

18 SEPTEMBER 2014 CATERINA POMINI 37627

UNDER THE TUSCAN SUN OF CORTONA

Surrounded by vineyards, olive groves and stone country houses, Cortona stands on a hilltop near the border with Umbria and offers fantastic views over Lake Trasimeno, Montepulciano and beyond. Rich in Etruscan relics, Medieval buildings and Renaissance works, it became even more popular after being featured in Audrey Wells movie "Under the Tuscan Sun" (2003) starring Diane Lane and Sandra Oh.

According to history, **Cortona** was one of the most powerful *lucumoniae* of the **Etruscan League**, a **Roman colony** and presumably a **bishopric**; the **Gothic War** (535-554) reduced the town to mere rubble and further devastation occurred until **Charlemagne**'s arrival (774). In the 13th century, Cortona became a **free commune** minting its own coins and was made an episcopal see in 1325. At

the beginning of the 15th century - after being conquered by the King of Naples - it was sold to Florence and later incorporated into the **Grand Duchy of Tuscany**.

An overview of Cortona's main sights

The **Etruscan Academy Museum (MAEC)** is certainly the town's most popular attraction: besides serving as **a documentation center for the Archaeological Park**, it includes important Etruscan artifacts, a fine collection of Roman ceramics and bronzes, a small exhibition devoted to the Egyptians and some Renaissance and Baroque paintings.

Look for the **Etruscan remains**: the mighty defensive walls, a double-arched gate known as Porta Bifora, the barrel vault of Via Guelfa and a vaulted arch in the Palazzo Cerulli Diligenti.

The **Roman remains** include a cistern next to the Church of Sant'Antonio Abate and an aqueduct by the Porta Montanina.

In the archaeological area of **Sodo** and **Camucia** you can visit the so-called "*meloni*" (some impressive burial mounds from archaic times) and the **Tanella di Pitagora** (an Etruscan chamber-tomb).

Some Roman roads have been recently discovered in an area known as the **"Cortona mountains"** and the remains of a late Republican villa can be admired on a hillside overlooking Lake Trasimeno.

Piazza della Repubblica is the heart of the old town and houses the picturesque **City Hall** which was built in the 12th century on the ruins of the Roman Forum.

The **Cattedrale di Santa Maria Assunta** (15th century) houses some valuable paintings by **Pietro da Cortona**, **Lorenzo Berrettini** and the **Signorelli School**; the bell tower was designed by **Francesco Laparelli**, the same architect who supervised the construction of the **city of Valletta** in **Malta**.

Other interesting religious buildings are: the **Church of San Francesco**, the **Church of Santa Margherita** and the **Church of Sant'Antonio Abate**. The **Abbey of Farneta** (7th century) is simply superb; however, it is not easily reachable if you don't have a car.

A 45 minute walk outside the walls of Cortona will take you to **Le Celle Hermitage**, a spellbinding Franciscan sanctuary founded by **St. Francis** himself in the early 13th century. The friar's cell can still be visited and has been kept untouched since his death.

Last but not least, real-life **Villa Bramasole** (Diane Lane's home in Under the Tuscan Sun) lies nestled on a hill, just 3 minutes outside the city walls; renovated between 2006 and 2010, it can be rented for €1828 - 3142 /night!

If you are visiting Florence and you feel like going on a group tour to Cortona, contact www.ciaoflorence.it for details.