

DAY TRIPS FROM FLORENCE

Beyond the city walls

Florence makes an excellent base for exploring Tuscany's medieval hill towns. Two of the most rewarding destinations — Siena and San Gimignano — are accessible as day trips, though both reveal their true character in the evening hours after the tour buses depart. If your schedule allows, consider staying overnight to experience these towns at their quietest and most atmospheric.

SAN GIMIGNANO: THE MEDIEVAL MANHATTAN

Getting there

Option 1: Train + Bus (via Poggibonsi)

Take a regional train from Florence's Santa Maria Novella station to Poggibonsi–San Gimignano (approximately 50 minutes). San Gimignano itself has no train station, so you'll connect by bus.

Important station access note: If taking the tram to Santa Maria Novella, the stop is called "**Alamanni – Stazione**" — not "Santa Maria Novella" as many visitors expect. It's directly in front of the station entrance.

Ticket purchase: Regional train tickets purchased from machines must be validated in the green-and-white boxes before boarding. Alternatively, download the Trenitalia app, add your payment card, and purchase digital tickets — these don't require validation and simplify the process considerably.

From Poggibonsi to San Gimignano: The bus connection takes approximately 25 minutes. The ticket office is located across from the bus stop outside the station (when open), or you can use contactless payment directly on the bus.

Critical payment note: One contactless card = one passenger only. You cannot tap the same card twice for multiple passengers. Travelers without proper payment are required to disembark. Plan accordingly if traveling in a group.

Option 2: Direct Bus from Florence

Direct buses from Florence to San Gimignano eliminate the train-bus transfer. This is often the simpler option, particularly for visitors uncomfortable with multiple connections. Check current schedules, as frequency varies by season.

Arrival: Porta San Giovanni

Buses arrive at Porta San Giovanni, the main medieval gate to the walled town.

If driving: The entire historic center is a ZTL (Limited Traffic Zone). Parking lots near the walls fill quickly, especially on weekends and holidays. Violations are monitored and fined. Arrive early or be prepared to search for available spaces.

Understanding San Gimignano

Once called the "Manhattan of the Middle Ages," San Gimignano was distinguished by its numerous towers — wealthy families competed to build the tallest as symbols of power and prestige. Of the original 72 towers, only 14 survive today, but they still create the town's distinctive and unforgettable skyline visible for miles across the Tuscan countryside.

The compact medieval center remains remarkably preserved, making San Gimignano one of Tuscany's most photographed destinations. Yes, it's popular. Yes, it can be crowded. But there's a reason this town has maintained its appeal — the atmosphere, architecture, and views genuinely deliver.

What to see and do

Torre Grossa

The tallest tower in San Gimignano at 54 meters, and one of the few you can actually climb. The ascent involves narrow medieval stairs (not suitable for anyone with mobility limitations or claustrophobia), but the panoramic view from the top justifies the effort — you'll see the entire Val d'Elsa, the surrounding towers, and the Tuscan hills extending to the horizon.

Entrance: Combined ticket with Palazzo Comunale and Pinacoteca (art gallery). Purchase at Palazzo Comunale. Can sell out during high season, so arrive early or book ahead if possible.

Torre e Casa Campatelli

Unlike most towers in San Gimignano, this one includes the attached medieval house, furnished to show how wealthy families actually lived during the Middle Ages. It's a smaller, quieter attraction that provides genuine historical context rather than just views.

The experience is more intimate than Torre Grossa — you're seeing domestic life rather than defensive architecture. Worth visiting if you're interested in social history beyond the typical tower-climbing experience.

Duomo (Collegiate Church of Santa Maria Assunta)

The exterior is plain and unassuming, which makes the interior even more stunning. The entire space is covered in remarkable fresco cycles:

- **Old Testament scenes** by Bartolo di Fredi on the left wall
- **New Testament scenes** attributed to Lippo Memmi on the right wall
- **Last Judgment** by Taddeo di Bartolo covering the entrance wall — dramatic, detailed, and genuinely impressive
- **Chapel of Santa Fina** with frescoes by Ghirlandaio depicting the life of San Gimignano's beloved local saint

This is one of the best-preserved medieval fresco cycles in Tuscany. Even if you're not typically interested in religious art, the scale and preservation merit a visit.

