

Client: Lungarno Collection

Source: The Sunday Times Travel Magazine

Date: November 2015

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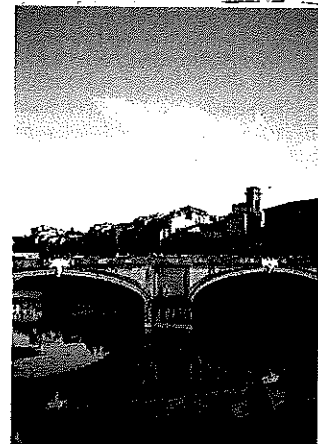
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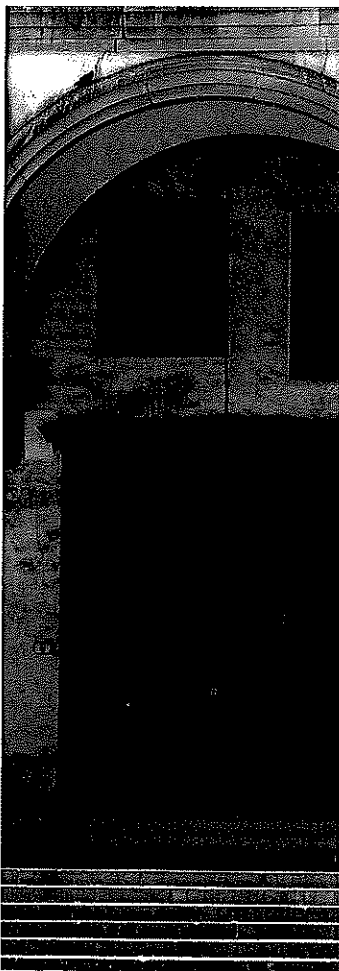
Crowd-free Florence

On sleepy piazzas and rooftop *terrazzas*, the real city reveals itself

Still the fairest of all Italian cities, Florence flourishes when you can flee the throngs. Discover hidden masterpieces, secret paths through the pines, perhaps even a cookery school cradled in a hilltop monastery. Throw in *pasticceria* on the *periferia* ('outskirts') and you have a recipe for cracking cuisine, culture and calm. **By Rachel Spence**



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instant escapes

CUT-OUT-AND-GO GUIDE | CROWD-FREE FLORENCE

SEE & DO

● If the queues at the Uffizi don't drive you to *vino*, the crackle of the audioguides will. Instead, tucked behind the walls of the Pitti Palace find a hidden gem. The Palatine Gallery (Piazza de Pitti 1; [● For a road less travelled, hike the five kilometres from Ponte alle Grazie to the Basilica of San Miniato al Monte \(Via delle Porte Sante 34; \[● With bush-sized bunches of fresh basil and oregano, the bustling Mercato Sant'Ambrogio \\(Piazza Lorenzo Ghiberti; \\[● The super-square lines of the Palazzo Medici Riccardi \\\(Via Camillo\\]\\(http://mercatosantambrogio.it; ③\\) is where Florentine mamas come to load up their larders. While tourists all flock to the Mercato Centrale, this 19th-century food hall — think Eiffel Tower iron facade under a cherry-red roof — remains unknown to all but the most in-the-know foodies.</p>
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<div data-bbox=\\)\]\(http://sanminiato.aimonte.it; ②\). It's steep, but the climb up pine-shaded steps leads to a city overlook that would have Leonardo reaching for his pencil. And inside this green-and-white marble 11th-century church are rainbow-bright mosaics and frescoes. Make it for evening mass for the monks' bell-clear Gregorian chant.</p>
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<div data-bbox=\)](http://polomuseale.firenze.it; E6; ① on map) is still dripping with <i>fresh</i> from this wing's glory days as home to the Medici Dukes, and its Renaissance paintings rival anything in the Uffizi. Don't miss the exquisite face of Raphael's <i>Madonna dell'Granda</i>.</p>
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FANCY A PICNIC?

The Boboli Gardens of the Pitti Palace (the €9.50 combined ticket gives you access to both) provide the city's most magnificent green space. (Buy your paints first at the Palace cafe)

VEGGIE ALERT

The chef is veggie-friendly. Ask him nicely and he'll show you his recipe for vegan croissants!

