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## TUSCANY COUNTRYSIDE TOUR FROM ROME PIENZA AND MONTEPULCIANO PRIVATE DAY TRIP



## TOUR DESCRIPTION

Dear friends, Tuscany is one of the most loved regions by foreign tourists, proliferating of exceptional artistic and food & wine inspirations thanks to the dense network of "**Strade del Gusto- Roads of Taste**" scattered throughout the territory and masterpieces of strong international appeal, one above all the "**David**" by Michelangelo, one of the most famous sculptures in the world. Cradle of the Italian Renaissance, Florence and its historic center, a UNESCO World Heritage Site, would be enough to retrace the history of the entire country. But unique treasures are scattered in the other art cities of the region, from Lucca to Livorno, from Siena to Arezzo, from Pisa to Massa-Carrara, without forgetting the minor villages with medieval charm and the fortified citadels scattered almost everywhere in the territory.

### -PIENZA-

Pienza is a small village in southern Tuscany, in the famous Val d'Orcia! It is located about 20 kms east of Montalcino and a few kms west of Montepulciano in the beautiful region of Val d'Orcia south of Siena, among soft and poetic hills and fabulous views. Pienza enjoys a truly strategic position perched on the top of a hill, overlooking the entire valley, Valle d'Orcia, with a breathtaking view.

This charming village is widely known as the "**ideal**" city of the Renaissance, created by the great humanist Enea Silvio Piccolomini, who later became **Pope Pius II**. Silvio Piccolomini had the economic possibilities and influence to be able to transform his humble native village, **Corsignano**, into what he believed should be a "utopian city", which should have embodied the principles and philosophy of the classical age and of the great Italian Renaissance.

The city until 1462 was nothing but a small village called Corsignano. The event that changed its fortunes was the birth in 1405 of Enea Silvio Piccolomini who 53 years later became Pope Pius II. A journey he made to

Mantua, nearby Milan, led him to cross the place of birth and the degradation he found led him to decide the construction of a new ideal city over the ancient village, entrusting the renovation project plan to the architect Bernardo Rossellino with supervision of the great humanist Leon Battista Alberti; the construction work lasted about four years, from 1459 to 1462, and brought to light a harmonious town with typically fifteenth-century forms. A complex of beautiful and harmonious palaces was built, the **Cathedral**, the **Papal Residence or Palazzo Piccolomini**, the **Municipality (Town Hall)** and the **beautiful Central Square**.

The **Bishop's Palace** of Pienza is located on the left side of Piazza Pio II in front of Palazzo Piccolomini. This ancient Gothic palace was donated by Pope Pius II to Cardinal Rodrigo Borgia (future Pope Alexander VI) who at the time was his closest collaborator with the position of Vice-Chancellor of the Catholic Church; he restructured it during the fifteenth century to make it his residence. The sober façade is characterized by a slender portal and two orders of "Guelph Cross" windows. On the edge facing the Corso del Rossellino you can see the Borgia family crest. At the moment it is the seat of the "Diocesan Museum of Sacred Art"

The untimely death of Pope Pius II also closed the history of the new city, which since then has undergone limited changes.

For the beauty of its historic Renaissance center, in 1996 Pienza became part of UNESCO's natural, artistic and cultural heritage, followed in 2004 by the same valley area in which it stands: the **Val d'Orcia**.

**Piazza Pio II** has a form of great harmony that gives great dignity and solemnity to all the surrounding buildings, built in travertine stone, which gives them a clear honey color. On one side of the square, you can admire a beautiful well, known as the "well of dogs".

**The Duomo or Cathedral dedicated to the Assumption of the Virgin Mary**, hosts important and remarkable paintings like the "Assumption of Mary" executed by Lorenzo di Pietra called il Vecchietta, or the "Madonna con Bambino" by Matteo di Giovanni; yet the beautiful octagonal bell tower rises above the ancient crypt and points straight to the sky.

