



# Seductive Siena

**Martin Ferid** goes in search of Italian culture, food and ambiance – and finds it in abundance in Siena...

**L**iverpool has Aintree and Windsor has Royal Ascot, but Siena has its own equine indulgence in Palio. They are all horse races – but that's just about where the similarities end – as they have vastly differing styles. With better planning, I'm sure I could have visited this Tuscan city to coincide with the twice-yearly event that takes place on 2 July and 16 August each year. Although getting there is an entirely different matter, it's a fair old way and unless you fly something quick it is likely to be spread over a couple of days at least.

Depending on where you come from, you could cross the Massif Central and route along France's south coast, although the two favoured routes from the UK are usually through the Alps or down the Rhone valley. The latter takes longer and has the Mistral winds funnelling through it about 100 days a year, and the trip through the Alps needs serious respect and benign conditions but, with several passes to choose from, it offers more options.

**Main** The Piazza del Campo, the heart of Siena and ideal for whiling away the day with that age-old pastime – people watching.

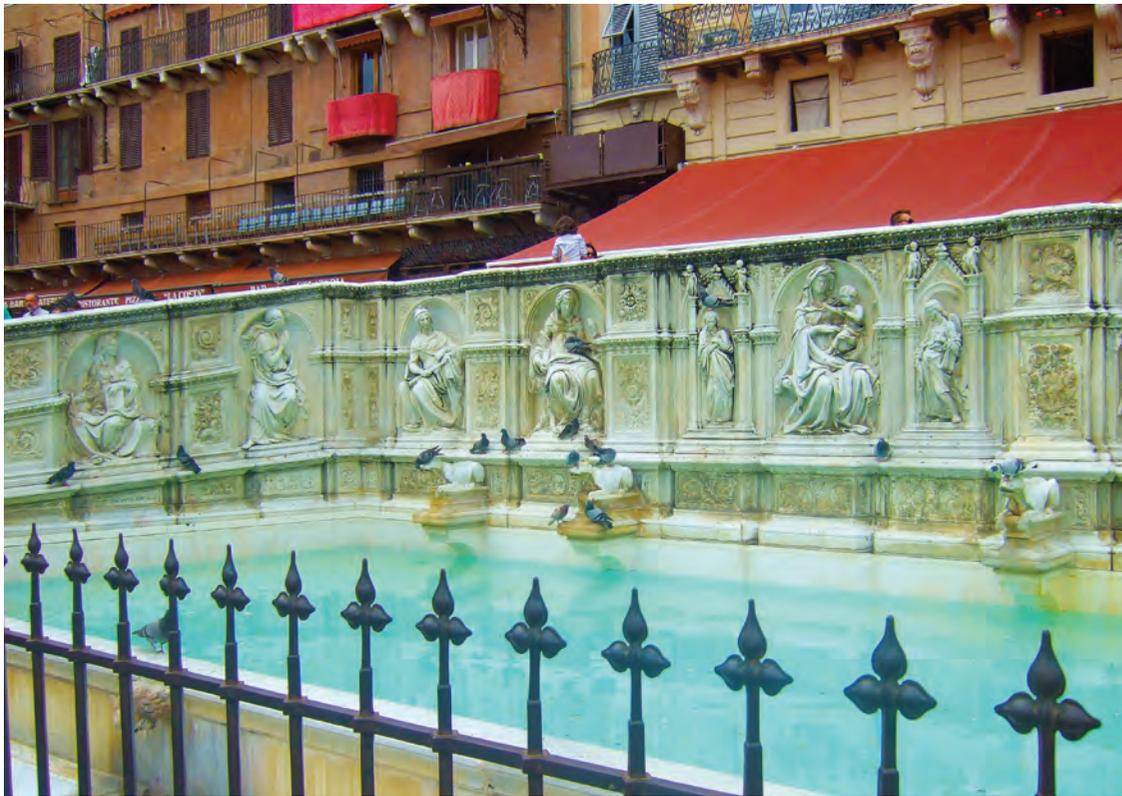
My first Siennese venture was with the help of what was then a modern Garmin Pilot 111 through the Rhone Valley to a fly-in organised by Club Aviazione Popolare (CAP), the Italian equivalent of the LAA. More recently, Sian (my partner) and I have opted for the stunning scenery of an Alpine crossing, using EasyVFR on an all singing and dancing tablet.

