



Certaldo: An Oasis of Calm in Tuscany

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In Tuscany, it can seem nigh on impossible to find a worthy sightseeing destination where you're not elbow-to-elbow with fellow travelers. That's part of what makes Certaldo such a treat. The masses often whizz by this stunning hilltop town in Chianti in their rush to visit nearby Siena or San Gimignano.

Only a 35-minute train ride from Florence, Certaldo is a former Roman colony with Etruscan roots. The star power of this small municipality lies in Certaldo Alto, the beautifully-preserved, 12th-century "old town" that tops the low-lying residential part of town like a jeweled crown.

The fun begins as you take a funicular to the upper town, a two-minute ride (\$3) that provides lovely views of the red-tiled roofs of lower Certaldo and the rippling Tuscan landscape beyond. Upon exiting, you are deposited into a small, impeccable town made almost exclusively of red-brown bricks.

Despite its tiny size, Certaldo Alto holds a respectable number of attractions. These include the house of Giovanni Boccaccio, the famous 14th-century author of *The Decameron*, who hailed from Certaldo, and the church where he is buried, Chiesa dei Santi Jacopo e Filippo, which contains several pieces of important Renaissance artwork. The town also houses the Palazzo Pretorio, a palace-turned-museum whose walls are plastered in exquisite 15th-century frescoes.

But arguably the biggest draw of Certaldo Alto is the beauty of the town itself. The intricate brickwork, time-weathered buildings, and panoramic views of Tuscany (which include an outstanding glimpse of the medieval skyscrapers of San Gimignano) are worth the visit alone.

After you've finished exploring, retreat to the shady, ivy-walled terrace of the Enoteca Boccaccio for a glass of Chianti (\$6) and a luscious fontina and black truffle open face sandwich (\$8). Or just ask the omnipresent owner, Andrea Casini, to suggest something to tickle your fancy. He knows exactly how to hit the right gastronomic notes—and round off a perfect day in Certaldo.

Note: Certaldo's proximity to Florence, Siena, and San Gimignano makes it an ideal place to stay if you're looking for a tranquil Tuscan retreat. Try the Podere Benintendi (Poderebenintendi.com) for incredible hilltop views.



The hilltop town of Certaldo is the ideal Tuscan escape.



Cuba's real estate market is emerging from the shadows.

Keeping an Eye on Cuba

All kinds of things are changing in Cuba. And though the changes may seem long overdue, they are opening up a whole new world to locals.

It wasn't long ago that television commercials were unknown here. Today, the popular show *Hola Habana* is advertising property for sale on state television. The ads aren't all that's new. Until recently, the only "real estate market" consisted of legal house swaps or donations. (Plus illegal, black-market sales paid in cash or kind.)

In the past, illicit property sales were disguised via a marriage

between the buyer and seller. The seller would then "donate" the house to his spouse. Luckily, divorce was allowed even when property sales weren't.

President Raúl Castro's reforms do not extend to foreigners, and the real-estate

market is still officially off-limits for non-nationals.

Still, the signs of change are visible... in the "for sale" signs that have popped up around Havana. While there are plenty of properties in the \$25,000 range, "upscale" listings are going for as much as \$100,000. This in a place where a respectable monthly income is about \$20.

We'll be keeping an eye on developments and will keep you informed.

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