

Clockwise from top left: Tourists making a photographic record of their visit to San Gimignano; artisan craft shops along a picturesque back street; skyline view of the town; a quiet corner; Turandot; woman working leather; flowerpots on a rooftop terrace

48 HOURS IN...

San Gimignano

The Tuscan town of San Gimignano has medieval architecture and art, and modern sculpture too. **Jane Keightley** gets a private tour with the sculptor's wife...

I had always wanted to visit San Gimignano in Tuscany. Known as "Medieval Manhattan" and "The City of the Beautiful Towers", it had been on my list of places to visit for a long time. Now finally I was heading through the Tuscan countryside waiting with bated breath to see the towers appear on the horizon. I had been warned that driving in the narrow streets of San Gimignano was not an experience for the faint-hearted so I parked outside the walls and walked into the centre to find my hotel. Apart from looking forward to exploring its narrow, medieval streets I had another good reason to be visiting San Gimignano: I was meeting up with my friend Christine. Her husband, Maurizio, is a sculptor and she had promised to show me his work, which is dotted all around the town.

Originally an Etruscan village, San Gimignano was named after the Bishop of Modena, who, it is said, saved it from Attila the Hun. It became a *comune* in 1199 and prospered because of its location on the Via Francigena, the pilgrimage path that leads from Canterbury to Rome. It became popular for prominent families to try to outdo their neighbours by building



Images by Jane Keightley unless otherwise stated

WHAT TO SEE AND DO

PALAZZO COMUNALE AND TORRE GROSSA 1

Museo Civico, Piazza del Duomo 2

☎ +39 0577 991312

This 12th-century building is home to the Camera del Podestà, with its meticulously restored and slightly risqué frescoes about marriage. There is also the Sala di Dante, where the famous poet addressed the town council. You can climb the 218 steps to the Palazzo's Torre Grossa for a view of the town and surrounding countryside.

THE COLLEGIATA 2

Basilica di Santa Maria Assunta, Piazza del Duomo

The Duomo is commonly known as the Collegiata, a reference to the college of priests who originally managed it. It is an 11th-century building with many vivid frescoes that depict stories from the Old and New Testaments. In the small Chapel of Santa Fina there are frescoes by Ghirlandaio depicting the sad life of a young girl who became one of the town's patron saints.

CHIESA DI SANT'AGOSTINO 3

Piazza del Agostino

This 13th-century church is known for Benozzo Gozzoli's fresco cycle of the life of St Augustine. It is behind the altar and you can put €0.50 in the slot to light it up. An English Mass is celebrated at 11am on Sundays in a chapel off the cloister.

MUSEO DEL VINO 4

Parco della Rocca

This is a small museum which celebrates San Gimignano's local wine, Vernaccia. It is situated up near the Rocca, the ruins of an old fortress. There is also an *enoteca* where you can buy some wine to sit and sample whilst admiring the stunning views.

MUSEO ARCHEOLOGICO AND SPEZIERIA DI SANTA FINA 5

Via Folgore da San Gimignano, 11

The Spezieria is a museum which features a part 15th- to 18th-century pharmacy. In the same building is the Museo Archeologico with various Roman artefacts. Upstairs there is a modern art gallery.

MUSEO D'ARTE SACRA 6

Piazza Pecori

Medieval works of art from San Gimignano's churches are displayed in this small museum. There are some crafted chalices and some beautiful embroidery.

SAN GIMIGNANO DEL 1300 7

Via Costanella, 3

www.sangimignano1300.com

This is a recreation of a medieval San Gimignano in handmade ceramics, complete with houses, streets, towers and people as it would have looked in 1300.



Aerial view of the Piazza della Cisterna

DON'T MISS

THE VIA FRANCIGENA
If you enjoy walking, this area is an ideal spot. The Via Francigena passes through San Gimignano and you can walk along it and visit other small Tuscan towns en route. It is a pilgrimage path that dates back to medieval times; it starts in Canterbury and finishes in Rome.

a higher tower in order to prove that they were more wealthy and powerful. In 1348 plague wiped out a lot of the population and weakened the local economy, leading to the town's submission to Florence in 1353.

Walking through the narrow streets it was like going back in time. As I turned the corner into Piazza della Cisterna to find my hotel, the sight took my breath away. Here was the location of scenes I had watched many times in my favourite film, *Tea with Mussolini*.

Here was the location of scenes I had watched in the film Tea with Mussolini

Once settled I was eager to explore. Piazza della Cisterna, where my hotel was situated, is named after the 13th-century cistern in its centre. The cistern seemed to be a popular focal point of the square with visitors sitting on the steps admiring their surroundings.

In the corner of the *piazza* I saw a place that I definitely wanted to investigate. The Gelateria Dondoli is owned and run by the former

gelato world champion, Sergio Dondoli, a member of the Italian Ice Cream World Championship team. A couple of his specialities are Crema di Santa Fina (saffron ice cream) and Vernaccia sorbet.

