

# 39

## VAL D'ORCIA

*“The lizards ran over the bricks of the farmyard which had been rounded by decades of sun and rain. There was a tumbledown hayloft near the farmhouse. Immediately behind it, there was a large olive grove which sloped slightly downwards and flowed like a river through vineyards and woods. On the opposite side, a few dozen yards from the house, a pine forest rose up towards the top of the hill. The view was magnificent. Villas, hamlets, small churches and castles could be seen on the ridges.”*

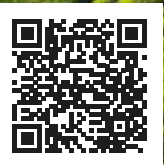
Nero di luna, Marco Vichi

In the Palazzo Pubblico in Siena there is a cycle of frescoes by Ambrogio Lorenzetti which can be dated to the first half of the 14<sup>th</sup> century. One of these is a visual description of the effects of good government: a paved road starts from the walls of a city and goes into land softened by gentle hills where, amid hamlets and castles, the nobility hunt and the peasants are engaged in their activities. The scene is inspired by the Val d'Orcia, which from the gates of Siena comprises the villages of Castiglione d'Orcia, Montalcino, Pienza, Radicofani and San Quirico d'Orcia: an extraordinary merging of natural beauty and human intervention, in gently sloping hills, picturesque medieval hamlets, avenues of cypress trees, vineyards and olive groves, evidence of a cultural landscape that has evolved over the centuries, keeping its precise identity. The many iconic places in Val d'Orcia have been a backdrop in Italian and international films; the countryside from Pienza to San Quirico d'Orcia for *The Gladiator*, Sant'Anna di Camprena for *The English Patient*, Palazzo Piccolomini in Pienza and the Abbey of Sant'Antimo for *Romeo and Juliet* and *Brother Sun, Sister Moon* by Zeffirelli.



**CULTURAL LANDSCAPE**  
UNESCO DOSSIER: 1026  
PLACE OF INSCRIPTION: SUZHOU, CHINA  
DATE OF INSCRIPTION: 2004

**CRITERIA FOR SELECTION:** The Val d'Orcia is a remarkable example of rewriting the cultural landscape in a Renaissance aesthetic, characterised by gentle hills, valleys, medieval hamlets, vineyards and olive groves. This harmonious composition reflects the interaction between human activity and the natural landscape over the centuries, in a region modelled by traditional agriculture, with the characteristic cypress trees, villas, farmhouses and cultivated fields which form a unique rural environment.





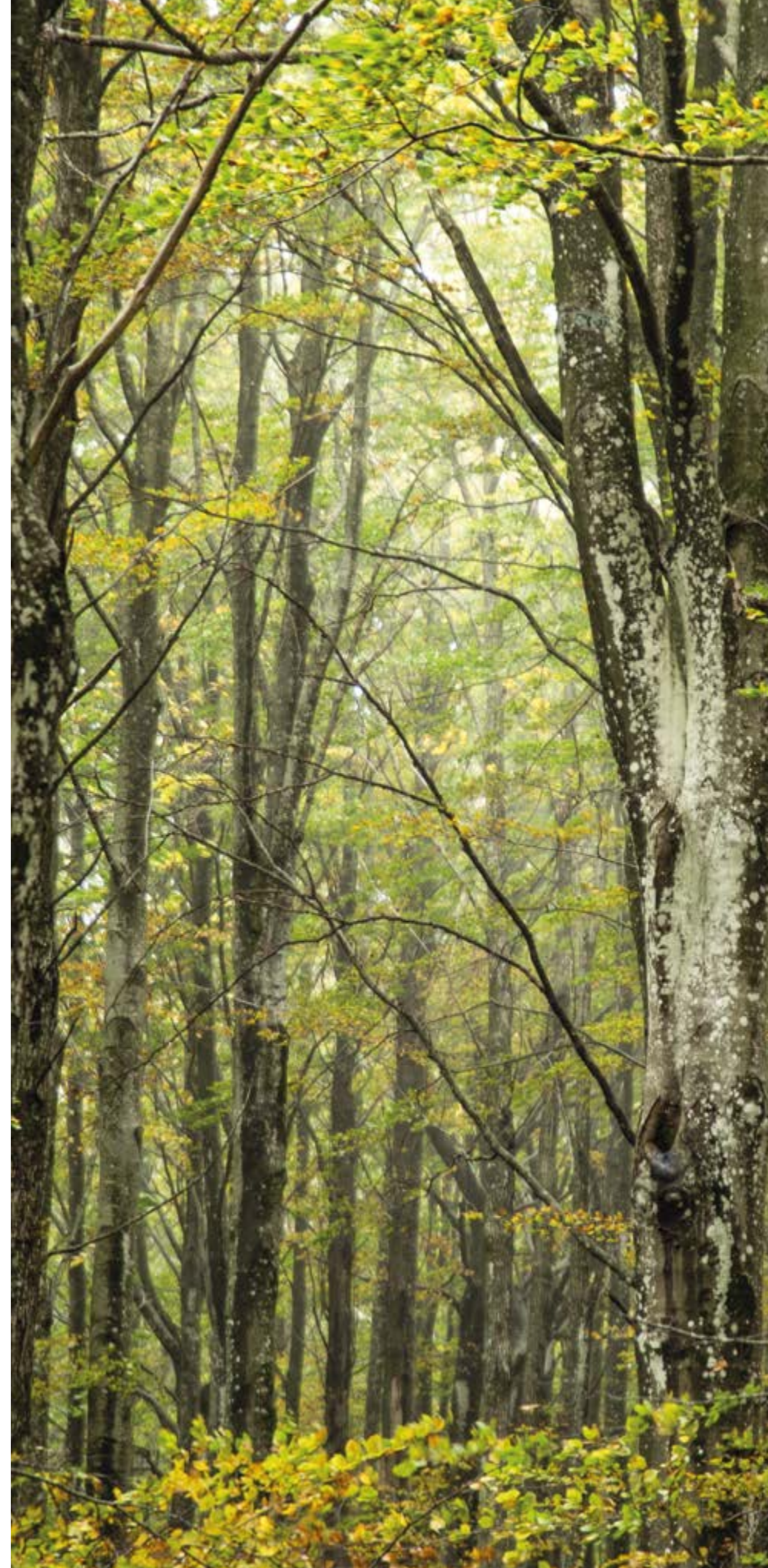
*“With what he had found [...], he could afford to enjoy himself, seated at the steering wheel, the view of the fields of wheat caressed by the wind, the river flowing by and, when the cold came, the clear sky, invigorated by the north wind, and the snow-covered hills that stood out on the horizon. In the summer, he could stop to rest under a tree or, following the directions of the signs, sit on the grass near the Etruscan tombs.”*

