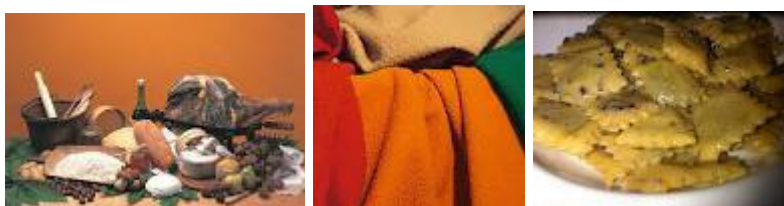




## IL CASENTINO

Art, history and nature make this itinerary very interesting. It unfolds in a magnificent set of hills and mountains, between green meadows and big forests where you find two beautiful hermitages, **Camaldoli** and **la Verna**. The basin of the Casentino is dominated by the **castle of Poppi** and characterized by the plain of **Campaldino**, famous for the battle opposing Florentine and Arezzo troops, in 1289, and where **Dante Alighieri** fought. The Casentino is one of the four main valleys subdividing the province of Arezzo. There flows the first tract of the river Arno, which has its source at Mount Falterona (at an altitude of 1654 m). Mount Falterona, with Mount Falco (1658 m), constitute the northern limit of the valley, on the border with Romagna. In the east, the Alpe di Serra and the Alpe di Catenaia divide the Casentino from the upper part of the Val Tiberina. In the west, the mountain range of Pratomagno separates it from the Upper Valdarno. Finally the western mountains from the Mount Falterona complex separate the valley from the Mugello. The diversity of the landscape includes big forests in mountainous areas, large plains and hills. The specific characteristics of this territory are likely to have pushed Francis of Assisi to choose La Verna (nowadays a famous Franciscan convent) as a place where to pray, and St Romualdo to found the hermitage of Camaldoli. The valley is divided up between 13 municipalities belonging to the “Comunità Montana del Casentino”: Bibbiena, Capolona, Castel Focognano, Castel San Niccolò, Chitignano, Chiusi della Verna, Montemignaio, Ortignano Raggiolo, Poppi, Pratovecchio, Stia, Subbiano and Talla. The main centres of the Casentino are: Poppi, registered as one of the "borghi più belli d'Italia", and Bibbiena, main handicraft and industrial centre.



The rich and old traditions of this land are living through craft and gastronomy. The areas of craftwork include the production of the “**panno casentino**” (a woolen fabric with bright colours, like orange or bottle green), the wrought iron, the wood and the carved stone. Regarding the gastronomy, here you find simple and traditional dishes like the **scottiglia**, the **acquacotta**, the **tortelli** with potato filling and cheeses and ham of an excellent quality. The Casentino is a land of old traditions which have been passed on by ingenious and laborious people. Even though in the present days the valley is industrialized, up to ten years ago its people still lived mainly on agriculture, cattle-breeding, and typical handicraft. These activities were modernized and upgraded along the years but they have kept the spirit of the past to make quality products. The Casentino offers a typical craft in various areas dealing with wood, iron and textile (with the famous *panno casentino*). These past few years research has been made to rediscover the old flavours of this valley and many food and agricultural companies focused on providing the best products to satisfy the pleasure of eating and drinking.

The “Panno Casentino”, the Casentino fabric, is an old product, with origins going back to the 14th century. In the 19th century, it started to be produced industrially thanks to the opening of the “Lanificio” company in Stia, in the premises where the Museo dell’Arte della Lana is now installed. Characterized by its small curls obtained with the “rattinatura”, this is a warm and tough woollen fabric. It does intentionally look raw but it is being used by fashion designers and associated to luxurious and refined clothes. For centuries, the Casentino fabric was only produced in orange and green but it can now be found in a variety of colours and it is used for a great diversity of items.

The Casentino is a land of pure savours, intense and delicate at the same time. Savours of the past upgraded to the present taste. Typical food products (pecorino and caprino cheese, honey, chestnut, wheat and corn flour, home-made pasta, salamis) are prepared by agricultural and craft companies, renowned for their work not only in the region but in the whole of Tuscany.

Past Dicomano, after a few kms you arrive in Contea where you take the road SS 556 to the left, in the direction of Londa-Stia. In Londa, there is an artificial lake using the waters of the torrent Rincine. Tourists visit this area for the various events organised there throughout the year. From Londa, the road goes up to a pass: the Valico Croce a Mori (955 m), and then it goes down to meet the river Arno, following its first section as it comes down from Mount Falterona. On the left hand side stands the **Complesso di Santa Maria delle Grazie**, with a farm that used to provide the Hospital Santa Maria Nuova in Florence with fresh food products.



The elegant church was built according to 15th century Florentine architectural patterns, and a small cloister in the classical Florentine style can also be found there. Inside, there is a single nave with a deep choir where you can see a **beautiful work in glazed terracotta** attributed to **Luca della Robbia**, the *Annunciazione*; the other artworks in terracotta in the Della Robbia style are by **Benedetto Buglioni**. Above the sacristy door, on the left hand side, there is a fresco dated 1485: *Madonna col Bambino e due angeli*. You take back the road SS 556 to go to Stia.

## STIA



**Stia** is an industrial textile centre, specialized in the famous bright coloured wool fabrics “**casentinesi**”. It is situated at the foot of Mount Falterona, at the place where the torrent Staggia merges into the river Arno. In the centre of the village, in via Ricci, near the main square, Piazza Mazzini and its archways, you find the **Chiesa della Madonna del Ponte**, keeping a piece in glazed terracotta from the Della Robbia’s workshop: *Madonna col Bambino e i Ss. Rocco e Sebastiano*. After crossing the bridge over the torrent Staggia, you arrive from the right into the long and narrow Piazza Tanucci, with its characteristic archways. There stands the **Parrocchiale di Santa Maria Assunta**, built in the 12th century, on the remains of a pre-existing church, renovated many times in the course of the centuries; its façade dates from the 18th century. On the right hand side, a tall medieval tower is its campanile. The interior, with three naves divided by **monolithic stone columns with remarkable capitals**, has maintained its **Romanesque original look**. On the second column we see a **marble holy water font** from the 15th century. In the right hand side nave, inside the chapel of the baptistery, the **marble baptismal font** is from 1526 and the beautiful triptych, the *Annunciazione e Santi* was made by Bicci di Lorenzo, in 1414; there is an emblem of the Della Robbia under the altar. We then find the altar displaying the *Predicazione del Battista* by Gian Domenico Ferretti, and a beautiful wooden pulpit from 1584. In the centre of the apse, redone in the Romanesque style, stands a tall wooden *Crocifisso* from the 14th century. In the chapel

on the left hand side of the choir, the *Madonna col Bambino* is a beautiful piece of work by **Andrea della Robbia**; on the altar there is a *Madonna col Bambino e due angeli*, or "*Madonna di Varlungo*", a beautiful painting by the Master of Varlungo. On the altar in the left hand side nave, the *Assunzione*, part of a Florentine retable dated 1408, is attributed to the Maestro of Borgo alla Collina.



