

## PELAGO-VALLOMBROSA-PRATOMAGNO-REGGELLO (about 140 kms)

The itinerary goes through the Valley of the Sieve river from Dicomano to Rufina and Pontassieve and from there it follows road SS 70 leading to Consuma. The road rises slowly through fields, some abandoned, olive groves and vineyards. Here we are in the area where the **Chianti Putto wine** is produced by a dynamic family company, the **Frescobaldi's**, owner of the **Castello di Nipozzano**, built before the year 1000 and surrounded by the picturesque houses of the medieval village (on the left after the village of Palaie). After leaving the main road and following the directions for Vallombrosa, we come across the municipality of **Pelago**.

### PELAGO

Although it is part of the Valdisieve from a historical and administrative point of view, the municipality of Pelago is mainly set on the hills leading down the Arno river. In the main town there are elegant palaces of ancient local noble families, some decorated with beautiful archways.



Only the high tower, built in the 12th century, remains from the **Ristonchi Castle**, whereas the **Villa di Altomena**, old property of Counts Guidi, was renovated and turned into a farm. In **Tosi** we find the **church and monastery of Saint Catherine** where we can visit the beautiful cloister, the chapter house, the refectory and the library. In the church there is a *beautiful triptych of a Madonna col Bambino e Santi*, from 1388. It is worth stopping by the small mountain villages of **Paterno** and **Raggioli** to see their picturesque small stone houses. In July, the old town of Pelago hosts the cultural festival "On the road" for three days. Many young people come from all over Tuscany to attend concerts and theatrical performances and enjoy small markets.

### VALLOMBROSA

The journey proceeds to Vallombrosa, where the gentle cultivated hills are replaced by a splendid forest, created and maintained for centuries by monks and declared a Natural Biogenetic Reserve in 1973.



In the heart of the forest we find the **Abbazia di Vallombrosa**, created thanks to Giovanni Gualberto who in 1008 left with a companion the monastery of San Miniato in Florence to look for a more isolated place. Near the small hermitage already set up in Vallombrosa and following a crucial meeting with Saint Romualdo, who had already founded the Camaldoli convent, Gualberto started to build wooden huts for the new followers. In 1015, the monks elected Gualberto as their superior and this is how the congregation of the Vallombrosian monks was born, following the Rule of Saint Benedict. In 1036 works started to build cells in bricks as well as an Oratory. Around 1450 some important works of enlargement added a new sacristy and premises for the novices. The complex got its present characteristic appearance at the end of the 15th century. The tower was erected as a defensive purpose in 1529, after Charles V's sack of Rome. The walls around the square and the pond used to breed fish and provide ice date from the 17th century. The monastery was suppressed during the Napoleonic period and then reopened in 1817 by Grand Duke

Ferdinando. In 1866, soon after the creation of the Kingdom of Italy, the monks were expelled and the monastery put into the care of the Forestry Administration. It is only in 1949 that the Benedictines returned there. Inside the abbey, several works of art are kept: a bas-relief from the Della Robbia school in the vestibule and fifteen paintings by Ignazio Hufford in the refectory; the timber choir was sculpted and inlaid by Francesco da Poggibonsi. Various chapels and tabernacles built around the 16th and the 17th century are found in the forest surrounding the monastery.

Masses are celebrated:

**In Winter (September to June):**

Weekly: 07:00

Public holidays: 11:00 17:00

Eve of a public holiday: 16:30

**In Summer (July-August):**

Weekly: 07:00 10:00

Public Holidays: 09:30 11:00 17:00 18:00

From Vallombrosa a road leads to Mount Secchiata reaching 1449 metres at its highest point.

### **MONTE SECCHIATA**

The village is made of a dozen houses, mainly holiday homes; there is a bar/refuge in the area where stands the Monument to commemorate the Victims of the Resistance. Many antennas found around the area allow radio and television broadcasting in a large part of Tuscany. There is also a wind power plant.

In the 1960s, Mount Secchiata became a ski resort, thanks to the building of three pistes for Alpine skiing and a very long one for cross-country skiing. It was much appreciated because of its short distance from Florence and thanks to the possibility to also use services provided by the nearby villages of Saltino and Vallombrosa. Mount Secchiata is the highest peak in the Arezzo province and on the boundary dividing Casentino and High Valdarno, and consequently Arezzo and Florence provinces. The ski resort was closed in 1988 because the *Corpo Forestale dello Stato* did not grant the permit to use the land anymore.

