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MONTALCINO and SANT' ANTIMO

A steep-streeted medieval hill town of moderate interest, but with a most beautiful Romanesque abbey nearby.

Montalcino

Turn right off the SS 2 (via Cassia) just South of Buonconvento. The best car-park, if there is space, is right up the hill in front of the Fortezza.



Photo wikimedia

Montalcino has all the required attributes of a Tuscan hill town: fortress, medieval town hall with tower; irregularly shaped central piazza; art gallery; Duomo. But none is outstanding – although the art gallery has recently been modernised and is now one of the best set out in the Senese. Historically, the town's main claim to fame is as the place to which 700 leading Sienese families fled in 1555 when Siena finally submitted to the French and Florentines. They stayed for four years, flying the black and white flag of Siena, until Montalcino also submitted to Florence. Now, Montalcino is a wine and honey town, famed for its 'Brunello' wine, which is on sale in every other shop in the town.

Even by Tuscan standards, the streets of Montalcino are extremely steep. The town is built on a slope along the side of a ridge and the main arteries run parallel to the ridge from the Fortezza in the north to Piazza Cavour in the south. Tiny, almost vertical lanes or steps run between them. Unfortunately, the map supplied by the Tourist Office is wholly inadequate with almost no names of either places or streets, but the town is small enough for it to be fairly easy to find one's way around.

Fortezza and San Agostino



The fortress (Fortezza, Castello or Rocca, open 9-13 and 14.30-1) is impressive. The ramparts were built by the Florentines after they took control of the town, and there are the usual extensive views from them. The way up to the ramparts and the small museum in the Fortezza is through the wine-bar (enoteca) on the ground floor; tickets can be purchased from the bar.

From the Fortezza, one can go down via Ricasoli to the 14th century church of San Agostino on the right. Its elegant Gothic marble doorway has a nicely discreet touch of Siennese black and white stripiness. The interior (with some rather damaged frescoes) is now part of the Civic and Diocesan Museum and is entered through it.

Civic and Diocesan Museum

Just up the road to the left, at No 4, is the recently renovated art gallery, the Museo Civico e Diocesano. It has a small collection of mainly 13th to 15th century Siennese painting and a particularly good collection of early painted wooden statues, cleverly interspersed with modern painted terracotta figures by a local artist inspired by the mediaeval pieces.

On entering, on the right in Room A, there is a good polyptych by Bartolo di Fredi (1330-1410) of the Coronation of the Virgin. Like most of this artist's work, it is extremely colourful and full of incident, including musician angels and scenes of the life of the Virgin. The room contains two other paintings by Bartolo di Fredi: a Virgin and Child on the wall facing the door, and a tryptich of the Deposition to the left of the door (note the side panels showing a local holy man curing somebody and then levitating). Also in this room are two wonderfully stiff and mannered, life-sized, painted wooden statues of the Virgin and the Angel Gabriel dating from the 1300s, the same period as the paintings.

Room B has yet another life-size pair of statues representing the Annunciation (there are three altogether in the museum). There are also a painting of the Virgin and Child by Simone Martini (c1284-1344) to the left of the door, and panels representing St Peter and St Paul by Ambrogio Lorenzetti (c.1290-1348) to the right of the door. It also harbours no fewer than four early 14th century sculpted crucifixes – the one beside the Simone Martini is the most striking, with its tortured face (the one on the opposite wall has cast up eyes reminiscent of Guido Reni at his most

sentimental). And in the middle of the room there is a really splendid statue of St Peter and his keys dating from about 50 years later. The large painting of Doubting Thomas at the far end of the room is also worth a look. He is alleged to have doubted whether the Virgin really was assumed into Heaven, and he is being shown her tomb, empty apart from some flowers, while above the Virgin ascends and lets drop her belt to Thomas as a sort of souvenir. Don't miss the huge 14th century semi-monochrome fresco of the crucifixion, high up on the wall, by a pupil of Ambrogio Lorenzetti.

Room C has on the left of the entrance a charming "Virgin of Humility" by Sano di Pietro (1406-1481) – very simple with no throne or lavish pavement but just a few roses and some discreet hovering angels above.

Room D contains two wonderful Andrea della Robbia terracottas. The first is a 1507 panel of the Virgin and Child between two saints – St Peter on the right with a set of particularly large and ornate keys. All the figures have wonderfully serene expressions. In a corner there is an equally excellent statue of St Sebastian.

There is little of interest downstairs, but the upstairs rooms (some still to be filled) are worth a brief glance. Room M has some of the earliest known works of Siennese art, including an icon-like Madonna and a crucifix, both dating back to the end of the 12th century.

