

MONTEPULCIANO

One of the larger south Tuscan hill towns with attractive churches and palazzi, a good main square and famous red wine. Another town with exceedingly steep streets.

Montepulciano lies to the east of Pienza. There are signs to car-parks at various points on the way up to the old town (where parking is restricted). The town is strung out along a sharply sloping ridge, so visitors have a choice between parking at the lower end by the Porta al Prato and the Piazza Sant'Agnese and struggling up to the top, or following the signs to Centro Storico and Fortezza and parking as near as possible to the Fortezza at the top end. We recommend the latter, even though it means going up hill on the way back, as it is nearer the Piazza Grande, the most attractive part of the town. There are usually some parking spaces just inside the town gate by the Fortezza, and another small car-park if you turn right in front of the Fortezza. Note that parking spaces with blue lines are paying; those with yellow lines are reserved for residents; and those with white lines (invariably the furthest away) are free.



View from Montepulciano, a city of panoramic views

Montepulciano changed hands a number of times between Florence and Siena in the early days of its history, finally passing permanently to Florence in 1511. The Florentine rulers immediately set about making their mark by bringing in their most distinguished architects to build a large number of grand palazzi (some 60-70 years before the construction of neighbouring Pienza). The main square, the Piazza Grande, is one of the most attractive in the Senese, with its honey-coloured renaissance palazzi and town hall. None of the churches is outstanding, but most are worth a quick look (the main churches now have QR codes by their main works of art). The greatest architectural treasure is just outside the town, the temple of St Blaise. The town's other great treasure is its heady, heavy red wine, the *Vino Nobile di Montepulciano*, said by many to be among the best in Italy.

If on a day trip, it is best to start with the town proper, and visit St Blaise (San Biagio) (which is open all day) on the way out.

Fortezza

If you start at the top end of the town, you will pass the Fortezza with its peaceful and shady garden. There was a castle here already in the eighth century called the Castello Politiano (otherwise Pulciano, leading to the name Montepulciano). It was on the site of a Roman Temple of Mercury, and before then an Etruscan settlement. The Fortezza was rebuilt by the Sienese in the 13th century and subsequently again destroyed and restored at various periods, so it is now a bit of a mongrel. It usually houses a free temporary exhibition of some sort.

Piazza Grande

The Piazza Grande, at the top end of the town close to the Fortezza, is marred only by the unfinished façade and ugly campanile of the Duomo occupying one side of the square (although the campanile is actually 15th century and earlier than the rest of the Duomo, it looks more like a hideous remnant of Mussolini's time). The Palazzo Comunale, the town hall, occupies another side of the square. It started life as a 13th century gothic structure, but was given a makeover by the Florentines in the 15th and 16th centuries, adding a tower so as to resemble the Palazzo della Signoria in Florence. The diminutive terrace below the tower is open to the public (small charge). Enter by the main door and take the stairs up to the left. There are the usual panoramic views over the surrounding countryside.



Palazzo Comunale

On the other side of the square stands the Palazzo Cantucci (now selling local wines), one of the best Florentine palaces. The bottom part was built by Sangallo the Elder (1455-1534), one of the architects who was sent by the Florentines to fortify and embellish the town after it

passed into their hands. The top floor was added later. The best building on the square is opposite the Duomo: the Palazzo Tarugi, also by Sangallo, with a grandiose baroque travertine façade, unfortunately marred by the filling in of the arches on the top floor to create more rooms. Sangallo also designed the well in front of the Palazzo, which must count as one of the most attractive wells anywhere, with its Florentine lions and Medici pawnbroker's balls matched by the Montepulciano griffon. Next to the Palazzo Tarugi stands the older but much restored Palazzo del Capitano del Popolo – Gothic windows to be seen clearly on the side going down the via Ricci.



A most beautiful well-head

The Duomo

Usually open all day.

From the outside, the Duomo (built in the early 16th century) is disappointing, with its unfinished, raw-looking façade – it seems that the distinguished Florentine architects were being kept too busy building palazzi to get round to the churches. But it has an elegant classical interior, giving an impression of coolness and space. It contains several paintings and sculptures of interest. On either side of the main door there are tombs surmounted by the figures of their occupants. The most distinguished is on the left and is by Michelozzo di Bartolomeo Michelozzi (1396–1472), another of the Renaissance artists (he was both architect and sculptor) favoured by the Florentine Medici family. The subject is Bartolomeo Aragazzi, secretary to Pope Martin V. He is portrayed in gleaming Carrara marble, with a wonderful characterful face beneath a deep hood. The tomb was originally a much larger and no doubt wonderful structure that was broken up in the 1600s; the fragments were rediscovered only in the 19th century. Other fragments of it are to be found around the church – two bas-reliefs on the pillars of the nave nearest the door; the two marble statues of virtues on either side of the altar; the statue of (probably) Christ to the right of the altar; and the beautiful marble frieze immediately above the main altar table. Two other statues from the tomb are in the Victoria and Albert Museum in London.