Arcade games: the Piazza della Santissima Annunziata is an oasis of calm; below left, the Ponte Santa Trinita; ceiling fresco in the Palazzo Medici Riccardi

Cavour 3; palazzo-medici.it; E5; ④) were designed by Michelozzo, the Zaha Hadid of his 15th-century day. Inlaid with ancient Roman marble, the inner courtyard radiates peace, but the real find is the tiny Magli Chapel — three of its four walls glow with Benozzo Gozzoli's action-packed painting of the *Journey of the Magi*. This is the Bible told in a fairy-tale-meets-photo-story.

● The most delicious way to escape from it all is at the cookery school in the Belmont Villa San Michele, in nearby Fiesole (Via Doccia 4, Fiesole; 0039 055 567 8200, [● While the Piazza del Duomo is a flytrap for tourists, just five minutes' walk away, the Piazza della Santissima Annunziata ⑥ is an oasis of Platonic calm. Closed to traffic, it is bordered on three sides by exquisite arcades: the first of them was designed in 1419, by Brunelleschi, the papa of Renaissance architecture, to house an orphanage. Don't miss the poignant reliefs of swaddled *bambini* on each arch.](http://belmond.com; E170pp, with lunch; ⑤). At this Michelangelo-designed monastery-turned-hotel, chef Attilio will teach you to cook pasta like your mamma never made. The celestial views of Florence are matched by the taste of, say, tortelloni filled with aubergines and goat's cheese in a fresh thyme sauce.</p>
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● Dodge the mall-sized crowds crossing the Ponte Vecchio and make your way over on the Ponte Santa Trinita ⑦ — the Cinderella of bridges, simple, but super-elegant. Its peaceful parapet delivers the perfect view of the Ponte Vecchio in all its honey-stone splendour. After your snapfest, pick up a tangy *limone e cioccolato* combo from the Gelateria Santa Trinita (Piazza Frescobaldi 11/12R; ⑧) on the corner.

● The Church of Santa Croce (Piazza Santa Croce 16;

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EAT

GUSTA OSTERIA (Mains about £10)
Because: Old favourites taste better served on wooden platters and in terracotta bowls, in this dinky dining room or on its terrace with a view over Santo Spirito church. **Travel's tip:** Try the superb gnocchi with truffles for a true taste of Tuscany. *Via de' Michelozzi 13/R; 00 39 055 285033; @.*

Locals favourite

TRATTORIA MARIONE (Mains about £12)
Because: Sometimes you want no-nonsense classics (say, tripe *alla fiorentina*), a great house Chianti, checked tablecloths and hanging hams — but no whiff of tourist trap. **Travel's tip:** Arrive at noon to be sure of a table — the locals love this place. *Via della Spada 27; 00 39 055 214756; @.*

For long lunches

OSTERIA SANTO SPIRITO (Mains about £13)
Because: A table overlooking this sleepy piazza is your invitation to linger over classic Tuscan faves such as *crostini* with chicken liver and stewed rabbit. **Travel's tip:** Dishes are plentiful, so ask for half portions, which are highlighted on the menu, to create your own sharing plates. *Piazza Santo Spirito 16/R; 00 39 055 238 2383; @.*

Serious steaks

OSTERIA DE' BENCI (Mains about £14)
Because: The legendary *bistecca alla fiorentina* is best as served in this no-frills locals' pick. **Travel's tip:** To leave room for that beef, share your pasta course. The *ubriacone* (drunkard) spaghetti boiled in red wine is the speciality. *Via de' Benci 13/R; 00 39 055 234 4923; osteriadelbenci.it; @.*

The roof with a view

TERRAZZA BRUNELLESCHI (Mains about £19)
Because: An *alfresco* pergola and views over rooftops give the faultless Tuscan cuisine, such as duck with aubergine caviar, the setting it deserves. **Travel's tip:** Vegetarians get five-star treatment thanks to the Wellness Menu, which includes spelt linguine with tomatoes and capers. *Grand Hotel Baglioni, Piazza dell'Unità Italiana 6; 00 39 055 23580; hotelbaglioni.it; @.*

