

VOLTERRA

A stern but spectacular grey hilltop Etruscan town beyond St Gimignano with good mediaeval buildings and museums; needs two visits to do it justice.

Just over an hour's drive from Barontoli. Drive up to the top and, if there is room, park in the multistory underground carpark on the right just before you reach the bus terminal near the Porta all' Arco and Piazza dei Martiri della Liberta.



Volterra painted by the French artist Jean-Baptiste Corot (1796-1875)

In pre-Roman days, Volterra was one of the biggest and richest Etruscan towns, and some of the old Etruscan walls are still visible outside the present much smaller mediaeval town which grew up in the 12th and 13th centuries. There is little sign now of the prosperous and busy countryside of Etruscan times, but the mediaeval town remains largely intact. Perched on a craggy hilltop with vast views over bare grey hills, it is windswept and rainswept, often cool in summer and icy in winter. Its inhospitable position made it a good fortress in times past; Volterra maintained real independence until 1472, when it was finally sacked and taken by Florence (long after Siena had effectively been subjugated). Maybe its position is also what decided the authorities in more modern times to put Tuscany's main prison (in the fortress built by the Medici after Volterra fell to the Florentines) and main lunatic asylum there.

Volterra's massive and austere attractive buildings all crowd in on each other, and both its two squares are rather cramped; there is none of the space and light and grace of its gayer neighbour, San Gimignano. But it has a sombre beauty, only slightly marred by the multiplicity of garish shops selling alabaster objects to the tourists (Volterra's economy has benefitted from nearby alabaster and salt mines since at least 800 BC). There are at least four museums and several churches that should be seen.

Piazza dei Priori



(photo via Wikimedia)

The main square is entirely surrounded by mediaeval or pseudo-mediaeval buildings, the genuine ones all of roughly the same early 13th century period. The south-west side of the square is dominated by the Palazzo dei Priori, the oldest Town Hall in Italy, built between 1208 and 1257 (although the first floor windows have been altered and the top of the tower is 19th century). The Council Chamber (Sala del Consiglio Comunale), on the first floor up two steep flights of steps, can be visited between 10.30 and 17.30 (modest charge). There is a rather damaged 14th century fresco of the Annunciation on the end wall, but otherwise the decoration is modern, but the shape is unchanged and there is a certain fascination in standing in a room that has been used by the city council almost continuously for over 800 years. In the next room, on the left wall, there is a bit of detached fresco with a rather beautiful painting by Luca Signorelli (1441-1523) of St Jerome. The original colour has almost completely faded, which serves to accentuate the skill of the draftsmanship.

The black and white stripy wall next to the Palazzo dei Priori belongs to one of the transepts of the Duomo, and beyond that is the 14th century Palazzo Vescovile, the Bishop's Palace. On the next side of the square, there is another old Palazzo (now the Cassa di Risparmio di Volterra). It was originally a seminary, and has been much modified since mediaeval times but still retains a general mediaeval look. Facing the Palazzo dei Priori are more 13th century buildings. On the left, with a crenellated tower, is an ancient prison; then the Palazzo del Podestà with an arcaded ground floor; and then the Palazzo Pretorio, the tower of which is known as the Torre del Porcellino from the small pig on a bracket to the right of the top window. The Palazzo on the final side of the Piazza is a modern copy of a mediaeval building, but looks almost more genuine than some of the older ones.

Duomo (Cathedral)

The Duomo (closed over the lunch hour) is behind the Palazzo dei Priori, in its own little square (although it can be entered from the Piazza dei Priori through a side door in the stripy transept wall. It dates from the 12th century, with a Romanesque Pisan-style blind arcade at the top of its facade (the elegant doorway was added later, in the 16th century). Inside, the Duomo was thoroughly done over in the 16th century, and not many Romanesque traces remain apart from the general basilica shape and the two rows of columns down the main aisle. The columns, which at first sight look like pink granite, are in fact painted stucco, as are the black and white stripes. There is a particularly magnificent painted ceiling dating from the 1580s. The overall effect is of elegance and order.

