

## A Walk With The Etruscans

March 31, 2017



Many hiking trails crisscross Tuscany. All of them promise natural beauty -- hills, forests, streams, and the ubiquitous *macchia Mediterranea* (rich green local vegetation) – but only one set of trails leads you through the heart of Etruscan Italy, from which the Tuscan region takes its name.

The *Parco Archeologico "Città del Tufo"* (The “City of Tuff” Archeological Park) is Tuscany’s first archeological park, inaugurated in 1998 and around Sorano, a small town near Grosseto in southwestern Tuscany. It spreads over 70 hectares and encompasses several areas of archeological interest, including the Necropolis, the Vie Cave, and Vitozza. Here you can experience an up-close-and-personal encounter with Etruscan culture, as well as the cultures of Rome and medieval Italy.

The Necropolis, a series of tombs carved into tuff rock, dates from about the 7<sup>th</sup> century BC to Roman times. The entrance is just outside the town of Sorano. Navigating the rocky paths from one burial site to another, you can observe marked changes in their decoration over the centuries. Even the earliest tombs reflected joy in the afterlife: you can see carved figures and images enjoying banquets and celebration, with food, wine, and dancing. In later centuries, they began to depict the afterlife as a series of trials and obstacles one had to overcome to reach a joyful and happy state.

One of the most beautiful sites is the Sopraripa Necropolis, containing several burial places from different eras. The most outstanding is *La Tomba della Sirena*, the Mermaid’s Tomb, taking its name from the sculpture of a siren on the site’s façade. The carving depicts what may be a mermaid with two tails, flanked by two guards, one with a shield and the other with a large helmet. On each side of the tomb’s façade, a lion stands guard.

The amazing thing about this and most other tombs in the park is that they are not barricaded. You can touch and examine them and interact with the past. No technical climbing is needed to reach them, no *via ferrata*, and the total distance for the recommended path is about four kilometers (2.4 miles). Only a good pair of trekking boots is recommended if you want to make a day of it.

Same applies for the Vie Cave. Mystery surrounds these ancient paths that cut deep into the tuff rock and run between Sorano, a village adjoining Sorano, and Pitigliano, about five kilometers (three miles) away. Were they manmade or did nature have a hand? Was the itinerary chosen with

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commercial motives as well as religious ones in mind? Whatever the answers, the trail is dramatic, with an impact suggesting the entrance to Petra in Jordan. The steep canyon-like walls of the trail have Greek carvings that indicated fertility or the sun. Later, in the Middle Ages, the same paths were used by Christians for transit and commerce; the crosses they carved into the embankments are equally visible.

The Vie Cave are not technically difficult, but are not recommended in icy weather as the rocks can be slippery. Ditto for a rainy day.

Next there is the City of Tuff, aka Vitozza or the "lost city." It is the easiest of all the trails in the Parco Archeologico and the one that gives the park its name. It is a series of 180 caves and grottos carved into the rock. Some of them may have been used by the Etruscans as religious sites, but they came into their own in medieval times. Many of the caves acted as housing for up to 1,000 people. Other caves were used for storage or shelter for animals. Some compartmentalized caves even served all three purposes.

No one lives in the "lost city" anymore but an easy trail winds through this former settlement with grottos flanking the path over a course of a few miles. Not all the caves are accessible, but some are open to visitors, revealing a certain rustic comfort. Tuff is a good insulator, remaining cool in summers and warm in winters, better than many rural cottages centuries ago. Additionally, some of the caves had an internal water supply, a rarity in the Middle Ages. In fact, a few hardy souls did not want to leave their cave homes when the government mandated their removal in the 18<sup>th</sup> century.

Today the grottos offer respite from summer sun and a glimpse into the enigmatic history of the Etruscans.

--Claudia Flisi

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