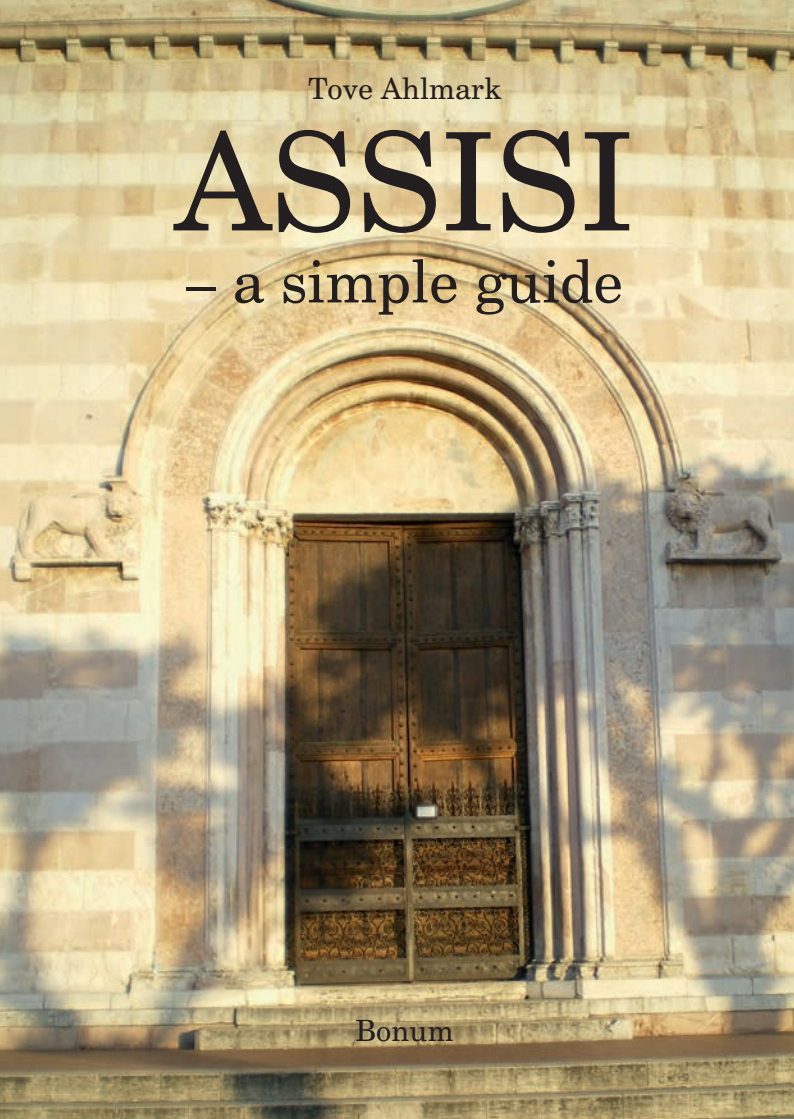




Tove Ahlmark

# ASSISI

– a simple guide

Bonum

Assisi – a simple guide

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Front cover: Entrance door to Santa Chiara.

Back cover: Typical Assisi stones (from the Basilica of Saint Francis)

