



Val d'Orcia and the Sienese Hills

Lesser-known delights of Southern Tuscany

10–16 April 2026 (MM 938)

7 days

Lecturer: Professor Fabrizio Nevola

Hilltop towns and villages, spectacular countryside.

Based in the charming towns of Bagno Vignoni and Colle di Val d'Elsa.

A good mix of architecture and art with a day spent in Siena.

This tour is representative of a category in which there is a shift of emphasis away from the major masterpieces of a region towards the lesser delights, from a concentrated diet of cultural achievement familiar from text books towards a mélange of landscape, less accessible art and a sense of the continuity of life and community amidst ancient masonry.

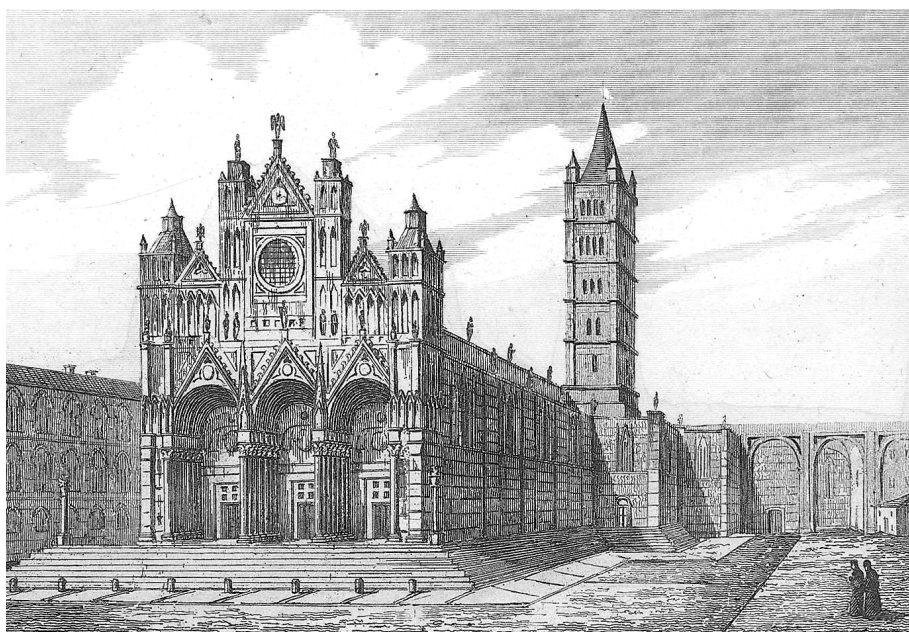
There are two bases for this tour, both utterly lovely and characteristic. The first three nights are spent in the charming village of Bagno Vignoni, with its central square occupied by an arcaded Renaissance piscina. The thermal baths of Bagno Vignoni have been visited by Pope Pius II, Saint Catherine of Siena, and Lorenzo the Magnificent. The last three nights are spent in Colle di Val d'Elsa, between Siena and San Gimignano, it is one of the many beautiful hilltop towns in the countryside around Siena, which contains perhaps the most extensive spread of medieval townscape in Europe.

If you delight in places which lie off the beaten track, in tiny hill towns where vineyards clamber up to the 14th-century walls, in majestic landscapes of storm-tossed hills punctuated by cypresses, in the discovery of great architecture and exquisite paintings in unexpected places, in tracing a maze of alleys scarcely changed for 500 years, this tour is likely to please.

Itinerary

Day 1: Colle di Val d'Elsa, Bagno Vignoni. Fly at c. 8.45am from London City to Florence (British Airways). From there drive, stopping en-route for lunch, to Bagno Vignoni where the first three nights are spent.

Day 2: Pienza. Visit nearby Pienza, the gem of Renaissance architecture set in some of the best of Tuscan landscape. The tiny hill town rebuilt 1459–64 by Pope Pius II in accordance with



Siena Cathedral, early-19th-century engraving.

