

MONTERIGGIONI-BADIA A ISOLA-ABBAZIA DI SAN GALGANO (around 340 km)



CASTLE OF MONTERIGGIONI

Seen from a distance, the castle of Monteriggioni gives the impression that time has stopped. In fact the people who have chosen to live there now have kept the slow and rich rhythm of a life in contact with nature respecting values belonging to rural culture and attached to history.

The image of the castle has always been very impressive for travellers as it appears on the top of a hill, dominating and “cheeky”, with its **fourteen towers** which represented a defensive look-out for the ancient Republic of Siena. It must have appeared in a more suggestive way to **Dante Alighieri** who saw it in the middle of a battle while he travelled in this region. In the Divine Comedy, this is how Dante described the castle (Canto XXXI–Inferno): “*Monteriggioni che è cinto come da una corona, da una serie di torri disposte sulla cerchia delle mura, così’ la sponda che gira attorno al pozzo la soverchiano, come fossero torri con la metà del loro corpo di orribili giganti*”.

Thanks to its beauty and its position, Monteriggioni is a priceless touristy destination and is visited by 70.000 tourists per year. It is often used as a set for films or commercials. *The symbol of its impregnable image is also famous as the crown sitting on the head of the effigy of Italy.*

The castle was built following an order of the Podestà of Siena, **Guelfo da Porcari**, between **1214** and **1219**. An old Lombard farm used to stand on this land bought by the Republic of Siena (the name *Montis Regis* was probably referring to a royal property enjoying tax exemption benefit). The castle was built there with a defensive scope for its dominant position on the top of the hill. Located on the **Via Francigena**, allowing control on the Elsa and Staggia valleys, in direction of Florence, Siena’s historic rival.

The building of a castle was a novelty for Siena politics of expansion as the town used to acquire existing castles like Quercegrossa. The circular layout of the walls follows the shape of the hill. Historians agree on the likely presence of a **drawbridge**. However it is certain that there were “*portcullis*” or rather thick iron-covered wooden doors activated by pulleys. It is possible, in this present-day, to see the holes made on both doors by the closing bars. On the western door, one can notice the marks of the “*revellino*”, another structure with a rectangular shape, facing the door and equipped with a second door. The castle was in addition surrounded by “*carbonaie*”, that is **moats filled with coal and wood to set fire to in order to repel attacking forces**.



Once the castle was built, it was the object of a struggle between Florence and Siena in 1244 and in 1255, but its walls always resisted the Guelph attackers.

In 1269 after the battle of Colle (mentioned by Dante in Purgatory Canto XIII), the **defeated Siena soldiers** took refuge in Monteriggioni vainly besieged by the Florentines.

Following the plague epidemics in 1348-49, the citizens of Siena decided to have a **Captain** residing in Monteriggioni, with a few soldiers, to protect its population against criminals running wild in the area.

In 1380 as written in the “*Statuti del comune et uomini di Monteriggioni*” Monteriggioni’s inhabitants were regarded as **citizens of Siena**. Between the 15th and the 16th century, the walls were buried to better resist artillery attacks making the use of “*carbonaie*” pointless.

In 1526, Florentine troops besieged Monteriggioni with 2000 infantrymen and 500 cavalrymen, bombarding the walls with their artillery. However, the castle resisted and on 25 July during the battle of **Camollia**, Siena soldiers defeated the Pope’s army, a Florentine ally, and the siege was immediately interrupted.

In the mid 1500s, when Charles of Habsburg (Charles V), king of Spain and Holy Roman Emperor was at war with king of France Henri II (from the Valois dynasty), there was an episode when **Sienese troops allied with the French confronted the Florentines who were Charles V’s allies**. On 27 April 1554, **Monteriggioni was given by treason** with no battle by Captain Giovacchino Zeti, a Florentine exile, to Marquis of Marignano, in command of the Imperial troops. **After the fall of Monteriggioni the Republic of Siena also fell in the Spring of 1555. This episode is regarded by historians as the event marking the end of the “communal” era in Italy.**

On 2 and 3 April 1559, after Charles V’s death (1558), the peace treaty of Cateau-Cambresis put an end to the conflict opposing France to Spain. As a consequence Montalcino being the last Siena stronghold was handed over to the Florentine Dukedom by Philip II of Spain. **Therefore Monteriggioni people and territory fell under the power of Cosimo I de’ Medici.**

Monteriggioni was then given up to the Golia family and afterwards to many other noble families to end up with the **Griccioli** family who is still currently the owner of various properties within the walls of the castle and in the surrounding countryside. Between the 1920s and the 1930s renovations took place to rebuild some of the towers which had been knocked down in the previous centuries.

