



THE GERMAN CEMETARY AT THE SUMMIT OF THE FUTA PASS



THERMAL BATHS IN BAGNO VIGNONI



THE FUTA PASS IS SWARMED BY BIKERS, AND FOR GOOD REASON



HEADING UP TO MONTICCHIELLO



Over the past 10 years I've mellowed out a touch and have tended to take the more cultured approach down through Tuscany. Setting out from Florence via Siena, it would be a mistake not to check out the famous historic centre and majestic Piazza del Campo the setting for the famous Palio di Siena horse race, which is held twice each year; 2 July and 16 August if you happen to be in the vicinity.

From Siena we set a course through the picture-postcard Tuscan scenery to Montepulciano, a well-known Renaissance hill town that's famous for its red wine. If you have the time, it's worth parking up the bike and walking through the car-free streets to the Piazza Grande at the top of the hill.

From Montepulciano it's a short hop and skip to the town of Pienza, another classic depiction of the Tuscan hilltop commune. Pienza has been declared the 'touchstone of Renaissance urbanism' and, in 1996, UNESCO appointed the town World Heritage

status and it's well worth stopping off for a coffee in its bustling historic centre.

The scenery around Pienza and Montepulciano is classic Tuscan rolling hills with towns and villas cresting the higher elevations with many featuring vineyards. The roads in the region are full of twists and turns and are generally open with great onward visibility as they follow the contours of the land, but they could pretty much all do with a new coat of tarmac. 'Rustic' is probably the appropriate word to describe the road conditions in this delightful location, and if your heart desires, there's a huge network of gravel trails.

As we head south from Pienza I'm going to implore you to do two things: check out the Val d'Orcia, and stop off at Bagno Vignoni. The Val d'Orcia is a beautiful valley of rolling hills, vineyards, Renaissance villages and atmospheric zig zagging roads lined with cypress trees with the most famous being the road up to Monticchiello. I guarantee you'll not be

able to resist a photo stop.

And just before we settle down for a long thrilling ride down through Central Italy there's one more stop off a few miles down the road from Monticchiello which is once again guaranteed to have you scrambling frantically for a camera.

I first set eyes on the main square of the small 16th century village of Bagno Vignoni on a cold, dark evening during the launch of a new Ducati motorcycle. The sight before me was both surreal and breath-taking.

The whole of the village square (about the size of a five-a-side football pitch) is a sixteenth century (though the spring was used thousands of years prior), walled-in hot bath fed by warm waters from a spring and there, in the middle, 'walking on water', was the new motorcycle enshrouded by an eerie Ducati red. Bikes in the bath or not, Bagno Vignoni is not to be missed.

If it were not for a planned detour over to Sardinia, my route south from Tuscany

would have looked like this; a ride through the high mountains of the Gran Sasso and Abruzzo National Parks followed by a ride up my favourite road in the region, the SPI0 on Monte Terminillo.

It's a fantastic road full of tight zig zags and sweet curves up a high 2,000m-plus mountain. The scenery is spectacular, and it never fails to amaze me that in years gone by I've found myself ice climbing on a high, exposed snow crusted ridge within 50 miles of Rome; somehow ice axes, crampons and Rome do not feel as if they should be in the same sentence.

With Sardinia being the main target of this trip, we set a course from Bagno Vignoni to the port of Civitavecchia, just to the north of Rome, careful to avoid any main roads. If you intend to follow our route, you'll not be disappointed on this ride through the north of Lazio. The roads are spot on, there's little traffic or tourists and the villages are full of charm and history.

## ▶ HIGHLIGHT: THE FUTA PASS

When I asked the locals at Ducati which road or route they would recommend south of Bologna, the reply was unanimous; The Futa Pass.

The Futa has gained legendary status amongst bikers in the area and, in all our travels through Italy, I don't think we came across a road so dominated by motorcycles. When we travelled through, I'd say that for every car there were 30 or more bikes blasting their way over the pass.

The other point of note was the nature of the bikes and riders. Whilst adventure bikes had been the dominant breed on every other road we'd travelled in Italy, the Futa is a mecca for sportsbike fans and, with the home of Ducati just to the north and the Mugello Circuit nearby, maybe that should have been no surprise.

The pass tops out at 903m and the road to the crest is, I have to admit, just made for opening up. Fast sweepers,

tight hairpins, chicanes, undulations, short, sharp sections... It's a wonder they bothered making a purpose-built track so close when the Futa was on hand.

What I also liked about the place was the casual way the village folk just did not bat an eye lid when a group of 20 howling sportsbikes came screaming through their little communes. But then, when it's an everyday event...

Aside from the motorcycle interest, the Futa was a major part of the Gothic Line during World War Two where the Germans made their last defensive stand against the advancing allied forces. There's a well-tended German military cemetery at the top of the pass that's worth a visit.