

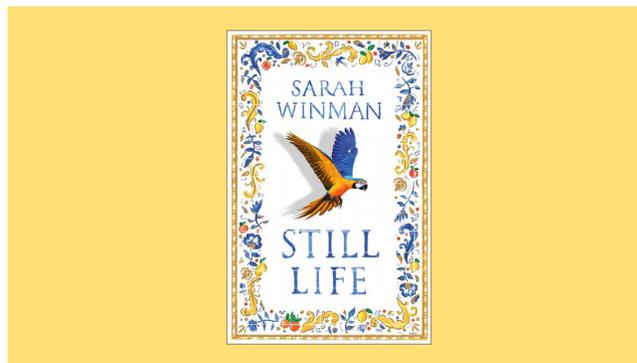


## The Original Guide to Florence

Birthplace of the Renaissance and the epicentre of Tuscany's wine region, Florence is brimming with culture and beauty. From Da Vinci masterpieces to open-air cinemas, secret passageways, botanical gardens and cooking classes, here are some of the experiences you won't want to miss

Words: **Phoebe Hunt**

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Still Life is a touching tale of people brought together by love, war and art



### Pre-trip culture checklist

**LISTEN:** Before queuing to shuffle past Michelangelo's *David* in the Galleria dell'Accademia, it's well worth listening to an hour-long podcast on *The Daily* titled [David's Ankles: How imperfections could bring down the world's most perfect statue](#). Writer Sam Anderson delves into his own relationship with the iconic statue, which may help you appreciate its fragility in a new light.

**READ:** Sarah Winman's tender, queer novel [Still Life](#). The book paints a picture of post-war Florence, weaving together the lives of a British soldier and an art historian over several decades.

**WATCH:** *Stanley Tucci: Searching for Italy* and the follow-up series *Tucci in Italy*. Both focus heavily on Florence and Tuscany. From the stories behind the ancient wine windows to street food staples such as *lampredotto* (cow's stomach), the much-loved actor is sure to ramp up your appetite.





The Piazza Michelangelo offers magnificent views of the city. Opening image: the Duomo

### A local's view

"For me, Florence is like an old friend: she knows me so well she can drive me mad, but I always forgive her because I know I won't find anyone better in three lifetimes. I grew up exploring the [Boboli Gardens](#) (my father worked there for many years). It's still where I go when I want to reconnect with the city at a slower pace. For a glass of wine I love [Meno - Vini E Altre Necessità](#), a cosy enoteca that feels like a second home. As a change from the big, famous sites, I love [Museo de La Specola](#), a natural history museum I used to visit with my grandmother. It's been recently renovated and is still full of wonder. But, really, Florence needs very little introduction. The trick is to put the maps away and get lost in its streets – the museum is the city itself. Florence needs people who truly love her, not just those who visit."



Matilde Pettini

Matilde Pettini is the founder and head chef of [Dalla Lola](#), a much-loved restaurant in Florence's Oltrarno quarter



#### First time

Immerse yourself in the flavours of Florence with a stroll around Sant'Ambrogio market, where stalls are piled high with seasonal fruit, Tuscan cheeses, freshly pressed olive oil, cured meats and more. After this, stop for lunch at Cibrèo, an iconic trattoria just steps away from the market that triumphs forgotten Tuscan recipes and local produce.

[Book a table](#)



#### Next time

Delve deeper into both traditional and contemporary Italian dishes at a private cookery class with trained chef Sara Cagle. You'll cook a delicious three-course meal tailored to your preferences (from traditional Tuscan to Italian fusion) before enjoying the fruits of your labours with free-flowing spritzes in Sara's quaint Florentine home.

[Book a class](#)



### New view

The Ponte Vecchio (above) is Florence's most iconic bridge – so beautiful that Hitler allegedly ordered for it to be the only bridge not destroyed in WWII. It's usually photographed from the bridges that flank it on either side, but there's also secret passage over the top of the bridge: In 1565, the ruling Medici family built the so-called [Vasari Corridor](#) across the top of the bridge (now open to the public again after more than a decade of building work). The passageway begins in what is now the Uffizi Galleries, passing over the top of the bridge, through houses and a 16th-century church and coming out in the [Boboli Gardens](#) (within the grounds of Palazzo Pitti).





Botticelli's *The Birth of Venus* in the Uffizi Galleries (Elena Popova)

### Rainy-day saviours

With the sheer volume of artwork on display, the [Uffizi Galleries](#) is an obvious choice for losing yourself for a few hours on a rainy day. Roam the three massive floors of Renaissance paintings and sculptures, gazing out on to the Arno River below you. Not far away in Piazza della Repubblica, the [Odeon Giusti](#) cinema has recently been reimagined as a library and bookshop space, with regular events celebrating the history of Italian cinema.