**The description by Anna Luisa Pignatelli of the Tuscan landscapes in *Il campo di Gosto* gives a good idea of the ideal attitude with which they are to be enjoyed: slowness.**

Start early from **1 Castiglione d'Orcia**. Leave from **Piazza il Vecchietta**, the heart of the village which, as is often the case in Tuscany, has a well in travertine marble in its centre. Fine medieval buildings such as the **Town Hall** look on to the square, and, if you just carry on for a few steps, you can visit the Romanesque church of **St Mary Magdalene** and the Renaissance church of **St Stephen and St Degna**. It only takes a few minutes to reach **2 Bagno Vignoni**, an unusual hamlet, whose thermal springs have been known since Etruscan was spoken in the area. The historic centre is dominated by the **Piazza delle Sorgenti**, an extravagant square made up of a

large pond of 49 m by 29 m, which the 16<sup>th</sup> century **St Catherine loggia** and **St John the Baptist's church** look on to. The **Natural Park of the Mills** is very picturesque, where the waters from the spring flow into the river Orcia. Going down on foot, you will see the four medieval mills dug out of the rock and you will arrive at the large natural well of the ancient **Roman Thermal Baths**. It will then be time for the beautiful **3 San Quirico d'Orcia**: the **Horti Leonini** alone are worth stopping at. They are a pleasant Italian garden, designed by Diomedeo Leoni (a friend of Michelangelo's) in 1585. Wander between the hedges laid out in a spoked pattern and enjoy the peace and

quiet and the many statues. From there you will recognise the dome of the **Collegiate church of St Quirico and St Judith**, built between the 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> centuries. The portal is magnificent: a porch resting on columns supported by two lions and an architrave with two fighting monstrous animals. Lastly, look for the **4 Chapel of the Madonna di Vitaleta**, one of the most iconic places in the Val d'Orcia: it is a small church that was built in the middle of nowhere, at the end of the 16<sup>th</sup> century. To reach it, take the unpaved road that starts from the SR146, the road linking Pienza and San Quirico d'Orcia, park where you can and continue on foot following the directions.



## MOUNT AMIATA

*“The bad weather’s fireworks / will be a murmur of beehives late tonight. / Worms have gnawed the rafters of the room, / and a smell of melons / pushes up from the floorboards. The soft / puffs of smoke that climb a valley of elves and mushrooms up to the peak’s transparent / cone cloud my windowpanes, / and yet I rewrite to you from this place, this faraway / table, from the honeycomb cell / of a globe launched in space – / and the covered cages, this hearth / where chestnuts explode, these veins / of saltpetre and mould are the frame through which / you soon will break. The life / that fables you is still too brief / if it contains you! Your icon reveals / the luminous background. Outside, the rain.”*

*News from Amiata, in The Occasions, Eugenio Montale*

A silent, autumnal and misty landscape, which arouses an ancestral religiosity emerges from the lines that Montale wrote during a stay on Mount Amiata, on the southern edge of the Val d'Orcia. With its thick forests of beech trees and meadows, its woods full of mushrooms and chestnuts and rare human settlements, the mountain seems a clear break from the Arcadian stretches of hills surrounding it. Anyone who has been lucky enough to reach the summit on a clear day says that from up there they can see the sea, the islands of the Tuscan Archipelago and even Rome.