The complex, which occupies the spot of the ancient parish church of Santa Maria, but oriented in a different way, was thought to be inserted scenographically in the main square of the town, Piazza Pio II, and was built at the behest of Pope Pius II Piccolomini between 1459 and 1462 by Bernardo Rossellino during the renewal of the city.

The tripartite façade in travertine was designed by Rossellino. Four pilasters divide it into three zones corresponding to the internal aisles. A string course frame divides the façade into two areas; in the lower one there are three entrance doors, in the upper one three arches supported by columns. Under the lateral arches, niches of classic reminiscence have been created and in the central one there is an oculus.

On the tympanum of the façade dominates the coat of arms with the emblem of the Holy See of Pius II Piccolomini. The external walls of the church and the apse have Gothic windows that allow a great and suggestive internal brightness.

The imposing **Palazzo Piccolomini**, to the right of the Duomo, has a fantastic Three levels Loggia with a wonderful suspended garden from where you can admire a truly unique view across the Valle d'Orcia, from Montalcino to the volcanic Monte Amiata.

It was inhabited by Pope's descendents until 1962.

Palazzo Piccolomini has even been chosen by Franco Zeffirelli, Italian movie director, to shoot some scenes of his famous and romantic movie Romeo and Juliet, where the two lovers meet for the first time at the Capuleti party.

We recommend, if possible, to visit at least the suspended garden with the view over the valley!

On the ground floor of the palace, there is a permanent exhibition that illustrates the architectural structure of the building explaining the project plan; on the first floor you can visit the secret rooms, furnished with elegant furniture of the time and remained unchanged over time.

The Palace, square in shape, is probably the closest work to the ideas of Pope Pius II and was designed as a summer residence which later became

an unmissable attraction for tourists: here, in fact, you can visit the first hanging garden created during the Renaissance!

Art and nature are inextricably linked in this quiet corner, framed by the flower beds and the fountain adorned with garlands of fruit, a small paradise inside a fifteenth-century palace.

The impression one has, walking through the alleys of Pienza, is that of a harmonious and proportioned whole; somehow it is as if you were admiring a Renaissance city portrayed in a beautiful painting.

**The Parish Church of Corsignano**, that is “**La Pieve dei Santi Vito e Modesto**”, to which you will arrive with a short walk along the hillside, is a Romanesque church with three naves and traces back its ancient origins to the 7<sup>th</sup> century, but its Romanesque style dates the 12<sup>th</sup> century. While the church inside is relatively empty, each nave has an altar and to the right, as one enters, there is the original baptismal font in which both Pope Pius II and his nephew Pope Pius III were baptized.

*The parish church, La Pieve (from the Latin plebs, "people") was a religious and civil territorial district belonging to a rural church with a baptistery, called the mother church, parish-pieve (or in Latin plebana). In the early Middle Ages it was reserved for the most important liturgical functions for the community and the churches and chapels without baptistery depended on it. From the Late Middle Ages the functions of the parish passed to the parish.*

Head to the last column to the left and take a look at the capital of the column: you will find a sculpture of the serpent Regolo. It is one of the few representations of the serpent Regolo that survived in its original form today. The snake Regolo was a Roman deity, it was still known when the church was built and does not necessarily represent evil, even though St. Gregory the Great calls it the "king of snakes".

### **Gourmet specialities**

But Pienza is also the city of cheese! **Pecorino of Pienza** is a very tasty cheese, more or less seasoned, made with sheep's milk, very renowned and really delicious. The village is full of small and charming shops that sell many varieties of pecorino that you can taste together with many

other typical local products, such as fabulous wines, spices, pici local pasta, honey, and so on.

### **Michelin Restaurants in Pienza**

**La Terrazza del Chiostro**, traversa of Corso Il Rossellino - Excellent view- Traditional tuscan proposals and other more creative.  
from € 45 to 90-

**La Porta**, Via del Piano 2, Loc Monticchiello- Pleasant, informal with a nice view (4km)- from € 35 to 65-

The tavern is located near the entrance to Monticchiello, a pretty medieval village near Pienza and Montepulciano.

