

LIVING FRANCIGENA

Our tour along one of the most spectacular stretches of the **Via Francigena** starts in **San Miniato**, a medieval town in the heart of Tuscany famous for its historic, artistic and cultural heritage and ends in **Monteriggioni**, a charming hilltop town in the province of Siena. During this tour through the unforgettable Tuscan countryside you can visit hidden sights, hamlets and small villages and towns such as **San Vivaldo** and **San Gimignano**, a picturesque UNESCO World Heritage Site.

YOUR ITINERARY DAY BY DAY

DAY 1: SAN MINIATO

Arrival at Pisa Airport. A coach will take you to the lovely **Ostello San Miniato** in San Miniato.

Our walking tour starts with the visit to **San Genesio's Archaeological Site**, considered as one of the main stops along the Via Francigena by medieval pilgrims.

The site was important in the Middle Ages as it hosted bishops' conferences, papal councils and imperial diets and it was located near the River Elsa and along the Via Francigena, the main connecting route between Northern Europe and Rome.

Sigeric the Seriuos, the Archbishop of Canterbury, who described the 79 stages of his journey from Rome to Canterbury in a journal, stayed in San Genesio in the year 990.

Recent excavations have brought to light the ruins of a settlement known as **Vicus Wallari**, an 8th-century church, which was one of the biggest medieval churches in Tuscany, a monastery and an Etruscan village with its graveyard. Here you can visit a small museum housing archaeological artefacts and objects such as jars, cinerary urns and ceramic tableware.

We next head off to San Miniato, where you can have a cup of tea at **Essenza**, a nice café in Piazza del Popolo.

From here it is easy to reach the **Conservatory of Santa Chiara**. The building is arranged around a cloister with arcades and it has a chapel dedicated to Saint Mary Magdalene. The Conservatory houses "Noli me Tangere", a wonderful painting by Ludovico Cardi called "Il Cigoli", a magnificent Medieval cross by Deodato Orlandi and paintings by Jacopo Chimenti and Antonio Domenico Bamberini.

If you want to taste typical Tuscan dishes such as “salumi”, “crostini”, “tagliolini” with black truffles, “tagliata” or Florentine steak with roast potatoes, we suggest you have lunch at **Osteria l’ Upupa** located in the city centre.

After lunch our tour continues towards **Piazza del Popolo**, where we can admire the **Saints Jacopo and Lucia’s Church**, also called **San Domenico’s Church**, dating back to the 14th century, the **Cloisters of the Convent** and the amazing **Via Angelica**, which is an ancient path famous for its chapels featuring 14th-century frescoes and 18th-century decorations.

Later on, we head for **Piazza del Seminario**, where we can admire **the Palace of the Seminary**, an 18th-century building characterized by its concave façade decorated with superb frescoes and phrases in Latin.

Our next stop is the **Town Hall**, which was built at the end of the 13th century. Inside we can admire two beautiful rooms: **La Sala delle Sette Virtù**, with its magnificent fresco, “The Virgin Mary nursing her Child surrounded by the Seven Theological and Cardinal Virtues”, and **La Sala Consiliare**, where Town Hall meetings are held. The room is decorated with frescoes depicting the history of San Miniato during the Middle Ages and Coats of Arms of noble families from San Miniato.

In front of the Town Hall we can admire **The Sanctuary of the Most Holy Crucifix**, a magnificent 18th-century Baroque church, which is completely decorated with paintings and frescoes by Antonio Domenico Bamberini and houses a tabernacle containing the famous “Holy Crucifix”, which is venerated and thought to be miraculous. In the past the wooden image of the Holy Crucifix was housed in **the Oratory of Loretino**, a famous museum located next to the Town Hall.

Leaving this church behind us, we reach **Piazza del Duomo**, where we can admire the **Bishop’s Palace**, the 12th-century **Imperial Vicars’ Palace** with its tower, which used to be a prison in the past, the 12th-century **Cathedral of Santa Maria Assunta and San Genesio**, which features a wonderful Romanesque façade but also exhibits Gothic and Renaissance architectural elements, and its Bell Tower, also called **Matilde Tower** as Countess Matilde di Canossa was probably born in San Miniato.

Our tour continues towards **Frederick II’s Tower**, also called the **Fort**, a 37-metre tall tower built by Frederick II of Swabia in 1217. It was the central core of the Imperial defensive system and today it is the landmark of the town. Pier delle Vigne, Frederick II’s Chancellor, was imprisoned here for treason until his death, as Dante writes in his “Divine Comedy”. From here you can admire the stunning Tuscan landscape, with the Apennines, the Arno Valley, Volterra’s hills and the sea.

