

PIENZA

A perfect small medieval town, built to order by a pope whose birthplace it was.

Pienza was originally an empty site near a small village called Corsignano. Aeneas Sylvius Piccolomini, who later became Pope Pius II (in whose honour the Piccolomini Library in Siena was built), was born there in 1405, the son of the local landlord. When he became Pope in 1458, he renamed the village Pienza in honour of himself, built a brand new cathedral church and a palazzo for his own use and invited his friends to build their own houses there. He employed a Florentine architect, Rossellino, and almost everything in the little square in front of the church is designed by Rossellino, including the handsome town hall (Palazzo comunale) opposite and the well to one side. Being all of one period, the town has an unusual stylistic unity and is often used as a film set when a romantic renaissance setting is called for.



The Town Hall



The well with the Palazzo Piccolomini behind

The Cathedral (Duomo)

The cathedral has a particularly handsome classical façade and is wonderfully light and airy inside, because of its white painted walls and three naves of equal height (a Germanic style unusual in Italian churches). Note the Piccolomini crest of a crescent moon incorporated in the tracery of some of the windows. Unfortunately the site was badly chosen for such a large structure, and the chancel end of the church is built on uncertain foundations on the hillside, down which it shows alarming signs of slipping – the floors at that end slant noticeably and there are great cracks in the walls.



The Duomo

Pius II employed the best Sieneese painters of the period to produce five paintings for the church. On the left (north) wall, there is a colourful “Madonna with Saints” (St Jerome and three bishops, Martin, Nicholas and Augustine) by Matteo di Giovanni (c.1435-95); above the altar to the left of the main altar, there is a more serene “Madonna with Saints” by Sano di Pietro (1406-81), the figures standing unusually on a wholly carpeted floor and with magnificent red and gold draperies thrown over the throne; and in the final chapel on this side there is an Assumption by Lorenzo di Pietro (usually known as Il Vecchietta (1410-1480) – a particularly dynamic portrayal of the Virgin rising into the sky, accompanied by numerous angelic hangers-on, all being impelled upwards as if by a jet of hot air. The saints on either side are, from left to right, St Agatha (whose martyrdom is said to have included the cutting off of her breasts, which she carries rather distressingly on a plate); Pope Pius I; Calixtus; and St Catherine of Siena with her lily. In the chapel past the main altar on the right, there is a fine sculpted travertine tabernacle designed by Rossellino, a masterpiece of Renaissance elegance (he also designed the equally elegant font in the church). Over the next altar to the right is another colourful and expressive “Madonna with saints” by Matteo di Giovanni, compared to which the final painting further along the right wall, yet another “Madonna with Saints” by Giovanni di Paolo (1403-82), although contemporaneous, appears dark, stiff and old-fashioned.

Palazzo Piccolomini

Opening hours 10.00-12.30 and 15.00-18.00. Closed on Mondays.

On the other side of the little square stands Pius II’s own palace – although in fact it was not finished until after his death. It is a handsome Renaissance building with a courtyard in the middle. Only the first floor is visited, and visitors must join a guided tour, unfortunately only in Italian. There is nothing particularly special in the palace, and little dating from the time of Pius II – most of the furniture is 17th century. Nevertheless, even for non-Italian speakers, it is worth the visit for a good impression of the typical interior of a large palace that was lived in fairly recently – it was still a Piccolomini family residence until the 1960s.

The dining room on the right of the entrance has some pretty furniture. On the other side of the entrance, the Music Room is the only room to have its original ceiling. There are handsome 16th century Spanish hangings on the walls, and a secretaire which at first sight seems to be covered in faded sepia postcards of views of towns – on closer inspection, these prove to be pieces of natural stone. The table in the middle of the room bears a map of the province of Siena in the days when it included Grosseto.

Next door is the main room of the palazzo, the Sala d'Armi, the walls hung with antique arms. It has a magnificent carved Renaissance fireplace and a wonderful balcony looking out onto the countryside. What was intended as the Pope's own bedroom is beyond, with an opulent if anachronistic baroque bed. The only piece of furniture in the palace which might have actually belonged to Pius II is the inlaid chest in this room. A passage with a secretaire positively bristling with secret doors leads to the library, the best room in the house. Down another corridor, the notice put up by the German occupying forces during the Second World War, declaring the palace to be a protected cultural treasure, has been preserved.

