

MONTERIGGIONI AND PLACES OF INTEREST NEARBY

MONTERIGGIONI

A romantic looking fortified village on a hill-top just north of Siena, and a graceful Romanesque abbey church nearby

15-20 minutes from Barontoli. Free car-park at the bottom of the hill with steps up; paying car-park at the top.



Monteriggioni looks best from below – there is a particularly good view from the Florence-Siena superstrada – with its 13th century walls surmounted by 14 towers. Its main claim to fame is that it is mentioned in Dante’s *Inferno*. The relevant verses are on a plaque outside one of the two gateways into the village: Dante compares the giants stationed around the ninth circle of hell to the towers crowning Monteriggioni’s walls.

Inside the walls Monteriggione is a minute mediaeval village with only a couple of streets and a small Romanesque-gothic chapel, needing only a few minutes to walk round. 30 years ago, it had no more than one tiny bar-cum-shop. But in response to the growth in tourism, the village has since been made to accommodate three bars, two restaurants, a 4-star hotel, two retail outlets for the local wine (nothing to write home about) and a number of souvenir shops. Surprisingly, none of these mars the mediaeval atmosphere.

Monteriggioni was a fortress founded by the Sienese in 1203, strategically placed on the road from Florence to serve as one of Siena’s outer defences against the constantly attacking Florentines. It had the reputation of being impregnable, and indeed did not fall until 1554, just before the final fall of Siena itself – and even then it only fell because of the treachery of the commander, who was himself of Florentine origin and - doubtless realising that Siena could not hold out much longer – betrayed Monteriggioni to the Medici in exchange for an indemnity for himself.

ABBADIA A ISOLA

A good Romanesque abbey church that was a stop on the Via Francigena

Also shown on the signs as Badia or Abbazia (all words for abbey) a Isola. From Monteriggioni, take the road towards Colle Val d'Elsa (left just before the superstrada). After a few hundred yards, turn left again. The abbey is a little way along on the left through an arch opposite a petrol station. To visit, ring the bell (marked in English) of the custodian's house, which is on the right down the little alley just inside the arch to the right.



Photo via wikipedia

The abbey was founded in 1001 as a stopover place for pilgrims on the Via Francigena, the great mediaeval pilgrimage route from Northern Europe down to Rome and – for the really ambitious – on to Brindisi in the south to embark on a boat to Jerusalem. The name Isola (island) probably comes from the fact that it was built on high ground in an otherwise swampy area. The abbey church is now almost all that remains, and is a beautifully proportioned 11th century structure built of attractive white stone, with good carvings on the blind arcading at the top of the facade, and an elegant basilican interior with three apses. There is a capital carved with primitive figures to the right of the altar, and a pretty baptismal font near the door, with a carving of the baptism of Christ and dated 1419. The remains of the old cloister can be seen to the right of the church.

If the church is not open, the lady who lives at No.1 of the little alley to the left has a key. The church used to contain a possible early Duccio of the Virgin and Child (although now attributed to an unknown master), extremely beautiful. This was removed to the Museo Civico in Colle Val d'Elsa in the 1980s, and all the church retains is a photograph. However, there remains a tryptich by Sano di Pietro over the altar and some 15th century frescoes on the side walls. On the left hand side there is a large fresco of the Assumption of the Virgin, a huge crowd of saints gathered below to speed her on her way. Doubting Thomas is shown

holding up the belt she dropped down to him to prove that she was real. Her tomb is shown at the bottom full of roses – which is what Thomas found when he checked the tomb to see if she had really left it. The painting is by is by Vincenzo Tamagno.

Nearer the door the same artist has left a well preserved fresco of St Blaise clutching the fearsome-looking iron wool-comb affair that he was tortured with.

There are two restaurants hidden away down the steps to the left of the church.

1994; revised 2003 and 2013.

SANTA COLOMBA

A village with a villa, church with frescoes, good views and good walks, about 15 km north-west of Barontoli.

From Barontoli, drive to Volte Basse and, at the main road turn right and then almost immediately left, following the signs for Firenze until after about 6 kilometres when you take a turning to the left sign-posted Santa Columba. After a few kilometres, there is a road to the right up (sign-posted) to the village.



The villa

Santa Colomba is a very small village with a large and handsome villa at the entrance. The place must have been important as a strong point in the past, as it had a fortress that was twice sacked in Sienese wars, the first time in 1364 by the soldiers of that great English mercenary or condottiere John Hawkwood, known in Italy as Giovanni Acuto. The fortress was left in a ruinous state, but at the turn of the 15th and 16th centuries Baldassarre Peruzzi (1481-1586), the most famous Sienese architect of his day, turned it into a gracious country house, installing a handsome spiral staircase inside. Only the massive stone base at the side of the building still hints at its more warlike past. After its completion in 1512 it became

the summer residence of the Petrucci family, then the rulers of Siena. The façade was slightly remodelled in the 17th and two enormous and uninteresting wings were added in the 18th century. It is privately owned and the inside cannot be visited, but the handsome façade can be admired from the road.

