



# Northwestern Tuscany

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## Best Places to Eat

- » Villa Bongi (see the boxed text, p144)
- » Podere del Grillo (p150)
- » Osteria Vecchia Mulino (p151)
- » Buca di Baldabò (see the boxed text, p156)
- » Filippo (p160)

## Best Places to Stay

- » Barbiaglia Nuova (p149)
- » Pradaccio di Sopra (p151)
- » Il Benefizio (p154)
- » Albergo Pietrasanta (p159)
- » Fattoria di Stibbio (p149)

## Why Go?

There is far more to this green corner of Tuscany than Italy's iconic Leaning Tower. Usually hurtled through at breakneck speed en route to Florence and Siena's grand-slam queue-for-hours sights, this is the place to take your foot off the brake and go slow – on foot, by bicycle or car. Allow for long lazy lunches of rustic regional specialities to set the pace for the day, meandering around a medieval hilltop village perhaps in the morning or along an ancient pilgrimage route.

Even the region's larger towns – university hub Pisa and 'love at first sight' Lucca with its 16th-century walls ensnaring a labyrinth of butter-coloured buildings, Romanesque palaces and gracious piazzas – have an air of tranquillity and tradition that begs the traveller to linger. This is snail-paced Italy, and you're sure to love it.

## When to Go

Pisa makes an easy weekend break any time of year although July and August are best avoided if you don't like crowds: plan for June instead, when it's still warm and the city celebrates its patron saint with fireworks, a regatta and magical visits after dark of its iconic Leaning Tower. Elsewhere, spring and early summer is the best time to savour the Apuane Alps and Garfagnana's outdoor action, while October to December is the time to hunt and eat white truffles and catch San Miniato's famous white-truffle fair (November).

## DON'T MISS

The chance to really get away: hike or drive up rugged mountains in the Garfagnana; bike or drive the villa-encrusted hills around Lucca; revel in exciting contemporary art in Pietrasanta.

## Culinary Experiences

- » **Lardo di Colonnata** (p158) Eat pig fat aged for 12 or 24 months in marble vats of herby olive oil.
- » **Martelli Pasta** (see the boxed text, p134) Watch an artisan spaghetti maker at work.
- » **Barbiallya Nuova** (see the boxed text, p149) Hunt white truffles with a *tartu-faio* (truffle hunter) and his dog.

## Advance Planning

- » Buy tickets online for Pisa's Leaning Tower (15 days in advance; p126).
- » Books tickets/accommodation for Viareggio's famous carnival (p161).
- » Buy a gold-dust ticket for Lucca's Puccini Festival (see the boxed text, p142).
- » Put in your request to visit sculpture garden Fattoria di Celle (see the boxed text, p148).

## Resources

- » Pisa Tourism: [www.pisaturismo.it](http://www.pisaturismo.it)
- » Parco Regionale delle Alpi Apuane: [www.parcapuane.it](http://www.parcapuane.it)
- » Toscana Mare: Tuscan Coast: [www.tuscancoast.org](http://www.tuscancoast.org)

## Itineraries

**Biking Lucca** Hire a bike, provision yourself with Forno Giusti's fresh-from-the-oven focaccia and pizza, and free-wheel along the city's medieval streets. Lunch atop the monumental city walls, or pedal east to picnic in Renaissance villa grounds. At day's end, listen to a Puccini recital in a medieval church.

**Valdo Pisano** Fall in love with backstreet Pisa – squirrel away the tower and Pisa's picture-perfect Piazza dei Miracoli until early evening. Next day watch how spaghetti is made in Lari, then continue to San Miniato for a mooch and lunch – in town or a nearby village. As the afternoon wanes, settle down for the night on a quintessential Tuscan farm or in a 15th-century villa built for members of the Medici family.

**In the Name of Art: Mountain to Sea** Shop for a picnic of local forest produce in Castelnuovo di Garfagnana, then motor up and over the Apuane Alps – allow plenty of time for pulling over to soak up vistas of monumental marble blocks being cut out of the mountainside. Picnic on the Passo del Vestito and visit its botanical garden, then drop down to the sea. In Massa, head north to Carrara (to see a marble quarry) or south to refined Pietrasanta (for contemporary art and creative dining).

## GETTING AROUND

Major towns and cities are well connected by the A11 and A12, but it's more fun to veer off the motorways and onto scenic secondary roads and narrow rural routes, particularly in the Lunigiana and Garfagnana. Pisa and Lucca have strictly enforced Limited Traffic Zones (ZTL) in their *centro storico* (historic centres) – be careful where you park! Regular trains link Florence, Pisa, Lucca and Viareggio, but less obvious places such as Lari and Lajatico (with great off-beat things to see and do) require a car.

## Where to Stay

Pisa is the obvious place to stay, but it's traffic busy and the choice of quality accommodation is limited. Opt instead for lovely Lucca (though parking is difficult), a farm stay around San Miniato, or stylish art gem Pietrasanta: all three are an easy drive to northwestern Tuscany's key sights, and will charm your socks off to boot.

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