

# Understand Florence & Tuscany

## **FLORENCE & TUSCANY TODAY . . . . . 272**

Facts, figures and some cultural and political context to inform the travel experience.

## **HISTORY . . . . . 274**

Plagues, plotting and patronage – Tuscany's wild and wonderful history is stranger than any fiction.

## **THE TUSCAN WAY OF LIFE . . . . . 286**

Family, fashion and tradition reign supreme in this privileged pocket of Italy.

## **THE TUSCAN TABLE . . . . . 290**

Food here is seasonally driven, flavour-charged and best savoured slowly.

## **TUSCANY ON PAGE & SCREEN . . . . . 297**

A comprehensive look at books and films to enjoy before your trip or while you're on the road.

## **ART & ARCHITECTURE . . . . . 302**

Its Gothic glories and Renaissance masterpieces give Tuscany an artistic heritage unmatched anywhere in the world.

# Florence & Tuscany Today

Tuscany – with its world-class fashion, Super Tuscan wines and farmsteads romantically lost in cinematic rushes of hills, vineyards, cypress alleys and wheat fields – is an enviable part of the world. Agriculture and travel are defining features of the region: ‘go slow’ is the spindle around which the Tuscan cart turns, just as it did three millennia ago. But it is not all fabled romance. Italy’s privileged land of autumnal gold vineyards and silvery olive groves is as susceptible to modern-day trouble and strife as any other.

## Best in Print

**The Stones of Florence** (Mary McCarthy; 1956) Timeless portrait of Florence.

**The Birth of Venus** (Sarah Dunant, 2003) The daughter of a wealthy merchant falls in love with a fresco painter in 15th-century Florence.

**The Decameron** (Giovanni Boccaccio, 1353) A bawdy masterpiece.

**A Tabernacle for the Sun** (Linda Proud, 1997) Book One of the Botticelli Trilogy.

## Best in Film

**Life is Beautiful** (Robert Benigni, 1998) Bittersweet comedy-drama set during the Holocaust.

**A Room with a View** (James Ivory, 1985) Exquisitely rendered screen version of EM Forster’s 1908 novel.

**Tea with Mussolini** (Franco Zeffirelli, 1999) Semi-autobiographical film, opening in Florence in 1935.

**The English Patient** (Anthony Minghella, 1996) Arezzo’s Cappella Bacci is the Tuscan star of this romantic drama.

## Trouble at the Bank

As Europe’s floundering economy limped from bad to dire in 2012 in a crisis considered to be the worst since the 1930s Great Depression, Tuscany found itself sucked in. The region had stood up well to initial troubles in 2007, but as Italy entered its third year of recession, resistance was wavering: Italy’s economy shrunk by 2.3% in 2012; and national unemployment hit 12% in April 2013, with youth unemployment hovering around 40%.

The Tuscan crunch came with the Monte dei Paschi di Siena bank scandal. In January 2013 the Banca Monte dei Paschi di Siena – Italy’s third-largest lender and the world’s longest-operating bank, in business in a gorgeous *palazzo* (palace) in Siena since 1472 – revealed losses of €730 million on a trio of derivative deals, made between 2007 and 2009 and hidden from regulators. While former high-ranking officials at the pedigree bank grappled with corruption, fraud and bribery allegations, the government came to the rescue with a €4.1 billion bail-out. Tuscan taxpayers, still reeling from the new home property tax and other tough austerity measures introduced by short-lived prime minister Mario Monti in 2011 and 2012, were far from impressed with such government ‘spending’.

Future restructuring at the bank, essential for survival, will see 400 of its 1900 countrywide branches close and 4600 redundancies made by 2015. But the fallout of the scandal reaches far beyond job cuts. For decades ‘il Monte’ (as Tuscans know the bank) sustained Siena’s vibrant cultural life. Through the foundation, Fondazione Monte dei Paschi di Siena, it funded part of the city’s university, hospital, football team, Palio horse race and so on – effectively providing around 10% of Siena’s local government budget. For Siena (and Tuscany) the social and economic impact of their sugar daddy’s dramatic fall from grace is catastrophic.