

CRETE SENESI –MONTE OLIVETO MAGGIORE-MONTALCINO-SANT’ANTIMO



The itinerary which leads from **Siena** to the **Abbey of Sant'Antimo** via **Montalcino** crosses **magnificent and unforgettable sceneries**. This part of Tuscany is one of the most photographed in the region because of the originality of its landscape and for its splendid historical and architectural remains. The first part of the drive goes through the heart of the area of the **Siena clay hills**, a moonlike landscape made of masses of soil, with a magnetic charm, that singer Mario Luzi praised very well in his songs. Here, the dominant colour is grey, changing its shades according to the time of the day or the season. The typical grey of the clay hills with no tall vegetation and cut by deep rocky inlets is coloured with yellow tones at sunset or turns to white in the summer light. No doubt the handicraft connoisseurs will find in this area lots of workshops where the terracotta is worked following traditional techniques which have elsewhere given way to modern technology.



All around the Crete there are green pastures, sunflower fields sparkling in the summer light, spectacular green wheat fields during springtime. Vineyards are essentially located in the **Montalcino** area, famous all over the world for the excellent quality of its wines. Everywhere medieval villages can be found, as well as ancient farms, parish churches and fortresses, all fascinating signs of the history of this region and of noble men activities. This mild and suggestive landscape is certainly one of the most attractive in Italy and men have been able to make it even more precious by caring for it, developing a sobre architecture that is in harmony with its natural richness. Balance is what makes this part of Tuscany different from the rest of it, showing a healthy and enlightened relationship between men and their territory. Here are made excellent products, mainly wines but also gourmet specialties which can be tasted in the many *trattorie* and *osterie* spread around the villages.



The *Pecorino delle Crete* is a type of cheese made with milk coming from **Asciano**, a milk produced by goats grazing freely in the clay fields which, even though arid, are full of aromatic bushes giving the flavoursome subtlety to the cheese, be it fresh or matured. Here you also find the precious **white truffle**, growing in great quantities along the waterways criss-crossing the clay terrain. Other types of truffles can also be collected, like the **black truffle** and the *bianchetta* (tuber borchii); the richest market where you can find all types of truffles is located in **San Giovanni d'Asso**. Another typical produce is the artichoke from **Chiusure**, cultivated thanks to the microclimate of the region, especially favourable to horticulture. You must also taste the **honey** produced in the Montalcino area, where the hilly meadows offer a great variety of perfumed flowers and aromatic essences. There is no need to introduce the **Brunello di Montalcino**, one of the most appreciated wines in the world. It is also advised to taste the *grappa* produced with Brunello grapes.



The itinerary (around 390 km, a rather long journey but worthwhile for the beauty of the area)

Leaving Siena, you drive on the Siena-Perugia road for a few kilometres and then turn right onto road SS 438 in direction of Asciano, going across **Taverne d'Arbia**, a set of newly built houses. Unexpectedly, after a few kilometres, the panoramas and typical scenery of the Crete open out, immersed in a solemn and quiet atmosphere. Scattered with sunflowers in summer and green pastures in winter, the undulated Crete are characterized by forms of erosion in the shape of a cupola, a round-looking relief, with farms on the top of them. We get beautiful views on the *biancane* (small bare cupolas striped with many typical white clay furrows) and on the *calanchi*, another characteristic type of erosion. This scenery is very dreamlike. There are no special features to distinguish the territory, no cathedrals, squares or castles. Just the intimacy of a group of cypresses, an old farm and the curve of a cobblestone road. The road becomes increasingly winding. One can notice many artificial lakes and grazing cattle. In this region, migrants from Sardinia brought back to life ovine breeding, using the many available pastures. After going uphill and downhill for a while, you finally reach Vescona and Fontanelle, from where you can admire a beautiful view on a set of hills lined with cypresses. **Asciano** is the first village you meet, it is the small and welcoming main centre of the Crete.