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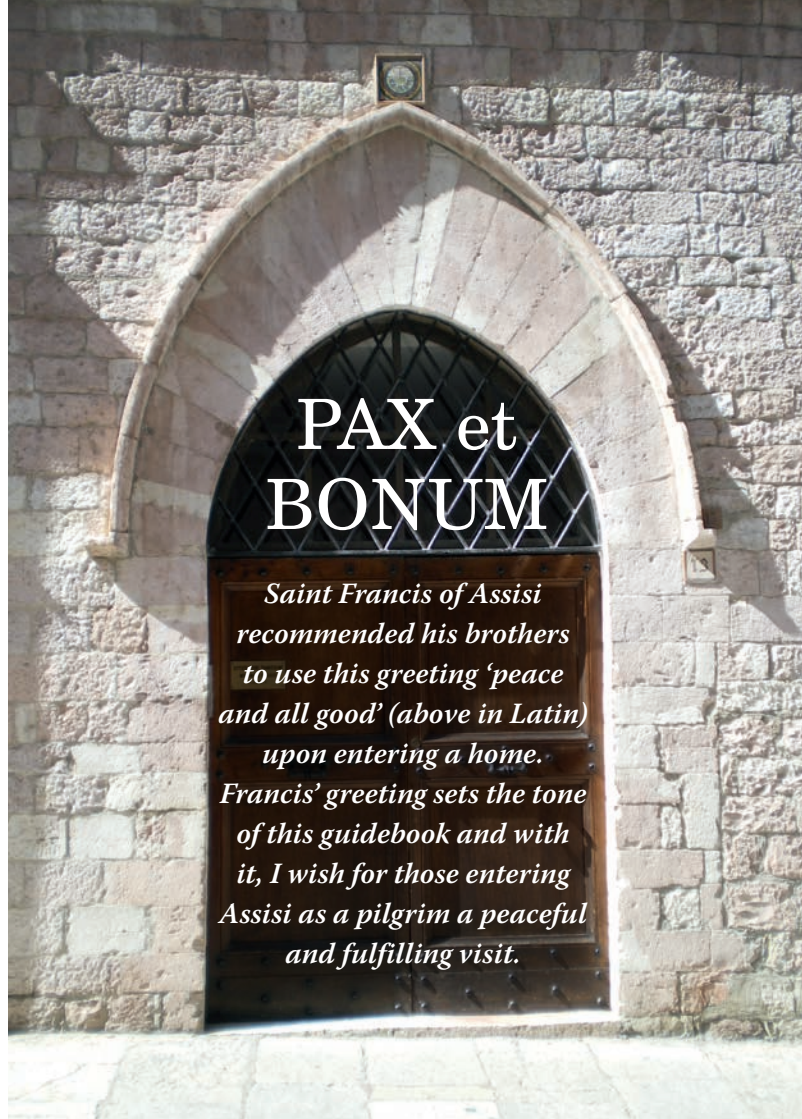
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*a deep psychological analysis.*

*The Hope of being reborn as a Boy – about Women*  
*and Tibetan Buddhism.* Co writer A-S Bernstorff.

*Enlighten the Darkness in my Heart.*





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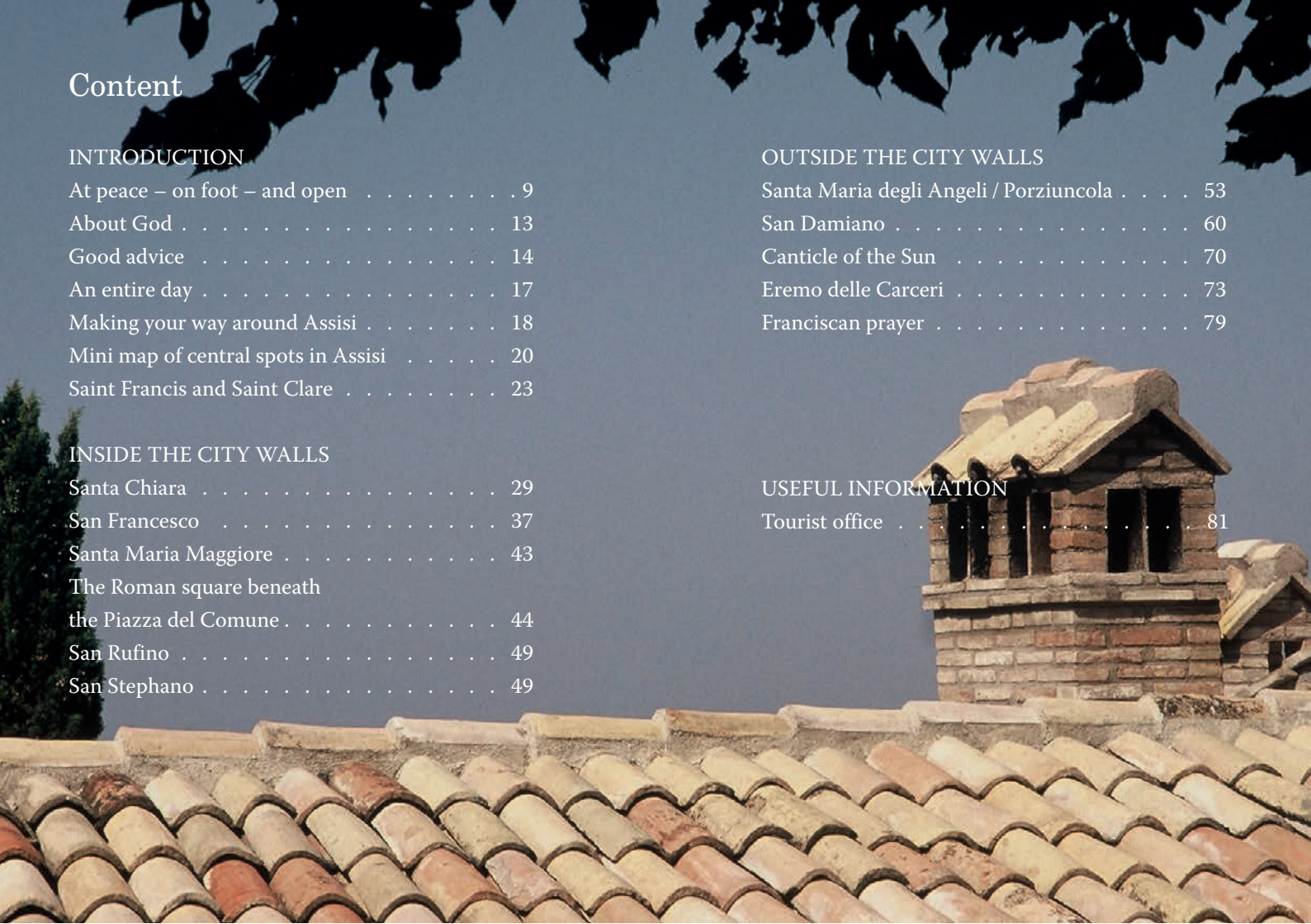
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# Introduction