Monteriggioni is a typical example of a fortified village. It is small with only 42 inhabitants and within the walls are found dwellings, two bars, a convenience store, two restaurants, one herbalist’s shop, a hotel and a souvenir shop selling regional produce.

The walls have an elliptic shape and sit on the top of the hill within a 570 metre radius, they are at the most 172 metres wide and 2 metres thick. The towers are 6.5 metres high and 4/6 metres thick. Originally there were 15 of them but today only 11 have remained as the other 3 were taken down to the height of the walls. It is possible to walk around the summit of the walls to admire the magnificent countryside towards the Chianti region and the Elsa valley; a special sight of the village can also be enjoyed from up there. With a bit of fantasy one could almost hear the soldiers marching around the castle like in the past...



Piazza Roma

Past the main door and walking up the street we arrive in Piazza Roma.



This is the main square in the castle and it looks very much like a Tuscan village showing a touch of countryside through its vegetation, various vegetable gardens and the green space in front of the church. In the past this square like the rest of the castle was "*a sterro*" that is not paved. It is only around 1960 that paving was done with a local stone called "*Pietra di Torre*" extracted from Rosia's caves.



The church: The **pieve di Monteriggioni** was built in 1219 and is dedicated to **S. Maria Assunta**. It presents one very large nave, covered with calotte vaults, under a roof structure where the old trusses can still be seen. The nave is closed by a square apse with cross vaults in the Gothic style and where is found a **choir with wooden stalls** from the **16th century**, located behind the high altar. The polychromatic façade is made of travertine and *pietra serena*. The big portal is topped by an arch with a lunette with terracotta decorations. Inside the church are kept two tabernacles from the 1400s and a painting of the Madonna by **Vanni**, a wooden **crucifix** and a **bell** dated 1298 and

donated to the church by the Republic of Siena.

Museum: "Monteriggioni in Arme"



Access and Tickets: Tourist Bureau: Piazza Roma 23, Monteriggioni – Tel: 0577 304834

The museum keeps faithful reproductions of weapons and armours from the Middle Ages and the Renaissance period as well as models illustrating various methods of attacking. Each room is dedicated to a specific time in the history of Monteriggioni. The visitor is also able to handle some weapons and put on parts of armours. Some explicative panels and an audio-guide in several languages help the visitor to enjoy this short but intense immersion into history.

Opening Hours for museum, walkways around the walls and tourist bureau:

16 February-31 March: 10.00-13.30; 14.00-16.00
1 April-30 September: 9.30-13.30; 14.00-19.30
1-31 October: 9.30-13.30; 14.00-18.00
1 November-15 January: 10.00-13.30; 14.00-16.00



Less than 3km to the west of Monteriggioni, following the road to Colle di Val d'Elsa you take a left turn to find Abbadia (o Badia) a Isola, a hamlet built around the Cistercian Abbey of San Salvatore (11th century).

BADIA A ISOLA



The name **Badia a Isola** derives from the fact that, in the past, wetlands surrounded the basis of the building giving the impression that the fortified abbey was **standing on an island**. Its position on the **Via Francigena** was strategic, according to the itinerary prepared by Sigerico, archbishop of **Canterbury**. This was the site where, in 1001, **Ava, the widow of Ildebrando dei Signori di Staggia**, had built the monastery of San Salvatore all'Isola, including land and up to forty-two farms. As the family could, through the monastery, consolidate its heritage and control the territory, they invited a community of **Benedictine friars** to settle at the complex. The monks' work was very important to dry out the marshlands and to extend the monastery. Its position on the very busy Via Francigena contributed to increase the power of the abbey. To fulfill this goal there was built a hospital dedicated to San Salvatore, known since 19 July 1050, and a hostel for foreign travellers, mentioned in texts as early as 29 April 1102. After the extinction of the Staggia family, at the beginning of the 12th century, the monks came into conflict with the bishop of Volterra regarding the abbot's appointment. The monks wished to choose their rector independently and did it when they became the new owners of the monastery. Between the 11th and the 12th century **a cloister was added to the structure of the monastery with a well in its centre**. The important **church of San Cirino, a Romanesque masterpiece** was consecrated in 1173.

