

Walking through the Etruscan necropolis of Sorano

From Sorano to Vitozza, along the *vie cave*
and the Necropolis of Poggio Felceto



From Sorano to San Quirico
Trail on foot, horse or bike - 7 km

This brief itinerary begins on an asphalted road and continues towards the Valley of the Lente River and the rocky settlement of Vitozza, then turns north towards the modern residential centre of San Quirico. It is possible to deviate from the itinerary towards the Selava del Lamone and Ischia di Castro in the province of Viterbo.

From Sorano to Vitozza , along the *vie cave*

If we wanted to find one word that could symbolize the territory of Sorano and Pitigliano it would be tufa the substance that has long characterized the area. This rock of volcanic origin is most definitely the area's main feature: tufa has modeled a landscape of outstanding beauty with its gorges, cliffs and plateaus. Tufa is part of the Maremma's history: prehistoric peoples carved their homes into the rock (underground dwellings); the Etruscans built their necropolis and roads (the *vie cave*); the Roman settlers exploited its peculiarities – it is easy to work – and made their columbaria, grape pressing vats, jars and brick-kilns. Ever since the earliest times the first settlers took advantage of the land's natural features.

This attractive itinerary, starting from the village of Sorano, and winding along a track through Etruscan *vie cave* and hilly sections, brings us to the Rupestrian settlement of Vitozza and the town of San Quirico. The origin of Sorano is Etruscan and has been a nice roman city and in the medieval period the Aldobrandeschi Family build the great fortress. The particularity of Sorano is its strategic position, impregnable in its defence of the city and excellent at an aesthetic view.

The fortune of the city grew much more in the renaissance, when the Orsini Family increased the fortifications of the fortress and made it impregnable.

The Via Cava di San Rocco, which will take us directly in the heart of the homonymous Necropolis.

The necropolis of San Rocco in Sorano

The necropolis is situated along the tuffaceous ridge that defines the valley of the River Lente. It can be reached by following the provincial road that joins Sorano and Sovana. To get there we have to cross the bridge over the river and then go up a series of hairpin curves dug into the tufa. The necropolis consists of chamber tombs carved into the rock that date from the III-II centuries B.C.

The Rupestrian settlement of Vitozza

The Rupestrian complex of Vitozza was inhabited from the 12th to the 18th century; it was naturally defended along the west, northwest and northeast sides by precipitous slopes. During the Middle Ages, near the southwest access side, it was fortified by a stronghold and tuffaceous wall belt, which are still visible. In addition, the remains of a hall-like church with an apse are preserved on the tableland. The settlement is composed of grottos with several rooms, positioned on various levels and entirely dug out of the rocky bank. The grottos (numbering about 180) are connected by stairs and were used as living quarters, store-rooms or shelters for animals for a long time.

On the slopes of the highlands, where the medieval stronghold was founded, to the northwest and along the banks of the Paradise River, there are *colombari* with the typical pointed or rectangular niches for breeding pigeons.

The route is guided by explanatory panels placed in front of the more complex structures.

Castello di Vitozza

This castle is located about two kilometers from the town of San Quirico. The first building we see along the road leading from San Quirico to Vitozza is the Rocca or stronghold with its thick walls of even tufa stones and inscriptions with the date 1572 and the name of Niccolò IV Orsini.

This section of the walls ended at a gate which controlled the access road, and its ruins are visible from either side of the path. On the north, the Rocca was protected by a moat which is now almost entirely hidden by vegetation. After passing shapeless ruins, probably the walls of Medieval homes, we come to the ruins of the "Chiesaccia." This is a rectangular building with a bell-gable, in the masonry there is a door with a depressed arch and narrow windows. On the apse wall we can see the beginning of a barrel vault. On the same level as the "Chiesaccia" we can also see the remains of a gate that once controlled the road



Ruins of the church of Vitozza



The Via Cava di San Rocco



La Tomba della Sirena

that runs parallel to the ridge, as well as the ruins of a fortified building that perhaps defended the north side of the plateau. In the XI century Vitozza was part of a large fief comprising fifteen castles built around the major affluents of the River Fiora. The earliest written information about this fief dates from 1168. Early in the XIII century the “Giuccesca” – a name derived from one of the likely founders of the “Rochetta Guinisci” – was held by the Aldobrandeschi who subsequently battled with Orvieto. In the first half of the XIII century the Baschi occupied Vitozza through kinship with the Aldobrandeschi. Their coat of arms is still the symbol of this fief. Between 1317 and 1319 yet another war was fought between the Baschi and Orvieto until the moment that Vitozza declared its independence. Subsequently, the two rivals had to form an alliance and for this reason much information about the castle can be found in the Orvieto archives.