### PRATOVECCHIO – PIEVE DI ROMENA – CASTELLO DI ROMENA

Not far from Stia, you come across **Pratovecchio**, **Paolo Uccello**'s native village (1397), and from there, following directions to Florence, and after crossing the river Arno, 3 kms later you find, isolated in a **beautiful countryside**, the magnificent parish church of **San Pietro in Romena**, **one of the most interesting Romanesque buildings of the Casentino**, dated from the mid 1200s. In 1678, a landslide caused the destruction of its two front rows and in 1729 it was damaged by an earthquake. Its façade is simple and rustic, a massive campanile stands on its left hand side. The **beautiful apse** presents two orders of arches, two gemed windows and a trifoil window. Inside, three naves are supported by monolithic columns with **precious capitals** showing a decoration of foliage and figures, the ceiling is hold by open trusses, the choir elevated and the apse semicircular.



From the Pieve a road leads to the **Castello di Romena** located on the top of the hill and offering a beautiful panorama on the valley of the river Arno. The imposing structure was erected in the year 1000 and represented **one of the main fortified castles belonging to the Counts Guidi**; in 1357 it fell under the control of Florence; in 1440 it was taken by Piccinino but later gained back by the Medici; in 1768 the Counts Goretti-Flamini took possession of it and they are still the current owners of the castle. Inside, it is possible to admire the articulations of the **powerful structure** which was defended by three sets of walls. From the 14 original towers, only 3 remain (dungeon, postern and jail tower) as well as the external dungeon. A small archaeological collection is displayed there.



Following the indications towards **Passo della Consuma** – Firenze, you meet the road SS 70 and after going through **Borgo alla Collina**, where the castle of the Counts Guidi used to be, you go down to the plain of **Campaldino**, driving through a beautiful scenery. At a roundabout you can see a **commemorative column topped by Arezzo and Florence coats of arms**. This column recalls the famous **Battle of Campaldino which took place on 11 June 1289, opposing Florence and Arezzo**, Arezzo's defeat setting up the decline of the Ghibellines in Tuscany. **Dante Alighieri** fought there as he mentioned it in his **Divine Comedy**. Continuing on the road SS 70, in the valley of the river Arno, the beautiful hill of Poppi emerges in the distance with the imposing profile of the castle of the Counts Guidi.



## **POPPI**

**Poppi is one of the most interesting historic centres in the Casentino.** It stands out on an isolated hill in the valley of the river Arno, in an important strategic position, already used in the Roman times. The medieval village started to develop in the 12th century when the Counts of the Guidi family established their feudal residence there (until the 15th century) and had the crenellated castle Pretorio erected. The Piazza Amerighi is characterized by the **Chiesa della Madonna del Morbo**, with its circular shape, and by the archways surrounding it on three sides. On the left hand side, there is the church of San Marco, also dated from the 17th century, which keeps a *Pentecoste* and a *Deposizione*, works done by the painter Poppi. The massive structure of the **Palazzo dei Conti Guidi** stands out. In front of it the vast open space of the *Pratello* has been transformed into a garden. Located at the highest spot in the valley, the spectacular palace was built during the second half of the 13th century for Simone da Battifolle to strengthen the fortress dated from the late 1100s. **Vasari attributed the project to the architect Jacopo or Lapo, Arnolfo di Cambio's father.** Its architecture would have actually inspired Arnolfo for the design of the **Palazzo Vecchio in Florence**. Enlarged in 1291, under Guido di Simone, it was restructured to become the headquarters of the Florentine Vicary in the 15th century and was then renovated many times. A tall tower divides in two, in its centre, the crenellated Guelph façade. On the right hand side, the oldest part has only one floor with gemed windows whereas the part of the building on the left hand side has two floors.



After crossing over the large moat surrounding the walls, a portal topped by a stone lion from 1447 gives access to an elegant courtyard, displaying on its walls the **coats of arms** of many Florentine vicaries (some of them made in glazed terracotta by the Della Robbia). The wall on the left hand side is remarkable with its wooden balcony and original ceiling; at the end of the courtyard we can see a stone table where vicaries and government officers used to administer justice. In the right hand side, a steep stone staircase with a column surmounted by the **Florentine Marzocco**. On the first floor we find the big **Salone**, its ceiling is decorated with painted trusses and inside are kept a few artworks: the *Assunzione con i Ss. Giovanni e Tommaso*, a 16th century terracotta piece by the Della Robbia school; a *Madonna col Bambino* from **Botticelli school**; a *Madonna col Bambino e due sante*, a *tondo* in the Umbrian-Tuscan style. On the same floor we find the very interesting **Biblioteca Rilliana**, keeping 20 000 volumes, 519 11th century manuscripts and 784 incunabulums. The Centre of documentation on the local history is also found there. On the second floor, at the top of the stairs there is a **caryatid statue** representing Count Guido di Simone da Battifolle and a column supporting the entire roof. In front of the staircase, a little room gives access, on the left hand side, to the **Sala Grande**, with remains of frescoes and a stone wash basin from 1469. On the right hand side is located the **Saletta d'angolo**, with a beautiful fireplace in the Renaissance style from 1512. There is also a chapel decorated with frescoes by Taddeo Gaddi. **In the palace is displayed a permanent exhibition about the Battle of Campaldino where Dante Alighieri fought.** When you go down to the village from the palace, through a small street on the right hand side, you find the **Chiesa delle Agostiniane**, with a portal decorated with a piece in terracotta from Andrea della Robbia's workshop; in front of the palace, at the end of the square, stands the old house of the Guidi family, built before the castle, and today part of the Villa Matteschi in the garden of which is the Torre dei Diavoli, built before the year 1000. Back on the Piazza Amerighi, you take via Cavour, the main street of the village, with its characteristic arches, and at the end of it you find the church of San Fedele from 1185. The interior is in the shape of a Latin cross and has various altars in the Renaissance style with artworks among which the most important is the *Madonna col Bambino* from the Maestro della Maddalena; the church also has a crypt with three small naves on pillars where can be seen the bust of San Torello, in golden and silver bronze, and a walnut urn keeping the body of the saint, who died in 1282.