**Mount Secchiata** is part of the **Pratomagno** mountains with its highest peak called the **Croce di Pratomagno** reaching 1592 metres. The Cross of Pratomagno is also a monument which was inaugurated on 15 August 1928; it is a tall modular cross made of iron which dominates the whole area and can be seen from far away. Herbert John Louis Hinkler, an Australian pilot and a World War I hero, crashed on this peak with his aeroplane while he was trying to reach Australia from England. A commemorative plaque recalls the tragic event which probably occurred on 8 January 1933. From Secchiata, it is only possible to walk to the Croce. Pratomagno is a popular destination for bike-riding and excursions lovers, especially during summer. It is one of the most beautiful and interesting "balconies" in Italy offering a unique panorama covering a great distance, in particular towards south, south-east, where you can see Mount Amiata beyond Cetona towards Lazio and up to the peaks dividing Umbria and the Marche.

Back in Vallombrosa, we take the road in the direction of Saltino and then one in the direction of Regello. We arrive at the village of **Pietrapiana** where it is highly recommended to stop and see the church of **Sant'Agata in Àrfoli**. The first indications regarding the church date from 1230 and its façade, heavily modified in the early 1900s, was recently restored to its original Romanesque appearance. Inside are kept some **works of art from the High Middle Ages**, a **beautiful organ** from mid-17th century and a **stone baptismal font** possibly dated from the year 1000. Next to the church there is a 13th century cloister with four columns of the Renaissance period.

## PIEVE DI SAN PIETRO A CASCIA

The church of **San Pietro a Cascia**, built for *Matilde di Canossa* around the 12th century, is only a few kilometres away from the centre of **Reggello**.



The Pieve di Cascia is a jewel of Romanesque architecture, perfectly preserved, and holds the very famous *triptych of San Giovenale*, the first remarkable work attributed to **Masaccio**, depicting the *Madonna in trono con bambino, angeli e santi*. In addition we can find a *Madonna con bambino e santi* attributed to **Domenico del Ghirlandaio** and a *Annunciazione* by **Mariotto di Cristofano**. The **Museo Masaccio di Arte Sacra** has been recently installed in the church of **San Piero a Cascia**. This was indeed the ideal location to keep and display paintings, decorations, ornaments, sculptures and pieces of silverware, belonging to this church as well as to other historic churches in Reggello. Two rooms in the museum are used for the permanent display of the *triptych of San Giovenale*, first of Masaccio's works. This masterpiece has an inestimable value from a historic as well as from an artistic point of view and was only rediscovered in 1961.

## REGGELLO

Around **Reggello**, there are many historic and artistic sites worth visiting, starting with the Piazza Potente lined with a 17th century archway and the elegant building of the **Palazzo Comunale**. There are also several beautiful villas in the surroundings such as the **Villa I Bonsi**, built in the 15th century and transformed into a villa-castle during the 19th century, and the **Medicean Villa I Mandri**, with a façade restored in the 17th century.



On the road leading back to Pontassieve, the **Castello di Sammezzano** is worth visiting. The castle got its present appearance in the 19th century and it is decorated, in the inside, with motives in the Mauresque style. The Cavalier Ferdinando Odoardo Ximenes d'Aragona purchased it in 1605 but its present appearance results from renovations done in the 19th century by **Niccolò Pinciaticchi**, the heir of the **Ximenes family**, who was a great lover of Arabic culture and architecture. Outside, the villa reminds us of the **Taj Mahal**; inside, the rooms decorated with stucco were inspired by the **Alhambra in Granada**.

The castle is surrounded by a vast park. **Panciaticchi** had rare and exotic plants planted there and embellished the park with works of art in the Arabic style. Today many original plants have disappeared but some new species have been introduced. The group of the giant sequoias is especially important as it represents the biggest number of them in all of Italy: 57 adult trees, all above 35 metres high, one with a trunk 10 metres high. Remarkable are also the Lawson cypresses, recognizable by the silvery colour of the lower part of the leaves. At present only the park can be visited.