



THE LANDSCAPE OF THE “CRETE SENESI” COMMUNICATES WITH THE FORCE OF EMOTIONS

## CRETE SENESI

**Going through the silent Crete Senesi (Siennese clays), where the ancient history is naturally intertwined with the present time, is like to go through the centuries without even realizing it. The Crete Senesi are a world apart, where everything is real but seems fanciful at the same time. A silent island tucked away in a timeless atmosphere, where you like to revert to recognize the scents and listen to the rustle of wind. The appearance of the clay hills changes with the season and sunlight and it is enough just to walk the same street in the different directions to discover a whole different world.**

### TERRE DI SIENA

A landscape of hills dotted with turreted medieval villages, with fortresses and castles, marked by cornfields, by rows of vineyards, olive groves, chestnut forests and the agricultural landscape of sharecropping. To the east, the land of Siena meets the districts of Arezzo and Perugia. The extreme west boundary of the ancient state of Siena was the Tyrrhenian Sea; in the north, Castellina in Chianti separates the land of Siena from Firenze; to the south, along the Via Cassia, the area reaches Radicofani, from the river Arbia also mentioned by Dante to the wild landscape of Val d'Orcia. The Etruscan Chiusi, the last stretch of Tuscany, connects Siena with the major national roads and railways. Even with the different characteristics of the spoken language, the district of Siena continues to maintain its own cultural, historical and linguistic identity, yesterday and today, a harmonious balance between city and countryside, between new and old. The quality of life here is still a value for the local population, and, of course, also for tourists who love this place.

## **CRETE SENESI**

The "Crete" (clay hills), the heart of the Province of Siena, present a surreal scene, halfway between the distant inaccessibility of a dream and the vivid reality of a landscape designed by the wise hand of man, made with wheat fields, rows of vineyards and olive trees. An area crossed by lonely whitened roads that unexpectedly wind from a hill to another dotted with cypresses: sometimes we do not know where they lead, they seem to continue endlessly through the fascinating landscape. And the landscape changes, after every curve. Somewhere it is sweet and satisfying as the hard earth and the sky over, somewhere it is rutted by the white stripes of the gullies, or featured by the barren hills and valleys, typical of the Crete. Today as yesterday, it is the clay that features this area always eroded by the water and the wind that provide its primordial wrinkles. But the area is both the expression of marvellous natural characteristics and human resources and, while you expect that the journey will continue indefinitely, suddenly, solitary and distant, the turreted profile of an old village appears: Asciano, Buonconvento, Monteroni d'Arbia, Rapolano Terme, San Giovanni d'Asso, rich in artistic, monumental and historical treasures such as towers and ancient monasteries, small churches and old farmhouses. They tell you stories bringing back to the past that, every year, is also reactivated by ancient festivals and events. To enjoy the Crete Senesi, there are many thematic itineraries recommended for tourists, each one characterized by a different point of view: from the ascetic to the naturalistic, from the historical-artistic to the economic-productive one.

## **A PATH TO TRUE SPIRITUALITY**

Undoubtedly interesting, a guided tour in search of the religiosity of the place, punctuated by religious buildings such as churches, monasteries and abbeys: the same deep mystical spirit of past time still seems to penetrate even the stone, involving you in a suspended intimacy.

The churches and parish churches, with their baptisteries, were the centre of the organization of the first Christian communities, places of prestige not only religious but, over the time, also economical. There are still numerous abbeys and monasteries, home to monastic orders once dedicated to both hermitage and literary and artistic ideals, in the area of the Crete Senesi. The Sienese Giovanni Tolomei, under the name of Bernard, retired to live as a hermit at Monteoliveto, in 1313, where he founded the Congregation of the Olivetani. The famous monastery, still now hosts people who long for moments of quiet meditation: it is the most important monastery of the area of Siena, located in a magnificent position among forests and ravines; it preserves precious frescoes by Luca Signorelli dating back to 1400.

From the historical and artistic point of view, no less interesting are the various smaller churches, that stand in secluded spots, as seat of the secular clergy: especially the church of Sant'Andreino alle Cave which, both in style and building technique, testifies to the sophistication of the local community. Even along the via Francigena (now via Cassia) and the crossroads connecting this area with Arezzo and Val di Chiana, there are numerous architectural structures related to the theme of religious pilgrimage, places of rest and hospital care for the pilgrims going to Rome or to the Holy Land. Among these, all directly linked to the Spedale di S. Maria della Scala of the city of Siena, we would like to mention the Ospedale del Santo and the Ospedale di S. Maria Assunta at Rapolano and the hospice at Cuna di Monteroni d'Arbia, now under renovation.

## **IN SEARCH OF EVIDENCE OF YESTERDAY AND TODAY'S DAILY LIFE**

The travertine has always been a real wealth for the area of Rapolano. At the end of the nineteenth and in the twentieth centuries, it was started the systematic excavation of the quarries that, in the past, had been carried out only sporadically and occasionally. The stone-working has given job to the population and especially in the sixties, during the rural exodus and the end of the sharecropping, it provided employment to farmers so turned into masons and diggers. Since the Middle Ages onwards, for centuries the sharecropping had dominated as agricultural job; then, hillside and plain fields were abandoned by farmers and became areas for the breeding of the cows of "razza Chianina" and especially by herds of sheep, moving on the land of the Crete and led by Sardinian shepherds. The agricultural products, especially cereals, were kept in the granges, large buildings which functioned as barn and storage, with a large courtyard, and protected by fortifications (walls and towers).