With its few seats, it offers an environment, furnished with taste and elegant simplicity in a rustic Tuscan style, which is welcoming and familiar. The kindness and professionalism of the owner are an excellent guide to the choice of dishes and wine pairings

During the summer it is possible to have lunch on the terrace, enjoying a wonderful view of Pienza, the Val d'Orcia and the Amiata.

**Fonte alla Vena**, Via Dante Alighieri 137, San Quirico d'Orcia- with a garden- (6km)- from € 20 to 80-

Just outside the nearby historic center, new management in the hands of an expert entrepreneur in the sector and a chef selected by him.

Generous, tasty and well presented local cuisine in a simple but clean and welcoming environment. Chioccioline alla Valdorcia, the real delicacy!

**Trattoria Toscana Al Vecchio Forno**, Via Poliziano 18, San Quirico d'Orcia- with a garden- (6km)- from € 15 to 70

Truly Tuscan cuisine, simple and savory, in a genuine environment with hanging cured meats and bottles of wine on display. Pleasant summer service in the garden full of historical memories: between an old portico and a still functioning well.

## **-MONTEPULCIANO-**

From Pienza, it takes about 20 minutes to Montepulciano.

According to legend, **Montepulciano** was founded by the Etruscan King Lars Porsena from Clusium (modern Chiusi). Recent findings prove that a settlement was in existence in the 4<sup>th</sup> -3<sup>rd</sup> centuries b.C. In Roman times it was the seat of a garrison guarding the main roads of the area.

After the fall of the Western Roman Empire, it developed as a religious center under the Lombards.

In the 12<sup>th</sup> century it was repeatedly attacked by the Republic of Siena, which the Poliziani (it is the name of the inhabitants of Montepulciano) faced with the help of the towns Perugia and Orvieto, and sometimes Florence. The 14<sup>th</sup> century was characterized by constant struggles between the local noble families, until the Del Pecora family became rulers of the town. From 1390, Montepulciano was a loyal ally (and later possession) of Florence and, until the mid-16<sup>th</sup> century, lived a period of splendour with architects such as Antonio da Sangallo the Elder, Jacopo Barozzi da Vignola, Baldassarre Peruzzi, Ippolito Scalza and others, building luxurious residences and other edifices here. In 1559, when Siena was conquered by Florence and Montepulciano lost its strategic role, its importance declined.

After the unification of Italy and the drying of the Val di Chiana, the town remained the most important agricultural centre in the area, while the industrial activities were moved mostly next to Chiusi, which was nearer to the railroad being built in that period.

A competitive "barrel race through the city" called the Bravio delle botti has been held on the last Sunday of August since the 14<sup>th</sup> century.

**The "Vino Nobile" of Montepulciano**, of the color of ruby, has even been celebrated by poets.

Montepulciano, famous for the wine to which it gives its name, stands on a hill 600 meters above sea level: from this height it is easy to get lost with a sight among the green Tuscan hills, the cultivation of olive trees and vineyards and the cypress trees that mark pleasantly the whole landscape. From the Town Hall the view reaches as far as the Sibillini and

the Cimone Mountains and when the air is particularly clear the Gran Sasso of Italy in Abruzzo as well.

