Montecatini Val di Cecina
and its surrounding area
Montecatini Val di Cecina, a natural shopping centre.

Montecatini Val di Cecina has been promoting both its tourism and commerce for some twenty years now, ever since these two sectors began to replace the mining and industrial activity in economic importance.

This economic change saw the birth of numerous commercial activities which met the needs of both the local inhabitants and tourists who - for most of the year - are very important for local trade.

Hence, the rapid economic structural change in Montecatini Val di Cecina has seen the growth of commercial activities which - in order to further their trade - gathered together in a “Centro Commerciale Naturale”: a sort of shopping centre spread throughout the entire communal area.

Shops and other business activities are to be found in four areas: Montecatini Val di Cecina, Ponteginori, Casino di Terra and La Sassa. The existence of these commercial entities is essential for both locals and tourists, and being part of the abovementioned organisation helps them in providing an important service to the population.

This guide is an aid to locals and foreign visitors, outlining the commercial activities scattered over the area, to enhance their visit and welcome them fittingly.
Short History

Rather than documentary evidence, it is the architecture that tells us most about the origins of Montecatini Val di Cecina, the Belforti tower that dominates the medieval village and valleys, the houses of Castello, the church of San Biagio and the Palazzo Pretorio. Historic documents substantiate that prior to the 11th century the *medieval village* was called Monte Leone and it is with this name that it appears in a Bishop of Volterra’s bull dated 1099, under whose authority Montecatini remained for a long time. In 1350, Montecatini belonged to the Belforti, noblemen from Volterra, after whom the towers were named. From 1472 the *medieval village* came under the rule of Florence, as part of the bishopric of the Cecina Valley. For the most part the documentation coming thereafter refers to Montecatini for its copper mines. Copper, already mined by the Etruscans, represented in fact for centuries the main economic resource and it is from this very mine that Montedison was born, one of the principal European mining and chemical companies. It was in the 19th century that the mines saw maximum development,
and Montecatini saw workers and visitors coming from all over Europe. In this period the medieval village lived an international moment as testified to by the 17th century painting of the Madonna of Guadalupe hanging in the oratory of Santa Barbara, painted by the Mexican Juan Rodriguez Suarez. Driving along the road from Volterra to Montecatini it is almost impossible to distinguish the medieval village, houses and the ancient castle from the summit on which it rises. Built from the surrounding stone the medieval village is difficult to pick out from the woods and rocks around. This same melting into the surrounds can be seen in the panoramic views from the old town.

Montecatini Val di Cecina - Loc. La Miniera, Oratory of Santa Barbara - The Madonna of Guadalupe, by Juan Rodriguez Suarez. The cult of the Madonna of Guadalupe, worshipped as patron saint of Mexico and Latin America, dates back to 1531 when the image of the Virgin appeared on the cloak of the Mexican Indian Juan Diego Cuauhtlatoatzin, to whom the Virgin appeared on Tepeyac hill near Mexico City. This work by Xuarez, that probably arrived in Montecatini between 1873 and 1879, narrates the miracle on the medallion surrounding the Virgin. This incident became for the native indians a message of hope. The Madonna of Guadalupe rapidly became the symbol of the identity of the Mexican people.
Visiting the Old Borgo

Leaving the car in the nearby car park, visitors can reach the upper part of the medieval village by taking Via XX Settembre, that leads to the castle. The 14th century walls of the castle, still partially visible, are decorated with the local dark stone.

Halfway along Via XX Settembre turn to the left into Via del Mandorlo, where one can admire the panorama of both the 19th century and modern parts of the town, the Poggio alla Croce, the entire Era Valley, and on a clear day the Monti Pisani on the horizon. The alleyway was restored in 2002 by the local authorities in the same point where an outcrop of selagite (a mica trachyte), the stone of Montecatini in which a statue-bench was carved, was found. Selagite is a sub-volcanic stone originating 3 million years ago from crystallized lava at a low level that never came to the surface to form a volcano. In the sunshine it glitters due to the minute mica crystals. The name, in fact, of Greek origin means to glitter. Looking to the right towards the old town a round tower appears, today a private house but one time the defensive tower of the castle.

