

Pilgrim's PROGRESS

Pete Coombs enjoys a saunter through the hills, vales and towns of Italian wine country, on the Via Francigena.

A couple of days earlier, I'd been thinking that Saint Francis and I would have had a bit of a falling out, had we ever met. But finally, on day three of my week-long hike from Lucca to Siena, I know that if this had happened, I would have grabbed his habit and given him a big old hug; everything is now simply perfect.

I'm sheltering from the midday sun in the

shade of a needle thin pine tree, admiring the rolling vineyards of the Chianti region of Tuscany, which stretch off to a hazy horizon. Serenaded by crickets, I'm allowing myself to slip into a well-earned midday slumber, whilst I watch two cabbage white butterflies dance on a light breeze. Now this was how I'd envisaged hiking the Via Francigena, as I slowly slip from consciousness, I'm so content that even my feet don't hurt

anymore (well, maybe only a little bit!)

My pilgrimage, of sorts, hadn't started in Canterbury – even though it's not only very close to where I live, it's also the starting point for the colossal 2,000km plus Via Francigena Trail. Instead I'd skipped a bit and headed to Gatwick and a short flight to Pisa, followed by a €3 forty-five minute bus ride to the walled city of Lucca - a journey which was simple, fast and completely stress free.

The old fortified centre of Lucca is wonderful, with quirky shops nestling alongside fine, inexpensive restaurants and cool wine bars. It's a town full of locals, and whilst busy with tourists, it feels authentic: Tourists are happily catered for alongside the residents, rather than it being a town contrived for bus groups.

I spend an hour or so early on my first morning walking around the elevated city walls, mingling with joggers, cyclists and widows dressed in black, having a good old gossip on the numerous sheltered benches of the tree-lined 16th century ramparts. I was never going to make my target for the week, Siena, at

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this rate. So entering the old town proper, I navigate the maze of Venetian style streets to the Piazza San Michele. After admiring the white marble San Michele in Foro church with its striking 13th Century façade, I locate Via Roma in the piazza's far corner and start my journey south. After all, 'all roads lead to Rome!' - don't they?

I'm now enjoying walking through the back streets of the new part of Lucca and its surrounding villages. Passing close to open windows, through which radios are blaring Italian pop songs, I nosily listen in on snatches of conversations. I catch the clanging of

WALKING IN ITALY

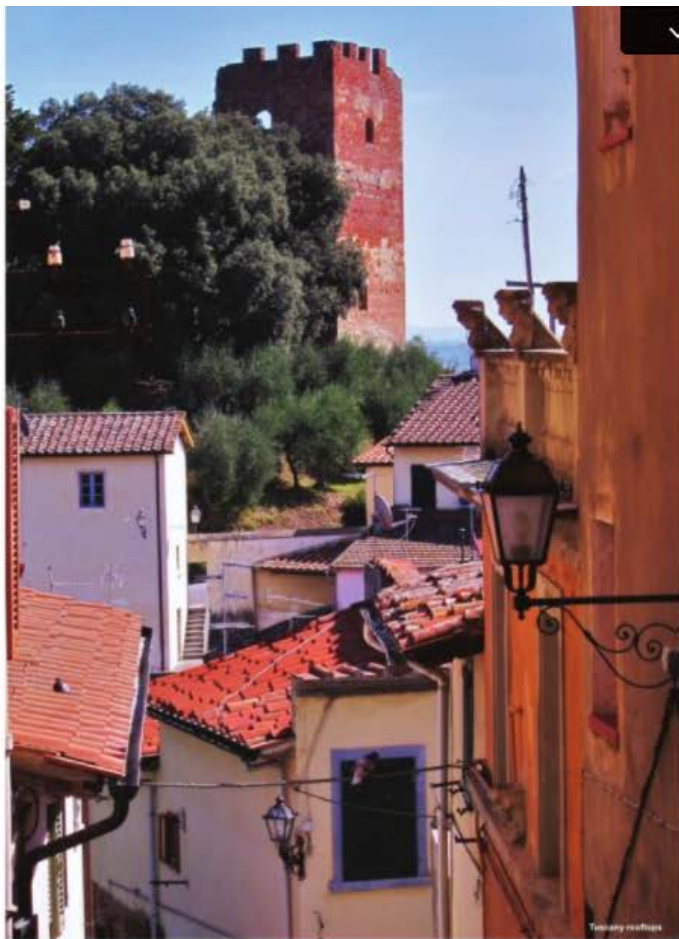
saucepans and breathe in the enticing aromas of soups and lunchtime pasta sauces.

Slowly, the landscape becomes more rural... with the exception of an industrial estate that I almost sprint through! In the distance I can see glimpses of hills and mountains on the horizon, yet my route is completely flat. It's at this point, I start to question old St Francis and his route finding, o me of little faith and patience. I appreciate that he was on a pilgrimage and that this necessitated visiting important urban centres and churches, as well as sticking close to water and food supplies... but come on, lets get into the hills!

