

## COLLE VAL D'ELSA

### A schizophrenic town north-west of Siena



Colle di Val d'Elsa is really two towns: a historical town (Colle Alta) strung out along the top of a high ridge and a bustling modern industrial town below (Colle Bassa). Almost alone among Sienese (and indeed Tuscan) towns, Colle has a real industrial base, manufacturing paper and high class glassware, until recently the only place in the Senese to be other than agriculturally orientated. The lower town has a lively and open atmosphere quite unlike that of the closed and secretive society of Siena. But for the visitor it has little to offer beyond a pleasant colonnaded main square and a restaurant with two Michelin stars. The upper town is largely dead except for tourists, but has a number of attractive palazzi and churches with interesting contents. Colle's most famous son is Arnolfo di Cambio, the architect of the Duomo in Florence, and many things in the town are called after him.

To visit the upper town, drive up the hill past the lower town in the direction of Volterra. There is a big car-park on the left just below the upper town, involving a steep climb up. So it is best to go on up and to park in the car-park of the via della Porta Vecchia, or a bit further on at the parking area down the lane to the right of the big mediaeval gate (Porta Nuova) at the top of the town.

The upper town consists of little more than one long street, running along the ridge downwards from the enormous turreted **Porta Nuova** (or Porta Volterrana). Like so many things called new in Italy, it is pretty old, dating from 1481. It was built on the orders of Lorenzo Il Magnifico of Florence. Colle was mainly allied to Florence against the Sienese, but in 1479 the city fell to the forces of Siena and the Pope (with whom Lorenzo had quarrelled). Shifting alliances brought Colle quickly back to Florence, but Lorenzo clearly felt that he must strengthen its defences. The gateway was designed according to the most modern military principles, to withstand not only traditional medieval weaponry but the fire-arms that were just coming into general use in European warfare. The old gate, the Porta

Vecchia, was a little further along the walls near the curious round red-brick water-tank (cisterna).



*Porta Nuova*

Going down the main street from the top (called first via Gracco del Secco, then via di Castello) from the Porta Nuova, the first church on the left is **St Catherine**. It is of little interest, but through the unmarked door to its left (next to No. 1 via Gracco), there is a small oratory (also accessible from the church if it is open), with an impressive 16th century “Lamentation” – a life-size group of painted terracotta figures representing mourners over the dead Christ.

The via Gracco continues down, lined with handsome palazzi (all labelled with name and date), until a bridge (which used to be a drawbridge) over a gap in the crest which marks the divide between the “Borgo” and the “Castello”, the latter being fortress-like medieval heart of the upper city. A wing of the L-shaped 16th century Villa Campana forms an arch over the road, and the latter shortly afterwards opens out to become the Piazza del Duomo. The **Duomo** itself is a pretty dull building, but has a good pulpit, in very simple low relief but all the better for that. The low relief dates from 1465, but the artist has used much older pillars to support his panels. The chapel in the right transept has a most elegant gilded tabernacle by Mino da Fiesole, a wonderful exercise in perspective. It was built to house a relic, a nail (Santo Chiodo) from the Crucifixion, and it is hard to believe that the door at the centre is not part of Mino’s sculpture.

There are two museums near the Duomo, both of strictly moderate interest, the Museo Archeologico and, just after the Piazza at No. 31 via Castello, the Museo Civico e de l’Arte Sacra.

The **Museo Archeologico** Ranuccio Bianchi Bandinelli is devoted to Etruscan and other remains dug up round Colle, including a 5,000-year old prehistoric tomb. Most of the best finds have been swiped by more important museums, and the items are, as is the Siense fashion, grouped according to where they were found rather than chronologically or thematically, which makes them more difficult to set in context. But the exhibits are well-displayed and well-lit and the explanations (in Italian and English) are pretty good, so it may be worth a brief visit. The museum is in the 15th century Palazzo del Podestà (chief magistrate) and the walls of the upper floors are delightfully covered in the frescoes of the coats of arms of the early holders of the office.

