

From Florence to Lucca and Back

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For the students at the International Studies Institute, Florence comes to define Italy—a big city, crammed with art, spectacular buildings, and great nightlife. They will probably go to Rome but many weekends they are off to Barcelona, Paris, Prague or any other hotspots they've heard about. They are less likely to venture nearer towns and cities only a few hours away. When they do, they often feel that they have seen the 'real' Italy.

The nearest of these destinations is Lucca, about an hour's bus ride from Florence. Getting even just a glimpse of this city will intrigue you enough to want to know more about it. If you do dig deeper, you will gain an entirely new perspective on Florence, for Lucca was great while Florence was still a backwater, and it is the one city in Tuscany that Florence never conquered.

Lucca was established as a Roman colony in 180 BC. It had a strategic location, lying at the foot of the shortest pass across the Apennines to the Po valley. It was built in the traditional way, a rectangle of high stone walls oriented to the cardinal points of the compass, the streets within arranged in a strict grid. Most of the streets in the center still lie where the Romans laid them. During Julius Caesar's time, Lucca was a safe enough spot for him to choose for his meeting with Pompey and Crassus to secure their absolute power as a Triumvirate. It is about the time of this meeting that we first hear of Florence as a village for retired soldiers.

Throughout the Roman period, Lucca flourished while Florence languished. An amphitheater was built just outside the walls. In good Lucchese fashion it was never demolished or allowed to decay but was continuously adapted to other purposes. Until well after World War II it served as the central market, a real hubbub, but now is surrounded by leisurely cafés.

In 376 the Goths invaded Italy and soon wrested control of the

peninsula from the Roman emperor, who ruled from Byzantium. In 535 emperor Justinian decided to drive them out and, after fifteen years of failure, sent his seventy-three-year-old eunuch general Narses, who swept victoriously up the peninsula until he came to Lucca where he was brought to a halt. The walls must have been in good shape. Only when Narses agreed to spare the town and its inhabitants did Lucca surrender. Narses appointed the first Duke of Tuscany, who ruled from Lucca, but Byzantine dominance didn't last long. A new horde of Germans, the Lombards, swept south and in 570 captured Lucca. They would rule most of Italy until 774, when Charlemagne arrived. He created the Marquisate of Tuscany and, naturally, made Lucca its capital. The French had little to do with the administration, however; so the Lombard influence remained for centuries. We see it in the local architecture (Lombard churches still dot the city and surrounding hills), the economy (the Lucchesi had a long tradition of trading with northern Europe), and the social characteristics of restraint and resolve.

It was under the Lombards, in 742, that a remarkable wood statue called *Volto Santo* (the holy face of Christ), arrived in Lucca. It would become an object of pilgrimage in the city for centuries, filling the local coffers, and it was Lucca's symbol abroad throughout the Middle Ages—a very famous trademark. If you go, make sure to visit *Volto Santo* in the Cathedral of San Martino.

While Lucca was the capital of Tuscany, the city and its rulers became ever more powerful, so much so that in 877 Duke Adalberto sent four thousand troops to Rome, occupied the city, and imprisoned the Pope. His son, Adalberto II, warranted the epithet 'The Rich.' When the Holy Roman Emperor visited him in 901, he was irritated by the grandeur of Adalberto's court, considering it more appropriate for himself than one of his vassals. When Adalberto died, his redoubtable wife Berta assumed rule of Lucca and Tuscany. Their tomb slabs are still in the cathedral, where you can read of their glories, which are impressive. Adalberto gave "sight to the blind, pity to the widows, feet to the lame, clothing to the naked." He was the terror of foreign peoples and was known to the ends of the

earth. When Berta died in 925 it was written that “All of Europe bemoans their loss. All France is in tears, as is Corsica, Sardinia, Greece, and Italy.”

