

# Via Francigena – Walking Europe’s Oldest Pilgrimage Trail

For centuries, people from all “walks of life” regardless of their religious or spiritual leanings, have been making pilgrimages to sacred places. For nearly as long, Christian pilgrims, rich, poor, and sometimes famous from throughout Europe have used a network of paths to journey to Rome, called the Via Francigena.



The Via Francigena is Europe’s oldest cultural trade route dating back more than 2,000 years. In Italy it is an elusive network of trails of ancient Roman roads and medieval paths that wind their way from Switzerland to Rome for 1,000 km.

Unlike its counterpart, the ever-popular Camino de Santiago in Spain, the Via Francigena in Italy, remains barely known. However, this is quickly changing as modern day pilgrims equipped with new guidebooks, trail maps and GPS devices are rediscovering the Via Francigena.

## Winding from the Alps to Rome

What makes the Via Francigena extraordinary, apart from its religious and spiritual importance as a Christian pilgrim trail, is that it crosses through six separate regions from northern to central Italy. From Gran San Bernardo high in the Swiss/Italian Alps, the Via Francigena descends into the distinct French speaking Valle d Aosta, and through the rice capitals of Europe, Piedmont and Lombardy, and meat and cheese heartland of Emilia–Romagna. It then slowly climbs the Apennines Mountains, entering the tiny district of Lunigiana of northern Tuscany. It continues south through undulating hills of vineyards and wheat fields, pass the medieval towns of Lucca and Siena, before entering Lazio, a prehistoric volcanic homeland of the original Italians, the Etruscans, before finally reaching the Italian capital of Rome.

While some sections of the trail have been lost to modern highways and thus re-routed, other segments include old cobble-stoned Roman roads and gravelly medieval paths and dirt farm tracks that bypass Etruscan and Roman ruins and hilltop towns. The trail weaves throughout famous Roman and medieval towns such as Aosta, Pavia, Piacenza, San Miniato, San Gimignano, and Viterbo where you can wander through many of the grand medieval churches and cathedrals, and gaze upon many of the ancient castles and forts.



## **Finding the Pilgrim's Way**

Navigating an elusive trail in modern day Italy does require an understanding of the nuances and challenges – something modern day pilgrims need to appreciate. When my wife and I walked the trail back in 2008, there were few good guidebooks, and none in English. Today, there is not only an excellent English guidebook (and another on its way), but two different Italian guidebooks, and one in French and one in German. There are also free downloadable road books (in Italian only for now), maps, and even GPS coordinates for the techie pilgrim types.

Signage remains a problem in some sections especially along the Po River, the country's longest waterway that divides northern and central Italy, and the region that produces most of the rice consumed by Europeans. Thus being equipped with a good guidebook and basic understanding of Italian is wise. Even though the Italian state government has spearheaded a campaign to install official signs along the entire route, they have left it up to the 139 local community authorities to carry out the task.

## **Sleeping in Monasteries**

Affordable accommodation is sometimes challenging but a network of religious accommodations offer inexpensive rooms with breakfast to bonafide pilgrims, an opportunity to sleep in thousand-year-old abbeys and monasteries. For those looking for something more upscale, staying in family run pensions or bed & breakfasts or the occasional agriturismo is an excellent opportunity to experience the local culture, taste some of Italy's fine cuisine, and meet some very hospitable locals. There is even the chance to sleep in an ancient castle.



This said, state and local authorities continue to make investments in improved signage and accommodation that will assist walkers in their journey.

In summary, the Via Francigena provides an exceptional opportunity to experience the contemporary

culture, intricate cuisine, and rich history of Italy, one footstep at a time. Moreover, it is one of the world's important religious and spiritual modern-day Christian pilgrimages. And it is still yours to discover.

**By Neville J Tencer**

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