



**Opening hours**

**Documentation Centre of Mining Museum - Montecatini V.C.**  
From 10 a.m. until 1 p.m.  
and from 4 p.m. until 8 p.m.

**Opening days**

**Documentation Centre of Mining Museum - Montecatini V.C.**  
From 1st July 31st August  
Sundays only

**Info and Reservations:**

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**Montecatini Val di Cecina**

**A little history**

Montecatini Val di Cecina has lost nothing of its former charm and beauty with the Belforti tower that still dominates the village and the valley below, the church of Saint Biagio and the Palazzo Pretorio.

Historical documents tell us that before the 11th century Montecatini was called Monte Leone (Lion Mount), a name that appears on one of the Bishop of Volterra's seals dated 1099, as the village was under the direct jurisdiction of the bishopric of Volterra for many years.

In 1350 Montecatini belonged to the Belforti, a noble Volterrann family from which the tower takes its name and in 1472 came under the dominion of Florence as part of the vicariate of the Cecina Valley.

In the following centuries the history of Montecatini is very much linked to the copper mine. Already exploited by the Etruscans, this precious mineral was a great source of wealth for the area and it was here that the Montedison, one of the leading chemical-mineral industries in Europe, was founded.

The copper industry flourished in the 19th century bringing economic and demographic growth to the area. Many workers and visitors flocked to Montecatini from all over Europe and the village became a hive of international exchange. A 17th painting hanging in the Saint Barbara oratory depicting the Madonna of Guadalupe by a Mexican artist Juan Rodriguez Xuárez bears witness to the importance of the copper mining to Montecatini.

As you approach Montecatini from Volterra, it is difficult to distinguish the layout of the village on the top of the hill and discern the buildings, for Montecatini is constructed in the very same stone as the hill on which it stands and the colours blend in and fuse with the surrounding rock and woodlands.

The heart of Montecatini is the Piazza della Repubblica with its war memorial, shops, bars and restaurants animated on a fine day by the local inhabitants, children playing in the square and curious visitors.

**Visit of the historical centre**

Once you have parked your car in the nearby car park, walk up Via XX Settembre, a steep climb that leads to the historical centre. The stronghold was encircled by a 14th century defensive wall, of which only traces remain, built in the local dark volcanic stone.

Half way up Via XX Settembre turn left into the Via del Mandorlo to admire a spectacular view of the surrounding countryside which includes the 19th century and modern village of Poggio alla Croce, the Era Valley and on a clear day you can see as far as the Pisan Hills. The road was restored in 2002 by the Comunità Montana just when the Montecatini stone, selagite, was coming through to the surface. Here there is a sculptured bench carved out of this very stone.

Selagite is a mica trachyte, a finely crystalline or glassy igneous rock formed 3 million years ago by the gradual cooling down of pockets of volcanic magma deep within the earth. The stone glistens in the light as it contains microcrystals of mica which in Greek actually means "to sparkle".

As you look to your right towards the historical centre you will see a round tower, now a home, but which once served to defend the village.

A little further ahead and you will find yourself at the foot of the imposing 11th century Belforti tower with a quadrangular base. The tower was commissioned by Filippo Belforti, son of Ottaviano Belforti, one of the Lords of Volterra. When his other son, Bocchino Paolo, a tyrant, was executed for having sold Volterra to Pisa, the Belforti family took refuge in the tower at Montecatini. After a long siege that lasted throughout the winter, Montecatini was taken by storm by the troops from Volterra. The uncrenellated tower, built of Montecatini stone, rises 30 metres in height. The lower portion, measuring 3.20 metres in width, is characterized by horizontal bands of black and white stripes of Montecatini stone and albarese, a precipitate white limestone. The two transverse viewing apertures, ordered by the Belforti family, served as telescopes to observe the two fortresses in the distance, the Mastio in Volterra and the Rocca Sillana in Pomarance.