"" Poliziano, Sir, was born in Montepulciano in 1454 and died in Florence in 1494. Agnolo Ambrogini, known as Poliziano, was one of the greatest poets of the Renaissance, linked by great friendship to Lorenzo the Magnificent, whom he called "Lauro". Next to the great lord of Florence he composed most of his masterpieces, perhaps the result of pleasant conversations between the two in the beautiful villa of Fiesole, then given it away to him by Lorenzo in gratitude for having saved his life in the Pazzi conspiracy, in which his brother had been murdered. Poliziano is the author of a short poem "Stanze" which was soon joined by the "Rime". His equivalent in painting can be considered Botticelli. ""

The historical center of Montepulciano, winds along a single main road called **"The Corso"** which starts from the lower part of the city and reaches **"Piazza Grande"**, the main square. Outside the walls, there is the **Church of Sant'Agnese with the original Gothic portal and the Balzana (type of architecture) façade by Viviani, the Medici Fortress of Sangallo and the fourteenth-century Gate of Gracciano restored by Sangallo in the early 1500s.**

Access to the characteristic historical center is from the **Porta (Gate) di Gracciano** and a little further on, to the left of the Marzocco column, precisely in Piazza Savonarola, is the small church of **San Bernardo**. On the right side of this street is the **Avignonesi Palace** built by Vignola, but also other Renaissance palaces including the **Bucelli**, in whose base-board there are many cinerary urns and several Etruscan and Latin inscriptions and stones.

**The Corso**, a street with the appearance of a refined 16<sup>th</sup> century charming street and home to many patrician palaces, consists of the three segments of the streets of Gracciano, Opio and Voltaia.

In Via Gracciano, on a stairway with a balustrade, the lovely fifteenth-century **Church of St. Augustine** stands out with the façade of



Michelozzo. Inside the church we highlight the "*Resurrection of Lazarus*" by Alessandro Allori, "*San Nicolas from Tolentino*" by Giovanni di Paolo, a polychrome wooden "*Crucifix*" by Antonio da Sangallo, and a "*Crucifixion*" painting by Lorenzo di Credi.

Still in Piazza Michelozzo we can see the **Tower of Pulcinella** with the typical mask that beats the hours. It is still a working watch but it is unknown exactly the reason why a classic symbol of Naples is located in the heart of Montepulciano. The stories around this watch are different: according to some, the idea came in the 17<sup>th</sup> century to a bishop or more likely to a priest of Neapolitan origins. A different story tells that it was chosen as a mask to represent the theater. The statue of Pulcinella certainly makes this watch unique in Italy.

**Piazza Grande** is the heart of the city where tourists and locals meet every day. In summer it comes alive in an extraordinary way thanks to the theatrical performances of the "**famous international art yard**" and on the last Sunday of August it hosts the competitors of the **Bravio delle Botti**, with the representatives of the eight districts of the area that have the task of pushing the large barrels for the village. It takes place through the streets of the historic centre from the Colonna del Marzocco to the finish on the Piazza Grande, the cathedral square. The total distance is approximately 1800m and is uphill for nearly the entire course. As the streets are narrow and the barrels cumbersome to manoeuvre, collisions are frequent. The word "bravio" derives from the Latin Bravium meaning "to be won". It refers to the prize given to the winning Contrada - a painted cloth bearing the image of the patron Saint of the city, Giovanni Decollato.

This area, made harmonious in the 1400s by Michelozzo, consists of many prestigious buildings such as the 14<sup>th</sup> c. **Palazzo Comunale or Town Hall**, which resembles the Palazzo della Signoria in Florence, the **Palazzo Contucci**, begun in 1519 by Antonio da Sangallo the elderly and completed by Baldassarre Peruzzi, and the **Nobili-Tarugi Palace**, covered

in travertine. Next to the latter, there is the typical fourteenth-century structure of the **Palazzo del Capitano del Popolo** in bricks, in front of which is situated the **well of Griffins and Lions** with their elegant renaissance forms supporting a marble “de’Medici” emblem. The south side of the square is occupied by **the great unfinished façade of the Cathedral, called the Duomo**. This imposing building was built according to the project of Ippolito Scalza between 1592 and 1630, restored later, in 1880. Inside you can admire the *Triptych of the Assumption* by Taddeo di Bartolo, the *Madonna with Child* by Sano di Pietro and to the left of the central portal, the reclining statue of *Bartolomeo Aragazzi*, poet and secretary of Martino V, by Michelozzo.

