

CHARTERHOUSE (CERTOSA) OF PONTIGNANO

A former Carthusian monastery in the Chianti with impressive cloisters.

The monastery is a few kilometres north-east out of Siena along a well-marked turning off the via Chiantigiana, the main road from Siena to Gaiole in Chianti – quite complicated to get to from Barontoli, but worth a visit if you are in the Chianti area. After parking in the visitors' car-park, go to the reception and ask to visit the cloisters. They may ask for one of the party to leave a passport or other identity document, and will then press a button allowing access to the cloisters. The reception desk is open all day if a conference is taking place, but may close for lunch at other times.

This former Benedictine monastery (also sometimes known as the Certosa di San Pietro), set in an olive grove, was founded in 1343. Its position outside Siena's city walls made it vulnerable to attack by marauding Florentines. In 1554 it was sacked after having been captured by British and German mercenaries fighting for Florence. The present Renaissance style buildings were those erected in the decades after the sacking. It continued operating as a monastery until 1810, when it was formally closed and its land and property sold off. The buildings (but not the church) now belong to the University of Siena, and it is used as a conference centre, with delegates being accommodated in the former monks' cells, updated to have en-suite bathrooms. It also offers hotel accommodation.

The buildings consist mainly of two large cloisters. The cloisters are surrounded by the cells of the monks in a typical Carthusian fashion – the Carthusians are a closed order and the monks spend most of their time in their cells in contemplative prayer. The first or main cloister is the smaller of the two, but is grander and was where the full members of the Order lived. Lesser fry in the form of lay brethren and new acolytes lived round the second, larger cloister. Both cloisters retain remains of trompe-l'oeil frescos of colonnades which must once have looked very fine.



The main cloister

The monks' refectory, complete with the standard fresco of the Last Supper, is now the main conference room. Opposite the entrance to the main cloister there is a central door leading to a loggia overlooking a well-tended formal "Italian Garden", in which the former monks' fishponds or water-tanks can be seen.



The Italian Garden

There is a door off the main cloister into St Peter, the former monks' church. The church belongs to the parish, so is nothing to do with the University, but the door is often open. The church seems to have survived the sack and externally retains its medieval character. Inside it was richly decorated in the late 16th-early 17th centuries with lots of wood and marble carving, and above all the walls and ceiling were completely covered with frescoes, mostly dating from 1579, of the life of Christ and his Mother, and of the history of the Carthusian order and its founder St Bruno.

2016