In the 18th century, the monastery fell under the political domination of Siena. As the fortified village of Monteriggioni developed on the other side on the wetlands, the monks' power started to diminish. In 1376 at the expense of the Republic of Siena, the abbey got surrounded by walls to protect itself from mercenaries and become part of the defensive castles located at the borders of Siena territory.

In 1445 the monks had to leave the complex as they lost their power while more and more villages developed around the area. All religious characteristics disappeared first and with the fall of Siena in 1554 its military importance vanished causing the Abbadia a Isola to become an ordinary country village. The walls and other ancient parts of the monastery were incorporated in further building extensions. Parts of the moats are still intact as well as the main entrance door, one square tower (currently a dwelling) and a beautiful polygonal tower (north-east) transformed into a pigeon-house.

The church dedicated to **San Salvatore e Cirino** has three naves and an apse supported by alternated pillars made of stone and brick. The artworks are very interesting as well as the alabaster **baptismal font** dated 1419 and various frescoes and paintings from the medieval period.

The Abbey of San Galgano: art and myth



At about 40km from Siena, in the south-east direction (Grosseto), in a valley isolated between hills we find the old and **grandiose Cistercian Abbey of San Galgano**, today deconsecrated and partly in ruins. Fifty metres above it, on the hill of Montesiepi is found the **Chapel of Montesiepi**, with a circular shape and inside which is kept one of the most fascinating and mysterious relic in the region: **the spade in the rock of San Galgano**. In the centre of the chapel, in the terracotta floor stands a rocky spur with a cross-shaped spade pushed in it and which, according to experts, would have been forged in 1170. Also found in the chapel are some 16th century frescoes representing it very precisely. One cannot help but find a resemblance with the British legend of King Arthur.

The legend of San Galgano

Galgano Guidotti, Guido and Dionisa's son, was born in 1147 at Chiusino, a small village located on the top of a hill not far from the Abbey. This period was full of injustice and violence used to prove vitality and vigour in men having to assert their strength with arrogance to increase their power. Young and proud Galgano was one of them and lived a frivolous and oblivious life. He got to realise how useless he was, having no goal to achieve. The legend says that one night Archangel Michael appeared in front of him and led him through a long and narrow path, hardly accessible, up to the hill of Montesiepi where the twelve Apostles welcomed him in front of a round-shaped temple. Galgano interpreted this vision as a sign of God's will. He supposedly chose this isolated place later on to establish his hermit dwelling. He left behind his cavalryman suit, disgusted by the crimes he had committed. As a tangible sign of his perpetual renunciation to any kind of violence, he took his spade and pushed it into a rock. Instead of using the spade as an offensive weapon, his intention was to use it as a cross in front of which he could pray. This big symbolic gesture happened in 1180. The spade is still there as the symbol of an incorruptible conversion. Galgano died on 3 December 1181. He was beatified by Pope Luciano III. During the following years a small church known as the **Rotonda** or the Chapel of Montesiepi was built at the place where his hermit dwelling was.

Beyond the wonder and suggestions provoked by the sight of the spade, this relic represents another aspect, even more attractive: **the possibility that the myth of the spade in the rock, famous image of the legend of King Arthur, could have been born in Tuscany to be then exported to France and be inserted into**

the British legend. Some facts made this hypothesis plausible: the date when the Cistercian abbey and the chapel dedicated to Galgano were built corresponds to the date of the discovery of Arthur's presumed tomb in Glastonbury, a glamorous event in all of Europe. To this can be linked the fact that Cistercian monks propagated the Arthurian legend assiduously; but did the monks insist on the legend to make it compete with Galgano's gesture or was the image initially born in Tuscany and transferred to England afterwards? All mystery around the spade pushed into a rock at 40 km from Siena. In Pisa National Museum paintings from the 15th century by the Siena artist **Taddeo di Bartolo** are displayed, depicting scenes from San Galgano's life.

