

Guide to Siena and the Senese: www.siena-guide.com

SANTO SPIRITO; and the PISPINI FOUNTAIN AND GATE

A mainly classical church with good paintings by Sodoma, near one of Siena's grandest city gates. There are some interesting fortifications outside the gate.

To reach this church, follow via Pantaneto, the continuation of the Banchi di Sotto, down the hill and turn left into the via Pispini, just after the massive neo-classical façade of the church of San Giorgio. You will see the red-brick façade of Santo Spirito in front of you.



The church of Santo Spirito was originally built in the thirteenth century but its present interior is early sixteenth century and of typically elegant classical renaissance style, with symmetrical wide round arches and a large dome (not, however, a true dome architecturally speaking; as can be seen from the exterior, it is built inside a drum). Originally, the inside of the church probably had almost no decoration, but later in the baroque age stucco angels were attached to the sober classical lines, perching on ledges above the altar and providing an attractive asymmetry to the classical geometry of the church's bare architecture.

The church has a number of paintings of which the most interesting are the **Sodoma** pictures of saints above the altar in the first chapel on the right at the back of the church. The wishy-washy painting immediately above the altar in this chapel is not his, but most of the others show his vigorous style and were painted in 1530. On the left hand side of the chapel there is a good St Sebastian, and on the right is St Anthony the Abbot with his symbols of a bell on his wrist and a pig, a baby saddleback, at the bottom of the picture. At the top, St James of Compostella can be seen galloping over terrified Saracens. St James, one of the Apostles, died in 44 AD, many centuries before the Saracens appeared in Europe, but acquired a reputation in the early Middle Ages for returning in spirit form to help Christian armies fight the Saracens and Moors who were then invading the continent.

To the right of the main altar, behind a grill (light switch on the right) is an interesting crib scene with life-size figures of painted terracotta, allegedly by **Ambrogio della Robbia** (1554), one of the lesser members of the della Robbia clan. The statues have clearly been much repainted over the years, and the baby in particular looks far too romantic to have come from as far back as the sixteenth century. One of the shepherds is playing the bagpipes. (Bagpipes were according to one story introduced to Scotland by Italians from Cremona, who became the MacCrimmons, the hereditary pipers to the Clan MacLeod. In fact, bagpipes were probably a natural development in almost any society where animal skins were readily available.)

1980s.

Pispini Fountain and Gate

The pretty **Fontana dei Pispini** used to stand in front of Santo Spirito, but has recently been moved a few hundred yards further down the via Pispini, where it now stands opposite the church of San Gaetano, the church of the Contrada of the Shell or Nicchio (see the large shell above the church door). This fountain dates back to at least the 1400s, but was transformed into its present shape in 1536. The Shell *contrada* has adopted it as its official *contrada* fountain.



Fontana dei Pispini

A little further down, the via Pispini reaches the Gate of the same name, the **Porta dei Pispini**. It is a huge double gate, one of Siena's grandest, built in the 14th century in Siena's outer ring of walls (which were constructed when the city expanded out of the previous walls).



Porta Pispini

There were real threats to Siena in those days and the walls are solid constructions. Outside of the Porta Pispini, along on the left is the Fortino di Porta Pispini, the sole survivor of seven bastions designed by the great 16th century Siennese architect Baldassare Peruzzi to strengthen the defensive capacity of the wall.

