Florence & Tuscany

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ROAD DISTANCES (km)

Florence
Grosseto
Livorno
Lucca
Pisa
Siena
Arezzo

Elba
San Gimignano
OUR WRITERS

Virginia Maxwell
Coordinating Author; Siena & Central Tuscany; Southern Tuscany; Eastern Tuscany
Based in Australia, Virginia spends part of every year in Italy indulging her passions for history, art, architecture, food and wine. She has written two previous editions of this guide and covers both Tuscany and other parts of the country for the *Italy* and *Western Europe* books. Though reticent to nominate a favourite Tuscany destination (arguing that they’re all wonderful), she usually nominates Florence if pressed. For this book Virginia also wrote most of the Plan Your Trip section, Tuscany on Page & Screen, Art & Architecture and the Survival Guide section.

Nicola Williams
Florence; Northwestern Tuscany; Central Coast & Elba
A British writer and editorial consultant, Nicola has lived on the southern shore of Lake Geneva for over a decade. Thankfully for her Italianate soul, it is an easy hop through the Mont Blanc Tunnel to Italy where she has spent years eating her way around and revelling in its extraordinary art and landscape. Nicola has worked on numerous Lonely Planet titles, including *Italy, Milan, Turin & Genoa* and *Piedmont*. She blogs at tripalong.wordpress.com and tweets @tripalong. For this book Nicola also wrote Eat & Drink Like a Local, Outdoor Experiences and most of the Understand section.

Read more about Virginia at: lonelyplanet.com/members/virginiamaxwell

Read more about Nicola at: lonelyplanet.com/members/nicolawilliams
Florence anchors any ‘best of’ tour. You’ll need at least three days to do this magnificent city justice – any less and you’ll be selling both it and yourself short. Spend one day visiting the Uffizi Gallery, another wandering through the San Marco and San Lorenzo neighbourhoods, and the third crossing the Arno to explore the artisan’s neighbourhood of Oltrarno. After having eaten, drunk, shopped and seen more Renaissance masterpieces than you would previously have thought possible, it’s time to slow down the pace and move on to the enchanting walled city of Lucca for two days. Hire a bike and use pedal power for a leisurely exploration of its cobbled city streets and villa-studded surrounding countryside. On day six, pop into Pisa to scale its Leaning Tower, leaving after lunch to arrive at a Tuscan farmhouse in Chianti before dusk. Check-in for three nights, visiting wineries, taking a day trip to San Gimignano or Volterra, exploring sculpture gardens and feasting on modern Tuscan food during your stay. On day nine, head to gloriously Gothic Siena, home to museums, restaurants and churches that will supply a truly fabulous two-day finale to your trip.
Head to the sun-kissed centre of Tuscany to indulge in some of Italy’s best wine, architecture and scenery. Kick off in Siena, where you should gravitate towards Gothic glories such as the Museo Civico and Opera della Metropolitana di Siena. Nibble on the city’s famous sweet biscuits – preferably accompanied by a glass of local Vin Santo – and explore the atmospheric streets and piazzas of the incredibly intact, World Heritage–listed centro storico (historic centre).

After three days here, tear yourself away and head south through the stunning scenery of the Crete Senesi, visiting the Abbazia di Monte Oliveto Maggiore, and then continuing southeast to base yourself in or around the towns of Pienza or Montepulciano for three nights – there are plenty of impressive accommodation options to choose from, including chic boutique hotels, atmospheric agriturismi (farm or wine estates offering accommodation) and idyllic villa retreats. From your base, you’ll be able to explore the Val d’Orcia and Val di Chiana, visiting the wine country around Montalcino, listening to Gregorian chants at the Abbazia di Sant’Antimo, wandering through the ruined Cistercian abbey of San Galgano, soaking in hot cascades at Bagni San Filippo and sampling the gastronomic products that this part of Tuscany is known for – Chianina beef, cinta senese (indigenous Tuscan pig), fresh pecorino (sheep’s milk cheese), fragrant olive oil and two of Italy’s greatest wines: Brunello di Montalcino and Vino Nobile di Montepulciano. If you are travelling during summer, you may be lucky enough to witness a medieval-themed neighbourhood festival or attend a musical performance in an abbey, palazzo (mansion) or piazza.

