

BACKSTAGE SIENA

Siena is one of those cities, if not THE city, that all visitors to Florence for more than one day seems to end up in. As always is, the hurried sightseer trying frantically to tick off all the stuff on his list, makes a bee line for the Piazza del Campo and then sits patiently in line to enter the dramatic and unique Cathedral, after which, if his or her energy is not completely burned out he or she still manage to muster up a bit of strength to go to the Baptistry or to visit the great Duccio Maestà and of course climb the stairs to the vertigo heights of the unfinished arch of the intended Cathedral....

All this is very easy and self explanatory once you get to Siena itself. However there are a couple of places that will slip by un-noticed unless you are told. So, we have chosen to tell you which they are. If on the other hand you are first time visitors to Siena and wish for a more conventional trip, don't be embarrassed and just do all the things we have listed above!

Pinacoteca di Siena, Via di San Pietro 29. (Open Tues-Sat 8.15-19.15, Sun 8.15-13.15, Mon 8.30-13.30. Entrance ticket 4 Euro)

For those visiting Florence it is almost mandatory to visit Siena before they tackle Uffizi or Accademia if they wish to get the sense of the impact of the Renaissance. Siena's Golden age of painting was most definitely before the outburst of Renaissance in Florence and the Sieneese artists though so close to the flourishing city nearby, somehow failed to catch onto the wave of evolution and continued to produce works in the Gothic style, exquisite and beautiful but destined to be surpassed. The Pinacoteca houses a wonderful collection of *fondi oro* (gold based paintings) and the most spectacular selection of pictures by Sieneese artists.

Starting with the wonderfully naïve altarpieces by the Maestro di San Pietro (notice how the bottom edge of the panel is ruined by the feet of the priest kicking against the altar-cover) continue through the rooms dedicated to **Duccio di Buonisegna** (the artist who deeply influenced almost all the Sieneese artists to come), to the **Lorenzetti** brothers, **Simone Martini** (his is the wonderful Madonna of Mercy with all humanity under her mantle!), or the Birth of the Virgin by **Giovanni Fei**, full of tartan materials (in the Uffizi do not miss Simone Martini's annunciation with a similar tartan motif!) to continue with the artists of the Quattrocento (compare them to what was happening in Florence!) **Matteo di Giovanni** with his innumerable Madonnas and Child with the liquid eyes and **Domenico di Bartolo**.

Many of the works inside the Pinacoteca belong indeed to the Ospedale di Santa Maria alla Scala, an extraordinary institution opposite the Cathedral steps which we shall visit next.

Ospedale di Santa Maria alla Scala. On the Cathedral square opposite the entrance doors of the Duomo. (Open every day from 10.30 to 18.30. Entrance ticket 6 Euro)

The history of the Hospital of Santa Maria alla Scala and that of the city are closely intertwined and indeed the great institution, at the same time hospital, orphanage, pilgrim hostel, in many ways was responsible for the off-set of many of Siena's prime activities such as the famous Monte dei Paschi bank.

Two words must be spent on the recent history of the building. Until 1982 this was indeed the Hospital of Siena, with its wards, its dissection room, kitchens and the likes. In that year it was decided to evacuate the hospital to a newer more functional building and it was in 1997 after a competition to assign the transformation of the building, that work began.

Siena was conveniently placed along what is known as the Via Francigena or French way, an ideal route which would take pilgrims from Canterbury to Rome and then in some cases all the way to Jerusalem. Around the year 900 AD the canons of the Cathedral founded the hostel to welcome

pilgrims, distribute alms to the poor, and take in abandoned children. The institution grew rapidly to the point of becoming administrated by laymen in the 15th century.

Many artists worked in Santa Maria alla Scala and today step by step parts of the building are being re-opened and made visible to the general public. One of the most impressive exhibits is the Pellegrinaio or Pilgrims hostel. Many examples exist throughout Europe, (it is sufficient to remember Beaune in France), but this magnificent room has the bonus of these splendidly restored frescos by several artists, the most famous and most successful of which was **Domenico di Bartolo**. His depiction of the several roles of the hospital is excellently described on the illustration panels below and is well worth reading. Notice the moving panel dedicated to the curing of the sick (the doctor observes the patient's urine with a critical look!), the confession of the dying and the abundance of detail in the decoration, the textiles. This truly is a masterpiece.

Further down the corridor is the Old Sacristy of the Church that during Hospital years was the dissection room for the medicine students.

On the lower level of the building it is well worth visiting the archaeological museum (the access if from the door on the side of the square) and the eerie Oratorio of Santa Caterina della Notte, the night chapel in which the atmosphere of suffering from past ages is still more than palpable.

Before leaving it is important that one should realise what a vital role the Ospedale played within the city and in the surrounding countryside. The institution was self-sufficient thanks to the produce that came from the farms it owned across the Sienese countryside. The system of the monks to "permit" pilgrims to deposit their valuables to be picked up on their return journeys from Rome and Jerusalem (which most often did not happen), set the basis for a baking system which in Siena found its roots.

The multi-faceted recuperation project is fascinating and will permit visitors to return time and time again to discover new elements in the huge hospital building.

Archivio di Stato. Museo della Biccherna. Via Banchi di Sotto 52 within the Palazzo Piccolomini. (Open from Mon-Sat., with entrances at 9.30-10.30 and 11.30. Entrance free.)

This delightful collection, now transformed into a permanent exhibit, assembles together the front-covers of the accounts books of the city of Siena, from 1257 to 1659. It had become a tradition to ask important artists (famous, yet poorly paid!) to decorate the books which every six months were drawn up. For those who have visited the Pinacoteca it will be interesting to see the work of many of the same artists on these small masterpieces. The account books have been a valuable tool in the hands of art historians who thanks to the fact that the payments to the artists themselves were recorded were able to discover the names of those who had simply been nicknamed in an effort to classify their work.

A couple of words on timing.

Given that the Museo della Biccherna closes in the afternoon, we strongly suggest that you start early if possible, with the Pinacoteca, to go on to the 11.30 entrance to the Archives. Take a break for lunch and continue after lunch with the Ospedale di Santa Maria Alla Scala.

Concerning lunch we strongly recommend a little restaurant on the Via del Porrione (standing on the Piazza del Campo and facing to Palazzo Pubblico, a little road on the left on the corner with the Palazzo Piccolomini where the archives are). The food is excellent and here you will find mostly Siennese eating. **Osteria le Logge, Via del Porrione. Siena Tel. 0577-48013. There are many other restaurants of course and if you are fixed on eating on the Piazza del Campo, go for Alla Speranza.**