The Romanesque church, on the other side of the road from the villa, looks rather small and boring from outside, but inside it is surprisingly spacious and contains some interesting remains of frescoes attributed to the early painter Segna di Bonaventura (active 1298-1331). A very faded Nativity can just be made out on the left, with the shepherds and their flocks and a huge sheepdog, and angels at the top. There is a better preserved crucifix on the right of the altar.

For good views, drive through the village and on up the dirt track. The road goes past the village cemetery and a number of villas – mostly old farmhouses recently restored and now either inhabited by the bourgeoisie of Siena or rented out as holiday lets. The road ends after a kilometre or so in a group of farmhouses. On clear days, looking back towards the village, there are fine views of Siena, and indeed of the whole plain to the south of Siena, including San Rocco and Barontoli. There are also often good wildflowers and butterflies.

For a wander in the Montagnola, the mountainous area to the south-east of Siena, park near the group of farmhouses at the end and walk up to the right between the two groups of farm buildings into the wood where there is a track that winds on up for miles.

1985. Revised 2012.

EREMO DI LECCETO

A tiny Augustinian monastery in the woods, about 7 km from Barontoli.

From Barontoli go to Volte Basse; turn right into the main road and then immediately left along the road signposted 'Firenze' and 'Bivio SS 2'. Carry on along this road until you see the yellow sign to Lecceto on the left.



Entrance to the hermitage

Founded on the site of a hermitage in among the holm oaks (*lecce* in Italian), the present buildings date back to the 14th century. They are not particularly distinguished architecturally, but are pleasingly simple and their lovely woodland setting makes this a most attractive place. Lecce is a favourite afternoon outing for local people, so at weekends it is often quite crowded.

The inside of the church was completely redecorated in baroque times, and is none the less attractive for that, being white and light. Unfortunately, some good 14th century frescoes were sacrificed to achieve the baroque effect, and now only a few frescoed fragments, a couple of which (including a Michael the Archangel) may be by Ambrogio Lorenzetti. The largest fresco, by an unknown 14th century Sienese artist, shows four saints – St Augustine, St John the Baptist, an unknown bishop and St Nicholas of Tolentino (with a sun on his front). On the same wall, near the altar, there is a modern portrait of St Augustine with his mother St Monica, in sharply contrasting style.

An elegant 14th century marble tombstone is set in the floor on the right, its peacefully sleeping owner reposing on a beautifully embroidered marble pillow. Above the altar on the right wall there is a curious naive painting of a crucifix standing on three sugar-loaves, the crest of the monastery (the sugar-loaves are also the crest of the Chigi, one of the great local families in the Middle Ages, who presumably sponsored the monastery financially), surrounded by portraits of monks from the monastery who had achieved the status of “blessed” (one below sainthood).

An ancient two-story cloister stands beside the church, very simple and peaceful, the sort that makes one understand why people take up the monastic life. There is also a second cloister, but it is closed to the public (Lecce is still a working religious establishment housing a community of nuns).



Cloister and tower

There are some pleasant walks in the surrounding woods.

EREMO di SAN LEONARDO al LAGO and the PYRAMID

An ancient hermitage with good frescoes; plus a walk to a strange memorial.

About 10km from Barontoli. Open 9.30-15.30 except Mondays. From Barontoli go to Volte Basse; then right and almost at once left. Follow the signs for Firenze until you see a left turn with a sign indicating San Lorenzo al Lago. Go along this road for a couple of kilometres (it ceases to be tarred about half way along); then left again up a rather bad track. For access, ring the bell for the custodian (who appreciates a tip when you leave).

The hermitage of San Leonardo once overlooked a lake (drained in the middle of the last century), hence the name 'al Lago' (on the lake). It is thought to be the oldest hermitage in Tuscany and may well have begun when a singly monk took up residence in a cave there, perhaps as early as 800 AD. A document dating from 1168 records that a monk called Benedict built a church there, probably in the 11th century, dedicated to St Leonard. Benedict is generally regarded as the founder. He would have gathered a small group of monks about him to live in solitude.

The hermitage became fashionable when one of Siena's favourite holy men, Blessed Agostino Novello, Prior-General of the Augustinian Order, decided to retire to San Leonardo, dying there in 1309. Various local magnates endowed the little monastery with land; the church was rebuilt in the gothic style; and good artists employed to provide suitable frescoes. The complex was heavily fortified in 1366, a time of unrest, to provide a place of refuge for the inhabitants of the neighbouring village of Santa Colomba. Later the monastery went into decline and it was officially closed in 1782. All that now remains is the little monastery church, with the remains of the monk's original chapel in the crypt, the old refectory and some remains of walls.

