

DUOMO (THE CATHEDRAL)

Although the Duomo is in full use as Siena's cathedral, it is also treated as a tourist attraction and entry is by ticket, which can be purchased from the ticket office by the Museum of the OPA. Separate tickets are needed for the Baptistery and Crypt, even though they are part of the Duomo. A three-day combined ticket that allows you entry to the Baptistery, Crypt, OPA museum and Oratorio San Bernardino (the latter not always open) is very good value. Within the Duomo there are wooden barriers herding tourists around in a circuit and away from the famous pavements. Duomo, Crypt and Baptistery are usually open from 10.30, but entry to the Duomo depends on what religious services are taking place. Go early to avoid the masses.



This is one of Italy's great cathedrals, but as a building curiously unsatisfactory; indeed to many hideously ugly. Ruskin, in the 1880s, described it as "*every way absurd - over-cut, overstriped, over-crocketed, over-gabled, a piece of costly confectionary, and faithless vanity*". William Beckford, in the 18th century, wrote of his visit to Siena:

"Here my duty of course was to see the cathedral, and I got up much earlier than I wished in order to perform it. I wonder that our holy ancestors did not choose a mountain at once, scrape it into tabernacles, and chisel it into scripture stories. It would have cost them almost as little trouble as the building in question, which may certainly be esteemed a masterpiece of ridiculous taste and elaborate absurdity. The front, encrusted with alabaster, is worked into a million of fretted arches and puzzling ornaments. There are statues without number, and relievos without end or meaning. The church within is all of black and white marble alternately.....I hardly knew which was the nave, or which the

cross-aisle, of this singular edifice, so perfect is the confusion of its parts.....In every corner of the place some chapel or other offends or astonishes you."

So you will not be alone if you find the whole thing all too much. Built between 1150 and 1330, the cathedral began as a Romanesque building, gradually turning to Gothic as fashion evolved during the long years of its construction. It is so surrounded by buildings that the outside is almost impossible to see properly from nearby - except for the hideously over-decorated facade, finished with garish 19th century mosaics, and the beautiful front of the Baptistry at the other end. For a general view of the dome, elegant campanile and lightly striped marble walls, it is best to go to another of Siena's hills to glimpse the cathedral across the valley - the view from behind San Domenico is particularly good.

The Siena Duomo (the word comes from the Latin *domus* or house, and stands for House of God) had barely been completed before the Sieneese, afraid that the Duomo then being built in Florence would outshine theirs, decided (in 1339) to build a whole new and much bigger cathedral, incorporating the present one as its transept. The beginnings of the new nave can still be seen on the right hand side of the cathedral - the Cathedral Museum (*Museo del OPA*) is built into one of its side aisles, and some beautiful marble tracery shows what a fine work it might have been. But the Black Death of 1348 struck before it was completed and left Siena so shaken and impoverished that this grand design was never taken forward. The huge red brick archway (*Facciatone*) that would have been the main entrance has a stairway inside it and can be climbed from the Cathedral Museum. The road down the side of the Duomo leads through another arch that would have been a side door; the outside of this arch has one of the most perfect and beautiful Gothic doorways in Italy.

Inside the Duomo, the slim, sparse and elegant stripes of the external walls are replaced by heavy horizontal zebra stripes on every surface. The effect is dark, over-powering and even downright ugly. To enjoy the interior, one must ignore the general effect and concentrate on the detail - as it is more full of wonderful things than almost any other church in Italy, and needs several visits to appreciate. The three best things in it are the Piccolomini Library, the amazingly carved 13th century Pulpit, and the Pavements - but there are many, many more works of art of a quality that people would come miles to view in any English church, and more in the Baptistery below the Duomo. Most guidebooks give the Duomo fairly full coverage, so this concentrates on the pavements, the Piccolomini Library, the (fairly) newly opened crypt and the Baptistery.

