

## BUONCONVENTO



Any time you enter (or leave) the Borgo, you will certainly pass through our small, neighboring town of **Buonconvento** which sits a few kilometers northeast, down the hill and across the Ombrone River. This medieval town is well worth its own extended visit, either as a starting or end point on a day-trip to another Tuscan destination, or as a quick foray from the Borgo for lunch, shopping, or a museum visit.

Buonconvento's name is derived from the Latin *bonus conventus*, or *happy community*. It has nearly 3,000 residents, a number of quality restaurants and shops, and two exceptional museums. The old part of town boasts impressive walls of defense, built following Siena's architectural style, which once enclosed the entire village.



Buonconvento originated in the late twelfth century as a trading post on the pilgrimage route to Rome, the Via Francigena. Its first historical mention was by French King Phillip Augustus, who sojourned there in 1191. Its name implies that it is a safe gathering place, a spot for weary travelers to rest and trade. Its strategic position means that it was witness to a good amount of history in the past eight hundred years. Most famously, Buonconvento was host to the death of Holy Roman Emperor Henry VII on August 24, 1313. Its thick outer walls protected generation after generation of merchants and farmers in periods of peace and strife, even withstanding occupation by the Florentine army that besieged the last Sienese holdouts in nearby Montalcino in 1559. The walls were finally exposed by two Nazi bombardments in January and June 1944 which destroyed her south facing gate, the **Porta Romana**.

A walking tour of Buonconvento is recommended, as the central part of town is reasonably small and encompasses most of the sites you will want to see or visit. **The Palazzo Podestarile** with its civic tower was constructed by the Sienese government in 1385, just after fortifying the town. The facade is typical Sienese medieval, and was most recently restored in 1921, boasting gothic arches and twenty-four coats of arms of local gentry.

### Museums

The **Palazzo Ricci Soccini** is the site of the **Museo d'Arte Sacra della Val d'Arbia**. The façade of the palace features many characteristic features of the Italian Art Nouveau, exemplified by the contrast in colors of stone, brick, and



strips of ceramic tiles in floral motifs that divide the building into horizontal courses. The classical windows on the first floor are ornamented with highly decorative ironworking. The balustrade on the second floor terrace echoes that theme, before the third floor returns to its classical roots. The **Museo d'Arte Sacra della Val d'Arbia** inside is well worth a visit as it is among the better small art museums in Tuscany, but delightfully free of crowds, an opportunity to view the art unencumbered and in the local context where it was produced. The museum boasts a series of masterpieces by artists of the Sienese school, collected from small churches all around the Val d'Arbia. Among the most noteworthy are a *Madonna and Child* by Duccio da Buoninsegna and another by Pietro Lorenzetti. One room is dedicated to works of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, representing artists including Bartolomeo di David and Francesco Vanni. Many works highlight the greatness of the Sienese school in the 1500's, with artists Rutilio Manetti and Bernardino Mei among others.



The **Museo Etnografico Della Mezzadria** is a quite exceptional museum offering a look at the old tenant farming system of the area. This becomes especially apt when you remember that Borgo Finocchieto refers to a village (borgo) based around the production of fennel (finocchio) whose roots are a staple vegetable to the Italian diet, and whose seeds stud the local salami. The mezzadria system operated based on a contract whereby the proprietor owned fifty percent of the production by peasant farmers living on the land. The system lasted well into the 1950s, when mechanization replaced many a job and droves of people abandoned farms for industrial jobs. The museum offers a video explaining the system, in Italian, but worth watching nonetheless, and various interactive features downstairs, where life-size statues of farmers and proprietors tell you about life from their personal points of view. Displays highlight various aspects of the sharecropping life, from the harvest to special feasts and festivals. Upstairs, displays demonstrate the common living quarters of such farmers. This is a unique opportunity to witness what the Borgo Finocchieto might well have looked like as few as fifty years ago.



