

COMMUNE OF SOVICILLE

The small town or large village of Sovicille, which gives its name to the commune (Council district) in which Barontoli lies, is of pretty limited interest. However, there are a number of places nearby that are worth visiting if one is staying in the neighbourhood, the cloister at Torri being the star.

Pieve (parish church) of Ponte allo Spino

Romanesque church amid fields

This most attractive Romanesque church, all that remains of a former abbey, arises amid fields at a crossroads on the route from Barontoli to Sovicille. Although it is called a parish church, it is now only used for the occasional wedding and other special occasion and is usually closed. The woman who lives at the far end of the courtyard next door to the church has a key and will open it for visitors.

The church dates from the 12th century and is built of the most beautiful golden stone in a standard three-aisle basilica form. Its façade is decorated with bas-reliefs of strange beasts – a dragon on one side and an even stranger beast being led on a lead on the other side. There are also good carved capitals inside, the best (with figures) immediately inside the door. The others mainly have geometric shapes reminiscent of Celtic designs (there were Celtic settlements in the area in earlier times).

The remains of the cloister next door have recently been excavated and some Roman mosaics have apparently been found, although not yet viewable.



Ponte allo Spino

Ponte della Pia and Abbey of Santa Lucia

An ancient bridge and a ruined monastery in the woods, or a woodland walk with ruins thrown in.

About 13 km from Barontoli. Drive along the SS73 through Rosia. About 3km after leaving Rosia, the Ponte della Pia is on your left spanning the stream bed. There are small spaces next to the road in which to park on your left just before the bridge or on your right just beyond the bridge. But care needs to be taken on the road as the traffic can be fast and also on the bridge as it has no sides.



Ponte Pia

Ponte della Pia is a hump-backed bridge over the Rosia 'torrente' (ie stream), a tributary of the Merse. It dates probably from Roman times. Cross the bridge and take the trail up the hill to the right. The paving stones of this ancient path are believed to be of Etruscan origin.

About 500 metres along the trail there a small tower on your left. Just before the tower make a sharp dog-leg turn to your left if you want to visit the ruins of the abbey or hermitage of Santa Lucia, which dates from the 12-13th centuries and retains traces of Gothic windows. The abbey was abandoned by the monks in the late eighteenth century and became a farmhouse, which doubtless accounts for the many fire-places in the building, untypical of the austere monastic life. The farmhouse was in its turn abandoned at the end of the 19th century. There is usually a wealth of wild flowers here, but be careful of the large potholes around the building; and also of broken floors if you venture within the building.

For a longer walk, without pot-holes, instead of turning left up towards Santa Lucia at the tower, simply continue along the original trail. It ascends gently and almost indefinitely through the woods, following the course of the Rosia torrente (we have only explored a couple of miles along: it is said ultimately to lead to San Galgano).

Rosia

A sprawling village about 10 kilometres from Barontoli on the Siena-Roccastrada road, with a tiny Romanesque church.



The ancient church (St John the Baptist or St Peter) is a simple and unpretentious structure with an elegant Romanesque Lombard campanile (the oldest part of the church). It dates from the 11th or 12th century but was substantially reconstructed in the 14th. Above the altar there is an agreeable fifteenth century triptych with Madonna and child with two saints by Guidoccio Cozzarelli (1450-1516). There are also some remains of frescoes; and a pretty marble font dated 1332 next to the entrance. The font is unusual in being rectangular, with a bas-relief of Jesus being baptized by St John the Baptist, attended by five angels. There used also to be a fine wooden statue of St John the Baptist by Domenico di Niccolò dei Cori (1363-1453). However, the Ministry of Cultural Goods decided that it was at too much risk in a small village church, and removed it to the Pinacoteca in Siena – all that is left in the church is a photograph of their lost treasure.

1989 and revised 2013

TEGOIA and MOLLI

Fabulous views and good walks.

