

STREETS AND PALAZZI

The via Francigena and the road layout

In the Middle Ages, Siena owed much of its trade to the fact that it was not only on one of the main roads from Florence to Rome, but was also on the ancient pilgrim route known as the Via Francigena, “the road that comes from France”. This was the route that pilgrims took from Northern Europe to Rome and Jerusalem. Its northernmost point was in fact Canterbury, and one of the people known to have used the route to go to Rome was Sigeric the Serious, a 10th century Archbishop of Canterbury. His journey took some 80 days, travelling about 20 kilometres a day. The route went through France, Switzerland and Italy. In Tuscany and the Senese, Sigeric’s journey took him through San Gimignano; Badia a Isola; Siena; Ponte d’Arbia; and San Quirico d’Orcia.

To this day the backbone of Siena is the the pilgrim route, the main street that starts in the north at the **Porta Camollia** (the ancient gateway into Siena from Florence), where it is called **via Camollia**; after that it becomes first **via Montanini** and then **Banchi di Sopra**. It leads down to the **Campo**, the beautiful main square, where it splits into two. The left hand fork, **Banchi di Sotto** goes on down to the **Porta Romana**, the gateway to the ancient main road to Rome. This is the way that travellers from Florence to Rome and pilgrims on the Via Francigena took in ancient times. The right hand fork, **via di Città**, leads out to the **Porta San Marco** and the road towards the south-west.



Looking down via di Città towards the three-way junction or “Travaglio” – Rome to the left, Florence to the right. The arcaded building is the 15th century Loggia della Mercanza, which in olden times housed an internationally respected commercial court.

The Via Francigena was until recently largely forgotten. But in the last few years, the Italian authorities have been making strenuous efforts to revive it as a walking route. Signposts have popped up all over the place; largely forgotten footpaths have been cleaned up; possible accommodation for walkers identified; and maps produced. There is even an official website www.viefrancigene.org/en.

A bit of the route is inevitably through built up areas, but the authorities have done their best to identify paths away from roads. This being Italy, however, if you do want to do the whole trail by car you can – a separate vehicular route is also signposted.

Palazzi

The main streets through which the pilgrims and travellers passed are lined with the medieval palazzi of the powerful families of Siena (many of which would originally have had towers); and they are also the main shopping streets. The palazzi include:

- **Palazzo Salimbeni**, on the Piazza Salimbeni off the Banchi di Sopra. Its white marble Gothic façade is one of the most reproduced images of Siena, but in fact much of it is the result of some heavy remodelling in the 19th century. It was the ancient home of the Salimbeni family and is now the headquarters of Siena's ancient bank, the **Monte dei Paschi di Siena**. It was established in the 15th century, is the oldest continuously operating bank in the world and is still a dominant force in Sienese affairs, contributing major subsidies to charitable and artistic activities. It was originally established as a state-run "Monte di Pietà" – a medieval credit institution for lending to the poor. The word "Paschi" was added in the 16th century and comes from an old word for "pasture lands", as part of the finance for the bank was provided by bonds based on the revenues of pasture lands in the Maremma, south of Siena. The Bank (which has quite a good art collection) does organise tours of the building, but they are not easy to arrange.



Palazzo Salimbeni

- **Palazzo Tolomei**, further down the Banchi di Sopra on the other side facing Piazza Tolomei. One of the oldest buildings in Siena, it was built in the mid-1200s and is a good example of a gothic private residence. The Tolomei were rivals of the Salimbeni, and it is perhaps fitting the Palazzo Tolomei now houses the Sienese headquarters of the Florentine bank that is the Monte dei Paschi's main rival.
- **Palazzo delle Papesse** at 126 via di Città. This massive palazzo was built in 1485 for the sister of the Piccolomini pope Pius II, and designed by the Florentine Bernardo Rossellini, the architect of Pienza. It is very much in the Florentine renaissance style, reminiscent of the Palazzo Pitti with its great rusticated blocks of stone. The palazzo was opened in the late 1990s as a gallery of contemporary art, but has now closed again. The collections formerly in it have been moved to the museum complex at Santa Maria della Scala opposite the Duomo.

