

# TUSCANY BY CAR

## THE ULTIMATE ROAD TRIP EXPLORING CENTRAL ITALY

Regularly topping out bucket lists across the globe, the central region of Tuscany immediately stuns with its captivating array of landscapes – ranging from treasure-filled cities to sprawling countryside dotted with miles of ever-green vineyards and olive groves, and the rocky coves and Caribbean-like sands of its expansive coast. Existing in perfect symbiosis with the land it occupies, Tuscany has made its mark as a gourmet destination where authentic cucina contadina (country cooking) can be sampled alongside rare bottles of small-batch wine that you are sure to greedily scramble to stock up on.

When you can bear to look up from the mouthwatering plate before you, a mindboggling array of exquisite art and architecture also awaits. Florence alone holds an unmatched number of masterpieces within its borders. Yet being the creative powerhouse that it is, Tuscany ensures its collection of riches can be enjoyed within churches, museums and galleries all across the region. And if not for the nature or the food or even the art, Tuscany is a must-visit for the easy-going, indulgent lifestyle it promotes – it truly is the epitome of la dolce vita.

Exploring the Tuscan region and all its cities and towns is most easily done by car. While the mention of driving within Italy sets off alarm bells for many, the ease of connection within Tuscany makes road tripping both smooth and safe. The principle Autostrada Firenze links Florence to Lucca and Pisa, with further state roads extending to San Gimignano and Volterra. If sea views and soft sands are on the agenda, the Autostrada A12 additionally moves along the coast from Genoa and La Spezia through Viareggio, Pisa and Livorno.

Note that narrow, winding roads make up the large proportion of the Tuscan hills and, as with the majority of the country, the central piazzas along with the roads leading to them are strict no-car zones. As a result, most of the central accommodation offerings do not have dedicated car parks. Plenty of public parking lots line the outskirts of these areas, however, providing an easily accessible solution.



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## FLORENCE

Tuscany's capital Florence is the ideal starting point for any road trip across the region. It boasts its own airport, Aeroporto di Firenze, where travellers can pick up hire cars, choosing from a wide range of options according to individual budgets and needs. Once readily equipped, it's time to head out into this cradle of the Renaissance, where world-class art and architecture dominate.

Few cities are so compact in size or so packed to the brim with captivating masterpieces at every turn. Given the urban fabric of this small city, Florence's centre can easily be explored on foot, its narrow, cobbled streets lined with 15th and 16th century *palazzi* (palaces), marble basilicas, medieval chapels, fresco-adorned churches and exquisite museums. Unmissable stops include the renowned Duomo (Cathedral of Santa Maria del Fiore) – the city's crowning glory made of natural green, white and red marble, and intricately carved details in both a Romanesque and Gothic style, Galleria dell'Accademia (housing Michelangelo's *David*), Palazzo Pitti (the once grand-ducal residence of the Medici family), and Casa Museo di Dante (built in 1910 above the foundations of the revolutionary poet's dwellings).



Inside Cathedral of Santa Maria del Fiore - Image by: Antonio Gravante / Shutterstock.com



Safeguarding the world's greatest collection of Italian Renaissance art, the mind-blowingly expansive and ever-popular Uffizi gallery deserves a full day's exploration alone, especially given the crowds that it attracts. Occupying the vast Palazzo degli Uffizi, the gallery boasts a breathtaking collection of masterpieces from icons such as Filippo Lippi, Raphael, Michelangelo, da Vinci, and Botticelli. The large majority of these works were bequeathed to the city by the Medici family in 1773 on the condition that they never leave Florence, making this the only place in the world where you can marvel at them in all their glorious splendour. As well as its core Renaissance collection, the Uffizi further displays (in chronological order) a wide range of paintings, sculptures and objects ranging from ancient Greece to the present day.

Being the birthplace of Italy's fashion industry, Florence is a treasure trove of high-end labels, specialist boutiques and family-run *botteghe* (workshops). It was here that home-grown designers Guccio Gucci and Salvatore Ferragamo opened haute-couture boutiques in the 1920s, making way for shopping that has been envied the world over ever since. Be sure to visit Ponte Vecchio,



Uffizi gallery

where independent shops have resided since the 13th century – with present tenants comprising goldsmiths, jewellers and art dealers – as well as the main shopping hub along Via Roma and Via dei Calzaiuoli, and the Oltrarno district famed for its artisan workshops.

No visit to Florence would be complete without sampling the region's speciality: *bistecca alla Fiorentina*. This giant, juicy T-bone steak, typically from the ancient Tuscan breed of Chianina cattle, can be enjoyed at the much-loved Trattoria dall'Oste, where the enormous cut is flavoured with rosemary and sage, softened with plenty of butter, and served rare with roast potatoes and salad.