Entrance fee required. Modest dress code enforced (covered shoulders and knees).

Piazza della Cisterna

The heart of San Gimignano, named for the 13th-century well (cistern) at its center. The triangular piazza is surrounded by medieval buildings, outdoor cafés, and shops. This is where the town's energy concentrates — sometimes overwhelming in midday crowds, pleasant in early morning or evening.

Gelato rivalry: Two world-renowned gelaterias face each other across this piazza:

- **Gelateria Dondoli** — Multiple-time World Gelato Champion, famous for creative flavors like Crema di Santa Fina (saffron-infused cream)
- **Gelateria Dell'Olmo** — Equally beloved by locals, often with shorter lines

Both are genuinely excellent. The "rivalry" is mostly marketing, but both maintain high quality standards. Try whichever has the shorter queue, or visit both and compare.

Parco della Rocca (Rocca di Montestaffoli)

The ruins of a 14th-century fortress converted into a peaceful public park. You can climb the remaining walls for sweeping panoramic views across the town and surrounding countryside.

Best features:

- Free entrance
- Fewer crowds than the commercial towers
- Excellent sunset viewpoint
- Grassy areas perfect for a picnic break from the stone streets

This is where locals go for views rather than paying to climb Torre Grossa. The perspective is different (you're looking down on the towers rather than from inside one), but equally beautiful.

Fonti Medievali

Medieval fountains located just outside the walls, below Porta delle Fonti. These brick-vaulted public fountains provided the town's water supply for centuries. The architecture is beautiful in its functional simplicity — distinctly medieval engineering.

Why visit:

- Free entrance
- Significantly fewer tourists
- Cool and peaceful even on hot summer days
- Interesting glimpse of medieval urban infrastructure
- Short walk from the main gates

Most visitors miss this entirely, which makes it even more appealing if you want a break from crowds.

Where to eat

Tourist-oriented restaurants dominate the main streets and piazzas, but several establishments maintain quality traditional cooking and local clientele.

Osteria del Carcere

No pizza, no pasta — instead, traditional Tuscan dishes that have become rare in tourist areas. Ribollita (Tuscan bread soup), wild boar stew, grilled meats, pecorino cheese with honey. The atmosphere is relaxed and genuinely local rather than performing "authenticity" for visitors.

What locals appreciate: The menu changes based on seasonal availability rather than tourist expectations. Service is straightforward and unpretentious.

Best for: Visitors interested in traditional Tuscan cucina povera (peasant cooking), those tired of the same tourist menu everywhere

Trattoria Rigoletto

Simple, fairly priced trattoria near the city gate. Locals eat here regularly, which tells you what you need to know about quality versus the dozens of tourist-oriented places along the main street.

Grilled meats and handmade pasta are reliable choices. Nothing revolutionary, just well-executed traditional dishes at reasonable prices.

Best for: Quick, satisfying lunch, budget-conscious travelers, anyone seeking local atmosphere over tourist polish

General dining advice:

Restaurants directly on Piazza della Cisterna charge premium prices for the location. Quality varies significantly — some are acceptable, others are overpriced and mediocre. If choosing to eat in the main piazza, you're paying for atmosphere and convenience rather than exceptional food.

Better value and quality typically exist one or two streets removed from the primary tourist route. Ask locals for current recommendations, as restaurant quality can shift with ownership changes.

Events and festivals

San Gimignano hosts several annual events that transform the town's atmosphere. If your travel dates align, these are worth planning around.

Ferie delle Messi (June)

The town's major medieval festival, held annually in June. San Gimignano transforms into a living history experience — locals dress in medieval costume, knights parade through the streets, flag-throwers perform in the piazzas, traditional games and markets fill the squares.

