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HISTORIC CENTRE OF SAN GIMIGNANO

"[...] In a place like this [...] one really does feel in the heart of things, and off the beaten track. Looking out of a Gothic window every morning, it seems impossible that the middle ages have passed away."

Where angels fear to tread, Edward Morgan Forster

These are the words that E. M. Forster, author of *Room with a view*, used more than 100 years ago to describe the atmosphere of San Gimignano, which has changed little over many centuries, except that today, of the original 72 tower-houses, only 14 have survived, firmly planted on the earth which at times slides away from under people's feet and the foundations of the buildings. The definition of "medieval Manhattan" is as snappy as it is effective, because on the one hand it describes the particular skyline of San Gimignano and on the other it defines the anxiety of the medieval merchant families to give monumental form to their status of wealth and in turn power, in a challenge on who could get closest to the sky. San Gimignano was not the only city in the 14th century to be adorned by these brick giants which made height the unit of measurement of individual prestige, but is one of the few that have been able to preserve them. In 1990 it was added to the list of UNESCO Heritage sites not only for its tower-houses but for the whole urban layout – the squares, the mansions, the private buildings and the wells – that give it a very distinctive aspect, which is continuously monitored and protected thanks to restoration work which uses a philological approach as to techniques and materials. And now some poetry, with the view of San Gimignano from Via Vecchia for Poggibonsi, preferably at sunset: the gaze will become molten metal and the medieval town an enormous shining magnet.



CULTURAL HERITAGE
UNESCO DOSSIER: 550
PLACE OF INSCRIPTION: BANFF, CANADA
DATE OF INSCRIPTION: 1990



CRITERIA FOR SELECTION: The historic centre of San Gimignano has kept a high degree of integrity and authenticity over the centuries, offering visitors a genuine experience of the Tuscan Middle Ages. The city preserves a considerable number of medieval buildings, including the characteristic tower-houses which date back to the period between the 13th and the 14th centuries; its architecture provides a real snapshot of life and society in the Middle Ages.



MAP



“If travellers, entering San Gimignano, were to wonder what they should visit, they should try and understand what type of place this town is, still crowned by its walls, with its unmistakable profile of towers known all over the world, cut into two by the road which one day was called the Francigena Way and was one of the most important in the whole of Christendom, set in the middle of some of the most beautiful countryside in Italy, almost in precarious balance between the lands of the Florentine lily and those over which the flag with the Sienese coat-of-arms fluttered [...].”

Using San Gimignano as a starting point for day excursions, Duccio Balestracci can be said to be right in *Breve storia di San Gimignano*, inviting the traveller to enjoy the beauty of the area, exploring the north-eastern corner of the Siena region by car. In the middle of the Via Francigena, there is Monteriggioni, a picture-postcard medieval enchantment, where you can stop for an aperitif or lunch within the city walls, but also Colle di Val d'Elsa, where you can wander in craft shops and stroll up and down its lanes.

Anyone who goes down the Via Francigena from **1 San Gimignano** knows **2 Colle di Val d'Elsa** well: travellers and pilgrims have always had to go through it since the Middle Ages, and today it is known above all for crystal glassware: 95% of Italian production and 14% of world production comes from here. Its historic centre is squeezed between the 15th century Porta Nuova, to the west, and the Baluardo, to the east. The tower that looms over the terrace is the **House where Arnolfo di Cambio**, one of the leading medieval architects

to whom we owe many of the important buildings of Florence, was born. St Peter's Complex, on the other hand, houses a variegated art collection, with the **Diocesan Museum**, the **Civic Museum** and the **Conservatoire**. From Val d'Elsa continue southwards towards **3 Monteriggioni**. There is no denying that the town, seen from a distance, looks like a child's dream come true, with its perfectly intact city walls: 570 metres long and dotted by 14 guard towers, the circle was built in 1213 by the Republic of Siena to protect itself from the threat of Florence (the

walls were then restored and reinforced until 1545, semi-destroyed in the 17th century and rebuilt two hundred years later). You can walk down two stretches of the patrol walkway which look onto the countryside and then visit the **Museum of Armour**, in the tourist office, with reproductions of the cumbersome protection worn by medieval warriors. In the heart of the tiny town, the **church of Santa Maria dell'Assunta**, built when Monteriggioni was founded, is surrounded by wine bars and restaurants which offer a relaxing pause.



THE VERNACCIA OF SAN GIMIGNANO

“... that's where the stream of Vernaccia flows – the best you'll ever drink and not a drop of water gets into it.”

Calandrino and the heliotrope, in The Decameron, Boccaccio

The ten young people locked up in a country villa to flee the 1348 plague must have drunk a lot of Vernaccia, at least going by the number of times it is mentioned in the *Decameron* by Boccaccio. It is certainly no easy feat to keep an oenological identity in a region where Chianti, Montepulciano and Montalcino are already hugely successful, but the white wine from San Gimignano can take great pride in being the first to obtain the DOC (controlled designation of origin) in Italy, as well as being appreciated on the table of popes and kings from the 13th century onwards. “And then return home and say to the cook: / ‘Here, take these things and prepare for tomorrow, and peel and cut up, and put them on the fire; / and there must be wine and white bread, / and lay the table for a feast and games: / make sure your cooking is not in vain!’” sings Folgore da San Gimignano in the *Sonetto del Sabato*, arousing in readers' minds the frantic atmospheres of cooking celebratory meals, when the aroma of roasts fills the streets and the smoke from barbecued meat rises to the sky where swallows dart here and there with their nests in the crevices of the tower-houses, while bottles of the best wines are opened. The Vernaccia Wine Experience, a museum-wine bar in the Rocca di Montestaffoli, organises lessons on wines and wine tastings.



