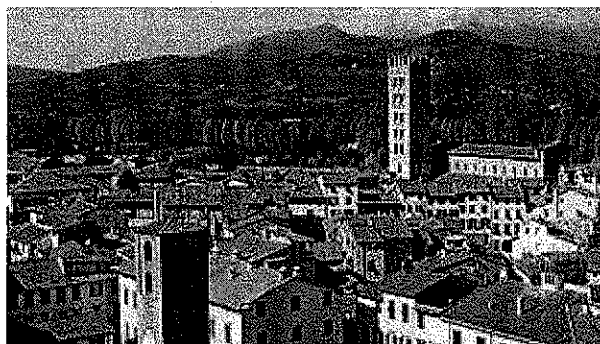


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TRAVEL WITH 

# Best city for spring 2011: Lucca, Italy

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Lucca's old town is encircled by fortified walls, which date back five centuries to the Renaissance. (Rachel Lewis/LPI)

Wandering through Lucca in Tuscany is like stepping into an illuminated manuscript. The town's red-orange roofs and spires thrust out of a landscape of deepest green, with cypress-tree brushstrokes and a backdrop of mountains. Author Hilaire Belloc's 1902 description holds true: 'The neatest, the regularst, the exactest, the most fly-in-amber town in the world, with its uncrowded streets, its absurd fortifications... everything in Lucca is

good.'

- **Best city for Summer 2011: Valencia, Spain**
- **Best city for autumn 2011: Tangier, Morocco**
- **Best city for winter 2011: Tallinn, Estonia**

It's hard to imagine anywhere more romantic than Lucca in the spring. From late March to early June, the surrounding meadows are splashed with colour, as wild flowers run riot. The climate resembles a perfect English summer's day: skies are blue and the valleys are lush. It's still low season, so there are bargains to be had, and none of the holiday crowds that descend on Tuscany in July and August.

The city is the birthplace of the opera composer Giacomo Puccini, and churches host nightly concerts. Between 22 and 29 April, Lucca also pays tribute to another local hero - its patron saint Zita, a 13th-century serving maid who gave to the poor.

Legend says that when Zita was caught by her master with food hidden in her apron, the offending items turned to flowers, so Lucca honours her memory each year by filling its squares with blooms. Medieval Piazza dell'Anfiteatro turns into a flower market, blazing with pink, red and orange azaleas and rhododendrons. Staff from the town's botanical garden transform the piazza in front of the Basilica di San Frediano into a garden, with a different theme each year. Zita's mummified body lies in a glass shrine inside the Basilica.

**Place to stay:** Albergo Villa Marta

Three miles outside Lucca, Albergo Villa Marta is a 19th-century hunting lodge with mountain views. It's set in gardens with magnolia, pine, cherry, olive and cypress trees, and a pool. Rooms are decorated in powder blues and pale terracottas and there's an in-house restaurant serving traditional Tuscan dishes (doubles from £85; albergo villamarta.it).

**Book for dinner:** Buca di Sant'Antonio

Puccini and Ezra Pound both dined at Buca di Sant' Antonio, which dates from at least 1782. It serves up hearty and sophisticated cuisine: dishes include pasta with hare sauce, lamb stewed with olives, and roasted kid with artichokes (meals around £30; bucadisantantonio.it).

**Breakfast time:** Caffè di Simo

Get a morning hit of cappuccino and cornetto (Italian for croissant) in an art nouveau setting. Caffè di Simo has a long, polished bar, displays full of pastries and sweets, and old-fashioned service - it can't have changed much since Puccini used to play piano here (breakfast around £1.70; caffedisimo.it).

**Pause for a snack:** Forno a Vapore Amedeo Giusti

Stock up on picnic ingredients at Forno A Vapore Amedeo Giusti, a temple of baking. Buy handmade focaccia loaded with tomatoes, onion, potato and mozzarella, as well as springtime produce such as artichoke and courgette. All varieties come hot from the oven (from £1.50; Via Santa Lucia 18/20).

**Circle the old town:** Lucca's city walls

The 'absurd fortifications' described by Belloc are Lucca's complete and substantial city walls, so sturdy that they support avenues of plane trees. The elevated two-and-a-half-mile circuit offers shifting viewpoints over the town, particularly glorious at sunset.

**Amble in the sunshine:** Parco Villa Reale

Once home to Napoleon's sister Elisa Baciocchi Bonaparte, Villa Reale is closed to the public, but its 17th-century gardens are a marvellously theatrical adventure. Daily guided tours take in a water theatre with grotesque, stream-spewing masks, a lemon tree garden, a topiarysculpted 'green theatre' and a labyrinth (£6; parcovilla reale.it).

**See religious art:** Cattedrale di San Martino

Loomed over by a medieval bell tower, the façade of the Cattedrale di San Martino is a magnificent, lace-like doily of carved marble, supported by sculpted columns, each one different. The late-Gothic interior is equally spectacular, with sculptures by

Matteo Civitali, a painting of The Last Supper by Tintoretto and a wooden cross said to have been carved by Nicodemus (admission free; museocattedralelucca.it).

**Souvenir stop:** Lucca's antique market

Get lost among a mishmash of silverware, brass, bronze, wood carvings, furniture, and antique and second-hand books. Lucca has one of Italy's best antique markets, an epic sprawl held on the third weekend of every month (Piazza del Giglio, Piazza San Giovanni, Piazza San Martino, Piazza Bernardini and Piazza San Giusto).

**Alfresco dining:** Vineria I Santi

This small, bottle-lined wine shop and eaterie close to Piazza dell'Anfiteatro has outside tables shaded by large, racing-green sunshades. It's the perfect place to watch the world go by over a selection of local wines, along with inspirational snacks such as antipasti, carpaccio and roast rabbit (glass of wine from £3; vineriaisanti.it).

**Getting There:** Alitalia, British Airways, Ryanair and easyJet fly to nearby Pisa, from where it is about a half-hour's drive or train trip to Lucca (from £50 return).

## Web link

<http://www.bbc.com/travel/feature/20110107-best-city-for-spring-2011-lucca-italy>