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The Insider's Guide to Tuscany

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Culture is the lifeblood that flows through Tuscany and visitors can not help but sense it in everything from the grandest monument to the humblest detail. From Arezzo to Siena, Tuscany's numerous historic towns played host to the birthplace of the Renaissance and are packed with world-class art, architecture, music events and arguably more fine eating and drinking options than anywhere else in Italy. The region is also home to spectacular scenery from medieval, walled hilltop towns to rolling hills punctuated with quintessential cypress trees, vineyards and olive groves. It is a region that never fails to deliver.

Florence

What to see and do

The big draws here are the Duomo for sheer splendor, the Uffizi gallery for the Da Vincis, Botticellis and other treasures of Renaissance art, the Galleria dell'Accademia for Michelangelo's David, and the Pitti Palace and Santa Maria Novella for their fine frescoes. To avoid the crowds visit before or around 10am. To cut entrance fees buy a Firenze Card (firenzecard.it), valid for 72 hours, which covers entry to most of the major sights along with unlimited travel on public transport. Alternatively simply wander the historic streets taking in the busy Mercato Centrale and breathtaking picture-postcard vistas such as along the River Arno and the Ponte Vecchio.

Off the beaten track

The Ferragamo Museum is a delight for shoe fanatics and fashionistas. Get inside the mind of the 14-year old boy who inspired an industry with his ground-breaking and vertigo-inducing shoe designs (ferragamo.com).

Brace yourself for a journey to the past and witness the arresting anatomical waxworks at La Specola, which was founded in the 18th century. Alongside the curious taxidermy there are many curiosities on display, formerly kept in the Boboli Gardens during Medici times (msn.unifi.it).

Wander around the Oltrarno district and visit the many bespoke shoemakers and craft stores, including goldsmiths and parchment makers. It was here that actor Daniel Day Lewis served his shoe-making apprenticeship at Stefano Bemmer (stefanobemmer.com).

Where to eat and drink

Ristorante Alfredo Sull Arno, Via de Bardi 46 (+39 0552 692702) serves up tasty taglierini with olive oil and truffle sauce. The views from here of the Arno and Ponte Vecchio are particularly fine. For its over the top frescoed décor and friendly staff try Trattoria Gargani, Via del Moro 48 (+39 055 2398898, garganitrattoria.com). The veal with avocado and truffle oil here melts in the mouth. The negroni cocktail was allegedly first concocted in Florence and the chic Florentines flock to Moyo after dark for something shaken or stirred. Moyo, Via dei Benci 23 (+39 0552 479738, moyo.it).

Lucca

What to see and do

Lucca is a quiet, sleepy town encased by high medieval walls with a plethora of pretty piazzas dotted with ancient churches dating back some 800 years. Of course, the Duomo here is lovely, and there are a handful of galleries and museums worth checking out such as Villa Guinigi and Palazzo Mansi for their fine art and tapestry collections. But to sit outside an alfresco café and watch the world go by is what Lucca is all about. And if you are feeling energetic, a stroll in the pretty Botanical Gardens is to be recommended. Piazza Anfiteatro, a former amphitheatre, is now lined with tourist shops so if you are looking for serious shopping head for Via Fillungo.

Off the beaten track

Piazza Napoleone during the autumn months hosts a plethora of music events and also a delightful skating rink (livornonow.com).

There is a great vintage market to discover and a host of concerts during the Lucca Winter Festival (summer-festival.com).

Lucca Centre of Contemporary Art showcases work by up and coming artists along with the established (luccamuseum.com).

Where to eat and drink

Lucca was the birthplace of Puccini and to hear his music while eating try Ristorante Puccini, Corte San Lorenzo 1 (+39 338 980 5927). The seafood salad here is particularly fine. For a snack or some pretty patisserie, Caffè di Simo, Via Fillungo 58 (+39 0583

496234) is a local favourite. The café dates from the belle époque era and was allegedly a favourite of Puccini. In the evening it turns wine bar. For a drink with a view sit outside Bar San Michele, Piazza San Michele, which overlooks the Romanesque church opposite.

Pisa

What to see and do

Pisa is frequently the entry point to Tuscany and a day and a half is really perfect here. Often overlooked, the Piazza del Duomo is a must. The interior of the cathedral has some fine marble facades and mosaics and the baptistery and cemetery are also worth visiting. But it is the view of the famous bell tower which is recognizable the world over as 'the Leaning Tower' that is seen at its best from here. Piazza dei Cavalieri (the Knights' Square), the town's second square, is similarly overlooked and definitely worth visiting. It was designed in 1558 by the architect Vasari (who designed the famous corridor from the Pitti Palace to the Uffizi) and commissioned by Cosmo de Medici.

Off the beaten track

The Museo de San Mateo houses a remarkable collection of ceramics and sculptures and archeological artifacts (+39 050 541865).

For upmarket fashion visit Il Cavallo Donna part of the chic Cruppo Dei chain of chic outlets (deifashionstore.it).

Where to eat and drink

Homemade pasta features high on the menu at Vineria di Piazza, Piazza delle Vettovaglie 12-14 (+39 0503 820433). Dine in traditional surroundings at really reasonable prices. La Buca, Via Massimo D'Azeglio 6 (labucapisa.it) is arguably one of the town's finest eateries where seafood features strongly. Pisa is a university town so it is no surprise that it has an excellent bar serving local beer from the many microbreweries that abound. Orzo Burno, Via Case Dipinte 6-8 (orzobruno.it) is noisy yet strangely both cosy and warm. For fine cocktails dress up to impress and join the local chic set who favour Almatea, Lungarno Mediceo 49 (+39 0335 53053390). And to soak up the drinks the pizzas here are particularly delicious too. Sit by the Arno and sip some fine wine at Vicolo Divino, Via Filippo Serafini 10 (vicolodivino.it), which also serves small plates and snacks.

Hotels

For an excellent range of [hotels in Tuscany](http://www.chicretreats.com/boutique-hotels-tuscany/) (<http://www.chicretreats.com/boutique-hotels-tuscany/>), all located in idyllic locations within or just a short distance from these three wonderful cities, visit Chic Retreats, featuring luxury hotels catering to every traveller's need.

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