

SAN GIMIGNANO

A small and immensely attractive walled town known for its many towers. Also many wonderful works of art.



Photo via Wikimedia

From Barontoli, the best way to San Gimignano is via Colle Val d'Elsa. As one winds across the hills, the magical sight of San Gimignano with its towers on its hill-top keeps appearing and disappearing tantalizingly. The best car-park is Parccheggio No. 2, by Porta San Giovanni, the main entrance to the walled old city; if that is full, there are others round the walls (the old city within the walls is quite small, so it does not matter too much where one goes in).

“San Gimignano of the beautiful towers” certainly bristles with towers – D.H. Lawrence likened it to an angry porcupine, but the fifteen or so towers there today are but a small proportion of the seventy two standing in the Middle Ages, when families vied with each other to build bigger and better ones. It is one of the most visited places in Tuscany and is almost always crowded with tourists, but still manages to retain its charm. The many tourist shops are on the whole untatty and of reasonable quality. It is named after St Germiniano, a fourth century bishop of Modena who is said to have protected the area from the Huns who were invading Italy.

The wealth of the town came from the wool trade and at one time San Gimignano was very wealthy indeed. Uncomfortably placed near several warring cities in the Guelph-Ghibellene wars, the town decided that Florence was likely to be its best protector and the citizens decided “to give themselves in perpetuity” to Florence in 1352.

From the Porta S.Giovanni, one walks up the via S.Giovanni to the attractive Piazza Cisterna with its well-head. After a coffee in one of the cafes or an ice-cream from the “Gelato world Champion” (a tiny shop reputed to make the best ice-creams in Tusacany), walk on up to the next piazza, with the Palazzo Pubblico on one side and the Collegiata (the main church) at right angles to it. There is no doubt that these are the main sights of the town. But while they are open all day, the other “must”, San Agostino, is shut between 12 and 3 pm, so we suggest you go there first. What follows describes San Agostino in some detail, but gives only a cursory description of the other main monuments as they are well covered by the guidebooks.

San Agostino

From the Piazza, go down the via Matteo, and turn right just before you reach the walls (there is a sign to the church). The brick exterior of the large single-aisled gothic church is plain, and the architecture of its interior spare, but it contains a number of interesting works of art and also has a plain but attractive cloister.

To the left of the entrance, behind an iron grill, there is a rather beautiful marble altar to San Bartolo, a local saint who devoted himself to the welfare of the city's lepers (the leprosarium was in the village of Cellole) and himself died of the disease. It took the Florentine sculptor Benedetto da Maiano (1442-1497) two years to complete in the 1490s. The statues at the top are the theological virtues; the predella at the bottom shows (from left to right) the saint's big toe falling off from his disease; his death; and the saint casting out a demon. On the side wall a fresco by the High Renaissance painter Sebastiano Mainardi (1460-1513) portrays San Gimignano holding the city on a little tray; Saint Lucy with the sword in her throat by which she was martyred; and St Nicholas of Bari. Mainardi also painted the attractive fresco near the entrance to the cloister, portraying San Gimignano blessing three of the city's leading citizens.

There are a number of other paintings and frescoes of varying interest, but the real glory of the church is the cycle of frescoes behind the main altar painted by the Florentine Benozzo Gozzoli (1421-1497), recording the life of St Augustine of Hippo (354-430). This is probably Benozzo's greatest work after his frescoes in the Riccardi Chapel in Florence. Augustine was born and brought up in Tunisia, then a Roman province, moved to Europe and became one of the great doctors of the church and founders of Christian philosophy.

The cycle, painted in the 1460s, begins on the bottom left of the left hand wall and goes all the way round the bottom row of pictures:

1. St Augustine being entrusted to the master of the school in his home town of Tagaste by his anxious father and mother (St Monica) and handed over to the master – who is seen beating a boy on the right hand side of the painting, while a slightly older Augustine dutifully studies a book.
2. The now teenaged Augustine being admitted to university in Carthage (damaged).
3. (on the back wall). His mother St Monica is shown praying and then blessing her son as he takes ship to Rome.
4. (centre of back wall). The ship taking him to Rome.
5. Being greeted on disembarking at Ostia.
6. (round the corner). A visibly older Augustine is seen teaching a not very attentive-looking lot of people in Rome.
7. Augustine leaving for Milan, where he is going to take up a position as a teacher of rhetoric. The figure on the right is thought to be a self-portrait of the artist. This is one of the best frescoes of the cycle.



