



# An ancient route where all roads lead to Rome

TUSCANY, ITALY

Jerome Reilly

**W**E HAD spent three perfect hours ambling in warm sunshine along the famous white roads of Tuscany, the silence broken only by bird song, the crunch of two pairs of hiking boots on flinty limestone and the occasional bass grunt of wild boar from deep inside the forest.

Tuscany's high woodlands are both larder and sanctuary for the boar. In the fall, they happily gorge on chestnuts and in summer the dark forests also provide perfect cover for raids on nearby vineyards in search of ripening grapes.

It's no wonder that in autumn and winter the hunters, replete with leggings of stout leather to protect them from sharp tusks, arrive with packs of hounds to pit their wits against a most resolute foe. The reward is fine, truly organic, dining for months on end.

During our five day trek across the Tuscan countryside we never saw a live boar but there was evidence all around us - the unmistakable horseshoe shaped tracks in the margins of soft mud and freshly ploughed rich brown earth that could only have been disturbed by tusk and snout.

That night in the wonderful hilltop town of San Gimignano we saw its first cousin, Porcchetta Toscana, freshly roasted, in the window of a rather grand Macelleria. The crackling was the colour of terracotta, a baguette jutting jauntily beneath its jib. It seemed perfectly appropriate in this medieval fortress town that is a Unesco World Heritage Site.

It looked delicious but delicate slivers of meat was not on our culinary agenda. We were on the hunt for heartier fare. One of the rewards of stretching your legs on a five or six hour walk on the Strade Bianche or "white roads" is the indulgence of unlimited pasta at journey's end. What I wanted was ravioli the size of a wealthy man's wallet, filled with spinach and cheese, an aromatic cream sauce and tobacco-fine basil. And that is what I got.

The food was abundant and delicious and high in the calories our tired bodies demanded. Pasta was followed by a handful of lamb cutlets flamed over an open fire in a rustic trattoria where it looked as though three generations of one family were working. There were raised voices bursting out of the kitchen. It sounded like an unholy row until the copper pots rattled with laughter.

We savoured every last drop of Vernaccia - a local white wine made in the hillside vineyards above this rather touristy and expensive town and ordered two glasses of grappa as we looked over the map of the next day's ramble; a perfect end to a perfect day.

If there is one quibble about eating out in

Tuscany it is that while the food was excellent and not particularly expensive, the final bill was always far higher than we guesstimated when perusing the menu. We never quite got to grips with local taxes and "cover" charges that are automatically added.

Because our walking holiday took place in March before the summertime scheduled flights to Florence, we had to make alternative arrangements. We booked flights to Rome and took a private people carrier taxi (€15 each) to Rome Termini Station. The driver tore along the dotted line of the autostrada. In all 38 minutes from airport arrivals hall to the centre of Rome. Not bad.

We had pre-booked one-way rail tickets to Florence (€86 a pair) on a high speed train which whizzed through the Italian countryside at 150 kph or so and had us in Florence by early afternoon. We checked our bags into storage at the train station (€5 for each bag) and spent the rest of the day exploring the streets that surround the Basilica di Santa Maria del Fiore (Basilica of Saint Mary of the Flower) as well as the cathedral itself.

It was all a bit rushed but we couldn't resist the opportunity for the whistle-stop tour of Florence before paying a few euro for a local train to San Miniato from where our walk was to officially begin the next morning (Monday).

We left our suitcases down at reception to be ferried to our next hotel, grabbed a quick breakfast and hit the road with a light rucksack. Within minutes we had turned off the highway and were following the red, black and white signs that mark the ancient pilgrim's path.

The Via Francigena literally means the "road that comes from France" but the road to Rome which has been in use since the sixth century often began for the ancients in the cathedral town of Canterbury in England.

Since we last walked on the Via Francigena (Viterbo to Rome a couple of years ago) the Italian Government has spent a lot of money improving signposting and facilities along the route. Every few miles there is a picnic table, fresh water and a billboard map featuring local landmarks and places of interest.

These are useful additions which do not spoil the rustic appeal of the Via. The pathway, occasionally of time-worn cobbles as smooth as a young nun's cheek, takes a meandering route across the Tuscan hills. We started around 9am and finished around 2pm each day which included a couple of breaks and the occasional diversion to a place of interest. It was hilly but not particularly hard walking and perfect for anyone with normal levels of fitness.

Each evening brought a new adventure in a new town. We found the town of Gambassi Terme after a memorable day's trek, skirting vineyards as workers pruned the vines in preparation for the summer, or cut back the olive trees that marched in uniform lines up the Tuscan hills like a well drilled Roman legion.

Colle di Val d'Elsa, another Unesco World

Heritage Site is an enchanted hill top village where every turn brought another architectural or artistic gem. Friday was to be our final walk - into the city of Siena - but a quick look at the map the previous evening showed that most of the route would bring us through Siena's industrial and business district. That held little attraction so we snagged a lift with the German owner of our accommodation who had to drop off our luggage at our next hotel in Siena anyway.

