

Cortona



Cortona is an ancient Etruscan city high above the Umbrian plain, and is famous in the States for being the site of the villa of Frances Mayes, author of *Under The Tuscan Sun*. Cortona is steep and instead of a central piazza it has two smaller ones. It's got a great view of Lago Trasimeno, which actually looks swimmable from that distance. Another perennial Cortona favorite: Dusty Etruscan Bits, which you'll find scattered all around town. Jokes aside, it's a great pick for a cute daytrip, and the recently-renovated Etruscan Museum is a winner with its bilingual information and artfully laid-out exhibits.

GETTING THERE FROM PERUGIA



BY BUS -- Not worth it: take the train.



BY TRAIN -- Cortona is an easy 45 minute, €3.15 ride. Get off at Cortona-Camucia and quickly by a ticket for the local bus up to the center in the station's tabacco shop/café. It will be waiting for you out in front of the station.



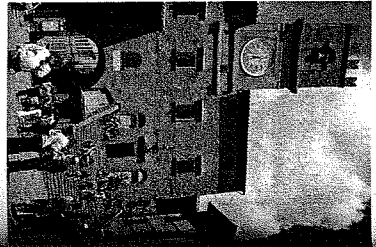
LEARN MORE -- Tourist Office: Via Nazionale, 42.

Cortona

Cortona blankets a 1,700-foot hill surrounded by dramatic Tuscan and Umbrian views. Frances Mayes' books, such as *Under the Tuscan Sun*, have placed this town in the touristic limelight, just as Peter Mayle's books popularized the Luberon region in France. But long before Mayes ever published a book, Cortona was popular with Romantics and considered one of the classic Tuscan hill towns. Unlike San Gimignano, Cortona maintains a rustic and gritty personality—even with its long history of foreigners who, enamored with its Tuscan charm, made this their adopted home.

The city began as one of the largest Etruscan settlements, the remains of which can be seen at the base of the city walls, as well as in the nearby tombs. (Also see "Under the Etruscan Sun" on page 828 in the Italian History chapter.) It grew to its present size in the 13th to 16th centuries, when it was a colorful and crowded city, eventually allied with Florence. The farmland that fills almost every view from the city was marshy and uninhabitable until about 200 years ago, when it was drained and turned into some of Tuscany's most fertile land.

Art-lovers know Cortona as the home of Renaissance painter Luca Signorelli, Baroque master Pietro da Cortona (Berrettini), and the 20th-century Futurist artist Gino Severini. The city's museums and churches reveal many of the works of these native sons.



ORIENTATION

Most of the main sights, shops, and restaurants cluster around the level streets on the Piazza Garibaldi–Piazza del Duomo axis, but Cortona will have you huffing and puffing up some steep hills.

Tourist Information: The helpful TI is on the main drag at Via Nazionale 42 (April–Oct daily 9:00–13:00 & 15:00–19:00, shorter hours and closed Sun off-season, sells train and bus tickets, tel. 0575-630-352, www.apr.arezzo.it).

Arrival in Cortona: Buses stop at Piazza Garibaldi. From here, it's a level five-minute walk down Via Nazionale (stop by the TI) to Piazza della Repubblica, the heart of the town. From this square, it's a two-minute stroll past the Etruscan Museum and theater to Piazza del Duomo, where you'll find the recommended Diocesan Museum. Steep streets, many of them stepped, lead from Piazza della Repubblica up to the San Niccolò and Santa Margherita

churches and the Medici Fortress (a 30-minute climb from Piazza della Repubblica).

Divers will find several free lots right outside the walls. Viale Battisti may be your best bet; after parking, take the escalator into town. Piazza Garibaldi is perfectly central (where the buses stop, a two-minute walk from Piazza della Repubblica) and has a handful of pay spots (marked by blue lines, pay & display, cheap, free 20:00–8:00). The small town is actually very long, and it can be smart to drive to the top for sightseeing there (parking at Santa Margherita Basilica).

