



Clockwise from left:  
La Terrazza at Continentale;  
Neptune and the nymphs;  
Birth of Venus at Uffizi  
Gallery; Portrait Firenze;  
Uffizi Gallery

## ART IN ABUNDANCE

It would seem that the Renaissance era is very much alive in **Florence**. Look around you. A medieval bridge, sculptures that shock and awe, paintings that bring a tear to your eye and a hotel called Portrait Firenze. **Mala Vaishnav** delves into the cultural heart of the capital city of Tuscany

**A**s our small group confidently strides past iron gates into a foliage-embellished courtyard, a bearded man in overalls gesticulates wildly. “Oof these Italians,” sighs my companion. “So dramatic. What is he saying?” Apparently, we have wandered into a private art class. “You want David,” says the man without questioning our foray and waves us off dismissively towards the left. And when we run into David at the Galleria dell’Accademia, he is more magnificent than his pictures. Michelangelo’s 1501-crafted 14-foot-tall marble statue towers above the camera-toting spectators prancing around the muscled beauty, much to the amusement of the yawning guards. While most artists sculpted the biblical hero after his victory over Goliath, the stance of Michelangelo’s David is one of that before

the battle. At the 18th-century Uffizi Gallery, a short walk away, we are overwhelmed by the extravagant display of sculpture on the fourth floor and have a close brush with Botticelli’s famed *Birth of Venus*, said to be the first example of a painting on canvas in Tuscany. Next to it is the artist’s other masterpiece, *Allegory of Spring*, a study in love, lust and fertility where well endowed mythological figures swirl under Cupid’s arrow in an orange grove.

On the first floor of the gallery is an unmarked door that leads to a secret passageway. Most visitors will not give it a second glance but those in the know step into an intriguing time machine accompanied by a guide. The Vasari Corridor, as it is called, is a kilometre-long walk that links the Uffizi Gallery with the Pitti Palace. The passage is lined with precious artworks of the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries as



well as a unique collection of self-portraits. Small circular windows look down upon the Arno river and the city centre. The corridor, named after the architect who completed it, was commissioned by the then powerful Medici family to celebrate a wedding. From this vantage observation point, the Medicis – who were known to move freely and safely from their home in Pitti to Palazzo Vecchio, the seat of government – could look down upon the general public while remaining fairly unnoticed themselves.

Art, in fact, springs from every corner of this medieval

city and I wonder if Florentians ever feel that they are living in a museum. Do they just take their historic surroundings in their daily stride while grabbing a copy of *La Nazione* and a cappuccino or stop and stare for a bit? I look out of my room at Portrait Firenze and am rendered speechless for a second. An Instagram-worthy view of a line of weird-looking creatures ascending a wall of the building across my hotel confronts me! Architect and artist Simone D’Auria’s imaginary world, populated by half-human, half-animal anthropomorphic figures are part of her latest exhibition, *Personal/Unpersonal*, where she plays with the concept of ‘moving forward and rising to the top’ for the newest hotel in the Lungarno Collection chain. The exhibits are inspired by the men who built the city of Florence and are represented by animal emblems such as the turtle symbolising wisdom, the rhino, strength...and more.

Portrait Firenze, a 34-suite hotel with a delectable view of Ponte Vecchio, stands on the historical site of the Grand Hotel Royal de L’Arno, a popular watering hole in the 1800s. Charles Dickens and Henry James were regular guests as were the master goldsmiths from the vicinity to whom Caffè dell’Oro is dedicated. The hotel, along with sibling properties, Continentale and Gallery Hotel Art, is the inheritance of the Ferragamo family, known for its passion for creative innovation and elegant hospitality. Salvatore Ferragamo, in fact, opened his first company in Italy in Florence, where his store pampered a legion of Hollywood beauties, European princesses and Italian



Clockwise from left:  
Caffè dell'Oro;  
Cathedral of Santa Maria  
del Fiore; Personal/  
Unpersonal exhibit;  
Museo Ferragamo;  
Renaissance Man: David



The sun's rays bounce off Neptune's shoulders, throw dancing beams on the seahorses at his feet and settle on the nymphs rising out of the fountain.

microwave, Nespresso machine, dishwasher and porcelain crockery, begs for some room-cooked fare but we are already gathering our stoles and clutches for a dinner date at the adjoining Caffè dell'Oro.

