

# THE WAY OF ST FRANCIS



#### About the Author

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In his spare time Sandy enjoys yoga, sailing and playing piano. He has two grown sons and his wife, Theresa Elliott, is a yoga master teacher.

## THE WAY OF ST FRANCIS

VIA DI FRANCESCO: FROM FLORENCE TO  
ASSISI AND ROME

by Sandy Brown

**CICERONE**

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*Front cover:* Views down to Spello and the Tiber Valley along the upper trail from Assisi (Stage 16A)

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### Updates to this Guide

While every effort is made by our authors to ensure the accuracy of guidebooks as they go to print, changes can occur during the lifetime of an edition. Any updates that we know of for this guide will be on the Cicerone website ([www.cicerone.co.uk/626/updates](http://www.cicerone.co.uk/626/updates)), so please check before planning your trip. We also advise that you check information about such things as transport, accommodation and shops locally. Even rights of way can be altered over time. We are always grateful for information about any discrepancies between a guidebook and the facts on the ground, sent by email to [updates@cicerone.co.uk](mailto:updates@cicerone.co.uk) or by post to Cicerone, Juniper House, Murley Moss, Oxenholme Road, Kendal LA9 7RL.

The route maps in this guide are derived from publicly-available data, databases and crowd-sourced data. As such they have not been through the detailed checking procedures that would generally be applied to a published map from an official mapping agency, although naturally we have reviewed them closely in the light of local knowledge as part of the preparation of this guide.

**Register your book:** To sign up to receive free updates, special offers and GPX files where available, register your book at [www.cicerone.co.uk](http://www.cicerone.co.uk).

### Symbols used on route maps

|  |                          |
|--|--------------------------|
|  | route                    |
|  | alternative route        |
|  | start point              |
|  | finish point             |
|  | start/finish point       |
|  | alternative finish point |
|  | direction of route       |
|  | glacier                  |
|  | woodland                 |
|  | urban areas              |
|  | international border     |
|  | regional border          |
|  | station/railway          |
|  | peak                     |
|  | campsite                 |
|  | building                 |
|  | church/cross             |
|  | castle/fortress          |
|  | manned/unmanned refuge   |
|  | water feature            |
|  | metro symbol             |

SCALE: 1:50,000

0 kilometres 0.5 1  
0 miles 0.5

Contour lines are drawn at 25m intervals and highlighted at 100m intervals.

### Relief

5000 and above

4800–5000

4600–4800

4400–4600

4200–4400

4000–4200

3800–4000

3600–3800

3400–3600

3200–3400

3000–3200

2800–3000

2600–2800

2400–2600

2200–2400

2000–2200

1800–2000

1600–1800

1400–1600

1200–1400

1000–1200

800–1000

600–800

400–600

200–400

0–200

### GPX files

GPX files for all routes can be downloaded for free at [www.cicerone.co.uk/626/GPX](http://www.cicerone.co.uk/626/GPX).



The Duomo, tower and main piazza of Spoleto (Stage 19)





Signs in Casentino Park showing trails to nearby mountains (Stage 5)

## INTRODUCTION



Vittorio Emanuel II Monument in Rome (Pilgrim Churches Tour)

With your pack on your back you have rounded the last bend of the Tiber River. You have walked past the looming brown hulk of Castel Sant'Angelo, past some offices and stores and, with 140 stern, saintly and stony witnesses watching from the colonnade above, you have stepped out of Italy and into bustling Saint Peter's Square. This is holy ground, the Vatican City – for millions the center of the world. After many days of walking you should be exhausted, but instead you're exhilarated.

Before you is Michelangelo's spectacular dome, soaring over the tomb of St Peter. To your upper right is the Pope's balcony where he speaks

to tens of thousands of the assembled faithful. Beyond is the treasure-filled Vatican Museum. Behind you are relics of Ancient Rome, its temples and palaces sprinkled within one of the world's most beloved and beautiful modern cities.

Around you are pilgrims from all over the world, here like you to experience the drama and grandeur of this place. They came in a bus or train or car; but like millions of pilgrims from centuries past who spent weeks or months getting to this very place, you walked. You feel your arrival in a joyful heart, but also you feel it in your bones and muscles and on the soles of your weary feet. You take off your





Interior of St Peter's Basilica, Rome (Stage 28)

pack to rest your back after a journey of many kilometers, and with a mixture of relief and joy you think back over your amazing pilgrimage – the Way of St Francis.