AFTER-PASTA ART

You're just five minutes' walk from the Palazzo Strozzi, which is home to super temporary art exhibitions (at least one table here is always taken up by the Strozzi's staff)

WRITER'S TIP

While you're here, check out the Basilica di Santo Spirito in the same square — it's another blaster by Brunelleschi

LAST SUPPER

This place makes a great goodbye if you're leaving Florence by train as it's within spitting distance of the station



BARS & GELATERIE

Sundowners in style

LOUNGE BAR LA TERRAZZA
Because: Sunset over the Arno looks sublime from the creamy sofas at Hotel Continentale's rooftop bar. **Travel's tip:** If you cocktail here, plan a light supper afterwards as the free canapés are abundant and delicious. *Vicolo dell'Oro 6; lungarnocollection.com; @.*

The virtuoso gelato

CARABE
Because: Antonio Lisclandro is the Vivaldi of ice-cream-making, and his fresh, low-sugar ingredients make flavours sing. **Travel's tip:** Go nuts! Antonio uses almonds, pistachios and hazelnuts only from his native Sicily, so those flavours are the *crème de la (ice) crème* here. *Via Ricasoli 60/R; @.*

Chocolate kick

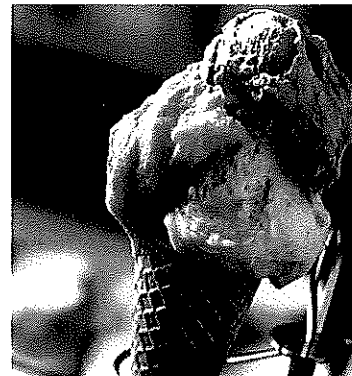
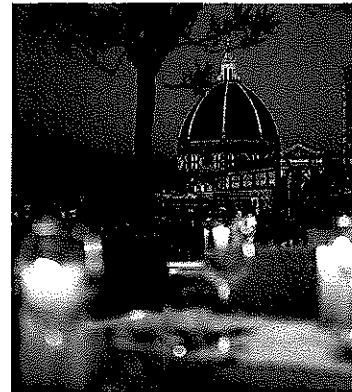
CAFFÈ RIVOIRE
Because: The best way to warm up on a cold morning is with Italy's silkiest hot chocolate in this sumptuous café. **Travel's tip:** Arrive at 7.30am to nab a table by the window for a view of the classical sculptures across the square. *Piazza della Signoria 5/R; rivoire.it; @.*



ASK THE LOCAL

David Aspin, city entrepreneur, has lived in Florence for 15 years

I tell friends to stay at San Frediano Mansion (Via Borgo San Frediano 8; sanfrediano mansion.com; @), a friendly B&B in a 16th-century mansion with *freschi* on the ceiling and great river views. If the Giotto crucifix at Ognissanti church (Borgo Ognissanti; @) were in London or Paris, you'd queue for hours to see it. Here, you nod to the priest, make for the side chapel and you might have it all to yourself. It's wonderfully uplifting — as is the mango ice cream at B.ice (Borgo Ognissanti 150; @). Most evenings, St Mark's church (Via Maggio; stmarksitaly.com; @) hosts abridged operas. They're beautifully performed and entry is just £25.



STAY

Quirky bargain

CASA HOWARD (Doubles from £50, B&B)
Because: Individually decorated rooms — think Toile de Jouy prints, vintage photographs and standalone baths — give this guesthouse near the train station a unique charm. Couples should consider the Hidden Room — the Chinese erotic prints will surely spice up their stay. **Travel's tip:** It's on a busy street, so light sleepers should ask for a room on the top floor. *Via della Scala 18; 00 39 06 6992 4555; casahoward.com; @.*