The Saints Sebastian and Rocco’s Church, which was the Bonaparte family’s chapel and houses Saint Rocco’s relics, is worth a visit. It dates back to the 15th century and was built on the ruins of an ancient oratory. This small one-nave church is dedicated to Saint Rocco, who is the patron saint of pilgrims, and it is one of the main stops along the Via Francigena.

The church is located in **Piazza Buonaparte**, a picturesque triangular square flanked by ancient palaces built by noble families from San Miniato between the 16th and the 18th centuries. Here we can admire **Bonaparte Palace**, which was the residence of the Bonaparte family. Napoleon Bonaparte, the famous Emperor of France, came to San Miniato during his campaign in Italy in 1796 in order to meet Filippo Bonaparte, who was a priest and the Bonaparte family's last descendant, and stayed in this palace as his guest. Napoleon's family was of Italian noble origins and they had most of their properties in San Miniato.

From the square you can get a glimpse of **Frederick II's Tower** and the 14th-century **Convent and Church of Saint Francis**. We walk along a steep road and we reach this church, which has a Romanesque façade. Inside the church there are 16th and 17th-century paintings and frescoes depicting Saint Francis and other Franciscan saints and Saint Francis's statue. The convent has two cloisters, many rooms and a big refectory, where you can admire a splendid painting depicting "Saint Francis and Saint Clare's Supper".

We suggest you have dinner at **Retrobottega**, where you can taste a selection of "salumi" such as "sopressata", truffle and pork sausages with toasted bread, "rigatino", "finocchiona", "spuma di gota", "mallegato", Florentine steak with vegetables, Chianti wine and "Cantuccini" with "Vin Santo".

Overnight stay at **Ostello San Miniato**.

DAY2 GAMBASSI AND SAN VIVALDO

Today we visit **Gambassi Terme** and **San Vivaldo**, which are ideal destinations for pilgrims who want to discover the history, art and culture of these small medieval towns and villages during their walk along the famous Via Francigena.

After an early breakfast we leave San Miniato and we head off to Gambassi Terme. After an hour's walk, we take a path leading to the hills of the Elsa Valley. Here you can see road-houses, forts, hospitals, monasteries, abbeys and castles such as the picturesque **Coiano Castle** surrounded by vineyards, where excellent local wines such as Chianti DOCG are produced.

During the route we can see the famous Romanesque **Pieve di Coiano**, a church dedicated to the Saints Pietro and Paolo, where Archbishop Sigeric stopped during his journey in 990.

Our walk continues towards **Gambassi Terme**, another famous stop along the Via Francigena. Here you can visit the historic centre, with its spa complexes located in the centre of the town gardens. The well-known **Terme della Via Francigena**, which are located in Pillo, have been celebrated for centuries as they offer thermal waters rich in minerals. Here you can find a relaxing indoor hydro massage pool and an outdoor pool and enjoy the pleasure of the heat and the vapours.

We stop for lunch at **Osteria del Pellegrino** in Gambassi Terme, where we can taste typical Tuscan dishes.

Our walk continues towards **San Vivaldo**, a hamlet is situated among the gentle hills of the Tuscan countryside at 450 metres above the sea level. The origins of San Vivaldo date back to the 14th century. In an atmosphere of peace, history and art we reach the **Holy Mount of San Vivaldo** also called **Tuscany's Jerusalem**. It takes its name from Vivaldo Stricchi, a 14th-century Franciscan hermit from San Gimignano, who chose this area to live a life of contemplation and fasting. A chapel was built in his honour on the site where the friar's dead body was found.

In the 15th century a monastery and church were added. Later the Franciscan friars created a complex of 34 chapels, 18 of which remain today, decorated with splendid polychrome terracotta reliefs and statues representing scenes and episodes from the Life and Passion of Jesus Christ and Palestine, thus reproducing the Holy Places of Jerusalem. The site offers visitors a pilgrimage without going to the Holy Land.

We have dinner at **Osteria San Vivaldo**. Overnight stay at **Castel Brelli**, a hostel near San Vivaldo.

DAY 3 SAN GIMIGNANO

We leave our hostel early in the morning and we head off to **San Gimignano**, one of the most spectacular towns along the Via Francigena.

This 13 km leg of the Via Francigena (Leg 31) is rich in splendid natural scenery. While walking we can enjoy the beauty of the landscape around us dotted with small churches, abbeys, ancient farmhouses, bridges and castles.

Late in the morning we reach **San Gimignano**, which is considered one of the main UNESCO World Heritage sites in Tuscany thanks to its characteristic medieval architecture.

San Gimignano is a small medieval town in the province of Siena. It rises on top of a hill dominating the Elsa Valley and it is a famous tourist town, whose unique collection of towers and winding lanes makes it a charming destination for tourists. The town is also known for its white wine called **Vernaccia di San Gimignano**.