Stretching out over 28 days and 550 kilometers, the Via di Francesco unveils countless unforgettable wonders. In Florence are the smooth, muscular lines of Michelangelo's David, the amazing heights of Brunelleschi's dome, the heavy bells of Giotto's tower and intricate details of Ghiberti's bronze doors. After Florence are countless medieval and Renaissance churches and monuments that stand in timeless testimony to a people's enduring faith over many centuries. In Assisi are delicate frescoes by Cimabue and Giotto. Roman amphitheaters, Etruscan arches and relics of saints dot the path that traces

a pilgrim walk through cities and villages but also under the shade of mighty forests and ancient olive groves.

Many have walked to Rome – heroes and conquerors, saints and reformers – but none loved this land more than St Francis of Assisi, a simple man of Umbria who became patron saint of Italy. In his *Canticle of Brother Sun and Sister Moon* he offered a poetic vision for a life that calls people to befriend the earth and all God's creatures. That song and his life sprang from under this sun shining over these fields, these forests, these stones.

The modern Way of St Francis connects places and paths important in the life of this beloved saint and makes them available to pilgrim walkers who seek to retrace his steps and capture his love of this land. Indeed,



View of the Basilica of St Francis from Porta San Giacomo (Stage 15)



Street scene near the train station in Florence

the ministry of Francis of Assisi began with a walk – in 1209 when he and his friends walked from Assisi to Rome to meet Pope Innocent III. His travels north of Assisi and in Tuscany inspire stories told to this day. He loved to visit in the Holy Valley of Rieti for rest and prayer. The Way of St Francis links these travels and destinations into a month-long walk that even after many centuries echoes with his presence.

Today, as you walk from Florence to Rome via Assisi it is easy to imagine the Italy of Francis' time. Still present are the thick, grey-brown walls of medieval hill towns, the quiet mountain pathways, the sweeping vistas of fertile farmland where wheat and herb are grown, and the ancient olive

groves where locals know to find the tender stalks of the wild asparagus they gather by hand and toss with the pasta of their evening meal. These Central Apennines contain some of Italy's most beautiful mountains and valleys, what Italians call *il cuore verde d'Italia* – the green heart of Italy.

If the mountains of Umbria, Tuscany and Lazio could speak of all that has happened in their shadow, they would tell a rich and colorful story of armies and conquerors, of mysterious Etruscans and crafty Romans, of Christian princes and worldly bishops, of invading hordes and bumbling dictators – all who made marks on the land that today are still visible to the observant pilgrim

walker. Every day of this walk brings evidence of another historic episode to see and touch: an Umbrian archway, a Roman road, a papal castle, a monument to soldiers lost in a war, a gleaming new European Union highway.

The Way of St Francis lays Central Italy at your feet and dares you not to love it. When you finally arrive in Rome and are given your completion certificate – your *testimonium* – your sense of accomplishment will be well-earned, having just completed one of the world's greatest pilgrimages.

But much more than that, you will have joined the countless pilgrims to Rome from over the centuries who've made a special place in their heart for this beautiful land, its deep and rich history, its food and people, and its humble patron saint who walked with you along the way.

#### ST FRANCIS AND THE WAY OF ST FRANCIS

##### The life of St Francis of Assisi

When Pietro and his French wife, Pica, celebrated the birth of their son Francis, in about 1181, they undoubtedly expected him to take up the family's prosperous cloth business in Assisi. As an adolescent, when Francis was not helping his father he was perfecting his skills as a horseman, archer and warrior – aristocratic proficiencies befitting the upper classes to which his family aspired.

In 1202 war broke out between Assisi and neighboring Perugia. Dressed in fine battle gear, Francis boldly joined his countrymen to fight the Perugians, but the tragic result was a heavy loss of life and many casualties in the brief but bloody conflict. The Perugian victors sorted the conquered soldiers between peasants, who were killed, and aristocrats, who were imprisoned for ransom. As a result, Francis spent nearly a year in the dungeons of Perugia while his ransom was arranged. He came back to Assisi in 1203 a very different man.

