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September 2014

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Summer Cities

Slap on the SPF and slinky sandals. From picnics in parks to carousing after dark, we've got the weekend lowdown on 10 of our favourite urban hotspots...

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Well preserved:
the ornate cathedral
complex in the Piazza
del Duomo is part of the
city's Unesco World
Heritage Site

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Summer
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Florence

There's as much beauty outside Florence's ancient buildings as in. **Donald Strachan** takes a stroll along the River Arno

Friday afternoon

Who says you must pay top dollar for a hotel with a knockout roof terrace? Rooms at Antica Dimora Johlea (00 39 055 463 3292, johlea.it; doubles from £72, B&B) mix trad Florentine with boho-chic — picture four-poster beds and Persian rugs over herringbone floors. And the rooftop view is spectacular at night, when the cathedral dome is illuminated.

Friday dinner

Take a 15-minute walk to 360 Three-Sixty, the rooftop poolside bar at the Grand Hotel Minerva (grandhotelmilnera.com), where cocktails cost about £10 and a mini-tray of tapas dishes just £4. Look out over a Renaissance square that has become the *haute couture* set's second home.

Saturday early morning

Not every great Florence artwork is locked inside a museum. The Loggia dei Lanzi, a Gothic-arched veranda in Piazza della Signoria, doubles as an open-air sculpture gallery with marbles and bronzes, including Cellini's *Perseus*, holding aloft the severed head of Medusa. Get there early, because the square becomes a tour-group favourite later.

Saturday morning

Do you have a head for heights? You'll need it for a walk on the roof terraces of Florence's cathedral — 32m up, you get a unique close-up of Brunelleschi's giant dome, and a view over a sea of terracotta tiles to the Chianti hills beyond. Tickets (£24) include entry to all the sights of Piazza del Duomo. Book ahead on 00 39 347 452 6463 or email L.prosperi@operaduomo.firenze.it.

Saturday late afternoon

There's always a few shacks open at the Mercato delle Pulci, Florence's daily flea market in Piazza dei Ciompi. It's a treasure trove of portable trinkets, antique prints and postcards, vintage Florentine costume jewellery and other hand-luggage-sized souvenirs.

Saturday sunset

Just as the sun hits the horizon, that's when you need to be at the Continentale hotel for cocktails in its Medieval tower; bartenders at La Terrazza (lungarnocollection.com) mix a mean Negroni. The vibe is casual — sandals and summer gear is fine. Cocktails cost £12 to £14, and set you up for a romantic riverside walk.

Saturday late evening

There's always a buzz in trendy Sant'Ambrogio, where bar-restaurant Vagalume (Via Pietrapiana 40R; 00 39 055 246 6740; dishes about £7) has alfresco tables. The cuisine is light and modern, a break from Florence's hearty cooking traditions. Mix and match from a chalkboard, small-plate menu, maybe cuttlefish with chard, followed by rabbit with white wine and juniper.

Sunday morning

A short stroll from the hotel is Florence by Bike (florencebybike.it), where a vintage-style cycle costs £7 for a half-day. The old centre is fairly flat, and now mostly closed to traffic; Sundays are quieter still. Take a map to navigate the warren of Medieval streets around Dante's church (Santa Margherita dei Cerchi), then down to the riverside cycle path.

Get me there

BA (ba.com) flies from London City to Florence from £131 return.

LOCAL'S TIP

Matteo Fantini is the owner of trendy Florence restaurant IO: Osteria Personale

- 'For a view, don't follow the tourists to Piazzale Michelangelo. Instead, have *aperitivi* at the Terrazza Bardini (Costa San Giorgio 4a; moba.fi.it), where you can **snack and sip cocktails on the terrace of a 17th-century villa.**
- 'Florentines don't drink in the touristy bars near the cathedral. Head south of the river to Via de' Renai in the **San Niccolò district, where the bars are packed with locals.**' ➤