Round the corner from Piazza della Cisterna is the Piazza del Duomo, where you can find the Collegiata (the Duomo, which is so-called because of the college of priests that ran it). From the outside it looks very plain, but once you go in you are greeted by a wonderful array of frescoes. Especially beautiful

are the ones by Bartolo di Fredi which depict stories from the Old Testament and are like a huge medieval comic strip. The frescoes in the nave by Taddeo di Bartolo are gruesome depictions of the Final Judgement. The Chapel of Santa Fina has some touching frescoes of scenes of the life of a revered saint of San Gimignano who had a serious illness as a girl and chose to spend the rest of her days lying on a

wooden board. According to legend, yellow violas blossomed from the board at the moment of her death.

Next to the Collegiata are the Palazzo Comunale and the Torre Grossa. The 12th-century Palazzo Comunale is the home of the Camera del Podestà, which has some slightly risqué frescoes of a pair of newlyweds bathing together then climbing into bed. If you are feeling energetic, climb to the top of the Torre Grossa up the 218 steps. I did and it was well worth the effort to get a bird's eye view of San Gimignano and the countryside surrounding it.

MAURIZIO'S SCULPTURES

By this it was time to freshen up ready to meet for an *aperitivo* with my friend Christine. She was going to show me her husband's works in San Gimignano. Maurizio Masini, Christine's husband, was born in San Gimignano and has lived here all his life. He taught in the Sculpture department of the Istituti d'Arte Duccio di Buoninsegna in Siena and through the years has made many sculptures which are dotted about San Gimignano and other towns in Tuscany. I was so lucky to

get a guided tour of his sculptures, especially a very personal one with Christine. First of all we went to an exhibition on one of the main streets of San Gimignano, where Christine explained to me that although he uses a great range of materials, he prefers to use marble and wood. He has also experimented with materials such as metals and glass.

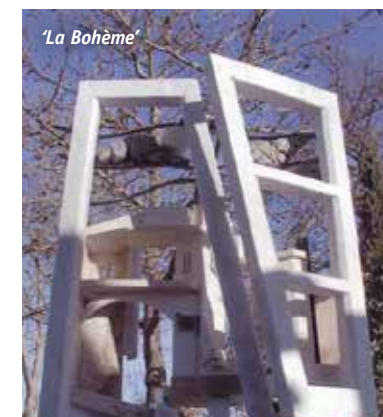
She told me that he is inspired by many subjects, especially music, with sculptures dedicated to three of Puccini's operas. She also told me that he loves to represent the Tuscan landscapes and architecture and often explores the balance between nature and civilisation. We then went into the Piazza del Duomo to look at the front of the Palazzo Comunale, where the coat of arms of San Gimignano are on the façade, carved out of polychrome marble by Maurizio. Walking into the Piazza della Cisterna, we found a lunette in marble set into the paving that was his work too. Wandering off towards the Porta San Giovanni, Christine explained to me that we were now going to see a huge piece of work that he had done in the Piazzale Martiri di Montemaggio outside the town walls called *L'Albero* ➤



Inside the Palazzo Comunale



The sign says it all...



'La Bohème'

DON'T MISS

TEA WITH MUSSOLINI
Do watch the film *Tea with Mussolini* before you go to San Gimignano. You will be looking at some of the places with different eyes.

WHERE TO STAY

HOTEL LEON BIANCO 8

Piazza della Cisterna

☎ +39 0577 941294

www.leonbianco.com

A friendly hotel situated right in the centre of town in the Piazza della Cisterna. Pleasant bedrooms mainly overlooking the triangular Piazza.

IL PINO 9

Via Cellolese, 6

☎ +39 0577 940415

www.locandailpino.it

This is superb value. Situated in one of the quieter areas of town, smart and also very comfortable.

L'ANTICO POZZO 10

Via Matteo, 87

☎ +39 0577 942014

www.anticopozzo.com

A lovely old hotel, full of atmosphere. Some of the bedrooms are named after poets. The biggest and best is named (naturally) after Dante Alighieri.

LA CISTERNA 11

Piazza della Cisterna, 24

☎ +39 0577 940328

www.hotelcisterna.it

Situated in the Piazza dell Cisterna and can boast bedrooms with spectacular views. It was featured in the film *Tea with Mussolini*.

AL POZZO DEI DESIDERI 12

Piazza dell Cisterna, 32

☎ +39 0577 907199

www.alpозzodeidesideri.it

Luxuriously decked out, it has marble bathrooms and beautiful stone walls. It also has fridges in every room and tea- and coffee-making facilities.



The town is surrounded by medieval wall and towers

WHERE TO EAT

PERUCÀ 15

Via Capassi, 16
☎ +39 0577 943136
www.peruca.eu

Excellent regional food is available here. The speciality of the house is *Fagottini del contadino* – ravioli with pecorino, pears and saffron cream.

€ €

TRATTORIA CHIRIBIRI 16

Piazza della Madonna, 1
☎ +39 0577 941948
www.ristorantechiribiri.it

A cosy *trattoria* off the beaten track but well worth seeking out. I spoke to people here that were coming back every time they returned to San Gimignano.

€ €



LE VECCHIE MURA 15

Via Pandornella
☎ +39 0577 940 270
www.vecchiemura.it

This restaurant serves tasty local dishes and has a panoramic terrace where you can eat gazing out over the beautiful Tuscan countryside.

