



HISTORIC CENTRE OF SIENA

“But Siena remains medieval and almost frozen in time. Wonder arises from seeing the intact skeleton of a medieval city, which has nothing archaeological about it. Today’s life, with its heated passions, simmers almost furiously; never, not even for a moment, does one have the impression of living in an anachronistic place.”

Viaggio in Italia, Guido Piovene

The absence of anachronism of which Piovene speaks is the hallmark of what visitors experience in Siena, and which has made the city famous around the world. Sixty years after *Viaggio in Italia* was written, Siena still boasts one of Italy’s most unique cityscapes. Although the fate of art cities is to be trapped by their prestige and besieged by mass tourism, there are still unquestionably good reasons to cross the ancient walls of Siena. The charm that enchanted anyone who visited the city in the Middle Ages remains the same today: Siena is the sum of its 17 *contrade* but knows how to speak with one voice and is a microcosm that embodies one of the most vital moments of medieval civilization. Its voice emerges from the stones of the palaces, from the Gothic kaleidoscope of the Duomo, from the crenelated battlements of the Palazzo Pubblico, the building that has always presided over the liturgy of the Palio in the gigantic “valve” shaped Piazza del Campo. This is all proof of an exuberant history that does not turn Siena into a fossil of what it was but is its main social binder instead: the absence of anachronism.



CULTURAL HERITAGE

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CRITERIA FOR SELECTION: The Historic Centre of Siena is a testimony to the creative genius and high aesthetic and artistic abilities of human beings. Its architecture, paintings, sculptures and urban planning had a positive influence throughout Italy and Europe between the 12th and 17th centuries. The city’s structure and its evolution make it one of the best examples of medieval and Renaissance cities.



“We enjoy the last piece of Val d’Elsa and, after the ascent of the Badesse, we enter triumphantly into Siena. [...] But we are not satisfied: the railcar to the Crete Senesi is departing, it goes all the way to Mount Amiata. We jump aboard sooty among the tourists, holding four salami sandwiches and a good bottle of Rosso di Barbi.”

The area of Siena makes you want to wander aimlessly around its lands. It’s easier by car, rather than the train that Paolo Rumiz uses in *L’Italia in seconda classe*. Between Siena and the Val d’Orcia, the Crete Senesi stand out with their hypnotic features and soft rolling hills, the soil sculpted by the clay that makes them look greyish – golden in summer – and the succession of badlands and *biancane*, slopes and grooves. San Galgano, in the Val di Merse, west of Siena, tells an entirely different story: the abbey is a melancholy skeleton of a Gothic building stripped by time.

Leave Siena heading south for a short break at **1 Site Transitoire** (on the Strada di Leonina), a work of art designed in 1993 by Jean-Paul Philippe. The stone sculpture has an O-shaped gap, through which the sunlight filters perfectly at sunset on the summer solstice, and is placed in front of an immense view of the beautiful Crete Senesi. Continue on to **2 Asciano**, where you may stop at the **Civic Museum of Archaeology and Sacred Art** at Palazzo Corboli and enjoy beautiful 14th-century frescoes and wooden crucifixes. Ten kilometres



MAP



further south is the **3 Abbey of Monte Oliveto Maggiore**, a medieval complex famous for its Chiostro Grande, with 35 frescoed niches from the late 15th century. From here, drive toward the Val di Merse, setting the **4 Abbey of San Galgano** on your GPS navigation device. The destination of a tourist pilgrimage that feels more like a Biblical exodus, it is one of the most visited destinations around Siena. In the middle of the countryside, this extraordinary Cistercian church, built during the 13th century, had little luck: hit by the famine in 1329, the plague

in 1348 and later on by looting, most of its vaults had already collapsed by the 16th century. Two centuries later the bell tower fell, struck by lightning, and the church was permanently deconsecrated. From San Galgano, a 10-minute drive takes you to **5 Chiusdino**, a pretty medieval village where, in addition to the ever-present city walls, you can visit the house where St. Galgano was born, as well as the small but interesting **Civic and Diocesan Museum of Sacred Art**. The view of the countryside from the third floor is notably worth the visit.



THE PALIO DI SIENA

“Now is the time to accelerate. You have to prove to yourself and others that you still have some strength left. Be careful, three laps are a long way, and if you’ve already given it your all at this point you’re doomed. You have to learn to dose your energy, to hold and then let go when it’s time.”

