

33

ASSISI, THE BASILICA OF SAN FRANCESCO AND OTHER FRANCISCAN SITES

“I spent two splendid days in 1937 in Assisi. There, alone in the little 12th century Romanesque chapel of Santa Maria degli Angeli, an incomparable marvel of purity where St Francis often used to pray, something stronger than I was compelled me for the first time in my life to go down on my knees.”

Waiting for God, Simone Weil

Assisi is a shrine city where spirituality is palpable and hovers not only in its countless churches – where the moments of prayer are jealously guarded and protected from the inevitable crowds of tourists –, but also in the pink stone alleys shining with light at sunset and in the enchanted gardens, as though the personality of its most illustrious son, St Francis, had been inexorably transmitted to the town where he lived and where he revolutionised the history of Christianity, and as though the awe in front of the frescoes in the basilica dedicated to him, one of the most important places in the history of world art, extended to the encounter with the people, the medieval buildings, the dreamlike views. The UNESCO site of Assisi is one of the largest in Italy and includes the Upper and Lower Basilicas, the church of St Clara, various other churches and, outside the walls, the Carceri Hermitage – with the grottoes where Francis lived with his companions – and the Papal Basilica of Santa Maria degli Angeli, which is the custody of the Porziuncola, the small church repaired by Francis with his bare hands, the place where he founded the Order of Friars Minor and the Poor Clares and where he died. “Praised be you, my Lord, with all your creatures, especially Sir Brother Sun, who is the day, and through whom you give us light. And he is beautiful and radiant with great splendour; and bears a likeness of You, Most High One”: the words in literature most closely associated with these places are those of Francis himself.



CULTURAL HERITAGE

UNESCO DOSSIER: 990
PLACE OF INSCRIPTION: CAIRNS, AUSTRALIA
DATE OF INSCRIPTION: 2000



CRITERIA FOR SELECTION: The Basilica of St Francis is a cornucopia of masterpieces, but above all one of the decisive places to understand the trajectories of world art. Together with other sites in the city, it is the starting-point for the spreading of the Franciscan Order which played an equally important role in the development of European culture.



“Here the land is really beautiful, as the Umbrian School shows us: lines of the horizon which slope down mistily from the distant mountains! I was in Assisi: it is something wonderful, village, city and shrine, for those who understand nature and art, in their harmony with history, the imagination and human affects.”

After having gone through the town, visiting its main sites, the words of Giosuè Carducci will seem to you to be full of an irrefutable truth.

We start from the **1 Basilica of San Francesco**, the place which, between the 13th and 14th centuries, revolutionised the history of art: nobody ever before Giotto and the great artists of his time, all together at work on a colossal pictorial masterpiece that has no equal in history (except more than 200 years later, in the decorations of the Vatican), had painted with such attention to realism, to psychological representation and to perspective. The second stopping place is the spectacular **2 Piazza del Comune**: in your walks in the town, you will be crossing it an infinity of times, and each time, you will be overwhelmed by the same, scintillating sense of wonder: here the 14th century Palazzo del Popolo and Palazzo dei Priori, venues for temporary exhibitions, the Fonte di Piazza, with the three lions that allude to the three neighbourhoods of

the town, the Torre del Popolo, from which there is a privileged view over the roofs, the alienating Volta Pinta and the solemn Temple of Minerva, all show themselves off in the best way possible. Goethe paid particular attention to the temple, with these words: “I would never have my fill of observing the façade and the brilliant coherence of the artist it shows. [...] Reluctantly I tore myself away from that view, proposing to attract the attention of all architects to this building, so that we can have an exact plan of it”. From there, you will reach the superb **3 Basilica of Santa Chiara** in a few minutes. Considering that, immediately after the figure of St Francis, the name of Assisi evokes that of his “sister” and “friend”, and founder of the order of the Poor Clares, the basilica built in honour of the saint, started in 1257 under the direction of friar Filippo da

Campello and opened after only three years to take in her body, is not to be missed. Outside, three awe-inspiring rampant arches from the end of the 14th century seem almost to support the church, as though it were to fall on one side, while the gabled façade in white stone presents a marvellous rose. The main reason of attraction for the faithful is inside, in the Oratory of the Crucifix: the cross (12th century) that you will find facing you, stands out from all those in the city for having spoken to Francis in the Sanctuary of San Damiano, exhorting him to restore the building and, symbolically, the whole of Christianity. As the aforementioned **4 Sanctuary of San Damiano** can be reached after a short walk, there is no better way to round off the itinerary than to plunge into its atmosphere, still today pervaded with a mysteriously tangible sacredness.



FRANCIS

“It was in Assisi that he started to speak. He preached wherever he would find people together, in the markets and in streets, on doorsteps and along the walls of gardens. His words were simple and full of love [...]. He was able to touch the hearts of many, he forced them to meditate and to pay and a silent veneration began to surround that preacher whose figure and words gave off a strength and a warmth as though from a good and bright star.”

Francis of Assisi, Hermann Hesse

Seven hundred years have gone by, but it is as though the words of Francis continue to echo in every corner of the city: the ardent sense of devotion that churches and monasteries exude, the lyricism of the lanes in sparkling pink stone at sunset, the inevitable awe in front of the frescoes in the basilica named after the saint seem to transpose the passionate eloquence with which Francis revolutionised the history of Christianity into the vibrant atmosphere of Assisi. You need not have read the simple words full of love Hesse refers to in the biographies and stories, in the canticles and poems: the saint’s message of brotherhood is reflected in the enthusiasm of the thousands of faithful who every day translate it into smiles, fervour and passion, making it clearly decipherable by any visitor.