## THE MONASTERY AND THE HERMITAGE OF CAMALDOLI

From Poppi, a beautiful road between meadows and lovely hamlets leads to **Camaldoli**; past Moggiona, you go across a **magnificent forest with secular pines**. At an altitude of 816 m, in a beautiful site, is **one of the most important spiritual centres in Tuscany**, in the middle of a forest of tall pines maintained by the monks for several centuries. The religious complex includes the Monastery of Fontebuona (first to appear on arrival), created as a refuge for pilgrims coming to the Hermitage, and the Hermitage, situated at an altitude of 1104 m, and 3 km to the north.

According to the tradition, it was said that the territory was given by Count **Maldolo di Arezzo** (from where derives the name "**Ca Maldoli**") to St Romualdo, who built in 1012 the first nuclear centre of the hermitage and then the refuge, a few years later. Historians give the date of 1023-1024 for the foundation of the hermitage and make its name derive from "**Campus Amabilis**", following the beauty of the site. The monastery has a surface area of 816 m<sup>2</sup>, it was built as a refuge in 1023 and renovated in 1203 and 1276, after two fires and many ransacks. The monastery has always been an important cultural centre which was equipped in the 15th century with typographic material to allow the printing of the "**Costituzioni camaldolesi**", including also rules regarding pines plantation and conservation. Here were also located the headquarters of a famous academy, with members such as Lorenzo the Magnificent and Leon Battista Alberti. The complex, massive and with an irregular shape, is made of a monastery, a church and a "**foresteria**". On the large square, we can see the long façade of the old **Foresteria**, the "**Hospitium camalduli**", meant to welcome hosts who had come here on a retreat or to meet members of the monastic community. In the building the Chostro di Maldolo presents a beautiful square courtyard surrounded by arches resting on columns from the 11th-12th centuries; the chapel of the Holy Spirit is found on the left hand side. From the Maldolo cloister we get access to a small 15th century cloister. The monastery, implanted in the 16th century, is built around a cloister we cannot visit, surrounded by arches on sandstone columns from 1543 with an octagonal pond in its centre.



**The Chiesa dei Ss. Donato e Ilariano** goes back to 1509 but was restructured in 1772. The Baroque interior has a single nave supported by Corinthian capitals and it contains various works by **Giorgio Vasari** like the *Madonna col Bambino e i Ss. Giovanni Battista e Girolamo* from 1538, near the third altar in the right hand side; the *Ss. Romualdo e Pier Damiani* in the choir, on the right hand side wall; a *Deposizione* from 1540 above the high altar; *Due Miracoli di S. Donato* and *i Ss. Donato e Ilariano* above the door of the smaller choir.

Going around the monastery you reach the **Farmacia**: built in 1543, it is filled with sculpted cabinets and old ceramic vases; here are sold some food and cosmetic products prepared by the monks following traditional recipes. Nearby there is the *Laboratorio galenico* keeping tools, books on medicine, surgery and botany (15th-16th centuries).

Opening Hours of the Hermitage: In winter: Monday to Saturday: 9-12 and 15-17. In summer: Monday to Saturday: 9-12 and 15-18. Opening Hours of the Monastery: In winter: 9-13 and 14.30-19 In summer: 9-13 and 14.30-19.30



The monastery is linked to the hermitage with a 3 km road going up the valley of the torrent Camaldoli. Along this road you find the **Cappella della Madonna della neve** dated 1456, the **Cappella di San Romualdo** (the oldest), the **three wooden crosses** marking the limits of the monastic closure, a small artificial lake made in the 15th century to **breed trout used to provide food to the monks**. The road goes through the monumental forest of **Camaldoli**, **part of the National Park of the Casentino Forests**, which is rich of a variety of species and tall secular pines.





## THE HERMITAGE

It is in this solitary and suggestive place that were established the first headquarters of the order created by St Romuald, who, in 1023, had five cells and a small oratory built. The present complex, made of 20 cells, has kept the original setting: the various buildings form **a kind of village typical of oriental monachism**. When you arrive on the square, you see on the left of the portal the old chapel of Sant'Antonio, incorporated in the walls. Then you enter a small courtyard lined with low height buildings: the library is set in the one of the left; it was founded in 1622 and contains 5000 volumes including rare books.



In the back on the right stands the **Chiesa del Salvatore** consecrated in 1027, enlarged many times, restructured in 1658 and restored in 1708. The façade showing elegant Baroque forms is enclosed between two campaniles and it is decorated with three statues: in the middle is the Saviour, on the sides St Romuald and St Benedict. A small corridor allows access to the inside. Above the portal there is a lovely bas-relief in marble with the *Madonna e il Bambino* by T. Fiamberti. The church is planned as an Egyptian cross; the interior is decorated with rich golden stucco works. In the transverse nave, on the altar in the right hand side, we see a *Madonna col bambino e Santi* by G.B. Naldini and on the left altar there is an *Immacolata* by Candido Sorbini. Through a door in the right hand side, we enter the chapter house, from the 16th century; on the left we find the Cappella di Sant'Antonio, with a glazed terracotta on its altar: *Madonna col Bambino e Santi* in the style of **Andrea della Robbia**.