## History of the Duomo

The cathedral was built between 1586 and 1680 on a design by Ippolito Scalza from Orvieto and dedicated to Santa Maria Assunta.

The church was solemnly consecrated June 19<sup>th</sup>, 1712 by Francesco Maria Arrighi, bishop of Montepulciano.

The only surviving structure of the ancient **Pieve** (church with annexed baptistery which, in the early Middle Ages indicated the baptized community and to which, other churches without baptistery, were dependent) is the massive bell tower in ashlar and brickwork, built in the third quarter of the fifteenth century by Iacomo and Checco di Meo da Settignano: the upper level, highlighted by the slender bell-shaped mullioned windows, was never completed. The salient façade is also unfinished, while the sides, terminated by brick and travertine ashlar, are enlivened by Tuscan pilasters between which round arches are inserted.

The inner, whose architecture is clearly of Florentine ancestry, is austere and elegant due to the sharpness of the plaster surfaces that alternate with the stone facing walls. The plan is a Latin cross divided into three naves by powerful pillars supporting round arches. In the central nave, in

the transepts and in the apsidal scarsella, reported entablatures support a barrel vault; at the intersection of the two orthogonal bodies the angular plumes support the drum on which the dome is set. The aisles are covered by cross vaults; on the walls, in correspondence of each bay, there are barrel-vaulted chapels. The pulpit supported by ionic columns is placed against a right-hand pillar.

Works of art - The vast spaces of the temple are adorned with a huge number of works of art. Some come from the ancient Pieve and from other local churches.

Among these, one of the most important is the monumental Triptych of the Assumption, painted by Taddeo di Bartolo in 1401, which dominates the high altar. The central panel of the triptych shows the monumental figure of the Assumption Madonna surrounded by Angels, while below are the twelve apostles who crowd around the empty tomb of the Madonna. Above the Assumption we see the Coronation of the Virgin. The three scenes must be read as a temporal sequence from the bottom up with the Death of the Virgin, his Assumption and his Coronation. The two side panels depict various Saints in the attitude of worshipping the central figure of the Madonna, while on the four pillars that frame the various panels we see twelve small figures of Doctors of the Church (three per pillar). Above the two side panels, to the left, is the Angel announcing and the Madonna Annunziata is to the right. The predella below depicts nine scenes from the life of Jesus Christ while above the predella we have some very small scenes from the Old Testament.

Another monument of primary importance is the fifteenth-century funeral monument of Bartolomeo Aragazzi, in Carrara marble, made by Michelozzo between 1427 and 1436. Today the monument is divided into nine fragments of which seven are walled up in different places in the church.

At the center of the first side chapel on the left, which constitutes the baptistery, is the fourteenth-century **Baptismal Font**, attributed to Giovanni di Agostino or Tino di Camaino. On the back wall, the so-called

altar of the Gigli, polychrome glazed terracotta by Andrea Della Robbia; the artifact dates back to around 1512 and is placed between two statues of an unknown author depicting St. Peter (left) and St. John the Baptist (right)

### **Via Ricci, between wine and art!**

This street is the commercial center of Montepulciano, along which renaissance and medieval residences of the Polizian bourgeoisie line up. At number 10, in the **Gothic Palazzo Neri-Orselli**, there are the Civic Museum and the Crociani Picture Gallery. The museum includes the Crociani collection and paintings from churches and convents. A collection of paintings from the Sienese and Florentine schools from the XIII to the XVIII centuries and a rich collection of glazed terracottas belonging to Andrea della Robbia are exhibited. At number 11 there's the **Palazzo Ricci**, whose construction is attributed to Baldassarre Peruzzi; it welcomes the Historical Archive and the Municipal Library which has an ancient collection of 15,000 volumes. The **Rodi Winery**, in which the Noble wine of Montepulciano is preserved, occupies the basements of this building and is considered one of the most spectacular wineries among those found under the city's historic buildings.