Climbing further, you finally arrive at the foot of the Belforti towers. The
towers were commissioned by Filippo Belforti, son of Ottaviano, a nobleman from Volterra. The other son, Bocchino Paolo, was a tyrant who sold Volterra to Pisa and was executed. The Belforti family then fled to Montecatini, to the towers, that were besieged for an entire winter until the troops from Volterra took the castle by force. The towers are almost 30 metres high and the wall at the base 3.20 metres wide. Interesting is the stonework of the lower part of the structure, built with Montecatini stone with white horizontal sheaves of clay stone from Alberese. The tower is without battlements. Two openings, at right angles, made at the time of the Belforti are two binoculars that look towards one the tower of Volterra and the other the Rocca Sillana.

Going down Via delle Torricelle you arrive in Piazza Garibaldi and, turning immediately to the left, from the wall you can admire the entire piazza with the well for rain water, with the square rim in large stones, that contracts lower down. Here, you find the most important buildings, the Palazzo Pretorio and the Church of San Biagio. Continuing the climb towards the Towers, take the Gatta Donne path on the left, from which you can admire the view towards Volterra and
discover some unusual parts of the Cecina Valley, such as the area where rock-salt is mined. Walking around the ancient walls, within sight of the second defence tower, you arrive at the old cemetery, located at the far end of the promontory, a unique position with an incredible view. From here on clear days Monte Amiata and the Isle of Elba can be seen. The cemetery was built at the end of the 1700s, outside the town walls in appliance with the Napoleonic decree requiring cemeteries to be outside living areas. Following the alley you come to Piazza Belforti, with the characteristic aristocratic palazzo Belforti, instantly recognisable for the cylindrical water storage cistern that gave water to the building. Beyond the solaie (covered passage) under the palazzo, the visitor can admire the buildings in Piazza Garibaldi.

The Palazzo Pretorio, today, houses the archives of the Mining Museum. Up until the 1950s it was the Town Hall, later transferred in Via Roma. This building dates to the 14th century, later modified with a beautiful facade and an arcade with three columns in selagite, cross-vaulted and round arches. The facade carries coats of arms and Latin inscriptions, plaques, one commemorating the inclusion of the Gran Duchy of Tuscany in the Kingdom of Italy with data on the plebiscite and another with information on ancient weights and measures.

To the right is the church of San Biagio, consecrated in 1361. During the 11th century, at the time of the building of the rectory, the facade was covered and a side entrance was opened. The clock tower, built in brick, dates to the 15th century. At the centre of the choir there is a very interesting wooden crucifix from the 16th century, on either side of which, in two niches in the wall, are two glazed terra cotta
statues by Andrea and Luca Della Robbia, made in the 15/16th century, to the left Bishop San Biagio and to the right San Sebastiano. Many other works of art are to be found in the church, some of which the artist is known others not. Not to be missed is the valuable oil painting from the 17th century, on the wall to the left, *The Return from Egypt* attributed to Guido Reni. In the presbytery to the right there is an altar piece, in tempera on wood from the 15th century by Neri di Bicci, *The Martyrdom of St Sebastian, St Biagio and St Antonio Abate*, while on either side the columns carry two kneeling angel candle trays, in veined white marble, called *i ciechini* (the blinds) and attributed to Mino da Fiesole. Furthermore in the nave to the left can be seen a 17th century Florentine painting, *St Antonio da Padova Defends the Virtue of a Wife*, and *Glory of Eucharist with St Biagio and St Sebastian* by Antonio Cercignano, nicknamed Il Pomarancio, from the beginning of the 17th century. In the nave to the right, instead, of particular interest is the polychrome sculpture in stone by an anonymous 17th century artist, *Madonna of Caporciano or of the Cava, of Lampetrosa and Lampedosa*, worshipped by the town populace on every September the 8th as co-patron together with St Biagio. To the right in the baptism area can be seen the *Madonna della Seggiola*, a 19th century oil by an anonymous artist, copying the masterpiece by Raffaello. On the side altar to the right, there is an interesting tempera and gold on wood with the monogram YHS, from the Greek name for Jesus, that traditionally has been believed to have been left here by St Bernardino da Siena after his sermon in 1425.