A wooden iconostasis richly sculpted divides the transverse nave from the rest of the church, allocated to the choir of the monks (no visits allowed) and marked by a simple wooden balustrade from the 15th century. The walls are decorated with two frescoes by G.B. Draghi: *San Romualdo con l'imperatore Enrico II* and *Visita di Ottone III a San Romualdo*. On the left hand side there is another fresco: *Confessione di Ottone III a San Romualdo* by Francesco Francia. **On the sides of the high altar, we see two tabernacles in marble attributed to Gino da Settignano dated 1531 and in the apse a *Crocifissione e Santi* from the end of the 16th century.**



The refectory, dated 1679, is located at the far end, in the right hand side of the church. This is where **the hermits used to have dinner together twelve times per year, in total silence**; on the walls there are large **17th century paintings representing saints in pairs**. In front of the church we find **St Romuald's cell, the only one that is possible to visit**.

The hermits' cells are situated inside an area which is closed by a iron gate and not accessible. There are 28 of them, set on five rows divided by octagonal paths. They are small rectangular houses at the ground level, with a porch, a hall, a bedroom, a study, an oratory, firewood storage and a garden. St Francis of Assisi's cell is located in the second row on the right hand side; it is one of the first five original cells and where he lived for a while. At the end of the street stands the Pope's cell, where Cardinal Ugolino dei Conti di Segni, who became Pope Gregory IX in 1227 lived; it was transformed into a chapel and some beatified hermits were buried there. The monks' cemetery is adjacent to it.



### **BIBBIENA, the main town of the Casentino**

**Bibbiena** is the biggest centre in the Casentino and can be regarded as the chief town of this valley. Its origins are very old as proved by the discovery in the area of Etruscan sites and Roman villas. Its history was also very important in the Middle Ages even though there are less vestiges to illustrate it because of the many sieges, loots and devastations Bibbiena had to suffer up to the end of the 15th century. The urban architecture in the historic centre where there are several beautiful palaces dates essentially from the Renaissance period. The "**Bibbiena vecchia**" is situated on the top of a hill. At the highest point you find Piazza Tarlati, with its beautiful bell tower and the Palazzo Bruni, with a porch, which was Bishop Tarlati's residence. Nearby stands the **church dedicated to Santi Ippolito and Donato**; inside many works of art are kept among which is a large 15th century polyptych by **Bicci di Lorenzo**, a *Madonna con Bambino*, still from the 15th century by Cola Da Camerino, a painting from the early 1600s by Jacopo Ligozzi, a painted Crucifix from the beginning of the 14th century and a wooden sculpture of the Madonna unfortunately deprived of her Child from the end of the 13th century. Not far from the church you find the Porta dei Fabbri, an architectural example of Bibbiena medieval period. To go down via Berni, you have to walk down steep stairs. The Oratorio di San Francesco is located there, it is a Baroque building with a neoclassical façade (unique in the Casentino) and its interior is in the Baroque style. In via Berni you also find Palazzo Niccolini, which is currently the seat of the town hall. In via Dovizi, in front of the homonym palace, you can visit the **Chiesa di San Lorenzo** where **two splendid pieces in glazed terracotta by Andrea Della Robbia** are preserved: a *Natività con adorazione dei pastori* and a *Lamentazione sul Cristo morto*. One kilometre away from Bibbiena you find the **Santuario di Santa Maria del Sasso** presenting a refined Renaissance architecture and where important 16th century works of art are kept. Bibbiena is not only interesting for its history but also for what the whole municipal territory has to offer, like its beautiful landscape and the various artworks.

### **SANTUARIO DI SANTA MARIA DEL SASSO**



The **Sanctuary of Santa Maria del Sasso** is located in the vicinity of Bibbiena. It represents an important religious centre for the region's inhabitants and especially those of Bibbiena. It has got to do with the fact that the sanctuary dedicated to Mary was built, in the best Renaissance architectural style, following the appearance of the Madonna on a big rock in 1347. The Madonna has ever since been kind to the people living in the area. The church was built on the rock which can be seen from inside. The sanctuary has always been under the protection of Dominican friars, assisted by nuns. This place demonstrates a great spiritual value also for those who do not live in the Casentino while it is also an interesting place for the many works of art and architecture, essentially from the 16th century, preserved there. The sanctuary is constituted by three churches named as the upper church, the lower church and the third church.



## LA VERNA

**La Verna is San Francesco, San Francesco is la Verna.** The saint from Assisi used to go to pray and repent on this rocky, steep and inaccessible mount. This is where with his disciples he had the first church of la Verna built: **Santa Maria degli Angeli**. This is where some miraculous events of his life took place. But the main fact is that this is where St Francis received the stigmata in 1224. Two years later, Francis died in Assisi and he was beatified as early as 1228. The miraculous episode of the stigmata gave a huge dimension to la Verna as a place of faith. Only a few years later the **Counts Guidi from Poppi** had a small church erected precisely at the place where St Francis had received the stigmata (the current **Cappella delle Stimmate**). There was an increase in the number of St Francis' followers wishing to live there which led to the building of the convent and the big basilica. A great family of artists, the **Della Robbia**, decorated la Verna with magnificent pieces in terracotta, between the end of the 15th century and the beginning of the 16th. Nowadays, thousands of people go every year to the Holy Mount, this mystical place of faith, prayer and meditation. It is also a place attracting art lovers and people who enjoy walking in a sweet and wild nature; the panoramas at the top of the Holy Mount are breathtaking.

The shape of the Holy Mount of la Verna, a kind of "big tooth" on the crests of the Apennines, is unique in the whole Casentino valley. The cliff on the top of which the Franciscan Sanctuary was built, the famous **Scogliera delle Simmate** appears more and more fascinating as you get closer to it. This rocky dent is embellished with lovely beech and pine woods, a natural environment around the sanctuary providing great walks. The nicest and definitely the easiest is the walk up to the **Penna**, the top of the mount. There you can discover a spectacular panorama of the entire Romagna. At la Verna, one can observe very peculiar natural art pieces, such as the sculpted roots of majestic beech trees, clutching the ground and the rocks. It is difficult to describe such a place with a few words and communicate its mysticism, its charm, its complexity, the beauty of its architecture and the refinement of his artworks, in the heart of fantastic panoramas.

From Bibbiena, the road leads up to Chiusi della Verna through thick wood; this is a place where are welcome pilgrims on their way to the sanctuary and always busy with all kinds of tourists. As a passage way connecting the Casentino and the valley of the Tiberina, the place was strengthened with the addition of a fortified castle, in 967, for Otto I; its vestiges still dominate the area, in the middle of beautiful woods.





