

Client: Lungarno Collection
Source: Italia!
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Clockwise from top left: Bikes for guests at Hotel Lungarno; see the sights in a Florentine tuk-tuk; Ponte Vecchio shopping; sushi at Fusion Bar; Captain Dorian with his boat in the fishing port of Gorino; the ubiquitous symbol of the Medici family; view over Ponte Vecchio from Hotel Continentale; San Miniato Abbey in the hills; shoes of silver screen stars at the Ferragamo Museum

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48 HOURS IN...

Florence

Staying in the heart of Renaissance Florence, by its oldest bridge, it's easy to immerse yourself in the city's magnificent heritage, says **Amanda Robinson**

Once the only Florentine bridge across the River Arno, built at the river's narrowest point, the Ponte Vecchio is made of stern stuff (and I'm not just talking about its stone construction), for not only do a jumble of tiny shops cling tenaciously like limpets to its butter-milk walls, it has withstood some floods, been rebuilt after other floods and more recently was the only bridge in Florence to avoid being destroyed by retreating Nazis during the Second World War. From a simple wooden bridge in Roman times to the stone construction of 1345, history has seen it reshaped to serve the needs of the times, and it is a symbol of Florence famous the world over. In the 14th century it was a hub for tanners, blacksmiths and butchers' shops (the river was the ideal way to get rid of their waste). These noisome trades were evicted at the end of the 16th century when jewellers and goldsmiths took up residence, and so it remains to the present day. Linking the Oltrarno, or south side, of Florence to the city centre, the 16th-century addition of the Vasari Corridor on top of the existing shops served as a discreet conduit between the Uffizi and the Pitti Palace to allow the Medici rulers to traverse the city in privacy and safety.

Our home for the weekend is right here on the bank of the Arno at Hotel Continentale, an effortlessly glamorous design hotel with the bustle of Ponte Vecchio just feet away from its door. From my second floor ➤

Images by Amanda Robinson unless otherwise stated



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WHAT TO SEE AND DO

PIAZZA DEL DUOMO ①

The complex of Santa Maria del Fiore is the focal point of tourist Florence. The main draw is the Duomo itself – you can go inside (free) but you will need to purchase a combined ticket (€18), or even climb up to Brunelleschi's cupola. The piazza also houses Giotto's Campanile and the majestic Baptistery (included in the ticket).

MUSEO DELL'OPERA DEL DUOMO ②
www.museumflorence.com

Much of the fabulous artwork inside the various buildings that make up the complex of the cathedral is now housed in this museum, making it well worth a visit. (Also included in the €18 ticket.)

UFFIZI & ACCADEMIA ③
www.uffizi.it

Florence's two biggest art galleries are packed with masterpieces, so it's hard to avoid the crowds. Book online and make a reservation to skip the queues. Combined ticket for the Uffizi, Pitti Palace and Boboli Gardens €38. Accademia ticket €16.

PALAZZO VECCHIO ④
www.musefirenze.it

Still in use as the Town Hall of Florence, the Palazzo Vecchio also houses a magnificent museum crammed with art and artefacts. Guided tours available. Tickets from €12.50.

PITTI PALACE & BOBOLI GARDENS ⑤
www.uffizi.it

One of the Medici residences, this grand palazzo is now home to several museums. Set aside a good few hours to do it justice, and don't miss the Palatine Gallery, packed with works of art from the masters. Enjoy the Boboli Gardens after your visit.

BASILICA DI SANTA CROCE ⑥
www.santacroceopera.it

With its wide open piazza in front, and an inviting pastel façade, the approach to this Gothic church is especially grand. Entrance is €8 and inside you'll find frescoes by Giotto, plus works by Donatello and Cimabue and more.

PALAZZO MEDICI-RICCARDI ⑦
www.palazzo-medici.it

The very first Medici palace in Via Cavour, with its construction supervised by Cosimo the Elder from 1444. The building will give you a true flavour of Florence from the Renaissance period. Entry from €7. (Find out more about this palace on page 54.)

FERRAGAMO MUSEUM ⑧
www.ferragamo.com

Dedicated to the life and works of shoemaker Salvatore Ferragamo and his family. Fascinating permanent displays and regular exhibitions. Entry from €9.



