

PLACES ALONG THE SIENA-GROSSETO ROAD

Grosseto is of very little interest, but there are some places worth visiting just off the road between Siena and Grosseto.

Bagni (or Terme) di Petriolo

An old spa with a sulphurous hot spring open to all

In a valley below a spectacular viaduct of the Grosseto superstrada, about 15 kilometres from San Rocco a Pilli and well sign-posted, there is to be found the old spa (with remains of 15th century walls) of Petriolo. All that remains today is a small (free) bathing pool where the bad-egg-smelling hot waters spill out into the river, and an establishment where one can pay to have serious treatment. The public bathing pool used to be rather a muddy affair and was overwhelmed by a landslide a few years ago; it has now been reconstituted in a much improved form. The water is really quite hot (43°C), not necessarily what one wants in high summer. There is also a smart spa hotel on the other side of the viaduct.



The public bathing area at Bagni di Petriolo

San Lorenzo al Lanzo, also known as Abbazia or Badia Ardenghesca

Romanesque church of minor interest and along a bad road but in a beautiful valley

This abbey church is difficult of access and only for the enthusiasts as it is of fairly minor interest. From Petriolo, drive towards Paganico for about eight kilometres, ignoring the turn off to the SS223. Take the right turn to Civitella Marittima. After about three kilometres, there is a right turn to the monastery along a cypress alley.

From Paganico, take the road to Arcidosso and Castel del Piano, and turn off to the left along a pretty country road to Civitella Marittima and Abbazia Ardenghesca. After about nine kilometers, turn left onto a very bumpy dirt road (signposted) and then after a further four kilometers right. The abbey church is about a kilometre on, on the right, recognizable by the filled-in arches which originally separated the nave from the now demolished side aisles.

If approaching from the Grosseto road (SS 223), take the exit for Civitella Marittima. Coming from Grosseto, the abbey road is signposted almost as soon as you leave the slip road. If coming from Siena, go towards Civitella and almost immediately turn right onto the road signposted Siena that crosses onto the other side of the Grosseto superstrada, turning left before the slip road back onto the superstrada. Beware: between the Civitella exit and the abbey church there is a ford that can be a raging torrent in time of rain.



The old abbey church of San Lorenzo al Lanzo

San Lorenzo is in a most beautiful wooded valley, with cypresses and umbrella pines (a good place for a picnic, except that it is almost below one of the spectacularly high viaducts over which the Grosseto road passes and there is a slight traffic roar). The church itself is closed, but there is an interesting travertine façade with capitals carved with fantastic beasts, including a one-headed two-bodied lion similar to that on one of the San Antimo capitals. A villa, usually deserted, has been built next to the monastery, probably on the remains of the old monastic buildings.

For those not interested in picnics, Civitella has a good restaurant, la Locanda nel Cassero, offering an interesting modern take on traditional Tuscan fare at very reasonable prices for the quality. It is right in the middle of the maze of narrow mediaeval streets of this typical hill village, however, and driving up into the village is a challenge, as is parking. The restaurant is closed on Tuesday, and also Wednesday lunchtime.

Paganico

Small town with church with interesting frescoes

Paganico is about 35 km from San Rocco a Pilli and is well sign-posted from the Grosseto road. It is a workmanlike small town or large village that used to be a defensive point on Siena's southern borders, and still has most of its 13th -14th walls, built on the instructions of the Sienese Senate. It has little to offer the visitor except for the frescoes in its church, San Michele Arcangelo, which are among the best preserved and most beautiful in any small church in the Senese.

The church is in the main square, and from the outside could not be plainer. The frescoes are in the chancel, behind the altar – if the young *parroco* (parish priest) is there, he will let you walk behind the altar to see them better. They have been recently restored, revealing the name of an artist called Biagio di Goro Guezzi, dated 1368. On the left wall, on the top there is a delightful Nativity, with the Child rather unusually being washed. Below, the middle fresco is a splendid rendering of St Michael the Archangel casting the devil out from heaven. The picture on the left shows a legend in which St Michael appeared in Puglia in the form of a bull and some hunters tried to shoot him, only to find their arrows turning round and coming back at them. On the right, St Michael appears above Castel Sant' Angelo in Rome, delivering the city from the plague.

