

## Traveling to Italy: Tuscany II



When you travel to Tuscany you must visit some of the hill towns, but don't forget the beauty of the Tuscan countryside. You could just drive around the area, getting lost here and there, grabbing a picnic lunch, and pulling over to relax in a field of poppies.

Every direction you look as you travel through the country is another beautiful vista. It's serene, lush, textural and picturesque. I actually became frustrated taking pictures because I didn't know which shot to take. For a while I took all of the shots, then after a bit I set the camera down and just enjoyed being there.

### Day 7 continued:

We did have cram a lot into a few short days and in my last article about Tuscany I told you about our visit to Siena. Well, that was just a morning visit and shortly, we were on our way to check out San Gimignano.

As expected, the approach to the town was lovely. It does give you an interesting perspective to approach a hill town. Here you can see that this town still had many of the family towers that were built to protect whole families from marauders. The higher the tower, generally, the more well off the family.





San Gimignano was founded in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century BC by the Etruscans. Hundreds of years later, the hill town got a name that stuck. It was named after the bishop; Saint Giminianus who helped keep the town safe from Attila and the Huns.

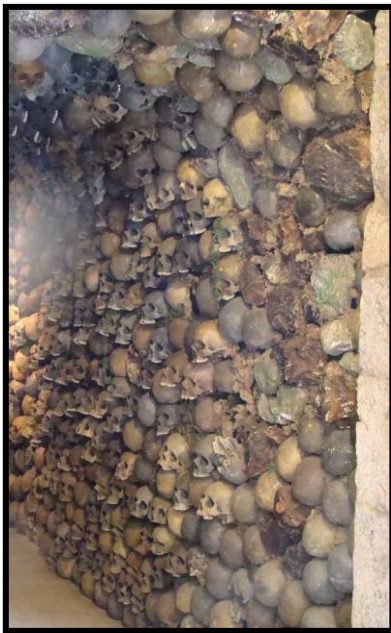
As we got closer, the walls of the city were a spectacle in themselves. These appear to have been added to at some time with the materials changing from stone to a redder brick of some sort. I loved the foliage growing out of the grouting and plan on painting some of these sights one of these days. This little town was quite busy and I've heard it said that this is one of the touristier hill towns to visit.

San Gimignano is well known for its white wine. It is surrounded by vineyards that grow the white wine grapes that create their namesake wines. Because of this, many of the tourists that were here were spending their time in the wine tasting rooms and buying wine and local crafts to send home.



Your first instinct is to check out some of the towers. Each one is a little different yet all interesting in and of themselves. I included this photo specifically to show you how “hilly” these towns are. It takes real stamina to get around in them but their magnificence is worth the heavy breathing!

After hours of looking upwards towards the next tower or climbing alleyway, it felt good to just notice the simple things that were down towards my feet!! This gave my neck a rest and brought a little life and color to the visit. I also took many photos of the beautifully carved doors in San Gimignano. Just look at the shine on this one. You can almost see the flowers reflected in it!



Then, one can't ignore the bizarre alongside the beauty. Nearly every one of these hill towns had a museum of torture. We didn't feel the need to go inside to see the equipment used to torture people but I was walking by this alley, and this was the entrance to something that I really didn't want to see. It was so bizarre, I had to photograph it.

The rest of our Day 7 was spent back in Volterra. Something about that particular town kept calling us back. We revisited many of the shops and vistas that we enjoyed the day before and talked about coming back to Volterra for an extended period of time, perhaps a full year to try living the Tuscan lifestyle!

## Day 8:

On this day, our trip was coming to a quick end. We packed up our bags in Florence and started the drive back to the airport in Rome for the long journey back the next day.

However, after looking through Rick Steve's Italy book, we decided to take a couple of little side trips on our way back towards Rome. The first town we stopped in was Montepulciano. It wasn't too far off of the main highway to Rome so we felt we could get a quick peek and be on our way!



For the first time since we arrived in Italy, we had a rather cool, rainy day. I think this did keep some of the tourists away, but the ones that were there were jamming themselves into the open shops and wineries. This is the gate into the town and I have to say we didn't venture too far from here. As you can see it was an uphill climb to anywhere else you wanted to go.

So, after a quick trip about halfway up the hill, a glance here and there into the alleyways and staircases that forked off of the main street, we were ready to rest. (Notice it looks sunny at the top of the stairs? I'm not sure why because it was definitely raining. Maybe it was my flash, or simply the magic of Italy!)





For the first time on our trip we went into one of the wineries where they offer tastes of all their wines, cheeses, sausages and more. What a fun treat this was! We tried bruschetta, several different cheeses with jams and blueberry syrups on them. I did taste wild boar...yuk, greasy, but the wines helped wash everything down! We purchased a variety of items to send home for our family and friends to try and that party was a hit as well!

### Pienza:

We still had a little bit more time, and there was a very small town I had read about that I thought I would love because it is mostly residential and not very touristy at all. It is called Pienza. Well, I was right, I fell in love. Just look at the main street here with the violet flowers lining the street!



I found the street I wanted to live on. This one with its double wood doors, well maintained garage doors and shutters, lace window coverings, flower boxes and stone façade. I was in heaven.

Or maybe I'll live here. Weather and time worn stucco exterior with those wooden doors I've come to enjoy all topped off with colorful flowers of all varieties is out of a dream of mine. How I wish I could have seen the interiors of some of these war and welcoming exteriors!



Every morning I would walk down to this little café and sit at the outside tables having some coffee and a piece of bakery. I'd think about what articles I want to add to the website and call Matt to discuss them. Of course he'd still be sleeping since I'd be 6 hours ahead of him!

While I was waiting for Matt to get up, maybe my husband and I would walk over a couple of blocks and do a little shopping for dinner. Pick up a loaf of fresh bread, vegetables to make a soup, and although we don't really drink, I think if we lived in Italy we'd have to start drinking wine with dinner, don't you?





The stroll back home would take us passed the view out from the town, over the wall lined with flowers and herbs, to the countryside.

Just about the time I'd have my paints and watercolor paper set up to paint what I could see from my windows, Matt would call and bring me back to the real world!

Oh my, was I just in a dream sequence? I think I was and it was wonderful. What a lovely day dream. I'll have to talk to Matt about bringing me out of it too soon!



Well, just as the dream was short and sweet, so was our whirlwind trip to Italy. We drove the rest of the afternoon to get to Rome at rush hour and it took us hours to get around the city. Thank heaven for our GPS system which helped us find our hotel near the airport. By the time we returned our car and were back at the hotel, there was only time for a quick bite before bedtime. At that point I want to be home...now! The flights were challenging the next day and we got home much later than expected. But we were safe on American soil again and as always, happy to be home.

Eight quick days certainly didn't do it justice, but I will always appreciate the chance I had to do something so wonderful.

I am also thankful for the opportunity to put my experience down on paper. It's been more than three months since the trip and as you can imagine, some of the details are growing fuzzy. I'm glad I took the time to divide up the photos into their locations right after arriving home or I never could have told some of them apart. I highly recommend both of these exercises the next time you do any traveling.

So I thank you all for the chance to tell of my experience and I hope that if you ever have the opportunity to visit Italy or any destination different from your own that you jump at the chance to expand your horizons. I learned, I experienced new things, I grew to love this pretty new place and I can't wait to go again!

Shari



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