Florence cityscape from Hotel Continentale



Salone dei Cinquecento, Palazzo Vecchio



Ancient wooden trusses at the Palazzo Vecchio

DON'T MISS

CALCIO STORICO FIORENTINO

Experience the thrills and spills of Florence's traditional sport. A mix of wrestling, rugby and soccer, it originated in the 16th century and is played in Piazza Santa Croce, right in the centre of the city. Four teams from the historical quarters of the city dress in traditional costume and play against each other, with the final taking place on the 24th of June (see opposite).

window, magnificent views of the city's terracotta rooftops unfurl towards the horizon and the Arno shimmers into the distance, snaking its way lazily through the city. From the street below, we are a short walk from Palazzo Vecchio and the Uffizi Gallery, Piazza della Signoria, Santa Maria del Fiore and Palazzo Pitti. We are well placed for our Florentine weekend adventure.

specialities like *pappa al pomodoro*, *tagliata di manzo* and *torrellini a casa* were presented in this relaxed blue-and-white space, setting a decidedly nautical theme with the waters of the Arno twinkling merrily through the double-height picture window.

THE SECRETS OF THE PALACE
 The Piazza della Signoria has been the hub of the secular life of

The Palazzo Vecchio is threaded with secret passageways and hidden chambers

But first, a spot of lunch. The Continentale is part of the quartet of hotels in the Lungarno collection here in Florence owned and curated by the Ferragamo family. Guests are encouraged to dine at any of them. Joining the slipstream of shoppers thronging the Ponte Vecchio, we crossed over to the opposite bank where our reservation at the Pictau Lounge in Hotel Lungarno was waiting. Platters of Tuscan

Florence for centuries, the place for political gatherings. The Palazzo Vecchio with its distinctive Arnolfo tower is still the 'Town Hall' of Florence, with council offices, including one for the mayor, but its most magnificent rooms are now a museum. Built around the turn of the 14th century, it looks like a fortress from the outside, but was extended and the interiors renovated by Giorgio Vasari in the

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Mixology magic at Fuson Bar



Detail of Michelangelo's unfinished Pietà at OPA



Vinyl tunes and retro chic



Dusk at Hotel Continentale

16th century, when the Medicis held power, and Cosimo I made it his ducal residence.

There is much to see, including the vast Salone dei Cinquecento with dramatic battle scene frescoes on every inch of wall and ceiling (more on that later). Visit the Map Room for Cosimo I's outstanding collection of 16th-century cartography, a fitting collection for a nobleman with powerful political ambitions of his own.

In common with most medieval palaces, the Palazzo Vecchio is threaded with secret passageways and hidden chambers, an escape route in times of political strife. If you have time, take a tour with one of the expert guides, who will lead you from the steep and winding stairway of the Duke of Athens, to the magnificent Studiolo (study) of Francesco I, and the Tesoretto (little treasure) of Cosimo I.

The final flourish of the tour takes us to the trusses that support the magnificent ceiling of the Salone dei Cinquecento. This

cobwebbed, musty, creaking space above the ceiling has a precarious 'Jenga' complexity to it; it was constructed entirely from wood by Giorgio Vasari (with a little help from Michelangelo) after Cosimo commanded that the original ceiling of the *salone* should be raised a further seven metres. When you consider the mighty ceiling beneath, it is breathtaking in its engineering and fragility. Not to be missed.

WORKS IN PROGRESS

In 1296 the Opera del Duomo (Cathedral Works) was created by Arnolfo di Cambio, the architect of the Cathedral of Santa Maria del Fiore (to give the 'Duomo' its full title) in order to oversee the ongoing construction of the Duomo and its interiors. Very much a practical workshop, it was the place where all the artisans and craftsmen could devote themselves to ongoing works for the cathedral itself.

In the early 15th century it took up residence in another building at the east end of the cathedral, ➤

DON'T MISS

SAN GIOVANNI FIREWORKS
 Every June the 24th, Florence's patron saint San Giovanni is celebrated with events running right through the day: flag throwers' shows, a historic parade, rowers' competitions along the Arno and the Calcio Storico finals (see opposite). The celebrations end with a huge firework display from Piazzale Michelangelo. Watch from Ponte Santa Trinita, Ponte alla Carraia, or the Lungarni (Arno river banks) for the best views.

WHERE TO STAY

HOTEL CONTINENTALE ❶

Vicolo dell'Oro, 6/r

☎ +39 055 2726 4000

www.lungarnocollection.com

Part of the Ferragamo family's Lungarno Collection, this welcoming hotel sits right by the Ponte Vecchio. The 44 rooms and suites are light and airy, with the décor inspired by the 1950s; a neutral palette and wooden furniture in unpainted mid-century style, while outside freestanding mirrors and billowing white drapes reflect light to create a restful ambience. Excellent views from the upper storeys, especially from the Consorti Suite in the Consorti Tower. La Terrazza roof garden also has stunning 360° views (and a private lift), for breakfast in the summer, and also for early evening drinks – very popular. Double room (off-season) €230 (excluding 10 per cent city tax and breakfast).