There are several good paintings and sculptures (with descriptions in English): in the middle chapel of the left aisle there is a quite beautiful painting of the Annunciation attributed to Fra Bartolommeo (1497), with a spacious Tuscan landscape shining through the door in the middle.



Annunciation attributed to Fra Bartolommeo

The pulpit was built in the 16th century at the same time as the makeover of the church, but using 12th century panels: the Last Supper on the front (particularly good, with Judas being egged on by a devil-like creature under the table); Abraham sacrificing Isaac on the back; and the Annunciation on the side.

In the second chapel of the left transept is a fine painted wooden statue of a rather anxious-looking Madonna and Child by Francesco di Valdambrino (early 1400s). On either side of the altar are two serene-faced stone angels kneeling on top of elaborate Gothic columns; they are by Mino da Fiesole (mid-15th century), who was also responsible for the carved tabernacle above the rather hideous 19th century altar.

In the south transept, to the right of the altar, there is an extraordinary and moving life-size group in carved and painted wood of the Deposition of Christ from the Cross, which looks quite modern, with its stylized attitudes and long mournful faces, but in fact dates from 1228.

It has recently had its painting restored, to rather garish effect, but probably bringing it close to what it looked like 800-odd years ago;

In the niches of the separate Lady Chapel by the main entrance, there are a number of full size 15th century terracotta figures - the Adoration of the Magi on the right and the Nativity on the left. The left hand niche is also decorated with delightful if somewhat faded frescoes by Benozzo Gozzoli (1420-1497), the artist of the Palazzo Medici Riccardi in Florence.

Outside the Duomo, pause to admire the 15th century campanile of the Duomo; the hospital of Santa Maria Maddalena with a Renaissance arcade; and the 13th century octagonal Baptistery, a simple building with a touch of Sienese black and white stripiness. The elegant marble font to the right of the altar was designed for the Baptistery by Andrea Sansovino in 1502, but replaced by the current rather grander but less interesting one in the mid-18th century.

Pinacoteca and Museo Civico

At No 1 via Sarti (out of the main square along via Ricciarelli and right down via Buonparenti). Open 0900-1900 daily in summer and 0900-1300 in winter. Combined ticket with the Museo di Arte Sacra and the Etruscan Museum.

It has a small but interesting collection of mostly Sienese and Florentine paintings, including a stirring mannerist masterpiece by Rosso Fiorentino. There are good signs in English.

Room 1 on the first floor has some 11-12th century capitals, including one of three animals eating an unfortunate man from several directions at once.

Room 2 has a small, damaged but beautiful painting of the Madonna and Child and a crucifix, both 14th century Sienese. Also a polychrome wooden statue of the Madonna and Child with lovely life-like faces, and a painting of Saints Giusto and Ugo (Just and Hugo), all of the same period. There are another couple of saints painted by Taddeo di Bartolo (1362-1422), but these are hack's works - note how St Nicholas of Tolentino with the designer stubble and St Peter with his key have identical faces - only the trimmings have been changed like a Barbie doll. There is a much better Taddeo di Bartolo in Room 3: a polyptych of the Madonna and Saints dating from 1411.

Nothing of interest in the little chapel or the next room, but **Room 6** has a wonderfully lively and colourful polyptych by a Portuguese painter, Alvaro Pirez (active 1411-1434), quite different in style from the Italian paintings that we have been looking at. The saints are, from the left, St Nicholas the Bishop; St John the Baptist; St Christopher (note the fish at his feet caught up from his crossing of the river), and St Michael (with a particularly tiny dragon, more like a small dog). Note also the Arab figures in the lunettes above, and the Christ-Child is actually feeding his goldfinch rather than, as so often in Italian painting, clutching it in an uncomfortable-looking grip.

Room 7 has more 15th century wooden figures, and Room 8 has a rather fascinating painting of an almost Picasso-esque long-necked Madonna, by Stefano di Antonio Vanni (1457), quite unlike any of the other representations of the Virgin nearby. There is some not very interesting pottery in a cupboard.

