

BUONCONVENTO AND PLACES OF INTEREST NEARBY

BUONCONVENTO

A small town of some – albeit moderate – interest, on the way to other major sights (Pienza, Montepulciano, Montalcino, Monteoliveto).

Just over half an hour from Barontoli, via a pretty route over the hills. Go through San Rocco towards Grosseto. After about 8 km turn left towards Fontazzi. Go through Fontazzi to Casciano di Murlo and turn right at the T-junction towards Vescovaldo di Murlo. After about two kilometers, turn right towards Vescovaldo di Murlo and SS 2 Cassia, and continue following signs to Vescovaldo di Murlo. When you reach Vescovaldo, drive through the village and start following signs to Buonconvento.



Gate into Buonconvento (Wikimedia)

Buonconvento lies on the Via Cassia at the confluence of the Arbia and Ombrone rivers and has long been a transit point on the Siena-Rome road. It also lies on a fertile plain and was a successful market town for surrounding farmers. Its main claim to fame is that the Holy Roman Emperor died in Buonconvento in 1313 shortly after capturing the town.

The town is surrounded by 14th century walls (much restored; the town took a big knock in the Second World War). One fine gate remains, the **Siena Gate** on the north of the town, with magnificent wooden doors. Inside, there is a tiny historic centre ('centro storico') boasting a mini medieval town hall complete with coats of arms on the front and a small tower modelled on the Mangia of Siena.



Coats of arms on the Town Hall

A few doors further long, in the **Palazzo Ricci**, a small **museum** has been installed, as usual collecting together the works of art from surrounding churches. The top floor has the earliest stuff – including some not very exciting possible Duccios and Lorenzettis; a pretty-pretty Virgin and Child by Sano di Pietro; an attractive Botticelli-style Virgin and child with angels by Matteo di Giovanni; and an interesting collection of early metalwork. The next floor down contains the 15th century paintings, including a polished rendering of the Virgin feeding the Child by Il Brescianino, more metalwork and a good small collection of ancient vestments, including a most frivolous brocade cope made in Venice in 1771 covered in colourful swans, boats and little castles. The bottom floor demonstrates all that is worst in Sienese 17th century painting with works that are florid and sentimental, full of saints casting their eyes to heaven. There is, however, a splendidly naive statue of an unnamed pope at the far end.

The Palazzo Ricci is not without interest because of its unusual (for Italy) English ‘Liberty’ style decor, a conceit of the person who inherited the house in 1908. The staircase has some good designs, and on the top floor a bathroom of the period has been preserved.

The nearby **church of Saints Peter and Paul** (1450, redone in the 1700s) is of little interest as a building, but has managed to hang onto a couple of attractive paintings. On the right there is a Virgin and saints by Pietro Oriolo and on the left a Virgin and child with angels by Matteo di Giovanni.

Just outside the Siena Gate, round to the right, there is the **Museum of the Mezzadria**, in an old farm building abutting the city wall. *Mezzadria* was the share-cropping system that prevailed in the Sienese countryside until the 1950s, when it collapsed as more and more of the peasant farmers deserted the countryside for a better life in the towns. The landowner (*padrone*) would live in a castle or grand villa, and his land would be divided into farms or *poderi* (singular *podere*) with a *casa colonica* for the peasant farmer (*contadino*) and his family. The *poderi* could be large, as they often accommodated several generations of the same family, or e.g. several brothers and their families. The ground floor was usually for the animals with the family living on the floor or floors above. There could also be a hay-barn or *fienile*, easily recognisable by the wide spacing of the bricks to allow the circulation of air (the *fienili* are increasingly being converted to residences). The *podere* was generally

between 12 and 40 hectares. The farmer did not pay rent but could keep only half his crops; the rest belonged to the landowner. The estate was run by a *fattore*, a factor or bailiff, based in the *fattoria*. The latter was a large establishment often of many buildings, including olive oil press (*frantoio*); store-rooms both for the olives before pressing and the oil (which was kept in large terracotta jars); a wine cellar (*tinaio*); a large granary (*granaio*); a big kitchen with an oven for baking bread; a canteen and pantry etc., as well as an office and accommodation for the *fattore* and his family. The system needed policing and a *guardia* ensured that the *contadini* delivered up their crops and did not cut down trees or hunt game in the woods, which were the preserve of the landowner.