Via Roma



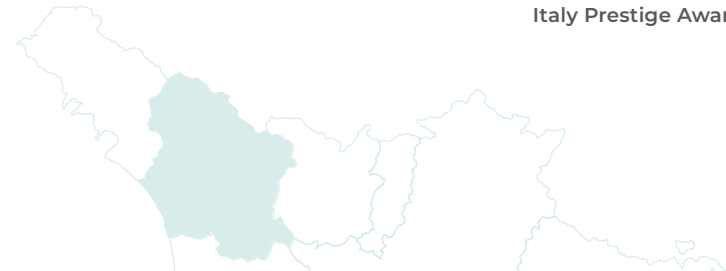
## LUCCA

Journeying west from Florence, the next stop on our road trip is historic Lucca. Hidden behind imposing Renaissance walls, this charming city situated on the Serchio River is often overlooked on Tuscany itineraries – a sure loss for those that do. An attractive day-trip destination and equally ideal overnight stopover, Lucca and its cobbled streets and shady promenades house a rich and diverse array of architectural riches.

The ancient walled city was once bristling with as many as 250 defensive tower houses. Today, only nine remain, including the must-visit Torre Guinigi. Built of red brick and topped by several ancient Holm oaks, this 45-metre-high tower provides the ultimate bird's-eye view of the city below and the rural landscape beyond. Although no one knows exactly when its flourishing rooftop garden first appeared, legend has it that upon the death of powerful Lucchese ruler Paolo Guinigi (1372-1432), all the leaves fell off its trees, as if they too were in mourning.



Torre Guinigi



For a culture fix, the Puccini Museum – which celebrates the life and work of one of Italy's foremost composers, Giacomo Puccini – is highly recommended, as is the Museo Nazionale di Palazzo Guinigi. The latter houses a comprehensive collection of artworks produced by artists born in Lucca, alongside significant archaeological findings ranging from the 8th century BC to late 18th century AD.

Scenic strolls set to blazing sunsets can be had along Lucca's famed walls or within its compact interior, which gives way to lively piazzas lined with independent bars, family-run restaurants, quaint cafes, and all manner of independent boutiques as well as more familiar brands. Take up a seat in a cobbled courtyard and enjoy your choice of aperitivo as the sun's last rays dance on the horizon. Don't leave without getting a taste of the region's best-loved dessert – *castagnaccio*. This typically autumnal cake is made with chestnut flour, pine nuts, rosemary, olive oil, raisins and other additions depending on personal taste – everything from fennel seeds to orange zest can find its way into the mix. You can grab a slice or two at Pizzeria da Felice, a local hotspot known to serve the best *castagnaccio* in town.



Puccini Museum - Image by: ELEPHOTOS / Shutterstock.com



Castagnaccio



Image by: Shutterstock.com



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## PISA

Just a 30-minute drive from Lucca, Pisa, the home of the world-famous architectural project gone terribly (or not so) wrong, is our next destination. Once a maritime power to rival Venice and Genoa, modern Pisa is a vibrant university town, boasting one of the oldest and most respected higher education institutions in all of Europe. As a result, its centre comprises an electric cafe and bar scene, all while balancing an impressive portfolio of well-preserved Gothic churches, Renaissance piazzas, and Romanesque buildings.



Image by: Shutterstock.com

While a dizzying climb up the Torre Pendente's (Leaning Tower's) 251 winding steps is often the very reason tourists have travelled to the region, the signature structure is not the only architectural wonder the city holds. Also located on Pisa's principal square, Piazza dei Miracoli, the magnificent Duomo is a true sight to behold. Construction on the striking Cattedral di Pisa began in 1064, ending in 1118 when it was officially consecrated. Its eye-catching marble, tiered exterior gives onto a columned interior capped by a gold wooden ceiling. The elliptical dome itself was added in 1380 – the first of its kind in Europe at the time.

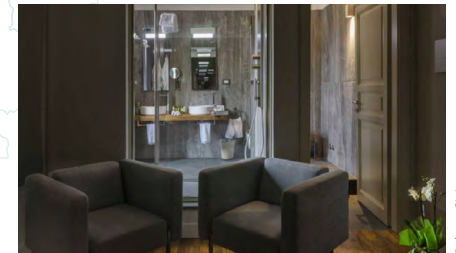


Image by: Shutterstock.com



Beyond the Square of Miracles, visitors can see the birthplace of the renowned astronomer, physicist and engineer Galileo Galilei at Ammannati House, breathe in the fragrant air at Jardin Botanico de Pisa, taste the best of local produce at Piazza delle Vettovaglie (Supply Square), or marvel at fascinating frescoes within Museo delle Sinopie.

For those looking to take shelter for the night, the ideally located Palazzo Cini is the ultimate choice. Set within an Art Nouveau villa surrounded by a verdant garden scented with orange and jasmine trees, this enchanting bed & breakfast offers intimate, modern, refined hospitality amid luxurious interiors adorned in unique pieces of art. The property even houses its own gallery, displaying a collection of ancient Greek objects and colourful works by modernist Marc Chagall. Its five suites each boast an individual style, marked by defining features such as a large whirlpool tub or private balcony with garden views.



