



David McGuffin's EXPLORING EUROPE

SIENA DESTINATION GUIDE



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Overview and Orientation

Siena and Florence are no more than 40 miles apart, yet they provide the modern-day tourist with a totally different experience in culture, art, and history.

Florence, now with half a million residents, became the original Renaissance city of art, culture, and power of the 15th century. Siena, on the other hand, with only 60,000 residents provides a look back into the era before the Renaissance, known as the Middle Ages.

The Republic of Siena came to power through prosperous trade and banking. The well-organized administration of the *Ghibelline* family steered Siena to prominence as a recognized powerhouse in the late 13th century. It was during this time that Siena prospered and built

the town you visit today.

Unfortunately, Siena was devastated by the plague in 1348, losing one-third of its citizens and falling into years of decline. By the early 15th century, Siena's golden age had come to an end. For nearly 700 years Siena sat stagnant, firmly entrenched in medieval times. While this was devastating for the Sienese economy in the 16th to 19th centuries, it's a good thing for modern-day tourism. Today, with a population of about 60,000, Siena looks and feels much as it did at the turn of the 14th century.

Siena is divided into seventeen neighborhoods known as *contrade*. Each *contrada* is represented by a colorful banner and a rider in the *Palio*. The *contrada* is a tight-knit group of residents bound together by localized patriotism and a sense of civic pride. Every important event is celebrated only within one's own *contrada*. Hence, you may stumble onto one of these neighborhood events celebrating a baptism, a death, a marriage, the *Palio*, a church holiday or a food or wine festival.

Don't miss out on the opportunity to venture off the tourist path and do some exploring on your own! It is nearly impossible to get lost; just don't venture beyond the city gates and walls. If you do find your-self turned around a bit, just ask anyone, “*Dov'e il Campo?*” (do-veh ill kahm-poh).

Getting around Siena

Public Transportation

There is no public transportation available in the city center, but if you are travelling beyond the city walls, busses are operated by Siena Mobilita. You can buy tickets at tabacconists, newsstands and other points of sale. Be sure to validate your ticket once on board.

Walking

Siena must be explored on foot. The historic medieval city center is designated a pedestrian-only zone. Except for taxis and service vehicles, no vehicular traffic is allowed within the city walls. Siena is situated on the site of several red clay hills (hence the name “siena” or burnt orange) so traveling anywhere in the city is likely to have one going up and down a hill or two to get anywhere.

Additionally, many of the streets are cobbled, dating from the Middle Ages, and require a little extra effort when walking.

Taxi

Taxis are available for hire for those who are physically challenged or just don't want to take that long walk back to the parking. There are taxi stands at several main squares around the city, but you'll probably not be near any of them when you need a taxi. You can call a taxi by dialing 0577 49222 and asking for a cab to

pick you up at your location. The dispatcher will confirm a specific cab number and name (i.e. #80, Ricardo) and an approximate arrival time. Alternatively, you could sit down at a bar or café, order a drink, and ask the waiter to call a cab when you are ready to leave. It is appropriate to offer a few euros as a tip when requesting someone to call a cab for you.

Bicycle

SiPedale is the bike-sharing service in Siena. There are 18 stations around the city. One-day and two-day passes are available through the Bicincitta App for €10 and €15 respectively. See bicincitta.com or the app for more information.

Tourist Information

While there is no city pass, the **OPA Si Pass** is a combined three-day pass for the Cathedral and the Piccolomini Library, the Museo dell'Opera, Baptistery, Crypt, Oratory of San Bernardino and Diocesan Museum of Sacred Art. Price varies by season from €8 to €15. To reserve tickets, call +39 0577 286300.

The **Gate of Heaven pass** is all inclusive (including tours of the cathedral rooftops). Tickets can be purchased at the ticket office for €20. To determine which ticket is right for you, visit operaduomo.siena.it.

Church Attire

Respectful attire is required. Shoulders and

knees must be covered. No hats or sunglasses.

Other Useful Information

Hospitals

Azienda Ospedaliera Universitaria Senese is located north of the city. Address: Viale Mario Bracci, 11, 53100 Siena SI, Italy

Pharmacy

There is a pharmacy on the Piazza del Campo. Antica Farmacia del Campo. Address: Il Cam-po, 26. Open: Monday-Saturday 9AM-7:30PM

Laundry

Lavanderia Europea

Via delle Terme, 55

+39 0577 44550

Hours: Monday-Friday 8AM-1 PM and 3 PM to 7:30 PM. Saturday 8 AM-1 PM

Drop off and pick up later.

Northeast of Piazza del Campo.

Lavanderia Waterland

Via dei Rossi, 94

+39 333 794 7993

Hours: Daily, 7 AM to 10 PM

Self-service

Sights in Siena

Il Campo

Like many medieval towns in central Italy, Siena's center is traffic free, giving free reign to the pedestrian to explore with ease. Today as in the Middle Ages, Il Campo, Siena's main

square, bustles with activity. This once was the political center of town, but more importantly it is the spot where locals and tourists alike meet and socialize. The piazza, shaped like a fan, is paved with red bricks set off by contrasting white stone slabs. The white stones form eight straight lines dividing the piazza into nine sections. Each section represents a trade or banking group who ruled Siena during its medieval era of prosperity.