The museum has many photographs, stories and artefacts from that period and there are good explanations in Italian, but very little in English.

2005, 2013, 2016

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PIANA

A tiny and very ancient fortified church and granary near Buonconvento.



A few kilometres along the road from Buonconvento to Vescovado di Murlo there is a turning to the tiny hamlet of Piana (on the Via Francigena), which has a very ancient parish church or *pieve*, dedicated originally to the Holy Innocents massacred by Pilate and now called **Sant'Innocenza**. The church is not open, but is in a lovely lonely spot on a spur, perfect for defence, and worth a very short detour.



The entrance to the tiny fortified church

The Church was built in the 11th century austere of brick and stone. It was strongly fortified between the 13th and 14th centuries against Florentine troops and marauding private armies. The site became what amounts to a brick-built fortress with the church as one of the sides. The Bishop of Siena is said to have taken refuge there in times of civil unrest. The buildings have been much altered over the centuries, and a campanile and pretty courtyard with wellhead were built in the 16th century when less warlike times prevailed.



Courtyard at Pieve di Piana

Grancia di Piana

Opposite the little road that leads up to the church there is a group of buildings known as the Fattoria di Piana (a *fattoria* is a sort of cross between an estate office and a home farm on a big estate). The estate belonged to the Tolomei family in medieval times and was donated to the Hospital of Santa Scala by a Tolomei who was the rector of the hospital at the time. At

the end of the 14th century, the Hospital built a *grancia* or granary there, subsidiary to the enormous one at Cuna (on which see below), to store wheat for supplying the hospital's huge establishment in Siena.



North side of the Grancia (granary) di Piana

The buildings of the fattoria are now either deserted or have been turned into villas and apartments. If you go up between the two groups of buildings, you will find a tiny red-brick baroque church, and the granary is the huge building to the left of it. Two wings were built onto the south side at some point when it was turned into a villa. But the north side remains in its original form and there is an attractive avenue of cypresses leading up to the north doorway. It is an impressively fortified stone building with slanting buttress sides, as befits dangerous times. As so often with Sienese medieval buildings, the wall is scattered with crests, probably of the various hospital rectors.



Baroque church at the Fattoria di Piana



Cypress alley leading from granary

See also (in Italian) <http://archeologiamedievale.unisi.it/santa-cristina/la-fattoria-di-piana>
2015, revised 2016

CASTIGLIONE DEL BOSCO

An agricultural settlement that has been turned into a five-star hotel, whose tiny chapel has the last authenticated work of the great Sieneese painter Pietro Lorenzetti.

The road to Castiglione del Bosco is well signed and turns off the Buonconvento-Casciano di Murlo road about 10 kilometres north of Buonconvento. After the turn-off, the road quickly becomes an unpaved “strada bianca” (white road). After another 5 kilometres or so, well-watered and aggressively green golf courses appear on either side. The very discreet and unmarked entrance to the hotel is a little further along on the left. The road goes on to Montalcino, but is not recommended as it is extremely tortuous and slow – it is better to go back to Buonconvento.

