

FLORENCE FOR FIRST-TIMERS

Tuscany's cultured capital doesn't have to be hard work. Here's how to fall in love (at first sight)



This Renaissance masterpiece of a city is every bit as drop-dead delightful as you'd imagined. Florence's pretty puzzle of piazzas is compact enough for easy walking, and the spots the locals love are in the thick of it, so you can get the postcard experience *and* the authentic flavour. (And if you're a return visitor? We've got a few surprises for you, too...)

Laura Goodman

WHAT TO SEE & DO

● The pace in Florence is slow, so learn to dawdle. Begin at the old-school Caffè Scudieri (Piazza San Giovanni 19; ① on map), **propping up the marble bar with a pastry and a macchiato**. You'll leave with a spring in your step, but you needn't walk far – the Duomo (duomofirenze.it; free; ②) is right in front of you. Its pink, white and green marble exterior is dazzling – keep looping round the building until you've absorbed it.

● The Renaissance Piazza Santa Maria Novella, with its beautiful basilica, is a five-minute walk away. Don't miss the church's Old Pharmacy (smnovella.it; free; ③), where Dominican monks used to concoct herbal remedies in the 13th century. Wandering around its frescoed rooms is a treat – even better, **invest in a bottle of secret-recipe scent** (about £55) and treat someone you love when you get home.

● Another short stroll will lead you to the all-important Mercato Centrale (Mon-Sat 7.30am-2.30pm; ④), *the place to buy porcini mushrooms, Tuscan pecorino, tagliatelle, lard and truffle paste*. Skip the multicolour 'monument'-shaped pasta for a family-run stand called Conti. Their brilliant semolina-based **pasta comes in truffle or lemon-and-black pepper flavours**.

● Come to Florence with an appetite, because if you go home having missed out on *bistecca alla Fiorentina*, you will regret it. Florentine steak is a juicy T-bone from local Chianina cows, served very rare. Trattoria Sostanza (Via del Porcellana 25; 00 39 055 212691; mains around £21; ⑤) has been **slamming down steaks since 1869**, and everything about this place exudes old Firenze: the staff, the photos on the walls, even the font used on the shop front.

● The Ponte Vecchio ⑥ is the **bridge of your Florentine dreams, lined with jewellers, and abuzz with buskers**. It's busy, though, so once across the Arno, head for a lesser-visited square – Piazza Santo Spirito ⑦, where Volume serves coffees in a library-style den (No. 5), while Borgo Antico (No. 6) is best for glasses of wine in the sun.

● Pre-book your ticket to the world-famous Uffizi gallery online (uffizi.org; £18; ⑧) or you'll have to grab a sandwich and hunker down for a two-hour queue. Once within, you'll be rendered **starstruck by Botticelli's Birth of Venus**, as well as masterpieces by Caravaggio, Michelangelo and Raphael. Book a tour or see the website's suggested itineraries, because you can't see it all in a day.

● Behind the Pitti Palace, home of the Medici family, the Boboli Garden (uffizi.firenze.it;

Town and garden: from left, Florence as seen from Boboli Garden; taking a break at the Uffizi gallery; chefs and waiters chatting in the sun outside Trattoria Sostanza; grab a coffee or glass of wine in the lesser-visited Piazza Santo Spirito

£6; ⑨) is a formal, 16th-century affair, with wide gravel avenues, lavish fountains, grottoes and garden temples. Renaissance sculptures, and Roman bits and bobs, will guide you along the cypress walks. **Bring a picnic – there are killer views of the Duomo's terracotta dome**, and all that sits in its shadows.