The Chapel of Montesiepi or Rotonda di San Galgano



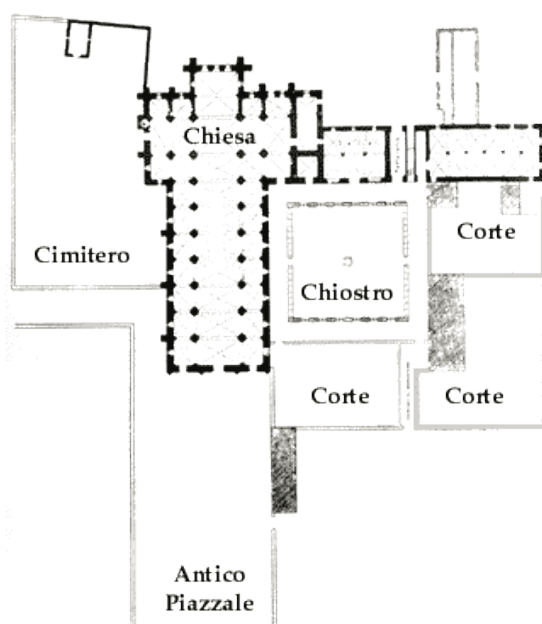
The first element of San Galgano Cistercian monastery complex was the small hermitage of Montesiepi, built in Romanesque style to serve as a mausoleum to the young saint hermit, a few years after his death, between 1182 and 1185. The Rotonda with its unusual structure makes it exceptional. The saint's tomb is kept inside as well as the rock with the spade. Even though at first glance one could see a likeness with Etruscan tombs of Populonia, Vetulonia or Volterra, the architect was in fact inspired by the Castle Sant'Angelo and the Pantheon in Rome.

Various questionable renovations were made after the 14th century but in 1924 a perfect restoration allowed the Rotonda to attain its original aspect. The chapel was built with alternated rows of white stones and of bricks. A similar two-coloured pattern is found in the cupola. An increased interest for the cult of San Galgano led rich private donors to contribute to the embellishment of the Rotonda. The chapel in the north side was built in 1340 and decorated with frescoes by **Ambrogio Lorenzetti**; it is possible to see a renovated part of them. In 1218 the disadvantage caused by the small size of the hermitage and the growing number of monks and worshippers pushed the monks, encouraged by the bishop of Volterra, to decide to build an abbey in the plain further down. The monks of San Galgano became such a reference for the region that the Republic of Siena managed to gather enough funds to complete the building of the imposing abbey.

The Abbey of San Galgano

The big abbey was realised between 1220 and 1268, at the time when Romanesque style was merging with French Gothic style. The building presents the classical Gothic aspect of other Cistercian complexes, with a **Latin cross shape and three naves, many richly inlaid capitals, a cloister, a chapter-house and a campanile**. Its splendour and the good relationship the monks had with Siena provoked Florentine armies' incursions causing the fast decline of the abbey as early as the mid 1500s. Some political events contributed to this fate as for example the introduction of the "*commenda*", allowing someone (the "*commendatario*") to enjoy the benefits drawn from an ecclesiastical possession without paying taxes. In 1550 only five monks remained there and in the 17th century one old and poor monk still lived in the abbey which was falling apart. **On 6 January 1786 the 36 metres high campanile collapsed, taking with it a big part of the roof.**

In 1789 the big church was abandoned and became a huge **quarry providing stones and columns** to the surrounding villages. Fortunately some renovation and maintenance works were undertaken in the early 1900s and it is nowadays possible to visit the roofless ruins of San Galgano to appreciate **its harmony between sky, stone and earth; it is one of the most visited medieval monuments in Tuscany.**