To return towards Piazza della Repubblica (or “in borgo” as the locals say) one passes under the two castle gates, arches in light and dark stone that recall the colours of the tower. While
returning to Via XX Settembre it is worthwhile stopping a moment to see or photograph Vicolo del Fornaccio, a sight that turns back the clock over the centuries.....
La Miniera

A must for who visits Montecatini is “La Miniera”, a small medieval village at about a kilometre from the town, where the archaeological part of the Mine Museum is located. (www.museodelleminiere.it; tel 0588 31026). It can be reached on foot in about 15 minutes or by car.

Evidence of mining in the area goes back to the Etruscan period, but it was in the 19th century that the Camporciano mine saw maximum development, when it became for the time the most important copper mine in Europe. The parts that can be seen and visited date to this period, when, as evidence of its importance, Montecatini had French, German, Russian and Belgian immigrants who came to work and manage the mine. The entrance hall to the mine has busts and commemorative plaques that recall past owners, directors and important personalities who visited the mine. The mine, that was worked up until 1907, was protagonist of one of the major Italian industrial developments, as it was here that the Montedison chemical group was born.

The guided visit of the area is an experience not be missed by both adults
and children, with all the emotion of a trip to the centre of the earth. The network of galleries extends for about 35 kilometres to a depth of 315 metres. Visitors can only see some of the galleries on the first level and observe the descents to the lower levels, by stairs (not presently included in the visit) that reach 120 metres below the surface. Particularly fascinating is the “Pancia della Balena” (stomach of the whale), a gallery dug in the rock where you can admire the iron supports used for security in the mine. The gallery can be visited up to the Alfredo shaft, from which the extracted material was taken to the surface by a system of bas-
kets auctioned by a steam pulley. Most of this system is still visible on the top of the hill, where, similar to a castle tower, the shaft tower rises.

**A mine ahead of its time**
The history of the mine in Montecatini is of particular interest for its living and working conditions. In a period when, in Italy, working conditions were severe and child labour the norm, in Montecatini the youngsters, who worked for the mine from the age of 12, could not go below ground until they reached 18. Furthermore in this mine there were never any very serious accidents. The miners had also established a mutual aid society that covered accidents, sickness and widows pensions. The documentation of the history of the mine is kept in the archives in the ancient Palazzo Pretorio.

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Montecatini Val di Cecina, Archaeological site of the Mining Museum, Maria Luisa Gallery. This tunnel, recently restored and open to visitors is better known as the “Whale’s Stomach” due to the characteristic iron structures recalling Carlo Collodi’s tale. Centrings supported the wooden boarding for the miner’s safety. Several wooden fragments are still visible today. The tunnel leads to Pozzo Alfredo (Well), through which the mined material was lifted to the surface.

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Montecatini Val di Cecina, Mining Museum - Minerals

Montecatini Val di Cecina, Archaeological site of the Mining Museum - Galleries
**Ponteginori**

Extending along the right bank of the river Cecina, this village gets its name from the bridge that the Marquis Ginori built over the river, between 1831 and 1835, to connect his castle with the road in the Cecina Valley. The bridge that today crosses the river at the confluence with the river Trossa was built after the last war, in a very different architecture from the original, which was destroyed by the retreating Germans in 1944. The development came at the beginning of the last century when the Belgian group Solvay began to mine rock-salt in the neighbourhood, a mineral found in abundance underground. Thus it was that in the 1920s the multinational built, next to their plant, that was for many years the major source of employment for the local people, a village to house the workers, management and their families. Even though Ponteginori, at first sight, hides its history, a short walk and an attentive eye brings to light the unmistakable characteristics of the “Solvay village”, similar to those built in the same period in Rosignano Solvay and San Carlo (near San Vincenzo). Red brick
buildings with gardens in rows for the workers, detached houses for the managers and community services, such as surgeries, schools, social clubs and playing fields. Even today the factory siren that rings at midday and six in the afternoon acts as the time piece for the town.