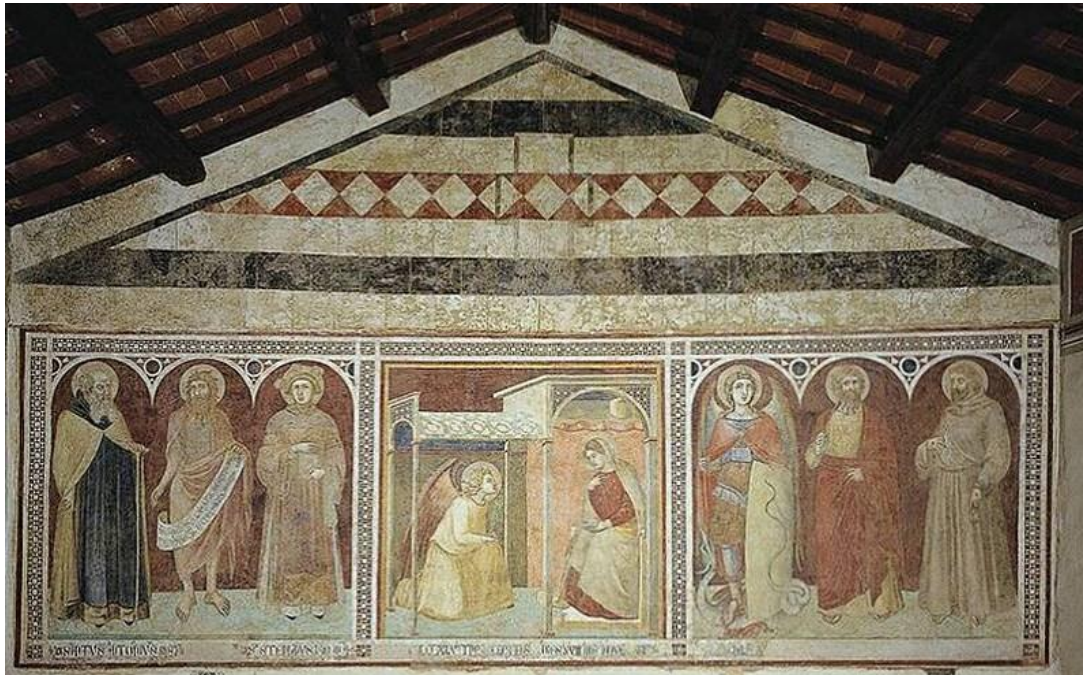


The ruined castle is in the background and the campanile of the chapel on the right.

Castiglione was a strong point with a castle in the middle ages, but the castle fell into ruins (part of which can be seen today) and for the last few centuries the place has been no more than the centre of a large agricultural estate, with a number of old buildings. The estate is in the Montalcino wine-growing area and was one of the pioneer producers of that city's “Brunello di Montalcino” – a wine that was developed only at the beginning of the last century. In 2003, a member of the Ferragamo family acquired the property and turned the whole thing into an extraordinary 5-star hotel in the middle of nowhere (it is only accessible along a winding dirt track) with fantastic views on all sides. It is more a luxury village than a hotel with the accommodation spread out over a number of villas.

For art-lovers the attraction is the tiny chapel of San Michele (ask at the reception to see it), which dates back to the time when Castiglione was a working fortress. A fresco painted by Pietro Lorenzetti in 1345 (shortly before he died in the Black Death) covers the end wall. The guides say that the central panel portrays the Annunciation. But it seems more likely that it is a representation of the Angel who according to legend came to warn the Virgin that she was about to die, as the angel is carrying a palm rather than a lily and the Virgin looks rather mature (Duccio painted a similar scene). The saints on either side are Anthony Abbot, John the Baptist and Stephen on the left; and Michael the Archangel, Bartholomew and Francis on

the right. Michael the Archangel is traditionally the Harbinger of Death, so a scene foretelling the Virgin's decease may well have been chosen because the church is dedicated to St Michael. The fresco was rediscovered only in 1876.



Fresco by Pietro Lorenzetti at Castiglione del Bosco

2013, revised 2015.



MURLO: ETRUSCAN MUSEUM

A small museum (Antiquarium di Poggio Civitale) in the little fortified village of Murlo (on the way to Buonconvento) with the Etruscan remains dug up from an archaeological site nearby; not worth a special expedition, but worth popping in if you are passing by.

In summer open mornings and afternoons except Monday; more restricted hours in winter.

The nearby archaeological site is on a small hill called Poggio Civitale which was a flourishing Etruscan settlement 800-500 BC. The museum is housed in two old ancient palazzi, the largest of which (known as the Palazzone or “big palace”, although it is only big in the context of the tiny village) used to be used in medieval times by the Bishop of Siena. There are panels with explanations translated into particularly fractured English, but unfortunately the individual objects have few labels.