## Preface

### At peace – on foot – and open

This book addresses people visiting Assisi in search of contemplation. Assisi offers the opportunity to become acquainted with Christian Mysticism by following the light of Saint Francis of Assisi.

Travelling with this book merely requires that you are looking for peace, that you move on foot, and take your time. Furthermore, I suggest that you listen to your thoughts and feelings. Sense yourself and be open to the things you encounter. In doing so, you'll get to know yourself better.

This book will support your inner and outer journey through Assisi. It's the simple approach.



The guide is structured in two main parts:  
inside and outside the city walls.

You can choose to follow the order presented in the guide, thus experiencing Saint Francis' life by starting within the city walls. Or you can follow your own path.

Distances inside the city walls are short but the San Francesco and Santa Chiara Basilicas both require plenty of time to experience.

Reaching places outside the city walls is more time-consuming due to greater distances. I therefore recommend allocating plenty of time

for each location outside the city walls – at least a couple of hours or more, if possible.

Changes to opening and service hours etc. might have occurred since the creation of this book. I hope you will bear over with this issue. Please ask for updated information at the Assisi tourist office.

Assisi, spring 2014  
*Tove Ahlmark*

Some details in this book may have changed since its original publication. I apologize for any resulting inaccuracies and appreciate your understanding.

2026, *Tove Ahlmark*





## About God

First you see God in Nature.  
Then you see God in other people.  
Then you understand  
that God is within you.

*A Birgittine nun in Assisi.*

## Good advice

Make sure you have plenty of time. Don't rush to see everything. Take your time and walk slowly. Feel yourself and be open to what you see and sense.

You can choose to focus on a couple of special places. This provides better results in my experience. Avoid giving dates, periodic styles etc. too much leverage on this journey.

I recommend reading more about Saint Francis in: »Saint Francis of Assisi: A Biography by Johannes Jorgensen«. It has been translated into many languages. It is a good idea to read at night when you have finished the day's walking.

Turn off your mobile, tablet and laptop. Make a decision to limit the amount of photos you take.

Tell family and friends that you'll be a little out of reach in order to immerse yourself in your Assisi stay. Make this clear to yourself as well. Choose contemplation!





## An entire day

If you have an entire day at your disposal I recommend you avoid too much planning, at least emit detailed control.

It can be a great experience to just let yourself be guided by following the wind wherever it takes you. Maybe you will encounter something unexpected.

Just be open and undogmatic towards your experiences. Let your feelings, sensations and joy guide you. This can be a wonderful contrast to a life full of busy working thoughts.



## Making your way around Assisi

When you encounter the spiritual treasures of Assisi you may need to differentiate between the town inside the city walls and the Franciscan sites outside the city walls.

