

WHAT IS THE 4-PROVINCE CHALLENGE?

The route begins in the Castagno neighbourhood of Gabassi, in the Province of Florence. Castagno is the gateway to the undulating hills of Volterra; shortly afterwards, though, you're in the Province of Pisa, but only for 12 short kms. State Road (SS) 68, aka the "Volterrana" takes you decidedly eastwards across the Siena part of Chianti towards the highest uplands, then it dips down sharply to the mid-Arno valley. From here, still heading eastwards, the road rises again to cross Pratomagno then down the other side to the upper Arno valley by way of Talla. These were the roads Hannibal led his elephants along on his way to Rome (Lake Trasimeno where the famous battle took place in 207 B.C. is close by), and the ruins of the old bridge can still be seen in Faltona (n.b. the indication can only be seen riding in the Talla–Rassina direction). You've almost arrived because as soon as you hit State Road 71 by Rassina in the Province of Arezzo you turn left and, once through the built-up area, you turn right, uphill towards Chitignano. These last kilometres up to Chiusi della Verna are among the most beautiful and enjoyable in a part of the country yet haunted by the spirit of Giotto where time stands still.

The route is 167 kilometres long and is to be done in 5 hours. The Challenge is also valid in the opposite direction.

PLACES OF INTEREST FOOD-WISE

The Bottega di Chiassaia sells panforte and biscuits and biscotti baked in an ancient wood-fired oven, and its bread and olive oil *schacciata* are to die for. Closed Wednesdays.

For lunch, try the "Orcello" in Talla – they gave their number with no trunk dialling code which could mean its cuisine is very local. The (complete) number is +39 0575 597710. Closed Mondays and Tuesdays.

A good place to buy cheese in Talla is the Zootecnica del Pratomagno, 'phone +39 0575 597680. Not far away, in Gello Biscardo, a village nestling amidst oak and chestnut woods on the mid-Valdarno side of Pratomagno, the "La Luna nel Pozzo" restaurant serves lunch and provides accommodation. 'Phone +39 0575 47676