

Italy
special

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Decanter



The *Decanter* travel guide to

Etruscan Riviera, Italy

FACT FILE

Bolgheri: 1,200ha
Suvereto: 400ha
Val di Cornia: 300ha
Common red grapes: Cabernet Sauvignon, Cabernet Franc, Merlot, Sangiovese, Syrah, Aleatico, Petit Verdot
Common white grapes: Vermentino, Trebbiano, Viognier, Sauvignon Blanc

Photographs: Stefano Amadio/4Corners, Mass: Maggie Nelson

Luciana Lynch explores a stretch of the Maremma coast where SuperTuscans rub shoulders with Etruscan remains. Dodge the steelworks and catch the sunset

FOFLUNS, ETRUSCAN DEITY of wine, would be pleased to see how viticulture has evolved in the stretch of coastal Tuscany called 'Riva degli Etruschi': the Etruscan Riviera. He'd surely approve of the quality, modern wines made there now which, in a few decades, have taken the world by storm.

This maritime zone is part of upper Maremma, the former marshy land reclaimed in the 19th

century. An hour's drive south of Pisa, some 210 kilometres north of Rome and less than 160km from Florence, it feels and looks very different from the gently sculpted Tuscan heartland. Its location makes it ideal for day trips to Siena, San Gimignano and Montalcino, or to catch a ferry to Elba. And yet there's much on offer within its boundaries.

Here the Etruscan coast stretches 48km north to south on either side of the SS1 Aurelia, the Roman highway linking Rome to France. It takes in Bolgheri to the north, down to Follonica in the south. On one side of the Aurelia rise woods and scrub-covered hills dotted with castles and stone-built villages such as Castagneto, Suvereto, Bolgheri, Campiglia, Sassetta. On the other side is the coast: many kilometres of sandy, pine-backed

TRAVEL: MAREMMA



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Above: picturesque pine trees line golden, sandy beaches at the Gulf of Baratti, between Piombino and San Vincenzo. The Etruscan coast boasts one of the finest climates in all of the Mediterranean, as well as ancient ruins and very modern wines

beaches, some stretches still wild and undeveloped, others with popular resorts at Donoratico, Follonica and San Vincenzo, offering accommodation from excellent campsites to six-star luxury resorts. The whole area has a network of wine roads.

Castles, beaches... and Leonardo

A hidden gem, too, for inquisitive travellers, is Piombino, best known as the gateway to Elba and for its steelworks (iron has been extracted and smelted round here since Etruscan times); but venture into this medieval harbour town, set below a scrub-covered promontory dotted with coves, and you will discover walls and ramparts designed by Leonardo da Vinci, a castle, ancient churches, pretty marinas, and a long promenade with views of Corsica,

Six of the best wineries to visit

★ Tenuta Argentiera, Bolgheri

Close to the sea, with great views. Mainly reds: Argentiera Bolgheri Superiore is the definitive style, while the Giorgio Bartholomauss Merlot shows the area's remarkable vocation for this variety. www.argentiera.eu

★ Gualdo del Re, Suvereto

Nico Rossi and Maria Teresa Cabella run their 45ha with enthusiasm and dedication. Their 100% Cabernet Sauvignon, Federico Primo, was the first wine to draw people's attention, while the intense l'Rennero Merlot is superb. www.gualdodelre.it

★ La Bulichella, Suvereto

A pioneer of organic production in Suvereto, this 36ha estate was instrumental in achieving DOCG recognition for the region. There's an outstanding Syrah, Hide, and a tiny production of Aleatico (hungry wild boars permitting). www.bulichella.it

★ Petra, Suvereto

Swiss architect Mario Botta designed this winery, which rises from Val di Cornia towards the metalliferous hills. The owners have done extensive clonal research and the results are admirable. Look out for Petra, a Merlot-Cabernet, and Quercegobbe, a pure Merlot. www.petrawine.it

★ Poggiorosso, Val di Cornia-Piombino

A beautifully tended estate near the Baratti-Piombino archaeological park. The Veive Viognier has fine depth and concentration given the youth of the vines. www.tenutapoggiorosso.it

★ San Giusto di Bonti, Val di Cornia-Piombino

A century-old property with steep vineyards and sea views. Try the Sangiovese and an excellent Vermentino, which is part barrique-aged. +39 (0)565 41198

Montecristo, Giglio and the whole archipelago.

Don't miss Piazza Bovio, a large terrace built above a huge rocky outcrop overlooking Elba, which gives the impression of being on a vast, open ship. And keep that camera handy: the sunsets are awesome.

The SS1 traverses the fertile, hot Maremma, with its cornucopia of produce. Olive groves link valley to slopes, where vines dominate, giving way to woods of chestnut and cork-oak, populated by wild boar and scented by myrtle, bay and strawberry bush, with wild mushrooms in the undergrowth. The Gulf of Baratti, between Piombino and San Vincenzo, ➤

How to get there

By plane to Pisa, then an hour's drive to the Etruscan Riviera

By train from Pisa Airport to Grosseto or Livorno



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offers a long, crescent-shaped golden sandy beach; within a short stroll lies a major Etruscan necropolis in the village of Populonia, with its castle, paved streets and superb sea views.

