

Walking through the Etruscan necropolis of Sovana

*From Sovana to Via cava di San Sebastiano
and the Tomba della Sirena (Siren Tomb)*



Who wants to get to know the Etruscan side of Tuscany will enjoy a tour through the towns and villages that were founded by them. A fascinating journey to Pitigliano, Sovana, Sorano and Castell'Azzara, to name a few, on a path of art, history and landscape.

According to the description by Dionysius Halicarnassus, the greek historian, the Etruscans were an ancient and unique people, without no language and lifestyle affinity with other people. The term Etruscan indicates a population that lived in Etruria, between the 9th and the 3rd century B.C. The Etruscan civilization represents one of the most important cultures in Italy.

Sovana, in the southern part of ancient Etruria (Tuscany, Central Italy) represents a centre of high historical and artistic values. Its Etruscan necropolis is particularly important, even compared to other centres of ancient Etruria.

From Sovana to *Via cava di San Sebastiano* and the Siren Tomb

Sovana was one of the principal Etruscan cities and was reborn in the Middle Ages when it became the property of the Aldobrandeschi family, who built a magnificent castle here during the 11th century. Its Etruscan necropolis is particularly important, even compared to other centres of ancient Etruria, in view of the fact that all the major kinds of funerary architecture of the Tyrrhenian region are present: one of the best examples of Etruscan funerary work from the Hellenic period is represented by the *Tomba della Sirena*, a tomb dating from the III century B.C. and situated in the necropolis of Sopraripe. The Tomb is a large niche type monument shaped like an arch hewn from a single rock mass, and on its façade there is a carving of a double tailed mermaid, symbolizing the Sea Goddess and the Otherworld.

Near to the convergence of the streams Folonia and Calesina, in the immediate vicinity of the necropolis of Sopraripe, the *chapel of San Sebastiano* (Saint Sebastian) is situated, from which the *via cava* takes its name. This path climbs up in the direction of the plain of Tollena and goes in the direction which leads to Pian Costanzo and Poggio San Pietro, then proceeds towards the valley of Fiora.

This ancient Etruscan track makes an impression on us because of the charm of the surrounding countryside and is characterised by vertical cliffs in which *dado* (cube) and *semidado* (half-cube) tombs open. The difference is not so much in the form, which remains cubic in both types, but in the different dimensions of height, which are greater in the *dado* type and smaller in the *semidado* one.

Via cava di San Sebastiano

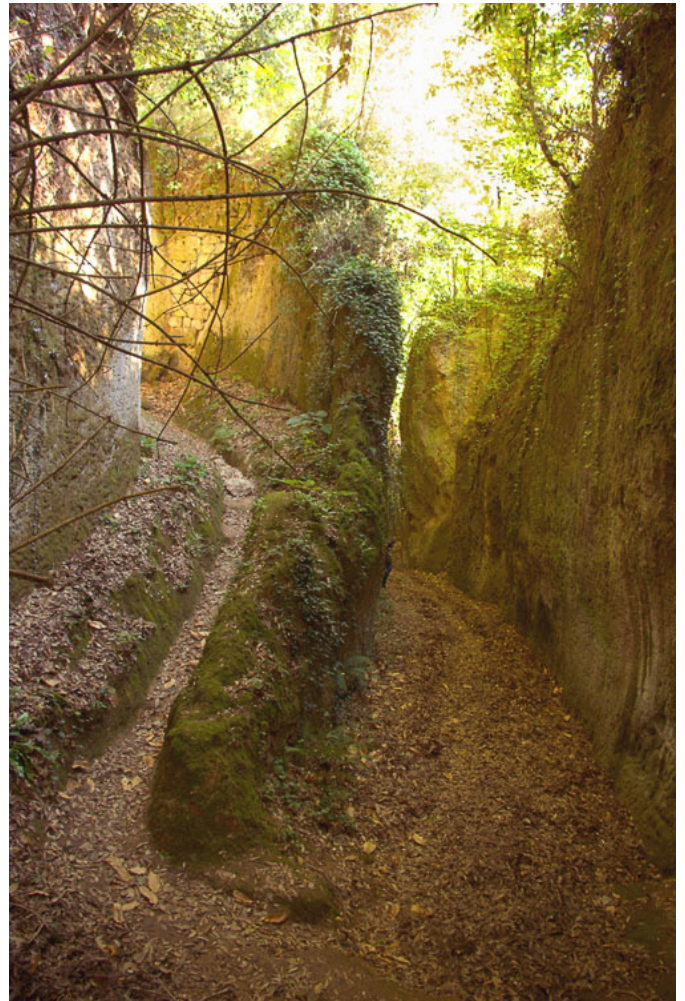
We continue along the path from the Mermaid Tomb. This is an old Etruscan road that linked the Tollena plateau with the Fiora valley. It gets its name from a church that stands at the opening of the valley. The path, which is entirely covered with vegetation is in a deep gorge, that is overlooked by ancient tombs in the tuffaceous cliff.

Siren Tomb

Passing the tunnel that leads from Sovana to the necropolis, you will find the entrance to the Sopraripe Necropolis. In this necropolis are several tombs which date back to different eras and all of which vary in size and beauty. However, there is one tomb that stands out among the rest and that's the Siren Tomb. The Sea Goddess from Etruscan myth, the statue on the tomb depicts a mermaid with two tails, flanked by two guards, one which holds a shield and another which wears a very large helmet. No in a good state of preservation, the statues have, over time been eroded by the elements and are almost beyond recognition. On both sides of the tomb are two lions, symbols of infernal deities and placed there to protect the dead. The tomb owes its name to the female figure portrayed in the pediment, identified as a mermaid by the presence of the dual-fishtail. More than just a mermaid, in reality this portrays Scilla, the monster who, according to Homer, lived in a cave in the strait of Messina and terrorised sailors.

