

Frommer's ShortCuts

**Lucca, Pistoia &
Northwestern
Tuscany**



About the Authors

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Frommer's Star Ratings, Icons & Abbreviations

Every hotel, restaurant, and attraction listing in this guide has been ranked for quality, value, service, amenities, and special features using a star-rating system. In country, state, and regional guides, we also rate towns and regions to help you narrow down your choices and budget your time accordingly. Hotels and restaurants are rated on a scale of zero (recommended) to three stars (exceptional). Attractions, shopping, nightlife, towns, and regions are rated according to the following scale: zero stars (recommended), one star (highly recommended), two stars (very highly recommended), and three stars (must-see).

In addition to the star-rating system, we also use seven feature icons that point you to the great deals, in-the-know advice, and unique experiences that separate travelers from tourists. Throughout the book, look for:

 **special finds**—those places only insiders know about

 **fun facts**—details that make travelers more informed and their trips more fun

 **kids**—best bets for kids and advice for the whole family

 **special moments**—those experiences that memories are made of

 **overrated**—places or experiences not worth your time or money

 **insider tips**—great ways to save time and money

 **great values**—where to get the best deals

The following abbreviations are used for credit cards:

AE American Express **DISC** Discover **V** Visa

DC Diners Club **MC** MasterCard

LUCCA, PISTOIA & NORTHWESTERN TUSCANY

The strip of Tuscany riding along the Apennines and the Emilia-Romagna border remains relatively uncrowded despite its being wedged between Florence and Pisa, favorites of guided tours. Florence's close neighbors—Prato, with its Lippi frescoes, renowned theater, and the best biscuits in Tuscany, and Pistoia, known in the Middle Ages for its murderous inhabitants but today for Pisano's most accomplished Gothic pulpit and a slew of Romanesque churches—have rich histories and artistic patrimonies that can keep you steeped in Tuscan culture just a few dozen kilometers from Florence . . . but a world away from its tourist traffic. Both are also blessed with fine, great-value eating establishments.

Beyond them stretches a land of serene hills smothered in olive groves and vines, genteel spas such as Montecatini Terme, and tall alpine mountains buried in green forest and capped with snow all winter long. Tuscany's northern coast catches some of the Riviera attitude in resort towns like Viareggio, but of more interest just inland are the jagged peaks of the Garfagnana. It was in these hills that Michelangelo quarried his marble, and where today you can explore one of the most extensive cave systems in Italy.

Lucca, the northwest's main città, lies in the plains just south of these mountains. This regally refined burg of few cars and many bicyclists is home to beautiful Romanesque churches, towers, and the mightiest set of walls of any medieval Tuscan town—now tamed into a city park and planted with trees to shade Sunday strollers.

PRATO

17km (11 miles) NW of Florence; 333km (207 miles) N of Rome

Poor Prato is unwisely overlooked by many sightseers: What they're missing is one of northern Tuscany's most open, friendly, and lively cities, one with heavyweight art treasures courtesy of Donatello and Filippo Lippi, as well as a glittering collection of early Renaissance altarpieces. The city was probably an Etruscan campsite and later meadow (prato in Italian) market site that quickly developed into a stable Lombard town around a.d. 900. Now the region's fastest-growing city, it has always been a thriving trade center and was a free commune from 1140 until 1351, when Florence bought it from its nominal lord and set it up as an ally state. The textile industry has been important since the Middle Ages and was the foundation of the medieval wealth of early Pratese capitalists like Francesco Datini, the famous "Merchant of Prato"; it's going stronger than ever today, as is other light industry. The Pratese also know how to enjoy themselves, and have perhaps Tuscany's top theater.

Essentials

GETTING THERE By Train: Prato is on the Florence-Pistoia-Lucca-Viareggio and

the Florence-Bologna lines, with more than 50 trains daily from Florence (trip length: 20–40 min. depending on interim stops). From Pisa, change at Lucca or Florence Rifredi. All trains stop at Prato Centrale, a 10-minute walk southeast from the center, but only some halt at the more convenient Prato Porta al Serraglio, outside the gate just a couple of blocks north of the Duomo (head straight down Via Magnolfi and you're there).

By Car: If you're taking the A11 from Florence or Pistoia, exit at either Prato Est or Prato Ovest and follow signs. The best place to park is on Piazza Mercatale, where there are a small number of free spaces (indicated by white markings) along the southeastern edge, and payment by the hour in the rest of the lot.

By Bus: Buses make the trip from Florence in about 45 minutes. The quarter-hourly (hourly on Sun) CAP bus will drop you on Via Pomeria or terminates at the train station (☎ 0574-608-218 in Prato, 055-214-637 in Florence; www.capautolinee.it). From Siena, change in Florence; from points west of Prato, take the more convenient train.

VISITOR INFORMATION The helpful tourist office (☎ 0574-24-112; www.pratoturismo.it; Mon–Sat 9am–1pm and 3–6pm, Sun 10am–1pm), is at Piazza Duomo 8. The free monthly events guide, *Pratomese*, available here and at many hotels, faces an uncertain future due to budget cuts—inquire locally. Thankfully, Prato's tourism website (www.pratoturismo.it) features an event search by date, so you can learn what's happening during your visit. A cumulative ticket for the Museo di Pittura Murale (in San Domenico), the Castello dell'Imperatore, and the Museo dell'Opera del Duomo costs 8€.

FESTIVALS & MARKETS The town's main event is the display of the Virgin's girdle ★★, which is done five times yearly—Easter Sunday, May 1, August 15, September 8, and December 25. This girdle is supposedly Mary's belt, which she removed and passed down to that ever-doubting St. Thomas while she was being Assumed into Heaven (rather than have Mary suffer a mortal death, God decided to assume her, or lift her bodily, up into the afterlife right at the point of her death; Thomas, as usual, didn't believe his eyes, and Mary did this to convince him—you'll see the moment captured in paint, marble, and inlaid wood all over town).

The holy artifact came to Prato at the time of the Crusades, when a local boy fighting in the Holy Land married Thomas's descendant and got the girdle as part of her dowry. The strip of dark green cloth is now preserved in a glass-and-gilt case that's kept inside nesting boxes within its own chapel in the Duomo under a series of locks that only keys held by the bishop, mayor, and local chief of carabinieri can open—and they do this with much pomp and Renaissance-style ceremony during the five yearly High Masses to celebrate the relic. The prelate, amid swirling incense and chanting, shows the girdle three times each to the parishioners inside the church and to the crowds massed on the piazza outside (there's a special exterior pulpit solely for this purpose), the faithful chosen to be so blessed

line up to kneel and kiss the case with the girdle in it, and the relic is then locked away until the next celebratory Mass. A costumed parade with lots of drumming and fifeing then follows.