Renaissance ideals. The cathedral and palaces grouped around the main piazza were designed by Bernardo Rossellino in collaboration with his papal patron. Visit the cathedral and the diocesan museum in the restored Palazzo Borgia, and the Palazzo Piccolomini, built as a summer residence for the pope and now containing a small museum.

Day 3: Montepulciano, La Foce. The main thoroughfare of Montepulciano, lined with grand palaces, winds circuitously through this once important city, with the Piazza Grande at the summit. The cathedral here is rich in Renaissance works of art. Outside the town, the centrally planned church of San Biagio by Antonio da Sangallo is one of the masterpieces of the Renaissance. Villa La Foce, former home of Iris Origo, has a garden designed by Cecil Pinsent.

Day 4: San Quirico, Montalcino, Colle di Val d'Elsa. Visit the Collegiate Church and the 16th century gardens created by Diomede Leoni in San Quirico before driving to the once impregnable fortress, and now centre of Brunello wines, Montalcino, a walled hilltop village with magnificent views and a collection of Sienese painting in the museum. Continue north to Colle di Val d'Elsa where the remaining three nights are based.

Day 5: San Galgano, Monte Oliveto Maggiore.

In the morning visit San Galgano where the impressive Gothic ruins of what in the 13th century had been one of the richest Cistercian abbeys in Italy. Drive to visit the monastery of Monte Oliveto Maggiore, an exquisite complex of Early Renaissance art and architecture, the main cloister having 36 frescoes by Signorelli and Sodoma (1505–8).

Day 6: Siena. The largest of the hilltop towns of Tuscany, distinguished by architecture and art of exquisite elegance. The scallop-shaped piazza is one of the most beautiful urban spaces in the world. Visit the hospital of Sta. Maria della Scala, with its exceptional collection of Renaissance frescoes. The imposing cathedral, a Romanesque and Gothic construction of white and green marble, offers an outstanding array of sculpture and painting. Especially deserving of close attention are the crypt and Pinturicchio's frescoes in the Piccolomini Library.

Day 7: San Gimignano. With its fourteen 13th-century, hundred-foot tower houses, it is an amazing sight. Visit the collegiate church which contains two great cycles of trecento frescoes depicting scenes from the Old and New Testaments. The town hall also has 14th-century frescoes and houses a small art gallery. Study the development of the city in the streets,

Val d'Orcia and the Sienese Hills continued

alleys and squares, and walk along a stretch of the walls. Fly from Florence to London City, arriving c. 4.30pm.

Lecturer

Professor Fabrizio Nevola. Chair and Professor of Art History and Visual Culture at the University of Exeter, specialising in the urban and architectural history of Early Modern Italy. He obtained his PhD at the Courtauld Institute and has held fellowships at the University of Warwick, the Medici Archive Project, and Harvard University's Villa I Tatti (Florence). He has published widely including the award-winning *Siena: Constructing the Renaissance City*.

Practicalities

Included: travel by private coach; hotel accommodation as described below; breakfasts; 3 lunches and 3 dinners with wine, water and coffee; all admissions; all tips for restaurant staff and drivers; all taxes; the services of the lecturer and tour manager.

Accommodation: Hotel La Posta, Bagno Vignoni (lapostahotel.it): 5-star hotel with thermal pool overlooking the rolling Tuscan hills. **San Lorenzo Hotel & Spa, Colle di Val d'Elsa (palazzosanlorenzo.it):** 4-star hotel set in a XVII-century palace. *Single rooms are doubles for sole use throughout.*

How strenuous? The tour involves a lot of walking in town centres, where coach access is restricted, and a lot of standing in museums and churches. Due to the nature of the landscape you will visit many Hill towns and therefore will need to be able to walk up into them as coaches are unable to do so. A high level of fitness is essential. You will be on your feet for lengthy stretches of time. Average distance by coach per day: 76 miles.

Group size: between 10 and 22 participants.