● The lure of Tuscany beyond the city can be difficult to fight, so don't even try. Tuscan Wine Tours (tuscan-wine-tours.com) runs day trips into the Chianti region, where you'll get a glimpse of **olive fields, farmhouses and little villages on your way out of the city** as you head to the vineyards. An eight-hour trip costs £115, including tastings and lunch. >

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WHERE TO STAY

Antica Dimora Firenze (Via San Gallo 72/N; 00 39 055 462 7296, johanna.it; 10). One of five gorgeous residences in a clutch of houses scattered north of the main piazzas, Antica Dimora Firenze's rooms are full of light, silk and local linens. The rooftop terrace is worth the (small) price tag alone. Doubles from €62, B&B.

High Style **Floroom 1** (Via del Pavone 7; 020 3564 6725, booking.com; 11). The Florooms are located at the top of a residential building in the Oltrarno district, and are decked out with dark wooden floors, black Smeg fridges and moody photographs of old Firenze. Doubles from €100, B&B.

Gallery Hotel Art (Vicolo dell'Oro 5; 00 39 055 27263, lungarnocollection.com; 12). This is one of seven Florentine residences owned by the Ferragamo family, more usually associated with footwear. Gallery Hotel Art is situated right by the Ponte Vecchio; it's a soothing, central space with changing exhibitions. Doubles from €135, room only.

Riva Lofts (Via Baccio Bandinelli 98; 00 39 055 713 0272, rivalofts.com; 13). These apartments are housed within a cluster of Tuscan stone buildings on the banks of the river Arno. The 'lofts' come in various sizes, with cross vaults, bookcases and fireplaces, and there's a shared swimming pool in the grounds. Doubles from €140, B&B.

Duomo Apartment (Piazza Duomo; 020 7855 2998, tuscanviews.eu; 14). The Florence first-timer's dream is to wake to a Duomo view. And it's possible, if you know who to call. Italian-owned Tuscan Views lets a handful of unusual city-centre apartments; 'Duomo' was once the Indian Embassy, and is opposite the famous red-tiled cupola. Must be taken for four guests for three nights; rate works out at €166 per couple per night, self-catering.

Il Salviatino (Via del Salviatino 21; 00 39 055 904 1111, salviatino.com; 15). This 15th-century villa is just a short shuttle ride out of town and is set high in the hills – perfect for restorative nights in. The grand, candlelit dining room brings Aperol spritzes, while ravishing beds and tubs fill the boudoirs. Doubles from €250, B&B.

WHERE TO EAT

Ino (Via dei Georgofili 3r/7r; 00 39 055 219208, inofirenze.com; 16). This little cafe by the Ponte Vecchio turns focaccia into stonking sarnies. The menu is a catalogue of delicious things: gorgonzola, Tuscan salami, fig mustard and anchovy *pâté*. Sandwiches around €7.

Trattoria Mario (Via Rosina 2; 00 39 055 218550, trattoria-mario.com; 17). Make sure to schedule in two trips, because your first will pass in a raucous, dreamy haze. In this lunch-only trattoria near the food market, wine is sloshed and steak is noisily tenderised. Mains around €7.

Trattoria la Casalinga (Via dei Michelozzi 9; 00 39 055 218624, trattorialacasalinga.it; 18). There's one queuing system for locals and another for the rest of us, but ride it out with your fellow tourists, watching as locals order. Families come to feast on roast chicken, pork chops, bean stews and roast potatoes – after a first course of pasta, naturally. Mains around €9.

La Bussola (Via Porta Rossa 58; 00 39 055 293376, labussolafirenze.it; 19). Perfect for a quiet, civilised night of pizza and wine, La Bussola is ever so sleek within – all Tuscan chestnut and marble. There's a separate menu for locally-focused pizzas, like a sheep's cheese, honey and pear number. Pizzas around €12.

Lively Vibe **Trattoria Cammillo** (Borgo San Jacopo 57; 00 39 055 212691; 20). Those wise enough to have booked ahead stream through the doors as soon as dinner begins and Cammillo immediately comes alive with multi-lingual chatter. Every good meal starts with a giant, golden pile of fried courgette flowers. Mains around €18.