The Diocesan Museum

In the old Bishop's palace to the left of the cathedral; entrance in the main street. Open 10.00-13.00 and 15.00-18.00; closed on Tuesday.

This has one particular treasure, Pius II's English cloak or cope; and a good little collection of early Sieneese paintings gathered in from surrounding churches, as well as quite a lot of boring vestments and ecclesiastical metalwork.

Room 1, to the left at the top of the stairs, has on the wall to the left of the door a particularly pretty little portable tryptich (presumably for travelling) by the "Master of the Osservanza" (14th-15th century), and on the end wall a large "Madonna della Misericordia" by Bartolo di Fredi (c.1330-1410) – just as in churches in those days the women sat on one side and the men on the other, so the people sheltering under her cloak are segregated according to sex. The two polychrome wooden statues by the 15th century Domenico di Niccolo dei Cori are of St Regalo (carrying his head to make sure nobody forgets that he was beheaded) and St Leonard.

Room 2 has more early Sieneese paintings, including one real treasure, the Madonna and Child by Pietro Lorenzetti (c.1280-1348) on the left wall. The figures still have the strange almond eyes of Duccio and Simone Martini, but with infinitely more feeling and movement as they stretch affectionately towards each other.

Passing rapidly through Room 3 (tapestries), one comes to Room 4, dedicated to the English-made cope. In the 13th and 14th centuries, English embroiderers were famous throughout Europe for their work, known as "opus anglicanum", and to own such a cope was a must for the rich churchman who had everything. There are several examples of opus anglicanum in the Victoria and Albert Museum in London, but none so fine as this cope. Unfortunately, it has been hung too high to see the detail at the top, and the dim light necessary for conservation – does not help. But as far as it is possible, it is well worth studying in detail, even for those for whom embroidery and church vestments are usually a turn-off.

The embroidered decorations on the cope are in three concentric circles. The inner one shows five scenes from the life of the Virgin; and the next one a further nine scenes from her life interspersed with pictures of Old Testament ancestors of Christ. The outer circle shows scenes from the lives of two saints, St Margaret of Antioch and St Catherine of Alexandria.

The work is incredibly fine with many lively details – like the goat eating a bit of a bush in the middle circle.

Room 5 has bits and pieces from the time of Pius II and a large painting of the Virgin with Saints by Il Vecchietta on an off-day – although the Annunciation in the lunette above is an attractive exercise in perspective. Room 6 contains 16th century works of which the main thing worth looking at is the painting by Fra Bartolommeo of the Holy Family resting during the flight to Egypt to escape Herod's massacre of boy babies. Although the draftsmanship leaves to be desired, it immediately makes an impression with its vivid colouring and strong figures. The remaining rooms have little of interest.

The rest of the town

The whole town is a pleasure to walk round, with its neatly kept streets and flowery courtyards. There is also a walk with spectacular views along the walls behind the cathedral. Most of the shops sell pecorino, the excellent sheep's cheese that is a Pienzan speciality – it comes in various degrees of maturity from a fresh soft version to a hard and strong tasting one. Almost the only building remaining from before Pius II's time is the little Gothic church on the main street; it is not of much interest, except for the magnificent presepio (crib) made by a modern master of glazed terracotta (Italian churches delight in competing with each other to produce the most elaborate crib). Next door is a cloister where an expensive meal can be had.



Pecorino on sale in Pienza (photo 2014)

CORSIGNANO

Those who like really ancient buildings should not miss the Pieve di Corsignano, the original parish church where Pius II was christened. Go out of the town through the southern gate and down the little road past the Il Prato restaurant, turning right at the bottom (about 600 metres altogether). On the right is an ancient fountain or spring, and on the left a little early Romanesque church (10-11th century) with the most amazing carvings round both the main doorway and the door in the South wall. The latter has the three Magi riding across its

top, but the figures on the main door seem entirely pagan, especially the fertility type figure forming the central mullion of the window above the door. These may be ancient Lombard designs, as may the carved stone screens on either side of the altar in the church. The whole structure, with its strange round tower and massive square stone pillars inside, gives the impression of emerging from the deep dark ages. The font in which Pius was christened is still inside, perched on an old Romanesque capital.