"IT WAS TOO COLD TO PAINT OUTSIDE, ESPECIALLY AT THE CRENELLATED TOP OF THE TOWER WHERE THE WIND COULD BE FURIOUS, BUT SOFIA HAD COMPLETED A FEW NEW SKETCHES OVER THE SUMMER. SHE'D DRAWN THE TOWER SO MANY TIMES IN THE PAST, FROM A SEAT ON THE WALL SURROUNDING THE CISTERN IN THE MIDDLE OF THE SQUARE AND FROM THE WINDOWS OF HER HOME."

Try to find all the towers in San Gimignano that Sofia, the main character of *The Tuscan Contessa*, likes to sketch. Both the **1 Torre Rognosa** (51 m tall, in Piazza del Duomo, recognisable for the belfry surmounted by a red dome) and the **2 Torre Grossa** (the tallest of all, standing at 54 m) can be visited all the way up and offer an incredible panorama, with a bird's eye view over the Siena hills and of course San Gimignano and its tower-houses. In Piazza Duomo there is also the **3 Torre Chigi**, which you can recognise by the two floors made from stone and its modest height. Notice how the door is not at ground level, but on the first floor: in a city torn apart by

feuds between family clans, a ladder would be lowered to enter the building in complete safety. The two twin towers which loom over Piazza delle Erbe are the **4 Torri dei Salvucci**, one of which had its top removed because it was taller than the Torre Grossa (a decree in 1255 curbed the competitive spirit of the builders, prohibiting them all from exceeding 54 m, which is why you will see many "cut offs", almost incorporated into the buildings). The two **5 Torri degli Ardinghelli** (the historic enemies of the Salvuccis) look on to the triangular Piazza della Cisterna. One has narrow single-light windows, the other wider openings, with arched windows; they are among the towers halved following the decree. Behind the well in the square there is the curious **6 Torre del Diavolo**, with a high gate, putlog holes (openings in the wall to receive the ends of scaffolding beams) and shelves.

On the opposite vertex you can see the **7 Torre dei Becci**, which overlooks the arch bearing the same name, with a square base and with small embrasures at the top. The **8 Torre dei Cuganesi** is slightly to the south and resembles that of the Becci in the structure with a square base. To help you imagine what San Gimignano looked like in the Middle Ages, pop over to **9 San Gimignano 1300**, a reconstruction in miniature of the town, on display in a former church. To crown your day, in a town that has made local pride and rivalry its style, you cannot miss the challenge for the best ice-cream in the world: in Piazza Cisterna there are two ice-cream shops that are contending for this title: the **10 Gelateria Dondoli** and the **11 Gelateria dell'Olmo**.

It is hard to say which of the two offers the best: they are both exceptional. Let children be the judges!



KIDS



SAN GIMIGNANO in books

Suggestions for further reading to discover the city of towers.

• **Sonetti della "Semana"**, Folgòre da San Gimignano (1308-16 circa). Poet of the comic-realistic school who was born in San Gimignano, Folgòre dedicates these sonnets to the pleasures of banquets, tournaments and hunting.

• **The Decameron**, Boccaccio (1353). Set during the Black Plague of 1348, the *Decameron* tells the story of ten young nobles who seek refuge in the countryside to flee the disease, and where they each tell ten stories to pass the time away. The short stories range between various genres and subjects, offering a vivid view of society at the time.

• **Where angels fear to tread**, Edward Morgan Forster (1905). Philip is sent by his family from England to Italy to fetch his sister-in-law Lilia who, after having lost her husband, has met an Italian called Gino. The whole story of love and suffering between the characters takes place in the Tuscan countryside.

• **Viaggio in Italia**, Guido Piovene (1957). After having travelled around Italy for three years, Piovene wrote this unique and highly detailed reportage, considered a classic of Italian travel literature. From the Alps to Sicily, also passing through San Gimignano, the author's gaze is an invitation to discover our wonders.

• **A short history of San Gimignano**, Duccio Balestracci (2007). Duccio Balestracci lectures in Medieval history and medieval civilisation at the University of Siena; in this invaluable book he tells the story of San Gimignano in very lively language.

• **Ventitré notti. Momenti di vita tra le torri di San Gimignano**, Walter Vettori (2018). Vettori spent twenty-three nights with his father, before losing him. In this novel, the author tells us the story of his life, interweaving his stories with those of his family, friends and the people who made the history of San Gimignano.

• **The Tuscan Contessa**, Dinah Jefferies (2020). A novel set in San Gimignano in 1944, whose main character is the Contessa Sofia de' Corsi, who lives in

the lush Tuscan countryside. When the Nazis arrive, the life of the noblewoman will cross paths with that of Maxine, a reporter who has arrived in the area to document the war.

• **Il caso Novotna**, Walter Vettori (2021). The peace and quiet of San Gimignano in 1974 are disturbed by the discovery of a woman's body. Inspector Lanfranchi and the magistrate Greta de Angelis are put in charge of the investigations, but it will perhaps be a modest waste collector who plays a key role in the story.

Children's books:

• **Dame, Mercanti e cavalieri**, Bianca Pitzorno (2011). The literary labyrinth of the *Decameron* comes back to life through all the immediacy of its slices of life, in this selection of the author's ten favourite stories; the stories are excellently translated into today's Italian, in an intelligent and respectful modernisation that keeps all the irresistible force of the original by Boccaccio.