

# The Balze and Calanchi of Volterra



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## The Balze and Calanchi of Volterra



Type: Bicycle - Gravel, Bicycle - MTB | ↗ 420 m | ↘ 402 m | ⇄ 32 km

Località di partenza e arrivo: -

***We have described only the points of interest located outside the town area.***

This is a scenic ring-route with no particular technical difficulties. The itinerary starts right near the edge of the Balze chasm and is designed to allow people to discover these weird, sharp-looking shapes created by erosion: the Balze and the Calanchi and the typical agriculture and pastoral farming based system of these bizarre hills. The route features long panoramic stretches over the clay hills that stretch as far as the eye can see until they reach the sea, scarred on the steep southern slopes by the sharp ridges of the Calanchi showing their naked whiteness in the sun while the softer, less steep slopes are farmed with cereals.□ The Balze, with their steep walls gilded by sand and sandstone, are the result of a spectacular natural phenomenon (still going on today) in which land gradually slides on the sediments left by a sea 2.5 million years ago and they are particularly stunning at sunset. The Badia, a massive Camaldolese monastery of medieval origin which looks as if it had been hanging somewhere between the earth and the sky for its 10 centuries of history proudly stands, as a monument of extraordinary importance and a place of great charm and mystery and defies the chasm of the Balze that advances inexorably.□ Leaving the Abbey behind you can take a detour on a dirt road to reach the small church of San Cipriano, an exceptional watching point to enjoy the Calanche which here are of notable beauty and show differences in length and height.□ These hills are home to the renowned PDO cheese “Pecorino delle Balze Volterrane”, typically with vegetable rennet from wild thistle which is abundant in the pastures. Once you reach the end of this dirt road also called the “Path of Balze and Calanchi” you will find some possible detours that will allow you to easily reach the environmental sculptures of the artist Mauro Staccioli, extraordinary expressions of “land art” that interpret the essence of the artist’s “places of experience” with installations that frame the poignant landscape of the crags, gullies and windswept hills dominated from above by Volterra.

## Points of interest

### Valdicecina - OUTDOOR -

#### 1. The Balze and the Etruscan walls of Guerruccia

##### Historical-cultural feature

The Balze, one of the most fascinating and disturbing places in the Volterrano area, is a gigantic chasm that deeply incises the NW side of the hill. The extensive landslide is the result of the erosive action of rainwater infiltrating through the permeable sandy deposit at the top of the Volterra hill and melting the impermeable clay below, thus causing the progressive collapse of the sandy and arenaceous layers on top of it. The erosive phenomenon, active for several centuries, has involved part of an Etruscan necropolis and the churches of S. Clemente and S. Giusto al Botro, devoured by the precipice in the 17th century.

From the car park near the Balze, it is possible to walk along the ancient Etruscan walls dating back to the 4th century B.C. and admire extraordinary views before reaching the remains of the Camaldolese Abbey, which has been suspended between the earth and the sky for about 10 centuries, challenging the inexorably advancing chasm of the Balze.

The great Etruscan circle of walls in "panchino" stone was more than 7 km long and enclosed an area of 102 hectares. Read more...



#### 2. Fonte di Mandringa

##### Historical-cultural feature

The Mandringa spring is covered by a single stone arch probably dating back to the middle of the 13th century, when the town council ordered the men of the Pratomarzio district, under whose jurisdiction the spring was located, to work on covering the fountain.

In the past, the spring was called Grimaldinga, a place-name of Germanic origin, while it was also called the Pratomarzio spring, mistaking it for the Frana spring.

"Whomsoever rinses their bed sheets in the Docciola, should draw their water from the Mandringa" G. D'Annunzio from "Forse che sì forse che no".

## Valdiccina - OUTDOOR -

### 3. The Camaldolese Abbey Historical-cultural feature

At the northern end of the town, the imposing mass of the Badia di San Giusto overlooks the Balze. The monastery was built at the behest of the bishop of Volterra Gunfredo in the year 1000; the building with all its properties was then entrusted to the care of the Benedictines, who were replaced by Camaldolese monks during the 13th century. In the early 17th century, the Balze landslide began, which in the following centuries came to threaten even the Abbey. Then in the early 19th century the monastery was temporarily suppressed by the French occupation government, but when the Camaldolese were able to return a few years later, in 1861, also due to the earthquake of 1846, they abandoned the building for fear of the Balze. Today, the monastery is a single structure divided into two distinct parts: the church, almost destroyed, of which only scant remains of the perimeter walls still preserve the Romanesque structure, and the residential building, with the cloister, the refectory and the monks' quarters, which have a more modern appearance due to the reconstruction ordered by Abbot Mario Maffei in the 16th century. The windows of the Abbey look out onto spectacular views of the village church, the Etruscan walls and the pinnacles of the Balze. Read more...

## Valdiccina - OUTDOOR -

### 4. The Gullies of San Cipriano Historical-cultural feature

Gullies are mainly generated by the leaching effect of meteoric water on silty-clay soils which forms a series of contiguous dales separated by steep, sharp ridges. The gullies are easily identifiable as an area, generally with a horseshoe contour, consisting of a system of furrows or dales, with extremely steep and denuded sides, separated from each other by thin clay ridges with a very steep profile. They are almost always present only on the southern slopes. Read more...



### 5. Places of Experience: Corbano Historical-cultural feature

Sculpture by Mauro Staccioli near the small Church of S. Lucia in Corbano (11th century). The work is part of the extraordinary open-air exhibition "Volterra 1972-2009 - Luoghi d'Esperienza" (Volterra 1972-2009 - Places of Experience), together with others located around the Volterra hillock. The works are placed in the landscape as viewpoints, underlining the relationship between man, work and the environment.



### 6. Places of Experience: San Giacomo in Fognano Historical-cultural feature

Sculpture by Mauro Staccioli at the San Giacomo farm. The work is part of the extraordinary open-air exhibition "Volterra 1972-2009 - Luoghi d'Esperienza" (Volterra 1972-2009 - Places of Experience), together with others located around the Volterra hillock. The works are placed in the landscape as viewpoints, underlining the relationship between man, work and the environment.



## 7. Places of Experience: Portal - Equanimity

### Historical-cultural feature

Sculpture by Mauro Staccioli on the road to the Lischeto farm. The work is part of the extraordinary open-air exhibition "Volterra 1972-2009 - Luoghi d'Esperienza" (Volterra 1972-2009 - Places of Experience), together with others located around the Volterra hillock. The works are placed in the landscape as viewpoints, underlining the relationship between man, work and the environment.

Sculpture by Emilie Cummings-Enneking. Landscape sculpture 'Equanimity'. Sculpted in bronze and nine metres high, it has become a monumental icon, perfectly blending with the natural landscape.

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*- OUTDOOR -*

## 8. Start and end of the route - Volterra crags and gullies

### Start-End

Balze car park [Read more about Le Balze...](#)