The atmosphere is particularly magical in evening hours when torches illuminate the stone streets and piazzas. This is San Gimignano at its most theatrical and enchanting — touristy, yes, but genuinely impressive in scale and authenticity.

Who should attend: Anyone interested in medieval history, families with children, photographers, visitors who appreciate elaborate historical reenactments

Estate Musicale (Summer months)

Open-air concert series throughout summer — classical music, jazz, folk — performed in historic settings like medieval cloisters, churches, and piazzas. Some concerts are free, others require tickets, but all benefit from the remarkable atmospheric venues.

The combination of professional musicianship and unique architectural settings creates memorable evenings. Check the program when planning your visit — schedules vary annually.

Calici di Stelle (August 10)

"Chalices of Stars" — an evening wine event held on the feast of San Lorenzo (August 10) throughout Italy. In San Gimignano, local wineries open their doors for tastings, the town's wine bars extend their hours, and music and entertainment fill the streets.

You can taste Vernaccia di San Gimignano (the local white wine, one of Tuscany's oldest documented wines) and other regional wines under the stars, with the medieval towers illuminated as backdrop.

Best for: Wine enthusiasts, romantic evening experiences, anyone visiting in early August

Practical note: The town will be crowded. Book accommodations well in advance if planning to stay overnight.

Practical considerations

Restrooms: The first public restroom immediately inside Porta San Giovanni typically has long queues. Continue along the main street, turn right into a side alley, and you'll find a second public facility with minimal wait. Bring coins — payment is required.

Return bus location: The return bus to Poggibonsi does NOT depart from the same location as arrival. Exit through Porta San Giovanni, locate the green Busitalia sign near the parking area. Don't confuse this with Porta San Matteo on the opposite side of town.

Optimal timing: Most day-trippers depart by late afternoon. The town transforms significantly in evening hours — quieter, softer light, more intimate atmosphere. If your schedule permits even one overnight stay, the experience improves dramatically. You'll see San Gimignano as residents experience it rather than as a daytime tourist destination.

Walking conditions: All streets are paved with stone, often uneven, with various inclines. Wear comfortable walking shoes. The town is compact (you can walk from one end to the other in 15 minutes), but the surfaces require appropriate footwear.

SIENA: THE GOTHIC RIVAL

Getting there

Regional trains from Florence's Santa Maria Novella to Siena require a connection at Empoli (total journey approximately 90 minutes). The Empoli station is small and straightforward — the connecting train to Siena typically waits on an adjacent platform.

Important notes:

- Regional train tickets purchased from machines require validation before boarding
- The Empoli–Siena segment often runs at capacity during peak hours; expect to stand if traveling midday or weekends
- Digital tickets purchased via Trenitalia app don't require validation

From Siena station to historic center

Budget option — Escalator system: Inside the shopping mall directly in front of the station (La Lizza), a series of escalators ascends the hill, emerging much closer to the historic center. This is well-known to locals but rarely discovered by visitors. Free and significantly easier than walking uphill with luggage.

Walking route: Approximately 20 minutes from station to historic center. The route gradually transitions from modern Siena to medieval architecture — an interesting perspective on the city's layers. Pleasant if traveling light; challenging with heavy luggage.

Taxi: Available at the station, though the escalator system eliminates much of the uphill distance if you prefer walking partway.

Siena Cathedral (Duomo)

One of Italy's most spectacular Gothic cathedrals. The interior features:

- Distinctive black and white striped marble
- Intricate inlaid marble floors (portions uncovered seasonally)
- Nicola Pisano's elaborately carved pulpit
- Soaring dome with blue ceiling and gold stars

Piccolomini Library (inside the cathedral): Don't miss this. Pinturicchio's vibrant frescoes depicting the life of Pope Pius II cover the walls and ceiling in remarkably preserved color. It's one of the best-preserved Renaissance fresco cycles in Italy.