The first floor has remains from a 7th century BC villa and nearby workshop that were burned down in about 600 BC forcing the inhabitants to flee, leaving jewellery etc. behind. The remains are not particularly exciting and mostly in small pieces. Their main interest is that they are so ancient, from the Etruscan “orientalising” period – this was long before the Romans and even early in terms of Greek civilization (with which there is evidence of trade). Part of a roof has been reconstructed with the remains of old tiles, showing a technique almost identical to that used in Tuscany today.

The second floor has remains from a grander 6th century BC villa in the slightly later “archaic” style that was built to replace the earlier one but then abandoned and deliberately buried in about 525 BC for some unknown reason. Here also the best thing is the re-creation of the roof, the ridge of which is decorated with terracotta statues, including one of a seated man wearing a wide-brimmed cowboy hat. The remains of several of these arresting figures were found, and they are unique to Murlo. There are also gargoyles and sphinxes, and friezes of stamped terracotta tiles under the eaves, showing banqueting scenes, processions and horse-races (perhaps an early version of the Palio), complete with the large cup awarded to the winner.



Entrance to the fortified village.



A Murlo cowboy

The third floor has remains from other nearby sites, mostly of lesser interest, although there are intriguing small bronze figurines of wrestlers. The Etruscans were good at metalwork. By the car-park outside the village, there is a small display of Etruscan bronze-casting techniques.

THE CUNA GRANARY

A large, rare and well-preserved fortified medieval granary, little visited by tourists. In 2016 it was closed for restoration, so it would be wise to check with the Siena tourist office before visiting.

Cuna is off the via Cassia (SS2 - the Siena-Rome road) just north of Monterone d'Arbia. Coming from Siena, after Isola d'Arbia, Ponte a Tressa and Le More, keep right on the old road towards Monterone. Cuna is up a little road to the right; you will see the huge brick-built granary on the hill above.

For an alternative route making for a really spectacular drive from Barontoli (with some untarred stretches), go through San Rocco and onto the Grosseto road. Turn left where signed to Grotti. Go on through Grotti to Le Ville di Corsano. At the entrance to the village, turn right towards 'Pieve di San Giovanni Battista di Corsano' (an attractive Romanesque church, rarely open). Go on down this road, ignoring the turn-off to Radi, until signs to 'Cassia SS2' start appearing. Follow these across fantastic countryside until you reach the Via Cassia, north of Monterone d'Arbia, and then follow the instructions above.



Entrance to the Cuna granary.

The granary ('*Grancia di Cuna*') was built by the Hospital of Santa Maria della Scala in Siena – see the Hospital's symbol of a ladder (*scala*) surmounted by a cross on the wall. The hospital – a massive undertaking – originally acquired land here in the 1100s. They built the original granary and the neighbouring church of Sts James and Christopher (*Giacomo e Cristoforo*) in 1314, a period of military instability, in order to safeguard their supplies of grain. Over the centuries, various changes and additions were made, including the construction of a ramp in the 18th century so that mules could carry grain up to the upper chambers of the granary. It has survived reasonably intact since then. This may be partly because, after it ceased being used as a granary, local families took up residence in many of its various chambers and remain there to this day – glimpses of washing lines and smells of

cooking greet those mounting the ramp. The authorities have made the best of the situation by classifying the whole building as a street, with official street numbers outside the dwellings. They have named the street '*vicolo Beato Sorore*' after the legendary founder of the Hospital.

One enters the complex through gates in the double line of defences and can then wander up the ramp. Unfortunately, the old granary chambers that have not been taken over as dwellings are closed because of structural dangers, but one can nevertheless obtain a good impression of the hugeness of the complex and the sophistication of the defences.

The church (the key of which can be obtained at house No.13 to the right of it) has the usual remains of 14th century frescoes, white-washed over and then rediscovered, some as recently as the 1990s. The most interesting are the ones on the left of the entrance. The large painting of two saints represents St Ansano (an obscure saint who was an early patron of Siena) and St James. Below are two tiny scenes showing the "Miracle of the hanged man". On the left some pilgrims are having a meal and a man is making off with a loaf of bread. The wrong man was caught and hanged and the right hand scene shows St James rushing in, superman style, to save him by holding up his feet. Originally, the whole church would have been covered in frescoes.



(2005 and 2013)