

Tuscany

HIGHLIGHTS

- Finding solitude and getting lost (yes lost) in the insanely popular confines of internationally lauded **Chianti-shire** (p196)
- Spying the towers of San Gimignano from six different angles on the **Medieval Towns** walk (p201)
- Enjoying a spare day or three between hikes at a traditional Tuscan *agriturismo* (p200)
- Stumbling upon marble quarries – but no ski resorts – in the scarred but beautiful **Apuan Alps** (p207)

Signature food: *Bistecca alla fiorentina*

Celebrated native: Leonardo da Vinci

Famous for... Tourists

Benvenuti a Toscana; land of tall, slender cypress trees and turreted medieval towns; home of da Vinci, Boccaccio, and vacationing British prime ministers; the font of humanism, mannerism, the Uffizi, and a thousand and one Italian clichés – most of which are true.

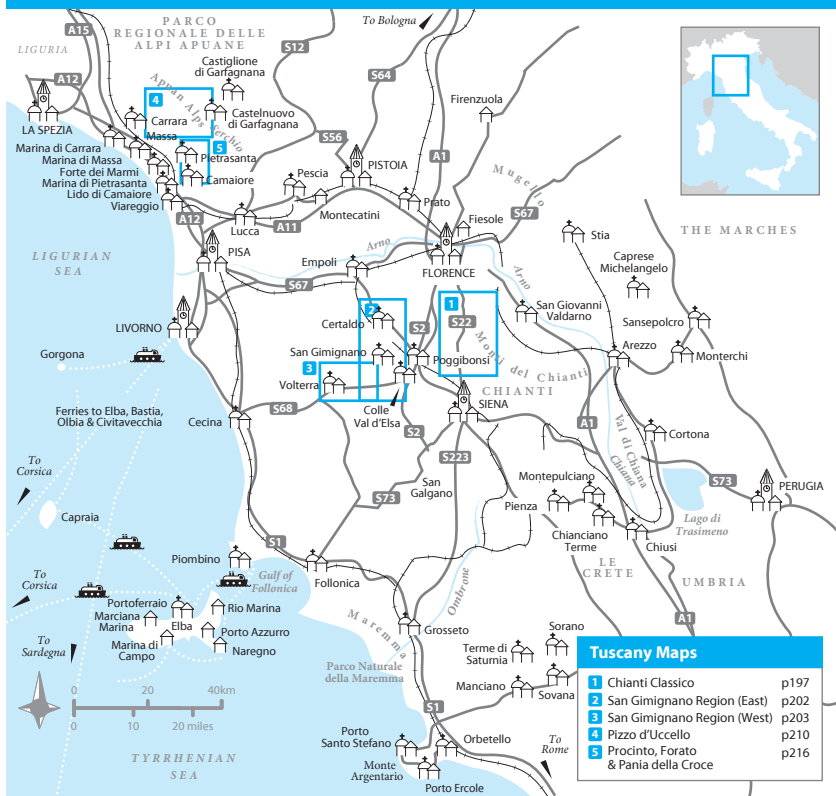
For many people, Tuscany is Italy personified – an intoxicating dose of everything a food-loving, culture-embracing Italia-phile might dream about. A quick flick back through history does little to refute the legend. It was Tuscany that invented the Italian language, Tuscany that bred the peninsula's first organised civilisation (the Etruscans), and Tuscany that inspired the greatest cultural rebirth in modern history – the glittering Renaissance.

But, while the urban centres of Florence and Siena never cease to raise the collective pulse, Tuscany's less spectacular but no less engaging countryside is just as credit-worthy.

Hiking-wise, Tuscany offers everything the great art cities can't; peace, solitude, decent prices and a refreshing dose of rustic realism. Wedged between Italy's spinal mountains and the Mediterranean, the landscape here ranges from pretty pastoral to downright weird. In the north, the battlement-shaped Apuan Alps, with their huge, centuries-old marble quarries look like displaced, battle-scarred relics of the Apennines. Further south, the rolling hills of Chianti-shire and the San Gimignano region could almost pass for rural France on a clear day save for the Renaissance architecture and the odd stray Fiat 500.



TUSCANY



GETTING THERE & AROUND

With such iconic tourist magnets as Florence, Siena and Lucca, Tuscany has excellent bus and train connections with the rest of the country. This service is replicated in the countryside where comfortable and punctual local buses reach all but the tiniest villages.

GATEWAY

The danger of staying in Florence (p218) is that you may never make it outside the city limits – there's simply too much to captivate, intrigue and distract you. But the illustrious capital of the Renaissance, with its close proximity to the Chianti countryside along with excellent bus and train connections, remains the region's most convenient and accessible gateway.

CHIANTI

Despite Chianti's pre-eminence in the book of breathless Italian clichés, its trails and footpaths remain surprisingly empty. For hikers, it's a mystery as perplexing as the Turin Shroud – but one that's worth jealously guarding. Jostling for elbow room in the more urbanised areas, the bulk of Tuscan tourists prefer to uncover the region's sublime secrets in less energetic ways; be it dining in San Gimignano, wine-tasting in charming Radda, or lolling by the swimming pool in their all-comforts-included *agriturismo*.

What they're missing is hard to capture and even harder to quantify. Wilderness-wise, Chianti is certainly no Alaska. Instead,