It meant we could spend more time exploring the famous Piazza del Campo, the town square, which houses the Palazzo Pubblico, the Torre del Mangia and a handful of swish restaurants, cafés, hotels and rather swanky shops. It's also famous for hosting the Palio horse race twice a year for which the whole city comes to a standstill. The jockeys ride bareback on the sharp dangerous course around the Piazza representing the contradas of Siena - the districts into which the town is divided. It's worth a look on YouTube

It's fiercely contested - a heady mixture of politics, pride, skulduggery and tempest. Occasionally it descends into fisticuffs among the passionate supporters of the contradas against a backdrop of flamboyant coats of arms hand painted on mainsail-sized flags, medieval pageantry, patron saints and fearless gambling on the outcome.

Later we sipped away at a bottle of Chianti near the great cathedral. It was time to rest weary limbs. The next day we took a coach to Rome arriving mid-afternoon on Saturday and enjoyed dinner in a rather twee but comfortable trattoria near the fountains of Trevi before departure the following morning.

Nietzsche observed that "all truly great thoughts are conceived while walking." I confess no great thoughts or enlightenment came to us in the hills of Tuscany, but cares melt away when the only worry is what to have for dinner later.

*“ What I wanted was  
ravioli the size of a rich  
man’s wallet, and that’s  
what I got ”*

## GETTING THERE

CAMINOWAYS.COM sister brand

FrancigenaWays.com specialises in walking and cycling holidays on the Via Francigena, the Camino to Rome. Like the Camino de Santiago, the Via Francigena is a medieval pilgrim trail and European Cultural itinerary. The Via Francigena starts in Canterbury Cathedral and crosses France, Switzerland and Italy.

A 6-night Easy Walking holiday in the heart of Tuscany, covering a stunning section of the Via Francigena from San Miniato to Siena, starts at €679pps in high season (April to October). This holiday includes accommodation on half board basis, luggage transfer from hotel to hotel and holiday pack with practical information. Flights and insurance not included. Hotel upgrades are also available in larger towns and cities.

Request a free itinerary and quote online at [www.francigenaways.com](http://www.francigenaways.com), contact the Francigena Ways team on 01 525 2886 or by email [info@francigenaways.com](mailto:info@francigenaways.com)



**LOCAL DELICACY:** Freshly roasted Porchetta Toscana in San Gimignano

Publication: Sunday Independent Living

Date: Sunday, June 08, 2014

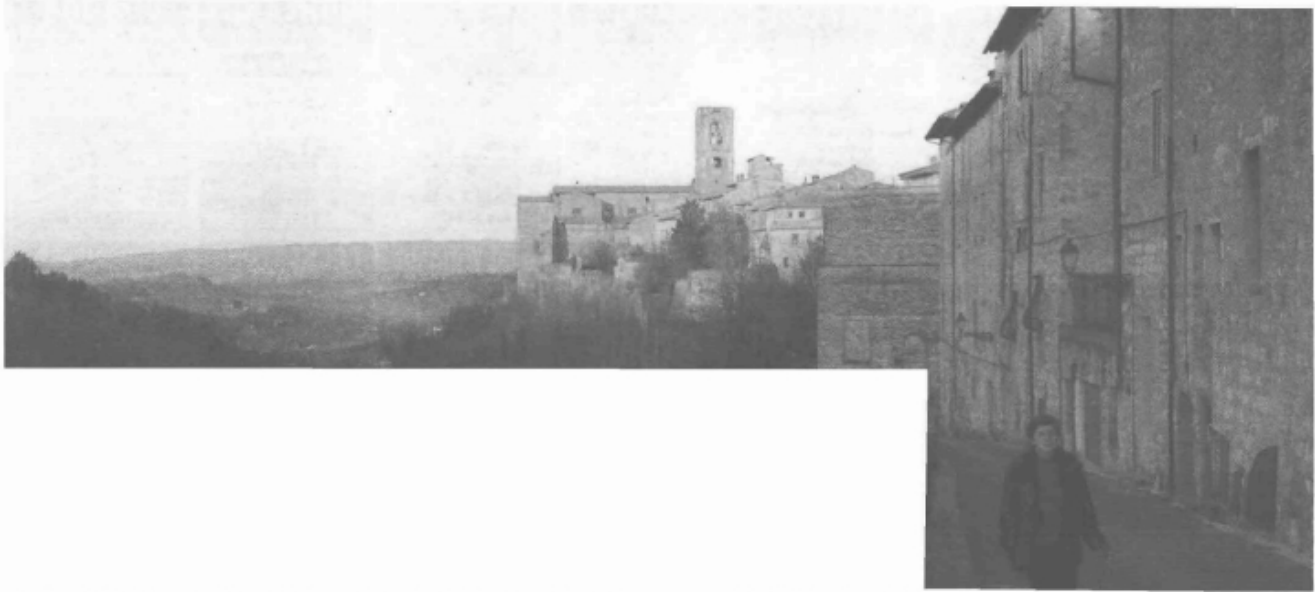
Page: 30

Extract: 3 of 3

Circulation: 238798

Author: Jerome Reilly

Headline: An ancient route where all roads lead to Rome



**THE END OF THE ROAD:** The white roads of the 'Via Francigena', a pilgrim's way which stretches from Canterbury to Rome, meander through the Tuscan hills passing through places such as San Gimignano, a world heritage site, and the famous city of Siena