We suggest a visit, among the others, to the architectural complex of Serre di Rapolano, with the imposing Palazzo della Grancia, and the Grancia of Monteroni d'Arbia. Numerous are the farms, simple farmhouses, that still now dot the hills of the territory: they used to be autonomous structures, completely self-sufficient, whose products (grain, oil, wine, etc.) were mainly sold and traded in Asciano, mall of the Crete Senesi. Even today, wandering through the town of Asciano, it is nice to go into the craftsmen shops and buy local products.

## **CELEBRATIONS, FESTIVALS AND GASTRONOMIC EVENTS IN THE ANCIENT VILLAGES**

Each of the towns of the Crete Senesi is characterized by the presence of a major Parish church, other minor churches lying in the outskirts of the village, a medieval city centre made of old houses and characteristic spots. These centres are full of liveliness on the occasion of local celebrations. If the second half of August is the time dedicated to music, theatre and games in the streets of the municipalities of the Crete, November is the month for tasting local produce, much loved by the connoisseurs.

Asciano is particularly rich in events in the month of September, with the Palio dei Ciuchi (donkeys) and the celebration of the SS. Crucified Christ. Not to be missed, the carnival parade of floats on the third Sunday of July and the Threshing under the walls, at Buonconvento. At Ponte Tressa, in the commune of Monteroni d'Arbia, the National Exhibition of the Chianina breed cows takes place on the second Sunday of September, and on December 24 the Nativity is celebrated in the little medieval village of Lucignano d'Arbia. Rapolano celebrates the National Literary Prize "The Molinello" in March, the historical commemoration of the "Festa di Ciambrogina" in the second week of May, and the "Fierone di fine Anno" on December 26. San Giovanni d'Asso celebrates the "Festa dello Scricchio", with an interregional motorcycle rally on Easter Sunday. We recommend the "Mostra Mercato del Tartufo bianco delle Crete Senesi" (the show of the white truffle), on the second and third Sundays of November, a festival of the precious tuber occupying about 40 hectares of the land between the Crete and the Val d'Orcia.

## **A NETWORK OF ROADS AND PATHS IN A HARMONIOUS LANDSCAPE**

Do you want to "live in a dream" and completely enjoy the land of the Crete Senesi, breathing the atmosphere in an authentic way, without any programme? What we suggest you is to stop and spend some more days here, leave behind the most popular hiking routes and satisfy your interests and wishes according to your own pace. You will discover that the countryside is both the expression of marvellous natural characteristics and also the product of the people who live here. You can put as a starting point the town of Asciano, Siena's granary and the capital of the Crete, located in the upper valley of the river Ombrone. Consider this small, welcoming village as the centre of a network of routes: the Lauretana leading to Siena, the road connecting to Chiusure Monteoliveto, the one going to Rapolano and, finally, the white road leading to Monte Sante Marie. But there is also a denser network of roads and paths, almost always unpaved, connecting fascinating secluded places familiar only to local people. You can freely walk along the paths of this tangled web, getting lost in this mysterious maze. If you really can not help it, you can take some photos, timeless images of a harmonious landscape without boundaries. You will return eventually to Asciano, only after having savoured the moment, admired, dreamed and truly lived the most intimate atmosphere of the Crete Senesi.

## *Cuisine*

Just a Fettunta, a slice of bread with garlic, seasoned with a dash of oil and a pinch of salt, to get closer to the peasant cuisine of the Crete Senesi, simple dishes that only at festivities became richer. The bread of every day was made not only from wheat, but also from corn, oats and barley; the panella di Rapolano, a thin puff pastry, just oiled, and the luxury of a lunch based on pork, was only cooked to celebrate the day in which the pig was killed. The range of dishes today is larger, but the simplicity of ingredients is the same as always. The excellent fresh or mature pecorino cheese from Chiusure, the beef of Chianina breed, pork or, if possible, wild boar; the soup with bread, beans, tomato and sage, excellent also the day after, to be certainly satiated and satisfied in a so simple and healthy way.

## *Getting There*

**By car:** Highway A1, exit Val di Chiana-Bettolle connection to Siena and exit at Rapolano Terme.

**By train:** Siena station - bus connection to the various locations of the Terre Senesi.

**By plane:** Firenze Peretola Airport.

### **UFFICIO INFORMAZIONI TURISTICHE**

**APT Siena**, Piazza del Campo, 56,  
tel. +39 0577 280551

**Ufficio Turistico Comunale Asciano**,  
Corso Matteotti, 18, tel. +39 0577 719510

**Ufficio Turistico delle Crete Senesi**,  
Monte Oliveto Maggiore, Corso Matteotti, 18,  
tel. +39 0577 707262. Sabato e Domenica.  
Ore: 10.00-13.00; 15.00-18.00