Room 9 has some saints by Neri di Bicci (1477), and **Room 10** a charming predella by Benvenuto di Giovanni (1436-1518) of scenes from the life of the Virgin - her birth,

presentation at the temple, marriage and assumption, all full of interesting detail: dogs, horses, people chatting. The marriage in particular is a wonderful scene - one can just imagine a mediaeval wedding looking like that. There is also a large 15th century Nativity by a Florentine artist, Benvenuto di Giovanni del Guasto, with some interesting detail – God above surrounded by angels in insufferably pious attitudes and three shepherds to the right, first been awoken by an angel and then appearing with their dog at the stable.

Room 11 has a marvellously accomplished Christ in Glory with Saints Benedict, Attinia, Greciniana and Romualdo, set in a beautiful Tuscan landscape – note the giraffe by the lake adding an exotic touch; it is by Domenico di Ghirlandaio (1449-1492). In the same room a painting by Leon da Pistoia already shows the rich colours and simple background of the mannerists - no elaborate landscape here to distract attention from the main scene.

The real mannerist masterpiece is, however, the Deposition from the Cross (1521) by Rosso di Fiorentino in **Room 12**. This, one of the earliest mannerist works, is a great painting which caused as much of a scandal as the Impressionists or the cubists in their time. Contrast it with the Luca di Signorelli picture of the Madonna and Child with Saints (1491) in the same room, itself a great painting, not much earlier but in the old style, its calm figures carefully posed against an exquisitely drawn background - whereas the Deposition has no background, roughly drawn figures, huge splashes of colour, all adding up to a tremendous sense of movement, passion and dramatic intensity. It was not just the style of painting which shocked Rosso's contemporaries, but also the way that the figures were arranged, against all previous notions of iconography. One's eye is drawn immediately to the Mary Magdalen in scarlet, dominating the bottom of the painting and eclipsing the rather grey grieving Mother of Christ on the left. From there the figures extend upwards and round in a great wheel, Christ with almost a smirk on his face and none of the holiness of earlier styles. Rosso Fiorentino (the 'Red Florentine', so-called because of his red hair) is supposed to have portrayed himself in the figure on the right.



Deposition by Rosso Fiorentino

The second floor has little of interest and is inevitably an anti-climax after the Rosso Fiorentino. There are good views, however, from the windows of the little court or cloister.

Museo di Arte Sacra

This tiny three-room museum round the corner from the Baptistery contains various paintings and sculptures brought in from nearby churches, together with the usual selection of monstrances and vestments. The second room has another painting by Rosso Fiorentino, of the virgin and child between St John the Baptist and St Bartholomew, reminiscent of El Greco. The Virgin is posed in a traditional hieratic attitude, curiously contrasted with the smiling, playful Christchild on her lap.

Also worth a glance are the good terracotta bust of a bishop next to the painting, and in the next room the rather terrifying silver reliquary head of St Octavian, one of Volterra's patron saints.

Etruscan Museum (Museo Etrusco Guarnacci)

Open every day 0900-1900 in summer and 0900-1300 in winter. Quite few of the rooms have brief descriptions of the contents in English.

The museum has one of the best collections of Etruscan remains, almost all dug up around Volterra, but it can be rather overwhelming - it contains, for instance some 600 funerary urns, rooms and rooms of them. So selectivity is essential. Most of the artefacts that have come down to us from the Etruscans (including almost everything in the museum) is connected with or taken from graves; it is not clear whether they really concentrated all their artistic skill on tombs, or whether it is just that only the tombs have survived.

Ground floor

The first two rooms, on either side of the entrance, contain the earliest stuff, including remains from the pre-Etruscan 'Villanovan period' and Etruscan artefacts from the 10th to 7th centuries BC. The dead were cremated and their ashes put in urns for burial. The earliest urns are mere earthenware pots with lids; already, however, the dead were being buried with all sorts of household bits and pieces to take to the underworld.

From the end of the 7th century to the 5th century BC very little remains; there may have been a demographic decline in Volterra, or possibly one of the landslides which created 'Le Balze' carried away the necropolis of that period. From the 4th century to the 1st century BC (when the Etruscan civilisation was finally swallowed up by the Roman one) the arts in Volterra - or at least the arts of the tomb - flourished and the next rooms contain large numbers of funerary urns from this period. There are far too many to look at more than two or three a room. The earliest urns are in Room III, often made of terracotta and shaped like houses, the lid serving as a roof. These roof-lids were, however, soon replaced by lids surmounted by statues representing the defunct, or sometimes husband and wife together, portrayed reclining as at a Roman-style banquet. Terracotta has also been replaced by stone for these urns.