End your sojourn in this idyllic area by looping back along scenic secondary roads to romantic San Gimignano, home to medieval tower houses, a lavishly frescoed duomo (cathedral) and a small but charming municipal museum and art gallery. Dine on delicate pasta dishes scented with locally grown saffron, and celebrate Tuscany’s manifold charms with a glass or two of the town’s golden-hued Vernaccia wine – life doesn’t get much better than this!
Into the East

Mix it up a bit by balancing well-known destinations with some intriguing off-the-beaten-track alternatives. Spend three days admiring the Renaissance splendour of Florence before branching out east into the little-visited Casentino region, home to the idyllically isolated Parco Nazionale delle Foreste Casentinesi, Monte Falterona e Campigna. Base yourself around the fortified hill town of Poppi for three days, sampling the area’s rustic and delicious cuisine, visiting the isolated medieval monasteries of Camaldoli and La Verna, wandering around the evocative ruins of the Castello di Romena and walking a few trails in the national park. Next, meander southeast to Sansepolcro, proud possessor of charming medieval churches, great restaurants and a museum showcasing works by the great Renaissance painter, Piero della Francesca.

Tear yourself away after two nights and continue to your final destination, the Val di Chiana, where you can spend a few days eating, drinking and sightseeing your way around the valley. While here, pop into the provincial capital, Arezzo, where locals outnumber tourists by a healthy margin and where churches are the highlight – don’t miss the Cappella Bacci, Pieve di Santa Maria and duomo, and be sure to follow your church visits with a passeggiata (evening stroll) along glamorous Corso Italia.

A number of nearby medieval hilltop towns are also well worth visiting – Castiglion Fiorentino and Lucignano are extremely pretty, but both pale in comparison with Cortona, which deserves a half-day visit at the very least. Be sure to walk up the steep cobbled streets to its Fortezza Medicea, and also check out the collections at the Museo dell’Accademia Etrusca and the Museo Diocesano.

When your time runs out, consider heading south towards Rome on the A1 autostrada, stopping to visit the stunning cathedral at Orvieto en route to admire Luca Signorelli’s famous fresco cycle of The Last Judgment. Alternatively, head into the neighbouring region of Umbria to visit one of Italy’s most famous pilgrimage centres, Assisi, home to the Basilica di San Francesco, where Giotto’s extraordinary frescoes portraying the life of St Francis stun all beholders.
### Pisa & its Provinces

Start your peregrination in **Pisa**, spending two days admiring the marble pulpits in the Baptistry and **duomo**, the paintings and sculpture in the Museo Nazionale di San Matteo and the exquisite exterior decoration of the Chiesa di Santa Maria della Spina. Conclude your visit at the Piazza dei Miracoli, home to that famous engineering project gone horribly wrong, the Leaning Tower. On day three, spend the morning paying homage to Italy’s famous Vespa scooter at the Museo Piaggio in **Pontedera** before driving (or maybe scootering!) through gently rolling hills covered in olive groves and vineyards to hunt truffles and sleep in style at the gourmet destination of **San Miniato**. From here, head to spectacularly sited **Volterra** in the Val di Cecina, where visits to alabaster ateliers and an extraordinary museum of Etruscan art await. Spend two nights here and then finish your tour in the neighbouring province and city of **Livorno**, home to an atmospheric central market, the delectable seafood stew known as **cacciucco** and the world-famous Sassicaia wine.

### The Maremma

To make the most of the great outdoors, head to the region’s south. Start in the little-visited but utterly delightful medieval town of **Massa Marittima** and spend a couple of days visiting its museums and sampling Maremmane food and wine in its rustic eateries. On day three, check out an archaeological dig, Etruscan tombs and an impressive museum at the ancient hilltop settlement of **Vetulonia** and stay in a local **agriturismo** for the night. From here, head down the coast to the wild and wonderful **Parco Regionale della Maremma** to walk, canoe, cycle or horse ride alongside the famous cowboys known as the **butteri**. End your journey inland amid the stunning surrounds of the Città del Tufa (City of the Tufa), where you should visit the towns of **Pitigliano**, **Sovana** and **Sorano**. Here you can sample the local Morellino di Scansano wine at Società Agricola Terenzi; explore the amazing Etruscan necropolises at the Parco Archeologico ‘Città del Tufa’; and spend a day taking an 8km walk along the enigmatic sunken roads known as **vie cave**.