

Siena

The streets of Siena and San Gimignano may be filled with rivers of people for much of the year, but off-season they are even more of a delight, as HELEN WERIN discovers...

Helen flew to Pisa with Ryanair (www.ryanair.com) The Pisa Airport Shuttle bus takes 110 minutes from the airport to Siena. Service twice daily. Alternatively, there is a train service, but you have to change.

written and photography by Helen Werin



Il Duomo, the cathedral, is one of the most popular sights in Siena

It's lunchtime in Siena and the Piazza del Campo – renowned the world over for packing in the people at its spectacular Palio – is almost deserted.

A small group of students lounge near the famous fountain and a few pedestrians hurry across the square, but I seem to be the only one around who looks remotely like a tourist.

Which might come as a bit of a shock to anyone who has seen pictures of this beautiful medieval city – a UNESCO World Heritage Site no less – literally swarming with visitors.



The Palazzo Pubblico in Siena, which houses famous frescoes

But then it is early February and the “rivers of people” our guide tells us about who engulf the city from May to September have yet to arrive.

Thankfully, it's the same story at that other Tuscan tourist magnet 18 miles away, San Gimignano, and at the eerily silent hilltop fortress of Monteriggioni. At nearby Colle di Val d'Elsa, famous for its lead crystal, the streets are ever so slightly busier.

But it's so wonderfully quiet in Tuscany that I can barely believe that I am in the same place that draws in 250 tour buses a day in peak season.

I can understand if you might want to go to Siena's Palio – one of the most famous horse races in the world, where riders hurtle around the tight track in the town square. But at up to 700 Euro a pop to cram on to one of the balconies, that's if you can even get the chance, it's a very expensive 78 seconds or so.

Much better, I think, to save your money and spend it on an off-season week in Siena and the nearby valley of the Elsa river, slowly savouring its delights, unhampered by the crowds.

Precious commodity

So it seems almost a sacrilege to learn that most tourists who come to

‘do’ this part of northern Italy cram the ‘big three’ – Pisa, Florence and Siena, sometimes Lucca too – into three days. For, like the glorious honey cake that we tasted, Siena simply has to be relished, morsel by morsel, from its fountains and courtyards, to its incredible works of art, marble and frescoes.

Wandering through its cobbled alleyways offers a tantalising glimpse of what, at times, seems a parallel universe. It may be a prosperous university city of upmarket businesses, restaurants and the most sumptuous five-star hotel in a former palazzo, but the underside reveals a proud and fascinating history and is a mirror to a hidden underground world.

Most of Siena's riches are very obvious but, beneath the sandstone hills on which the city is built, lies its most precious commodity – water. Fonte Gaia (the fountain) in the Piazza del Campo is at the centre of a network of underground channels, called bottini, which run for more than 25 kilometres below Siena. They have been carrying water to the city since the 12th century.

There is currently an 18-month waiting list to tour the bottini. And that's if the level of the water is not too high. Apparently the tunnels are filled with

FOR MORE INFORMATION

For Siena tourist information visit:

www.terresiena.it

For accommodation offers, packages and excursions in Siena visit:

www.offerte.bookingsiena.it

For San Gimignano tourist information visit:

www.sangimignano.com



The quaint streets of San Gimignano are particularly charming off-season



Uncharacteristically quiet – the Piazza del Campo in Siena, where the Palio is run in July and August

icons because their creators believed that going underground was going nearer to hell and that the icons would protect them.

My disappointment at not being able to delve deeper – literally – in to this city's past was short lived. This is a city which is said to still look much as it did in the Middle Ages.

This is where going off-season also wins hands down for me. There are so many treasures to see here that I couldn't imagine waiting in endless queues to shuffle through Il Duomo (the 13th century cathedral), for instance, even though the magnificent floors with their tapestry of multicoloured, etched marble would be on full view.

Or, for that matter, trying to appreciate the breathtaking interior of the Santa Maria della Scala, opposite the cathedral, surrounded by hordes.

Fierce pride

Like a great many sites in Siena this museum gives new meaning to the word 'grand', especially considering that it was a hospital until 1996. To be a patient here may have meant little, or no, privacy in a ward with 80 other people.

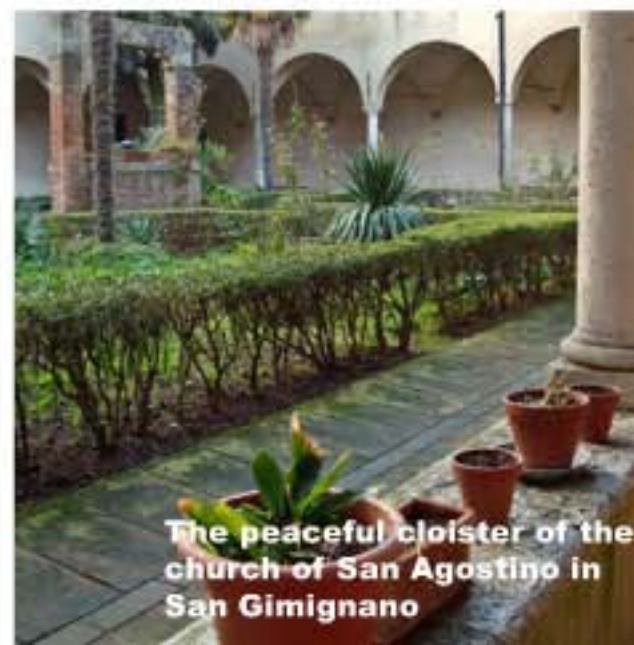
But the sick and the weary pilgrims who came through the frescoed reception hall must have looked around them and thought they had arrived in Paradise.

Our only other fellow visitors were a group of nursery children, who were initially entranced into uncharacteristic silence before launching in to a 'Where's Wally'-like game to find the artist who had painted himself in to each of the fabulous 15th century frescoes. These wall paintings by Domenico di Bartolo describe the mission and illustrate scenes from life in the hospital.

Our guide described the old hospital as "like a small town" and told how she loved to take the keys and explore when the director was not around.

Indeed, explore you must in Siena. The Sieneese are almost fiercely proud of their city, with a passionate allegiance to their contrada. There are 17 contrada – districts – in Siena with the boundaries marked with tiles depicting their representative symbol, whether it be a double-headed eagle, panther, caterpillar or a she-wolf.

San Gimignano's 'symbols', of course, are its tall towers, particularly



The peaceful cloister of the church of San Agostino in San Gimignano

impressive from a distance. Wandering through the charming winding streets I tried to picture what this compact town must have looked like with 72 such towers rising above the medieval rooftops. There are 'only' 14 towers now, but they still lend a romantic fairytale ambience to the place.

But out of season you can really get to its heart and see the other treasures that tourists don't usually get to see. There are free guided tours with art historians to places only open off season and other treats, such as tastings of local products, including the wonderful Vernaccia wines.



A typical street in picturesque San Gimignano

World first

Back in Siena, our guide, a very proud member of the she-wolf contrada, was reeling off another notable fact about the city. The world's very first bank, the Monte dei Paschi di Siena, is here. Never having moved since the 14th century, it still has the papers from the day it first operated.

It is also a city very familiar to James Bond fans; Quantum of Solace was filmed here. Actor Daniel Craig stayed at the Grand Hotel Continental, the only five star hotel in Siena, which boasts a beautiful ballroom frescoed with 18th century trompe l'oeil and since restored by local artists.

When I asked our guide if Daniel had been mobbed by fans, she looked quite shocked.

"We do not give too much attention to stars," she sniffed.

Maybe that's because the people of this part of Tuscany have far too many treasures of their own to take notice.