Yes, the cold and damp dungeon had taken a toll on his health, but it was more likely the traumatic experience of human cruelty that changed his outlook. One day after his release from prison he was riding toward Assisi and came across a leper. The old Francis would have been horrified at such a sight and would have kept his distance, but this time he subdued his revulsion and, out of a newfound compassion, gently kissed the man. Francis was living into a new worldview.

He began to spend more time alone in study, deep contemplation and prayer and encouraged his friends to do the same. One day in 1206, from the crucifix of the ruined church of San Damiano just outside Assisi's walls, he heard these words: 'Francis, rebuild my church.'

Along with a dozen of his friends he began to do just that. To fund his work Francis chose to tap a familiar



## STAGE 1

## Florence to Pontassieve

|                      |   |
|----------------------|---|
| <b>Start</b>         | Basilica of Santa Croce, Florence   |
| <b>Finish</b>        | Piazza Vittorio Emanuele II, Pontassieve  |
| <b>Distance</b>      | 18.9km  |
| <b>Total ascent</b>  | 494m  |
| <b>Total descent</b> | 450m  |
| <b>Difficulty</b>    | Easy  |
| <b>Duration</b>      | 4¾ hrs  |
| <b>Note</b>          | Santa Croce doesn't open until 9.30am so you should visit its bookshop the day before to acquire the stamp for your credential. |

Memories of Renaissance masterpieces fade quickly as this stage travels along quiet bends of the scenic Arno River and briefly among olive groves before coming to modern, but charming Pontassieve.

## FLORENCE 50M POP 367,796

Florence's many works of art and culture deserve additional study beyond the scope of this book. If you have never visited Florence, plan at least 1–2 days to enjoy its sites with a good guide or guidebook.

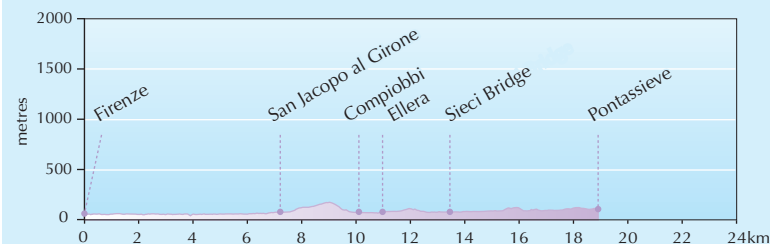
Make your way from the most common entry point – Santa Maria Novella train station – to the starting point of the first stage of the Way of St Francis at the Basilica Santa Croce. As well as being the largest Franciscan church in the world, the Basilica Santa Croce is sometimes called the 'mausoleum of Italy' since it contains the tombs of some of Italy's most revered citizens. The basilica itself is darker and more dense with color than its more famous sibling, the Duomo of Florence. Spend time here to enjoy the ornate tombs and rich frescoes. Entry costs €6 and visiting time is from 9.30am–5.00pm Monday to Saturday, and 1.00pm–5.00pm Sunday. Watch for closures on special holidays. A lovely pilgrim stamp (*timbro*) is available at the bookshop inside the main basilica.