The **Museo Civico e de l’Arte Sacra** has one good work, a Virgin and Child by a contemporary of Duccio. The painting used to be in the Badia a Isola (see below under Monteriggione) and was thought to be by Duccio. It was then reattributed by the experts to an unnamed late 13th century artist, who was dubbed on the strength of this painting the

“Master of the Badia (or Abbadia) a Isola”. There is another of his works in the Pinacoteca in Siena.

Further down on the right is **Santa Maria in Canonica**, a Romanesque structure of ageless simplicity. Its one treasure is a 14th century altarpiece of the Madonna and Child with saints, with generous use of gold leaf, by Pier Francesco Fiorentino (active 1474-97). This is an excellent example of the way that paintings and frames were made together to meld into a single work of art.



*Santa Maria in Canonica (via wikimedia)*

Back up near the circular water-tank, a road takes off to the monastery of **San Francesco**, in the church of which there is a good altarpiece by Sano di Pietro. Unfortunately, however, the church is rarely open - although arrangements can probably be made with the tourist office.

Gastronomically, Colle is well endowed with a number of restaurants in both upper and lower towns. For those with deep pockets and time on their hands, the Michelin-starred Arnolfo restaurant awaits in the lower town (not to be confused with the hotel of the same name in the upper town), and there are a number of other eating places in or near the main square.

(2004, 2010 and 2015)

## Le Grazie

A church near Colle worth a brief look.



*Entrance to Le Grazie*

From Colle, follow the signs to Volterra. About a kilometre after passing the great mediaeval gate into the upper city of Colle, you will see in front of you the tiny brick facade of the church of Santa Maria delle Grazie, with an attractive terracotta festoon of fruit and pinecones around its circular window.

Inside it is a miniscule Renaissance church with several interesting 16th century frescoes - there are fact-sheets describing them in English and German just inside the door. On the right wall near the door, there is a Madonna and Child with St Anthony Abbot (painted in 1524), and next to it St Sebastian and St Rocco (or St Roch, a 14th century saint who caught the plague and, as here, is usually depicted showing the plague sore on his leg). On the left the Madonna and Child are accompanied by St Catherine of Alexandria, who was renowned for her learning - she disputed successfully with 50 philosophers who were called in to convince her of the errors of Christianity, and is shown here with an appropriate collection of highbrow books on rhetoric, music, metaphysics etc. She appears again on the wall on the left transept, this time with St George and his dragon. At the end of the same transept (being restored) is a 15th century Circumcision, the best of the works in the church. The fresco over the altar is the locally venerated 'Madonna delle Grazie'.



## Abbazia di Coneo

Just beyond Santa Maria delle Grazie, take the left fork towards Casole d'Elsa. A little further along, turn right at the sign to the Abbazia di Coneo (or Badia a Coneo). Follow the signs to 'Abbazia', 'Badia' and 'la Chiesa'; the church is behind a farmhouse on the left.



*Abbazia di Coneo in 2015*

It is a beautifully simple, grey stone Romanesque building set in lovely countryside. It was consecrated in 1123. The facade is decorated with blind arches; the interior is single-aisled; and there are three apses. It was once part of an abbey, and the doorway into the farmyard to the right of the facade originally led into cloisters and other abbey buildings. Both inside and out a variety of carvings have been made in the stonework. Inside there are carved capitals with intricate patterns and primitive little men in Atlas-like poses appear to hold up the roof (with a snake above them on the left side). Outside, there are further good carvings on the facade, on the gateway into the farmyard, and around the apse and the hexagonal lantern above the vault.

Unfortunately, although one can wander freely round the outside, the church itself is now kept locked and used only for special occasions – for instance when a local person wants to get married there. The parish priest (parroco) at Le Grazie has a key and it might be possible to arrange a visit through the tourist office in Colle Val d'Elsa.

1993 and 2015