## Attitudes to change

In the current climate I think we should 'be careful what we wish for'. With the possibility of the CAA taking back more control I fear the recidivism of the past and worry that we may face more repressive regulation.

Surprisingly though, there have been occasions where common sense has prevailed and managed to eventually permeate through. Their precept on the use of GPS and electronic devices is a prime example, where they have gone from being cautious on their use to finding pilots culpable when it's absent in a remarkable *volte-face*.

When I first learned to fly, pilots couldn't have



**Left** The Fonte Gaia, the joyous fountain, in the Piazza del Campo was completed in 1342.

**Below right** Mensanello airfield, has a 700-metre grass runway and hangarage available.

**Below left** The Mensanello aeroclub badge.



imagined something affordable in the cockpit with moving maps, airspace, Notam and even weather. The lucky ones had VORs or ADF, but most of us relied on maps, a stopwatch and a compass with which we plotted a route based on a series of estimates, correcting as we went.

Somehow it worked, and more often than not we actually managed to get where we wanted to go but it was, on occasion, quite fraught, especially if you became 'temporarily unsure of your position'!

And on a longer trip, those wafer thin Bottlang plates, aviation's answer to the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, and half-mil charts on the seat next to you needed to be kept in order or folded and refolded to ensure a seamless transition.

Modern tablets and smartphones are the 'bee's knees' by comparison, rather like having a dedicated navigator sitting in the right-hand seat. Nowadays I wouldn't want to go much out of the local area without some sort of moving map, a paper chart and the little old Garmin just in case. However, the fallibility of the tablet

is well documented, as they can overheat and shut down, and the batteries soon give up without an external power supply.

Unfortunately, as a by-product of their affordability and popularity, many pilots have lost the navigational skills that they once possessed. And my guess is that many who have learned to fly over the last 20 years have never really honed those skills farther than their PPL Navex stage. Many have blind faith in the technology and don't even keep a chart to hand, making me more than a little unsure as to what their 'Plan B' might be, or even if it exists at all!

### Equal measure

Another double-edged sword of this tech is that they enable flight in situations when one might otherwise choose to stay on the ground. Although, it has to be said in equal measure, that they can also provide that 'get out of jail free' card when things start getting a bit fraught. If it sounds like I am a Luddite, then believe me I am not. These days tablets are relatively inexpensive

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and a subscription to something like SkyDemon or EasyVFR is worth every penny. The advantages certainly outweigh any disadvantages of complacency, but for my two cents worth – draw a line on a chart and compare it and the tablet as you go, keeping a mental note of heading and ETA should things go belly-up.

Sian has always been a bit of a James Bond fan and I love Italy so, in the planning stage, I let slip that the opening scenes of *Quantum of Solace* had been filmed in and around Siena...

Italy is great to visit but, along with hereditary artistic flair, passion for food and a zest for life, the Italians have also unfortunately managed to turn bureaucracy into an art form, with all the associated costs. At one time, Siena Airport had a mix of commercial and GA traffic, and then it closed for a couple of years before reopening in 2017, in theory as a dedicated GA airfield. It is administered by Sky Services handling agents, making it like many Italian airports – expensive to visit and possessing a complex pricing structure. The long-term plan is to re-open it as an international airport but the plan is currently being met with stiff local resistance.

### Handling charge

Many Italian airports charge a landing fee, fire cover charge, a parking fee and a take-off fee, to which Sky Services adds its handling charge. For the latest information: Operations: say@skyservices.it +39 393 4891086. For general information: info@skyservices.it +39 081 5522421 / +39 081 2514837.

Now, like most things in life, if they become too difficult or expensive people tend to find a way to circumnavigate the problem, and this is by no means an exception. Less than 10 miles to the north-west is the airfield of Mensanello with a 700-metre grass runway and hangarage available ([www.mensanello.com/airfield](http://www.mensanello.com/airfield)). Getting PPR is straightforward by email, and either Dimitri or Malcolm will get in touch offering help with accommodation, transportation to Siena and just about anything else a pilot may need. Conveniently, about 800 metres from the airfield, is the superb 3-star hotel/restaurant and working farm of Agriturismo Tenuta di Mensanello, Località Mensanello, 34, 53034 Colle di Val D'Elsa +39 0577 971080. (Around £75 in season). ([www.mensanello.com/home-eng/](http://www.mensanello.com/home-eng/)).