With Etruscan and Roman origins, still surrounded by its 14th century walls, **ASCIANO** has kept a medieval look. Buildings made during the Fascist period and the time following World War II did not change the historic centre of the village, still charming. The **Collegiata di Sant'Agata** is worth visiting. It is a Romanesque church, built in the 12th century in travertine stone and with a crenellated campanile built a century later standing next to it. Nearby we find the **Museo di Arte Sacra**, keeping two statues of **Francesco Valdambbrino** and works by artists from the Siennese school of painting from the 14th and 15th centuries. The **Museo civico archeologico** is also worthy of a visit. There are gathered pieces discovered in the countryside and dated from the end of the 5th century B.C. to the beginning of the 1st century A.D.



Along the road leading from Asciano to San Giovanni d'Asso, you have to visit the splendid **Abbazia Benedettina di Monte Oliveto Maggiore**, erected on a unassailable height, immersed among cypresses.

ABBAZIA DI MONTE OLIVETO MAGGIORE

The main abbey of the Olivetan Benedictine Order dominates in a suggestive way a forest of ancient cypresses typical of the Crete landscape. This is one of the most interesting abbeys to be found not only in Tuscany but in the whole of Italy. It was founded in 1313 by **Giovanni Tolomei**, from Siena (who took the name of **Bernardo**) and by two other noblemen, **Patrizio Patrizi** and **Ambrogio Piccolomini**, who decided to withdraw from the world to live a hermit life. The foundation was approved in 1319 by the bishop of Arezzo, Guido Tarlati; later in 1344, the new monastic institution, professing to observe St Benedict's Rule, was confirmed by pope Clement VI. It was called **Monte Oliveto Maggiore** as a distinction from the other abbeys of Florence, San Gimignano and Naples, subjected to it. The congregation distinguished itself especially regarding studies, science and art. An institute of "book pathology" was recently created and highly qualified monks work there with passion.

The abbey is surrounded by a very old park with a 16th century fishpond. The complex, resembling a town, is constituted by churches, chapels, cloisters and various buildings decorated with loggias. There is also a small medieval palace from the 14th-16th centuries, all made in bricks and with a crenellated dungeon where the entrance to the building is located (outside and inside the door, one can see two works in terracotta from the **Della Robbia** school). A wide road leads to the church, erected in 1417 and transformed in the 18th century, but which kept its original campanile and portal. The entrance to the Monastery is next to it.



The heart of the complex is the **Chiostro Grande**, a cloister with two floors on columns and decorated with the **famous and magnificent frescoes** about the *Storie della vita di San Benedetto da Norcia*, nine of them made by **Luca Signorelli**, from 1479 to 1498, and the other twenty-seven by **Giovanni Antonio Bazzi**, called **Sodoma**, between 1505 and 1508. A well from 1439 stands in the centre of the cloister. **The inside of the church** goes back to the 15th century; its style is Gothic; it presents a Latin cross shape with a single nave and baroque decorations from the 17th century. There are various works of art in the church among which is found a 13th century **Crocifisso Ligneo**, a magnificent choir with inlaid works and sculptures by **Fra Giovanni da Verona** from 1503 and a pulpit made in 1518 by **Raffaello da Brescia**. Above the side door of the choir is a fresco depicting *I tre fondatori di Monte Oliveto*, by an unknown artist and dated from the 15th century. In addition to this big cloister, there are two others with arches supported by octagonal pillars: the **Chiostro di Mezzo** and the **Chiostro Piccolo**, built from 1459 onwards.

From the Chiostro di Mezzo we have access to the refectory, decorated with frescoes from the 17th century, and to the library, designed as a solemn basilica with three naves and columns decorated with Corinthian capitals by **Fra Giovanni da Verona** in 1518. This artist also made the sculptures at the front-door, the candelabra, and the inlaid decorations of a wardrobe. Here are kept beautiful manuscripts, choral songs from the 14th and 15th centuries. More than 40.000 volumes, opuscles and incunabulums are preserved in the library of the monastery, all carefully maintained by the monks managing a very important workshop to restore ancient books.

