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The city of Florence is a must visit.

FASHION-FORWARD FIRENZE

Fall in love with Florence. And if you've been, get ready to fall in love all over again.

BY NANCY E. BERRY

➤ **If you have not traveled to Florence**—a city in central Italy imbued with medieval architecture and Renaissance art juxtaposed against 21st-century cuisine and fashion trends—book a flight. I promise you will not regret it. The city is bursting with beauty at every turn, from impressive 15th-century palaces and grand cathedrals to winding cobblestone streets to the friendly Florentines, all with distinct style. This is not only a bucket list destination but a destination to visit often.

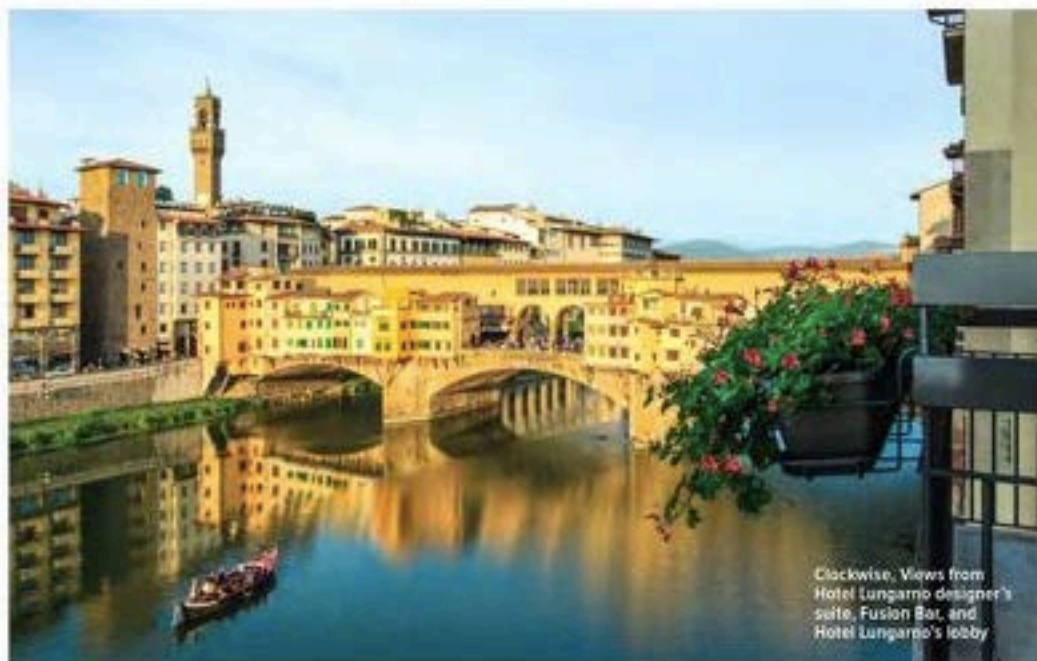
This ancient city is home to a collection of chic boutique hotels that you will want to make your luxury base camp while touring. Hotel Lungarno is just one in the collection, and after more than 22 years in operation, it has been exquisitely renovated, reopening its doors in 2017. The five-star hotel, complete with Michelin-starred restaurant Borgo San Jacopo, is located on the south side of the Arno River overlooking the Ponte Vecchio Bridge.

The hotel offers guests the perfect

atmosphere and sumptuous accommodations you might expect from the hotel's owners, the Ferragamo family, who run the iconic haute couture house whose clothing and shoe lines epitomize excellence and luxury. The light-filled spaces are enhanced by original art—more than 450 pieces of 20th-century art, including Picasso and Cocteau.

I arrive at Hotel Lungarno's entrance, tucked down a side street running perpendicular to the river, and step into a crisp white lobby that is more of a soothing lounge than a reception area, with windows overlooking the water and ancient buildings beyond. Interior designer Michele Bonan likens the space to a cruise ship sailing along the Arno. Plush blue and white sofas and chairs create a dreamy spot to have an espresso and plan your day's excursion.