The Festa degli Omaggi is a costumed historical pageant on September 8. The renowned Teatro Metastasio's season runs October through April, and the main market is held on Mondays at the Mercato Nuovo.

Exploring Prato

Castello Imperatore Hohenstaufen Emperor Frederick II's sharp-lined and blindingly white stone citadel was inspired by the Norman-style fortresses of Puglia. Frederick II built it here in the 1240s to remind the Pratese who was boss, and to defend the route from his homelands in Germany to his realm in southern Italy. While these days the inside is bare, you can climb onto what's left of the broken-toothed ramparts for a view of the city. Nearby is the newly restored 14th-century keep, the Cassero, Viale Piave (📞 0574-26-693), once connected to the defensive wall by a viaduct until modern roads cut through it.

Piazza Santa Maria delle Carceri. 📞 0574-38-207. Castello: Admission on cumulative ticket, or 2.50€ adults, 1.50€ children. Apr–Oct Mon, Wed–Fri 4–7pm, Sat–Sun 10am–1pm and 4–7pm; Nov–Mar Fri 3–5pm, Sat–Sun 10am–1pm and 3–5pm. Cassero: Free admission. Apr–Oct Wed–Mon 4–7pm.

Duomo  There was once the Pieve di Santo Stefano in the center of the Prato of the 900s, but between 1211 and 1457 a new building with Romanesque green-and-white striping rose on the site to become Prato's Duomo. The facade has a glazed terra-cotta Madonna and Sts. Stefano and Lorenzo (1489) by Andrea della Robbia above the main door. The beautiful Pulpit of the Sacred Girdle hangs off the facade's right corner, from which Prato's most revered relic, the Virgin Mary's girdle, is displayed five times yearly (see above). The pulpit is a Michelozzo (design) and Donatello (sculpted friezes) collaborative effort (1434–38). The frolicking cherubs around the base are casts of Donatello's originals, now kept in the Museo dell'Opera (see below).

Inside the church on the left is the Cappella della Cintola (Chapel of the Sacred Girdle), entirely frescoed (1392–95) by Agnolo Gaddi. On top of the altar stands one of Giovanni Pisano's finest sculptures, a small marble Madonna and Child (1317). Popping 2€ in the box buys you 5 minutes of light. The nave pulpit was carved by Mino da Fiesole and Antonio Rossellino (1469–73).

To access the church's prized, frescoed chapels, you have to pay a small fee. To the right of the high altar is the Cappella dell'Assunzione (Chapel of the Assumption) ★, frescoed by Paolo Uccello and Andrea di Giusto with the Lives of St. Stephen and the Virgin (1436). St. Stephen was the first Christian martyr—his death by stoning is the subject of the middle panel of the left-hand wall.

The frescoes ★★★ (1452–66) covering the walls of the choir behind the high altar—the Life of St. Stephen on the left wall (spot his martyrdom again to the

left of the stained glass) and St. John the Baptist on the right—comprise one of the masterpieces of Filippo Lippi, and indeed the early Renaissance. The amorous, monk-painter asked if a certain Lucrezia Buti, a beautiful young novice from the nearby convent, could model for his Madonnas. The nuns agreed, Filippo promptly seduced her, and the two ran off, eventually having a son, Filippino Lippi, who became an important painter in his own right. Supposedly Filippo did actually use Lucrezia in the paintings—she's the graceful flowing figure of Salome dancing into the Feast of Herod on the right wall's lower register. Lippi portrayed himself, along with Fra' Diamante and the assistants who helped him here, on the left wall among the crowd mourning the passing of St. Stephen. (They're the little red-hatted group on the far right; Filippo is third in from the end.)

Piazza Duomo. ☎ 0574-26-234. Free admission to nave; 3€ to altar chapels (3.50€ with audio guide). Mon–Sat 7:30am–7pm, Sun 7:30am–noon and 1–7pm; access to altar chapels Mon–Sat 10am–5pm, Sun 1–5pm.

Galleria degli Alberti Just up the street from the Palazzo Datini, the pinkish Palazzo degli Alberti houses the Cassa di Risparmio di Prato bank, which keeps its painting collection above the pit where they carry on Datini's money-making tradition. Giovanni Bellini crucified his beautifully modeled Christ ★ in the middle of a Jewish graveyard and painted an amalgamated fantasy city in the background. Next to this masterpiece hangs a small Madonna col Bambino against a scallop-shelled niche by Filippo Lippi, and a few paintings later we get the large canvas of Christ Crowned with Thorns (1604), the crowning apparently being done by Roman soldier triplets—Caravaggio must have used the same model in different poses.

Via Alberti 2. ☎ 0574-617-359. www.galleriapalazzoalberti.it. Free admission, but you must book ahead. Mon–Fri 8:30am–12:30pm and 3–5pm.

Museo Civico & Galleria Comunale ★ Inside the crenellated, 14th-century Palazzo Pretorio in Prato's civic heart, is the city's communal museum—or at least, it will be when it finally reopens after a seemingly interminable renovation project that's currently scheduled to complete in 2013 or 2014. The fine collection's highlights include a World War II-damaged 1498 Filippino Lippi tabernacle he frescoed for his mother, Lucrezia, and a Nativity by his father Filippo, that's obviously another portrait of her. The museum also houses one of the finest collections of polyptych altarpieces ★ in Tuscany. Among the masterpieces is a predella by Bernardo Daddi telling the story of the Holy Girdle cartoon-strip style. Most of the works, though, are various takes on the Madonna theme (with Child, with Saints, Enthroned, and so on) by Pietro di Miniato, Lorenzo Monaco, Luca Signorelli, both Filippo and Filippino Lippi, Raffaelino di Garbo, Andrea di Giusto, and Botticini. The collection's best works are on display at the Museo di Pittura Murale in San Domenico (see below) while the museum is undergoing renovations.

On the piazza outside is a statue of Francesco Datini (see Palazzo Datini, below) with bronze plaques showing the man's life accomplishments.

Piazza del Comune. ☎ 0574-1836-302. Admission and opening times to be announced.

Museo dell'Opera del Duomo ★ The collection here is fairly limited, although the admission price is worth it for the worn originals of Donatello's beautifully detailed friezes of dancing putti from the Duomo's outdoor Pulpit of the Sacred Girdle. The Michelozzo bronze capital for the pulpit also returned to the collection in 2011, after restoration. First, however, you pass through a room with early-14th-century works, including Bettino di Corsino's Madonna del Parto—the pregnant Mary is an extremely rare subject in early Italian art. The remainder is arranged around a pretty cloister; look out for a St. Lucy sprouting a huge sword from her neck by Filippino Lippi, dad Filippo's 1453 Funeral of St. Jerome, and a 15th-century reliquary case for the Holy Girdle by Maso di Bartolomeo. The atmospheric vaults across the cloister house fragmentary frescoes dating to the 14th and 15th centuries.