About 15 km from Barontoli. Go to Sovicille and follow signs first to Ancaiano and then to Tegoia.

Tegoia is the hill village that you see overlooking Barontoli from the hills to the west. It has perhaps the most spectacular views over Siena of anywhere in the neighbourhood. It also provides the point of departure for an interesting walk to the hamlet of Molli, now almost deserted but with a small Romanesque 'pieve' (parish church). The church is often shut, and even when open it is of limited interest. So this is an expedition for the views and the walks rather than the art.

Drive through the village of Tegoia, pausing to admire the extraordinary views on the right. Park at one of the widenings on the dirt road beyond (you can drive all the way up to Molli but it is pretty bumpy). Then walk up the dirt road, keeping to the right at the fork, and after about 1½ kilometres you will come to the small cluster of buildings that is Molli. The church, at the top on the right, is a very simple 11th century structure. Its cemetery (which is still used) is another 300 metres along the ridge.

In Molli, you are on the crest of the main ridge of the mountains with fine views in several directions. If you want to walk further, you can either go on beyond the cemetery, or return to the fork below Molli for a gently contoured path through the woods that takes you onto the western flank of the mountains, i.e. the side invisible from Barontoli.

The area round Molli was the scene of much partisan action during the last war, and memorials to those shot by the Nazis are scattered around.



Memorial near Molli to a partisan shot in 1944

1992

TORRI

An exquisite mini-cloister.

About 10 km from Barontoli. Drive through Rosia and turn left at the end of the village. Torri is well signposted from there on. On the final approach road to the village, it is best to take the right fork (via Carlo Costa) to avoid having to drive through the extremely narrow village street. Open 9.00-12.00 on Mondays and Fridays only. Free.



Torri is a picturesque hill village with stone-paved streets. It was the site of the Benedictine monastery of St Mustiola, dating from the 11th century and active until 1682 when it was taken over by the state and sold. All that remains of the abbey today is a small basilica-shaped 12th century church of only moderate interest, usually shut, and the tiny but exquisite Romanesque cloister, now part of a private house. The buildings are right at the top of the village, through a low arch. Ring the bell at the door at the end to enter the cloister.

The lower arcade of the cloister is 11th or 12th century with black and white Siense stripes and interesting capitals, different on each column. Immediately opposite the entrance the biblical scenes represented on the capitals include Adam and Eve and the serpent (note on the side of the capital the angel with a shining sword guarding the way into the Garden of Eden). A neighbouring capital portrays the history of Cain and Abel with on one side the brothers offering their rival sacrifices to God, who shows his preference by pointing at the lamb offered by Abel rather than Cain's sheaves, while on another side Cain is killing Abel. Another capital shows Noah's Ark, with the dove returning empty-beaked on one side and then returning with the olive branch on the other.

Other capitals have allegorical figures. The dove eating grapes alludes to divine grace; the bee-hive is the symbol of orderly human society under the supreme authority of God; the double-tailed mermaid represents the attraction of evil; the axe embedded in a piece of wood is probably the emblem of a local corporation.

The upper arcade of the cloister is of wood and dates from the 14th-15th century. On emerging from the cloister, note the trompe l'oeil painted windows on the building opposite the church – this is a fairly frequent Siense effect.

On the right of the entrance to the cloister stands the Romanesque-gothic church of the Holy Trinity and St Mustiola (an obscure Roman martyr), with an elegant carved doorway. If the church is open, the inside is worth a glance. It is entirely striped like Siena cathedral (possibly a 19th century addition), and has a handsome Romanesque altar in which some bones are kept in a reliquary. They were dug up near the church during a restoration, and nobody knows if they belong to a saint or a sinner. The painting of the Madonna and Child above the altar is by the Siennese painter Luca di Tomme' (1356-1390).



Interior of the church at Torri.

Note also the trompe l'oeil painted windows on the building opposite the church – this is a fairly frequent Siennese effect.

Revised 1990s and 2013.