After leaving the abbey, we take the road to **San Giovanni d'Asso**, going via **Chiusure**. **Chiusure** deserves a visit for its splendid castle, built in the 13th century by citizens of Siena, and located on the top of a hill from where we enjoy a superb panorama on the Crete. Chiusure is also famous for the delicious quality of its **artichokes** and **pecorino**, the best in the region.



SAN GIOVANNI D'ASSO is, on the other hand, the motherland of white truffle lovers from the Crete senesi. Even those who do not especially like the taste of truffles should go through San Giovanni d'Asso, a charming little village with guesthouses immersed in a spectacular landscape. The historic centre has maintained its medieval aspect and structure and is dominated by an elegant castle which in the 12th century belonged to the Counts of Scialenga and then fell under the authority of the Scala Hospital in Siena. Every year, in November, the **Mostra - Mercato del tartufo bianco** (the white truffle market) is held in the castle. It is also possible to visit the church of San Giovanni Battista, from the 14th century and the church of San Pietro in Villore, dated from the year 1000 and immersed in cypresses. From San Giovanni D'Asso we take the road SS 2 Cassia to reach Montalcino.

MONTALCINO has become worldwide famous for the incomparable quality of its wines. The town of **Brunello** is situated on a hill covered by olive trees and vineyards, dominating the valleys of the Asso, Ombrone and Arbia rivers. Already inhabited in the Etruscan and Roman times, Montalcino was managed by the Abbey of Sant'Antimo until it became independent. After the Montaperti battle, in 1260, it came under the influence of Siena and the Rocca was built in 1361. The fortress remains famous for having resisted the most to the Florentines's attacks to conquer Siena outposts. Today, the centre of Montalcino is still kept inside its ancient walls, all around the **Piazza del Popolo**.



The **Palazzo dei Priori**, which has now become the town hall, must be seen. With its beautiful crenellated towers, it is a magnificent example of architecture of 14th century Sienese style. On the main square is also located a **14th century Loggia** and we can walk to the top of the hill to admire the **Rocca**, excellent example of medieval military architecture with its pentagonal shape. In the **Museo Civico e Diocesano** are kept several artworks in the Sienese style. Among them there is a beautiful **Painted Cross** from the 12th century, coming from Sant'Antimo, as well as the **Stendardo di Siena**, by Giovanni di Lorenzo attributed for a long time to **Sodoma**. The **Duomo of Montalcino** is a grandiose example of neoclassical architecture, it was built in the 19th century at the place where the parish church of San Salvatore used to be.



Montalcino, the land of some of the best known wines in the world can be proud to count **3 DOCG (original location certified and guaranteed wine) and 5 DOC**; the very famous **Brunello** can be drunk within 6 years; the **Chianti dei Colli Senesi** and the **Vinsanto del Chianti** are all labelled DOCG. The **Chianti dell'Etruria Centrale**, the **Moscato di Montalcino**, the **Rosso di Montalcino**, the **Bianco di Sant'Antimo** and the **Orcia Rosso** have all DOC qualities and characteristics. Visitors to Montalcino must absolutely savour a succulent roast of red meats cooked on the spit, whilst drinking Brunello wine. They also must taste the salamis and the sweet *cavallucci*, the honey and the *panforte* sold in the local shops. The medieval atmosphere, the charming landscape of the vineyards, the breathtaking panoramas and the wines for connoisseurs constitute a real touristic offering of high quality, promising relaxing stays including the visits of cellars and places rich with historic memories and works of art.



After Montalcino you must go to the **Abbazia di Sant'Antimo**, 10 km away down south.