## Shopping

**La Dolce Vita** (65 Via Soccini). High quality handmade leather goods produced before your eyes by father and son craftsmen. Each piece is a handmade work of art, and likely one of a kind, as the artisans rarely produce two of the exact same color and shape. **Il Soffione** (43 Via Soccini). An apothecary stocked with vitamins, herbal teas, and a huge range of aromatic bath supplies with local scents. **Artelier** (8/10 Piazza Matteotti). An eclectic







collection of carefully chosen local crafts, glasswork, pottery, jewelry, and clothing. This is a great spot for souvenirs.

**Le Dolcezze di Nanni** (36 Via Roma). Offering breads and freshly baked goodies, Fleuriana's shop started in Buonconvento but has since expanded to include a big factory in nearby Monteroni d'Arbia. A number of specialty products stores throughout Italy carry her cookies, including cantucci (a hard, almond cookie that goes by the generic name "biscotti" in America), ricciarelli (almond paste cookies), brutti ma buoni ("ugly but good" mounds of cookie and nut), ossei dei morti (tooth cracking "bones of the dead"), and pan forte, a traditional Sienese cake, heavy with fruit, nuts, and nougat.

**Bottega delle Carni** (11 Via Roma). Besides the obvious supply of fresh meats, this shop is a good place for homemade pasta like ravioli and tortellini. A house specialty is chicken in a rich artichoke sauce. **Tutta Frutta** (Via Roma). One of two shops in town specializing in fresh fruits and vegetables.

Saturday is market day in Buonconvento. Go early for the best selection, but stalls will remain open until the early afternoon. There, you can take your pick of fresh fruits, vegetables, and flowers. Other stands specialize in cheeses, meats, bread, roast nuts, and candy. Further along the walls are stands to satisfy almost any need, from kitchen equipment to socks and tee-shirts.

#### Restaurants

**Ristorante da Mario** (60 Via Soccini). A restaurant must be doing well if it can afford to make Saturday its weekly closing day. Indeed, most locals count this their favorite restaurant in town and maintain standing dates for lunch. It is usually packed, but it boasts a second dining room upstairs for overflow and a large garden offers additional seating on warm evenings. Run by Mario's widow, daughters, and grandsons, this is the place for an authentic Tuscan dinner of pici pasta and steak. Your waiter will help you decipher the ever changing, verbal menu, as well as choose a good local wine.

**La Porta Di Sotto** (Via Soccini 76 <http://www.laportadisotto.it>). Traditional Italian and Mediterranean fare. Well-rated by customers for quality food and good value. Seasonal menu and daily specials. Friendly service with an extensive and varied wine list.

**Ristorante Osteria il Bibbio** This highly-reviewed restaurant is a great lunch destination for Borgo guests. Less than a mile from the Borgo in neighboring Bibbiano, it is an easy walk, or if by car there is ample parking. Osteria il Bibbio offers delicious local food, a fine wine list, great service, warm hospitality, and moderate prices. Try dining on the terrace with beautiful views.

#### **Pizzerias**

**Pizzeria Percenna** (Percenna.) Closed Monday. Cafes and snacks. **Pizzeria Primavera** (Via D. Alighieri). This is a good bet for a quick, cheap meal. Try the white pizza with fresh tomato and a salad of arugola. **Pizza al Taglio** (Via Roma) For a quick bite, you can find pizza by the slice at this newly renovated pizza-to-go spot in the center of town. **Pizzeria le Antiche Mure** <http://www.leantichemuradaciro.it>. Authentic Neapolitan pizza, plus traditional Italian dishes.

#### **Directions and Parking**

Exit the Borgo gate and follow the dirt road to Bibbiano. Follow the sign to Buonconvento and turn right on Strada Provinciale Murlo (34/c) which will lead you directly into town where you can park at the Coop on the left or continue several blocks to the Piazza Garibaldi on the right. Other, ample parking is also available by turning left onto Via Cassia and proceeding several blocks to the lot in front of the town walls.