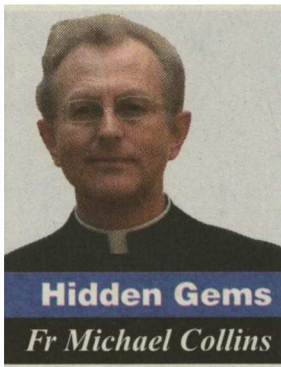


Going back in time to reach Rome on a pilgrimage trail



Fr Michael Collins continues his walk on a stretch of the ancient pilgrim way the Via Frangigena

Poor weather put paid to my initial steps along the Via Frangigena. The owner of the Hotel Puccini kindly gave me a lift to the ancient town of San Miniato in Tuscany about 20 kilometres from Lucca.

San Miniato is famous for art and occupied an important strategic role in the medieval period. The town lay on the popular pilgrimage route and also was close to Florence, Pisa, Lucca and Siena. As a result it was often prey to passing armies. In the tenth century Otto, the first Holy Roman emperor claimed the town and built a protective defensive wall.

The hotel did not offer an evening meal but had arranged dinner in a nearby restaurant. Here I dined on white truffle pasta and exquisite steak with Parmesan and black truffle shavings.

All this was done, dear reader, so that I could pass on the details of these delights to you!

The next morning the weather had improved. A watery sun

shone and spurred me on.

A day's walk across a fairly flat terrain brought me to Monteriggioni, a charming medieval hill top fortified town. Here I stayed in a delightful B&B owned by a German and Dutch couple.

In the morning I woke to the cooing of pigeons padding up and down on my windowsill.

Such was the silence of the Sunday morning that they seemed to be the only things stirring. Even the cats and dogs seemed comatose.

The bell in the tower rang at 9.45, alerting me to Mass and so I trundled over to the little stone building.

The elderly priest celebrated Mass with 12 people.

I tried to imagine what it must have been like centuries ago when pilgrims along the route packed into the local churches and shrines for their devotions.

The old town comprises about 20 houses ranged around a medieval church.

Exploration took less than 20 minutes before I took to the road, this time in the company of a French couple I had met in the local cafe.

My next stop was Siena. One of the jewels of Tuscany, there

is no comparable city in Italy. I stayed in the elegant Grand Hotel Continental built as a wedding gift by Pope Alexander VII for his niece.

Once more I was confronted with the problem of staying in my magnificent room or going to explore the city.

Having been to Siena many times, I extended the wisdom of Solomon once more and spent a great deal of time lolling around the room. From my window I had a magnificent view of the tower and facade of the cathedral.

From the opulence of the centrally-located hotel – I am told it is the best in Siena – I made forays to the great Duomo, the Orphanage of Santa Maria, as well as dipping in and out of the city's cafes. I particularly enjoyed visiting St Catherine of Siena's house but I must tell you about that another time.

The weather had turned cool. It was now late October and I needed constant revival with scalding espressos and rum-saturated pastries for which one would gladly surrender one's life.

After two days of luxury it was back to the trail. With a slight detour I visited San Gimignano with its enormous

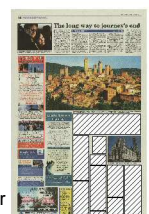
medieval towers used to dry dyed cloth. That city is also worth describing in detail on another occasion but suffice it

to say that San Gimignano is one of the most charming areas of Tuscany.

My penultimate stop was Viterbo, regarded as the best preserved of Italy's large medieval towns.

Had my trip coincided with the feast of St Rose on 3rd September I would have witnessed the marvelous procession of the saint's statue. Mounted on a wooden column, 125 men carry the image through the streets of the medieval town. Having seen the procession some years ago I relived the sense of anticipation and excitement of the annual feast day.

My last stop before Rome was the old Etruscan town of Vetralla. The piazza is like the set of an Italian movie. Young men, their black hair slicked back in the latest style, leaned up against



the walls of the crumbling piazza, smoldering away at the women who were taking their afternoon walk.

I read with amusement a medieval Latin inscription near the gate of the town which pointed to the nearby Street of the Cobblers and Prostitutes. I wondered what made that unlikely combination.

Many people who undertake the Spanish Camino talk about the great spiritual peace and camaraderie. The Via Frangigena

likewise offers time for contemplation. However, it is probably best to arrange a trip with like minded companions as there are not many pilgrims along the route. I stayed in a small villa set in an olive grove outside Vetralla. Setting out early one morning I met two German travellers. Fifteen centuries earlier, their Teutonic ancestors had thundered down this road on horseback, their armies intent on taking the Eternal City. They, however, mounted their bicycles and pedalled off along the ancient Via Cassia which lies under the Via Frangigena.

My journey ended in Rome, where I spent a few days in the busy, noisy capital. From time to time I found my mind wandering back to the flaxen-coloured fields of Tuscany.

The road is a great leveller. The journey is probably best made with a companion or two as the route is nothing as packed as the Camino of Santiago.

The charming medieval towns contrast with the lush countryside paths. There is something to appeal to every taste.

The Italian Camino offers each traveller a new horizon and leads us on a journey into ourselves.

■ **Fr Michael Collins travelled courtesy Green Life Tours:**
(353)1 525 28 86 or
www.caminoways.com



Tuscan jewel – The black and white cathedral in Siena

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Medieval magnificence – With its huge towers which were used to dry dyed cloth, the small walled hill town of San Gimignano is one of the most charming areas of Tuscany. In its heyday the town had 72 towers, but today only 14 remain.