

An Insider's tour of Tuscany

This classic tour of Tuscany introduces you to the very best of Italy's most beautiful region: the most fascinating cities; masterpieces of art, secret gardens, Italy's finest cooking and wine; and some of the most beautiful landscapes of Europe.

Tuscany represents the best of Italy. A region of incomparable natural beauty, Tuscany has beguiled locals and foreigners alike for centuries: it has a celebrated cuisine; produces some of Italy's finest wine and, of course, it was the centre of the Renaissance, a pivotal moment in history that transformed Italy and Europe. The products of this marvellous period embellish the towns, villages and cities of the region making it an essential destination for any visit to Italy. Tuscany, however, is much more than a living museum, it remains a place of innovation in fields as diverse as fashion, viniculture, engineering, manufacturing and agriculture. It is easy to skate over Tuscany's beautiful surface but it takes an insider to unlock the secrets of this timeless region and there are few people better prepared to do this than Hidden Italy's own Anna Sagaria.

The tour leader:

Anna Sagaria has worked with Hidden Italy for fourteen years. She was born and raised in San Quirico d'Orcia in southern Tuscany; she studied art history and literature at University of Siena; she has lived in Florence for the last seven years and she is a certified guide for both Siena and Florence. She is also fluent in three languages and has been leading tours in Tuscany for over twenty years and, of course, she loves her region.

The accommodation:

Our accommodation in Florence is an exclusive 4-star hotel housed in a Renaissance building located in the pedestrian historic centre of Florence, on one of the most elegant shopping streets in town. The refined rooms are decorated with frescoes and antiques and it has a roof terrace with 360 degree views of the city. In the Val d'Orcia we will be based in the pedestrian heart of Anna's hometown, San Quirico d'Orcia, a perfectly intact medieval town that was an important staging point on the pilgrim road to Rome in the Middle Ages. Our accommodation is a beautiful 4-star hotel in a restored noble palazzo that dates from the 14th century, which has private gardens, a pool and a wellness centre.

Guided visits:

The tour includes private visits to: the Mercato Centrale, Florence's famous produce markets; the Uffizi Gallery (one of the world's great art museums) and the Accademia (to see Michelangelo's incomparable David); the private gardens of an historical Florentine family (with aperitivo); the 'Opificio' (a rare opportunity to visit Florence's historic restoration institute, founded by the Medici in 1588); Luca Signorelli's magnificent fresco cycle at the isolated 'Monastery of the Moon'. It also includes guided walks through the historical centres of both Florence and Siena as well as three of the most beautiful towns in central Italy: Montalcino, Pienza and Montepulciano.

The food:

The food and wine, of course, are some of the highlights of the tour: beginning with a cooking lesson above the Mercato Centrale, Florence and finishing with a cooking lesson in the kitchens of one of the finest restaurants in southern Tuscany; a gelato making demonstration at the best gelateria in Florence; a visit to a pecorino cheese producer; a 'panforte' demonstration in Siena; and a wine-tasting with lunch in a Medieval castle overlooking Montalcino at one of the historic producers of Brunello di Montalcino, Italy's greatest red wine.

The walk:

Anna will lead you on a beautiful walk on country lanes through the southern Tuscany, from the medieval walls of Montalcino through forest and vineyards to one of the most impressive medieval castles in the district (where one of the best Brunello is produced).

An Insider's Tour of Tuscany itinerary:

Day 1:

Your tour starts with a guided tour through the Florence, starting from your hotel overlooking the Arno River, crossing the Ponte Vecchio and exploring the historic centre of Italy's most beautiful city. After returning to the hotel, we'll have an aperitivo and then dinner in a charming family-run osteria. *Dinner*

Day 2:

The day starts with a walk and a guided visit of Florence's famous produce market, the Mercato Centrale. This is followed by a cooking lesson and lunch in the newly appointed kitchens above the market. After lunch, the afternoon is free to explore or do some shopping on your own. In the evening, we regroup at the hotel to visit the private gardens of one of Florence's historic families, founded in the 16th century: seventeen acres hidden in the heart of Florence, it is the largest privately-owned garden in Europe situated within city boundaries. We will be accompanied by a member of the family, who still live here. After an aperitivo at the gardens, the evening is free. *Breakfast and lunch*

Day 3:

Today you will come face-to-face with some of the greatest works of Western art, starting with a guided visit to the Uffizi gallery, to see masterpieces by Leonardo da Vinci, Michelangelo, Botticelli, Giotto etc. We then go to the Accademia to get up close to Florence's most famous citizen, Michelangelo's extraordinary statue of David. On the way to the Accademia, you will stop for a demonstration of gelato making at the city's best gelateria. After a light lunch (wood-fired pizza) we will have the rare privilege of a private visit to one of the great Florentine foundations: the Opificio delle Pietre Dure, dedicated to the restoration of Florentine art since being founded by the Medici in 1588. In the evening, we will have dinner at one of Florence's culinary institution, operating since 1979. *Breakfast, lunch and dinner*

Day 4:

To today we leave Florence and head south to visit its eternal rival Siena, 'the best preserved Medieval city in Europe'. Anna will take you on a tour of the centre of this beautiful city, stopping on the way to visit a panforte maker (a delicious cross between fruitcake, candy, and honey cakes, a most Sienese treat). You will have the late morning and early afternoon free to explore the town and have some lunch. We then drive south to the Val d'Orcia (the Orcia River Valley) an area as famous for its rolling hills, wheat fields dotted with red brick farmhouses, stands of deep green cypress pines and endless views, as it is famous for its wines and food. After checking into your hotel, you will be taken on a walk through San Quirico d'Orcia and then have dinner. *Breakfast and dinner*

Day 5:

This morning we drive to lovely Montalcino, a pretty town perched on a hill high above the valley and home of Italy's finest red wine, Brunello di Montalcino. After a visit to the town, Anna will take you on a lovely two-hour walk through forest and vineyards to a 12th castle that is owned by one Italy's most important contemporary artists and produces some of the finest Brunello. After a visit to the castle we will have a degustation and a light lunch in the castle grounds. In the afternoon, we return to our base via a 14th century Benedictine, Tuscany's grandest monastery, once known as the Monastery of the Moon for its splendid isolation. The monastery contains a wonderful fresco cycle by the great Renaissance painter Luca Signorelli. Back in San Quirico the evening is free. *Breakfast and lunch*

Day 6:

This morning we drive south to the nearby town of Montepulciano, Tuscany's highest hill-town, which dates from pre-Roman times. This morning you will have a cooking lessons in the kitchens of one of the areas best restaurants. In the afternoon we visit the beautiful town of Pienza, stopping at one of the valleys celebrated pecorino cheese producers before returning to our base. In the evening we'll have our farewell dinner in one of towns excellent restaurants. *Breakfast, lunch and dinner*

Day 7:

After breakfast, we'll be transferred to Chiusi railway station, 30 minutes away, which has regular connections to Rome and Florence. *Breakfast.*

An Insider's Tour of Tuscany inclusions:

- 6 nights' accommodation (see the itinerary for details) in boutique hotels
- All breakfast, and all lunches and dinners listed in the itinerary
- All transfers during the tours and all paid admissions during the tour
- 5 guided tours (Florence markets, Uffizi, Accademia, gardens, Opificio, Signorelli)
- 5 town tours: Florence, Siena, Montalcino, Montepulciano and Pienza
- 2 cooking lessons (Florence and Montepulciano)
- Gelato and panforte demonstrations; wine degustation; cheese producer
- All taxes and service charges at the hotels and restaurants as well as all gratuities during the tour