Piazza Duomo 49 (left of the cathedral entrance). ☎ 0574-29-339. Admission on cumulative ticket, or 5€ adults, 3€ children. Mon, Thurs, Fri 9am–1pm and 2:30–6:30pm, Wed 9am–1pm, Sat 10am–1pm and 2:30–6:30pm, Sun 10am–1pm.

Museo di Pittura Murale in San Domenico Inside this barnlike Dominican church finished by Giovanni Pisano in 1322 is a Niccolò Gerini Crucifix on the second altar on the right and a pair of Matteo Rosselli works (Madonna and St. Filippo Neri on the second altar on the left and an Annunciation on the fifth altar). Across the cloister is the Museo di Pittura Murale, which alongside the outstanding 14th- and 15th-century altarpieces from the Museo Civico (see above) houses fresco fragments and sinopie, many of them damaged, by Niccolò Gerini, Pietro di Miniato, Agnolo Gaddi, and a nice Taddeo Gaddi San Domenico, along with anonymous 15th-century graffiti decorations saved from the gardens of the Palazzo Vaj.

italy's best BISCOTTI, TUSCANY'S TOP THEATER & FINE CONTEMPORARY ART

Prato is known throughout Italy for making the finest of those twice-baked hard almond crescent cookies called cantucci. To pick up a bag of these biscotti di Prato, as they are known here, stop by the city's venerable biscottificio (biscuit-maker), Antonio Mattei, Via Ricasoli 20–22 (☎ 0574-257-56; www.antoniomattei.it), which has been selling Prato's famous cantucci and the vin santo in which to dunk them since 1858. It is open Tuesday through Friday from 8am to 7:30pm, Saturday from 8am to 1pm and 3:30 to 7:30pm, Sunday from 8am to 1pm (closed Sun in July and completely for 3 weeks in Aug).

For an evening at one of Tuscany's most innovative theaters, head to the Teatro Metastasio ★, Via Cairoli 59 (☎ 0574-608-501 for tickets; www.metastasio.it). The program features mostly prose theater in Italian, but there are also regular jazz events. The box office is open Tuesday through Saturday from 9:30am to 12:30pm and 4 to 7pm.

Lovers of contemporary art have also come to the right city: The Centro per l'Arte Contemporanea, the Pecci for short, outside the center at Viale

Repubblica 277 (☎ 0574-53-17; www.centropecci.it) has a varied and important permanent collection (closed for major building works through late 2012) and runs themed shows (which continue through renovations). See the website for info.

Piazza San Domenico 8. ☎ 0574-440-501. Church: Free admission. Daily 7am–noon and 4–7pm. Museo: Admission on cumulative ticket, or 5€ adults, 3€ children. Apr to mid-Sept Mon, Thurs–Sat 9am–1pm and 2:30–6:30pm, Wed 9am–1pm, Sun 10am–1pm; mid-Sept to Mar Wed–Mon 9am–1pm (Fri–Sat also 3–6pm).

Palazzo Datini ★ This was the home of Francesco di Marco Datini (1330–1410), a textile magnate and secular patron saint of capitalism whose life was drawn so vividly by Italian-American author Iris Origo that he’s become known by the title of her book, *The Merchant of Prato*. Datini invented the promissory note, and he kept scrupulous records of all his business activities—the basis for Origo’s book—and inscribed each one of his ledgers with an accountant’s battle cry: “For God and Profit.”

One of the few places he allowed himself to spend money was on the decoration of his home, hiring Niccolò Gerini and Arrigo di Niccolò di Prato for the job. The outside frescoes have faded to reveal fascinating sinopie (preparatory sketches) underneath—though what you see on the facade is a copy (originals are in the archive). However, many paintings on the interior walls remain. The ticket room retains bucolic scenes bubbling with plant and animal life, and a side room contains a portrait of Datini. Next to the door, as in many medieval houses, is a giant St. Christopher, which Datini glanced at daily to protect against sudden death while he was out conducting business.

Via Mazzei 43 (corner of Via Rinaldesca). ☎ 0574-21-391. Free admission. Mon–Fri 9am–12:30pm and 3–6pm (mornings only July–Aug); Sat 9am–12:30pm.

Santa Maria delle Carceri ★ This was the first centrally planned templelike church of the High Renaissance (1485–1506), a not entirely successful exercise in Brunelleschian theoretical architecture by Giuliano da Sangallo. The light plaster walls with pietra serena accents and Andrea della Robbia friezes and tondi are pleasantly evocative, but the monumental space can leave you a little cold. The interior contains a St. John the Baptist statue over the font by the architect’s son Francesco and the miraculous 14th-century fresco of the Madonna with Child and Two Saints that the church was built to house. The stained glass was designed by Domenico Ghirlandaio.

Piazza Santa Maria delle Carceri. ☎ 0574-27-933. Free admission. Daily 7am–noon and 4–7pm.

Where to Stay

With tourist juggernaut Florence just a few kilometers down the road, Prato doesn’t offer much in the way of hotels aimed at leisure travelers. In fact, the city makes a better day trip than an overnight destination. Besides our favorite below, you could also try the Wall Art, Viale della Repubblica 8 (www.wallart.it; ☎ 0574-596-600), a brutal-looking business-oriented hotel on the fringes of the center. Rooms are spacious and contemporary, with some style, but the hotel is not well located for strolling the centro storico; doubles

run 100€ to 160€, including overnight parking in a secure garage. (Better rates are available through Booking.com and agents.)

Hotel Giardino The Giardino is right on the corner of Piazza del Duomo (but you can't see the Duomo itself), just a short walk from Porta al Serraglio station. It is the center's most modern hotel, with good-size rooms for the price and location, quality built-in furniture, and large, firm beds. Another plus is the Risaliti family who run it: an extremely friendly bunch who have kept their little inn in great shape since the 1930s.

Via Magnolfi 2–6, 59100 Prato. www.giardinohotel.com. ☎ 0574-606-588. Fax 0574-606-591. 28 units. 70€–135€ double. Rates include breakfast. AE, DC, MC, V. Garage parking 11€. Closed Christmas and 2 weeks in Aug. Amenities: Bar; concierge; room service. In room: A/C, TV, hair dryer, minibar, Wi-Fi (6€/day).