Admission: The main cathedral sometimes offers free admission (requiring a free ticket from the nearby office), though this varies. The Opera complex (which includes cathedral, library, museum, and various viewpoints) typically requires the combined ticket. Verify current admission structure when planning your visit.

Timing note: Arrive well before closing time. Last entry is typically 30 minutes before official closing.

Piazza del Campo

Siena's shell-shaped central square is among Italy's most beautiful piazzas. The distinctive sloped design creates natural amphitheater seating where locals and visitors gather.

This is the site of the Palio — Siena's famous bare-back horse race held twice annually (July 2 and August 16). The intensity of neighborhood (contrada) rivalries surrounding this event defines Sienese identity in ways visitors often underestimate.

Dining in the piazza: Restaurants surrounding Piazza del Campo charge premium prices for the location, but quality can be acceptable. The atmosphere and people-watching provide value even if the food is standard tourist fare. For serious dining, venture into side streets.

Torre del Mangia

The soaring 102-meter tower adjacent to Palazzo Pubblico offers spectacular panoramic views. The climb involves 400 steps in narrow medieval passages — not suitable for anyone with mobility limitations or claustrophobia.

Important: Advanced booking is essential, especially in high season. Same-day tickets are rarely available. The tower nickname "Mangia" (the eater) comes from the first bell-ringer, whose salary was so substantial he earned a reputation for excessive eating.

Wandering Siena

Beyond major monuments, Siena rewards aimless exploration. The medieval street plan remains largely intact — narrow lanes, sudden piazzas, neighborhood fountains, hidden courtyards.

Shopping note: Siena's ceramic workshops often offer better prices than Florence for comparable quality. The city has strong artistic traditions beyond tourism, so you're more likely to find authentic handmade pieces rather than imported goods.

Evening Siena

Like San Gimignano, Siena transforms significantly in evening hours. Day-trippers depart, locals emerge, restaurants shift from tourist service to neighborhood dining, the atmosphere becomes intimate and peaceful.

The warm ocher and brown stone takes on golden tones in evening light. The city feels entirely different from its daytime tourist persona.

If possible, stay overnight. The evening passeggiata (evening stroll), dinner at a genuine local restaurant, and morning in Siena before the buses arrive provides a substantially richer experience than day-trip visits allow.

Return to Florence

Critical timing note: Regional trains from Siena to Florence cease running relatively early — typically around 9:00-9:30pm (verify current schedules). Miss the last train and you're facing expensive taxi alternatives or an unplanned overnight stay.

Evening return trains often run nearly empty — a stark contrast to crowded midday departures. You'll likely find seats easily and have a peaceful journey back.

Santa Maria Novella arrival: The station area has numerous restaurants and cafes, though quality varies significantly. Research specific establishments rather than choosing based solely on convenience.

Planning considerations for both destinations

Day trip versus overnight:

Both San Gimignano and Siena function adequately as day trips from Florence, but both substantially improve with overnight stays. The evening and early morning hours reveal these towns' authentic character — what they are for residents rather than what they display for day-trippers.

If your Florence itinerary includes 4+ days, consider allocating one night to either destination. The experience quality increases disproportionately to the minimal additional time required.

Seasonal timing:

Summer weekends bring maximum crowds to both towns. Spring (April-May) and autumn (September-October) offer better weather-to-crowd ratios. Winter can be beautiful but cold, with some attractions operating on reduced schedules.

Physical considerations:

Both towns involve significant walking on uneven medieval paving, hills, and steps. Wear appropriate footwear. Neither destination is particularly accessible for visitors with mobility limitations, though Siena's escalator system helps somewhat.

Combined itinerary possibility:

Visiting both San Gimignano and Siena in one day is theoretically possible but inadvisable. You'll spend most of your time in transit and experience neither town properly. If time is severely limited, choose one based on your interests: San Gimignano for compact medieval atmosphere and towers, Siena for Gothic architecture and larger city experience.