Proceeding down Via delle Torricelle you will reach Piazza Garibaldi and turning a sharp left, from the low wall, you can admire the square in its entirety with the square shaped stone cistern that collected the rain water and the most important buildings in the square: the Palazzo Pretorio and the church of Saint Biagio.

Let's proceed up towards the tower and on the left walk onto a path named the Gatta Donne which offers a spectacular view of Volterra, the surrounding countryside and the area where salt is extracted. Walking along the length of the ancient walls you will get a glimpse of a second defensive tower until you reach the old cemetery situated on the edge of the hill: an evocative location affording a spectacular view. On a clear day it is possible to see as far as Monte Amiata and the Island of Elba. The cemetery was established in the 18th century outside the defensive walls respecting a Napoleonic decree to remove the cemeteries from town and village centres.

Proceeding along the street you will reach the Piazza Belforti which contains the Belforti mansion easily identified by the enormous cylindrical well with two stories which supplied the residence with water.

Passing under the rafters below the mansion you can admire the buildings in the Piazza Garibaldi.

The Palazzo Pretorio, once the Town Hall, transferred to Via Roma in the 1950's, now houses the documentation and reference centre of the Mining Museum.

A 14th century building, which has undergone several modifications throughout the centuries, still retains a splendid façade adorned with an elegant arched portico with cross vaults supported by three selagite stone columns.

The façade is decorated with coats of arms, Latin epigraphs, a plaque commemorating the admission of the Grand duchy of Tuscany to the Kingdom of Italy with the recorded data of the plebiscite and an ancient table of weights and measures.

On your right stands the Church of Saint Biagio consecrated in 1361. The church is built of selagite in Romanesque style with an unusual entrance on the north side. In the 11th century when the rectory was built, the façade was covered over and a side entrance was opened. The clock tower built in brick was added in the 15th century. In the centre of the chancel there is an interesting 16th century wooden crucifix flanked by two niches each containing a glazed terracotta statue by Andrea and Luca Della Robbia sculptured between the 15th and 16th centuries: on the left the statue of the Bishop Saint Biagio and on the right that of Saint Sabastian. The church has a rich collection of works of art by known and unknown artists. On the left wall hangs a noteworthy 17th century oil on canvas painting that depicts The Return from Egypt attributed to Guido Reni. In the presbytery on the right a 15th century painted panel altarpiece by Neri di Bicci portraying the Martyrdom of Saint Sabastian with Saints Biagio and Anthony Abbot flanked by two columns surmounted by two white veined marble statues of genuflecting angels holding candles commonly known as Ciechini ( the light bearers – masked figures seen in religious processions and at funerals carrying a torch or a candle) and attributed to Mino da Fiesole.

In the left isle you can admire a late 17th century Florentine canvas painting of Saint Anthony from Padua defending the virtues of a wife and Glory of the Eucharist with Saints Biagio and Sabastian executed by Antonio Cercignani known as Pomarancio at the beginning of the 17th century.

In the right isle there is a very interesting stone polychrome statue sculptured by an unknown artist in the 17th century the Madonna of Caporciano ( the name of the mine in Montecatini) or the Lampetrosa and Lampedosa mines whose feast day is celebrated on the same day as Saint Biagio, the 8th of September, by the inhabitants of Montecatini.

On the right, in the vicinity of the baptismal font, the Madonna of the Chair, a 19th century oil canvas painting, a copy of Raphael's masterpiece, by an unknown artist.

On the side altar on the right there is an interesting monogram YHS, the Greek name of Jesus painted in tempera and gold which is said to have been left by Saint Bernardino from Siena after a sermon he gave here in 1425.

To get back to the Piazza Repubblica or to the "village" as the locals call it, pass through the two gates: arches in dark and light stone reminiscent of the tower and as you walk back down it is

well worth pausing, perhaps even to take a photo, in the Vicolo del Fornaccio and step back into the remote past.....