From the train station, it's a long, strenuous uphill walk to town, so take a taxi or a bus (€1, 2/hr between station and Piazza Garibaldi—buy tickets at newsstand 200 yards from station).

Helpful Hints: Market day is Saturday on Piazza Signorelli (early–14:00). The town has no baggage storage, so try asking nicely at a hotel or museum to store your bag there. The best public WC is located in Piazza del Duomo, under St. Margherita's statue.

Private Guide: Giovanni Adreani exudes energy and a love of his city and Tuscan high culture. He is great at bringing the fine points of the city to life and can take visitors around in his car for no extra price (€110/half-day, €200/day, tel. 0575-630-665, mobile 347-176-2830, www.adreanigiovanni.com, adreanigiovanni@alice.it).

Cooking Classes: Husband-and-wife team Romano and Agostina hold morning hands-on cooking and cheese-making classes in the kitchen of their Ristorante La Buccaccia (see "Eating," page 560). In the three-hour class you'll prepare two *antipasti*, two types of pasta, an entrée, and a dessert, which you then get to eat (€60–70/person, classes start at 9:30, book in advance, Via Ghibellina 17, tel. 0575-630-575).

SELF-GUIDED WALK

Welcome to Cortona

This introductory walking tour will take you from Piazza Garibaldi, up the main strip, to the town center, its piazzas, and the Duomo. *Start at the bus stop in...*

Piazza Garibaldi: Many visits start and finish in this square, thanks to its bus stop. While the piazza, bulging like a big turret out from the town fortifications, looks like part of an old rampart, it's really a souvenir of those early French and English Romantics—the ones who first created the notion of a dreamy, idyllic Tuscany. During the Napoleonic age, the French built this balcony (and the scenic little park behind the adjacent San Domenico Church) simply to enjoy a commanding view of the Tuscan countryside.

With Umbria about a mile away, Cortona marks the end of Tuscany. This is a major cultural divide, as Cortona was the last town in Charlemagne's empire and the last under Medici rule. Umbria, just to the south, was papal territory for centuries. These deep-seated

- 1 Albergo San Luca & Parking
- 2 Casa Betania
- 3 Istituto Santa Margherita
- 4 San Marco Hostel
- 5 To Casa San Martino B&B, Villa Sant'Andrea & Castello di Montegualandro
- 6 Trattoria la Grotta
- 7 Ristorante La Loggetta
- 8 Ristorante La Buccaccia
- 9 Ristorante Dolce Maria
- 10 Fuffluns Tavern Pizzeria
- 11 Osteria del Teatro
- 12 Enoteca la Saletta
- 13 DeSpar Market Molesini

- INTRO WALK
- VIEW
- PARKING
- STAIRS
- ENTRY POINT TO SIGHTS
- BUS STOP



cultural disparities were a great challenge for the visionaries who unified the fractured region to create the modern nation of Italy during the 1860s. A statue in the center of this square honors one of the heroes of the struggle for Italian unification—the brilliant revolutionary general, Giuseppe Garibaldi.

Enjoy the commanding view from here. Assisi is just over the ridge on the left. Lake Trasimeno peeks from behind the hill, looking quite normal today. But, according to legend, it was blood-red after Hannibal defeated the Romans here in 217 B.C., and 15,000 died in the battle. The only sizable town you can see, on the right, is Montepulciano. Cortona is still defined by its Etruscan walls—remnants of these walls, with stones laid 2,500 years ago, stretch from here in both directions.

Frances Mayes put Cortona on the map for many Americans with her book and the movie *Under the Tuscan Sun*. The book describes her real-life experience buying, fixing up, and living in a rundown villa in Cortona with her husband Ed. The movie romanticized the story, turning Frances into a single, recently divorced writer who restores the villa and her peace of mind. Frances' villa (pictured on this page) isn't "under the Tuscan sun" very often; it's named "Bramasole"—literally, "craving sun." On the wrong side of the hill, it's in the shade after 15:00. She and her husband still live there part of each year and are respected members of their adopted community (outside the walls, behind the hill on the left).