Such glory would, of course, be challenged. With the turn of the millennium, one great rival arose—Pisa. It was only ten miles away for a crow but, separated by a ridge of mountains, the two cities were worlds apart. To defend against this new threat, the Lucchesi built a new ring of walls, which incorporated the suburbs that had grown around it, almost doubling the area of the city. At the same time the street level within the walls was raised eight feet so that the Serchio river would no longer flood the city. This was a massive undertaking, building a new city on top of the Roman foundations. There is an archaeological site under the Baptistry which offers glimpses into the Roman city, and the centuries of development between then and the modern age. Seeing this, you will understand why some ancient church doorways seem absurdly short and why you step down, not up, to go through them. These are the Lombard churches.

As Pisa became a maritime power, Lucca became ever wealthier in the terrestrial economy, through a surprising means—silk. Lucca’s merchants had brought home the secrets of silk production from the Orient and soon were providing the finest garments and vestments to kings and popes. As they traveled to sell their goods, the merchants of Lucca became the best known and the most trusted throughout western Europe. There is still a plaque on the façade of the cathedral, dated 1111, that proclaims the probity of all money changers and dealers in spices, who carried out their business in the piazza in front of San Martino. They have sworn an oath so that “all men can exchange, sell, and buy with confidence. There are officials who see to it that if any wrong has been committed, it will be rectified.” This perfectly captures the mercantile ethos of Lucca still today and is why private bankers find it a congenial place to set up shop.

The wealth of Lucca attracted many a covetous eye. In 1300 a soldier of fortune arrived—Castruccio Castracani. The name probably rings no bells, but he was once very famous. Mary Shelley’s second book, after *Frankenstein*, was the romanticized story of Castruccio’s life. Castruccio had been hired by the Pisans to seize Lucca, which he did, but then decid-

ed to keep it for himself. Within the walls he built a large fortress to secure his impregnability and then set out to conquer Tuscany.

By this time the dukes of Tuscany had transferred their capital to Florence, which was now the greatest rival of Lucca. Castruccio decided to put an end to this threat and in 1325 he defeated the army of Florence. He staged three triumphal marches around its city walls, the last one by the camp prostitutes. Three years later, Castruccio died, and the fortune of Lucca reversed. New mercenaries conquered, bought, and sold it and then, in the ultimate indignity, Pisa ruled it for twenty years. By the time Lucca bought its freedom in 1370, Florence had surpassed it as the dominant city in Tuscany. Lucca dug in and, more fiercely than ever, defended its independence. Although it lived in the cultural penumbra of Florence, Lucca never lost control of the areas surrounding it, the *Lucchesia*, which extended from the Mediterranean to the plains towards Florence and, crucially, up the Apennines along the best pass to Europe. The inhabitants of this region owed allegiance to Lucca and every year they were required to come to the city where they would parade with their local banners. Still today, from all over the world, the Lucchesi come to honor their homeland, though now their banners read Rio de Janeiro, San Francisco, New York, or Auckland. The procession is led by the statue of the *Volto Santo*. All electric lights are turned off and the city is lit with thousands of candles. If you want to know how special the Lucchesi feel about their heritage, you should attend the festival, but be sure to book early.

In 1406 Florence finally took control of Pisa but it never seriously tried to conquer Lucca. The city felt secure until a new threat arose when King Charles VIII of France invaded Italy in 1494, bringing with him a new invention—light and maneuverable bronze cannons which could easily dispatch medieval stone walls. Lucca, being a very diplomatic city, with close ties to France, was never seriously threatened but the lesson of siege artillery for the future was clear.

By 1525 plans for a new set of walls were being made. As with the raising of the city four hundred years earlier, it was a daunting project. The new walls would be one hundred feet wide, filled with earth, imper-

vious to an eternity of cannon shots. They would be encased in brick, with bastions large enough for a host of troops and artillery. Most dramatically, everything outside the wall was to be leveled—every house, church, and tree—for several hundred yards, the length of a cannon shot. This *tagliata* (cut-down zone) sloped away from the walls so that approaching infantry would have to advance upwards through raking fire. Just outside the walls was a second band of earthen fortifications for snipers and pickets. A few of these remain and we can imagine the rest. Lucca was impregnable.