Assisi has been built around two poles: the Basilicas of San Francesco and Santa Chiara. They are both located within the city walls, San Francesco in the West and Santa Chiara in the East. In the centre of the town lies Piazza del Comune. All streets are easily connected with these three places – you can't get lost. East of Santa Chiara lies the city gate Porta Nuova, from here you can reach San Damiano. Beneath San Francesco is the city gate Porta San Pietro. From here you can walk to Santa Maria degli Angeli/Porziuncola. In the upper part of town you'll find the road to Eremo delle Carceri by exiting through the Porta Cappucini gate.

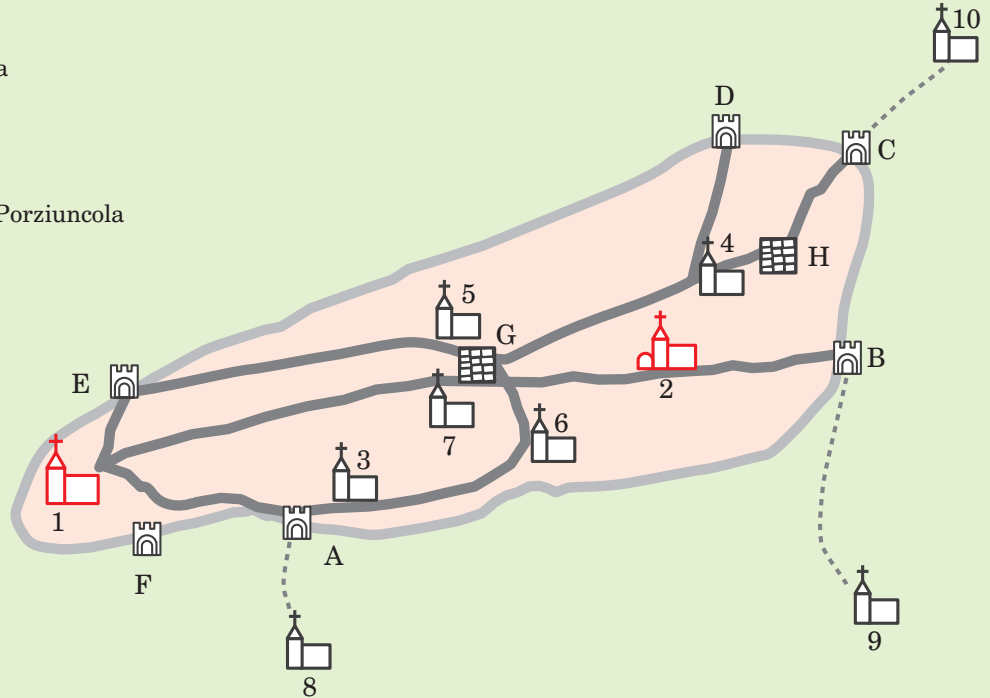


# Mini map of central spots in Assisi

1. Basilica San Francesco
2. Basilica Santa Chiara
3. Basilica San Pietro
4. Cathedral San Rufino
5. Church Santa Maria sopra Minerva
6. Church Santa Maria Maggiore
7. Church San Stephano
8. Church Santa Maria degli Angeli /Porziuncola
9. Church San Damiano
10. Hermitage Eremo delle Carceri

- A. Porta San Pietro
- B. Porta Nuova
- C. Porta Cappuccini
- D. Porta Perlici
- E. Porta San Giacomo
- F. Porta San Vetturino

- G. Piazza del Comune
- H. Piazza Matteotti







## Saint Francis and Saint Clare

Assisi is unique because of its two poles, Saint Francis of Assisi (1181-1226) and his female counterpart Saint Clare (1193-1253). These two medieval saints were both born and grew up here. They were almost the same age. They walked the spiritual path together. They're buried in each end of the town and their churches indicate its male and female poles.

Francis had dreams and visions that instructed him to live a radical, Christian life from an early age. Christ on the cross was constantly displayed before his inner eye. The New Testament, in particular the Gospel of John, guided him. A cave on Mount Subasio was his preferred place to dedicate himself to prayer. His

life alternated between withdrawn contemplation in solitude in nature, and life in town, with people to whom he preached the joyous message of Christianity.

Furthermore he strived to be the poorest of the poor. His humility, gentleness and love radiated to all people. Those inflicted with leprosy had a special place in his heart. He founded the Franciscan Order.

Clare joined Francis and his brothers early on in life. Clare was Francis' spiritual partner and he named her his »little plant«. She founded the Order of Saint Clare, the Poor Clares.

Two years before he died Saint Francis was stigmatised, which means he got the same wounds as the crucified Christ. Saint Francis was the first person in history to be stigmatised.