•From this square, head into town along...

Via Nazionale: The only level road in town, locals have nicknamed Via Nazionale the *riga piana* (flat wrinkle). This is the main commercial street in this town of 2,500, and it's been that way for a long time. Every shop seems to have a medieval cellar or an Etruscan well. Notice the crumbling sandstone door frames. The entire town is constructed out of this grumpy, eroding rock.

•Via Nazionale leads to...

Piazza della Repubblica: The City Hall faces Cortona's main square, where three flags fly: Europe, Italy, and peace (Tuscany is famously left-wing and likes peace). Note how the City Hall is a clever hodgepodge of twin medieval towers, with a bell tower added to connect them, and a grand staircase to lend some gravitas. Notice also the fine wood balconies on the left. In the Middle Ages, wooden extensions such as balconies were common features on the region's stone buildings. These balconies (not original, but rebuilt in the 19th century) would have fit right in the medieval cityscape. These days, you usually see only the holes that once supported the long-gone wooden beams.

This square has been the town center since Etruscan times. Four centuries before Christ, an important street led from here up to the hill-capping temple. Later, the square became the Roman forum. Opposite the City Hall is the handy DeSpar Market Moleseini, good for cheap sandwiches (see page 561). Above that is the loggia—once a fish market, now a recommended restaurant.

•The second half of the square, to the right of the City Hall, is...

Piazza Signorelli: Dominated by Casali Palace, this square was the headquarters of the Florentine captains who used to control the city. Peek into the palace entrance for a look at the coats of arms. Every six months, Florence would send a new captain to Cortona, who would help establish his rule by inserting his family coat of arms into the palace's wall. These date from the 15th to the 17th century, and were once painted with bright colors. Cortona's fine Etruscan Museum (listed in "Sights," next page) is in the Casali Palace courtyard, which is lined with many more of these family coats of arms. The inviting Caffè del Teatro fills the loggia of the theater that is named for the town's most famous artist, Luca Signorelli.

•Head down the street just to the right of the museum to...

Piazza del Duomo: Here you'll find the Diocesan Museum (see "Sights," next page), cathedral, and a statue of St. Margherita. If the cathedral seems a little underwhelming and tucked away, that's because it is. Cortona loves its patron saint, Margherita, and put the energy it would normally invest in its cathedral into the Santa Margherita Basilica, at the top of the hill. Margherita was a 13th-century rich girl who took good care of the poor and was an early follower of St. Francis and St. Clare. Many locals believe that Margherita protected Cortona from WWII bombs. (Many also thank her for the best public toilets in town—clean and free, just under her statue.)

The Piazza del Duomo terrace comes with a commanding view of the Tuscan countryside. Find the town cemetery in the distance. If you were standing here before the time of Napoleon, you'd be surrounded by tombstones. But Cortona's graveyards—like other urban graveyards throughout Napoleon's realm—were cleaned out in the early 1800s to reclaim land and improve hygiene.

•Next, enter the...

Duomo: The Cortona cathedral is not—strictly speaking—a cathedral, because it no longer has a bishop. The white-and-gray Florentine Renaissance-style interior is mucked up with lots of Baroque chapels filling once-spacious side niches. In the rear (on the right) is an altar cluttered with relics. Technically, any Catholic altar, in order to be consecrated, needs a relic embedded in it. Go ahead—gently lift up the tablecloth. The priest here doesn't mind. You'll see a little marble patch that holds a bit of a saint (daily 7:30–13:00 & 15:00–18:30, shorter hours in winter, closed during Mass).

•From here, you can visit the nearby Diocesan Museum or head back toward Piazza della Repubblica to visit the Etruscan Museum in Piazza Signorelli (see "Sights," next, for both), or to get a bite to eat (see "Eating," page 560).