### Piazzale or Quadrante

At the entry of the sanctuary a large paved square opens out; it is called the **Quadrante** because of the sundial engraved in the wall of the Basilica's campanile, on which we can read: "Se il sol mi guarda, le ore ti mostro" ("if the sun looks at me I can show you the hours"). Here we are at 1128 m above sea level. A **tall wooden cross** is planted in a rock, at a spot where you can admire a vast panorama on the valley of Casentino and on the mountains of Pratomagno. On the left hand side stands a 16th century water tank. The uneven roofs made of stones or tiles, decorated with fancy-looking chimneys, are a beautiful example of "spontaneous architecture", made by friars and workmen employed in the construction. Going down from the square towards east, you arrive at the **old entrance**. The paved road which used to lead to the convent from the valley reaches a large flat arch. On the big portal on the left, above a wooden bench where the travellers could take a sit for a first halt, a stone mentions in miles the old distances to the closest towns. On the frame of the portal we can read the inscription: "Non est in toto sanctior orbe mons" ("There is no other mount in the world holier than this one"). This message means to provide justification and reward after the tiring walk uphill. Nearby, on the left hand side wall, a terset of Dante Alighieri's 'Paradise' indicates the historical and geographical data of La Verna: we are between the valley of the Tiber river, with its spring at Mount Fumaiolo, and the valley of the Arno river, coming from Mount Falterona. The road goes down into the valley and at the first curve appears the **Cappella degli uccelli**. The building recalls the place where a big oak tree used to stand, covered with many birds singing their best welcome to Francis of Assisi on his way up to La Verna.



### Santa Maria degli Angeli

An asymmetric porch with a stone roof gives access to the old "foresteria", to the cloisters and to the small church of **Santa Maria degli Angeli**, the oldest of La Verna, which was built by St Francis and Count Orlando Catani (1216-18). The façade is decorated with various coats of arms from families or associations which were benefactors of the church, like Eugene IV, the Municipality and the people of Florence or the "Arte della Lana". On the left hand side stands a small campanile "a vela" with a bell cast in Pisa in 1257 by Leandro Pisano; it is called "St Bonaventura's bell" as it is supposed to have been given to the church by the saint. The interior has a single nave with an ogival vault and is rather simple; there are four windows on the left hand side and a gemed window on the façade. The length of the building was increased after 1250 to contain more believers. The oldest part sits between the small central gate and the Della Robbia's retable on the altar. Both terracotta works illustrate the fundamental principles of the Christian faith and of St Francis of Assisi's meditation: **the Incarnation with the representation of the manger and the Passion with the deposition.**



On the left, we see the *Natività con l'adorazione del Bambino e I Ss. Francesco e Antonio da Padova*, by Andrea della Robbia and maybe Luca. Next to Jesus, laid down in the grave, the predella includes figures of Maria, San Girolamo and San Bonaventura while on the other side we see San Giovanni, San Bernardino and San Luigi. The melancholic retable of the *Deposizione* is situated on the right, with the symbols of Passion hanging on the cross, a few angels sadly looking at their Lord who has been killed, two of them help Maria and Giovanni to hold the body to lay it down in the sepulchre. In the predella, Maria with the Child in her arms is in the company of Santa Salomè, Santa Elisabetta d'Ungheria, Santa Caterina, Santa Maria Maddalena, Santa Chiara d'Assisi and Santa Cecilia. This piece was also realized by Andrea della Robbia with Giovanni's help (1490). In the other part of the church, a small stair gives access to the oldest area, built by St Francis himself and where he used to often come and pray. This is also the place where he said farewell to his companions on 30 September 1224. It is enclosed in a simple wooden choir in the Renaissance style (1465).



In the centre, the retable by Andrea della Robbia (1480-85) depicting the *Assunzione di Maria al Cielo (Santa Maria degli Angeli)* is extremely beautiful. At the top, this **masterpiece** represents God the Father with two adoring angels. In the centre, the main scene shows Mary, freed by death (her grave is filled with flowers), is being taken to Heaven in a *mandorla* with a group of cherubs by four winged angels. This is the moment when she gives her belt to St Thomas, the apostle who did not believe in the resurrection. St Francis, with a cross in his hand and St Bonaventura, covered with a cope decorated with angels, are contemplating this historic and symbolic moment. On the left hand side we see a bishop who represents the pope St Gregory the Great, with a dove close to his ear. The tabernacle is placed in the centre of the lowest part with angels on both sides.



### The Della Robbia family in the Casentino

The Della Robbia family was a family of great sculptors and potters who worked in Florence in the mid 1400s for about a century. The first member to distinguish himself was **Luca della Robbia**, the most important artist of the family. Around 1440, he realized the first glazed terracotta works which would remain famous as **terrecotte robbiane** or **ceramiche robbiane**. His nephew, **Andrea della Robbia** was Luca's first helper and continued his artistic activity following the tradition. He was very inspired by his master's work, regarding plasticity and colours, mainly white and blue. Later, Andrea's sons, the most famous being **Giovanni** della Robbia, continued to practice this original art. Work orders increased greatly at the end of the 15th century and the Della Robbia employed many assistants. This is why it is often said about their works that they were made by the **bottega** (workshop) of either **Andrea or Giovanni della Robbia**. In the first decades of the 16th century, on the other hand, **Benedetto and Santi Buglioni** who were trained at the Della Robbia's workshop, produced art pieces in their own style. For political, commercial, cultural and logistics reasons, the Casentino has always been **very close to Florence**. This bond is the reason why nearly fifty Della Robbia's terracotta works can be seen in the region. A third is kept at La Verna, far from Florence although closely connected with the chief town of Tuscany. The *Annunciazione*, one of Andrea della Robbia's masterpieces is preserved in the basilica of the Franciscan Sanctuary. The figures represented in these glazed terracotta works change their expression according to the place where the observer is and depending on the light falling on them. This is why sometimes the details of a ceramic piece are more interesting than the overall work.