## Inside the city walls





## Santa Chiara

I highly recommend experiencing the nuns of Saint Clare singing in her church. It can be compared to listening to a heavenly choir of angels.

The nuns sing *laudes* at 6:45 in the morning and at the following mass.

Evenings – after mass – the nuns sing *vesper* at 18:45 in summer and 18:15 in winter.

The song is heard in the chapel to the right. Here you'll also find the original crucifix that spoke to Saint Francis providing the actual reason for his spiritual path. Saint Francis spoke this prayer before the crucifix:

*All-highest, glorious God  
Enlighten the darkness in my heart*

*(excerpt)*



He then heard Christ on the cross exclaim:  
»Francis go forth and rebuild my church!« You  
can take a seat and let the crucifix speak to you.

In the nave above the Alter hangs a very different, expressive crucifix, which you could dwell on. At the feet of Christ you'll see Saint Francis and Saint Clare. On the far left a nun is displaying a big bag of money. She followed in Clare's footsteps as the Abbess of the order and paid for this crucifix.

The Order of Saint Clare are successors of Clare. They live cloistered in the big convent, which means they have chosen a life in seclusion behind the four thick walls of the convent.

They do this to advance their spiritual process. A few Poor Clares have external church duties.







The main task for the Clarissas or the Order of Saint Clare is to pray – for the world.

In my experience the prayers of the Poor Clares are powerful. In the little box hanging on the right side of the nave you can leave a wish for them to pray for. You can include a donation for the Poor Clares, who never ask for money but live off charity.

Underneath the church is a crypt with blue vaults covered in golden stars. Here lies the relics of the Holy Saint Clare. Clare lived from approximately 1193 to 1253. Due to the deterioration of Saint Clare's physical body she was embalmed in the late 20th Century, but she still lies in this tomb. Take notice of her pillow. The images on the walls in the crypt express the story of her life. As does the painting where she holds the vase of the Host, the body of Christ,

and in doing so prevented the hostile Saracens, Muslims, from attacking the convent.

*Open from around 6:30-12:00.*

*The church is closed between 12:00-14:00.*

*Closes at 18:00 from October 26th until Easter, and during summer at 19:00.*

*Laudes is sung at 6:45 followed by mass.*

*Vesper is sung at 18:45 (18:30 on celebrations)*

## San Francesco

The San Francesco Basilica consists of three churches built one on top of the other. Furthest down lies the crypt containing the grave of Saint Francis. His simple stone coffin takes shape of the animal's trough and is bound together by iron strips. Saint Francis lived from 1181 to 1226. One of the best places for contemplation. It can be quite wonderful here. But there can also be many people and events. Try to keep your focus all the same.

Some times it can be an advantage to come in the early hours or right before closing time, as you'll find less people around.

The two churches above the crypt are blessed by artworks. Here you'll find the most stunning frescos. Just take a seat and enjoy







their beauty. When you feel at peace allow the images to become alive and speak. You can try to imagine participating in the events taking place.

In the museum behind the middle church choir some of Francis' clothes are exhibited. They can bring you closer to Francis and his life. Try to imagine what his life was like!

In the upper church the painter Giotto has created a series of images illustrating the life of Francis of Assisi. They begin to the right of the Alter.

On Sundays there is high mass at around 10:30 in the middle church. The Alter here is based on Saint Francis' tomb. It can be a powerful

experience to participate in the service joined by the many people who have come to Assisi from all over Italy, and the world, to be with Saint Francis. Make sure to arrive in good time and prepare yourself for sharing this experience with many pilgrims.

*The crypt and middle church are open  
6:00-19:00 all year round.*

*The upper church with Giotto's frescoes  
is open 8:30-18:50*

*On Sundays high mass is at around  
10:30 in the middle church.*

*Friday and Saturday the crypt is open  
21:00-22:00 for silent prayer.*



## Santa Maria Maggiore

This church can seem bare in comparison with the other, more colourful, sites. Yet it has some beautiful frescos. Merely sitting here can offer great comfort. Concerts are often held in this church.

## Santa Maria sopra Minerva

This church is hiding inside the Minerva Temple located visibly on the Piazza del Comune. The actual church décor consists of grand, baroque sculptures covered in plenty of gold. The Virgin Mary towers inside a cave that is part of the grand Alter piece, surrounded by golden, baroque angels.