Sampling smells at Officina Profumo-Farmaceutica di Santa Maria Novella

### The original perfumery

Said to be the oldest perfume-maker in the world, the catchily titled [Officina Profumo-Farmaceutica di Santa Maria Novella](#) has eight centuries of history. It was founded in 1221 by Dominican friars, who cultivated herbs and plants to make medicinal balms. When Caterina de' Medici set off to marry the king of France in the 16th century, she took friar Renato Bianco with her from Santa Maria Novella as her personal perfumer. He designed her a clean, citrusy alcohol-based scent, Acqua della Regina, and it is credited with bringing the art of perfume – as we know it today – to France and the rest of Europe. You can still visit the ornately decorated perfumery near Santa Maria Novella train station, and pick up a scented candle or fragrance of your own.



### Bird's-eye view

Brunelleschi's 15th-century [Duomo](#) (above) looms large as you fly into Florence's Peretola airport. It's hard to get a sense of its scale from the ground – this is the largest masonry dome ever constructed to this day – but from above you can see just how much it dwarfs the rest of the city. As you fly closer, you'll see the Arno river snaking through the city centre, with the rolling Tuscan countryside and the foothills of the Apennine mountains in the distance.





Helena Bonham Carter and Julian Sands in *A Room with a View*

### As seen on screen

Florence's honeyed piazzas, cobbled streets and mediaeval palaces are simply made for a movie setting. Switch out Vespas for horse-drawn carriages, and the scenes that Edwardian tourist Lucy Honeychurch (played by a young Helena Bonham Carter in the 1985 adaptation of EM Forster's *A Room with a View*) frolicked around still look pretty similar today. Watch 2016's *Inferno* for a whistle-stop tour of yet more famous spots, this time through the eyes of Harvard professor Robert Langdon, as he pieces together clues from Dante's *Divine Comedy*. [Palazzo Vecchio](#), [Basilica Santa Croce](#), Porta Romana and Piazza della Signoria are all just as glorious in real life as on the big screen.



The Vasari Corridor connects the Palazzo Vecchio, the Uffizi Galleries and the Pitti Palace (Matt Richardson-Wood)

### Access all areas

Florence's cobbled streets and historic buildings require careful planning if you are differently abled. A good route with large, mostly flat flagstones and ramps starts in Piazza della Repubblica, goes down Via dei Calzaiuoli to Piazza della Signoria, along Via Por Santa Maria and over the Ponte Vecchio. The newly reopened [Vasari Corridor](#) is now fully accessible for wheelchair users, taking you through the Uffizi Galleries, over the Ponte Vecchio and into the Boboli Gardens – incorporating three of the city's major landmarks into one.

### The sensory six

Beyond the major monuments, Florence is a riot of delicious smells, flavours and experiences that appeal to all the senses.



The Fragrant Rose Garden was created in 1865 by Giuseppe Poggi



#### Smell

Stroll through the picturesque [Rose Garden](#) on Florence's Oltrarno quarter to enjoy the scent of 400 different varieties of roses.



A room at Hotel Continentale overlooking the Ponte Vecchio

### Where to stay

Perched on the Arno River, literally steps from the Ponte Vecchio, [Hotel Continentale Florence](#) is a chic, design-led retreat. Owned by fashion's Ferragamo family, this boutique property blends 1950s Italian glamour with modern minimalism – think crisp white interiors, curated fashion photography and pops of pastels. The rooms are stylish and serene (we recommend booking one with views of the river and the newly restored Vasari Corridor). The rooftop bar, La Terrazza, offers sweeping city vistas and is perfect for sunset aperitivos. While the hotel doesn't have a restaurant, a generous breakfast spread is available to guests at its sister hotel across the road.

[Book your stay](#)



Watch the sunset from Piazzale Michelangelo (Matt Richardson-Wood)



### The one thing

**DO:** Climb up to Piazzale Michelangelo to watch the sunset over Florence. It's an unforgettable moment where locals and tourists come together (often with a spritz and some spontaneous busking) to gaze over the city below at golden hour.

**EAT:** *Schiacciata* – a salty focaccia-style sandwich stuffed with local meats and cheeses – is Tuscany's original cheap eat. Head to [Lo SchiacciaVino](#) for the real deal, washed down with a glass of red wine.

**DRINK:** Legend has it the Negroni cocktail – a heady mix of gin, Campari and vermouth – was invented in Florence 100 years ago. Don't leave the city without sampling one. [Caffè Gilli](#) is one of the most iconic places for an evening aperitivo, while the glamorous [Atrium Bar](#) at the [Four Seasons](#) has a dedicated Negroni trolley.



Basilica di Santa Croce in Lecce

### Where next?

If you love Florence's classical architecture, try the southern city of Lecce, a Baroque masterpiece in the sun-drenched region of Puglia. Less than 30 minutes from [Bari](#) by train, there's a sunken Roman amphitheatre, a grand cathedral and limestone boulevards that glow golden at sunset. As if that's not enough, you're only a short hop from Puglia's white sand beaches.

[Book flights to Florence](#)



Phoebe Hunt

[Phoebe Hunt](#) is a British travel writer based between Italy and the UK. Her work has featured in *National Geographic*, *Time Out* and *Elite Traveler* and she runs a [coffee shop](#) in The Whitechapel Gallery

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