The farm is officially in the smaller village of Gracciano, a couple of kilometres from Mensanello, with nice rustic rooms, a swimming pool and a restaurant. Architecturally the area's roots are medieval and are

nothing short of stunning. There is also no preparation for the sensory journey, from the warm hazy sunshine to the wonderful scenery, the scents and smells of olive groves, garlic, sage, rosemary and an array of Tuscan herbs transported on a gentle breeze.

Then there's the food, which can only be rivalled by the French in my opinion, the Tuscan wines, and of course the laid-back friendly attitude of the people. If you plan on going you need to know that a short visit isn't really going to do the area justice.

*(Author's note: Those of you who have read this far, before reading on, whatever your experience level, from tyro to Airline Captain, and even if you never fly more than an hour from base, copy the airfield and farmhouse websites into a search engine and have a look. Maybe you'll realise that with just a little help and motivation this subliminal destination is within a pilot's grasp).*

If you need the hard runway or choose to land at Siena there is a bus (116) from the other side of the airport at Malignano and with the walk will take about an hour into town depending on the bus timetable. Alternatively, a taxi costs about €25.

What can we say about Siena? Its city centre is not only awe-inspiringly beautiful, with distinctive polychromatic hues, but is rightly listed as an UNESCO World Heritage Site. The etymology of its name is a little delphic, with several versions on offer. Some historians say it was named after the Saina, a tribe of the Etruscans extant from 900-400BC, while others suggest it was founded by Senius and Aschius, who fled Rome after their father was murdered by their uncle Romulus. Romulus being the first King of Rome and the 'chap' after whom the city was named.

As the legendary long straight Roman roads had not been built to connect Siena and Rome, trade naturally went elsewhere, and the city only began to prosper when alternative supply routes were needed to avoid its easily plundered trade routes by Byzantine raiders.

Like many ancient cities, Siena has had a turbulent past. Over the centuries, it was ruled by the Lombards, Franks, suffered greatly from the Black Death of 1348, and became a Republic and part of King Felipe II's Spain, before finally forming part of Italy's unification in the 19th century.

Siena could best be described as an eclectic mix of intoxicating charm. Just sitting at one of the bars, bistros or gelaterias at the Piazza del Campo on a sunny day is a wonderful experience. The Piazza has been at the centre of city life since the 1300s and whether it's the



satisfaction of the flight, the historic setting or the easy atmosphere, you certainly get a feeling of having 'arrived'. It's here that the Palio di Siena takes place. Ten riders adorned in almost court jester-type outfits represent 10 of the city's 17 contrade (districts). The pageantry kicks-off with a Corteo Storico (huge parade) and the race is run bare-back around three circuits at breakneck speeds, lasting only about 90 seconds. With the frenetic pace, it's not unusual for horses to finish rider-less, their rider having been unseated.

### Italian life

As far as points of interest go, the guides will have umpteen listings for particular interests, but here a few suggestions in and around the piazza. Religion has always been a big part of Italian life with the Baptistery being built in 1325 and, as its name suggests, it was where most of Siena's denizens were baptised.

You don't have to be a worshipper to enjoy or appreciate the beauty of the medieval Duomo di Siena, the city's Cathedral. With lavish frescoes by Pinturicchio, it also includes the Piccolomini Chapel where Michelangelo worked from 1501 to 1504.

If you have an aversion to heights, it's best to give this next one a miss as it is 88 metres to the top of the Torre del Mangia (Tower of the Eater). However, after 400-coronary inducing steps, it affords spectacular views and is named after Giovanni di Duccio, its first guardian, who incidentally earned his nickname of 'Mangiaguadagni', due to his gargantuan eating habits.

The Public Palace of Siena has frescoes by Ambrogio Lorenzetti, representing the Allegory of Good and Bad Government. The hidden messages are of a time and place where generally a government's mismanagement of affairs was far more subliminal. It also houses The Civic Museum.

For eating out in Italy, the first restaurant you come across is probably as good as any. At the expensive end, the discerning diner might like to try La Taverna di

**Above** A typical street in this medieval city, decorated for the biannual Palio horse race.

**Above top right** The Siena Duomo, cathedral, amongst the centuries' old streets of this UNESCO World Heritage Site.

**Above right** The three-star hotel/restaurant and working farm of Agriturismo Tenuta di Mensanello offers superb accommodation.