'YOU REACHED THE FARMHOUSE, SURROUNDED BY HOLM OAKS, ON AN UNPAVED ROAD FLANKED BY BRAMBLE BUSHES, AND ON ITS EDGE, JUST BEFORE ARRIVING AT THE HOUSE, THERE LOOMED A LARGE, CONICAL AND PERFECT CYPRESS TREE [...]. WHEN THE SUN DISAPPEARED BEHIND THE HILLS, 'THE BIG CYPRESS,' AS IT WAS CALLED, TURNED A DARK BLACK

## TENDING TOWARDS BLUE, TO GRADUALLY MELT INTO THE NIGHT.'

The cypress tree described by Marta, the main character in *Foschia* by Anna Luisa Pignatelli, seems the archetype of all the cypresses in the Val d'Orcia. One of the favourite visitors' activities in the valley is to travel through the gentle slopes in search of the most iconic views, which have also been backdrops to scenes in very famous films. Here is an itinerary that will allow you to touch on the most popular locations. Begin from the road that leads from

Torrenieri to San Quirico d'Orcia, the SR2: from here, a **1 ring of cypresses** is reached after a small unpaved road. After passing San Quirico, aim for the **2 Podere Belvedere** for more views of the Val d'Orcia along the way. Continuing towards Pienza, you can reach the spot where the scene from the 2000 film by Ridley Scott, *The Gladiator*, was filmed; it's the scene in which Maximus Decimus Meridius walks in the **3 Elysian Fields**; you will recognise it on the road that leads to the Agriturismo Terrapille, north-east of San Quirico. To reach the often photographed **4 zigzag road**, take the SS88 in the direction of Montichiello. If you reach the Agriturismo Baccoleno, after having parked, you have to continue in a field, after which you will have a raised view over the strip of asphalt bordered by cypress trees. Leave Montichiello towards the south-west for a slightly different green pause: at the **5 Quercia delle Checche**. In Tuscany, the 'cecca', or 'checca', is the magpie, and the enormous tree on the SP 53 which from Bagno Vignoni leads to Radicofani is named after this bird. This oak (*Quercus patraea*) was planted in 1760 and is still alive today. Thanks to its 19 m height, and foliage covering a 34 m diameter, it has deserved the title of Green Monument, the first in Italy. Go and say hello to it, savouring the shade and the spirituality it gives off, and treat yourself to a mystic break. To finish off, dedicate the last pause to one of the most popular views in the area: the **6 double row of cypress trees** at the entrance to the Agriturismo Poggio Covili. You will find it on the Via Cassia 2(SR2), south-east of Bagno Vignoni.



## THE VAL D'ORCIA in books

Reading suggestions to dream about the Val d'Orcia.

- **Nero di luna**, Marco Vichi (2007). Set in Chianti and the Senese hills, this excellent noir is also a ghost story which tells the story of Emilio Bettazzi, a writer from Florence who rented a country house, convinced that he would use it to write a novel. All sorts of things will happen to him, including strange nocturnal visions and raids in mysterious villas.
- **Il sangue di Montalcino**, Giovanni Negri (2010). A thriller set in the world of wine-making which starts with the murder of an oenologist in the Abbey of Sant'Antimo. It will be Inspector Cosulich who investigates and reveals an intrigue that tastes of wine, sacrilege and truths to be discovered.
- **Il poggio dei cipressi**, Daniele Lotti (2016). Ledo Antinelli, a middle-aged man, faces the death of his father to a long illness. He then inherits a huge

estate near Montepulciano, which he decides to put up for sale, unaware that in actual fact it did not belong to his father at all but was only in his name as a figurehead. The sale is concluded with a wealthy American woman, triggering off a series of mysterious and puzzling events.

• **Foschia**, Anna Luisa Pignatelli (2019). In this family novel with severe tones, which has made the name of Pignatelli famous to the general public, the mist is that which permeates the Tuscan countryside, where Marta relives her conflictual relationship with her father Lapo.

• **The Tuscan Contessa**, Dinah Jefferies (2020). The novel is set in San Gimignano in 1944. The heroine is Countess Sofia de' Corsi, who lives in the lush Tuscan countryside, contemplating the wide views over the Val d'Orcia from her window. When the Nazis arrive, her life will cross paths with that of Maxine, a reporter who has come to the area to document the war.

• **Il campo di Gosto**, Anna Luisa Pignatelli (2023). The novel tells the

story of Agostino, known as Gosto, divorced, with a daughter who only cares about money and surrounded by ill-intentioned people. The events alternate descriptions of the marvellous landscapes of the Val d'Orcia with the inner shadows of the characters.

• **Notti in Val d'Orcia**, Dario Pasquali (2023). Against the picturesque backdrop of the Val d'Orcia, the arrivals of engineer Andrea Solo, the intelligent executive of a powerful pharmaceutical multinational corporation, and of Beatrice Lucci, a woman of great determination with ambitions of economic and social success, mark the start of a series of heinous murders which follow one another relentlessly.

## Children's books:

• **Scoprire la Val d'Orcia. Storie di Santi, Re e Briganti**, Chiara Cipolla (2011). This book is a key to enter the treasure trove of the history and stories of the five villages that make up the Val d'Orcia, from popes to emperors, saints and bandits, to be discovered in the faithful company of the pilgrim Orcino.