### **The church of San Biagio**

Outside the walls of the historic center, towards the slopes of the Montepulciano hill, in the middle of a spacious and verdant lawn, there is the Church of San Biagio, a masterpiece by Antonio da Sangallo. This temple is considered the highest point of Renaissance architecture on buildings with a Greek cross plan.

### **Wine at Montepulciano**

The **Vino Nobile** di Montepulciano, together with Chianti and Brunello di Montalcino, is one of the 3 most famous Italian wines in the world. In

Montepulciano they produce the "Nobile" DOCG and the DOC Rosso di Montepulciano, Vin Santo, Chianti Colli Senesi and Bianco Vergine Val di Chiana. **Il Nobile** is the ideal wine to accompany the local cuisine, offering simple but robust and tasty products and dishes: ham, tasty croutons with spleen and fegatielli, pansanto and crunchy bruschetta. The typical dish is the pici: handmade spaghetti, which once were prepared by farmers who could not afford meat or other more expensive foods, dressed with meat sauce. You should also try the pappardelle with hare sauce, the bread soup, the roasted porcini mushrooms accompanied by the ciaccia, crushed bread dough seasoned with oil, or fresh bread, strictly without salt to leave room for all the other flavors. As for the desserts delighted with the cantucci, almond biscuits, to be dipped in the Vinsanto.

Our favorite spot for lunch in Montepulciano is “Ristorante Gattavecchi”.

Apart from the excellent quality of food but you have also the chance of tasting the local wines while eating. It is a good option they offer so that afterward you can also buy some bottles from their own production.

The restaurant is found in the refectory of the monastery of the 13th century church dedicated to Santa Maria de’ Servi. The wine cellars underneath are found within grottoes of 1200s, and one more level down is an Etruscan tomb of the 5th century b.C.

## **Michelin Restaurants in Montepulciano**

**Le Logge del Vignola**, via delle Erbe 6, Montepulciano. (A good resource for this small restaurant in the historic center, with tables that are a little close together, but covered and very well kept regional raw material. The wine list is also interesting)

**La Grotta**, San Biagio 16, Montepulciano. (In front of the church of San Biagio, inside a 16th-century building, rustic-elegant room, with a nice summer service in the garden. Excellent cuisine: Tuscan, expertly revisited.)

**Trattoria Toscana al Vecchio Forno**, via Poliziano 18, San Quirico d 'Orcia (Pure Tuscan cuisine, simple and savory, in a genuine environment with hanging cold cuts and bottles of wine on display. Pleasant summer service in the garden full of historical memories: between a old porch and a well still working)

**Fonte alla Vena**, via Dante Alighieri 137, San Quirico d 'Orcia (Just outside the nearby historic center, new management in the hands of an experienced entrepreneur in the sector and a chef selected by him. Cuisine of the generous, tasty and well presented territory, in a simple but clean and welcoming environment Specialties: handmade pici with garlic - grilled Cinta Senese capocollo - artisan cantucci and Vin Santo)

### **Tripadvisor Restaurant in Montepulciano**

**L'Altro Cantuccio**, via delle Cantine 1, Montepulciano. From €40 to €140 Fish, Italian, Contemporary, Tuscan, Vegetarian, Gluten Free.

### **Cantina Gattavecchi, Osteria the cuisine of Lilian**

Cantina Gattavecchi is the family's historic aging cellar in the center of Montepulciano, while the vineyards are located in Poggio alla Sala, about 15 km away. Producers for several generations, they offer here guided tours and wine tasting accompanied by specialties such as pecorino cheese and cured meats. It is also the family restaurant, where you will discover La Cucina di Lilian in the charming refectory of the old monastery of Santa Maria dei Servi (13th century) which offers traditional family cuisine prepared by Lilian Gattavecchi. Cooking lessons are also available upon request. Via di Collazzi 74, loc. Santa Maria

