



## » WHERE ELSE: **Viterbo** Baths, Conclaves, and Processions

by Tiffany Parks

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Nestled between the rolling foothills of the Cimini and Volsini mountain ranges 50 miles north of Rome lies a fascinating city with a rich history. Despite being one of the largest cities in the region of Lazio, Viterbo possesses a surprisingly well-preserved medieval center. **San Pellegrino**, the oldest part of town, is entirely surrounded by walls dating to the 11th century, and the narrow cobbled alleyways, gurgling fountains, and crumbling stone buildings create a labyrinth you'll long to get lost in.



Viterbo burst onto the international scene in 1257 when it was chosen as the official seat of the pope, and it continued to be the home of the papacy for the next 24 years. The imposing Palace of the Popes was built to provide the pontiffs with a sumptuous home-away-from-home, and contains the **Hall of the Conclave**, frescoed with portraits of the popes who were elected within its walls. The hall was the site of the infamous conclave of 1268–71, which lasted a record 34 months and was concluded only

when the frustrated city magistrates ripped the roof off the palace and put the cardinals on bread and water.

If you feel the need for some rest and rejuvenation as the blustery autumn winds threaten to blow in, hop a cab to the nearby **Terme dei Papi** (Strada Bagni, 12). Like many areas in central and southern Italy, the land around Viterbo is rich with thermal springs that are believed to have healing powers. Used by the Etruscans and Romans in open-air pools, Viterbo's natural springs were rerouted to feed a luxury bath complex fit for a pope, built by Nicholas V in the 1450s. While the Renaissance-era bathhouse is no longer in working condition, the site has been incorporated into this modern complex



offering complete spa services, holistic treatments, saunas, and a 22,000 square foot outdoor thermal pool.

If you happen to be in Viterbo on 3 September, don't miss the town's most important festival, **La Macchina di Santa Rosa**. To celebrate the city's patron saint, every year 100 local townsmen carry a 100-foot tower through the narrow streets of the medieval center, cheered on by jubilant crowds. The soaring

structure, rebuilt every few years, is made of steel, aluminum, and fiberglass and lit with 800 candles. Try to snag a spot near the church of Santa Rosa to see the burly men run up the final steep incline with the five-ton *macchina* on their shoulders.

### Visiting Information

**Palazzo dei Papi** – Tickets (including guided tour) can be purchased at the Cathedral of San Lorenzo, next door to the palace. €7 (€5 reduced), includes entrance to the Colle di Duomo Museum. Piazza San Lorenzo.

#### Where to Eat

– **I Tre Re**: A warm, inviting place to enjoy a hearty meal of traditional regional recipes. Via Macell Gattesco, 3.

– **Il Labirinto**: Excellent pizza and simple pasta

dishes with outdoor seating in one of the loveliest squares in town. Via San Lorenzo, 46.

– **Convivium**: Stop here to refuel with a pot of gourmet tea and a luscious piece of cake. Piazza della Morte, 14.

#### Want to stay the night?

**Niccolò V** is an elegant 4-star hotel attached to the famous *terme*. The perfect base if relaxation is on your mind. Strada Bagni, 12.

#### Getting there

Trains leave 2–3 times per hour from Rome's Ostiense Station. 90–100 mins. €5–8 each way.