L'ABBAZIA DI SANT'ANTIMO



According to a legend **Charlemagne** himself founded the **Abbazia di Sant'Antimo** in 781. The story says that as the Emperor and his retinue were returning from Rome, travelling on the **Via Francigena**, they faced the risk of contracting the plague as a severe epidemic was raging in the areas close to Mount Amiata. Near the river Starcia, the Emperor made a wish for himself and his retinue asking for mercy which led to his foundation of the Abbey of Sant'Antimo. Immersed in olive groves, the abbey was enriched by a church built by Benedictine monks in 1118. The façade, with its rich portal, is in Romanesque style with French and Lombard influence; it is a building made with travertine and onyx stones, creating its extraordinary shiny aspect. Inside are kept lots of art masterpieces among which stands out the *Daniele nella fossa dei leoni*, attributed to the Master of Cabestany, and a crucifix in polychromatic wood from the 12th century. Today, the community counts eight monks from various nationalities, mainly French and Italians. Leading a life respectful of monastic traditions, the monks have also developed a pastoral activity dedicated to families and youth, in the various parishes of the neighbourhood. In fact, a few monks became the priests of local parishes. Every day, the community is gathered in the church for all religious services following the monastic rule, singing **Gregorian chants in Latin**. During the past few years, Sant'Antimo's community did record several cds of these Gregorian chants sung with the liturgy.

The outside



The church apse and campanile

Campanile and apse

Outside, the body of the church is distinguished for its elevated conch and the adjacent campanile. The campanile is characterized by single and grouped windows. The apse is magnificent and solemn. It is crowned by an **ambulatory** in the French style, with three **radiating chapels** showing beautiful sculpted consoles under the roof, one depicting the head of a monk and another one an eagle.

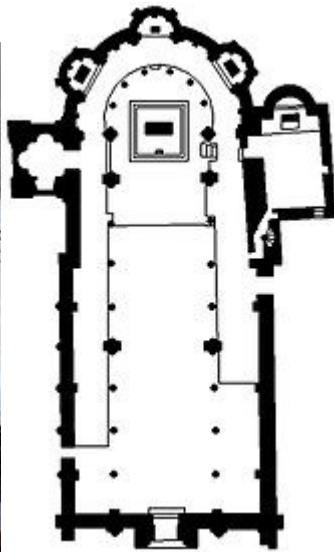
Façade



The sculpted architrave above the portal

The façade of the big church faces west. In the centre the **portal** is set inside a porch canopy. The beautiful architrave represents a tree of life.

The inside



The architect responsible for the inside of the church was **Azzo dei Porcari** from Lucca. He is quoted as a *“uomo buono, ricco di virtù in Cristo, monaco, padre e poi decano (...) progettista di questa egregia aula”*, on an inscription set on the inside architrave of the portal. Inside there are three naves, ending with a semicircular apse with an ambulatory, a case almost unique in Italy. Two lions in travertine stone can be found on each side of the portal.

The naves

The central nave is covered by a simple vault with wooden trusses bearing the coat of arms showing the half moons of the **Piccolomini** family. The roof was in fact rebuilt during Pius II's pontificate. Born as **Enea Silvio Piccolomini** the pope put the abbey under the care of Bishop **Cinughi** from Montalcino.



The capital with "*Daniele nella fossa dei leoni*", sculpted by the Maestro di Cabestany

The central nave is separated from the side naves by a series of four semicircular arches supported by monolithic columns in between cross-shaped pillars. The side naves, covered with cross vaults have ten rows each where various works of art are kept. There is also the baptismal font in stone and the fresco of *Gesù in Croce con un Santo Vescovo Martire, San Sebastiano ed il committente in ginocchio* (in the first row of the right hand side nave), but the most beautiful work is definitely the sculpted capital depicting "*San Daniele nella fossa dei Leoni*" by the Master of Cabestany. Inside a reduced space, the artist managed to represent all details concerning this biblical event, told in Chapter 6 of the Book of the Prophet Daniel.

The galleries and the bishop's apartment



The northern gallery seen from the central nave

Above the two side naves of the churches are two galleries opening out on the central nave with large gemed windows. We have access to the south gallery, above the right hand side nave, through a very steep spiral staircase, carved within the wall between the nave and the Caroligian chapel. We can also get there going through the sacristy and up a wooden staircase built for the bishop of Montalcino, Agostino Patrizi Piccolomini. This gallery, unlike the other one, was subdivided in the 16th-17th centuries into six rooms: the Patrizi staircase comes out into one of them, the spiral staircase into another one and four other rooms constitute the "**Quartiere (apartment) del Vescovo**".