Where to Eat

Compared to many Tuscan destinations, Prato's family-run trattorie offer plenty of bang for your euro. Besides the places listed below, you could try Osteria Cibbé, Piazza Mercatale 49 (☎ 0574-607-509; www.cibbe.it), an informal, friendly place with plenty of home-cooked regional staples at value prices. The ragù di coniglio e faraona (with rabbit and guinea hen) is especially tasty. Dishes cost around 8€; it's closed Sunday. For a sweet treat, be sure to stop by Chocolat, Via Magnolfi 83 (☎ 0574-27-308), home to an arsenal of chocolate goodies and tasty pastries. It's just across from the main entrance to Porta al Serraglio train station (and makes for a great, air-conditioned lobby while waiting for a train in the summer.)

Il Piraña ★★ SEAFOOD Hard to believe, but this modern restaurant landlocked in a residential suburb is one of Tuscany's bastions of fine seafood. They leave you no doubt about their purpose: When you open the door you come face-to-fish with an aquarium of the flesh-eating critters after which the place is named. After you target the fresh specimen you want grilled, steamed, or baked for a second course from the ample selection, start with one of the superb antipasti, such as "fantasy of crustaceans" with asparagus and tartar sauce. Select primi might include gnocchetti con scampi e fiori di zucca (potato dumplings with shrimp and stuffed squash blossoms) or riso con crema di scampi (a large portion of shrimpy, creamy rice). The Piraña is popular enough to warrant reservations even midweek, but service, while very competent, can sometimes make a glacier look speedy. If you don't like fish, don't come.

Via Valentini 110 (south of the walls). ☎ 0574-25-746. www.ristorantepirana.it. Reservations strongly recommended. Primi 12€; secondi 20€–30€. AE, DC, MC, V. Mon–Fri 12:30–2:30pm and 8–10:30pm; Sat 8–10:30pm. Closed 1 week in Jan and Aug 5–Sept 5.

Soldano ★ 🍷 TUSCAN No-nonsense food at unfashionably cheap prices in the city backstreets—this is what Tuscany was like before mass tourism arrived, and at Soldano the clock hasn't moved on an inch. The dining room, hung with nostalgic, black-and-white photos and featuring checked tablecloths, is plucked right from trattoria central casting. The dishes are too: Primi favorites include tortellini in brodo (filled pasta in clear broth) and pici (hand-rolled

long pasta) with any number of sauces. Secondi like osso buco (braised veal shank) and papero in umido (duck stew) are accompanied by seasonal vegetables. It's an overall fantastic value in a genuinely authentic setting.

Via Pomeria 23 (corner of Via Simintendi). ☎ 0574-34-665. Primi 4€–6€; secondi 6€–8.50€. MC, V. Mon–Sat noon–2:30pm and 7:30–10pm.

PISTOIA ★

17km (11 miles) NW of Prato; 35km (22 miles) NW of Florence; 336km (209 miles) N of Rome



An ancient Roman town (Catiline and his conspirators were defeated here in 62 b.c.) built against the foothills of the Apennines, Pistoia has retained its pretty churches, small but worthy art collections, and well-preserved dark medieval alleyways. Halfway between rivals Pisa and Florence, it inherited Romanesque architecture and Gothic sculpture through the influence of the former and the best of the Renaissance from proximity to the latter.

However, the machinations of these eternally feuding Tuscan rivals, with some 14th-century meddling by Lucca thrown in, also left their mark on Pistoia's medieval character. After the city's Ghibelline comune was conquered by Guelph Florence in 1254, the Pistoiese were reportedly the ones who began the schism between Black and White Guelphs. One day, a Pistoiese child of the ancient Neri (Black) family was playing at wooden swords with a friend from the Bianchi (White) household and one—the legend doesn't say which—was injured. When the perpetrator was sent by his father to apologize

to the other boy, the hurt child's father responded by hacking off the offending youth's hand, declaring, "Iron, not words, is the remedy for sword wounds." The ensuing conflict spread to Florence as noble households waged secret wars and occasional all-out street battles against one another.

The Pistoiese already had a nasty reputation. Political arguments here were historically decided by secret assassinations, performed with the aid of the daggers, called *pistolese*, produced by the city's famous metalworking industry (which ironically, also once led the world in the manufacture of medical instruments). As advances in science allowed people to kill one another in increasingly effective ways, the city began producing hand-held firearms that adopted the dagger's old name: pistol.

The town's biggest modern industry is horticulture, and Pistoia's peripheral "industrial zone" is a miniature landscape of ornamental trees and shrubbery lined up in orderly rows at the city's famous plant nurseries, or *vivai*. Many of the cypresses that stud the ridges and decorate the postcards of rural Tuscany began their lives here.

Essentials

GETTING THERE By Train: Pistoia is on the Florence-Lucca-Viareggio line, with more than 35 trains daily from Florence (45–55 min.). Pistoia's train station is on Piazza Dante Alighieri. To reach the center from there, walk right ahead on Via XX Settembre for about 5 blocks as far as Via Cavour, in Pistoia's pedestrian heart.

By Car: From east or west, take the A11: from Florence, past Prato, and from Pisa or Lucca past Montecatini. From the south, a slower but panoramic drive ★ heads north from Empoli through olive groves and past Vinci. The most convenient free parking is signposted "Cellini," and lies just southeast of the city walls.

By Bus: Lazzi/COPIT buses (☎ 0573-363-243; www.blubus.it) run to Via XX Settembre 71 (opposite the train station). To and from Florence, the fast Lazzi "via autostrada" nonstop service links the two in around 50 minutes. Montecatini Terme is also well linked by bus, but from just about anywhere with a rail station, you're better off taking the train (see above).

VISITOR INFORMATION The helpful tourist information office (☎ 0573-21-622; www.turismo.pistoia.it, though you'll find as much info regarding museums and such at www.comune.pistoia.it) is open daily 9am (10am Sun) to 1pm and 3 to 6pm at Via Roma 1/Piazza del Duomo 4 (inside the Antico Palazzo dei Vescovi).

FESTIVAL & MARKETS In 1300, the Giostra del'Orso was a real Joust of the Bear, a bearbaiting event in which horsemen ceremonially took on a captive ursine. Revived in 1947, the wildly popular July 25 event is now more humane. The highlight in a day of costumed pageantry is the joust, when mounted knights circle around a track and score points by slamming their lances into stylized bear targets. There are daily fruit and veggie markets (except Sun) on Piazza della Sala and Via Ciliegiole, and a thriving Wednesday and

Saturday morning market on Piazza del Duomo.

Exploring Pistoia

Baptistry This baptistry was built in those strong Pistoian bands of dark green and white by Cellino di Nese from 1337 to 1359, based on a design by Andrea Pisano. The Gothic pulpit to the right of the entrance was added in 1399, and the Madonna above the door is the work of Tommaso and Nino Pisano. The spare interior, with bare bricks showing off the bulk of the dome, contains a reconstituted baptismal font (1226) of carved and intarsia marble panels by Lanfranco da Como.