On the right wall, the upper scene is of the Adoration of the Magi. Below there is a Last Judgement, with the Virgin Mary giving souls a helping hand out of purgatory into heaven (the figure in green above is Wisdom); Archangel Michael in the middle; and the Devil on the other side, having collected only one soul compared to the many on the purgatory/heaven side; the Devil is clearly furious and is baring his teeth at the Archangel Michael (the *parroco* commented approvingly to us that this scene presents an optimistic picture of mankind). There are symbolic connections between the upper and lower scenes. For instance, although Michael is holding the baskets of the scales, the actual weighing is done by Christ and the chains can be seen going up to him. On the left hand side of the top scene, above the heavenly side of the Last Judgement, there are horses' heads bowing to Jesus, whereas on the other side the horses have turned their rumps to Jesus, showing that those who accept Christ can expect heaven and those who reject him must expect hell.

To complete this wonderfully preserved series of frescoes, there is an Annunciation on either side of the window; the four evangelists in the vault and saints under the chancel arch.

There are three other good works in the church; a Madonna and Child by Guidoccio Cozzarelli (1450-1516) over the main altar; another Madonna and Child (about 1480) by Andrea di Niccolò (1445-1525) on the left wall; a huge and unfortunately damaged fresco of St Christopher on the right wall, and next to it, in a glass case over a side altar, an extraordinarily moving, not to say harrowing, painted wooden crucifix (15th century).

Roselle

Interesting and extensive Etruscan and Roman ruins, little visited.

About 10 km north of Grosseto, well-signed from the Siena-Grosseto road (follow brown or yellow signs to “Rovine” or “Ruderi” (ruins) di Roselle, or to Parco Archeologico – not those to Bagno Roselle, which is a small village some kilometres away). It is open from 8.30-19.00 between May and August, and closes slightly earlier at other times of the year. As it receives so few visitors, you may have the place entirely to yourselves.

Roselle was an important Etruscan town, sited on a strong point overlooking the lake that covered the plain where Grosseto now stands. It was founded around the 7th century BC. It was conquered by the Romans, however, in the 3rd century BC and substantially rebuilt over the next few centuries, so most of the buildings visible today are Roman. The most visible Etruscan remains are the impressive 6th century BC city wall, built of huge blocks of stone and extending to some 3 km. For “health and safety reasons”, it is not possible to walk round the wall, but it can be glimpsed from various points.

The town retained its importance into the early Middle Ages when it was the seat of a bishopric. But it was pillaged by the Saracens in 935, the bishopric moved to Grosseto in 1138 and the town was gradually abandoned. As so often, people from local villages removed much of the stone for their own building purposes. In the 19th century, a British traveller in search of Etruscan remains, George Dennis, described it as “a wilderness of rocks and thickets – the haunt of the fox and the wild boar, of the serpent and lizard – visited by none but the herdsman or shepherd”.

Since then, it has been considerably tidied up by the archaeologists. None of the walls of the buildings is more than a few feet high. But the lay-out can still be clearly seen, as can the impressively paved streets. Quite a few broken Roman statues were found on the site. These are now in the museum in Grosseto, but rather hideous replicas, in Carrara marble, have been erected at random points around the site.

From the entrance, turn up to the left to the main part of the city. You can go along the modern path, but it is more romantic to go up the old Roman road with its bumpy paving stones. At a certain point, the road (which was the *decumanus maximus* or main road through the city) passes a threshold into the central part of the city and the rough paving stones suddenly give way to large, smooth flagstones. The remains of shops can just about be made out beside the road.

There are panels with detailed (albeit not always easy to understand) descriptions of the various buildings, and a small map is also handed out at the entrance. At the top of the *decumanus maximus*, the *cardo* or main cross-road takes off to the left. It leads past the open space of the forum up to a residential quarter where some of the houses still have the remains of rather beautiful marble tiles on their floors. Originally their internal walls were covered in plaster (of which the odd vestige remains) and would have had wall paintings. Some excavations to the right of the forum have uncovered the remains of some of the pre-Roman Etruscan buildings (under cover).

Turning right from the top of the *decumanus maximus*, you come to an area of shops – probably the bond Street of Roselle. Further up the hill, the remains of a much earlier Etruscan house have been given a plastic roof. There is not much to see, but it excites the archaeologists because it is an extremely early form of what was to become the standard Roman house with an atrium open to the skies and an *impluvium* (shallow pool) in the middle to collect the rainwater. Beyond this there are the well-preserved remains of the Roman amphitheatre (1st century AD) with walls of *opus reticulatum* – a well-known Roman building technique of placing square bricks diamond-wise (reticulatum means webbed).

On the way back down to the entrance, there are the remains of some Roman baths on the right. These are the only things on the site which can be dated, as an inscribed stone was found indicating that they were opened by Betitius Perpetuus Arzigya, the governor of Tuscia and Umbria from 366-370 AD. A path up from the right of the entrance leads to some mainly 6th century BC Etruscan remains (tomb and hypogea).



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