The Piccolomini-Patrizi coat of arms in the *Quartiere del vescovo*.

This little apartment was made for Bishop **Agostino Patrizi Piccolomini** not as a bishopric residence but as a place where he could have a rest when he was visiting the abbey. It was also used for private audiences. In addition, from the window next to the fireplace, in the dining-room, the bishop could attend church services without being disturbed. We get access to the apartment through a door topped by the bishop's coat of arms. It consists of a dining-room, a study, a waiting-room and a bedroom. The walls of the four rooms are decorated by two lines of frescoes: the bottom part represents a dark drape where can be seen various plants and some birds; the top part presents a decoration with festoons.

Choir, apse and ambulatory



The apse

The *ambone* is standing out on the left hand side, decorated with a bas-relief from the **Master of Cabestany**: “*Madonna con il Bambino e gli Evangelisti*”, while on the other side we see the place where the celebrant sits, during the liturgies, assisted by two helpers and a master of ceremony.



The high altar and the crucifix

At the centre and elevated on three steps, the **high altar** built in stone is made of a base in a parallelepiped shape, totally deprived of decorations and on which lies a marble top. Behind the altar is one of the most precious works of art of the church, the tall medieval **Crocifisso** which was only put back there in 1972. In this magnificent representation of Christ on the Cross, where sculpture and painting are mixed, Jesus appears in pain, with his eyes closed, a bare chest and a piece of blue cloth with a golden trim around the waist, showing simplicity and wealth at the same time.



The crypt

Under the high altar, there is a small **crypt**, accessible with a small staircase located in front of the door of the sacristy, in the last row of the right hand side nave. This little space is covered by a low **barrel vault** and there is a small altar inside it. **Sant'Antimo**'s sepulchre used to be against the back wall. Above the altar, a simple fresco from the beginning of the 15th century depicts "*La deposizione di Gesù nel Sepolcro*".



The crucifix and the ambulatory

Around the apse, the **ambulatory** is linked to it by seven semicircular arches supported by monolithic columns. It is very rare to find an ambulatory in Italian Romanesque churches as it is a French feature. **Three small apse chapels** are crossed by rows; they have the shape of apses and each of them contains an altar in stone. Behind its altar, the central apse chapel, in line with the high altar and the medieval crucifix, presents a very beautiful **capital** supported by two small blind arches and decorated with **four small heads of eagles**.



The fresco with San Gregorio Magno (right) and San Sebastiano (left).

In the archway between the central apse chapel and the one on the left hand side, under two small blind semicircular arches supported by a column in alabaster, we can see a 15th century **fresco** attributed to **Spinello Aretino**, depicting *St Gregory the Great*, at the right hand side, with his papal emblems. On the left there is *St Sebastian*, holding an arrow in his right hand and showing the martyred palm of his left hand. According to an hypothesis, a great part of the church must have been covered with frescoes, such as those left in the ambulatory and the Carolingian Chapel.

Not far from Sant'Antimo it is a good idea to stop at **Castelnuovo dell'Abate**, a small village which has maintained its medieval look: you can visit the *Palazzo del Vescovo*, built in the 15th century and the **Palazzo Bellanti**, from a later Renaissance period. The church, restored in 1597 has kept its original Romanesque structure.



From Sant'Antimo you return to Montalcino to take the road SS 2 Cassia in the direction of Siena. The village of **Buonconvento** is situated on the Cassia road.

Located on the Via Francigena, at the confluence of the Arbia and Ombrone rivers, **Buonconvento**, an old fortified village, has kept its medieval aspect and **powerful walls built with red bricks** by Sienese citizens between 1371 and 1381. The *Porta Senese* is the entrance way leading to the heart of the village where you can visit the *Museum of sacred art of the Arbia valley*, set in the local library. There are kept liturgical objects, silversmith pieces, sculptures and many works by painters from the Florentine and Siena schools of the 14th to the 17th centuries.