- **Palazzo Chigi-Saracini** at 82 via di Città, a gothic-style structure with a lovely courtyard, dating from the 1300s **Palazzo Chigi-Saracini**. The nucleus of the building dates back to the 1100s when it was the castle of the then powerful Marescotti family. Before the Palazzo Pubblico was built, it briefly housed part of the Sienese government. Only the tower now remains of that early building. The structure changed hands between various dominant Sienese families over the centuries and was enlarged and modernised by them to create the present building. The next door buildings were incorporated into the structure in the 1300s by the Marescotti. In the 1500s when the palazzo was acquired by the Piccolomini-Mandoli family, the renaissance-style inner courtyard was created. In the 18th century the palace was acquired by the Saracini family who lengthened and largely rebuilt the front of the building in 13th century style to create the curving façade of today.



Courtyard of the Palazzo Chigi Saracini

From the Saracini family the palazzo passed by inheritance to a branch of the huge Chigi family, who added Saracini to their name. A 19th century Chigi-Saracini filled the palazzo with works of art and redid much of the interior in renaissance style. The early 20th century owner, Guido Chigi-Saracini, whose passion was music, turned the ballroom into a magnificent concert hall decorated in the baroque style and filled the Palazzo with music and musical mementos. In 1932, with the help of the Monte dei Pasqui bank, he founded a musical academy in the palazzo, the Accademia Musicale Chigiana, which quickly attracted many world famous musicians. The Academy is still operating today as a summer music school and there is a good series of classical concerts during the summer months.

There are guided tours of the palazzo (in Italian and English), which last about an hour. Many of the rooms are closed for music lessons during the summer season, so a visit is more rewarding between September and June. Much of the art consists of huge canvases by Siena's less distinguished 17th century painters, but there is a good Beccafumi of the mystic marriage of St Catherine in the "piano room", some interesting pieces of furniture and ancient musical instruments and of course the magnificent if somewhat bogus décor of the rooms.

The Campo

The sloping scallop-shell-shaped Campo, where the Palio is run twice a year, is one of the most famous squares in Italy if not the world. The Town Hall or Palazzo Pubblico straddles the lower side, and ten lines of travertine marble radiate out from in front of it, dividing the Campo into nine segments, said to represent "The Nine" (I Novechi), the medieval government of nine magnates who laid out the Campo in its present form in 1349. The great medieval families of Siena built their palazzi round the hemi-circle of the scallop shell. Most have been much changed over the centuries, and now all have cafés, restaurants or shops at their base. The cafés and restaurants are expensive (and the restaurants not particularly good), but well worth it for the view over this fabulous square.



*Painting of the procession of the Contrade around the Campo in 1546.
Note that several of the palazzi still have their towers.*

The **Palazzo Sansedoni** is the most impressive of the palazzi on the Campo. It was built in the 1300s, but reconstructed in 1767, so its medieval look is probably too good to be true. But it is still a fantastic building.



Palazzo Sansedoni in the centre; Palazzo Chigi-Zondadori on the right.

The **Palazzo Chigi-Zondadari**, to the right of the Palazzo Sansedoni, is probably the most recently built, being a graceful 18th century building, nevertheless fitting well with its medieval or pseudo-medieval neighbours. It was built by a Roman architect for a Sienese cardinal called Zondadari, demonstrating the being a cardinal was still a good guarantee of riches in those days.

The **Palazzo Pannochieschi d'Elci or degli Alessi**, the tall crenellated building on the other side of the Campo, was first erected in the 1200s by the Alessi family; but was then taken over by the Pannochiesci d'Elci family and remodeled in the 1500s. It was remodelled twice more over the centuries, so it is hard to tell how much of its medieval appearance is genuine. But again it is a fine building.



Palazzo Alessi in the centre with the crenellations.

2012, revised 2013 and 2015.