From the shops and cafés above, the piazza slopes down to the dominating façade of the **Palazzo Pubblico** and the nearby bell tower. The Palazzo Pubblico, or Town Hall, was built around 1300 in the Gothic style. Notice the marbled arches forming the foundation and the characteristic triple-arched windows above.

Torre del Mangia

Soaring above the Town Hall and Campo is the 300-foot-tall Torre del Mangia. This bell tower, the tallest secular tower in Italy, was named for a night watchman who devoured his earnings like a glutton eats food. Below the tower, is a loggia-shaped chapel constructed in 1352 to mark the end of the plague.

It is a grueling 400 steep steps to the top of the bell tower. But, if you are fit, the view is certainly worth enduring a racing heart and burning thighs. At the top you'll find the huge bells and broad sweeping vistas of Siena and the surrounding Tuscan countryside. Hours: 10:00-19:00 mid-March through October; 10:00-

16:00 remainder of the year. The ticket office is located at the foot of the tower in the city hall. Last admission is 45 minutes before closing. Cost: €10.

At the top of the Campo stands the **Fonte Gaia**, the Fountain of Joy, constructed by Ja-copo della Quercia. In the Middle Ages a city's wealth was often judged by its public fountains. The marble panels date from 1858 and are copies of the della Quercia's 1419 originals.

The Duomo

The **Cathedral of Siena**, known as *Duomo di Siena* in Italian, is formally called *Santa Maria Assunta* (Most Holy Mary of Assumption). The cathedral was originally designed and completed between 1215 and 1263 on the site of an earlier structure. It has the form of a Latin cross with a dome and a bell tower. The dome rises from an octagonal base with supporting columns. The lantern atop the dome was added later by Baroque legend Bernini.

The exterior and interior are constructed of white and greenish-black marble in alternating stripes with the addition of red marble on the façade. Black and white are the symbolic colors of Siena, which are somewhat linked to the black and white horses of the legendary city's founders, Senius and Aschius.

In 1339, Siena was determined to outdo their

archrival, Florence. As work was progressing on the new Duomo in Florence, the Sienese undertook a plan to build a huge Cathedral with the existing Duomo being the transept (the “arms” of the cross design) and the nearby piazza (near the present-day Duomo Museum) becoming the new nave. You can see this clearly by standing in the piazza on the “bell tower side” of the church and looking at the surrounding building’s wall, which contains a few of the original marble arches now filled in with brick and mortar. This project was doomed from the outset by technical problems. Its final blow of defeat came in the form of the terrible plague of 1348.

Don’t miss going inside the cathedral. It’s here you will find beautiful frescos, ornate inlaid marble floors, and colorful stained-glass windows. However, topping the list of “not to miss sights” are works by Michelangelo and Bernini as well as the **Piccolomini Library**. Purchase a combination entrance ticket at the nearby Duo-mo Museum. (*Museo dell’ Opera*).

Since you’ve bought a ticket for the Cathedral, be sure to give the Duomo Museum a walk-through. You can skip all the artwork and jump right to what I think is the best view of Siena and Tuscany. It’s kind of difficult to locate, but follow my instructions and you’ll be rewarded! From the ground floor, go upstairs to the top floor. Walk through the room on the right to a small doorway leading to a narrow spiral stairway. Look for a sign noting

Panorama del Facciatore. At the top of the stairway you will be outside on what would have been the “front” of the massive cathedral of 1339, had it been completed.

Up here we can make some sense of Siena’s winding multitude of streets and alleys. Across the valley is the austere *San Domenico* with its relics of Saint Catherine. There in the center of town is Il Campo and its Gothic landmark bell tower. Here, from our vantage point, you can see how Siena was a defensible position in the Middle Ages. Beyond the town walls stretch the amber, green, and olive hills of Tuscany, which for centuries have beckoned travelers and tourists to settle in and enjoy.

Saint Catherine of Siena

Catherine (1347-1380) was the second youngest of a very large Sienese family of 25. Her father was a dyer and belonged to the lower middle-class faction of tradesmen known as “the Party of the Twelve.” In early childhood, Catherine began to experience heavenly visions. As a result, she consecrated her life to Christ at age seven. At sixteen, Catherine took the habit of the Dominican order. For three years, she locked herself away in a room at her family’s house where she experienced celestial visitations and first-hand conversations with Christ. It was soon after this that Catherine emerged from her self-imposed confinement and joined her Dominican sisters in tending the sick, serving the poor, and working for the conversion

of the sinners. During the summer of 1370, she went into a trance-like coma and emerged with a divine mission to spread her message to the world.