Soon the body of the urn also came to be decorated, first with symbols and fantastical animals (usually griffons) as in the urns in Rooms IV and V. Then the fashion was for the dead person to be shown bidding farewell to his or her family and friends, usually with a businesslike handshake (Room VI and one end of Room VII).

The next fashion was for the dead person to be shown actually on the way to the underworld, on horseback - the best of these urns is at the other end of Room VII (urn 121). Room VIII shows couples setting off for the underworld in covered wagons, looking rather like settlers on their way to the wild west. The more dashing (warriors and magistrates) drove themselves down in quadrigas (Room IX).

First floor

This floor contains seemingly endless urns decorated with heroic legends from the mythology that the Etruscans had by then learnt from the Romans - the urns date mostly from the 2nd or 1st century BC when Roman influence was already strong. The best urn is in Room XX, unusually for the 1st century BC made of terracotta rather than stone, and showing a beautifully modelled middle-aged couple looking tenderly at each other. This seems to be a rare example of a portrait most urns were mass-produced in the fashion of the day and the figures were stereotypes rather than faithful portrayals of the dead person.

The rooms on this floor not containing urns are stuffed with dozens of pots, bronze figurines, bronze mirrors etc (the Etruscans were masters of bronzework). The figurines are the most interesting, especially the Giacometti-like 'Shadow of the evening' in the middle of Room XXII. It was so named by Gabriele d'Annunzio, the 19th century poet of the Risorgimento, because of its likeness to the shadows cast by the evening light. It is thought to date from the 3rd century BC.

Rooms XXIV and XXV contain jewellery, the best in Room XXV. It mostly dates from the 4th century BC, and is imitative of the Greek jewellery of the period. Room XXX has perhaps the best-known object in the museum, the "urn of the spouses", a 3rd century BC funerary urn depicting a husband and wife looking intently at each other. Unlike the idealized portraits of most of the urns, they look very like real people, distinctly middle-aged – the wife even has crow's feet round her eyes.

Top Floor

This floor has a selection of the better and more sophisticated urns - perhaps those done to special order by the rich, as opposed to the more bourgeois mass-produced 'heroic cycle' ones of the floor below. There are particularly finely carved ones in Rooms XXIX and XXX (the last room also has a good view over the surrounding countryside). Room XXIX also shows how urns were carved, and has a particularly moving urn of a child. The urns in Room XXXII have figures on top with faces of such character that one feels that they must be portraits - although the experts tell us that this is by no means established.

The following rooms contain more bronzework and pots, including Greek-style black and orange vases. They are fairly crude: the Volterrans were obviously better at carving alabaster and stone than at making pots. After Room XXXVII there is an interesting mock-up of a tomb with rows of urns on shelves.

Churches and the Balze

For a good walk taking in a number of churches (open all day in summer) and a spectacular view, leave the Piazza dei Priori by the via Ricciarelli to the left of the Cassa di Risparmio. This leads into the via San Lino, and a little further down on the right is the church of **San Lino** (St Linus). He was the second pope after St Peter and allegedly came from Volterra, so he is much feted in the town. The main item of interest in the church is the 16th century tomb on the left of the altar, whose occupant sits on top looking exceptionally lively for a deceased person.

Further down there is **San Francesco**, the usual barn-like church of the Franciscans. There is nothing much of interest in the church itself, but in the separate chapel through the door to the right of the altar there are some spirited frescoes, well worth a look even if not of great artistic merit. They are by a local artist called Cenni di Francesco and date from 1410. The frescoes to the right of the altar and on the first bay on the right hand wall portray the usual scenes from the life of the Virgin and Christ: the Annunciation; Nativity; Adoration of the Shepherds; and Circumcision.