Most interesting are the large steps you climb to enter the church and the Roman pillars you must pass. These belong to the façade of the original Roman temple. This is the way of the world. Old sacred places are occupied by new.

## The Roman square beneath the Piazza del Comune

It can be a rewarding experience to visit the town's archaeological excavations. I suggest limiting this excursion to the part of the town that lies beneath the central square, Piazza del Comune. This is a true slice of history. The place is called Foro Romano, The Roman Square.

The entrance is situated at the west end of Piazza del Comune a few paces down the steeply descending Via Portica. On the right you find the water basin which used to be an ancient washing site. Here is the entrance to Foro Romano. Under the Piazza del Comune you'll find a big wall and some steps leading up to the Minerva Temple, that you just climbed up. The Minerva Temple begins on the original Roman square. These steps are invisible from the contemporary entrance on





the square, Piazza del Comune. You discover that the temple used to be located high above the Roman square.

*Open 10:00-13:00 & 14:30-18:00*





## San Rufino

The façade is very exceptional and one of the oldest in Assisi. Just inside the entrance to the church is an old water cistern from Roman times. A beautiful ancient crypt lies under the church. Saint Francis is said to have been praying here. Today it's sadly converted into a museum.

## San Stephano

A town oasis where you can cool down and sit in tranquillity. Service is rarely held in this church.





## Outside the city walls





## Santa Maria degli Angeli / Porziuncola

Walking from Assisi to Santa Maria degli Angeli can be very pleasant. The church can be viewed almost the entire time, so you can't get lost.

To avoid the busy roads you can follow a path running from the large parking lot below San Francesco. Find the city gate called Porta San Pietro. Just opposite are some steps leading down. Here you'll find the beginning of a brick pavement on a small road. I suggest that you follow this pavement until you reach the flat stretch by the first crossroads. Turn left and walk for about 40 meters. On the right you'll find a road parallel to the one you were using. It's an old, asphalted, small field road. You'll be able to see the dome of Santa Maria degli Angeli. The road ends – after the roundabout – by the station, and you continue on the right

side of the train tracks. Then you arrive at the main thoroughfare between Assisi and Santa Maria degli Angeli. To get to the church take the steps leading under the tracks and continue straight ahead from there. This trip may take a little more time but it's much nicer than the traffic route.

You can also choose to take the bus. It runs from the Piazza Matteotti at the top of the town and has many stops along the way, among these the San Francesco parking lot. The bus stops at Porziuncola, which translates as 'little portion' and signifies the small church inside the large one. The very church in which Saint Francis began his vocation as the leader of a new order. This is where he collected his brothers in a convent that was to be the prototype for the order. Porziuncola is one of the oldest Franciscan churches.

Here Saint Clare had her hair cut off to





prove the dedication of her life to God, and that she would follow Francis. She became his »little plant«. In Porziuncola you have the opportunity to peacefully enjoy the church space and the exquisite altarpiece.

Behind the little church you'll find a small chapel that commemorates Saint Francis' death. Saint Francis was a radical man and even in his death process he chose to demonstrate how we take nothing with us when we die. He spent his final hours lying on the bare earth. The brotherhood was ordered not to intervene until a few hours after death occurred.

It can be worthwhile spending some time here focussing on death – which none of us can escape.

*Praise be to You, my Lord,  
for our Sister Bodily Death  
from whom no living person can escape.  
Woe to those who die in mortal sin.  
Blessed those who have done Your most holy will.  
The second death can do no harm to them.*

*(a verse from Francis of Assisi's Canticle of the Sun)*

To the right of the little Church you can walk through the convent to the Rose Garden, Il Giardino delle Spine, where Saint Francis threw himself upon the roses when the demands of the body and ego became too overwhelming.

When walking around you get an impression of the vast area the friars had at their disposal to build up their community. You may catch a



glimpse – further on – of the location of Saint Francis' little straw hut. Today all that is left is a compressed space under the floor.

*Open weekdays from 6:15-12:30 & 14:30-19:30*

*Celebrations from 6:30-12:50 & 14:30-19:30*

*During the season, July, August and September at 21:00-22:30 open for contemplation and at 22:30 there is the Night Prayer, Compline.*



## San Damiano

### Getting there

There are many roads to San Damiano. I recommend taking the smaller, pedestrian path that begins below the little cluster of 5-6 trees by the city gate, Porta Nuova. Walk under the viaduct and past the little chapel. Take a break from time to time to enjoy the glorious view of the valley.