Piazza del Popolo

Down the hill behind San Agostino, a choice of a road or steps through a tunnel leads down to the diminutive main square, the Piazza del Popolo. It is dominated by the mediaeval town hall, the Palazzo del Popolo, complete with tower and family crests of mediaeval mayors. In the arcade beneath the tower there is a 16th century statue of Cosimo I, the Grand Duke of Tuscany at the time of the Florentine take-over, no doubt commissioned to mark that event. There is a cafe under the pretty 14th century loggia on the other side of the square that makes a good place for a coffee-break.

Santa Maria della Croce and San Francesco

From Piazza del Popolo, via Mazzini leads down to Piazza Cavour, on the opposite side of which a building that used to be the hospital of Santa Maria della Croce. It has been appropriated by the town council for its offices, but just inside the door on the right (No. 15) there is a window (with a light switch underneath) through which one can peer into the old pharmacy of the hospital. Its walls are covered in charming frescoes by Vincenzo Tamagni, painted in 1510. Opposite the window the Virgin sits enthroned with St Jerome and his lion on the left and St Augustine on the right – as Doctors of the Church, both are engaged in reading or writing. To the sides there are trompe l'oeil cupboards and figures in niches.

The church of San Francesco, further down the slope to the north-west of Piazza Cavour, is permanently closed, and all the best things in it have been removed to the museum. The cloister next to it is now part of the local hospital.

Sant' Antimo

The church is usually open to visitors from 10-12.30 and 15-18.30. The monks are specialists in Gregorian chant, and it is sometimes possible to sit at the back to listen to them chanting the Offices at 12.45, 14.45 and 19.00 (18.30 on Sunday). There is also a Gregorian Mass at 11.00 on Sundays.



This abbey church, one of the oldest and most beautiful in Tuscany, is about 10 km to the south-east of Montalcino, well sign-posted with yellow signs. It is set in a grove of olives and cypresses just below the village of Castelnuovo del Abate (the olive trees include some of the few survivors of the great frost of 1985 that killed almost all olive trees in Tuscany down to ground level; they were at first thought to be completely dead, but then sprouted branches from the roots which explains why most now look like bushes rather than trees). Until 1979, the church was deserted, the abbey buildings having long since disappeared. But now a small group of monks has come back, living in the building to the right of the church.

The abbey was founded by Charlemagne when he conquered Tuscany in the 8th century. The legend is that his army, returning from Rome, were struck by an epidemic when they got to this spot. The church was the fulfilment of a vow made by Charlemagne to found an abbey there if the sickness stopped, which it did thanks to an angel appearing with a magic herb. But all that remains of the Carolingian church is its apse (to be seen on the outside next to the main apse) and the crypt. The present church was built in around 1118 of wonderful pale honey-coloured stone. Originally the abbey was extremely rich, benefitting from bequests from the pilgrims who stopped there on their way to Rome. But the Siense took a large chunk of the abbey's territory when they sacked Montalcino in 1212; the bequests dried up; one of the abbots was imprisoned for villainy; and in 1462 Pius II closed it down. It has remained gently decaying since then.

The exterior of the church is dotted with ancient carvings of fantastical animals, although some of the best are unfortunately round the door on the right-hand side of the church which has now been closed off to accommodate the monks. Particularly unusual for that early period is the panel with a Virgin and Child at the base of the tower. The facade was never finished (owing to funds running short), and there was obviously uncertainty as to whether to have a double or a single door. The original ornate porch has not survived, although the lions on which its pillars rested are just inside the door.

Inside, there is a marvellous feeling of light and height. The church is built in a French-style Romanesque basilica pattern, with elegant and interesting capitals; note in particular Daniel in the lions' den above the second column on the right (with two lions eating each other simultaneously on

the other side). The deambulatory behind the altar is one of the most beautiful parts of the church, several of the columns or their bases being of alabaster or onyx, translucent when the sun - or a torch - shines through them. When the Piccolomini Pope Pius II suppressed the abbey in 1462 and made it part of the diocese of Montalcino, he rubbed in his dominance by leaving his half-moon crest all over the place, for instance on the flag-stones round the altar. The carved stones round the door into the sacristy (on the right) are supposed to have come from the original Carolingian church. The sacristy itself (rarely open) is in what remains of the Carolingian building; it is covered in 15th century grisaille frescoes of the life of St Benedict.

The church contains two ancient and beautiful wooden sculptures: a stark and tragic 12th century crucifix over the altar (unfortunately often difficult to see against the light from the windows in the apse) and a 13th century Virgin and Child in a glass case on the right. Beneath the altar is a small crypt with a fresco of the Pietà. The slab that forms the top of the altar in the crypt is a bit of recycled Roman marble.

Restaurants

Montalcino is a bit of a gastronomic centre, and most restaurants are reasonably good. In the town, there is a clutch of good value trattorie on via Ricasoli near the Fortezza. In the little village of Castelnuovo dell'Abate next to San Antimo there are also couple of simple trattorie.

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