Enoteca Pinchiorri (Via Ghibellina 87; 00 39 055 242757, enotecapinchiorri.it; 21). If Italian food is your true love, book a table at this Palazzo-style dreamboat. You'll get a Florentine feast that's so good they Michelin-starred it thrice. It's named after Giorgio Pinchiorri, whose amazing wine cellar lurks beneath. Tasting menu €188; mains around €50.

All white for the night: from left, penthouse suite in the designer-styled Gallery Hotel Art; puzzle for the sweet-toothed at Enoteca Pinchiorri; take a rest from shopping at the old Procacci deli

WHERE TO DRINK

Procacci (64 Via Tornabuoni; www.procacci1885.it; 22). This old deli sits on Via Tornabuoni with Cartier, Dior and Gucci. Unlike its neighbours, it's full of old Italian charm and wood panelling. Take a shopping break over flutes of Prosecco and soft bread rolls spread with truffle butter.

Good Buffet **Negrone** (Via dei Renai 17; negroni.bar.it; 23). London's drink of the moment, the Negroni, is Florence's signature cocktail (gin, vermouth rosso, Campari). This bar's regulars spill on to the square until the small hours. The *aperitivo* buffet is good, too (served 7-11pm, free with a drink).

WHERE TO SHOP

Bartolini (72 Via dei Servi; dinobartolini.it; 24). If you're going to get busy with your Tuscan ingredients when you get home, you'll need new tools. So make Bartolini your first port of call for copper pans, cleavers and, for the ambitious, ravioli stamps.

Desii Vintage (17 Via de Conti; 25). There isn't a hint of fustiness in this carefully curated second-hand shop, where furs and silk scarves are suspended above gold Doc Martens, Louis Vuitton handbags and black Chanel jewels. ■

Ask the local



Sofie is a blogger (thecurious eater.com), who's lived in the city for four years

'The best church in the city is free: the Abbazia di San Miniato al Monte (26) is in the southern Oltrarno neighbourhood, and is an incredible 11th-century building, with its own pine forest. Do wander around the Oltrarno – it's where we locals hang out at

weekends. Stop for *gelati*, taking care to avoid the whipped, airy nonsense. At La Sorbettiera (Piazza Torquato Tasso 11; 27), Antonio makes 16 flavours a day – his lemon and sage is one of my favourites. When I'm shopping at Mercato Centrale, I avoid the queues at the stands in favour of the tucked-away Casa del Vino (Via dell'Arieto 16; 28), where perfect little *crostini* are topped with anchovy, egg and peperoncino. If you don't like paying for views, the Rinascente department store (Piazza della Repubblica; 29) has a rooftop cafe with exquisite Duomo vistas.'



Get me there

GO INDEPENDENT

Vueling (0906 754 7541, vueling.com) flies from Heathrow to Florence from €105. Or try **CityJet** (0871 663 3777, cityjet.com) or **BA** (0844 493 0787, ba.com) for flights from London City from €130. Alternatively, **EasyJet** (0843 104 1000, easyjet.com) and **Ryanair** (0871 246 0000, ryanair.com) both fly to Pisa airport, an hour's drive from Florence city centre.

GO PACKAGED

Citalia (0843 249 7055, citalia.com) has three-night breaks in three-star hotels from €285pp, B&B, with Heathrow flights and transfers. **Kuoni** (01306 747008, kuoni.co.uk) has three nights' B&B at Il Salviatino from €487pp, with Gatwick flights.

FURTHER INFORMATION

The journey to the central train station from Florence

airport takes 25 minutes on the shuttle bus and costs €4.25 one way (look out for 'Vola in bus' and pay when on board). Taxis cost a flat fee of 20 euros (€17). From Pisa, the Terravision bus (terravision.eu) takes an hour and costs €4.20 each way. For more details on the city in general, contact or visit the Florence Tourist Board (Via Cavour 1; 00 39 055 290832, firenzeturismo.it).