San Giuseppe, Via Giovanni Dupre 132, 53100. Tel: +39 0577 42286 ([www.tavernasangiuseppe.it](http://www.tavernasangiuseppe.it))

Or at the other end of the price bracket is, Osteria Degli Svitati via Della Galluzza 34 53100. Tel: +39 0577 601755. (<https://tinyurl.com/y55rwpsv>).

For local food and Sienese specialities, look for some of the following items on the menu: crostini neri (liver and toast), ribollita (thick slow-cooked mixture of vegetables, bread and beans), pappardelle con lepre (ribbon-shaped pasta with hare), and pici (fat, long, hand-rolled spaghetti with a variety of rich sauces).

There are some truly palatial hotels at the luxury end of the market and only the hostels are cheap. The best value you're likely to get in the centre of town, at around £110 per night, is Antica Residenza Cicogna Via Delle Terme 76, 53100. Tel: +39 055 062 0577 ([www.anticaresidenzacicogna.it](http://www.anticaresidenzacicogna.it)).

Or at £85 and about a 20 minute walk away is the Best Western Hotel San Marco Strada Massetana 70, 53100. Tel: +39 0577 271556 ([www.sanmarcosiena.it](http://www.sanmarcosiena.it)). The best way to keep costs down is to stay outside the city itself and visit on a daily basis and, unless you're planning to do a bit of touring, a car can be more of a hindrance than an asset.

I think that Italy is a bit like France used to be 25 years ago, where good food was found everywhere at a reasonable price, although Siena itself is more expensive than most other destinations, particularly right in the centre.

The Italians themselves could not be more welcoming, friendly and helpful, valuing the spirit of 'amici' which is particularly apparent among their pilots, who share our passion. I like flying in Italy but it is true that many don't, possibly because controllers ask for the next turning point with an estimate as a matter of course. In addition, I have heard of pilots being routed miles out of their way for no apparent reason although, through luck or judgement, as yet I haven't had such a problem.

After each *Flying Adventure* appears in *LA*, I am happy to say that I usually get a few emails from suitably inspired pilots wanting to go further afield. Thank you for your interest and I must say it really wouldn't take much to tempt me back to Siena!

I realise, of course, that for many readers the likelihood of making such trips is oneiric, but for others the articles have proved the fillip required to persuade them to venture outside of their usual comfort zone.

On such trips we either fly together in a single aircraft, as a gaggle in loose formation, or we just meet-up here and there along the way. So, with that hard-earned PPL and access to an aircraft, there is really nothing but perhaps the worry of the unknown stopping you!

### The Rally

This is the last issue prior to the LAA Rally, and once again this year I've been given a corner on the LAA stand and asked to present on touring in Speakers' Corner.

The full schedule be published later, but I hope to see some of you there, 'the more the merrier' as they say. Do come and say 'hello' on the stand or to the seminar, I'm always happy to answer your questions and offer advice on how to get the maximum enjoyment from touring in your aircraft.

Next month our destination is Vannes (LFRV) in Brittany, offering stunning views of the beautiful Golfe du Morbihan. ■

## Get touring with the author!

**Martin Ferid** is a Class Rating Instructor and Revalidation Examiner and specialises in helping qualified pilots expand their horizons by introducing them to the splendours of flying in Europe, both as day trips, or a few days at a time. If you lack a little confidence in crossing the channel, touring in general or indeed any aspects of flying, contact Martin via:

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**Tel:** 07598 880178

For anyone looking for a little inspiration, browse through our 'favourite destinations' on the website below. There should be enough there to quench most thirsts, all discovered cruising at a relatively sedate 90kt. ([www.lightaircrafttraining.co.uk](http://www.lightaircrafttraining.co.uk)).

As part of this monthly series of 'Touring Adventures', throughout the season we have been arranging fly-outs to destinations in both the UK and abroad.

The idea is to get pilots to take part in adventures that are literally at their fingertips by going a little further afield. Picture a weekend away; a nice town, good food, a glass or two and a bunch of like-minded people. If you would like to join us you will be most welcome. It makes no difference whether you are a seasoned tourer or have never crossed the channel before, there is enough support and experience around to help allay those fears.

Email the address above and we'll add your name to the list and keep you informed. Just be warned before you do that this kind of touring can become very addictive!

**Below The Torre del Mangia (Tower of the Eater) is 88 metres tall and offers superb views over the city.**