### The Della Robbia family: three generations of artists

The artistic activities of the Della Robbia family covered a long period of time: from the first decades of the 15th century to nearly the end of the 16th century; over one hundred years which marked modern western culture in an indelible way. Luca, the first artist in the family, was praised by **Leon Battista Alberti** as one of the fathers of the Renaissance. He had a cultivated and inquiring mind and created a new technique to produce glazed sculptures and paintings; in doing so he managed to transform the minor art of ceramics into a form of expression able to compete with the best traditional paintings and sculptures. Thanks to his nephew, Andrea, the **glazed works were abundantly distributed** throughout the territory, finding more and more lovers and clients; the specialized workshop, in via Guelfa in Florence, had great power over Tuscany. Giovanni, Andrea's son, managed with success the activities in the workshop while his brothers were focusing on creating objects of exceptional quality, using their great-uncle's technique. Luca, Andrea, Giovanni but also Francesco, Marco, Girolamo and Luca junior: three generations of artists who contributed to a century of the Tuscan and Italian art history.

Glazed ceramics is a **fundamental innovation** in the artistic production of the Renaissance period: applying on a monumental sculpture a special mixture of minerals to create tin glazed pieces similar to ceramics works. An extraordinary invention, an agreement between artistic genius, creativity, fantasy and technique, study, research of materials and elaboration techniques. The Della Robbia were outstanding craftsmen, able to **transform clay into art works** and to mix painting, sculpture, architecture and applied arts to create fully original pieces. The formula used to make glazed terracotta remained a **total mystery** for centuries. The family kept its technique as a guarded secret for decades, giving no indication on methods and procedures, and the contemporaries were convinced it was a matter of exceptional invention. A legend says that this magical recipe was given to **Benedetto Buglioni** by a lady from the Della Robbia's household, and the mystery was demystified. In fact, the glazed technique was not a proper invention but the revival of a technique used by artists in the Antiquity. The technique was a re-elaboration of methods known by Antic Oriental civilizations and inherited by Romans and Byzantine people, which was then transmitted by Arabic artists to the European regions with a Moorish presence, Spain especially, where the island of Majorca (or Maiolica), was an important sale centre of crockery, pottery and enamel works.



### The Basilica

The building of the **Chiesa Maggiore** or **Basilica**, dedicated to the **Madonna Assunta**, presenting a simple architecture, started in 1348 upon the initiative of Count Tarlato di Pietramala and his wife Giovanna di Santa Fiora, who at the time owned the castle of Chiusi. Works resumed in 1451 and were completed in 1509 thanks to the support provided by the Florentine consuls of the Arte della Lana. The portico, dated from the end of the Renaissance period (1536-38), was partly rebuilt after WWII; the campanile dates from 1486-90.



The interior is in the style of the Renaissance with a single nave following the Franciscan tradition; it presents four rows under cross vaults. The second row is embellished with the coat of arms of the Arte della Lana which was deeply involved with the complex of La Verna; the emblem was done by Benedetto Buglioni (1459). On the first altar in the right hand side, a *Madonna col Bambino in trono e i Ss. Francesco, Maria Maddalena, Antonio Abate e Onofrio*, glazed terracotta by Andrea della Robbia.



Then we arrive at the **Cappella della Concezione or delle Reliquie** (1640), closed by a wrought iron gate and keeping, behind two big wooden doors, many relics and objects used by St Francis of Assisi, among which there is a piece of cloth stained with his own blood. At the front, a reliquary displays another precious relic: the frock worn by St Francis in September 1224 when he received the stigmata at La Verna.



The niche with *la Natività, Adorazione del Bambino e angeli con l'Eterno fra Cherubini*, presents a magnificent masterpiece in glazed terracotta by Andrea della Robbia; kneeling Mary is contemplating her son lying on a pile of grass. God the Father, angels and the Holy Spirit are happy to see the Word made flesh. The intense motherly emotion expressed by Mary's face is repeated in God's and the angels' ecstatic faces.



Baby Jesus is the only figure looking at those who are watching the scene. In the bottom, one can read the inscription: "*Verbo si è fatto carne per mezzo della Vergine Maria*". The beauty of Mary's face, the joyful human participation, every feature of this poor but happy naked child make this artwork almost as beautiful as the retablo of *l'Annunciazione*. Under the big organ from 1586, attributed to Onofrio Zeffirini di Cortona, there is a chapel built in 1939 by Count Ginori. On the altar there is another small terracotta piece, *La Vergine in adorazione*, which was made by the Manifattura Ginori in Sesto Fiorentino (1950), this is the copy of the original preserved in the Bargello Museum in Florence. On the side of the entry to the choir, we find another terracotta by Andrea della Robbia: *S. Antonio Abate e S. Francesco*. In the apse, the simple choir is made in wood with two rows of stalls (1495), decorated with friezes, two engraved figures attributed to Baccio d'Agnolo and a rich lectern dated 1509. The organ was inaugurated in 1926 for the seven hundredth anniversary of St Francis of Assisi's death. It was made by the firm Tamburini di Crema. Essential support to accompany liturgical singing, this instrument is also very precious during the concerts performed in the church in the Summertime.



In the chapel on the left hand side of the choir, the **retable of the Ascension** is an exceptional terracotta work by **Andrea della Robbia** (1490-1493). The double cornice with fruit and angels contains a scene which seems attracted upwards to Heaven, as Christ is going back to his Father.



We then see a niche in the shape of a small temple, under which is located another masterpiece of Della Robbia's art: the *Annunciazione*, made by Andrea around 1475. The scene captures the essential moment when Mary is about to reply to the angel: everything is suspended and still: the angel's eyes and face, the wings of the dove, the cherubs' faces; the figure of God the Father seems kept in the background, respectful of the Virgin's freedom. She is finding herself in this specific moment passing from worry to joy with the acceptance of God's will.

On the way out of the church, we find a stone pulpit from 1637. And further on, the Cappella di San Michele preserves under the altar Saint Giovanni della Verna's body (1259-1322). The last altar is dedicated to St Anthony of Padua.

### **Cappella di San Pietro d'Alcantara and Sasso Spicco**

In front of the basilica, an iron gate gives access to the stairs leading to the **Sasso Spicco** (the projecting rock)). It is located next to a two-level building: this is where St Francis' first cell was. Whenever he was going up to La Verna, always in the company of another friar, St Francis had a great need for solitude and this is why he had his own cell built some distance away from the others. On the large square, the upper chapel is dedicated to **San Pietro d'Alcantara**, a Spanish Franciscan monk. The frescoes have disappeared from the walls. Going down the stairs, you enter in the **Cappella di Santa Maria Maddalena**, an example of penitence and love for the Lord. Her statue is found in a niche on the back wall, looking poor and simple.



