Between Service Quality and "Monumental" Experiences, the Via Francigena in Tuscany Embraces the Walking Trend

The search for more sustainable forms of travel capable of fostering an authentic relationship with the territories finds one of its prime locations in Tuscany. This is also confirmed by the latest survey from the **European Association of the Via Francigena Ways**: among the preferred starting points for the journey, Pontremoli ranks first (alongside **Lucca**) with 20% of preferences, followed by **Siena** at 11%; the city of the Palio is also the second most popular arrival destination after Rome, with 20.6%, ahead of other Tuscan destinations like **Monteriggioni** and **San Gimignano**. It is an itinerary that traverses art cities, villages, rural landscapes, and iconic locations such as the Val d'Orcia (another **UNESCO World Heritage site**, alongside Siena and San Gimignano), catering to an international demand that is increasingly interested in discovering territories at a walking pace.

However, what makes the Tuscan Via Francigena attractive is not just the landscape. Over the years, the **Tuscany Region** and local authorities have invested in the quality of the itinerary, from maintenance and signage to services and hospitality. The accommodation itself represents one of the most original aspects of the experience: along the route, it is possible to spend the night in "**monumental**" places that have welcomed pilgrims and wayfarers for centuries. In Chianni, just outside Gambassi Terme, visitors can stay in the Romanesque parish church and the ancient reception complex mentioned by **Sigeric** in his travel diary from 990 AD. In Abbadia a Isola, near Monteriggioni, hospitality is housed within the walls of the ancient 11th-century abbey complex; in Altopascio, the tradition linked to the Knights of the Tau survives. Finally, in Siena, Santa Maria della Scala, one of the oldest European "hospitals" and now a major museum complex, still preserves the memory of its centuries-old function of welcoming pilgrims and continues to offer hospitality to travelers. These are places where the overnight stay becomes an integral part of the journey itself: almost a living museum, capable of connecting the walker with the centuries-old history of the route.

Today, quality and usability also mean making this experience accessible to ever-wider audiences. The recent launch of *Via Libera 2.0 – **Accessibilità sui Cammini Toscani*** (Clear Path 2.0 - Accessibility on Tuscan Trails), a project by the Itinera cooperative of Livorno supported by the "Tuscany, a Region Accessible to All" program, moves precisely in this direction. The initiative aims to overcome not only physical barriers but also informational, digital, and cultural ones through the mapping of routes and services, co-design with associations, operators, and accessibility experts, and the production of inclusive tools, ranging from guides in Augmentative and Alternative Communication to videos in Italian Sign Language (LIS), virtual tours, and podcasts. On the **Via Francigena**, the project focuses on the Massa–Camaiore stage and involves people with motor, sensory, or cognitive disabilities, families, the elderly, and travelers with specific needs. This model is designed to be replicable and also encompasses the **Way of St. James** (**Cammino di San Jacopo**) and the **Way of St. Francis** (**Via di Francesco**).

It is exactly this systemic logic that Tuscany has progressively extended in recent years from the Via Francigena to other major regional itineraries. The ***Atlas of Tuscan Trails*** **now** brings together ten routes, building a true **slow mobility infrastructure** that connects **art cities, small villages, rural areas, and natural parks**. It is a network where the path becomes a gateway to the territories, communities, and their services, offering travelers new ways to cross and experience Tuscany while simultaneously helping to distribute flows towards less-visited areas and during new times of the year.