Revised 2003 apart from the section on the Palazzo Piccolomini which dates from the early 1990s.

SANT'ANNA IN COMPRENA

A little visited monastery with frescoes by Sodoma

A couple of kilometres before Pienza when approaching from San Quirico d'Orcia, there is a turning to the left signposted to Sant'Anna in Camprena and Castelmuizio. The monastery of St Anna in Camprena is about 5km along this road, on the left. What remains of the monastery buildings is now an "agriturismo" in private hands. The refectory with the Sodoma frescoes is however open to the public every day from 16.00 to 19.00. If there is nobody around, just push the door and go through into the old cloister; the refectory is a room off the far corner.

The monastery of St Anna in Camprena, beautifully set among cypresses and olive groves, was an off-shoot of the Benedictine monastery of Monteoliveto Maggiore. It was founded in the early 1300s, but the present buildings date from some 100-150 years later. It is dedicated to St Anne, the mother of the Virgin Mary. Part of the film *The English Patient* was shot there.

In 1503 the monks invited the 25-year-old painter Giovanni Antonio Bazzi – more usually known as Il Sodoma – to paint frescoes in their refectory. It was his first big commission and obviously impressed the monks enough for them to invite him a few years later to complete the big cycle of frescoes of the life of St Benedict in the cloister of the mother house at Monteoliveto Maggiore. Only some of the frescoes at St Anna survive, but they show him already to be a master of vivid colour and attractive characterisation. They also show his love of landscape and of animals – he could never resist inserting a dog or wild animal into his works.



St Anna in Comprena

On the entrance wall, the fresco on the left shows the Bishop of Arezzo approving the Rule of the Olivetan Order. The central fresco is a moving depiction of the Deposition of Christ which includes both St Anne (in black) and her husband St Joaquim comforting the Virgin and St Mary Magdalen on the left. The final fresco portrays the Madonna and Child with St Anne standing behind her – hand tenderly on the Virgin’s shoulder – and two Olivetan monks in their white habits kneeling reverently on either side.



The Deposition, with Sts Mary Magdalen, Joaquim and Anne.

The frescoes on the other end wall tell the biblical story of the Multiplication of the Loaves and Fishes. After the death of St John the Baptist, Jesus and his disciples withdrew to a remote place. Crowds of his supporters followed, and when evening fell, Jesus told his disciples to feed them. But they had only five loaves and two fishes. Jesus miraculously transformed these into sufficient to feed the multitude. The first fresco shows the little food available being collected together (lots of almost empty baskets); the second shows a boy holding up the five loaves that have been found, which Jesus blesses; and the third –

unfortunately damaged – shows the distribution of the miraculously multiplied bread. Note the dogs at the bottom of the first two frescoes.



The inner side wall is also decorated with frescoes by Sodoma with saints, grotesques, cherubs and fantastical animals. This decoration is heavily influenced by that in the Golden House of Nero in Rome, which had recently been rediscovered after having been buried since Roman times.
(2014)

MONTICHIELLO

About 5 kilometres from Pienza, this is an optional extra for anybody who wants to see more before leaving the area. Not much time is needed.

Montichiello is a largely unspoilt fortified mediaeval village on a hilltop, from which there are good views back to Pienza. It has walls, a watchtower with battlements and a good church, dedicated to Saints Leonard and Christopher. The church was built in the 14th century and is very simple on the outside apart from a most elegant Gothic main doorway. Inside, there are a number of quite interesting if somewhat fragmentary 14th and 15th century frescoes by Sienese artists, including a huge St Christopher to the left of the altar. The church used to contain the Madonna and Child by Pietro Lorenzetti (now in the Pienza museum), and displays a reproduction where it used to be (they must have been extremely cross in Montichiello when it was removed, although it was doubtless on good grounds of security as there have been many thefts of artworks from Italian churches).

The other attraction of Montichiello is that it has two eating places which are less touristy than those of Pienza. The cheaper one at the entrance to the village has a terrace with excellent views; the more expensive one, Taverna di Moranda, is said to have excellent food (closed on Mondays).



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