The old **refectory** has what must once have been a powerful semi-monochromatic fresco of the crucifixion by the fifteenth century **Giovanni di Paolo** (1399-1482), unfortunately damaged as at some point when a ceiling was built half way up the refectory right through the middle of it. Only the heads of the crucified men can be seen, together with part of the figures at the foot of the cross can still be seen, women to the left and men (including some orientally dressed Pharisees) to the right.

The small **Romano-Gothic church** is decorated with attractive frescoes by the Sienese artist **Lippo Vanni**, painted between 1360 and 1370, the larger scenes demonstrating a good use of space and perspective. Those round the altar show scenes from the life of the Virgin: her presentation at the temple as a child; the Annunciation; and her betrothal to Joseph, apparently by the same priest as the one to whom she was presented earlier. In the vault, on the sides, Vanni has painted a wonderful heavenly orchestra of angels, playing a strange array of instruments.



Detail of Lippo Vanni's fresco of the betrothal of the Virgin.

On the left of the entrance to the chancel there a picture of San Leonardo himself, with, below, some illustrations of the miracles which he performed. St Leonard was a Frankish noble who converted to Christianity and became a hermit near Limoges, becoming renowned for his sanctity and the miracles that he performed. Here as often the case with Sienese saints and holy men, he has been credited with the capacity to fly like Superman through the air to spots where his miraculous aid was needed (cf. Simone Martini's painting of the blessed Agostino Novello in the Pinacoteca in Siena).

The fresco on the right depicts St Augustine of Hippo in his bishop's robes (above) and in a garden at the moment of his conversion to Christianity (below) – he heard a heavenly voice saying “take up and read”, which he interpreted as a divine instruction to read the Bible, shown on his lap. His mother St Monica prays nearby and a divine hand can be seen pointing down from the clouds above.

The Pyramid

A track leads into the wood beside the little car-park below the monastery, sign-posted “La Grande Traversata Osteraccia”. Follow this, taking a left fork after 150 metres. After a pleasant walk of about half a mile it brings you out onto the road below the monastery, next to a little settlement called “Osteraccia” – probably an inn (“osteria”) in medieval times. On the other side of the road, to the right of the house and garden, another path leads down through the wood sign-posted “La Grande Traversata Piramide” (now part of the via Francigena). This comes out into a field, and on the other side of the field is the “pyramid” – actually more of an obelisk. It stands incongruously in the middle of nowhere to commemorate the draining of the lake that used to cover the area. In medieval times, it seems to have been a true lake, its fish and waterfowl providing a useful source of food for the local inhabitants. But by the 18th century it had become a malodorous swamp, blamed by the neighbouring villages for bringing sickness (these were the days when malaria was blamed on “miasmas” rather than to the mosquitoes that no doubt infested the swamp). A

local noble undertook to drain the swamp at his own expense in 1764, and built a tunnel to take the waters to the river Merse. But he failed to complete the work. Fortunately, the then Grand Duke of Tuscany, the Austrian Peter Leopold of Habsbourg (who had inherited the Duchy of Tuscany from the last of the Medicis), was an enlightened ruler and he took over the project, completing it in 1781. The pyramid was built to celebrate the event.



There is a small picnic area nearby with a table and a minatory notice forbidding everything from lighting fires to making unnecessary noise.

(1995; revised 2005)

27/9/16

CASTELLO DI BELCARO

An attractive fortified villa just outside Siena, still privately owned.

Open to the public for free the first Monday of every month (closed over the lunch period). From Barontoli, take the old road to Siena through San Andrea and Costalpino. Turn left just after Costalpino, following the yellow signs to Castello di Belcaro.



The fortified gate into Belcaro

Belcaro was originally built as a castle in the 1100s, but was sacked a number of times; substantially remodelled as a villa in the 16th century by the fashionable architect of the day, Baldassare Peruzzi; and further altered on several occasions since then. So it is hardly an architectural unity, but still a fine example of a castle-villa built both for defence and for gracious living. The villa is still entirely surrounded by high walls.

It has been owned during its long history by various leading Sieneese families, including the Salimbeni (whose unpopularity caused the populace to rise up and attack Belcaro); St Catherine of Siena who turned it into a convent in 1376; the Turamini (who were responsible for employing Peruzzi to rebuild it); and since 1710 the Camajori, the present owners. The name is said to come from a rather upsetting story. A lady of the Castello, waiting for her husband to come back from the wars, was promenading on the battlements with her baby in her arms, when she perceived her husband coming over the horizon. She extended her arms towards him, dropping the baby into the garden below. This led her to exclaim to her husband "you are handsome (bello) but you have cost me dear (caro)".

The main things to see in Belcaro are the chapel and orangery or loggia, both decorated with attractive if undistinguished frescoes dating from the 16th-17th century; and the battlements around which you can walk and admire stunning views of Siena and surrounding countryside (the entrance to the battlements is up some steps just inside the second courtyard, on the right). There is also a fresco of the Judgement of Paris painted by Peruzzi inside the private part of the villa, not normally viewable.