The climate, among the best in the Med, makes this a virtually year-round destination. Long hot summers are mitigated by sea breezes: the Mistral, blowing fast and furious down the Rhône valley, reaches these shores as a refreshing, cooling wind. The luminosity and the absence of fog and mist are the envy of growers from inner areas, with grapes normally ripening two weeks ahead of the interior, and little risk of disease – indeed, the soil's high mineral content, the perfect climate and the proximity to the sea help to explain why several of Italy's top wine producers were attracted to this small area. They have invested heavily, establishing vineyards and gleaming new wineries, and have added to and stimulated the local talent.

Exploring the wine regions

There are three official wine areas: Bolgheri DOC, Suvereto and Val di Cornia, the last two elevated recently to DOCG. Bolgheri, in the north and

extending south to Castagneto, is the most prestigious, and is home to Sassicaia, the very first SuperTuscan. Suvereto, in the south, has shown its potential since the early 1990s – some of the world's best Merlots are made here. Val di Cornia, which encompasses steep vineyards on the Piombino promontory and surrounding communes, is more fragmented geographically and less homogeneous in quality.

You would expect Sangiovese to feature prominently here as elsewhere in Tuscany and, to some extent, it does. But since change began here in the 1980s, Sangiovese has not been the main protagonist, except in Val di Cornia; it was joined, and arguably sidelined, by Cabernets Sauvignon and Franc (starting with Bolgheri), then Merlot both in Bolgheri and Suvereto; Syrah and others now also feature. The native red Aleatico makes a dense, luscious, alcoholic sweet red, when the grapes can be saved from the voracious wild boars which have acquired a taste for them.

Long-established Vermentino is the most notable white grape, giving fresh, textured dry wines perfect for seafood and summer drinking; there's no shortage of Trebbiano (aka Ansonica), and Sauvignon Blanc and recently Viognier are gaining attention.

Food lovers who appreciate high-quality ingredients and relatively simple cuisine will be happy here, and almost everything will call for a generous dash of local olive oil. *Cacciucco*, a hearty fish stew, and black squid-ink risotto, feature on most menus. Or you might be tempted by a rare delicacy: sea urchin roes as a pasta topping. Wild boar appears as pasta sauces, cured ham and in savoury, wine-drenched stews. Porcini mushrooms abound in the chestnut woods, and chestnut flour is used for *castagnaccio*, a dense cake enriched with pine nuts, sultanas and rosemary, baked in olive oil. Fofluns doesn't go hungry, either. **D**



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Etruscan Riviera

WHERE TO STAY, SHOP, EAT AND RELAX

Spa heaven, handmade jackets and how the Etruscans made wine

ACCOMMODATION

Castello di Bolgheri

At the heart of this estate is the 15th-century castle which frames the entrance to the village. Cellar visits are possible and *agriturismo* (farm-stays) are on offer along the cypress-lined road to San Guido.

www.castellodibolgheri.eu

Tombolo Talasso Resort



Deep pockets are needed here, but for top-class pampering and thalassotherapy with sea-water pools, join the VIP guests at Castagneto-Carducci, with beach, accommodation and restaurant.

www.tombolotalasso.it

Agriturismo La Bulichella

Award-winning accommodation above the winery, in a bucolic hillside setting in Suvereto. The restaurant serves simple, traditional, local cuisine using the estate's own organic produce and wines. www.bulichella.it



La Sorgente

A new boutique hotel in Piombino overlooking the sea and Elba. There are eight individually themed rooms (all with a sea view), an infinity pool, fitness centre, beach access and restaurant offering refined yet traditional cuisine based on local ingredients of the highest standard. www.lasorgentepiombino.com

Poggio All'Agnello Country and Beach Residential Resort



Less than 2km from Baratti and the archaeological site, a vast new resort with Olympic-sized swimming pool, extensive sports facilities, wellness centre and 202 self-contained apartments, with restaurant at hand. There's a frequent shuttle service to Baratti. www.poggioallagnello.it

RESTAURANTS

Gualdo del Re

The restaurant adjoining the winery in Suvereto is highly rated, with wild boar featuring prominently on the menu. The nearby *agriturismo* accommodation (with pool) is of the highest standard and comfort in a peaceful, rural setting. www.gualdodelre.it

Taverna dei Boncompagni

In the heart of Piombino's delightful historic centre, just by the pretty town hall, this taverna offers beautifully presented, largely sea-inspired cuisine with a gourmet twist, matched by an extensive, well-chosen wine list. www.tavernadeiboncompagni.it

SHOPS

Enoteca Tognoni

Gaze at the range of local wines, maybe taste a few by the glass while enjoying a delicious lunch in this historic setting in Bolgheri – you can choose a bottle to be served with your meal at no extra charge. www.enotecatognoni.it

Arte e Moda

This historic tailor is in the central street of pretty Castagneto – Florin Cristea handmakes traditional Maremma country-style jackets. Don't be surprised to come across Mick Jagger or Bryan Ferry, regular customers here, along with the occasional British or Tuscan aristo. **+39 (0)565 763694**

Il Barretto

In the unlikely setting of an espresso bar adjoining a Conad supermarket in Piombino is this small enoteca, with a big selection of local wines, and some from further afield. Great espresso, too. **+39 (0)3391 864 863**

ACTIVITIES

Calidario

Combine fun and wellbeing with a few hours at this Etruscan natural spring in Venturina: hot-water lake, thermarium, massage, cosmetic treatments, along with dining facilities, accommodation and a great pizzeria. www.calidario.it

Museo Archeologico



In Piombino's citadel overlooking the sea, this is a must for anyone interested in Etruscan civilisation. A vast collection, with evidence of the role of iron and the importance of vines. www.parchivaldicornia.it