After I check in, the pleasant bellman takes



Clockwise, Views from Hotel Lungarno designer's suite, Fusion Bar, and Hotel Lungarno's lobby



me to my room, a suite overlooking the river. I open the casement windows and look out onto the water and the famous bridge, beckoning with jewelers selling every trinket from silver fleur de lis pendants (the symbol of Florence) to diamond and gold engagement rings.

The suite, awash in sunlight that enhances the light blue paint and white trim, has a classical colonnade separating the bedroom and sitting room. The refined blue and white color palette is the backdrop for carefully curated antiques. Egyptian cotton sheets and cashmere throws dress the dreamy queen beds. A wall of closets leads to a bathroom complete with an Italian marble soaking tub.

After a bubble bath, I head out into the afternoon sun and cross the bridge into the heart of this magical city. It's November, and above the streets, white lights and decorative snowflakes dangle. Everywhere you look are beautiful shops with wares from perfumed soaps to couture baby clothing. I walk to the White Iris Beauty Spa for a massage. The space is as soothing as the treatment itself. After, this jetlag remedy, I wander back to my hotel, peeking into boutique after boutique. I spy the perfect pair of black leather boots in a shop window. Looking down at my all-American Converse, I make a mental note to come back when they open tomorrow.

I dress and head to the trendy Fusion Bar & Restaurant, part of the Lungarno Collec-

tion, for a one-of-a-kind dining and cocktail experience for my first evening in the city. Sushi and small bites are on offer, along with creative signature cocktails made with unexpected flavors by expert mixologists. Smoky, intense, robust—these fashionable elixirs are all the rage in Florence. The Singapore Sling, which contains gin with notes of cherry and orange liqueur, fresh pineapple, and lime juice, and finally bitter Angostura and Dom Benedictine, is not to be missed.

The next morning, after an Americano

in the lounge, I head to Palazzo Vecchio (meaning "old palace") for a tour of its secret passages. Built during the 13th and 14th centuries, the fortress is made of solid rusticated stonework with two rows of Gothic windows and crowned with a battlement and clock tower. A series of courtyards and apartments, the palace once housed the city's governing bodies. Within its walls are also a series of secret passageways and hidden chambers containing breathtaking works of art. Among the secret chambers is the Studiolo of Francesco I. Its walls and barrel-vaulted ceiling are covered with murals depicting the four elements—earth, air, water, and fire. The grandeur of this room is a must-see on an adventure to the city.