HOTEL LUNGARNO 10

Borgo San Jacopo, 14

☎ +39 055 27261

www.lungarnocollection.com

This stylish hotel has much to recommend it. Its location is superb – overlooking Ponte Vecchio (on the opposite bank to Hotel Continentale) and within easy reach of many of the main sights. Rooms are elegant, staff are helpful and the bar's terrace is just the perfect spot for *aperitivo*. Oh, and the Borgo San Jacopo restaurant happens to be Michelin-starred. If you're in Florence for the art, the Lungarno has an added USP – spot original works by artists such as Picasso and Cocteau hanging on the walls in the public spaces. Double room from €390.

PORTRAIT FIRENZE ❶

Lungarno degli Acciaiuoli, 4

☎ +39 055 2726 4000

www.lungarnocollection.com

Also owned by the Ferragamo family, the five-star Portrait Firenze is all about sleek elegance and comfort. The interior décor takes its cue from the birth of Italian couture in the 1950s and offers a crisp, stylish feel to its plush suites. The cool retro ambience extends to the in-house Caffè dell'Oro (see page 24). Rooms from £440 per night (two adults sharing, excluding breakfast, VAT and city tax).



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WHERE TO EAT

THE FUSION BAR & RESTAURANT

Vicolo dell'Oro, 3
 ☎ +39 055 2726 6987
www.lungarnocollection.com
 So-called because of the inventive fusion of Mediterranean and Oriental cuisines, the menu of this modern restaurant offers good sushi and tapas, but go for the inventive cocktails and the relaxed ambience too. Happy Hour is between 5-7pm, when all cocktails are €10.
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BORGO SAN JACOPO RESTAURANT

Borgo San Jacopo, 62/r
 ☎ +39 055 281661
www.lungarnocollection.com
 Michelin-starred chef Peter Brunel's menus are inspiring with tasting menus and à la carte for a wonderful gastronomic experience. His potato spaghetti is quite extraordinary. Overlooking the Arno, this is the perfect venue for a special celebration.
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EATALY

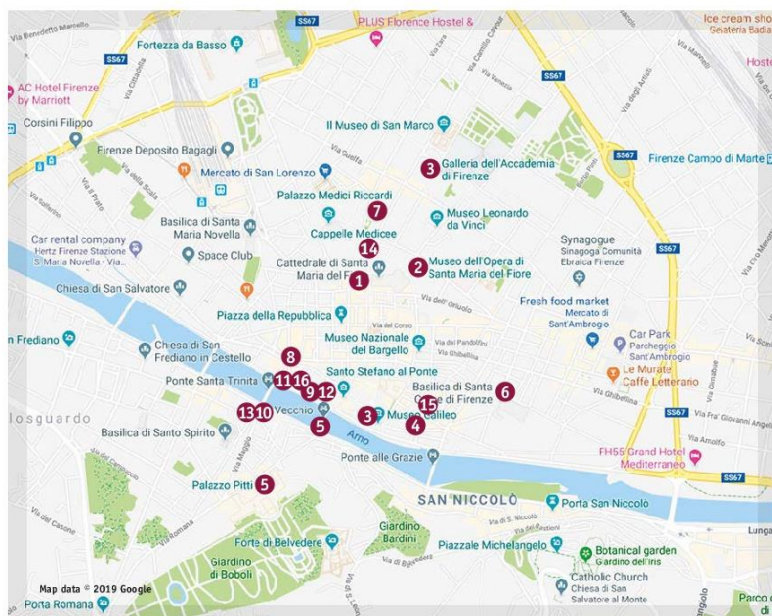
Via De' Martelli, 22/r
 ☎ +39 055 015 3601
www.eataly.net
 Step inside this food lovers' paradise for an irresistible array of fresh, local food and drink, with a café that serves excellent coffees and a bar-restaurant upstairs. There's a bakery on the premises and it's a great place for people watching. Check out the rolling programme of cookery courses and events through the year if you're staying longer or coming back again.
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BERBERÈ

Via Dei Benci, 7
 ☎ +39 055 399 4589
www.berbere.it
 This award-winning pizzeria makes its own dough fresh every day, using organic stoneground flours, water and a sourdough starter. Craft beers and organic wines complement the extensive pizza menu which caters for meat eaters and vegetarians. The desserts are delicious! There are two pizzerie in Florence with several more in Italy and one in London.
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CAFFÈ DELL'ORO

Lungarno degli Acciaiuoli, 2p
 ☎ +39 055 2726 8912
www.lungarnocollection.com
 An truly elegant all-day-dining Italian bistro overlooking the River Arno by the Ponte Vecchio. Push the boat out with their unlimited Sunday brunch, which is a real feast of regional dishes and delicious treats.
 + + +