The Pavements

Almost the entire floor of the Duomo is covered in pictures in inlaid stone, designed by the leading artists of the period between 1370 and 1550. Until recently, as many of the 56 separate scenes are so worn and susceptible to further damage, they were permanently covered in pieces of hardboard and could not be seen. However, since the Duomo has been turned into a museum during the most of the pavements are uncovered; and visitors are allowed to walk between them, and also behind the altar to see the pictures in inlaid wood above the stalls. So well worth a visit if you are there then.

The scenes are extremely varied, ranging from pagan sybils along the side aisles to great Old Testament battles and New Testament dramas. Each of the sybils is different - an elderly one from Cumaea; a black one from Libya; a learned one with a book from the Hellespont (beside whom a wolf and a lion endearingly but sheepishly shake hands).



In the main aisle, the second from the main door shows Siena's (and Rome's) symbol of a wolf suckling Romulus and Remus (Remus's son is supposed to have founded Siena). In the middle of the main aisle, one of the best is the mysterious History of Fortune or Hill of Virtue designed by Pinturicchio. Fortune helps some wise men reach a rocky island. She holds the sail of a ship in one hand and anchors it to the earth with her foot. Above, Knowledge offers the palm of Victory to Socrates and Crates empties a casket of jewels – beautifully rendered, as is the detail of the plants and animals on the island.

Near the pulpit, there is a dramatic Massacre of the Innocents (a scene of which Siennese artists were horribly over-fond), with Herod actively directing operations from a throne on the left. It is by Matteo di Giovanni. Beyond, there is a good battle scene showing the liberation of Bethulia (besieged by Holofernes in the Book of Judith). In front of the main altar, difficult to see even when uncovered, is one of the best of several by Beccafumi, depicting the sacrifice of Isaac. Nearby, on the other side of the church, there is a striking death of Absalom, who had rebelled against his father David and was caught and killed by one of David's supporters after his hair got entangled in a tree.

The Piccolomini Library

This a magical room off the left aisle decorated with brilliantly coloured frescoes. The room was intended as a library for the books of Siena's most famous Pope, Aenea Silvio Piccolomini (Pius II) and frescoed in the early 1500s by Pinturicchio with scenes from the Pope's life. The story begins in the fresco at the far end of the right hand wall and the frescoes then go round clockwise. They depict:

1. Piccolomini (on the horse) as a young man of about 18 from a noble but impecunious family, departing for the Council of Basle as the secretary to a Bishop. The party were driven ashore by a storm, shown in the background.



2. Piccolomini addressing James III of Scotland, to whom he had been sent on a secret mission in 1435 by his new master, a cardinal. A marvellously improbable picture of Scottish landscape. The weather was apparently not as good as appears in the painting; Piccolomini had to walk through ice and snow, on which he blamed the gout from which he suffered for the rest of his life. He is also alleged to have fathered an illegitimate child in Scotland.

3. Piccolomini being crowned as a poet by the Holy Roman Emperor Frederick III in Vienna. Piccolomini was by this time well established in diplomatic circles as a talented and useful young man. It was the period of opposing popes and anti-popes, and he first sided with the anti-pope, who had sent him on a mission to Vienna, where he had joined the service of the Holy Roman Emperor.

4. Piccolomini, an ambitious man who clearly knew where his best interests lay, then decided to switch papal sides. This served him well. In 1446 he was ordained a subdeacon, and here he is shown, only two years later, giving allegiance to the legitimate Pope and being consecrated as a bishop (the Church was the best way for a clever young man with no funds to achieve power and greatness).

5. (On the entrance wall) By 1450 Piccolomini had become Bishop of Siena, but continued his work as a diplomat and undertook the negotiations leading to the marriage of the Holy Roman Emperor to Eleanor of Aragon. Here he is presiding (in his Bishop's mitre) over the meeting of the betrothed couple at the Camollia Gate of Siena. The pillar with the crests in the middle background still stands outside the Porta Camollia.

6. Continuing his rapid progression up the ecclesiastical ladder, Piccolomini is being ordained as a cardinal by Pope Calixtus III in 1456.

