

MONTE OLIVETO MONASTERY AND SAN GIOVANNI D'ASSO: HIDDEN TREASURES OF THE CRETE SENESI

DISTANCE FROM THE BORGO: 20KM

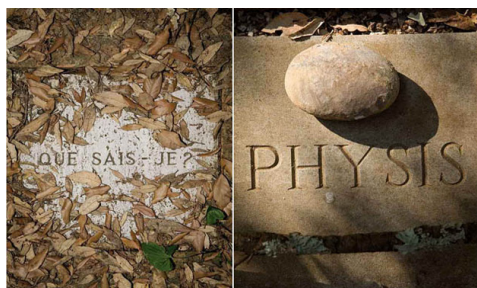


A visit to the Crete Senesi – an amazing landscape dotted with Tuscan farm houses, castles and ancient villages – is a photographer's paradise and the highlight of many a visitor to Borgo Finocchieto. The variety and richness of the lesser-known towns and sites within kilometers of Buonconvento will surprise and delight, whether undertaken on a bright spring day when the wheat fields are bursting with green, on an autumn afternoon when the colors of the harvest warm the light, or on a crisp winter day when the views are at their clearest.

This itinerary takes you on a loop from the Borgo to Buonconvento, then northeast toward Asciano, to the east to visit the **Abbey of Monte Oliveto Maggiore** and the town of Chiusure, south to **San Giovanni d'Asso** and the gardens of **il Bosco della Ragnaia**, further south to Torrenieri, then west and north to return to the Borgo.



From Buonconvento, take the SP 451 north toward Asciano. About 10 km on you will spot a turreted castle amid a forest of oaks and pines on your right. Signs will lead you to **Monte Oliveto Maggiore** <http://www.monteolivetomaggiore.it/lang1/>. This monastery, which many consider the finest in Tuscany, is the work of Giovanni Tolomei, a Sienese nobleman who renounced his worldly existence after being struck blind and subsequently claimed he was visited by visions of the Virgin. He chose the name Bernardo and set out to live in the wilderness of the Crete with two companions. The followers who quickly gathered soon formed the order Olivetan, or White Benedictines, as this group was intended to recall the simple works of Saint Benedict. Bernardo died in 1348 while ministering to victims of the Black Death, as did many of his men. The order would continue to flourish, however, making the monastery a powerful force into the nineteenth century.



A particular delight for many visitors to Monte Oliveto Maggiore is the opportunity to listen to the monks sing their Gregorian chants which are part of the services at Mass and Vespers. The monastery also operates a flourishing workshop for the restoration of ancient texts and a gift shop of handmade products. The building has changed many times since it was begun in the mid- fifteenth century. The abbey church was converted to the Baroque in the

18th century, although Fra Giovanni da Verona's impressively intricate choir stalls from 1505 remain. The cloisters or Chiostro Grande feature a well-kept fresco cycle on the life of Saint Benedict, an exemplary product of its time created by two greats of the Italian Renaissance: Luca Signorelli, who began in 1497, and Antonio Bazzi, who completed the work from 1505 to 1508.

Allow about an hour for the visit, plus fifteen minutes if you wish to explore the gift shop, which sells herbs, soaps, and tinctures produced by Benedictine monks, some from Monte Oliveto itself. Should you desire to attend Mass service, including Gregorian chants, they are offered on Sundays at 11:00 AM. The Abbey is open to visits in the summer from 9.00 to noon and 3.15 to 6.00 pm, and in the winter from 9.15 to noon and 3.15 to 5:00 pm. On Sundays mornings the Abbey is open until 12.30 pm. When it's time for lunch you can dine at **Ristorante La Torre of Monte Oliveto** (0577707022), which enjoys a constant crowd of locals as well as the bike tourists who are ubiquitous on this route.

Next you may wish to visit the beautifully characteristic town of **Chiusure**, perched on a high cliff of Sienese clay just beyond Monte Oliveto. Or you can continue your tour by driving toward Asciano briefly, then turning northeast on Strada Provinciale del Pecorile then turning to the South on SP 60/A to **San Giovanni d'Asso**. The road takes you through the **Senesi Crete**, so called "craters" because clay erosion makes the landscape of this strange area south of Siena resemble the moon. Farms, small and large, each perfectly situated to catch the sun, stud the hillside. Olive groves, neatly tended rows of vines, and the ever-present cypresses make this the classic ideal landscape of Tuscany. Follow the road about 3 km before turning right to continue 4 km to San Giovanni d'Asso.

If extending the beautiful drive sounds appealing, however, one of the best roads in rural Tuscany begins where otherwise you would turn right toward San Giovanni d'Asso. Turn left to follow the winding road through beautiful pastures, vineyards, and groves. In harvest season, you can smell the grapes. After a few kilometers, it is possible to turn around and resume the itinerary, or make a loop back to San Giovanni d'Asso by passing through **Trequanda** and **Montisi** (this loop adds about 20 km). Just before reaching San Giovanni d'Asso, you will pass an undiscovered treasure of the Crete Senese, il





Bosco della Ragnaia <http://www.laragnaia.com/EN/>. This oak forest and adjoining hillside is the property and artistic achievement of American artist Shepard Craige and has been his chief work since 1996.

Today, Craige's property abounds with trickling fountains, quiet contemplative spaces, and sculpture, all under the dappled light of the ancient holm oaks that so attracted the artist. Craige is often on site, tall with white hair, and is always pleased to have guests and when possible, discuss the works. Il Bosco della Ragnaia is on your right as you approach San Giovanni d'Asso. The gravel road leads you to a lot from which you may enter the garden, free of charge, at any time.

The town of **San Giovanni d'Asso** claims preeminence over Alba as Italy's white truffle capital, thanks to a per capita registration of white truffle hunters that is Italy's highest. In honor of that potent but elusive treasure, the town hosts a Sagra del Tartufo every November with a bustling market and outdoor feasting. Any time of year, it is possible to visit the town's tiny truffle museum, set within the walls of the Castello. Also located within the Castello is one of the area's better restaurants, **La Locanda del Castello** <http://www.lalocandadelcastello.com/en/> (closed Wednesday; 0577802939.) Outdoor dining in front and back is beautiful on sunny days, or the vaulted interior is pleasant as well.

From San Giovanni, it is 9 km further south to Torrenieri, then back to Buonconvento 10 km on the S2 and then home to the Borgo.

TIMING IN BRIEF:

- 20 min to Monte Oliveto, 75 min visit
- 90 min lunch in Monte O., Chiusure, or S. Giovanni d'Asso
- 15 min to San Giovanni d'Asso, 60 min touring il Bosco della Ragnaia, 30 min in the town of San Giovanni d'Asso
- 35 min return to Borgo Approx. 5.5 hours Any of the above can be shortened to make a quicker outing.