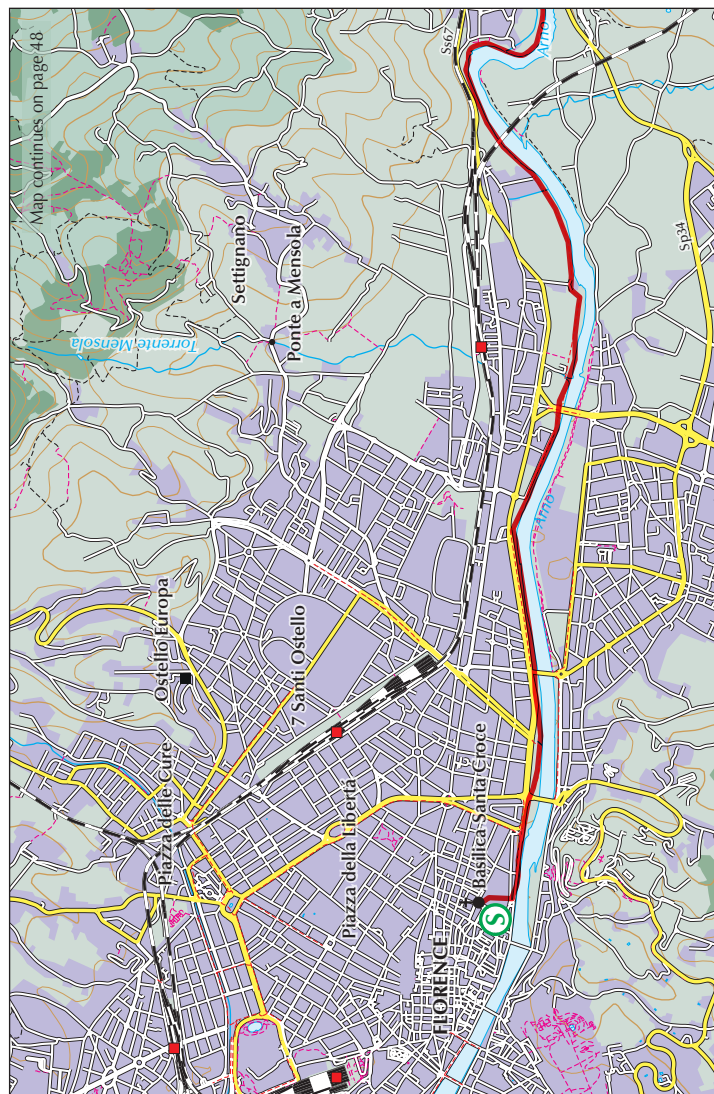
As one of Italy's main tourist destinations, Florence has hundreds of hotels. Two on the lower end of the price scale and near the train station are the recently renovated Hotel Eden (Via Nazionale 55, tel 055 483722, info@hoteleden.firenze.it,

€50/60, breakfast included) and Hotel Accademia (Via Faenza 7, tel 055 293451, info@hotelaccademiafirenze.com, €50/55, breakfast included). Florence also has several hostels, but most popular among pilgrims and near the Campo di Marte is 7 Santi Hostel (Viale dei Mille 11, tel 055 5048452, info@7santi.com, from €19), set in a former monastery. Another fine choice is Hostel Santa Monaca set in a 15th-century convent in the Santo Spirito quarter (Via S. Monaca 5, tel 055 268 338, info@ostellosantamonaca.com, from €11).

At the steps of Basilica Santa Croce, facing the church, follow the street to the right until it ends in one block, then turn left onto Via dei Tintori. In just 1½ blocks you see the raised sidewalk alongside the Arno River. Cross the street and follow this sidewalk past the busy riverside hotels, with the old tower of Florence's original walls visible across the river. Car traffic crosses the Arno on successive bridges. Before the second bridge find a footpath down to the dirt trail alongside the river. This path will take you all the way out of urban Florence.

Not long after crossing under the railway bridge come to the town of **San Jacopo al Girone** (6.7km). At the entry to town and just before a children's outdoor play area, turn left off the path and follow Via del Girone alongside the railroad tracks for two long blocks to the stoplight and piazza at the center of town. Cross





left, under the tracks, and then veer right onto the white brick sidewalk of Via San Jacopo. At the end of the sidewalk turn left and follow Via dei Bassi as it winds its narrow way uphill along stone walls and through olive groves. At the second right, turn onto Via della Rosa which traverses the hillside then descends with views of Compiobbi below. Follow the road downhill past the railroad tracks where it finally ends at Strada Provinciale 110 in **Compiobbi** (10km).

Now turn right at the Strada Provinciale, cross under the railroad tracks and then cross the Via Arentina highway. Here the official path heads back up into the hills, but a shorter and quieter option is across the street. ▶ Take the trail just past the newspaper kiosk at the right side of the piazza along the slow and lazy **Arno River**. In 300m turn left at a yellow utility tower and walk the steps up to the protected walk beside the highway. In 400m you come to the riverside town of **Ellera**. Continue as the walkway becomes a sidewalk and then briefly rejoin the highway at a traffic circle in the town of **Le Falle**.

Here in the small piazza are a bank, restaurant and café/bar.