Siren Tomb

Passing the tunnel that leads from Sovana to the necropolis, you will find the entrance to the Sopraripa Necropolis. In this necropolis are several tombs which date back to different eras and all of which vary in size and beauty. However, there is one tomb that stands out among the rest and that's the Siren Tomb. The Sea Goddess from Etruscan myth, the statue on the tomb depicts a mermaid with two tails, flanked by two guards, one which holds a shield and another which wears a very large helmet. No in a good state of preservation, the statues have, over time been eroded by the elements and are almost beyond recognition. On both sides of the tomb are two lions, symbols of infernal deities and placed there to protect the dead.

Sorano

Sorano too dates back to the Etruscan era and its surroundings are rich in historical and artistic memories of this glorious past. The various remains visible near Sorano date back to different historical periods. Some fortifications, such as the Castle of Montorio, the Fortress of Castell'Ottieri and the castle of Montebuono hail from the Middle Ages. However, the most interesting place to visit is the Archaeological Park of this Tuff Town, where the most interesting Etruscan remains are preserved along with some caves which were once used as houses by pre-Etruscan civilizations. This is really an archaeological area which must not be missed.

Sorano is constructed from dark tufa and is one piece with the rock on which it rises, dominated by a high fortress that time has made to resemble a natural peak. Of Etruscan, and later Roman, origin, it was a possession of the Aldobrandeschi and then, from 1312 on, of the Orsini, who gave it its current appearance and build the walls and mighty fortress that made it one of the strongest defenses of the Earldom of Pitigliano.

The Medieval portion has remained intact. The houses are typically Medieval and tall, and inside they are quite singular. The various floors are not all on the same level: they are staggered and connected by wood or stone steps. Many of these houses were built into the natural hollows in the tufa.

The best thing is to walk along its narrow lanes observing the structure of the houses until you come to the Fortezza Orsini an impregnable fortification that, by following its underground walkways, also provides an understanding of many aspects of renaissance military life. In town, you can also visit the Church of San Nicola and il Cortilone, a huge granary built by the Orsini in 1554. We can enter the village via the two gates, one in the northern section – that is not in use is known as Porta dei Merli and is decorated with the coats of arms of Cosimo II de' Medici and Niccolò IV. On either side of the gate, there are two openings that probably held the drawbridge chains. The southern gate, also known as Porta di Sopra leads from the town hall to the village's historic center.

Sasso Leopoldino

As its name clearly indicates, this castle was built in the XVIII century when the Lorraine grand dukes ruled the area. It is located north of the tufaceous spur on which the village stands and, together with the fortress, dominates the entire surrounding settlement below.

The reason that the Lorraine rulers fortified it with a scarp wall, transforming this enormous mass of tufa in the center of the village into a fortress is unclear. Perhaps they felt it necessary to improve the defenses of Sorano by building a compound complete with a crenellated tower that held the town bell. Whatever the reason, it proved useless if the outer defenses had fallen and in fact it created a hazard for the houses below due to the frequent landslides that plagued the old village. Later it was flattened and transformed into the vast piazza from which we can enjoy a splendid view.



Fortezza Orsini rises on a tufaceous spur to defend the village below on the only side from which it is easily accessible. The village was protected on three sides by the River Lente which flows quickly to the bottom of the valley, and by this fortress on the south side facing the plateau. Inside the fortress we can recognize the three nuclei that were built in different eras: the Medieval fort, the Renaissance curtain, ramparts and donjon, and an early XX century structure. The oldest portion, the surviving parts of the Aldobrandeschi fort, is in the northern part of the complex, separated from the large inner piazza by a deep moat.

Giovanni Francesco Orsini ordered the construction of the Renaissance fortress as we can see on the coats of arms and the inscriptions of the ramparts of S. Marco and S. Pietro. The portico facing the upper piazza (Piazza Cairolì) was closed and transformed into a chapel and the adjacent chaplain's residence. A staircase from the piazza led to a terrace that dominates the village and overlooks the palace.