This mythological creature was, in all probability, winged, or dressed in a cloak stirred by the wind, in which erosion by the weather has now made unrecognisable.

The small dimensions of the burial room confirm the hypoth-



The Via Cava di San Rocco



La Tomba della Sirena



esis that the tomb was designed for just one deceased person, “Vel Nulina, son of Vel”, as reads the inscription preserved on the pediment.

The mermaid tomb

Along with the tomb of Ildebranda, this is the most famous grave in the Sovana necropolis. It is in a beautiful setting. We reach it via a path that goes from the provincial road, crosses the Colonia river at the point where there is a charming little waterfall. We continue through a lovely forest that is ablaze with colored wildflowers in spring. The façade duplicates the facades of Etruscan homes. Above the door is a pediment decorated with high relief sculptures of a mermaid hugging two youths with her tail. This is an aedicula-type tomb, but because of the lavish decorations that depict anecdotes from the life of the deceased, it is considered a true monument. Continuing along the same path we will see various examples of semi-dado Etruscan tombs.

Tomba Pisa

This is a chamber tomb that dates from the III century B.C.: it is built to an uneven plan and comprises 9 adjoining chambers. Its layout leads to the hypothesis that it was used by several generations, and in fact it contained items from different periods. The name comes from the fact that it was discovered by researchers from the University of Pisa.

Dopo aver visitato il primo settore della necropoli (Tomba Ildebranda) si consiglia di procedere a piedi sul percorso pedonale che fiancheggia la SP22 in direzione Sovana. Dopo circa duecento metri si arriva al secondo settore della Necropoli che comprende la Chiesa di San Sebastiano, la Tomba della Sirena, le Tombe a Semidado e la Via Cava di San Sebastiano.

Si consiglia l'uso di scarpe comode.

Durata del percorso: 30 minuti ca

Difficoltà: Media (non accessibile ai diversamente abili)

Si supera il torrente Calesine attraversando un ponte di legno e si continua dietro la Chiesa di San Sebastiano su un percorso piuttosto ripido fino a un bivio: a destra si raggiunge la Via Cava di San Sebastiano mentre a sinistra il percorso permette la visita delle Tombe monumentali a semidado e della tomba a edicola della Sirena dove finisce l'itinerario.

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Opening of Etruscan Necropolis of Sovana

weeks before Easter to 2 November 10.00-19.00
26 December - 6 January 10.00-17.00
Winter visits by prior arrangement
Tickets: Free

Maps | GM, Topographic Map 1:25,000, sheet 333 TAB III – Pitigliano
Multigraphic – Tourist road map 1:50,000 - Maremma

Viaggio attraverso la civiltà del tufo (*Journey seen through the tufa civilisation*), a guide about cultural trekking, is edited by the cooperative *La Fortezza di Sovana*. Inside this guide, it is possible to find pictures of the landscape, very detailed maps representing the archaeological sites situated in the whole Province of Grosseto (among which it is also feasible to find the necropolis in Sovana), and the best local trekking routes. The guide also introduces the itineraries in the hinterland of Maremma, ranging from the Municipality of Sorano and Sovana up to Pitigliano and Saturnia.

The guide is for sale in the Book Shop of the Cathedral in Sovana or in the Palazzo Orsini in Pitigliano.

RELATED ITINERARIES

The ring of Sorano, Monte Vitozzo, Castell'Ottieri and San Valentino
Trail on foot, horse or bike - 22 km

This long itinerary can be subdivided in multiple excursions. It begins heading north, hugging an asphalt road and continuing in the Cerreta forest and arriving at Monte Vitozzo. Head east towards San Giovanni delle Contee (which can be reached with a 4km round-trip deviation), and then returns towards Castell'Ottieri, San Valentino and Sorano.

From Castell'Azzara to Montebuono and Sovana
Trail on foot, horse or bike - 17 km

A long itinerary along a gravel road which leads to Monte Civitella, a south-eastern offshoot of the Amiata, to the valleys of Fologna and Fiora. After hugging the cliff of Monte Vitozzo, cross the Selvena-Sorano provincial road to arrive at Montebuono. At the end, before heading up to Sovana, head down to Fosso Picciolana and the tombs of Ildebranda and Pola.

From Pitigliano to Manciano
Trail on foot, horse or bike - 18 km

This long itinerary near the border with Lazio leaves from Pitigliano for the "quarry road" or Poggio Cani, following a "customs road" on the orographic left of the Lente, descending across the Fiora on the bridge of state road 74, arriving at the necropolis of Poggio Buco. The last stretch is a hilly walk through wood and grassy hills.

From Sovana to Pitigliano
Trail on foot – 4,5 km

An easy, beautiful walk along an Etruscan and Medieval road which takes you from the centre of Sovana to Pitigliano, passing the Fosso del Puzzone, the Piano Conati and the "quarry roads" of the Annunziata a Poggio Cani.

From Sovana to Sorano
Trail on foot, horse or bike - 13 km

This comfortable itinerary is the same as the previous itinerary up to Fosso del Puzzone (which is certainly worth checking out), then heads north-east across the Piano della Madonna and Fosso Calesina. The path ends at the hill and the archaeological zone of San Rocco. To arrive at Sorano you must follow the asphalt road for another two kilometres.