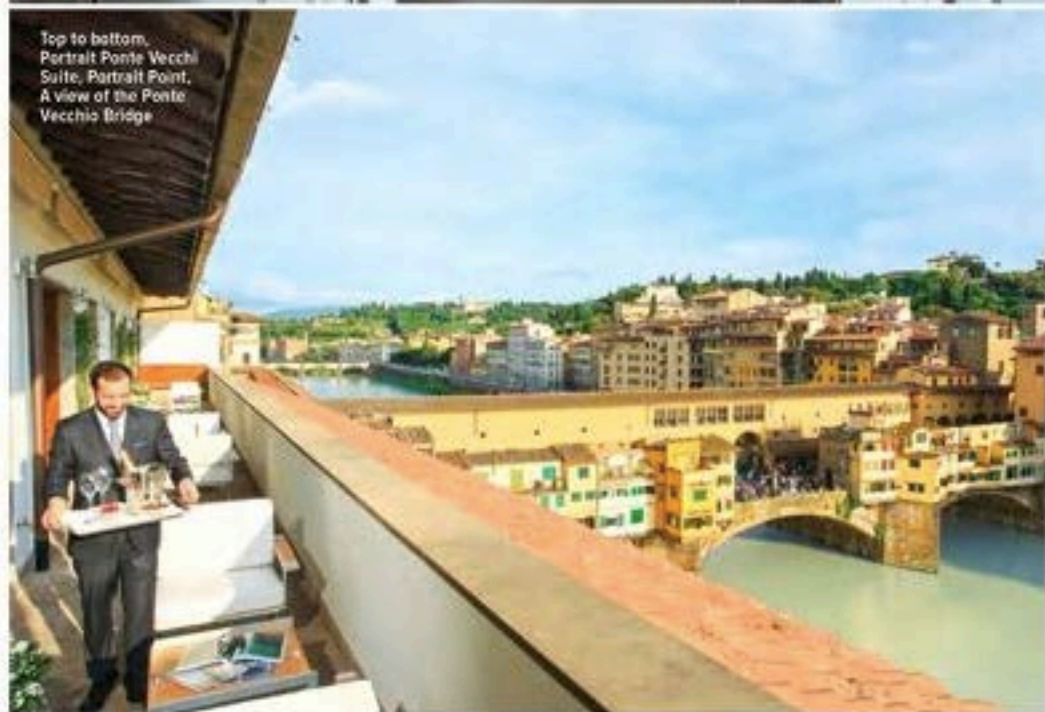
FACES + PLACES

Another must-see is the city's Duomo. The Gothic structure was built beginning in 1297 on the 7th-century site of the church of Santa Reparata, which can still be seen below the cathedral in the crypt. The final building took almost two centuries to complete, with its famous dome being constructed in the 15th century. The exterior walls are covered in pink, white, and green marble. Within the building are elaborate mosaic floors. Perhaps the most magnificent artwork is the dome's *Last Judgment* by Giorgio Vasari, painted in 1572.

After a day of exploring the city, I head back to the hotel for a stellar gastronomic adventure at Michelin-starred Borgo San Jacopo. Chef Claudio Mengoni designs inventive modern Italian dishes for an elegant dining experience, and the wine list has over 900 labels. (If weather permits, you can enjoy a romantic dinner on the terrace overlooking the Arno.) The dining room's décor is as beautiful as the dish presentations. Crisp white tablecloths and sophisticated surroundings twinkling in candlelight complete this fabulous meal.

To get the full experience of the hotel collection, I also tour the Hotel Continentale. Elegant and inviting, its white color palette evokes harmony, simplicity, and fantasy, and it is the most playful of the collection. Topped with a rooftop bar, this the place to see and be seen when the weather warms.

Then I head to Portrait Firenze to check in. A new concept in bespoke tourism, Portrait has taken uniform luxury and turned it into a very personalized experience for each guest. The hotel is an all-suite property overlooking the Arno where the most discerning traveler can find an exclusive, pampered stay. The rooms are gray with accents of black and gold, creating the ultimate sophisticated backdrop. Black-and-white photos of iconic stars adorn walls and desks. There is no lobby, but rather a comfortable lounge decorated in stylish mid-century modern furnishings made in Florence. A welcoming portrait of the Ferragamo's daughter, Fiamma Ferragamo, hangs in the space. A member of the hotel's lifestyle team provides personal touches to your stay and will customize tours for you. I venture out on



Top to bottom, Portrait Ponte Vecchio Suite, Portrait Point, A view of the Ponte Vecchio Bridge

a Tuk Tuk (basically a motorized rickshaw) tour of the city that passes over historic bridges, through winding back streets, around the city's original Roman and Byzantine wall, and up into the surrounding hills for a bird's-eye view of Florence. This is a perfect way to get an overview of the city and cover a lot of ground.

The next day I venture out for a window-shopping odyssey. Florence is truly the place to see the latest fashions; head to Via Tornabuoni and its exclusive boutiques. A must-stop for those with a shoe obsession is, of course, Salvatore Ferragamo, where you can browse the archives of this iconic shoe designer and

recreate shoes worn by Judy Garland, Greta Garbo, or Audrey Hepburn. The shop, which opened in 1937, is located in a medieval palace and caters to the world's elite. Stop into the Ferragamo Museum for a tour of the Golden Age of Hollywood glamour.

After a day of shopping (I score a beautiful emerald green satin slip dress) and taking in the history and beauty of this ancient city, I have clocked 10 miles according to my iPhone. I am sad to leave this magical place—and perhaps my favorite European city—but vow to one day return to fall in love with Firenze all over again. ♦

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