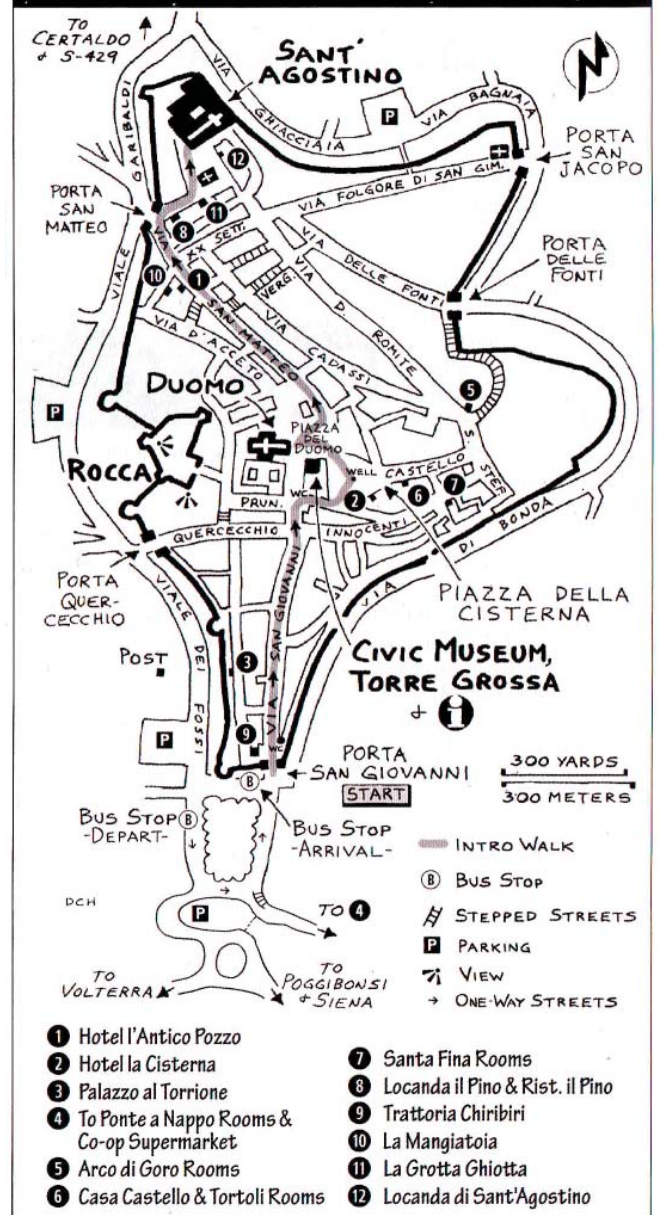


San Gimignano



includes admission to Town Hall, Torre Grossa, and a Vernaccia wine tasting; pay and meet at small TI—actually a hotel-booking office—at Porta San Giovanni).

Arrival in San Gimignano: The bus stops at the main town gate, Porta San Giovanni. There's no baggage storage anywhere in town, so you're better off leaving your bags in Siena or Florence. You can't drive within the walled town. There are three pay lots a short walk outside the walls; the handiest is Parcheggio Montemaggio, just outside Porta San Giovanni.

Helpful Hints: Thursday is market day on Piazza del Duomo (8:00–13:00), but for local merchants, every day is a sales frenzy. A public WC is just off Piazza della Cisterna (€0.50), and another is around the corner from Porta San Giovanni. A little electric shuttle bus does its laps all day from Porta San Giovanni to Piazza della Cisterna to Porta San Matteo (€0.50, 2/hr, buy ticket from TI, *tabacchi* shop, or from coin-operated machine on bus).

SELF-GUIDED WALK

Welcome to San Gimignano

This quick walking tour will take you from the bus stop at Porta San Giovanni through the town's main squares to the Duomo and Sant'Agostino Church.

• *Start, as most tourists do, at the Porta San Giovanni gate at the bottom end of town.*

Porta San Giovanni: San Gimignano lies about 25 miles from both Siena and Florence, a good stop for pilgrims en route to those cities, and on a naturally fortified hilltop that encouraged settlement. The town's walls were built in the 13th century, with gates that helped regulate who came and went. Today, modern posts keep out all but service and emergency vehicles. The small square just outside the gate features a memorial to the town's WWII dead. Follow the pilgrims' route (and flood of modern tourists) through the gate and up the main drag.

About 100 yards up, on the right, is a pilgrims' shelter (12th-century, Pisan Romanesque). The Maltese cross indicates that this was built by the Knights of Malta. It was one of 11 such shelters in town. Today, only the wall of this shelter remains.

• *Carry on, up to the town's central Piazza della Cisterna. Sit on the steps of the well.*

Piazza della Cisterna is named for the cistern that is served by the old well standing in the center of this square. A clever system of pipes drained rainwater from the nearby rooftops into the underground cistern. This square has been the center of the town since the ninth century. Each Thursday, it fills with a weekly market—as it has for more than a thousand years.