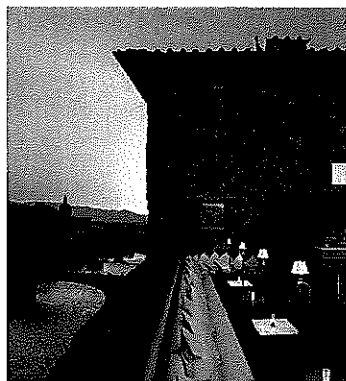
The off-piste gem

HOTEL DAVID (Doubles from £95, B&B)
Because: It's worth being a 15-minute walk from the city centre for breakfast here under the pines, seductive prices, rooms in pale summery hues, an honesty bar and chilled-but-cheerful staff. **Travel's tip:** If your name is David you get a five per cent discount. *Sertously. Viale Michelangelo 1; 00 39 055 6811695; hoteldavid.com; @.*

PHOTOGRAPHS: ALAMY; GETTY; MAP: HAIDERHEAD/CARTOGRAPHIC

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● Trad-luxe sleep

LOGGIATO DEI SERVITI (Doubles from £100, B&B)

Because: It's a joy to throw open the shutters of this Renaissance monastery and gaze down on Florence's prettiest piazza. Inside is just as graceful, with silken textiles and antique four-posters. **Travel's tip:** Don't diss the annexe. The rooms are vast and even bigger than those in the main building. Crucially, they cost no more. *Piazza Santissima Annunziata 3; 00 39 055 289592; loggiatodeiservitihotel.it; @.*

● Architect-designed digs

RIVA LOFTS (Doubles from £165, B&B)

Because: Clean, modern, luminous design studios — in a converted factory amid a verdant garden, with outdoor pool — are a recipe for chilled-out comfort. And, at 30sqm, the smallest rooms are still spacious. **Travel's tip:** Instead of tramping it to the Centro Storico, borrow one of the vintage bikes from reception and pedal along the Arno river. *Via Baccio Bandinelli 98; 00 39 055 713 0272; rivalofts.com; @.*

CLUB CLASS

If Tuscan fare palls, the restaurant here is winning hearts and tums for its crackling club sandwich.

● The boutique townhouse

JK PLACE (Doubles from £275, B&B)

Because: Sumptuous white, grey and pistachio rooms are given verve with mirrors and architectural prints. The honesty bar and welcome-back snacks in your room make it feel like a luxurious home-from-home. **Travel's tip:** A Superior Classic room is well worth the extra cost (from £30), with views over square or hotel terrace and a tad more space. *Piazza di Santa Maria Novella 7; 00 39 055 264 5181; jkplace.com; @.*

● City-centre oasis

FOUR SEASONS HOTEL FIRENZE (Doubles from £282, room only)

Because: God is a hotelier! Nothing else accounts for the glory of this 16th-century palace with its antique frieze in the glass-roofed lobby, magnolia-blossoming garden and tip-top spa/sauna/pool combo. **Travel's tip:** Eating here can be pricey. For better value, try the lively local trattoria *Accadi (Borgo Pinti 56/R)*. The *gnocchi* with wild duck sauce is quacking. *Borgo Pinti 99; 00 39 055 26261; fourseasons.com; @.*

Feast your eyes: clockwise from top left, dine with a view at Terrazza Brunelleschi; JK Place hotel; the presidential suite at the Four Seasons; Lounge Bar La Terrazza; atop Hotel Continentale; ice cream at Carabe

GET ME THERE

The cheapest flights are to nearby Pisa. *EasyJet* (easyjet.com) flies from Bristol, Gatwick, Luton and Manchester airports, from £23 one way. *Ryanair* (ryanair.com) flies from Stansted from £19 one way. *Jet2* (jet2.com) flies from Manchester and Newcastle from £39 one way. The train from Pisa airport to Florence's Santa Maria Novella station takes one hour and costs £6.50 one way (trenitalia.com). The bus takes 70 minutes and costs £4 one way (terravision.eu). *BA* (ba.com) flies from London City straight into Florence from £71 one way.

GO PACKAGED

Italy specialist *Citalia* (01293 731642, citalia.com) has three nights at the four-star Grand Hotel Baglioni (see Eat) from £249pp, B&B, including Gatwick flights. Or try *Kirker Holidays* (020 7593 1899, kirkerholidays.com).

FURTHER INFORMATION

See firenzeturismo.it and italia.it ■