7. Piccolomini being crowned Pope Pius II in 1458, after being elected to succeed Calixtus III.

8. Pius II gathers together the Christian princes in a congress at Mantua to organise a crusade against the Turks (the central idea of his pontificate was to liberate all Europe from Turkish domination).

9. Pius II canonises St Catherine of Siena.

10. Pius II, who is by this time visibly ill, arrives in Ancona in 1464 to hasten preparations for the crusade. The Venetian fleet is arriving in the background. Unfortunately, the Christian princes did not share Pius's enthusiasm for the crusade, and the Venetians, who were in it for the money, employed delaying tactics, no doubt hoping to extract a bigger payment for the use of their ships. The crusade never took off and Pius II died disheartened a couple of months later.

Each fresco is painted to show the scene through an arch with patterned sides, carefully drawn so that from whichever angle you regard the fresco the arch appears to have the correct perspective.

The Piccolomini crest was a crescent moon, and crescent moons pop up all over Siena. In the Library, the whole floor is covered in crescents.

The Crypt (*separate ticket required*)

Halfway down the steps beside the Duomo is a door into what is known as the Crypt (Cripta). In fact, it is no such thing; it was originally a series of ante-rooms to the Duomo used by pilgrims before the Baptistery was built. In the 1990s, while some rubble was being cleared out, it was discovered that these rooms were covered in pre-Duccio frescoes, dating from the early to mid-1200s. Unsurprisingly, they are in a bad state, but nevertheless retain their vivid colours and provide a fascinating glimpse of what an early medieval church was like, with every surface covered in paint – where there are no actual frescoes, the walls are painted to resemble marble, and even the pillars and their capitals are covered in bright colour



Brightly painted pillar. St Joseph stands on the left carrying the two turtle doves he brought to the temple as an offering when Jesus was circumcised.

The best frescoes are in the main room, particularly the Crucifixion and the touching scene to the right of it showing the Virgin with the body of Christ, her hand round his neck and embracing his dead face. The end wall shows the Annunciation, Visitation and Nativity. On the back wall, there are further scenes from Old and New Testaments (Old above, New below). There is an unusual picture of the Christchild being given a lesson on one of the pillars. On another side wall there is a charming picture of the Holy Family, presumably on their way to Egypt, eating dates from a rather fanciful date-palm. This portrays a legend from an apocryphal gospel, which is also recorded in the Koran. According to the legend, the family stopped to rest under a date-palm, but it was too high for them to reach the fruits. The baby Jesus then performed his first miracle, by climbing down from the Virgin's lap and ordering the palm-tree to bend down so that his mother could gather its fruits. Joseph is shown proudly pointing towards the miraculously bending palm-branch (below).



The palm tree bends miraculously so that the Virgin Mary can reach the dates.

The Baptistry (*separate ticket needed*)

At the bottom of the steps, under the altar area of the Cathedral, is the Baptistry (Battistero). As so often in Italian cathedrals, it was built to impress and to recognise the importance of baptism in the Christian religion. Its magnificent Gothic façade (built in 1355) would do justice to a moderate-sized church. Inside, almost every inch is covered with 15th century frescoes (heavily restored in the 19th century). There is a beautiful hexagonal font surrounded by gilded panels with reliefs illustrating the life of St John the Baptist:

- An angel announcing to St Zachary (the Baptist's father) that he is to have a son – miraculously as his wife Elizabeth was barren;
- The birth of the Baptist;
- The Baptist preaching;
- The Baptist baptising Christ;
- The Baptist in prison;
- Herod's feast at which Salome demanded the head of the Baptist.

The first and last are by Jacopo della Quercia and are particularly fine. The six statues above the panels represent the Virtues (Faith, Hope, Charity, Justice, Prudence and Fortitude). Two (Faith and Hope) are also by Donatello, who also created the four bronze angels.



The Baptistry

The Bishop's Palace (not visitable)

Next to the Cathedral is the handsome gothic residence of its Bishops.



The Bishop's Palace