€ €

LOCANDA SANT'AGOSTINO 16

Piazza San Agostino, 15
☎ +39 0577 943141

It is like eating in an Italian home here. Surrounded by knick-knacks you will eat lovely local food and it comes in generous servings too. White truffles are a speciality of the house.

€ €

IL PINO 17

Via Cellolese, 6
☎ +39 0577 94 04 15
www.ristoranteilpino.it

This elegant restaurant serves up local Tuscan dishes and truffles feature in many of the dishes. They bake their own bread and their four-course set menus are very good value.

€ €

▶ KEY TO RESTAURANT PRICES

(full meal per person, not including wine)

€ Up to €25

€ € €26-€50

€ € € More than €50



DON'T MISS

GELATERIA DONDOLI

Former world champion ice cream maker, Sergio Dondoli is a member of Italy's Ice Cream World Championship team.

Specialities include Crema di Santa Fina (saffron cream) and Vernaccia sorbet.

Piazza della Cisterna
www.gelateriadi piazza.com

delle Cannelle. This is a monumental fountain made of white Carrara marble, local stone and bronze. It was inaugurated in November 2011. I was very impressed by his work and thought how amazing it must be to not only live in a place like San Gimignano, but to see your work dotted around the town for

I headed up to the Rocca for its panoramic views of the surrounding countryside

everyone to enjoy. I asked Christine whether there were many sculptors and artists in San Gimignano. She told me that Maurizio was the only sculptor but there was a very talented painter, Alessandro Andreuccetti, whose paintings I had seen in the same exhibition as Maurizio's work. There are also many small art galleries dotted around the town with some local residents' paintings for sale. All this

walking had made me hungry and thirsty so I went off to try the local food and wine, and very good it was too. Eating outside on a terrace gazing out over the Tuscan countryside just added to the wonderful experience.

MARKET DAY

The next morning I discovered it was market day and it was brilliant wandering around watching the locals do their shopping. I always love to see places that are usually full of tourists actually being used for normal everyday activities. Passing through the market I headed up to the Rocca, where you could get panoramic views of the surrounding countryside. While you are up there you can visit the Museo del Vino, where you can learn about the local wine, Vernaccia, and there is also an *enoteca* where you can buy glasses of wine to sit and enjoy whilst admiring the view.

Wandering back down to the hustle and bustle I decided to look for the Chiesa di Sant'Agostino, where there are some exceptional frescoes by Benozzo Gozzoli. Enjoying the peace and tranquility away from the crowds, I lingered a while in the quiet cloisters.

I had heard that there was a new attraction in San Gimignano that well worth seeing, so I headed off to Via Costarella, where San Gimignano 1300 is situated. This is a handmade ceramic re-creation of the medieval city, complete with houses, streets, towers and people as they would have looked in 1300.

I could see how it was capturing the imagination of the children who were visiting.

By this time I was ready for some sustenance. There is no shortage of good places to eat in San Gimignano so I recharged my batteries and had a plate of some pasta with wild boar sauce. Ready and raring to go again, I decided to visit the Museo d'Arte Sacra to admire works of medieval religious

art gathered from the churches of San Gimignano. There are also some beautiful chalices and some exquisitely embroidered textiles.

To finish off my day I visited the Museo Archeologico and Spezieria di Santa Fina. The Museo Archeologico showcases some pottery and some Roman finds including figurines, mirrors and mosaic tiles. The Spezieria di Santa Fina features a partly-reconstructed 15th- to 18th-century pharmacy complete with ceramic jars, potion bottles, terracotta bowls full of ingredients and leather bound inventories. Upstairs from here you can visit San Gimignano's Galleria d'Arte Moderna e Contemporanea.

Shattered after my busy day, I had a relaxing drink then another lovely meal and an early night. The next morning I knew I had not got much longer here in San Gimignano so I decided I needed some retail therapy in the shops that line the medieval streets. Shops full of beautiful ceramics, local delicacies and much more tempted me as I wandered around. I tried to resist getting too carried away but came away with bags of stuff.

I packed my bags wishing I could stay longer but I vowed I would certainly be back to visit this beautiful and unique place as soon as I could. ■

GETTING THERE

▶ BY AIR

The nearest airport is Pisa, which is served by many major airlines, including Ryanair.

▶ BY TRAIN

The closest train station is at Poggibonsi.

▶ BY CAR

From Florence or Siena take the Siena-Florence autostrada and finally the SP1 from Poggibonsi Nord. Parking in San Gimignano is expensive. The cheapest option is at Parcheggio Giubileo on the southern edge of town but the most convenient is the Parcheggio Montemaggio right next to Porta San Giovanni.

▶ BY BUS

The bus station is next to the police station at Porta San Giovanni. You can buy bus tickets from the tourist office, in the Piazza del Duomo near the Palazzo Comunale. Routes include Florence via Poggibonsi, Siena and Volterra.



The city's towers afford great views



Sant'Agostino cloisters



'L'Albero delle Cannelle'



Medieval street



Souvenirs and mementos



Sheep's cheese in a shop window