

I'll take the slow road

How do you find the heart of Tuscany – and avoid the tourists? Follow the pilgrims' path, says **James Rippingale**

The one thing more sublime than Tuscan sun is Tuscan shade. It's midday, white hot, cloudless. In these moments, the shadow cast by a line of poplars is worth more than water.

I'm here to walk a 72-mile stretch of the Via Francigena, one of Europe's oldest pilgrim paths. The Via begins at Canterbury Cathedral and winds for 1,200 miles, through France and Switzerland, to the Basilica in Rome. Trodden for nearly 13 centuries, it's a testament to the pilgrims' faith.

My five-day route would take me from Lucca to Siena. The former is a great introduction to the region: baroque buildings, sweeping piazzas, fountains. The composer Puccini was born here. His house, now a museum, is across from the Piazza Citadella.

I set out early along the sunbaked

route. It takes just a few hours to reach Altopascio.

"Pilgrim, sit, sit." My

backpack is taken, and a glass of cold water and a hunk of bread thrust into my hands. It feels like a pilgrim's welcome. I ask the hotel receptionist, Antonio, what the Via Francigena will be like tomorrow, on the way to San Miniato.

"You don't worry," he says. "Tomorrow is a beautiful day." From Altopascio to my next hotel, the path twists up

For locals, the piazza is their lounge, the benches their sofas, the people their TV

a series of sandy tracks, banded by deep evergreens. I pass a ramshackle house where an old woman pulls feathers from a huge chicken.

She is the first person I've seen in hours.

The panorama from San Miniato, which I reach at about 3.30pm, is profoundly invigorating. The Arno, Elga and Elsa valleys sprawl

lazily beneath it.

I can see the Via Francigena, a straight white line between hillsides and cornfields towards the sleepy town of Gambassi Terme. This is Tuscany as the Romans would have seen it.

After another couple of days on the path, I reach a small sign saying Chianti. Walking through these world-famous vineyards, where men with scythes hack at the undergrowth, it's hard to connect them to that other, well-manicured world of neatly etched wine lists.

The one substantial climb on the route is to the Unesco-listed village of San Gimignano, which can be explored in an hour or so, while the sun is too high for walking.

Afterwards, I make for Colle di Val d'Elsa. At 4pm, I reach it and sit among the columns of the Piazza Arnolfo with a glass of chianti. For locals, the piazza is their lounge, the little benches their sofas, and the people out strolling their television.

On the last morning, the route flattens out and the air cools. A series of ambling wheatfields lead up to Siena. I reach the car-free city by lunchtime, the Via Francigena entering it through the hulking stone gate of Porta Camollia. It's an exciting



hive of activity, especially against a four-day backdrop of space and silence.

A flight of swallows wheels over the Duomo.

Carlotta, who runs my hotel, jokes: "The swallows could make your trip in one hour."

Even so, looking out past Siena, I feel the urge to keep going. At times, walking the route is like something out of step with this century. I see long virgin hillsides and a milky blue lake in the distance. And I think that it could well be true: maybe all roads still lead to Rome.

THE BRIEF

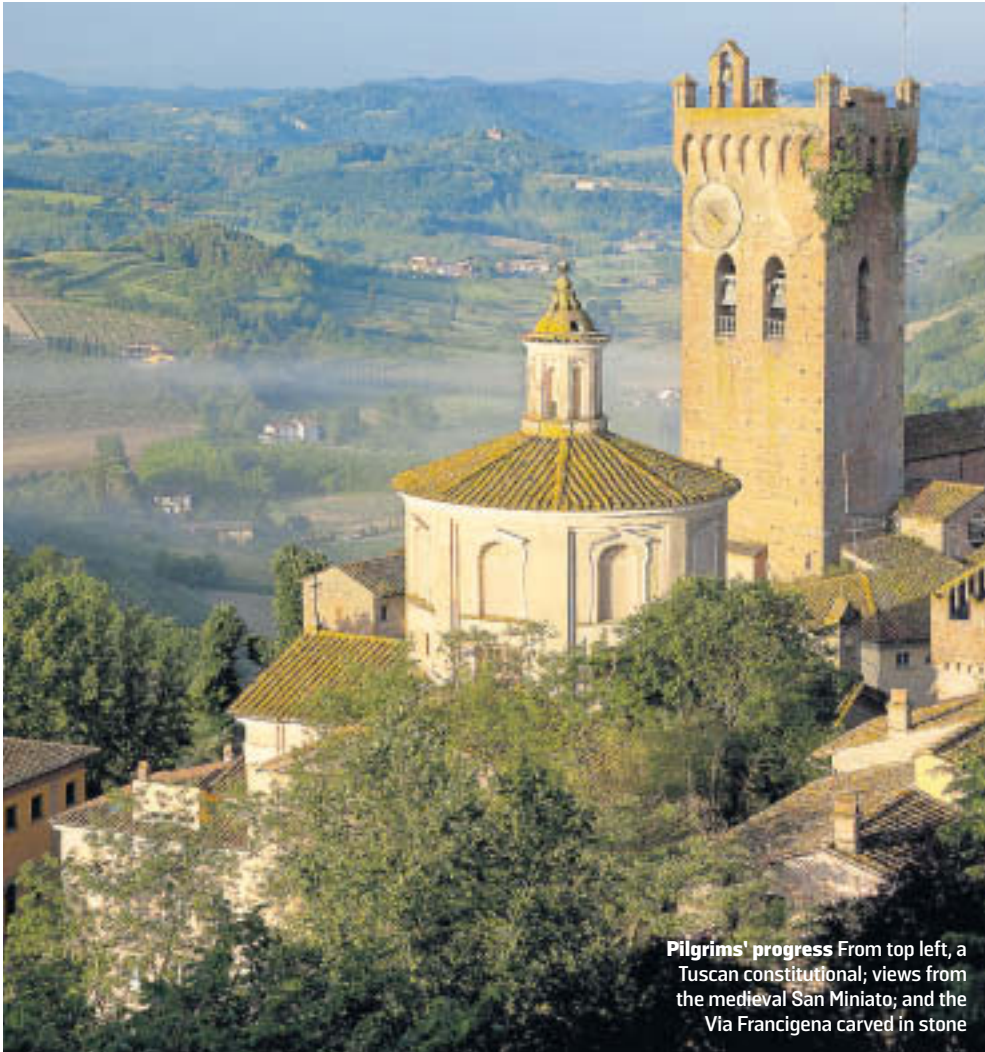
FLIGHTS British Airways and easyJet fly to Pisa. The bus to Lucca takes 40 minutes.
HOTELS In Lucca, Hotel Universo (universolucca.com; doubles from €118) has views over the Piazza del

Giglio. In Altopascio, try the minimalist Cavalieri del Tau (cavalierideltau.it; doubles from €80). Hotel San Miniato (hotelsanminiato.com; doubles from €89) has hilltop views. In Gambassi Terme, pick Villa della Certosa (villadellacertosa.it; doubles from €98). For a modernist stay in Colle di Val d'Elsa, it's La Vecchia Carteria (www.lavecchiacarteria.it; doubles from €54). Siena's Hotel Albergo Bernini (albergobernini.com; doubles from €65) has a great terrace.
PACKAGE Camino Ways (00 44 20 3468 1516, caminoways.com) runs trips along many sections of the Via Francigena. Prices for Lucca to Siena start at €593pp for six nights, half-board, including luggage transfers but not flights.



Danita Dellmont, Heinz Wohner, DeAgostini/Getty, Alessandro Caponio





Pilgrims' progress From top left, a Tuscan constitutional; views from the medieval San Miniato; and the Via Francigena carved in stone



