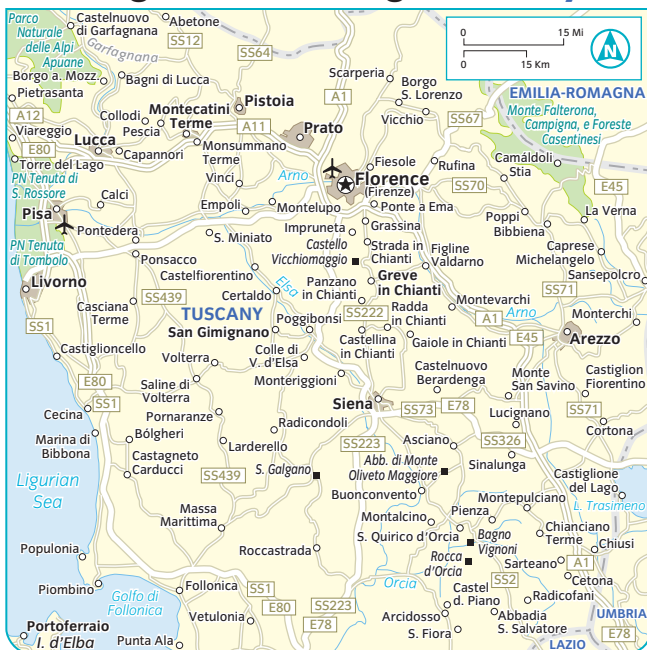


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Strategies for Seeing **Tuscany**



Strategies for Seeing Tuscany



Tuscany isn't Tokyo or New York; racing around the region trying to "see" everything runs against the grain and the pace of the place, and might prevent you from really *experiencing* it. It's tempting to want to make tracks, given that there is so much to see within a relatively small region easily traversed by car. But structuring a relaxed itinerary makes for a memorable trip. In this chapter I provide some suggestions for maximizing your time in Tuscany.

Rule #1: Keep your expectations reasonable.

Consider the experience of two couples I know who recently visited the region. One fashioned an aggressive itinerary that encompassed most of the major towns I cover in chapter 6. And while they were able to say they saw town after town, church after church, and artwork after

artwork, they spent 2 or 3 hours a day stuck in the car, fighting traffic, the heat, and crazy truck drivers. The other couple decided to take on less turf and, naturally, didn't see as much; they even missed Cortona and some of our other favorite towns. Instead, they spent an entire afternoon in a Montepulciano cafe, splitting a chilled bottle of Orvieto Classico, staring over a wrought-iron balcony at a church in the distance.

Previous page: Vineyards in the Chianti region.



The countryside near Panzano, in Chianti Country.

In hindsight, they considered that stop the pinnacle of their trip, writing, “We wouldn’t have traded that lazy Tuscan afternoon for the world.”

Rule #2: Remember, distances between towns are short.

Visiting Tuscany is as easy as traveling around a small U.S. state or mid-sized Mediterranean island. You can drive from Florence to San Gimignano, Lucca, or Siena in less than an hour. The entire Chianti wine country is only 48km (30 miles) from north to south, and 32km (20 miles) at its widest point. What’s more, it begins only 4km (2½ miles) south of Florence. You can even drive from Florence west to Pisa in an hour. Once you veer off the autostrada, the roads become slower, but unless you’re going to the most remote hamlet in Tuscany, they’re generally well maintained and signposted (if sometimes erratically). The only problem in summer will be occasional heavy traffic caused by thousands of other visitors aiming for the same hilltowns as you.

Rule #3: Decide whether to hotel hop or stay in one place.

Checking in and out of hotels is often a tedious hassle—involving luggage transfers, packing and unpacking, registering and checking out, and other technicalities that can drain pleasure from a vacation. Because most Tuscan towns are within easy reach of one another, you can set up camp in the same

Passing the time in a Tuscan outdoor cafe.



Pick Your Point of Entry

The logical start to your Tuscan adventure is Galileo Galilei airport in Pisa. Keenly priced flights connect it with most of Europe—and there's a direct flight to New York's JFK 5 days a week. However, if you're already touring near Milan, Venice, or Rome, there's no need to think about connecting to Pisa by air. All are well linked to Tuscany by rail or autostrada. Rome and Milan are alternative, hassle-free intercontinental air gateways—both about 3 hours from Florence by train. From Rome, a 277km (172 mile) drive north to Florence on the fast-moving A1 takes you right past some of the highlights of southern and eastern Tuscany: Break your trip in Montepulciano, Cortona, or Arezzo. Milan is slightly farther—298km (183 miles) northwest of Florence—but worth the minimal extra distance if you find a cheaper flight there. A drive down to Florence can easily be broken in Pisa or Lucca. For more about reaching Tuscany by plane, and the options for getting between airports and your final destination, see the “By Plane” section in “Getting There/Getting Around,” in *Savvy Traveler* (p 187).

hotel for 3 nights—in Siena, for example—and venture to smaller towns nearby on day trips. From Siena, you can easily visit San Gimignano, Pienza, Montepulciano, or even the Chianti wine country without wasting too much time in the car. You'll save a lot of wear and tear on your soul with this tack, reserving your energy for hotel changes required by longer hauls.

Rule #4: Plan your excursions around lunch.

If you're driving from town to town, plan to reach your destination by noon. Restaurants usually serve lunch until 2 or 2:30pm, but you'll need time to park (which is often tricky) and to locate the address of your restaurant (ditto). If you don't want to follow a schedule, pack a lunch before setting out and follow your bliss to the ideal picnic spot somewhere under the Tuscan sun. There's no shortage of them.

Rule #5: Every now and then, let the train take the strain.

It's cheaper, greener, and hassle free arriving in your Tuscan town for the day by train. The Italian network is inexpensive, accessible, and easy to use—even for beginners. Not every town is handily reached by rail, but the highlights of the region's northwest like Lucca, Pisa, or Prato are all made for seeing by train.

Rule #6: Don't follow these ideas to the letter; use them as building blocks for your trip.

This guide was designed to help you piece together your own dream getaway. You can plan your time in Florence using one section and then hop about Tuscany, in the next few days, using another. It's like an à la carte menu—select one item from column A and another from column B, according to your own tastes and interests, to make the most of our advice. ●