Michelin-starred chef Peter Brunel, famed for his innovative flourish of traditional Tuscan cuisine, serves up a medley of meats, pastas and desserts that are flavourful enough to often distract you from the heart-stopping view from the windows. The lamb chops, tender to the bone, complement a tart apple salad and the prawn risotto with lemon foam competes with platters of fennel-roasted sea bass. When we down the last drop of a full-bodied Bocelli from the home-grown wine cellars, we can even feel Botticelli smiling down at us proudly. "You mean Bacchus," comments my companion drily.

In the early morning light, Piazza della Signoria is a photographer's dream. The sun's rays bounce off Neptune's shoulders, throw dancing beams on the seahorses at his feet and settle on the nymphs rising out of the fountain. Not far away, the snake-haired Medusa's slain head dangles from Perseus' clasp and David's twin rises out of a passing cloud's shadow. Strolling past more gigantic sculptures, all copies of originals that stand sentinel-like in an open-air museum bustling with gelato-eaters, handbag-sellers and immovable people-watchers, we reach San Lorenzo Basilica. An orchestra is booming forth from the steps as Canadian schoolchildren give a lusty, encore-worthy performance. Possibly the oldest church in Florence, it is also the burial place of the Medicis whose tombs within have been designed by Michelangelo.

And then there is the surreal Ponte Vecchio, caressed by a copper-tinted sunset. Robust survivor of World War II bombings, it is where all that glitters is pure gold. Jewellery stores show off their pink sapphire rings and diamond-encrusted bracelets from a privileged position once occupied by the town's butchers. Brave the superior air of the sales personnel at the 1888-opened Dante Cardini or the fourth-generation-run Carlo Piccini and be amazed at their collections. This is handcrafted Italian jewellery at its best. Wander into the hallowed surroundings of Galleria Ponte Vecchio or Ceramiche d'Arte and pick up, as I did, traditional handmade pottery and wine stoppers, many engraved with the six-petal red iris, proud emblem of Florence, a city that was born in the Middle Ages and continues to be in well-preserved bloom. 

aristocrats. A brief turn around the corner from the hotels and we reach the Museo Ferragamo housed in the lovingly restored Palazzo Spini Feroni. *Equilibrium*, the current exhibition, enthral with the elements that the iconic designer laboured with the most: the importance of balance and the arch of the foot. The museum, up until April 2016, is showcasing *A Palace and The City*, a new project, which through private art collections and specially created sets, will relate the story of the palace and celebrate Florence, the birthplace of the Renaissance.

More history wraps itself around us when we enter the 100-year-old Trattoria 4 Leoni at the quaint Piazza della Passera. The server-host bears with our useless debate at trying to decipher a menu in Italian (only) with a pretended air of sufferance, then takes pity on our translation ordeal and suggests a meal that does the chef proud. The salads are crisp, the Tuscan stew, hot and peppery, the cheesecake, all froth and fluff, and the signature dish of pear-stuffed ravioli with asparagus sauce, worth every euro against its name. Lest we wander away without noticing, the rustic-style restaurant which was born as a family-owned tavern before it changed hands, displays large photographs of celebrity diners on its stone walls. Dustin Hoffman,

Anthony Hopkins, Kevin Costner, Sting...

A 10-minute trot and we are at the Duomo where all of touristic Florence converges (after paying obeisance to David!). The Cattedrale di Santa Maria del Fiore, the third largest cathedral in the world – after the ones in Vatican City and Milan – and a UNESCO World Heritage Site, rules from the centre of a piazza bursting with the aromas of warm waffles and freshly brewed coffee. Little cafes sit perkily between souvenir stalls and designer windows, and while you absorb the grandeur of the green and white 13th-century Gothic-styled edifice, banish from sight the selfie stick hustlers who constantly step into your circle of privacy, trying to ruin your own selfie moment!

When the ankles begin fretting at the 13,000 steps we have clocked in on our pedometers, we head back to the family suite at Portrait Firenze, a haven of silence and comfort. Pale olive furnishings, Egyptian linen, vintage lamps, oversized beds; the intricate touches masterminded by Florentine architect Michele Bonan to create contemporary Florence from its classic roots also find their way in the Carrara marble bathrooms flaunting attractive Tuscan Soul amenities by Salvatore Ferragamo. The kitchenette, blessed with all things modern like a