• *Notice San Gimignano's famous towers.*

The Towers: Of the original 60 or so towers, only 14 survive. Before effective walls were developed, rich people fortified their own homes with these towers: They provided a handy refuge when ruffians and rival city-states were sacking the town. These towers became a standard part of medieval skylines. Even after town walls were built, the towers continued to rise—now to fortify noble families feuding within a town (Montague and Capulet-style).

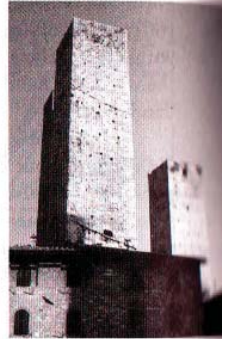
In the 14th century, San Gimignano's good times turned very bad. In the year 1300, about 13,000 people lived within the walls. Then in 1348, a six-month plague decimated the population, leaving the once-mighty town with barely 4,000 alive. Once fiercely independent, now crushed and demoralized, San Gimignano came under Florence's control and was forced to tear down its towers. (The Banca Toscana building is the remains of one such toppled tower.) And, to add injury to injury, Florence redirected the vital trade route away from San Gimignano. The town never recovered, and poverty left it in a 14th-century architectural time warp. That well-preserved cityscape, ironically, is responsible for the town's prosperity today.

• *From the well, walk 30 yards uphill to the adjoining square with the cathedral.*

Piazza del Duomo faces the former cathedral. The twin towers to the right are 10th-century, among the first in town. The stubby tower opposite the church is typical of a merchant's tower: main door on ground floor, warehouse upstairs, holes to hold beams that once supported wooden balconies and exterior staircases, heavy stone on the first floor, cheaper and lighter brick for upper stories.

On the piazza are the Civic Museum and Torre Grossa, worth checking out (see "Sights," on the next page). You'll also see the...

Duomo (or Collegiata): Walk inside San Gimignano's Romanesque cathedral. Siene Gothic art (14th-century) lines the nave with parallel themes, Old Testament on the left and New Testament on the right. (For example: the suffering of Job opposite the suffering of Jesus, Creation facing the Annunciation, and the birth of Adam facing the Nativity.) This is a classic use of art to teach. Study the fine Creation series (top left). Many scenes are portrayed with a local 14th-century "slice of life" setting, to help lay townspeople relate to Jesus—in the same way that many white Christians are more comfortable thinking of Jesus as Caucasian (€3.50, €5.50 combo-ticket includes mediocre Religious Art Museum, daily April–Oct 9:30–19:30, Nov–March 9:30–17:00).



From the church, hike uphill (passing the church on your left) following signs to *Rocca e Parco di Montestaffoli*. You'll enter a peaceful hilltop park and olive grove within the shell of a 14th-century fortress. A few steps take you to the top of a little tower (free) for the best views of San Gimignano's skyline; the far end of town and the Sant'Agostino Church (where this walk ends); and a commanding 360-degree view of the Tuscan countryside. San Gimignano is surrounded by olives, grapes, cypress trees, and—in the Middle Ages—lots of wild dangers. Back then, farmers lived inside the walls and were thankful for the protection.

• *Return to the bottom of Piazza del Duomo, turn left, and continue your walk across town, cutting under the double arch (from the town's first wall) and into the new section where a line of fine noble palaces—now a happy can-can of wine shops and galleries—cheers you down Via San Matteo to...*

Sant'Agostino Church: This tranquil church, at the opposite end of town, has fewer crowds and more soul. Behind the altar, a lovely fresco cycle by Benozzo Gozzoli (who painted the exquisite Chapel of the Magi in the Medici-Riccardi Palace in Florence—see page 153) tells of the life of St. Augustine, a North African monk who preached simplicity. The kind, English-speaking friars (from Britain and the US) are happy to tell you about their church and way of life, and also have Mass in English on Sundays at 11:00. Pace the tranquil cloister before heading back into the tourist mobs (free, €0.50 lights the frescoes, daily April–Oct 7:00–12:00 & 15:00–19:00, until 18:00 Nov–March).

SIGHTS

Civic Museum (Museo Civico)—This small, fun museum is inside City Hall (Palazzo Comunale). Enter the room called Sala di Consiglio (a.k.a. Danti Hall). It's *molto* medieval and covered in festive frescoes, including the *Maestà* by Lippo Memmi. This virtual copy of Simone Martini's *Maestà* in Siena proves that Memmi doesn't have quite the same talent as his famous brother-in-law. Upstairs, the Pinacoteca displays a classy little painting collection, with a 1422 altarpiece by Taddeo di Bartolo honoring St. Gimignano. You can see the saint, with the town in his hands, surrounded by events from his life. As you exit, be sure to stop by the Camera del Podesta to check out the medieval dating scene (€5, includes Torre Grossa, audioguide-€2, daily March–Oct 9:30–19:00, Nov–Feb 10:00–17:30, Piazza del Duomo).

Torre Grossa—The city's tallest tower (200 feet) can be climbed (€5, includes Civic Museum, same hours as museum, entrance inside Civic Museum—halfway up to Pinacoteca, Piazza del Duomo).