Detail

8. Whereas the bottom row showed Augustine's education, teaching and journeys, the next row up, again beginning at the far left, shows his path to the Christian faith. The first fresco shows him arriving in Milan and being helped off with his riding boots; on the right he is being greeted by St Ambrose, Bishop of Milan and – as long with St Augustine – one of the four original Doctors of the Church.
9. St Augustine listening to St Ambrose, who appears to have been largely responsible for his conversion to Christianity (his mother was a Christian, but he does not appear to have become serious about it until then. He had earlier flirted with Manicheism).
10. The next scene, on the back wall, shows a pivotal moment in the life of St Augustine. He is sitting in a garden when a voice commands him to "take up the book and read". The book is the Bible and the passage he reads is from the Epistle in which St Paul enjoins the Romans "Make not provision for the flesh, to fulfil the lusts thereof". Thenceforth, the somewhat hedonistic Augustine's life is transformed.
11. St Augustine is baptized by St Ambrose.
12. St Augustine's next move was to found a monastic community and devote his life to God. The next scene "the parable of the Holy Trinity" shows him in his monkish robes in Tuscany (a probably apocryphal scene as there is no evidence he ever went to Tuscany).
13. The death of his mother St Monica.

The cycle then moves to the lunettes at the top. Again starting from the far left, the damaged fresco on the first wall show St Augustine blessing the faithful at Hippo. On the end wall, the little lunette to the left of the window shows St Augustine dressed as a bishop but with his monk's robes beneath, converting a heretic. On the other side of the window St Jerome is appearing in a vision to St Augustine. Finally, on the right wall, Augustine's death is portrayed.

The chapel on the right of the altar has an attractive set of frescoes by the Sienese artist Bartolo di Fredi (1330-1410) depicting the life of the Virgin.

Benozzo Gozzoli has left one more painting in the church – a large scene with St Sebastian, unusually fully clothed, painted to commemorate the end of a pestilence, on the left side of the church next to the pulpit.

The Collegiata (Duomo)

The Collegiata or Duomo, dedicated to San Galgano, is a plain Romanesque building on the outside, with two doors, one for men and one for women – in medieval times the sexes occupied different sides of the church. Within, however, it is covered with colour.

Tickets are needed to enter, from the office to the side of the church (you may be offered a combined ticket for the Collegiata and the small museum of Sacred Art – which is not the same as the Pinacoteca in the Palazzo Pubblico).



The Collegiata with the old town hall (now a museum) on the left.

The interior is almost entirely covered in frescoes. Leaflets are usually available identifying the scenes. Those on the left-hand wall are of Old Testament stories and are by the accomplished Sienese painter Bartolo di Fredi (1330-1410). At the very top, the story of the Creation and Adam and Eve is depicted. The next row continues the story with the expulsion from Eden, Cain and Abel, Abraham and Joseph. The bottom row includes the stories of Moses and of the unfortunate Job.

The right-hand wall was painted some 15 years later by the somewhat less accomplished Barna da Siena (active 1330-1350) with drama-filled scenes of the New Testament. The poor Barna, after he had finished the huge and wonderful crucifix that completes the cycle, fell from the scaffold and died.

To the right of the altar is the Chapel of Santa Fina. She was a young girl struck by an agonizing and incurable illness at the age of 10 (in 1248) who, for the five remaining years of her life, devoted herself to God and mortified her flesh still further by lying on a plank. The two beautiful frescoes in the Chapel, showing her deathbed and then her funeral, were painted in 1475 by Domenico Guirlandaio. The chapel and its fine altar are the work of the Florentine sculptors Giuliano and Benedetto da Maiano.



The well-attended funeral of Santa Fina by Domenico Guirlandaio

Palazzo del Popolo, Museo Civico and Pinacoteca

The Palazzo del Popolo, at right angles to the Collegiata, was the ancient town hall and now houses the Civic Museum and Pinacoteca, well worth a visit.

On the first floor there is the old Council Chamber, also known as the Sala Dante to commemorate the fact that Dante visited San Gimignano, and was probably received in this room, in 1300 as a Florentine Ambassador. The highlight of the room is the huge *Maiestà* on the inner wall, by Lippo Memmi (c.1285-1361). He was the brother-in-law of Simone Martini, and his *Maiestà* (or *Virgin in majesty with saints*) is clearly inspired by Simone Martini's *Maiestà* in the Palazzo Pubblico in Siena. Even the saints are almost all the same, although the four patron saint of Siena are absent and have been replaced in the front row by the commissioner of the painting (in handsome stripy robes). There is a particularly wild-haired and wild-eyed St John the Baptist. The two outermost figures on both sides (and the dog) were added later by Bartolo di Fredi.

On the next floor is a small but choice picture gallery or Pinacoteca. In particular, it contains a Crucifix of great power in a stylized Byzantine way by Coppo di Marcovaldo (c.1225-1276), one of the earliest Florentine painters. There are also tondi of the Annunciation by Filippino Lippi, painted in 1482-83, as well as high quality works by Benozzo Gozzoli, Pinturicchio and Taddeo di Bartolo – the latter represented by a triptych with scenes from the life of San Gimignano.

In a small side room of the stairs are some charming frescoes of wedding scenes, with the newly married couple playing together and sharing a bath.