Going down even more, you find yourself at one of the most distinctive spots on the mountain: an impressive amount of rocks piled up on the top of each other with secular beech trees standing on them. This area allows to understand the geological structure of the whole mountain made out of a big emersion of rocks. They are resting on a clay soil varying in consistency according to the amount of water. This is why in the course of the centuries, there have been many landslides, especially in the north-west part of the mountain. Works of reinforcement were completed in 1987. At the end of the stairs, you find yourself inside a damp abyss. An imposing mass is projecting several metres above another robust rock which seems to be detached (**Sasso “Spicco”**) but is actually kept in balance thanks to the counterweight of the part that is not visible.



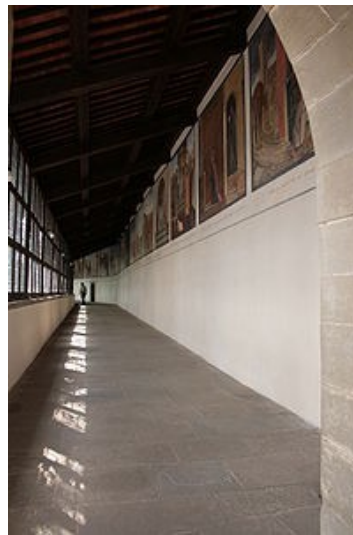
The wooden cross against the rock is there to recall how much St Francis loved meditating in this area. The caves and crevices became for him like the Lord’s wounds; this was a place where to hide and focus on contemplation. Moving forward, you reach a narrower gallery dividing in half this part of the mountain. Above there is a small bridge supporting the corridor leading to the stigmata area.

### **Cappella della Pietà**

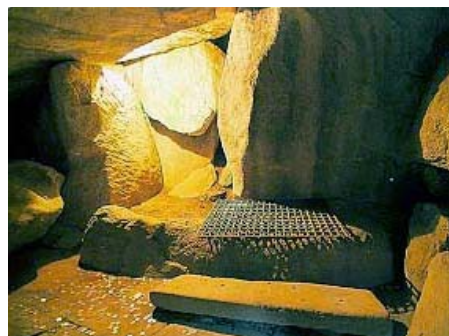


Back up on the esplanade, between the porch of the basilica and the Stigmata Corridor, marked by a stone balustrade, you find the **Cappella della Pietà** embellished with a colourful glazed terracotta work by Santi Buglioni (1494-1576), last representative of the family who competed with the Della Robbia. The retable, damaged by a bomb in 1944, shows a big cross above the figures. In the top part, the sun and the moon are crying, in the bottom part, Mary holds Jesus unconscious on her lap. St John the Evangelist and Mary Magdalene are by her side. Behind we see St Francis, Michael the Archangel, St Anthony and St Jerome, all distraught with pain. In the predella there is the coat of arms of the Counts of Montedoglio, who commissioned the artwork and three scenes with the *Annunciation*, the *Nativity* and the *Adoration of the Magi*.

## Il Corridoio delle Stimmate



A lovely legend describes the building of this place. At night or during the day, the friars used to go regularly to the place where St Francis had received the stigmata. One winter night, they could not go because of the bad weather. The next morning, they found on the snow the imprints left by animals who had acted as pilgrims in their absence. The long porch with 23 columns was built between 1578 and 1582. Thick windows protect it from snow during harsh winters so that the monks can perpetuate the old tradition of the Procession of the Stigmata, that had started in 1432. A wall is used to display 21 frames illustrating the life of the Assisi Saint, insisting especially on the episodes lived in La Verna. The original frescoes were damaged because of humidity and bad weather. They were redone by Friar Emanuele da Como in 1670 and renovated in 1840. In the middle of the corridor, a small door gives access to an impressive spot, a crack of the projecting rock.



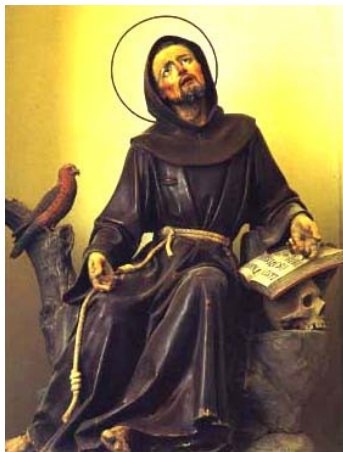
On the left of the Hermitage, in front of a **splendid view of the forest**, going down a little to the right, a cave has been made between rocks which seem to support one another; it keeps **St Francis's stone bed**, covered by an iron grid. The grid was installed to protect the stone seen as miraculous and to prevent visitors from removing pieces of it. At the end of the corridor opens out the Capella Loddi with parts of frescoes remaining on its ceiling and a 15th century wooden crucifix.



## Cappella delle Stimmate



Past the iron gate, you find on the left the Cappella di San Sebastiano, where religious people and monks are buried and where you see a small terracotta statue of St Sebastian. Further down you arrive at the cell built for St Francis on his last visit to La Verna in 1224. Transformed into a chapel, you have to walk through it to go to the stigmata area and get access to the sacristy and the Cappella di San Bonaventura.



In a niche above the altar, a terracotta statue represents Francis stigmatized, sitting with one hand on the Passion of the Christ Book. The **hawk** who had become his friend and used to wake him up in the night to let him pray is found next to him. A door on the left hand side wall allows you to go into a small room giving access the Stigmata Chapel, the heart of the sanctuary. Above the door, a 13th century marble bas-relief is the oldest known representation of the time of stigmatization. In a very intense scene, the Christ's body is wrapped up by the strong wings of a seraph. The seraph is positioned perpendicularly above Francis, kneeling with his hands open to receive the gift. Behind him there is a chapel in the shape of a round tower and next to him some bushes hang on the rocks.