The church of San Niccolò The old collegiate and archipresbyterate church stands in the middle of the Medieval village of Sorano. It was built by Sienese craftsmen between 1290 and

1300, under orders from Countess Margherita di Monfort. The original structure is no longer recognizable: many nineteenth century modifications completely altered its original Romanesque appearance. Inside the church we can see a beautiful, XVII century wooden crucifix that Cosimo III de' Medici gave to the collegiate of Sorano, an interesting ciborium of dark stone and a Renaissance canvas by Raffaello Vanni. Heavy Baroque stuccowork has transformed the original surfaces which probably consisted of rows of tufa alternating with travertine. It is believed that Margherita's hasty departure for the Maremma is the reason that the church has no frescoes and not even a holy water stoup that date from its construction. The church is dedicated to Saint Nicholas, the miracle worker, Bishop of Myra who died in 326.

Colombari

The columbaria are one of the typical features of the Sorano area. They are to be found in the lowest part of the village and in the surrounding crags (Columbarie, Rocchette, Castelvechio and San Rocco). Some consist of rough, uneven niches, but others (at Columbarie) are quite elegant and refined and contemporaries of those built outside Rome during the Augustan age.



Colombari

The collapsing of the tufa makes it impossible to enter many of them, but even in ancient times some could only be accessed via temporary ladders. The entrance consists of a small vestibule that leads to two four-sided chambers with windows; square niches, with curved tops, placed in the walls at even distances. The debate over the use of these columbaria is still open. There are those who maintain that they were used to raise and shelter

pigeons, and others who view them as an example of the "Roman burial columbaria". One very interesting hypothesis takes their location into account. The columbaria are located in tufaceous walls overlooking the River Lente. This river is full of fish, and nearby are woods and pastures so it seems to have been the ideal location for establishing a village that predated the advent of the Etruscans. The village was linked to the land below via a rope ladder that was pulled in every night to protect the inhabitants from enemy raids. The natural position offered the people safety and tranquility. The Etruscans probably used these early cave dwellings for burial purposes because there would have been no reason or advantage in building them in such a difficult position. In fact, the Etruscans generally built their necropolis in easily accessible locations (such as the site at San Rocco).

After the Etruscans it is possible that the Romans used them to shelter thousands of carrier pigeons – a business that flourished during their era – but this is only one of many hypotheses.

Rock settlements

There is indeed a broad range of dwellings and rooms carved into the tufa rock in the area around Sorano. Often a single underground room served several different purposes over the centuries, like the columbaria. During some periods, such as the High Middle Ages, they were used mainly as housing and in others the underground spaces were used as annexes - stables and the "famous" cellars (that provided excellent storage for the local wines), and as necropolis. A typical example of this use can be found in the Etruscan period: the area has many important specimens of rock-carved tombs. However, the most fascinating use was as dwellings. There is a considerable amount of data about cave dwellings from the Middle Ages, thanks to the many examples conserved in abandoned castles (e.g. the Vitozza castle near San Quirico) and from the late eighteenth century thanks to the Lorraine land registries. The underground Medieval dwellings (XII to XV century) in this area have many recurring features: even size, a rectangular opening with a wooden door, a vent for smoke and a ground-level hearth near the entrance. Niches and shelves are carved into the walls; the beds consisted of matting and rods inserted into the walls. There is always a ziro (jar) for storing grain. Water that seeped inside was drained off to cisterns or basins providing useful reserves. The grotto dwellers shared common rooms, for storage, bread ovens and cisterns with others. The grotto with a dividing wall, a roughly circular layout and with an archivolt opening could be older (VI-XI century). The ease of digging into these tufaceous rocks to create naturally "air conditioned" rooms at very low costs led to the creation of a great many underground dwellings in the area. The locations along ridges that were not easily accessible provided good defenses. Viewed in relation to how hard life was in times past, all these features allowed the proprietors to charge rents that were just slightly lower than those for "real" homes. As I mentioned earlier, these rock-nuclei served other purposes besides dwellings. In every grotto, and even in the cellars of masonry buildings there were ziri (flask-shaped jars of various sizes, around 2.5 meters (8 feet) that were used to store grain). They were covered with wooden boards or stones, set into a notch on the mouth. Once they had served their original purpose they were used to dump wastes. Often we find pestarole, (vats) carved into the tufa that were used to crush grapes or to macerate linen or hemp. Starting in the

