

The Road Begins Within

The Via Francigena is a 1200 mile road leading from Canterbury Cathedral to Rome. As early as 990 AD, King Sigeric wrote about the route, and pilgrims have been embarking on it ever since. Walking 15 to 25 miles a day, they could reach Rome in about 12 weeks. The English part of the journey was fairly short, only 8 hours to reach Dover.

Maybe part of the fascination is simply in the walking, realizing that we are basically, without modern technology, quite similar to our ancestors. There are many motives today, besides the original religious one, for walking all or part of the Via Francigena. Getting in touch with one's quieter self, one may wish to go it alone, walking through rain and storms and sun listening to nature's voice. Or seek companions along the way. Evenings can be a time to discover the various sites, local languages, foods and lifestyles. Freeing oneself from normal life can offer space to explore a personal project, be it artistic, musical or even literary.

Not many people can escape for as long as 12 weeks, but a few days a month, or a week, or even a month, are feasible. Then comes the question, where do I begin? The Italian part of the trek takes about 38 days, crossing from the French border along the Apennines, then heading towards the coast near La Spezia. Closer to home, we may begin at La Spezia and walk towards the Roman amphitheater Luni, with marble-covered spectacular mountains to our left and the sea to our right, passing through Pietrasanta and then arriving at Lucca.

That would be one day, followed by a walk towards Altopascio, famous Home



of the Tau. Sometime between 1070 and 1080, they say, the Contessa Matilde founded the Order of Saint James (the Tau) for the protection of pilgrims. Altopascio became one of the most important stops along the way, with a hospital to cure the sick.

Some historians say the founders of the Order of Saint James were 12 men from Lucca. Nowadays Lucca, celebrating the 500th anniversary of its Walls (1513-2013), is restoring more of its ancient monuments, beginning with the Casa del Boia (the hangman's house) near Porta San Gervasio. There is little indication that Casa del Boia is older than the 1800's, but joining in with the Francigena spirit, this old pile of stones is being rebuilt as a Via Francigena museum, a place for tourists to come, maybe along the way if they are intrepidly walking towards Rome. I imagine, however, many will decide to stay longer at Lucca once they discover its many treasures.

For more information, consult francigenafestival@libero.it or call 0583 909012 if you would like to join a trek along the route in Italy.

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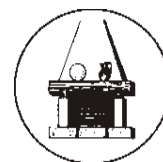
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