Piazza del Duomo. No phone. Free admission. Tues–Wed and Fri–Sat 10am–1pm and 3–5pm; Sun 10am–1pm and 3–6pm.

Cappella del Tau ★★ This remarkable chapel was built in 1360 by a branch of the Franciscan order that cared for the sick and those with disabilities, and whose members wore a Greek Tau as their symbol. In the 1500s a private citizen bought it and whitewashed over the 1372 fresco cycle by Niccolò di Tommaso that covered every inch of the walls and ceiling. In the process of stripping the whitewash in 1968, many of the frescoes were seriously damaged, but what remains illustrates the Life of St. Anthony Abbot (lower register), Stories from the New Testament (middle register), and Stories from the Old Testament (upper register and vaults). The wall facing the door is covered by a huge Last Judgment: The colors of the images in the upper back corners give some idea of how vivid the original effect must have been. The space is now shared, somewhat incongruously, with giant bronzes by Pistoiese sculptor Marino Marini (1901–80).

Corso Silvano Fedi 28 (at Piazza Garibaldi). ☎ 0573-32-204. Free admission. Mon–Sat 8:30am–1:30pm.

Duomo (Cattedrale di San Zeno) ★ The current incarnation of San Zeno dates from 1220, soon after which an old defensive tower close by, bristling with Ghibelline swallowtail crenellations, was given a respectable church clothing of Romanesque striped arches and converted to the cathedral bell tower. The glazed terra-cotta decorations of the barrel vault ★ in the entrance arcade and the lunette above the main door are Andrea della Robbia creations.

On the inside right wall is a tomb by Cellino di Nese (1337), beyond which is the Cappella di San Jacopo and the Duomo's greatest treasure, the Altare di San Jacopo (Altar of St. James) ★. Close to a ton of partially gilded silver is molded into medieval saints (the upper half), early Renaissance biblical scenes (the front and flanks), and a pair of Brunelleschi prophets around on the left side. Started in 1287 and not finished until the 15th century, this altar outlasted a number of silversmiths, including a handful, such as Leonardo di Ser Giovanni, who also worked on the only other comparable altar, a similar pile of silvery holiness now in Florence's Museo dell'Opera del Duomo.

Pop down into the crypt for the remains of the 5th-century church and marvelously medieval bits of a Guido da Como pulpit (1199), dismembered in the 17th century. On the right-hand wall of the chapel to the left of the high

altar is the 1485 *Madonna di Piazza*, a brightly colored work, including a fantastically rich carpet under the Virgin's feet, that has been declared the only documented painting by Verrochio (though some are now trying to credit it to his protégé Leonardo da Vinci—or even Leonardo's student Lorenzo di Credi).

Piazza del Duomo. ☎ 0573-25-095. Admission to Duomo free; Cappella di San Jacopo 2€ adults, .50€ children. Duomo daily 8:30am–12:30pm and 3:30–7pm. Cappella di San Jacopo Mon–Sat 10am–12:30pm and 3:30–5:30pm; Sun 8–9:30am, 11–11:30am, and 4–5:30pm.

Museo Civico Pistoia's most worthwhile museum is housed in the 1294 Palazzo del Comune, which sprouts a basalt black head from the early 14th century above the entrance that local legends take to be either a Moorish king of Mallorca, enslaved by pirating Pistoiese, or a traitorous citizen who sold his city out to Lucca. The museum's first floor boasts a Lucchese-style panel of St. Francis surrounded by his life story (1270s), a 14th-century Lamentation by Lippo di Benivieni, a polyptych of the Madonna and Child with Saints by the anonymous Master of 1310, and four early-16th-century Sacred Conversations with colors of deep saturation. Two of the conversations are by local boy Gerino Gerini, and one each came from the brushes of Florentine's Lorenzo di Credi and Ridolfo del Ghirlandaio. (There's also one almost surrealist attempt painted in 1523 by Pistoiese painter Bernardino Detti.) The collection continues upstairs but goes downhill from here, with a glut of 17th- to 19th-century efforts on the third floor—including Empoli's 1624 *Justice of Midas*.

Piazza del Duomo. ☎ 0573-371-296. www.comune.pistoia.it/museocivico. Admission 3.50€ adults, free children 17 and under or seniors 60 and over. Thurs–Sun 10am–6pm.

Museo dell'Antico Palazzo dei Vescovi A local bank now owns the old Bishop's Palace wedged between the Duomo and the Baptistery, but they keep their archaeological and Duomo-related collections open to the public via a guided tour. The ancient highlights are bits of a Roman house and an Etruscan furnace, as well as a pair of Etruscan tomb markers and a precious alabaster funerary urn carved with a chariot scene in high relief. There's also a gold reliquary case (1407) by Lorenzo Ghiberti and his workshop in the room that was once used as the Duomo's sacristy and treasury. In the 13th century, Vanni Pucci—one of those bad seeds who helped cement Pistoia's evil reputation—broke into this room looking for politically damaging documents. While inside, Pucci also helped himself to some of the church's riches, a despicable act that caused Dante to stick Pucci, surrounded by snakes and a cursing God, in a fairly low circle of Hell.

Palazzo dei Vescovi, Piazza del Duomo. ☎ 0573-36-91. Admission 4€ adults, 2€ children 1m (3¼ ft.) tall and over and seniors. Guided tour only: Tues and Thurs–Fri 10am, 11:30am, and 3pm.

Ospedale del Ceppo/Pistoia Sotteranea ★ Pistoia's star outdoor attraction is the facade ★★ of the Ospedale del Ceppo, one of the best works by the often disappointing Giovanni della Robbia and Pistoia's answer to the Ospedale degli Innocenti in Florence, which was decorated by Giovanni's father, Andrea. Here, Giovanni was in top form, creating a frieze (1514–25) of glazed terra-cotta panels to surmount a Michelozzo-designed loggia. The six well-

preserved della Robbia panels, plus a decaying one added later by Filippo Paladini, represent the seven acts of mercy, divided by the cardinal and theological virtues.

The hospital is also the jumping-off point for the Pistoia Sotterranea ★ tour, inaugurated in mid-2010. The 1-hour guided visit follows the path of a diverted stream, under a couple of intact bridges now below the hospital's foundations, that over the centuries has served as a power source for an olive press, a public laundry, a refuse dump, and a source of water—often simultaneously. The fascinating tour takes in the history of the hospital above (founded in 1277 and still going strong), and ends at the tiny, frescoed teaching and autopsy theater that was built in the mid-1700s and used to teach medical students until its replacement by the Medical Academy in 1844. Tours in English are available.