Differing from the surrounding buildings is the modern church dedicated to Pope Saint Leo the Great, built in the 1960s. Nearby is another church, smaller, dedicated to the Madonna. Thanks to its position on the main road 68, Ponteginori today offers all the fundamental services necessary for the local inhabitants and visitors, such as small shops, a bank, a post office and surgery. In the summer a tennis court and open air swimming pool are available.

Swimming Pool. Open from the last week of June to the second of September. 9:30am - 7pm. From August 1st to 16th closes 7:30pm.

Tennis. Booking compulsory

Football. Booking compulsory at the local “Gruppo Sportivo”. For information about the sporting facilities please call: +39 3484667941. In summer: +39 0588 37450
Gello

Gello is near to Ponteginori, on the right bank of the river Cecina. Wandering amongst the delightful group of little houses on the grass covered streets it is difficult to imagine the history of the important castle. This is probably the place called Agello cited in a document dated 754 by Walfredo, founder of the Abbey of San Pietro in Palazzuolo di Monteverdi. In 1186 Gello, like many others, was given by Henry VI to Ildebrando dei Pannocchieschi, Bishop of Volterra. Over the centuries it was ruled by Pisans, Aragonese and the Florentines when, probably, it again became an important garrison town. In 1479, the castle was conquered and sacked by the Sienese, after which it never again recovered.

Casaglia e Miemo

Leaving the SR68 and taking the SP14 in the direction of Miemo, one comes across Casaglia. The little medieval village presents interesting architectural and town-planning aspects. Not to be missed is the parish church dedicated to St John the Baptist, open only for mass. The castle, with its turrets and battlements in front of the church, is also interesting. The earliest reference to Casaglia dates to 1115, when the Bishop of Volterra purchased for the sum of 50 lire the rights that Count Ugo had over the medieval village. At the boundary of the Montecatini municipal area you find the ancient medieval village of Miemo, with the characteristic church dedicated to Sant’Andrea. The origin is probably medieval, even though some believe it dates to the Etruscan period. Its historical importance can be immediately understood on seeing its position, from Miemo the road that joins the Valdiera with the Valdicecina can be controlled. It became the birthplace
of an important aristocratic family and the castle is often mentioned in medieval documents. From the 15th century mention decreased, a sign of the progressive decadence and from the 18th century it became a large farm holding.

Casaglia, view of the Castle and of the parish church of St John the Baptist
Sassa and the Castles of the Sterza Valley

High up on the northern promontory of Poggio al Pruno, the highest point in the area that overlooks the coastal plain from Follonica to Rosignano, the castle of Sassa has a unique panorama over the entire Val di Sterza and a good part of the central Cecina Valley. Sassa gifts visitors with the silence, history and tradition seen in the faces and memories of the few local inhabitants.

The first mention of Sassa as a settlement without fortifications dates to 1128 but already from 1171 mention is made of a *castrum*, castle, or a fortified settlement. This area of the Val di Sterza where Sassa stands was, nevertheless, inhabited in Etruscan times, 8th century BC, in Roman times, in the Middle Ages, up until today abandoned though for periods in the 5th century BC and between the 4th century AD and the second half of the 11th century. At the beginning of the 12th century numerous castles were built in the area, a group of buildings amongst which architecturally important are the nobleman’s residence and castle church, encircled by a mighty wall. There are three today still inhabited in the Val di Sterza, Querceto documented as a castle in 1118, Sassa a settlement in 1128 and castle in 1171, Canneto a settlement in 1128 and castle in 1171. The castles in our area, particularly Sassa and Querceto, have only partially survived over the centuries, while only the narrow alleyways have remained intact.

The Medici Tower

The village of Sassa, reached from the fork on the SP18 “*dei Quattro Comuni*”, developed around the Medicea tower, built on a high spur of rock. The building has a slightly rectangular base and a sloping wall leading up to the threshold of the imposing entrance.
The construction is characteristic of that of the second half of the 15th century, following the invention of the mortar and gunpowder, favouring slanting walls to break the destructive force of the cannon balls. The turret, that up until the middle of the 18th century was used for military necessities, was about eight metres higher than it is today. This gave it a broad field of vision, to the east to the hills that separate Sassa from the area beyond Saline di Volterra and to the west to the Val di Fine. The building has been restored in recent years, especially the upper part, and today is lived in by the owners.