Renaissance entire grottoes that were very damp were a source of saltpeter. The saltpeter was collected from the walls every other year and it was used as gun powder. The Leopoldine land registry has entries stating that a large grotto (which can be visited at Piacistallo near Vitozza) and one on the Pian di Rocca estate on the right bank of the Nova river were used as sources of saltpeter. And finally, there were underground rooms used to shelter animals, for storage and other purposes. From the Middle Ages and the subsequent period there are documented examples of grottoes used as stables for mules, sheep, and cattle complete with troughs dug into the tufa and traces of fence posts. Pig sties – small apse-shaped niches with a channel in the floor to drain off waste in the floor were also common. However, the most interesting shelters for animals were the columbaria, carved into the tufa with variable numbers of cells or cubicles for the birds. The niches were square or ogival and were complete with perches. The pigeons flew in and out through a tunnel that opened onto the ridge projection. The breeder would enter from the path via a door to collect the guano, an excellent fertilizer...

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Opening of Etruscan Necropolis of Sovana

weeks before Easter to 2 November 10.00-19.00
26 December - 6 January 10.00-17.00
Winter visits by prior arrangement
Tickets: Free

Maps | GM, Topographic Map 1:25,000, sheet 333 TAB III – Pitigliano
Multigraphic – Tourist road map 1:50,000 - Maremma

Viaggio attraverso la civiltà del tufo (Journey seen through the tufa civilisation), a guide about cultural trekking, is edited by the cooperative *La Fortezza di Sovana*. Inside this guide, it is possible to find pictures of the landscape, very detailed maps representing the archaeological sites situated in the whole Province of Grosseto (among which it is also feasible to find the necropolis in Sovana), and the best local trekking routes. The guide also introduces the itineraries in the hinterland of Maremma, ranging from the Municipality of Sorano and Sovana up to Pitigliano and Saturnia. The guide is for sale in the Book Shop of the Cathedral in Sovana or in the Palazzo Orsini in Pitigliano.

RELATED ITINERARIES

The ring of Sorano, Monte Vitozzo, Castell'Ottieri and San Valentino

Trail on foot, horse or bike - 22 km

This long itinerary can be subdivided in multiple excursions. It begins heading north, hugging an asphalt road and continuing in the Cerreta forest and arriving at Monte Vitozzo. Head east towards San Giovanni delle Contee (which can be reached with a 4km round-trip deviation), and then returns towards Castell'Ottieri, San Valentino and Sorano.

From Castell'Azzara to Montebuono and Sovana

Trail on foot, horse or bike - 17 km

A long itinerary along a gravel road which leads to Monte Civitella, a south-eastern offshoot of the Amiata, to the valleys of Fologna and Fiora. After hugging the cliff of Monte Vitozzo, cross the Selvena-Sorano provincial road to arrive at Montebuono. At the end, before heading up to Sovana, head down to Fosso Picciolana and the tombs of Ildebranda and Pola.

From Pitigliano to Manciano

Trail on foot, horse or bike - 18 km

This long itinerary near the border with Lazio leaves from Pitigliano for the "quarry road" or Poggio Cani, following a "customs road" on the orographic left of the Lente, descending across the Fiora on the bridge of state road 74, arriving at the necropolis of Poggio Buco. The last stretch is a hilly walk through wood and grassy hills.

From Sovana to Pitigliano

Trail on foot – 4.5 km

An easy, beautiful walk along an Etruscan and Medieval road which takes you from the centre of Sovana to Pitigliano, passing the Fosso del Puzzone, the Piano Conati and the "quarry roads" of the Annunziata a Poggio Cani.

From Sovana to Sorano

Trail on foot, horse or bike - 13 km

This comfortable itinerary is the same as the previous itinerary up to Fosso del Puzzone (which is certainly worth checking out), then heads north-east across the Piano della Madonna and Fosso Calesina. The path ends at the hill and the archeological zone of San Rocco. To arrive at Sorano you must follow the asphalt road for another two kilometres.

ITINERARIO VITTOZZA