Our walk begins at the **Town Walls**. We pass through **San Giovanni's Gate** and walk along Via San Giovanni, a road flanked by old palaces, going up to the centre of the town.

We soon reach **Piazza della Cisterna**. This square takes its name from the 13th-century cistern located in its centre, has a triangular shape and is lined with beautiful medieval buildings and towers.

Leaving Piazza della Cisterna behind us, we head off to **Piazza del Duomo**, which features the most important buildings and palaces in San Gimignano.

On the left, at the top of a long flight of steps, we can admire the **Cathedral of Santa Maria Assunta** or **Collegiata Church**. It is a Romanesque church, which was built in the 12th century and has a fine brick and stone façade dating back to the 13th century.

Inside the church there is the **Chapel of Saint Fina** or **Saint Serafina**, who was an Italian Christian girl venerated in this town, and amazing Sieneese and Florentine School frescoes such as “The Martyrdom of St. Sebastian” by Benozzo Gozzoli and “Stories of Santa Fina” by Ghirlandaio.

Our tour continues with the **Town Hall**, which was built in the 13th century and is the seat of the **Civic Museum** and the **Art Gallery**, and the magnificent **Torre Grossa** (Great Tower), which is the highest tower in San Gimignano. From its top you can enjoy a wonderful view of the Tuscan countryside: lovely Tuscan hills with villages, villas and groves of trees.

In front of the Cathedral we can see **Palazzo del Podestà**, which was built in the 13th century and is characterized by a stone and brick façade and a 52-metre tall tower called **La Rognosa**, which is the second tallest tower in town.

During the tour we will stop for lunch in a local restaurant in the historic centre, where we can taste delicious Tuscan dishes.

After lunch we can have an ice cream in the famous ice cream shop, **Gelateria Dondoli**, which offers a wide range of sophisticated flavours such as “Crema di Santa Fina”, “Dolcenero” and “Vernaccia Sorbet”.

You can also wander through the cobbled streets of the town and reach the **Rocca**, a ruined fortress on the highest part of the hill. It is surrounded by parks and olive groves, where you can sit and admire the Tuscan landscape.

Our tour ends with the visit to the famous **Wine Museum**, which is a tribute to the quality and prestige of **Vernaccia di San Gimignano**. Vernaccia di San Gimignano is produced exclusively in the medieval town of San Gimignano and has been considered Italy’s finest white wine since Renaissance.

We continue our walk along the Via Francigena and we reach **Colle Val d’Elsa**, with its charming old town centre and narrow alleys winding through the stone walls.

We have dinner in the picturesque **Ristorante Arnolfo**, located in a Renaissance palace, where you will enjoy sophisticated and genuine Tuscan dishes.

Overnight stay at **Ostello Rifugio d’Elsa** in Colle Val d’Elsa.

DAY 4 Monteriggioni

After an early breakfast we head off to **Monteriggioni**.

We have a pleasant stroll along the panoramic route of the Via Francigena enjoy the Tuscan countryside dotted with orchards, olive groves and vineyards.

We stop in **Monteriggioni**, which is a fascinating town located on a top of a hill, in the province of Siena. It is considered one of the best preserved medieval towns in Italy and

boasts magnificent town walls featuring fourteen rectangular towers overlooking the Via Francigena.

After passing through the majestic **Porta Romea**, also known as **Porta Franca**, facing Florence to the north, or **Porta San Giovanni**, we head off to **Piazza Roma**, the heart of the castle, built in the 13th century by the Republic of Siena for defensive purposes.

In the square you can admire **the Church of Santa Maria Assunta**, a Romanesque-Gothic church dating back to the 13th century. Its façade features a fine doorway with a stone arch, with a round window above.

Monteriggioni in Arme is worth a visit. The museum houses reproductions of medieval and Renaissance weapons and armours. Here we can have fun wearing an ancient knight's armour on horseback and learn about the history of Monteriggioni.

Don't miss the experience of walking along the top of the castle walls from which we can enjoy breath-taking views of the amazing countryside of the Chianti and Elsa Valleys.

We have lunch in the restaurant **Antico Travaglio**, where you can enjoy typical Tuscan dishes such as "salami", homemade pasta and bread and Florentine steak served with a fine selection of Tuscan wines. In the afternoon we can sit in a café, buy local wine in the picturesque wine shops or visit the small shops of the town.

The beauty of this town has attracted many Hollywood's film directors. Monteriggioni was the setting for the film "The Gladiator".

Dinner in the pizzeria, **Il Feudo**, in piazza Roma.

Overnight stay at **Casa per Ferie Santa Maria Assunta**, a hostel for pilgrims, located inside the walls.

DAY 5

Transfer to Pisa Airport for your flight back home..