Construction of the walls began in 1550 and would take one hundred years to complete. Every citizen of the Republic of Lucca was compelled to contribute, which often meant using a shovel for a few weeks each year. The walls of Lucca truly belonged to every citizen.

When, in his turn, Napoleon invaded Italy, Lucca had a fortunate introduction to the new Emperor. At five o'clock one morning in 1796 his wife Josephine arrived unannounced at the gates. Her husband was fighting a touch-and-go campaign in the Po valley so, for her safety, she fled across the Apennines to the first sheltered place, Lucca. The town fathers roused themselves and quickly devised a suitable welcome for such a notable visitor. Considering that Napoleon's future eminence was still uncertain, it was the traditional Lucchese custom of cultivating all possible alliances that accounted for Josephine's warm welcome. Her own past, certainly, fell well short of Lucca's standards of propriety. By such a chance event the patricians of Lucca forged a personal relationship with Napoleon, which would serve them well when he became Emperor in 1804. The next year he made his sister, Elisa, ruler of this independent realm, the Principate of Lucca.

Elisa ruled a glittering court, entertaining in the grandest fashion. Niccolò Paganini served as her concert master, writing some of his most compelling pieces in Lucca. When in 1809 Napoleon elevated Elisa from Princess of Lucca to Grand Duchess of Tuscany she moved to Florence, which she didn't like nearly as much as Lucca.

It would not be until 1847 that Lucca was absorbed into the Grand Duchy of Tuscany. For the first time in well over a thousand years, Lucca

was no longer independent.

But old differences die hard. To take the hour-long bus ride from Florence to Lucca is to move between different worlds. After years in Florence I still struggle, listening to casual conversation in a Florentine café, to understand what people are saying, but as soon as I get on a bus to Lucca, filled with Lucchesi going home, their speech becomes clear. This, for me, is proper Italian.

Such subtleties of the Italian experience are too often missed by students. I understand why. There is so much to absorb, so many distractions, not to mention classwork and, if I remember being twenty-years old correctly, never enough time to party. Lucca is not a party town. It is one of those places that Italian poet Gabriele D'Annunzio called "cities of silence." Silence is the most under-rated pleasure, and often the most rewarding. I encourage every student at the International Studies Institute to avail themselves of the opportunity to visit such places as Lucca, Siena, Orvieto, Volterra (real silence), or a host of others. Not to get to know the 'real' Italy—Florence is certainly real—but to know *Italy*.

For students and non-students, I warn you. A day will not be enough. So, for your first visit just wander around and absorb what you see. You will need to eat, and for this I recommend the restaurant Da Guido. It is large, informal, with classic Lucchese cuisine; the menu hasn't changed in decades. Horse tartar is one of the items and "farro," the ancient local grain, can be had in various ways.

While you are walking, do not be afraid of getting lost. You will get lost, but you will soon find your way; the Roman grid makes it easy to get yourself back on track. You'll quickly realize that at the center of this grid lies the piazza and the church of San Michele, a site you will never forget. The façade can keep you occupied for hours, deciphering the stories it tells. It was built in the 1100s according to an aesthetic un-found in Florence. The façade of the Cathedral of San Martino, which was built about the same time, is equally surprising and stunning. But I won't go on about churches because there are too many. Lucca was long known as the city of one hundred churches, and about forty remain,

almost all pre-Renaissance.

What else to do on your first day? A walk along the walls is absolutely necessary. The entire circuit takes about an hour, but even a few minutes looking down on the city or out onto the snow-capped Apennines will give you insight into Lucca.

Did I mention art? Well, that's for another day. For now, return to Florence. You will have a new perspective on it.

About the author

Brian Lindquist was Associate Director for Student Life at the Institute at Palazzo Rucellai, the predecessor to the International Studies Institute. He is the author of *The Wanderer's Guide to Lucca*, a comprehensive guide to the history, art, and architecture of Lucca. He is also the cartographer of *The Wanderer's Map of Lucca*. When not in Italy, he lives in Connecticut. He is currently completing a book on the *Ventotene Manifesto*.