Piazza Giovanni XXIII 13. ☎ 0573-368-023. www.irsapt.it. Tour 9€ adults, 8€ children, 30€ family. Tours (1 hr.) daily at 10:30am, 11:30am, 12:30pm, 2pm, 3pm, 4pm, 5pm (Apr–Sept also 6pm).



A Cappuccino Break

Valiani, Via Cavour 55 (☎0573-23-034), is a cafe and pastry shop installed in 1831 under high, vaulted ceilings behind a striped Romanesque facade next to San Giovanni Fuorcivitas. There are also a few tables outside; it's closed Tuesday.

Sant'Andrea ★ Pistoia's undisputed artistic heavyweight is Giovanni Pisano's pulpit ★★★ (1298–1301) inside this 12th-century church. The third of the four great Pisano pulpits (the others are in Pisa and Siena) and the first carved by Giovanni without the help of his dad, Nicola, this is the work with which the Pisan sculptor brought his art to absolute Gothic perfection. The reliefs are so deeply carved that the figures seem to come out at us. Because the naturalism of the Renaissance hadn't yet come into vogue, Giovanni relied on narrative density and power (the Annunciation, two takes on the Nativity, and the angels averting the shepherds in their fields are all crammed into the first panel) and exaggerated expression to bring his works to life. But the reliefs do foreshadow later movements, especially where Giovanni breaks the borders of the panels to carry the artistic narrative across real space. Notice how the angel of the Magi panel is pointing back to the Nativity scene as it wakes the three wise men to go adore the baby Jesus. There are also two wood crucifixes, one behind the pulpit by Gerino Gerini (early 1500s) and another by Giovanni Pisano across the nave. Bring a .50€ coin for the light box.

Piazzetta Sant'Andrea. ☎ 0573-21-912. Free admission. Daily 8am–12:30pm and 3–6pm.

San Domenico This 1280 church squats a block inside the southern walls of town. The first item on the right as you enter is the tomb of Filippo Lazzari ★, one of

Dante's best friends. The scholar lectures on eternally in the relief panel below. (We like to think his young follower Boccaccio, said to be one of the students here, is the kid stifling a yawn on the right.) The chapel to the left of the high altar contains a Cristofano Allori canvas of St. Domenic Receiving the Rosary, interesting not so much for the painting itself, but for the argument in the background between the artist and the church sacristan over payment for the picture. Benozzo Gozzoli, who died of the plague while on a fresco job here in 1497, is buried in the cloister, which also (when open) gives access to several rooms housing detached 13th-century frescoes. The refectory and attached tiny museum house the remaining fragments of Gozzoli's last work, a Journey of the Magi, and a possible early Verrocchio St. Jerome.

Piazza San Domenico. ☎ 0573-28-158. Free admission. Daily 7–11:50am and 3:30–6pm (Sun to 8pm).

San Francesco Pistoia's barnlike Franciscan church contains lots of good 14th-century frescoes, the best of which are in the transept chapels. Behind the high altar is a fresco cycle on the Life of St. Francis by a Giotto copycat (perhaps a student) who mimicked his master's formulae for most of the scenes. The chapel to the left has a Sienese cycle of an Allegory of the Triumph of St. Augustine. After giving a nod to the frescoes in the second chapel to the right of the high altar, go through the door at the transept's end for a peek at more 14th-century works in the sacristy. If it's open, pass through the door into the chapter house beyond for even better frescoes, including a giant Tree of Life that just might be by the hand of Sienese master Pietro Lorenzetti.

Piazza San Francesco. ☎ 0573-368-096. Free admission. Daily 8am–noon and 5–6:30pm.

San Giovanni Fuorcivitas ★ The side facade of this small, supremely Romanesque church is an orderly festival of blind arcades, inlaid diamond lozenges, and stripes to put a zebra to shame. Inside are a giant 13th-century crucifix, a Visitation in white terra cotta by Luca della Robbia, and a Giovanni Pisano holy-water stoup. The main attraction, however, is the pulpit ★ (1270) by Fra' Guglielmo da Pisa (a student of Nicola Pisano). Of the three major pulpits in Pistoia (see Sant'Andrea, above), this is the most solidly Romanesque.

Via Cavour. ☎ 0573-24-784. Free admission. Daily 8:30am–noon and 5–6:30pm.

Where to Stay

With just a few business travelers and a handful of tourists staying the night, central Pistoia doesn't have a particularly scintillating crop of hotels. An additional choice to the ones below, especially well adapted to budget travelers, is the Hotel Firenze, Via Curtatone e Montanara 42, 51100 Pistoia (www.hotel-firenze.it; ☎/fax 0573-23-141), where spacious, plain rooms come with air conditioning and are kept spotlessly clean. Doubles are a value at 55€ to 88€ per night (extra beds for family groups range from 15€–25€).

Patria ★ Completely renovated and reopened in 2011, this is the most striking option in the historic center, a modern hotel with midsize, contemporary yet warm rooms sporting parquet flooring and shiny chrome rainfall shower units. Its location can't be beat: just a few blocks from the train station but also

only three doors down from the Romanesque stripes of San Giovanni Fuorcivitas and a minute's walk from the Duomo. Weekend rates offer the best value.

Via Crispi 8–12, 51100 Pistoia. www.patriahotel.com. ☎ 0573-358-800. Fax 0573-977-236. 27 units. 110€–250€ double. Rates include breakfast. AE, DC, MC, V. Free parking on street; ask hotel for overnight permit. Amenities: Bar; airport transfer; babysitting; bikes; concierge. In room: A/C, TV, hair dryer, minibar, Wi-Fi (free).

Villa de' Fiori ★★ 🎁 To label this refined, secluded colonial villa set amid olive groves north of the center a mere “agriturismo” appears to do it a grave injustice—but strictly speaking, that's what it is. There's been no conversion as such, just a re-equipping of the structure to receive 21st-century hotel guests in comfort: Rooms come in all shapes and configurations, from suite-style family units divided by period screens, to romantic doubles with canopy beds, to mini-apartments suited to long stays. There's also nothing fake-antique-chic about the handsome wood furniture that embellishes the warren of bedrooms and comfortable common areas on both floors of the villa. Service is impeccable: You'll feel like a guest in an aristocratic home.

Via di Bigiano e Castel Bovani 39 (3km/2 miles north of center), 51100 Pistoia. www.villadefiori.it. ☎ 0573-450-351. Fax 0573-452-669. 9 units (7 rooms, 2 apartments). 94€–152€ double, plus 30€ per stay cleaning charge; 90€–165€ apartment (July–Aug weekly Sat–Sat only). Room rates include buffet breakfast. AE, DC, MC, V. Free parking. Closed Jan and weekdays Feb–Mar. Amenities: Restaurant; bar; babysitting; outdoor pool; Wi-Fi (free). In room: A/C, TV, hair dryer.