There are many paths to explore around San Damiano. You don't have to walk along the busy road. From here you can walk to several sanctuaries, for instance Rivotorto. To The San Francesco Basilica and Santa Maria degli Angeli a small path begins after the curve to the right on the asphalted road below San Damiano. A handrail and some stone steps. It continues between the olive groves.

### Monks singing from the heart

If you long to hear monks singing from their





hearts San Damiano is the right place to be. I suggest starting the day with laudes at San Damiano – it's just a great beginning. Laudes and Vespers are prayers of the Hours, where modernised Gregorian chant is sung by the monks before Mass.

*Laudes: in the summer season at 7:00  
and winter at 7:15. Followed by mass.*

The monks also sing at other churchly events. It makes sense to be there in good time, partly to secure a good seat, partly to get into the spirit. It's wonderful to sit here for half an hour before activities commence. The church is usually dark, with only a few candles burning. Others may also be sitting here in the dark and silence. So just slip quietly into your seat.

It can be a strong experience to finish off the day with the monks.

*Vesper: in the summer season at 19:00, and  
winter at 17:00 (from 26th Oct. until Easter)*





At this prayer of the hours the monks also sing. This churchly liturgy focuses on a period of silence for about 10-15 minutes.

### **Saint Clare's original convent**

In the afternoon (or late morning) you can get into the old convent for the Poor Clares at San Damiano. This is very much worth the visit. This will give you a good impression of the frames Saint Clare and her sisters lived in during the initial stages of founding their community.

Walk in silence, sense yourself. Concentrate on where you are and then travel back in time to join Clare at the very beginning of the Franciscan movement. Clare moved to San Damiano after having vowed to dedicate her life to God and follow Saint Francis in 1212. Very shortly after the first women joined her little community.

You have probably already seen the church in the morning. To enter Saint Clare's convent





begin at the Alter. On the right you'll find a door opening into a small chapel, the Choir, where Saint Clare and the first Clarissas are said to have held their liturgy and prayers of the Hours. (The original chapel is behind the church apse and not for public viewing). As they were an enclosed order they didn't participate in the liturgy in the church room, but took part hidden from view.

This Choir is the spiritual focuspoint for the Poor Clares worldwide.

Climb the stairs and you'll find a more intimate part of the convent.

On the way up you'll pass a window on your right. From here you can see the spot where Saint Francis lay seriously ill and was nursed by Saint Clare. Here he wrote the Canticle of the Sun.

At the top of the stairs you'll find the Clarissas' sleeping quarters. The first room is

their small chapel. Here is a hatch in the floor that opens up to the church below. The Alter in the church can be seen through this hole. This access to the church was applied once when Clare was taken ill. It provided her with the possibility to participate in the church service from above. In the big common room all the Poor Clares must have slept side by side.

This is where Clare passed away. A big bunch of flowers is placed by her deathbed. Her last words were:

*»And you, my Lord, be blessed because You have created me!«*

Do sit down here and surrender to the mild atmosphere.

Before descending take in the view of the feminine courtyard with a well in the centre.

Once you are downstairs take a stroll round the courtyard before leaving San Damiano. You





will find the refectory, the dining room of the Poor Clares. Saint Clare was seated at the head of the table, where you'll see a bunch of flowers. You can imagine how it must have been to be in this dining room.

The wooden furniture in the refectory are not originals but from a period a couple of hundred years later. Even so they are old and tell stories about the lives of the Poor Clares.

After Saint Clare died the Clarissas no longer felt safe living outside the city walls in San Damiano, so they moved up to Assisi into the newly erected Santa Chiara convent.

*The church is open from 6:30-12:00 & 14:00-19:00 (14:00-20:00 during summer; from Easter to approx. Oct. 26th)  
Laudes is at 7:00 and Mass at 7:30.  
Vesper is at 19:00 (summer), 17:00 during winter.  
The convent is open from 10:00-12:00 & 14:00-18:00 (summer), 14:00-16:30 (winter).*





## Canticle of the Sun

*All-highest, glorious, good Lord!  
All praise is Yours, all glory, all honor, and all blessing.*

*To You, alone, Most High, do they belong.  
No mortal lips are worthy to pronounce Your name.*

*Be praised, my Lord, for all Your creatures,  
especially for Master Brother Sun,  
who illuminates the day; and You give light through him.  
And he is beautiful and radiant in all his splendor!  
Of You, Most High, he bears the likeness.*