DON'T MISS

FLORENCE BIENNALE

In 2019 the 12th Florence Biennale will take place from 18-27 October. Since its inception in 1997, nearly 6,000 artists from over 100 countries have taken part in a wonderful celebration of contemporary art. It takes place in the Spadolini Pavilion of the Fortezza da Basso, in Viale Filippo Strozzi. ☎ +39 055 324 9173; info@florencebiennale.org; www.florencebiennale.org

➤ KEY TO RESTAURANT PRICES (full meal per person, not including wine)
 + Up to €25
 + + €26-€50
 + + + More than €50

where, over seven hundred years later its modern reincarnation, the Museo dell'Opera del Duomo, is housed. Curating and conserving those works and their fascinating history, this superb museum recently opened (2015), the magnificent outcome of a €50 million building project. If you want to understand the history of the Duomo over the way, start your journey here; a tour

Adorned with masterful medieval frescoes, it is a place of stillness and contemplation

guide is a must and you will leave with a much deeper appreciation of Florence's magnificent edifice and the medieval visionaries behind it.

You immediately get a sense of the scale of the original vision in the first room you visit, a massive hall housing Arnolfo di Cambio's restored cathedral façade and some of the statuary which was carved to go in its niches. Marvel at the Madonna with startling blue irises (made of glass to reflect the light and make the eyes dance) then turn around to take in the three-dimensional splendour of recently renovated gilded bronze Doors of Paradise by Lorenzo Ghiberti, taken from the Baptistery and housed here

away from the vagaries of modern-day pollution and mass tourism.

Everywhere you turn, there is a wealth of original art, mosaics and statues telling the proud history of the cathedral and Baptistery. I would single out Donatello's *La Maddalena* (1453-55); carved in wood, the realism of the haggard features of penitent Mary Magdalene shocked its audience in the 15th

century, yet it touches our modern sensibilities in a remarkably contemporary way. Michelangelo's unfinished *Pietà* is also here: hooded Nicodemus is widely believed to be a self-portrait of the ageing artist, who possibly intended this sculpture for his own tomb. Take a closer look to observe how Christ's lower limbs appear awkwardly placed. Was this an error of perspective made by the grand master in his declining years?

SEE THE CITY BY TUK-TUK

Get a different view of the city and its environs with a tuk-tuk tour. Florence By Night, Hidden Places and more from €50 per hour. www.tuktukflorence.net

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Borgo San Jacopo restaurant looks out over the Arno



Caffè con panna at Eataly



View along the Arno from Ponte Vecchio

Finally our guide takes us in the lift to the top floor. On the terrace outside, Brunelleschi's magnificent Duomo is right there before us, almost close enough to reach out and touch its 14th-century cloak of russet-hued terracotta tiles.

LOOK TO THE HILLS

From close-up views of venerable buildings, it was time for a wider perspective on this glorious city as we drove through Oltrarno in a buzzy little tuk-tuk. It bounced us all the way up Viale Galileo to the Abbey of San Miniato al Monte (www.sanminiatoalmon.te.it). Built over the shrine of 3rd-century martyr San Miniato, the basilica is a stunning example of Tuscan Romanesque architecture and a watchful sentry over the city below.

Despite the abbey's popularity on the tourist map, the interior is so peaceful, illuminated only by natural light filtering in from outside. Adorned with masterful medieval frescoes, artwork and mosaics, it is a place of stillness and contemplation, and a reflective respite from the bustle of the city centre. Look down on Florence spread out below, the orange roofs like fallen leaves and the dappled Arno criss-crossed with bridges, a lasting memory of this cherished Renaissance city. ■



The art of food by Peter Brunel



Spoilt for choice at Eataly Florence

GETTING THERE

► BY PLANE

British Airways flies to Florence from London City. A greater range of flights operates between UK airports and Pisa, from which Florence is easily accessible. From Pisa airport you can take the train (from €10 one way – about an hour and a half, either direct or changing at Pisa Centrale) or the Airport Bus Express service (€28 return, about 80 minutes).

► BY CAR OR TRAIN

You can drive to Florence from Pisa in a little over an hour, and it is easily accessible from main roads in Tuscany, but driving in Florence itself isn't recommended. Santa Maria Novella train station is well placed for the city and is well served by high-speed trains across Italy, so provides a far better option.

► GETTING AROUND

You can pretty much walk everywhere you need to in the city centre, but if you want to go further or get around faster, try hiring a bike or using the comprehensive bus system.



Gilded sandal made for a Hollywood epic