“A PARTICULAR VISION OF MAN AND LIFE RADIATE FROM THIS LAND: YOU HAVE TO SEIZE THEM IN SILENCE, GOING FROM ONE PLACE TO ANOTHER AS THOUGH ON AN ANCIENT PILGRIMAGE.”

In *Umbria terra d'ombre*, Vittorino Andreoli suggests discovering the region like the ancient pilgrims travelling towards places of the faith. Moreover, in Umbria there is one of the most important destinations of pilgrimage in Italy: the Basilica of San Francesco in Assisi. This itinerary will help you get to know it piece by piece,

fresco by fresco. An extraordinary stronghold of art, history and spirituality, work on the basilica started in 1228 on the spot where Francis was buried in 1226. Its richness seems to challenge the idea of poverty preached by the saint for his whole life: the best labourers and the most skilled architects and painters of the time were called to build the church. This holy site will reveal its first secret to you when, after crossing the lower square, you admire the marvellous portal with two entrances into the **1 Lower Basilica**. This way you will find out that it is not only one, but two churches, one on top of the other, that form the basilica. With its low ceilings on impressive pilasters

and the dim light, this is the part of the complex used for Masses. Through two flights of stairs halfway down the long central corridor, you go down to the **2 Crypt**, the simple place of the tomb of St Francis. The atmosphere in the church above is completely different, which you can reach through the flight of steps on the right of the portal you came in through. The **3 Upper Basilica** is flooded with the light that filters through the marvellous stained glass windows, which are some of the oldest that can be seen in an Italian church. Under the high and very colourful ceiling, a large and luminous area welcomes the faithful, the public preaching and the official meetings of the Franciscan Order, the community of monks founded by Francis. From the very beginning, the space was thought of especially for the frescoes with the pictures illustrating scenes from the life of the saint, which are at mid-height and which, according to scholars, were made by Giotto and his “team” of assistants between 1290 and 1295. Some of these scenes have become very famous indeed. Have fun trying to find the episode of the **4 sermon to the birds**, in which Francis is intent on preaching to a large group of birds in the shade of a tree. In the **5 dream of innocence**, you will see the pope sleeping and the apparition in a dream of Francis, supporting all the weight of the Church. In the scene in which he **6 gives up his goods and belongings**, Francis appears without clothes, looking towards the hand of God that blesses him. His angry father is going towards him, who has given up his wealth to embark on his path of faith: you will recognise his father immediately, as he has his clothes piled up on his left arm.



ASSISI in books

Reading suggestions to seize the spiritual essence of Francis' town.

- **Elegies**, Sextus Propertius (28 B.C.). We do not usually associate Assisi with the subject of passionate love. Yet, a great love poet, as was Propertius (as can be seen from line 125 of the first elegy of Book IV) legitimises this unusual connection.
- **Italian Journey**, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1816-17). The fascinating reportage of the Grand Tour by Goethe between 1786 and 1788 is a journey in the art, culture and beauties of Italy. Few pages are dedicated to Assisi, when Goethe travelled from Ferrara to Rome, however, the writer's careless dislike for the Basilica of San Francesco and the almost exclusive attention he reserves to the Temple of Minerva makes them among the most singular of the whole work.
- **Antologia Carducciana. Poesie e prose**, Giosuè Carducci (1902). A great deal has been written about the controversial relationship between Carducci and religion: the poet was a Freemason and anti-clerical, he dedicated a poem to Satan but on his journey he seems to have then reconciled himself with the idea of God. When staying in Assisi in 1877 on ministerial appointment, he experiences

the appeal of the city, absorbing its atmosphere imbued with spirituality.

- **Francis of Assisi**, Hermann Hesse (1904). In this small book, written after a few journeys to Italy between 1901 and 1904, Hesse focuses on the figure of a young man full of spirituality, as he will do with Siddhartha in 1922: “Great and magnificent men who have never thought of conquering glory through single extraordinary gestures or writing poems and books have always lived on the earth since ancient times. However, similar spirits exercised an enormous influence on whole peoples and ages”.
- **Waiting for God**, Simone Weil (1950). This is a collection of six letters and five essays, all on a religious topic, written between 1941 and 1942 and sent by the writer to a Dominican friar who was her confidant, Joseph-Marie Perrin. In them, Weil tells of how she approached Christianity through meditation, thoughts, doubts and the description of vivid experiences, such as the particularly intense ones in Assisi.
- **Viaggio in Italia**, Guido Piovene (1957). Assisi could not be missing from the countless places Piovene visited during his journey along the peninsula. In his typical analysis which mixes economy, society and art, the fear for the fate of the town at a time when mass tourism was beginning to be widespread stands out. Who knows what he would think of it nowadays.

• **Umbria terra d'ombre**, Vittorino Andreoli (1994). Andreoli has dedicated a book full of poetry and meditation to Umbria, that can refresh its most private identity and intercept its essence. The psychiatrist describes the region as follows: “A land of adventure to rediscover ourselves, that hidden ego, chained in the madness of the time.”

• **Storia di Chiara e Francesco**, Chiara Frugoni (2011). This is the story of two young people, cultivated and affluent offspring of the urban elite of medieval Italy: from the time they opened their eyes on the poverty of the world, which would lead them, each on their own path, to shedding their privileges and embracing the poorest.

• **In praise of disobedience, Clare of Assisi**, Dacia Maraini (2013). A dialogue in two voices, audacious and supportive sisterhood, separated by the centuries but linked by the negated need to see the freedom of their voices recognised. The writer allows the saint to speak of her life outside the shadow of Francis for the first time.

Children's books:

• **San Francesco e il lupo**, Chiara Frugoni, Felice Feltracco (2013). The greatest Italian expert on St Francis poetically rereads the famous episode of the wolf of Gubbio, letting young and old alike discover a moral story that is extraordinarily up to date.