*Be praised, my Lord, for Sister Moon and the stars;  
in heaven You have created them bright, precious and  
fair.*

*Be praised, my Lord, for Brothers Wind  
for Air and clouds and clear sky, and all the weathers,  
through which You give Your creatures sustenance.*

*Be praised, my Lord, for Sister Water;  
she is very useful, and humble, and precious, and  
pure.*

*Be praised, my Lord, for Brother Fire,  
through whom You brighten the night.  
He is fair and cheerful, and powerful and strong.*

*Be praised, my Lord, for our Sister Mother Earth,  
who feeds us and sustains us,  
and produces various fruits with colored flowers  
and herbs.*

*Praise and bless my Lord, and give thanks  
and serve Him with great humility!*

*By Saint Francis of Assisi, English translation*



## Hermitage delle Carceri

You can get here by taxi. Yet if you prefer to walk I recommend taking the asphalted road on the way up. It takes a little over an hour and you might become a bit out of breath. On the way back down you can take a small path, on less firm and steeper ground in the wonderful nature, that offers the most spectacular views of the valley, without a car in sight. This path begins above the actual Eremo area. Continue 300 meters up the road and on the left hand side you'll find a handrail made of thick, crossed branches. This is the path leading down to Assisi. The path is marked with a painted symbol.

You are now entering the hermitage.

Prepare yourself for the mildness of this place. Try to remain silent from the moment you step through the gate and be open to the tranquillity on offer from the nature.



Francis was in his early vocation attracted to nature. Sources claim that Saint Francis found some caves above the town of Assisi and they became his preferred dwelling. He chose to be in solitude in his cave and dedicated himself to prayer. It was such a powerful experience that on his return he was described as a changed person. Saint Francis called the cave his treasure chamber – it was so precious to him.

This cave is still today bearing witness of Saint Francis. Take your time to surrender to the very special mildness that still remains.

Saint Francis' cave was not then fitted with roof, walls and joining chapels. It lay like others in the rock face. A hole has been made in the cave floor, so you can get an impression of how steeply Saint Francis' cave was situated.

Eremo delle Carceri consists of several caves that are spread over the right side of the now dried up riverbank. Brother Leon's cave is the only cave located on the opposite side of the





river. Take your time to explore these caves and seek out a place for you to settle.

The exact translation of the name, Eremo delle Carceri, means the Hermitage Prison. A hermit is a human being who discards worldly existence – mostly by living in nature – in order to devote himself or herself to the divine. This devotion is thought to become enhanced through isolation from human ways and values. The hermit surrenders to a set of values, and a life, where the ego is set aside. The hermit seeks unity, unity with nature and unity with God, or in other words: with the spirit, or higher consciousness, where we all are one.

When Francis and the first brothers let themselves »incarcerate« here, it was because they were hermits who wanted to be captive in their search for this unity.

*Open from 6:30-18:00*

*(6:30-19:00 during the summer season)*



## Franciscan prayer

*Lord,*

*Make me an instrument of Your peace;*

*Where there is hatred, let me sow love;*

*Where there is injury, pardon;*

*Where there is error, truth;*

*Where there is doubt, faith;*

*Where there is despair, hope;*

*Where there is sadness, joy*

*And where there is darkness, light.*

*O Divine Master,*

*Grant that I may not so much seek*

*To be consoled as to console;*

*To be understood as to understand;*

*To be loved as to love.*

*For*

*it is in giving that we receive;*

*It is in pardoning that we are pardoned;*

*And it is in dying that we are born to eternal life.*

*Amen.*

*This prayer is credited to Saint Francis  
but is probably from a later date.*





## Useful information

### Tourist office

Is situated on the western side of Piazza del Comune. Town maps, and lists of churches and their opening hours etc. can be acquired here.

### Lodgings

Many convents offer lodgings at reasonable prices. They can include half or full board made up of decent food (remember to point out if you are vegetarian). Most convents have an open chapel allowing you some peace and quiet. Not all speak English.



## PAX et BONUM

*The guide shows how pilgrims can explore Assisi on foot, visiting its most peaceful and inspiring places. At the same time, it offers an introduction to the life and spirituality of St. Francis of Assisi. It is intended for those who wish to take their time and embark on a journey that is both outward and inward. Rather than prescribing a particular experience, the guide points the way to specific places and then invites each traveller to open themselves to what they discover there.*