The rest of the frescoes portray the story of the True Cross, as in Piero della Francesca's famous cycle in Arezzo. The story starts in the right-hand lunette at the top of the second bay on the right, which shows Seth planting a branch of the Tree of Forbidden Fruit next to the body of his father Adam. The story then proceeds like a strip cartoon along the top of the walls and backwards along the bottom of the walls. In the damaged fresco above the end door the story goes fast forward to the time of the Queen of Sheba, when the tree planted by

Seth has been cut down and used to build a bridge (the planks at the bottom of the fresco), the holy significance of which she recognizes. The planks were subsequently buried, but somehow rediscovered and re-used when wood was needed to build the cross for Christ's crucifixion (on the next wall, top left). Another fast forward to St Helena in the fourth century AD finding the cross in the Holy Land (top right) and then entering Jerusalem with it (below). However, it is stolen by the wicked Persian Emperor Chosroes (in the fresco above the two windows). Back to the end wall, where Chosroes can be seen bottom left making himself adored like a god. But help is at hand: on the right the emperor Heraclius is told in a dream of the fate of the cross (on the right). Round the corner, he is seen beheading Chosroes and restoring the Cross to Jerusalem.

Go on down the road, through the mediaeval wall by Porta San Francesco and down the Borgo Santo Stefano. On the left you will pass the church of **Santo Stefano**. This was the parish church of the area until the late 18th century when the church of St Just, further down, was declared the parish church and the Romanesque church of Santo Stefano was pulled down, leaving only the ruins that can be seen today, together with a tiny church that was built for those who found it too difficult to get to St Just.

On a few hundred metres down the road you will come to the truly magnificent sight of the church of **St Just** (San Giusto), well worth the trek to the edge of the town. Its austere but majestic façade rises to the left, a great golden building against the sky, separated from the road by a long expanse of grass framed by two rows of cypresses. The present building dates from the 17th century, when it replaced an earlier Romanesque church which had been swallowed up in a collapse of the cliffs on which this part of the town is built. Four pillars from the original church stand outside, bearing the statues of four saints associated with Volterra: St Just, St Linus, St Clement and St Octavian. St Just was a sixth century Bishop who preached Christianity to the Volterrans. He made his reputation during a siege of Volterra by the barbarians when he ordered the inhabitants to throw bread down over the walls to the enemy. The latter took this gesture to mean that bread was so plentiful in the city that it could last out a siege and promptly withdrew.

The church has an austere and uncluttered classical interior, the more impressive on account of its empty spaciousness. Sadly the main paintings in the church were stolen in 2000 and now only photographs of them remain. The altar contains the bones of no fewer than five saints: the relics of St Just and St Clement are in a sarcophagus on the top, and underneath there are the remains of three early Volterranean martyrs with the slightly unlikely names of Carissimo ('Dearest'); Dolcissimo ('Sweetest'); and Crescenzo.

Further on, at the end of the road, there is an arch in the remains of the Etruscan outer wall through which one can look down at the **Balze**, crumbling yellowy-grey cliffs which have collapsed on a number of occasions taking chunks of the town with them. In the hillsides beyond them, there are the remains of the old alabaster mine-workings that helped Volterra to flourish.

City Gates

Several of the old gates into the city still survive. The most famous is the Porta all'Arco, the arch of which dates from Etruscan times - the weatherworn heads on the outside are supposed to be Etruscan gods (the superstructure is Roman and mediaeval). In 1944 the German occupying forces threatened to blow up the gate to delay the allied advance. The population pleaded with the Germans not to do this and undertook themselves to block the gate with paving-stones and rubble within 24 hours - a feat which they successfully concluded as is recorded on a plaque outside the gate.

Roman Volterra

Volterra remained a fairly important regional centre under the Romans, and has the remains of a Roman theatre (1st century BC) and baths (1st century AD). These are best seen from above. From the main street go down via Guarnacci. At the bottom, just before the mediaeval 'Florentine Gate', turn up to the left for an excellent view.



Photo via wikimedia

Restaurants

There are a number of restaurants and trattorie, of which none really stands out. Volterra specializes in game, so it is worth trying pasta with hare (lepre) or wild boar (cinghiale) sauce.

1994, revised 2004 and 2010