

3 MARCH 2014 CATERINA POMINI 10734

THE SVIZZERA PESCIATINA

Located north of Pescia, in the Tuscan-Emilian Apennines, the Svizzera Pesciatina was given its name by Jean Charles Léonard Simonde de Sismondi, the Genevan writer who believed this particular area of Tuscany resembled the Swiss Alps. Included in the province of Pistoia, it boasts breathtaking natural landscapes, enchanting oak-chestnut forests and 10 small Medieval villages (or "castella") built entirely of pietra serena sandstone.

The easiest way to reach these little wonders perched on hillocks and ridges is to contact a Florence car rent and hire a vehicle; once ready, you can drive to **Pontito** (the northernmost village) or **Pietrabuona** (the southernmost *castella*) and visit them all.

A short introduction to the villages

Situated 749 metres above sea level and surrounded by characteristic fan-shaped mounds, in olden

times **Pontito** was known as the village of the "*figurinai*", the **artisans of plaster figures**; around Christmas time, thousands of twinkling lights illuminate the village, making it look like a **huge Christmas tree**.

For centuries **Stiappa** marked the boundary between the Grand Duchy of Tuscany and the Duchy of Lucca; also renowned as the **Village of Beautiful Women**, it is the starting point of the "*Via dei Mulini* " trail (the word "*mulini*" means mills) that leads to the **Mulino del Fontanone**. Stiappa's main sight is the Church of Santa Maria Assunta.

Castelvecchio has a beautiful Romanesque church (one of the seven which were founded by the Bishop Frediano in the 6th century); although a disastrous collapse in the 19th century altered the original building, the church is still really worth seeing. The village was also known as the **Village of the Ice-cream Makers**: Mr. **Aurindo Ferrari**, born in Castelvecchio in 1873, learnt the art of gelato-making and taught it to the boys of the village.

San Quirico lies on the eastern slope of Monte Battifolle and has the distinction of being the highest village in the whole Valleriana area; its urban structure resembles a fan and is characterized by crisscrossing, picturesque alleys which pass under the buildings. The wonderful Romanesque **Church of SS Andrea and Lucia** dominates the village and houses a **splendid 15th-century baptismal font** decorated with horns of plenty and rosettes.

Once a popular holiday destination, **Vellano** stands on a steep slope and is home to the only **pietra serena quarry** that is still working in the province of Pistoia; outside the town walls is the beautiful **Parish Church of SS Sisto and Martino**, once part of an ancient abbey of Benedictine monks.

Sorana sits on the slopes of Monte Petritulo and owes its name to a fortress which has now disappeared; the fortress was named **"The Sovereign"** (= *sovrana*) because it overlooked the entire valley.

The village is also famous for producing **a particular type of bean**, which has made Sorana a destination for foodies.

Located on a peak overlooking the Val di Torbola, **Aramo** offers extraordinary hiking trails and **underground passages** (ancient escape routes) dug into the rock. In its surroundings, you'll also find the "*metati*", some traditional stone structures in which **chestnuts** were laid out to dry.

Situated 424 metres above sea level, **Fibbialla** is **one of the most intact villages of the valley**, this is due to the fact that it was drastically abandoned during the last decades. Historically the battlefield of Florence and Lucca, in the sky over the village you can often spot small raptors such as **buzzards** and **kestrels**.

Medicina is basically known for its old church that was built in the 15th century and stands on top of the hill. There are also ancient defensive fortifications and the remains of an underground passage still visible. Everywhere around, you can observe the "*terrazze-aie*" (= **"terraces-farmyards"**) where

harvested agricultural products were traditionally dried by exposure to direct sunlight.

Pietrabuona is considered the **natural access point into the Svizzera Pesciatina**; like Fibbialla, it was the scene of bloody battles between the Florentines and the Lucchesi in the Middle Ages. The village name comes from the pietra serena quarries situated in the area (*pietra* means stone); Pietrabuona's main attractions include an old church and the **Paper Museum**.

Once very much inhabited, these villages were progressively abandoned, especially in the last three decades (with the exception of Pietrabuona, Sorana and San Quirico); for this reason, **they sometimes feel like true ghost towns**. Since they are joined together by the **Valleriana trekking network** (on average it takes up to six hours to complete the hike) you can choose to leave your car in Pietrabuona or Pontito and get around the villages by foot.

If you are visiting Florence and you feel like taking a Tuscany tour, contact www.blucarservice.it for details.