

# Heart of Italy

San Gimignano rises on a hill (334m high) dominating the Elsa Valley with its towers. Once the site of a small Etruscan village of the Hellenistic period (200-300 BC) it began its life as a town in the 10th century taking its name from the Holy Bishop of Modena, St. Gimignano, who is said to have saved the village from the barbarian hordes.

The town increased in wealth and developed greatly during the Middle Ages thanks to the [Via Francigena](#), the trading and pilgrim's route that crossed it on the way to Rome.

The patrician families who controlled the city built some 72 tower-houses (up to 50m high) as symbols of their wealth and power. Only 14 have survived but San Gimignano has retained its feudal atmosphere and appearance. The city also contains masterpieces of 14th- and 15th-century Italian art.

In 1348 San Gimignano's population was drastically reduced by the ["Black Death" Plague](#) throwing the city into a serious crisis which eventually led to its submission to Florence in 1353.

There are 14th century paintings of the Sienese School to be seen and 15th century paintings of the Florentine School.

There is no charge to visit the [Galleria Gagliardi d'arte contemporanea](#), located on Via San Giovanni, the main street of town, just past Porta San Giovanni, the principal gate into San Gimignano. The gallery claims to have the largest selection of contemporary ceramic sculptors in Italy, as well as a wide collection of paintings.

At Piazza della Cisterna at the top of Via San Giovanni is [Gelateria di Piazza](#), renowned for its prize-winning *gelato*, made by master ice cream-maker Sergio Dondoli.



Terry and Pat Ringler of Rosendale, NY  
with Gelato Master Sergio Dondoli, 2006 World Champion  
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