She began to write letters to popes, bishops, dukes and kings, begging them to work for peace for the war-torn area we now know as Italy. It was during this time when in Pisa that Catherine received the Stigmata (the wounds of Christ) on the fourth Sunday of Lent, 1375.

Two years later Catherine went to Avignon and convinced Pope Gregory XI to return the papal seat to Rome. In 1378, Pope Urban VI summoned Catherine to Rome. It was here she spent the rest of her life working with the sick and destitute, laboring diligently for the reformation of the Church. Catherine was canonized in 1461 by the Sienese-born Pope Pius II.

[Basilica San Dominico](#)

The Basilica San Dominico is a Gothic church constructed in the 13th–15th centuries. Its featureless façade and unremarkable interior are well suited for that of the Dominicans who have forsaken worldly goods and dedicated their lives to preaching the Gospel. Here is a short “tour” of the interior:

Walk up the steps in the back to find a portrait of Saint Catherine, Siena’s patron saint, painted by her contemporary, Andrea Vanni.

In the nave, continue about halfway up on the right to find a metal bust of Saint Catherine, and in the small case, a portion of her finger and the chains/straps she used for self-flagellation.

Closer to the alter (about 10 meters beyond the bust) is a small chapel with many candles. Look closely to see Saint Catherine's actual head on the altar surrounded by the candles. The nearby frescoes by Sodoma depict scenes from the saint's life.

Totally unrelated but also of interest are the colorful banner flags representing the seventeen *contrade* neighborhoods of Siena.

Brief History of Siena

Siena, like many Tuscan hill towns, was settled in the time of the Etruscans (ca. 900–400 BC) when it was inhabited by a tribe called the Saina. The Etruscans were an advanced people who changed the face of central Italy with their advanced culture. Later, a Roman town called *Saena Julia* was founded here in the time of the Emperor Augustus. The first document mentioning it dates from AD 70.

All over Siena, you will find images of the she-wolf suckling Romulus and Remus. Just take a look around Il Campo, the Duomo, public squares, drainpipes, etc. I think there might be more images of the suckling she-wolf in Siena

than in Rome! So, what's the connection? Legend has it that Remus' son **Senius** fled Rome, wandered north and founded Siena. The folklore seemed to stick and now you'll find the she-wolf woven into every *contrade* (neighborhood). Look around and see how many you can find.

Note: If going to Rome, see my extensive account of Romulus and Remus and the Siena connection (under Rome).

Shopping

There are three main pedestrian streets that link the local neighborhood with Il Campo. These streets contain the best shopping in the city. Like one of our classy upscale shopping malls in the USA, Siena's cobbled streets are flanked by an endless assortment of shops selling clothing, shoes, jewelry, toys, hand-made ceramics, books, stationary, food and much more.

The *Via di Citta*, *Banchi di Sopra* and *Via Dei Montanini* are filled with the local folks each evening during the *passeggiata*, or evening stroll. It is here you'll find the young and old residents taking in all Siena has to offer. **Don't miss this opportunity to experience Siena!** The *passeggiata* usually begins around 7:30ish in the summer and about 5:00ish in the winter.

Markets

The **city market** is held every Wednesday

morning at La Lizza, near the Fortezza. You can find fresh produce, flowers, clothing, shoes, bags and other household goods. Hours: Wednesday, 8:30 AM to 1:30 PM

Entertainment and Outdoor Activities

[Palio di Siena](#)

This horse race is held twice a year in Siena on July 2 and August 16. Typically, it consists of ten men, dressed in *contrade* regalia, riding bareback around the circumference of Il Cam-po. Originally, all seventeen of the *contrade* were represented in each race. Now only ten entries are allowed due to a race in the 18th century where too many riders and horses were killed or injured. Now, there is a rotation in place for each race. A grand parade proceeds the event that attracts visitors from all over the world. The event itself (3 laps around Il Cam-po) only lasts about ninety seconds and most often includes several fallen horses trying to make almost impossible turns in the piazza, as well as riderless horses arriving at the finish line without their jockeys.

Traditional Cuisine and Vino

Panforte, meaning “strong bread,” is a confection with its origins in Siena. Legend has it that in 1205, serfs and tenants of the Mente-cellesi nunnery brought spices and honey cakes for the yearly census. In those days, nunneries prepared medicinal mixtures of herbs and spices. Later, the concocting of these was assumed

by the *speziali* (chemists), and along with it, the preparation of Panforte. As you stroll the streets of Siena, notice the different varieties of Panforte with their ancient names and logos of long-lost pharmacists' families.

Round in shape, Panforte's basic ingredients are fresh almonds, candied fruit (primarily citrus), spices and honey. The most widely sold Panforte today is *Panforte Margherita*, named in honor of Queen Margherita, the wife of the Italian king Umberto I, and based on a recipe which gave the cake a more delicate taste. Pan-forte is best served with Vin Santo, a sweet raisin wine with origins in Tuscan monasteries.



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