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POPPI AND THE CONTI GUIDI CASTLE, ONE OF TUSCANY'S BEST PRESERVED MEDIEVAL CASTLES

The medieval village of Poppi is situated in the heart of the Casentino Valley, about halfway between Arezzo and Florence. Included in the list of Italy's most beautiful villages, it is best known for its fascinating castle that resembles Florence's Palazzo Vecchio and dominates the village skyline.

Built by the **Guidi Family** - one of the most powerful families of medieval Tuscany – between the end of the 12th century and the beginning of the 14th, the **Conti Guidi Castle** is the undisputed symbol of **Poppi** and stands high on top of a hill with great views over the entire **Casentino Valley**. Contrary to other fortifications in the area, it has remained almost completely intact and can be clearly seen from almost anywhere in the countryside around Poppi. The castle often looks different, depending upon

the time of day, the environmental conditions and the seasons; elegant and imposing, it has nothing to do with **Neuschwanstein Castle** in south-west Bavaria, Germany, but it definitely looks like it came straight from a fairytale.

Castle layout

The castle façade is divided into two unequal sections by a high square tower that was originally much taller: damaged by a lightning strike in the second decade of the 19th century, the tower was shortened and transformed into a belfry. The left side of the façade boasts six two-light windows, while the right side features only two. Although there is no documentary evidence, **Lapo di Cambio** is said to be the architect behind the oldest part of the castle, while his son **Arnolfo** (the architect involved in the construction of Palazzo Vecchio and the Basilica di Santa Croce in Florence) is said to be the man behind the more recent one. The entire structure is surrounded by a wide, now-empty, moat that encircles a defensive wall with Guelph crenellations. Access to the castle is through the **"Munizione Tower"** that was once defended by a drawbridge. The **"Lion Gate"** opens into an inner courtyard – probably the most delightful feature of the castle – the walls of which are covered with fine coats of arms.

The ground floor of Poppi Castle boasts elements of particular interest, such as the beautiful stone staircase built by **Jacopo di Baldassarre Turriani**, some wooden landings and a majestic column that provides support to the roof.

The first floor is home to what is considered to be the jewel of Casentino, or rather the **Rilliana Library**, which contains 25000 old books! Besides some 14th-century frescoes by **Giotto**'s pupil **Taddeo Gaddi**, the castle's upper floor (or *Piano Nobile*) houses a museum devoted to the **Battle of Campaldino**, with a diorama showing how the **Guelph army** (supporting the Pope) and the pro-imperial **Ghibelline army** (mostly from Arezzo) were arrayed on the field. Also mentioned by **Dante Alighieri** in his *Divine Comedy*, the battle took place on June 11, 1289 and marked the beginning of the hegemony of the Florentine Guelphs over Tuscany.

Before leaving the Conti Guidi Castle, don't forget to climb the 104 steps up to the belfry: the climb is challenging, but you will be rewarded with some truly wonderful views!

Other places of interest in Poppi

Most people go to Poppi simply because they want to visit its wonderful castle; however, this village in north-east Tuscany is also **a perfect place to take a pleasant stroll** in every season and has several other interesting sights. The village's main square, for instance, is home to the **Oratorio della Madonna del Morbo**, a rare example of *Tuscan Barocchetto* that houses a *Madonna and Child with the Young Saint John the Baptist* attributed to a follower of **Filippino Lippi**. The **Church of San Fedele** is a beautiful example of Romanesque architecture and contains some valuable artworks too. Poppi is known for its **splendid colonnades**, which are extremely rare in Tuscany; if you are travelling by car and have some extra time to explore the surrounding area, we suggest you consider

visiting the **Monastery of Camaldoli** and its secluded **hermitage**, situated in an ancient forest, about 25 minutes from Poppi.

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