The door gives entry to the place where St Francis became Jesus-Christ's perfect image, thanks to the miracle of the stigmata: marks of nails started to appear on his hands and on his feet, similar to those he had observed a moment earlier in the image of the crucified man. A frame in red marble indicates the place where Francis was, protected by a piece of glass in front of the altar. Friar Leon had put a wooden cross there, but in 1263 the present chapel was built thanks to the financial help of Count Simone di Battifolle. The vault and the walls were decorated with frescoes by

Taddeo Gaddi, one of Giotto's disciples in 1350, but everything was eventually demolished to give space to Andrea della Robbia's masterpiece (1481).



**This is the biggest work ever made by the Della Robbia.** The double frame, enriched with floral patterns and 23 faces of cherubs is surrounded by the Franciscan belt. The crucifixion scene is expressing a lot of pain. At the bottom one can read words from the Bible: "O voi tutti che passate per la via, fermatevi un attimo, guardate se vi è un dolore pari al mio". Above the inscription INRI stands a pelican. This is the bird said to pierce its torso to provide food to its starving young. This is the symbol represented by Jesus-Christ giving his life to save mankind. On the sides, a sad sun diffuses its rays twisted with pain and the moon cannot help crying. Four pairs of angels with St Francis, Mary, Jesus' mother, St John and St Jerome share the pain of the crucifixion. At the bottom, a tusk reminds us of an old symbolic legend. Abraham's tusk was buried just underneath the Calvary and the Redeemer's blood woke him up from death, giving its life back to mankind. Under the inscription we see the beautiful face of Christ crowned with thorns. On both sides is found the Alessandri's coat of arms, the Florentine family who commissioned the artwork.

The walnut wood choir beside the chapel dates from 1532. Above the entry door, we find a beautiful tondo by Andrea della Robbia depicting the Madonna leaning her head softly on the blessing Child's face. After coming out of the Chapel, you go down to the right to the Cappella di San Bonaventura, from where you can see the rock where St Francis was when the crucified Christ appeared to him. You then go up to the Cappella di Sant'Antonio da Padova, where the saint lived in 1230.

## **Il Precipizio**

Outside, it is possible to walk around the big rock supporting the foundations of the Chapel of St Sebastian and of the Hermitage. Protected by an iron banister, the visitor can contemplate the meadows underneath and see, behind another iron gate, the little crevice in the rock where St Francis stayed. While the devil was trying to make him fall, "he leaned against the rock which protected him as if it were soft wax".



**From the balustrade, feeling suspended between Heaven and Earth, we can see the whole valley of the Casentino, towards Poppi and the Pass of the Consuma.**

## Il Convento

Initially built as a hermitage, the convent of La Verna became more important following the major event it commemorates. No other reason would explain the size of the structures built along the centuries to meet the vital needs of many friars, pilgrims and guests. From the top of the site or on an aerial photo, one can realise how big and complex the whole area is. One can appreciate the rough beauty of a spontaneous architecture linked to necessity and to the genuine creativity expressed by various monks and guilds who worked in La Verna. The oldest part is near Santa Maria degli Angeli and from the corridor along the church we have access to a 15th century square-shaped cloister, with a cistern in its centre. The monks' cells are located all around on the upper floor. On one side with an extra floor is found the Noviciate. This is the area of the convent reserved for the young in their first year of life in the Franciscan order. The 1518 refectory is located on one side of the ground-floor; it is a large room with wooden tables and benches, enriched with two precious works of art: a terracotta by Andrea della Robbia with the *Madonna del cardellino* and a *Ultima Cena* from 1873 by Ferdinando Folchi. Inside, in addition to the *Foresteria* wanted by the Medici, there are the Sala di Santa Chiara, used for conferences, the pharmacy and the infirmary keeping ancient cabinets and medical vases. There are also two libraries. A museum located in big 15th century rooms present precious enlightened manuscripts, liturgic objects, tapestries and paintings.

## Around the Convent



**The sanctuary rich with history and art is only one aspect of the natural beauty the whole mountain of La Verna has to offer.** To realise what a jewel the area is, you just have to walk into the forest and take a path from the base of the mountain to climb up to the top of La Penna (1283 m). The trees are mainly beeches, pines and ashes, some of them reaching a gigantic size. There are also virgin zones in the forest. This area is one of the rare places in Central Italy to have kept such plants and forests, It was maintained in good condition thanks to the harmony kept between man and nature, as the monks only used it to cover their needs and those of the poor living in the neighbourhood. The monks took care of the area for centuries until 1985 when its management was entrusted by convention to the *Comunità Montana del Casentino*. In 1944 it was made part of the *Parco Nazionale del Monte Falterona, Campigna* and of the *Foreste Casentinesi*.

A walking itinerary can start with the steep climb on a path near the Basilica to reach the **Cappella del Faggio**, also named **Cappella del Beato Giovanni della Verna**. It was built in 1518 when heavy winds caused the fall of the beech on which the saint had hung a cross as a reference for his praying and meditating sessions. A space lined by a small wall is supposed to represent the area where Jesus walked with Francis when he appeared to him. The saint spent thirty years of his life there. Another walk takes the visitor on a rocky path following the top of the mountain, going uphill and downhill to arrive at the **Masso di Fra Lupo**, a gigantic jagged peak totally detached from the mountain, looking like a pin sticking out of the escarpment. There is a legend involving a bandit connected to this place. The rascal and a group of nasty people used to rob travellers and abandon them on this rock. Initially he did not like St Francis' presence in the area but eventually he benefited from it as it changed his life, becoming a monk under the name of **Frate Agnello**. At the top of the path, you arrive at the Cappella della Penna, built in 1580. There stands a terracotta crucifix from 1500, which for a long time was kept inside the convent to avoid it to be stolen. On the way up, the visitor can admire plants, rocks, escarpment; at the top (1283 m) he can admire a panorama spread out from Mount Fumaiolo to Mount Falterona, to the Sasso di Simone, and to the mountains of Romagna towards the Adriatic sea and Umbria.

## Tourists Reception at La Verna

Its natural beauty and its spiritual charm have always attracted many pilgrims and visitors to La Verna. An ever increasing number of structures have managed to welcome and give shelter to everybody. At a small distance from the entry gate, there is a big room with a bar and a restaurant. The *foresteria* can accommodate visitors wishing to spend a few days there for a spiritual retreat. The TAU welcomes the youth wanting to get closer to Francis of Assisi.