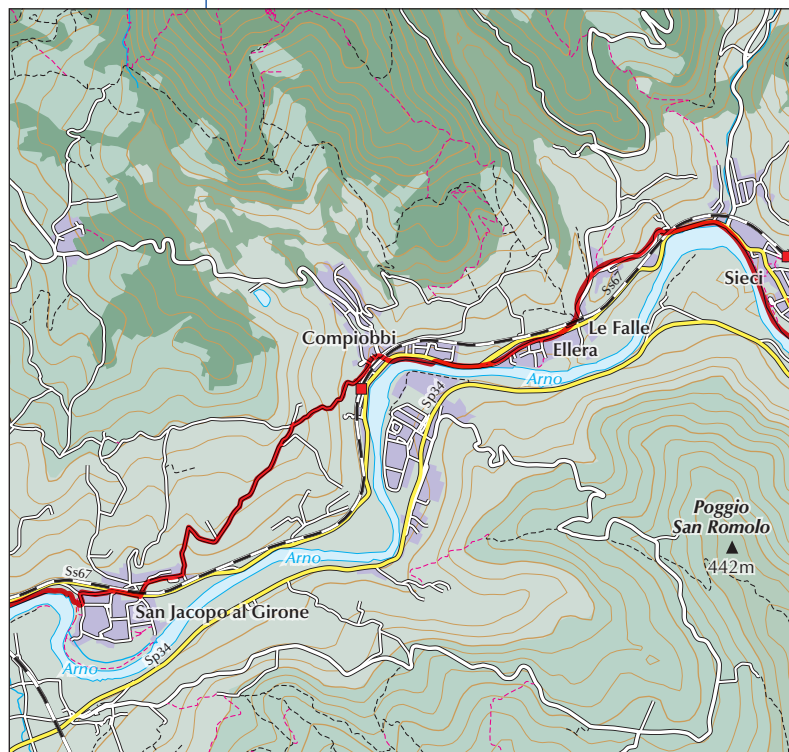
*The flat, gravel path along the Arno River makes for a relaxing and tranquil walk*



Just after the traffic circle look for a new, nondescript, yellow church on the left side of the road. Immediately after this turn left onto tiny Via Le Folle. Cross under the railroad tracks and cross the pedestrian bridge that spans the creek.

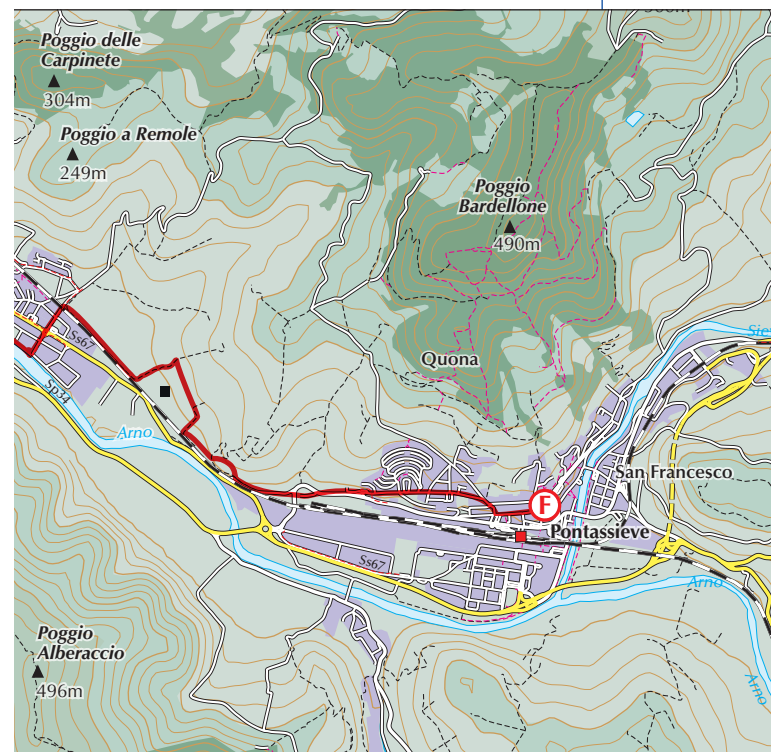
The official route rejoins here. Follow the walkway, then turn left at its end and follow Via Gricigliano uphill beside a yellow apartment building. At the fork in 300m turn right onto Via Paretaio.

The road veers to the right and in 700m crosses back under the railroad bridge. Turn left at the highway and



carefully follow it on the left shoulder for 200m to the town of **Sieci** (13.4km). Walk on the highway's sidewalk and cross the Arno tributary on the highway bridge. Just after the bridge, turn right onto the pedestrian walkway along the river.