SIGHTS

▲Etruscan Museum (Museo dell'Accademia Etrusca)—Established in 1727, this was one of the first galleries dedicated to artifacts from the Etruscan civilization. Along with lots of gold and jewelry, you'll find a seventh-century B.C. grater (for some really old Parmesan cheese) and a magnificent fourth-century B.C. bronze oil lamp with 16 spouts, set in a small, four-pillared temple. Don't miss the library of the Etruscan Academy upstairs. The academy was founded in 1727 to promote an understanding of the city through the study of archaeology. This eclectic museum also has an Egyptian section, fine Roman mosaics, and a room dedicated to modern works by Severini, all lovingly described in English (€7, €10 combo-ticket includes Diocesan Museum, April–Oct Tue–Sun 10:00–19:00, Nov–March Tue–Sun 10:00–17:00, closed Mon, Casali Palace on Piazza Signorelli; tel. 0575-637-235).

▲Diocesan Museum (Museo Diocesano)—This collection of art from the town's many churches has works by Fra Angelico and Pietro Lorenzetti, and masterpieces by hometown hero and Renaissance master Luca Signorelli.

Don't miss Fra Angelico's sumptuous *Annunciation*. In this scene, Mary says, "Yes," consenting to bear God's son. Notice how the house sits on a pillow of flowers...the new Eden. The old Eden, featuring the expulsion of Adam and Eve from Paradise, is in the upper left. The painting comes with comic strip-like narration: The angel's lines are top and bottom, Mary's answer is upside down (logically, since it's directed to God, who would be reading from heaven).

Another highlight is Luca Signorelli's *Mourning of the Dead Christ (Compianto sul Cristo Morto)*. Signorelli was a generation ahead of Michelangelo and, with his passion for painting ideas, was an inspiration for the young artist. Everything in his painting has a meaning: the skull of Adam sits under the sacrifice of Jesus; the hammer represents the Passion (the Crucifixion leading to the Resurrection); the lake is blood; and so on. I don't understand all of the medieval symbolism, but it's intense (€5, €10 combo-ticket includes Etruscan Museum, helpful audioguide-€3, daily April–Oct 10:00–19:00, Nov–March Tue–Sun 10:00–17:00, closed Mon, Piazza del Duomo 1, tel. 0575-62-830). For more on Signorelli, see page 580.

Church of St. Francis—Established by St. Francis' best friend, Brother Elias, this church dates from the 13th century. Francis fans visit for its precious Franciscan relics. To the left of the altar, you'll

find one of Francis' tunics (Mon–Fri 9:00–17:30, Sat 10:00–17:30, Sun 9:00–10:00 & 11:00–19:00).

San Niccolò Church—Signorelli enthusiasts will want to make the pilgrimage up to this tiny church. Ring the bell, and the caretaker might give you a short tour in Italian (€1 donation, daily in summer 9:00–12:00 & 15:00–19:00, off-season until 17:00). The highlight of this humble church is an altarpiece painted on both sides by Signorelli. The caretaker activates a tricky arm mechanism that moves the picture away from the wall to reveal the painting behind it.

Santa Margherita Basilica—From San Niccolò Church, a steep path leads uphill 10 minutes to this basilica, which houses the remains of the town's favorite saint. St. Margherita, an unwed mother from Montepulciano, found her calling with the Franciscans in Cortona, tending to the sick and poor. Her son eventually became a Franciscan monk (daily 9:00–12:00 & 15:00–19:00, tel. 0575-603-116).

Still need more altitude? Head uphill five more minutes to the Medici Fortezza (€3, usually open daily mid-March–June and Sept 9:00–12:00 & 15:00–18:00, July–Aug until 19:00, closed Oct–early March). The views are stunning, stretching all the way to distant Lago Trasimeno.

Etruscan Tombs near Cortona—Guided tours to nearby “Il Sodo” tombs (called *melone* for their melon-like shape) are complicated to arrange. But the excavation site and bits of the ruins are easy to visit and can be seen from outside the fence in the morning. It's just a couple miles out of Cortona on the Arezzo road (R-71), at the edge of Carnucia at the foot of the Cortona hill; ask anyone for “Il Sodo.”