Siena a modo tuo, Lorenzo Bianciardi, Andrea Sguerra

The entire community of Siena feels excited all year long, starting from the preparations that culminate in the four days before the race, with events of all kinds. When it finally takes place, the Palio di Siena is like a collective orgasm that lasts

little more than a minute: the time of three laps of Piazza del Campo, accompanied by the background bedlam, as Lorenzo Bianciardi and Andrea Sguerra describe it. The Palio di Siena has not always been like we know it today. In the 13th century the race started outside the walls and then reached the Duomo. The 17 *contrade* competed for the *pallium*, a long cloth made of precious silk, while the last *contrada* suffered the shame of the so-called “*porco*”, perhaps a pig-shaped headdress. In the early 17th century, the Palio was permanently moved to Piazza del Campo, mainly to render the event even more spectacular and guarantee enough space to everyone to watch it. “Piazza del Campo, do you remember, looked like a giant shell from above” sang Mario Castelnuovo in 1985. Indeed, this unusual space seems tailor-made to host the world’s most famous horse race. The square does not belong to any of the 17 *contrade*.



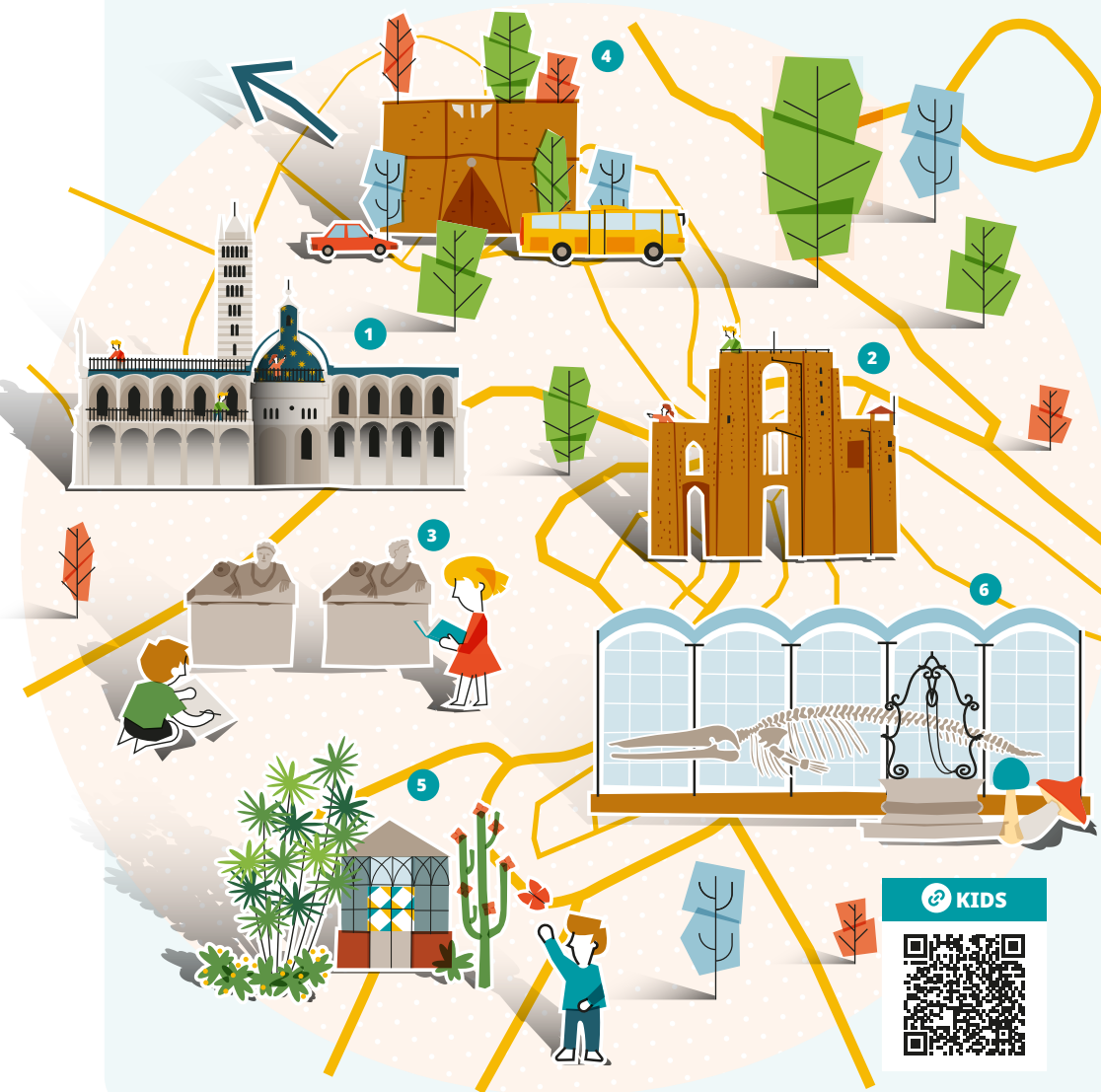
'SIENA, A MYSTERIOUS CITY WITH ITS WINDING STRUCTURE AND STREETS TWISTED AROUND EACH OTHER, AWAITS US UNDER ITS TOWERS AND AN ENORMOUS MOON.'