Where to Eat

At groovy enoteca (wine cellar) Gargantua ★, Piazza dell'Ortaggio 12 (☎ 0573-23-330; www.tavernagargantua.com), a lengthy wines-by-the-glass list is complemented by large mixed tasting platters (7€–10€) of bruschetta, cheese, salami, and seafood. Tables outside enjoy a fine spot on a buzzing little piazza. For excellent midpriced meals under brick vaults, you could also try reliable San Jacopo, Via Crispi 15 (☎ 0573-27-786; Wed–Sun 12:15–2:30pm and 7–10pm, Tues 7–10pm), for well-cooked dishes that make use of local and seasonal ingredients.

Cacio Divino ★★ 🍷 CONTEMPORARY TUSCAN This fun, friendly, and tiny enoteca with outside tables close to Pistoia's produce market offers a menu of surprisingly daring, contemporary Tuscan flavors at fair prices. There's also an unusual (for Tuscany, in this price bracket) amount of care taken with the presentation of each dish. For primi, expect the likes of pici alla lepre sul cacao amaro (hand-rolled pasta with hare sauce on bitter chocolate) or pacchero al tonno fresco con melanzane e pesto rosso (pasta tubes with fresh tuna, eggplant, and tomato pesto). Many secondi are equally unusual, with the pollo in crosta di mandorle (chicken in an almond crust) among the more conservative options. The superlative wine list is as thick as a novella—there's a whole page just on reds from the Pistoiese hills. The two-course weekday lunch special is a steal at 13€.

Via del Lastrone 13. ☎ 0573-194-1058. www.cacio-divino.it. Reservations recommended. Primi 9€–11€; secondi 9€–11€; set weekday lunch 8€ one course, 13€ two courses. MC, V. Daily 11am–3pm and 7–11pm (mid-June to mid-Sept closed Sun lunch).

La BotteGaia ★ MODERN TUSCAN This popular restaurant opened in 2001 to great fanfare in the gastronomic community after the success of the owners' nearby wine shop, I Sapori della BotteGaia, Via di Stracceria 4 (☎ 0573-358-450). It serves classic local cuisine, elevated a notch above the norm, alongside some more daring Tuscan specialties, such as the lampredotto trippato all fiorentina—which, even for someone who normally steers clear of tripe, is a tasty stew—and supremely succulent slow-cooked, milk-fed veal. The tables in the back look across to Piazza del Duomo.

Via del Lastrone 17 (also an entrance behind the Baptistery). ☎ 0573-365-602. www.labottegaia.it. Reservations recommended. Primi 7€; secondi 10€–14€. AE, DC, MC, V. Tues–Sat noon–3pm and 7–11pm; Sun 7–11pm. Closed 2 weeks in Aug.

MONTECATINI TERME & MONSUMMANO TERME

15km (9½ miles) W of Pistoia; 46km (29 miles) W of Florence; 330km (205 miles) N of Rome

The curative powers coursing through the sulfurous underground hot springs and steaming vaporous caverns of the Valdinievole west of Pistoia have been renowned for centuries. This “Valley of Mists” is home to Montecatini Terme, the grande dame of Italian spas, as well as Monsummano Terme, with eerie natural sauna caves. Although modern thermal centers aimed at relaxing your body and emptying your wallet have begun filling the valley, the hillsides remain beautiful. Capped with tiny medieval villages, they are a joy to wander—the SS633 twists its way into the mountains north of Montecatini, providing a gorgeous route for Sunday drivers. If you're heading here hell-bent on heavy relaxation, know that both Montecatini and Monsummano become veritable ghost towns from mid-October to Easter.

Essentials

GETTING THERE By Train: The Florence-Lucca-Viareggio train, which pauses at Pistoia and Prato on the way, stops at Montecatini (19 daily; 50 min. from Florence, 10 min. from Pistoia). Montecatini Centro is the most convenient station for most of the town. However, if you're heading to Monsummano Terme, get off at Montecatini Terme–Monsummano and take a taxi (☎ 0572-75-100).

By Car: Take the A11 from Florence or Lucca to the Montecatini exit. There's plenty of pay parking in the center. Monsummano Terme has a free car park.

By Bus: Hourly Lazzi/BluBus (☎ 055-363-041 or 0572-911-781; www.blubus.it) buses run from Florence (50 min. by autostrada) to Piazza Italia in Montecatini. There are also hourly weekday buses to/from Lucca (55 min.), but it's easier to take the train.

VISITOR INFORMATION Montecatini Terme's tourist office is at Viale Verdi 66 (☎ 0572-772-244; www.montecatiniturismo.it). It's open Monday through Friday from 9am to 1pm and 3 to 6pm, Saturday 9am to 1pm only. For Monsummano information, see www.grottagiustispa.com.

Exploring Montecatini & Monsummano

MONTECATINI TERME Montecatini is a quiet and aging town that seems to long for its heyday as a “ville d’eau” where the wealthy came to “take the waters.” It is still a mecca for well-heeled seniors who like to do a bit of shopping to unwind after drinking mineral-laden, laxative waters, getting radioactive vapors steamed into various parts of their body, and generally lying about doing nothing. This town’s on permanent riposo, and its nucleus is the Parco delle Terme, a long park of neoclassical temples each expanding over the sources of various underground hot springs and vaporous crevices.

The oldest is Terme Tettuccio, Viale Verdi 71 (☎ 0572-778-501), written of as early as 1370 and visited by the high-strung merchant of Prato, Francesco Datini, in 1401. The spa wasn’t really exploited until Grand Duke Leopold I took an interest in developing the termi of the town in the 1700s. Reconstructed from 1919 to 1927, the neoclassical facade opens onto the 20th-century ideal of a Roman bathhouse, decorated with murals, ceramics, and statues by Art Nouveau Liberty masters, like Galileo Chini and Ezio Giovannozzi. Drinking the waters here will supposedly do wonders for the intestines and liver you’ve been rotting with all that Chianti Classico: A ticket to imbibe the waters morning and afternoon costs 14€. Tourist visits (after 11am) cost 6€.

The Terme Leopoldina, Viale Verdi 67 (☎ 0572-778-551) at the park’s entrance goes so far as to dedicate itself as a neoclassical (1926) temple to Asclepius, the god of medicine, as if its mineral mud baths could cure all ills. These and most of the other spas are open Easter through October only, but one remains open to the ailing, aching public year-round: the neo-Renaissance-meets-modernism Excelsior, Viale Verdi 61 (☎ 0572-778-511). It costs anywhere from 22€ to 115€ for thermal baths, mud soaks, ayurvedic massages, and more serious treatments. Tickets for all the spas, and a brochure with details of Montecatini’s various treatments, are available at the Società delle Terme office, Viale Verdi 41 (☎ 0572-7781; www.termemontecatini.it). An open-air thermal pool, like that at Monsummano Terme (see below) is scheduled to open by 2013.

