps shop among Montepulciano's classy boutiques.

Accommodation: Montepulciano – Hotel ***

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

Day 7 – Departure

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



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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. You'll spend one night in the monastery of Monte Oliveto with good, though spartan rooms, in a unique setting.

Most accommodations are on a **B&B** basis. Only on the night in 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.

INCLUDED

- 1 night in Siena *** - BB
- 1 night in Monte Oliveto – HB
- 2 nights in San Quirico d'Orcia *** - BB
- 2 nights in Montepulciano *** - BB
- Extensive route notes, with description of the route & tourist information
- Maps at 1 : 25.000 scale
- GPS tracks for each day
- 24/7 assistance
- Luggage transport
- Private transfers as specified

NOT INCLUDED

- Departure taxes
- Visas & Travel Insurance
- Tourist tax
- Drinks and meals not mentioned in the itinerary
- Optional additional tours or activities
- Tips & Items of personal nature

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.



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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.

ARRIVAL & DEPARTURE

Arrival: The tour starts in SIENA, 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. A frequent bus service can bring you to 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

It is possible to include some extra nights in your tour, in any of the accommodations 'en route'. For those who have never been to Siena an extra day here is strongly recommended.

At the beginning or the end of the tour there is the opportunity to visit Florence. The tour can easily be extended with a few days there. 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.



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PREMIERE INN LUXURY VERSION

A luxury version of this tour is also available, with stays in the most authentic luxury hotels in the area. We can offer you a large selection of 'Premiere Inns', very good hotels, some among the world's best hotels, as acclaimed by *Condé Nast Traveler*, *Travel+Leisure* and many others. Genius Loci Travel, as the leading adventure travel company in Italy, can book a room in the hotel of your dreams!

EXTENSIONS

Possible extensions: Rome, Florence, and why not Umbria! Prices on request. Longer and shorter versions of this tour are also available. Prices on request. Why not check out our other Tuscany tours as well?

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