Follow this trail to enjoy the last quiet moments along the beautiful Arno. Turn left, away from the river, at Via Toscanini after the park and continue across the Via Arentina highway at a roundabout. Cross under the railroad tracks on the right side of the road and immediately make a hard right, doubling back to a dirt road that







*Looking down  
toward Compiobbi*

follows alongside the tracks. Follow this road until it ends at a house.

Turn left and aim uphill on the gravel road past a yellow, concrete utility tower. Turn right at the tower and follow the dirt road across the hillside among vineyards. The road turns right again to head down toward the tracks and when it is near, back up a path to the left that goes through a small woods. Soon come to a

gravel road which you follow right and downhill. The gravel road becomes concrete as it enters the outskirts of Pontassieve.

Stay on this road as it passes a small piazza and then veers right and downhill, ending at the Via Gualdo Reni. Turn left here and follow the road through the Porta Fiorentina city gate, finding Piazza Vittorio Emanuele II on the right.





#### PONTASSIEVE 108M POP 20,622

In the Middle Ages, Pontassieve was called 'Castel Sant'Angelo' for the Florentine castle built here. The town later became known for its strategic bridge across the Sieve River, which opened to Florence the territories of Mugello and Casentino. By the 18th century Pontassieve's location made it a regional economic hub, and in the 19th and 20th centuries the railroad made it an industrial center. Its economic importance led the Allies to bomb the town repeatedly during World War II. Although none of its medieval features remain, the town was rebuilt along its medieval lines, with winding roads that follow the contours of the riverbank. The modern town hall is built on the foundations of the original medieval castle, and Via Ghiberti, the bustling, central commercial road, connects it with the Sieve bridge as in days past. Today, Pontassieve is a hub for artisanal leather, Chianti wine, olive oil, and handmade glass and pottery.

Pilgrims receive a warm reception at Leonardo's Rooms B&B (Via Piave 7, tel 360 923824, [info@leonardosrooms.it](mailto:info@leonardosrooms.it), €45/60/70/80. Hearty pilgrim breakfast). Also convenient is Toscani da Sempre (Via Fratelli Monzocchi 13/15, tel 558 392952, [info@toscanidasempre.it](mailto:info@toscanidasempre.it), €50/70). In the lower town, by the river, is Hotel i Villini (Viale Armando Diaz 28, tel 055 8368140, [info@ivillini.it](mailto:info@ivillini.it), from €40).

## STAGE 2

### *Pontassieve to Passo della Consuma*

|                      |   |
|----------------------|---|
| <b>Start</b>         | Piazza Vittorio Emanuel II, Pontassieve   |
| <b>Finish</b>        | Main piazza, Consuma  |
| <b>Distance</b>      | 17.8km  |
| <b>Total ascent</b>  | 1021m   |
| <b>Total descent</b> | 138m  |
| <b>Difficulty</b>    | Hard  |
| <b>Duration</b>      | 6hrs  |
| <b>Note</b>          | The sole possibility for refreshment after Pontassieve is the bar at Diacceto, so it may be wise to bring provisions for the whole day. |

A constant uphill track takes you from vineyards into the forests that will be your setting for the next five days. Today's climb is to the top of a saddle of mountains that separate two sections of the Arno River. Although about two-thirds of today's walk is on pavement, the often-spectacular views over vineyards and through forests to the green mountains of the Central Apennine range make this an enjoyable stage.

From Piazza Vittorio Emanuel II walk toward the Municipale and turn right onto Via Tanzini. Go under the clock tower arch and veer left as the road becomes Via Ghiberti. ▶ In 500m the road veers right and you cross the Sieve on a stout bridge. After the crossing continue along the road, passing the lovely **Chiesa San Francesco** on the right. One block later turn left on Via Bettini. At Via Farulla turn right and in one block come to the Via Forlivese, the main road up and down the Sieve Valley.

Just across the street is the barely visible **Via Tirolo**. Take it uphill, first crossing a railroad bridge. You will climb uphill on this pleasant, asphalt lane for the next 2.9km, with beautiful views of the Sieve Valley and the 10th-century **Castello di Nipozzano**, now a prosperous

*Note the grocery store and bakery for provisions.*