Perhaps most interesting for younger visitors is Montecatini Alto, reachable in the summer via a funicular railway (☎ 0572-766-862; www.funicolare1898.it), which makes a 10-minute trip from Viale Diaz every half-hour daily from 9:30am to midnight. It costs 4€ one-way and 7€ round-trip (2€/4€ for children aged 6–10). For a bite to eat, stop by La Torre, Piazza Giusti 8 (☎ 0572-706-50; closed Tues), built around a medieval tower, where you’ll find reliably tasty but (like everywhere else here) slightly pricey food: primi cost 10€ to 12€, secondi 14€ to 18€, and the cover charge is a steep 3€. The Old Town offers fine views across the Valdinievole, and makes a pleasant break from the languorous, wallet-draining hedonism and general flatness of the modern spa town below. It’s also a base for short hikes, especially to visit the stalactites of the Grotta Maona caverns nearby (☎ 0572-74-581), open April through October Monday to Saturday from 9am to noon and 3 to 6pm. Admission is 6€ adults, 4€ for kids 6 to 12. The

surrounding complex includes a bar that becomes a disco some evenings.

MONSUMMANO TERME One of the eeriest spas in Italy lies just south of Montecatini at Monsummano Terme. In 1849, the Giusti family discovered on their lands a series of stalactite- and stalagmite-laden caves with a sulfurous lake at the bottom and hot mineral-laden vapors permeating the air. By 1852, they had built a spa around it dubbed the Grotta Giusti Terme ★ and converted their adjacent villa into a luxury hotel (see below).

You don't have to stay at the inn to visit the spa at Via Grotta Giusti 1411 (☎ 0572-90-771; www.grottagiustispa.com), where you can don a white shift and a dun-colored robe—like a member of some monastic order—and descend through a series of increasingly hot and steamily dripping caverns named, of course, Paradiso, Purgatorio, and Inferno, after Dante (the scalding sulfur pool below is the Lake of Limbo). It costs 40€ to steam in the caves for 50 minutes, but you can also go in for a massive array of treatments (such as full-body massages, starting at 30€ for 20 min.; or 20€ for a “thermal nasal irrigation”; or 40€ to soak in anti-inflammatory thermal mud). Less serious (and more fun, especially if you're traveling with kids) is the outdoor thermal pool ★, where you can soak and splash in the 95°F (35°C) waters, whatever the weather, looking out at the wilderness. All-day pool entry costs 20€ on weekdays, 24€ on weekends (13€/11€ for kids 12 and under). There's a few euros off in low season, and after 2pm on weekdays adults pay just 13€. The terme are open from 10am to 6pm (mid-May to mid-Oct closes 3pm Wed).

Where to Stay & Eat

IN MONTECATINI TERME

We sometimes wonder where Montecatinians live, because almost every building that isn't a restaurant, store, or spa seems to be an albergo (hotel). With more than 300 hotels in town, you should have no difficulty finding a room—Montecatini's tourist office spends half its time rounding them up for vacationers. Many hotels require you to take half or full board, and several are closed completely from mid-October until just before Easter. If you can escape your hotel's pension requirement, head to the refined Enoteca Giovanni, Via Garibaldi 25 (☎ 0572-71-695; www.enotecagiovanni.it), for an excellent, but far from cheap, meal of innovative Tuscan fare. Primi cost around 19€, with secondi ranging from 25€ to 30€.

If you're seeking old-fashioned Belle Epoque grandeur for your Montecatini base, consider the Grand Hotel & La Pace, Via della Torretta 1 (www.grandhotellapace.it; ☎ 0572-9240). Rooms, alas, don't quite deliver on the promise of the palatial lobby, but staying here gives a flavor of Montecatini in its pomp. For a real splurge, however, we prefer options in Monsummano Terme (see below) or Pistoia.

IN MONSUMMANO TERME

There's nothing hugely surprising about the menu at La Cantina (da Caino), Via Picasso 3 (☎ 0572-53-173), but you're assured a friendly welcome and are

in the capable hands of a kitchen staff that knows what it's doing with Tuscan flavors from land or sea. In warm weather, you can dine in the arbor-covered garden. Primi range from 8€ to 10€ and secondi from 10€ to 25€. It's closed Monday. To find it from the Grotta Giusti, exit the property and take the first left (just before Albergo La Speranza). La Cantina is the last building on the right.

Grotta Giusti ★ Converted from a family villa in the 1850s, this hotel has hosted Garibaldi, Verdi, and Liz Taylor, and provides a greater sense of escape than the supposedly “grander” hotels of nearby Montecatini. Rooms are well sized if bland, but they're comfortable and have thermal bathwater on tap. A few accommodations downstairs have frescoed ceilings, and some on the third floor have balconies, but steer clear of the boring modern rooms in the new wing. The ceiling frescoes are repeated in the sunny breakfast rooms and in the vaulted lounges off the lobby. They also have a 42-hectare (104-acre) forest with a fitness path.

Via Grotta Giusti 1411, 51015 Monsummano Terme (PT). www.grottagiustispa.com. ☎ 0572-90-771. Fax 0572-907-7200. 64 units. 260€–300€ “comfort” double; 296€–356€ “charm” double; 310€–626€ superior. AE, DC, MC, V. Rates include breakfast. Free parking. Amenities: Restaurant; bar; babysitting; bikes; concierge; gym and health spa; outdoor pool; room service; outdoor tennis court; Wi-Fi. In room: A/C, TV, hair dryer, Internet, minibar.

En Route to Lucca: Pescia & Pinocchio

Pescia, stretched along the Pescia River 12km (7½ miles) west of Montecatini along the SS435, is Tuscany's capital of cut flowers. Its huge market still ships out carnations, gladioli, lilies, and chrysanthemums, in commercial quantities daily before 8am. Pescia's horticulture industry also produces excellent asparagus, olive oil, and sorano beans (a prized local pulse). Art aficionados will enjoy 13th-century San Francesco, frescoed by Bonaventura Berlinghieri (1235) with a cycle of the Life of St. Francis—Berlinghieri was a close friend of Francis, who had died a mere 9 years earlier, and many believe that these may be some of the most accurate portraits of Assisi's famous mystic.

LUCCA ★

26km (16 miles) W of Montecatini; 72km (45 miles) W of Florence; 335km (208 miles) NW of Rome