**Oratory of the Redeemer**

Continuing the walk around the medieval village, near the tower, you come across the Oratory of the Redeemer. The little religious building was commissioned by Lorenzo Regoli during the 18th century and used as a family chapel. It was built probably to house a stone statue decorated in stucco, of Christ the Redeemer. Very expressive, with a body not very proportional, the statue dates to the 17th century. Around the niche where the statue is housed recently a decoration has been discovered that reproduces a neoclassic marble altar. Twisted columns, beams, gables and wood are typical of provincial architecture, that adapted what was locally available to suit the depth of the pockets.

**The Parish Church of San Martino**

Certainly not to be missed is the Parish Church of San Martino Bishop. The church, originally dedicated to San Nicola, became a parish church in 1361. From its medieval origins damage and expansion transformed it over the centuries. The original building was quite small, a chapel, apse at the eastern end and entrance to the west. The most important development came about during the middle of the 15th century when the building was
extended from the south wall over the ancient cemetery, this distorted the orientation. The apse and main altar, together with the presbytery, were placed in this new part of the building, creating an unusual orientation with the altar to the south and entrance north facing. The bell tower was built in 1788, as recorded on the plaque under the bell compartment on the south wall. The church has never been important from the architectural or artistic point of view. The altars that were built along the walls during the 18th century were removed in the 19th century, in this same period the altar dedicated to Our Lady of the Rosary was built, already endorsed at the beginning of the 17th century, as was the imposing entrance that reaches up almost to the roof on the north face. Worthy of mention is the font in red marble from Castagneto Carducci (16/17th century), with a column with unpretentious decoration and a pentagonal basin.

In the summer the locals return to their home town with their children and grandchildren, to enjoy the cool hilltop climate. It is thus that in August Sassa comes alive with festivals and other events, that allow one to enjoy the local dishes especially game.
The first mention of Querceto comes in a document dating to 1082 which classifies the locality as a villa. The centre though soon became a castle as mentioned in a document of 1118.

Leaving the car in the car park at the entrance to the medieval village, follow the little avenue that leads to the square where the parish church, St John the Baptist, is to be found. The building, as seen today, dates to the 14th century as can be clearly seen from the construction technique, called a filaretto. With a single nave, a wooden truss roof, the building is of limited size. Originally there was a semicircular apse, as all the Romanesque churches, but this was later rebuilt with a square apse, that today houses a wooden choir. A double arch leads to the transept, the capitals of the columns are decorated with acanthus leaves. Of particular artistic value is the half capital to the right, decorated with the symbols of the evangelists Giovanni and Luca who frame the figure of the infant Jesus. Remaining in the transept to the right is an original lancet window, the last remaining that still today lights the interior. The main altar was built in the 1970s when the church was restored to the original medieval features especially internally, the walls had the neoclassic altars removed and stonework uncovered.

During the restoration works inside the old 19th century altar several interesting pieces came to light amongst which a wooden pectoral cross decorated with a stylised crucified Christ, between whose arms are two faces, those of the robbers, all surrounded with a vine branch. The cross dates to the 9/10th centuries and is now in the Diocesan Museum of Sacred Art in Volterra.

Besides the fresco behind the altar, with rural scenery, the majolica above the doorway is characteristic and was
produced by the Ginori works at the beginning of the 20th century.
The history of Querceto is tied to that of the Ginori-Lisci family, after whom
the castle, around which the village grew, is named.
The castle as it is today was built at the beginning of the 20th century, by
Count Lorenzo who decided in 1907 to build a family home where it was
assumed the medieval residence had been. The building is palatial and
includes several parts joined together. Topping the building is the central
tower, garnished with a balcony on brackets crowned with Guelph mer-
lons (the Ghibelline are overturned swallow-tails), which comes to view
on entering the medieval village.
In the spring and summer the walls are completely covered by an unmis-
takable Virginia creeper.
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