Tomb of Bartolomeo Aragazzi

In the first chapel of the left hand aisle, there is a good polychrome terracotta altar (1512) by Andrea della Robbia, portraying saints Stephen, Bonaventura, Catherine and Bernardino. On either side there are strongly carved statues of St Peter and St John the Baptist, attributed to Tino di Camaino (1280-1337), the Siennese sculptor who responsible for much of the work on the Duomo at Pisa; and below there is an elegant 14th century marble font. Further along in the same aisle, between the third and fourth pillars, there is a charming painting of the Madonna and Child – the Child with red hair and a beautifully painted robe – by Sano di Pietro (1406-81). Over the main altar there is a tryptich (1401) of the assumption by the Siennese artist Taddeo di Bartolo (commissioned during one of the periods of Siennese domination). Immensely colourful and crammed with figures, it gives a splendid glittering impression from afar, but is a bit of a muddle closer to unless one has binoculars to study the detail.

Museum

A little way down the via Ricci, in a red-brick gothic Siennese palazzo, there is a small picture gallery, the Museo Civico, with some Siennese paintings (not of tremendous interest), open 09.30-13.00 and 15.00-18.00 except Monday.

The Corso and the other churches

The main shopping street of the town is the Corso, or more properly successively via Voltaia nel Corso and via Gracciano nel Corso, running from the Fortezza at the top of the town down to the Porta al Prato. It is situated well below the Piazza Grande and to reach it from the Piazza one needs to go steeply down to the end of via del Teatro, next to the Palazzo Cantucci.

The church on the right about half-way down the Corso, **Gesu**, has a baroque interior, although money appears to have run out when they got to the side altars which have trompe

l'oeil pillars, and it has yet another unfinished façade. Further on, also on the right going down, is the huge and grim **Palazzo Cervino**, now the headquarters of a bank. It was built in the heaviest possible rusticated style on one of Sangallo's off-days for the future unlucky Pope Marcellus II (whose family name was Cervini) – unlucky because he died only 22 days after becoming Pope in April 1555, leading all Popes for the next four hundred years to avoid taking a name with a II in it.

A bit further down, by the pretty **Loggia del Grano** (1570), the Corso forks left and goes down to the church of Sant' Agostino (about 1427), the only church with a really fine marble façade, trying to be purely classical but betraying the odd Gothic touch still: pointed arches and the ghosts of crockets in low relief above the door. Its designer was the Florentine architect and aculptor Michelozzo (1396-1472), who also made the terra cotta relief of the Madonna and Child over the door. It has an attractive classical interior, but with so much else to see, it is not worth lingering. Opposite the church, there is a medieval tower with a grotesque commedia dell'arte figure of a clown who strikes the hours, more reminiscent of Germany than Italy.



The clock-tower

Other churches include **Santa Lucia** with an attractive travertine façade and inside, behind a grill on the right of the right hand altar, a rather beautiful tender-faced Madonna by Luca Signorelli (1441-1523); **Sant'Agnese** outside the Porta al Prato; and **Santa Maria dei Servi** the other end of town behind the Fortezza.

Tempio di San Biagio



San Biagio seen from the town

The temple (in fact a normal church) of St Blaise, just outside the town, is one of the best buildings of the high Renaissance anywhere in Italy. In the form of a Greek cross, it was built of honey-coloured stone by Antonio Sangallo the Elder between 1518 and 1534 and is generally considered his master-work. Its beautifully carved interior encompasses almost every classical motif which the Renaissance drew from ancient Greece and Rome – rather like a text-book exercise in Renaissance design. Proportion and symmetry are all, marred only by the failure to complete the second tower - what was it about the inhabitants of Montepulciano that made them incapable of completing their churches? – and the baroque angels high above the main altar, who are dangling their feet over the arch below in a charming but most unclassical way. There is a good echo, especially from the central point beneath the dome. The only thing remaining from the previous church on the site is the rather battered 14th century fresco of Virgin, Child and St Francis immediately above the main altar – it had a reputation for working miracles, so was given pride of place in the new church.

The beauty of the church is enhanced by its setting, unusually for Italy in the middle of a green field with a well and a nearby loggia (the Canons' house), dating from about the same time as the church.



The Canons' house