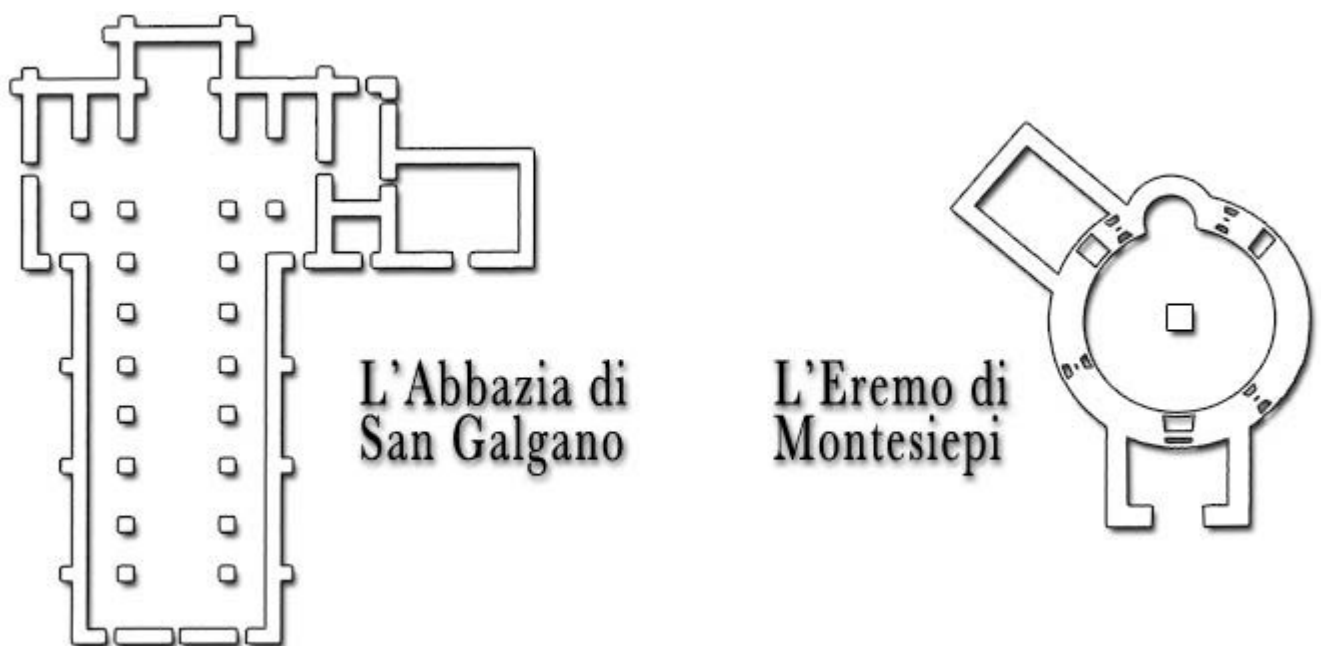
The abbey complex is constituted by the famous roofless church and a big building located along the left hand side of the transept. There used to be the sacristy, the archives, the chapter-house, the parlour and the “*scriptorium*”. On the upper level there were the dormitory and the chapel. A cloister which is no longer there was situated on the right of the church. *Because of its historic and artistic importance San Galgano Abbey deserved a better fate than the one caused by human carelessness.* **The building is 72 m long and 21 m wide. The apse presents six single windows and a rose-window conferring an extraordinary feeling of lightness and elegance to the structure.** What remains from the abbey is especially charming with a sense of mysticism. The visitor feels as if he were back in the Middle Ages. The proportions, the materials, the lack of roof, the empty rose-window, the silence, the open sky are absolutely stunning. In fact the lack of roof intensifies the architectural elegance with spirituality. One will get the same feeling in Melrose and Kilso Abbeys, in Scotland or in Cashel Abbey in Ireland or else in the Eldena Abbey in Germany. Even in its present state and in fact thanks to this state, the abbey is part of an imaginary context linking it to the legend of the Graal and mysterious esoteric sources.

The very suggestive site has been used as a shooting site for films like: “**Nostalgia**” by **Andrej Tarkovskij (1983)**, and “**The English patient**” by **Anthony Minghella (1996)**.

The abbey is open every day from 9.00 to 20.00 from April to October and from 9.30 to 17.30 (18.30 during public holidays) from November to March.

Ticket cost: 2 euros

Montesiepi hermitage is open every day from 9.00 till sunset with free entrance. On Sundays at 11.30 Mass is held there. Opening hours may vary during winter. One can also see the Chapel with Ambrogio Lorenzetti’s frescoes.



Visits inside the abbey: It is possible to visit the chapter-house, the “*scriptorium*” (where are located the ticket office, the information desk and a bookshop opened in summer) and the outdoor spaces around the building with the remains of the cloister. After completion of the current renovation works, it will be possible to visit the first floor, including the dormitory where used to be the monks’ cells and the room reserved to the abbot.