Palazzo Cini





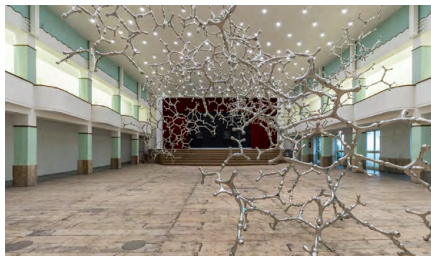
Image by Shutterstock.com

## SAN GIMIGNANO

It's time to leave the city and its bustling streets behind and journey further south out into the open. As you crest the nearby rolling Tuscan hills, the 14 towers of the walled town of San Gimignano will come into view, rising from the earth like a medieval Manhattan. At the height of its glory, the region's patrician families had built 72 of these mighty tower-houses as symbols of their wealth and power. Today, less than half remain standing, yet San Gimignano retains its feudal atmosphere.

A UNESCO World Heritage Site, this once Etruscan village holds an impressive array of attractions, ranging from Romanesque cathedrals to a contemporary art gallery, torture museum, 14th century fortress ruins, and even a handmade ceramic recreation of the city.

While it may seem a little strange to highlight contemporary art in this distinctly medieval setting, the magnetic pull of Galleria Continua is just too great. As one of Europe's finest commercial art galleries, it houses an outstanding selection of works from big-name artists such as Ai Weiwei, Mona Hatoum, Daniel Buren and Antony Gormley.



Galleria Continua - Image by moussemagazine



Moreover, it is spread across four distinct venues (an old cinema, medieval tower, vaulted cellar and an apartment on Piazza della Cisterna), making a trip to the gallery all the more an adventure.

An additional museum worthy of all wine lover's itineraries is the Vernaccia di San Gimignano Wine Experience. Set within San Gimignano's very heart at the Rocca di Montestaffoli (the city's highest point), this museum and *enoteca* traces, through multimedia exhibits, the history and current production of the region's signature variety: Vernaccia. Gracing the tables of popes and kings as early as 1200, the "White Queen" is distinguished by its crisp citrusy/floral taste. Visitors can sample its delicate, fresh flavour at one of the wine tastings available at the site, which can also be combined into a two-hour masterclass covering the broader story of wine production in the area, including cultivation and vinification techniques.



Vernaccia di San Gimignano Wine Experience





## VOLTERRA

Just a further 40-minute drive, and you will reach another well-preserved wall town known as Volterra. Despite being a key location within Stephenie Meyer's billion-dollar grossing fantasy series *Twilight*, this historic hilltop settlement sees fewer tourists than its neighbours. Yet, this is part of its very charm – its winding cobbled walkways and prominent ancient sites easily explored without the hindrance of crowds.

Defined by its rich artistic heritage, Volterra has long been at the centre of alabaster craftsmanship within Italy. The ancient Etruscans that once called the area home popularised the use of the material for sculptures, vases and other decorative objects, prizing it for its durability, natural veining, and luminous effects when held up to the light. Today, the handmade techniques used by generations past are preserved by a handful of dedicated artisans who slowly work this exceptionally hard material into ornamental objects such as paperweights, dishes, candle stands, birds, and horses – all of which can be purchased from their workshops and often adjoining stores.



Image by: Shutterstock.com



Alabaster handwork

While the streets of Volterra are adorned in alabaster displays, visitors can get an in-depth look into the precious raw material and all its uses at the Ecomuseo dell'Alabastro. This centrally situated museum chronicles the story of alabaster from the moment it is mined until it is made into a finished product. The engaging exhibition featuring both contemporary and Etruscan creations is boosted by a long-established alabaster workshop purchased from the Pagni family of artisans.

Encircled by verdant countryside, Volterra offers the perfect outdoor escape. To enjoy the true beauty of the luscious greenery that surrounds, visitors can indulge in a day or two of strict rest and relaxation amid natural beauty at one of the town's many farmhouses and villas. Often standing alone with miles of open space between the next sign of human life, these authentic accommodation options present the perfect end to a road trip across Tuscany and its famous hills.



Villa di Ulgignano



Ecomuseo dell'Alabastro - Image by: mytourintuscany

A true standout, Villa di Ulgignano enjoys an enviable position atop the very hill from which it gets its name. The 17th century stone structure, which was built upon the commission of the governor of Livorno, extends across seven glorious hectares between Volterra and San Gimignano and is further entirely surrounded by stunning landscaped gardens, ensuring ultimate privacy. The villa itself boasts 11 bedrooms in its central building, with an additional four spread across the renovated barn, school and smaller Villa Mansarde. Further facilities include an outdoor swimming pool, sauna, gym, wood oven and barbeque, as well as several games rooms. Given its more recent role in the world of Italian cinema, the often dubbed "movie villa" also boasts a private projection room where guests can enjoy intimate evenings with the stars of classics such as *OFA Thousand Delights*.