Exploring the snail, as Piovone calls it in *Viaggio in Italia*, can be a very fun adventure at all ages. Start at the Duomo and follow the itinerary of the **1 Porta del Cielo**, which goes through the attics of the cathedral and gives access to the outdoor routes around the dome, the terraces surrounding the building and the loggia of the façade.

The most impressive part is the walk on the balustrade of the *counter-façade*, which offers a glimpse of the interior of the church that you will not easily forget. Another itinerary worth booking is the one that leads to the **2 View of the Facciataone**, the only evidence of the cathedral's extension project stopped in 1357 because of the plague. This was supposed to be the facade of the Duomo Nuovo. To have a sense of its colossal size, just think that the body of today's cathedral would have been the transept (the short side of the cross) of the new one! From the vantage point, you can appreciate the architectural volumes designed to match the project's ambition.

From here, continue to the **3 Santa Maria della Scala Museum Complex**, an old hospital converted into a museum complex that, with its frescoes, is like a portrait of medieval society. Although the tour itinerary begins in the Old Sacristy, giving access to the Church of the Santissima Annunziata, the most incredible room is the Pellegrinaio, a hall where travelling wayfarers slept. The walls and the wide vaulted ceiling are covered with frescoes depicting daily life in a 15th-century hospital. The complex now houses several museums, such as the **Treasure of Santa Maria della Scala**, a group of Byzantine relics; the **National Archaeological Museum**, with thousands of exhibits from the Etruscan and Roman periods, including several sarcophagi and funerary urns; and the **Children's Art Museum**, where you can become the protagonist of the tour by participating in various creative activities.

If you're traveling in summertime and the heat is stifling, seek shelter at the **4 Medici Fortress** and enjoy what is left of the imposing bastion, built by Cosimo I de' Medici in 1555 to ward off the rebellion of the people of Siena. Alternatively, you can head to the **5 Botanical Garden**, near Porta Tufi: 25,000 square meters of vegetation, comprised of native and exotic plants. End your tour at the **6 Natural History Museum of the Accademia dei Fisiocritici** to admire the skeleton of a 15m whale or replicas of the world's most poisonous mushrooms.



SIENA in books

Reading suggestions to understand Siena and its territory.

• **Viaggio in Italia**, Guido Piovene (1957). Piovene travelled around Italy for three years to write this unique and extremely detailed reportage, considered a classic of Italian travel literature. From the Alps to Sicily, passing also through Siena, the author's gaze is an invitation to discover the wonderful places of Italy.

• **Terra di Siena**, Pablo Echaurren (2007). Chief of police Vanessa Tullera has to investigate a series of strange murders, right before the Palio di Siena. She will be aided by a strange priest and a reporter, who will find the solution within the city walls.

• **L'Italia in seconda classe**, Paolo Rumiz (2009). One goal: to cover as many train kilometres in Italy as there are between Moscow and Vladivostok, strictly travelling second class. An interesting glimpse of Italy written by an ironic and smart author.

• **Sguardi bruciati di Siena**, Marco Catocci, Mauro Pagliai (2011). For lovers of suspenseful detective stories, here is one set in Siena. The book tells the story of Giulio Codorni and his daughter, who after a bad fight with her father runs away from home, opening the plot to a disturbing scenario.

• **Donne, madonne, mercanti e cavalieri. Sei storie medievali**, Alessandro Barbero (2013). Six different perspectives, six stories about the Middle Ages and the social dynamism of those times through the portraits of some of its most emblematic figures. Among them, Professor Barbero has included the mystic Catherine of Siena, who gives us an insight into medieval spirituality.

• **Siena My Way**, Lorenzo Bianciardi, Andrea Squerri (2019). Written as a dialogue between two friends and using a very pleasant language, *Siena My Way* tells many of the stories that lurk in the streets of Siena: a kind of compendium of the city that reveals many hidden gems.

Children's books:

• **Teo, Sofia e l'avventura nel Duomo di Siena. Alla scoperta del tesoro della cattedrale**, Iaria Bichi, Silvia Rocucci, Agnese Mommona (2014). The adventure of the two little protagonists take place in the small universe made of stone and starry vaults that is the city's cathedral, among sculptures, altarpieces, stained glass windows and extraordinary characters.