After yesterday's 18.5km hike, day two is a respectable 29km from Altopascio to San Miniato. I happily hike through farmland and alongside the Arno River, stopping for the odd coffee or ice cream in the many small villages through which the route passes. Yet I still have a nagging lust to get into the hills – one that is only relieved when, at last, I start to climb steadily over the last three kilometres of the day to reach the 13th century hill top tower of San Miniato. The views across the Tuscan hills are a joy to behold and, retreating back to the village of San Miniato proper, I watch a stunning sunset from the balcony of Bar Cantini: fully worn out by the days hike, but happy that at last I was getting some elevation.

The forecast for day three was for clear skies, so I hit the trail early, wanting to get as many kilometres under my belt as I can, before the day heats up too much. With my legs feeling tired from roadwalking on the previous days, I leave San Miniato as it yawns itself awake. Locals scurry home through the cool morning air with fresh bread under their arms, having knocked back an espresso and caught up with friends and neighbours in one of the busy cafes.

I have 24 kilometres of open country to get across today and what wonderful countryside it is. Soaking up the ever changing views, I am soon amazed at how tightly folded the farmland is. Many of the fields are freshly ploughed, exposing a sun-baked almost white soil. There's almost the impression of shifting sand dunes,



rather than fertile farm land. The open expanse of fields is broken only by the regimented green strips of the region's famous grape vines, and the ordered dots of frequent olive groves.

As I slipped into a post-sandwich snooze after a hard and hot morning on the trail, St Francis finally had me onside; this was a trail worth leaving home for. I'd seen no other hikers all day (in fact, I'd only met one small group of three Italian men on the trail over the last three days). However I'd not felt isolated, as this part of Tuscany is well inhabited. Large palatial villas, often with wonderful tree-lined drives and grand stone gates, sit on top of, seemingly, every hill top. The Via Francigena pays little heed to these exclusive secret getaways, and more than once I find myself passing beneath a pair of



roaring stone lions sat high upon stone columns, as I stroll through the entrance gates and down the drive of these wonderful properties.

The trail is fantastically marked, with a wide array of signs and stone waymarks. It's almost impossible to go the wrong way, but little, if anything, has gone into any other infrastructure along the route. There's little shelter in these hills and a distinct lack of available water to drink too. So it's imperative to make sure you have all the water you need for a hot days hiking. However, I did get to practise my broken Italian on some of the locals - working in their vegetable patch amongst lush tomato vines I'd kill to have in my garden back in England - and managing to get my water bottle refilled with a smile.

I'd been hiking alone for eight or so hours every day, heading straight to bed each evening after dinner. Whilst I'd chatted to hotel staff and the odd local, I'd grown accustomed to my own company and having an internal conversation with myself. So much so, that on the morning of the fourth day, as I read the 'Silence Please' sign

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WALKING IN ITALY

outside the Pieve di Cellole Monastery, it felt totally natural to walk around the beautifully tended Romanesque complex with the only external noise being that of bird song, and the shuffling feet of monks.

A short hike later I pass under a high stone arch and into the cobbled streets of the UNESCO heritage site of San Gimignano - and suddenly it's tourist central, and definitely an assault on that inner calm I'd been working on!

San Gimignano is a walled medieval town of thirteen towers. There's no doubting its beauty, nor its lure, and many hikers walking the trail choose to stop here overnight and take time to visit the Duomo, considered the most beautiful museum in Tuscany. But after a quick lunch I was glad to be heading back

out of the old town into the silence of the countryside, leaving the marauding coach parties far behind me.

My penultimate day's hike led me again along farmland ridges, with far reaching views of fortified villages and church towers silhouetted against the horizon; the only change being the ploughed fields gave way to more grape vines.

I finished my hike at the hill-top Monteriggioni Castle, which whilst touristy, is calm and a great place to relax for an hour or so. From there, I called the Fattoria Il Colombaio, a working vineyard just off the trail where I'm due to stay for the night, to ask them to come and pick me up.

"We start our harvest tomorrow," explains Mirko, the owner. "The late summer weather

Pete Coombs travelled with pilgrim route specialists, Green Life Tours, who offer both hiking and cycling holidays along the Via Francigena and the Camino de Santiago amongst other active trips.

www.francigenaways.com

Pete hiked section 14 of 16 of the Via Francigena on a self-guided basis, covering 133km over 7 nights from Luca to Siena, costing €775 excluding flights.

See <http://bit.ly/2psdupr> for more details.



is perfect for us. The hot and dry September days have swelled the grapes to perfection, while the clear cold nights have chilled the fruit, stopping any fermentation within the grape taking place. Keep an eye out for our 2016 Chianti in a couple of years' time: it's going to be very good."

You heard it here first: the glass or three of his wine I drank with my wonderful home cooked meal was simply fantastic.

Back on the trail for my final day's hike to Siena, I'm saddened that my journey is about to come to an end - but what better urban centre than Siena in which to finish? It's busy and bustling, with both

locals and tourists, yet easily manageable on foot and strikingly beautiful. An evening spent eating an alfresco pizza in the Piazza dei Campo, famed for its twice yearly horse race, followed by a morning exploring the black and white marble Duomo di Siena, with its mosaic floor and stunning roof top views, is an apt way to finish my week long Tuscan journey.

After 130 km on the trail I'd come to realise that hiking the Via Francigena in Tuscany is as much about modern Italian life and its towns and cities, as it is about far reaching views and farmland - maybe St Francis did know how to pick a route after all. ■■■