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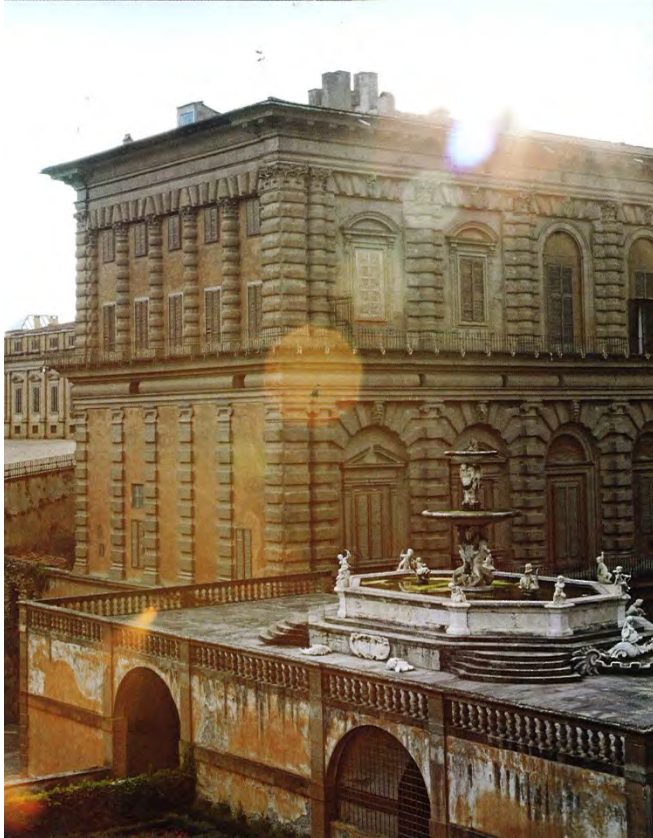


SOMEWHERE FOR THE WEEKEND?

In Florence, even the graffiti is ancient. But now the city is getting into bed with iconoclastic art, edgy architecture and quirky twists on regional food

By Nicky Swallow

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From left: Four Seasons Hotel Firenze; view from the hotel. Opposite, clockwise from top left: SoprArno Suites; a statue on Ponte Santa Trinita; La Ménagère restaurant; Boboli Gardens amphitheatre. Previous page, SoprArno Suites

GONE ARE THE BELCHING BUSES AND BUZZING SCOOTERS. FLORENCE'S IMAGE AS A FUSTY LIVING MUSEUM IS BEING CHALLENGED

FLORENCE IS ON A BIT OF A ROLL. For a start, the city is gleaming from the ongoing clean-up ordered by former mayor Matteo Renzi (now Italy's youngest prime minister) that banned motorised traffic from much of the city centre, spruced up scruffy piazzas and filled in pot holes. Gone are the belching buses, bumper-to-bumper cars and incessant buzzing scooters, replaced by the sounds of cheerful voices and heels click-clacking on pavements. There's also a fresher, funkier vibe to the whole place that's challenging Florence's image as a fusty living museum.

Of course, the city's blockbuster sights attract millions of selfie-seeking visitors every year, so it's difficult to avoid the crowds (although it's quieter between November and February), but as a long-time resident, I've learnt to be a bit more selective and get my culture fix from the many off-the-radar treasures: Masaccio's seminal frescoes in the **Brancacci Chapel**, Ghirlandaio's exquisite *Last Supper* in the

refectory of **Ognissanti** and the madcap haul of curiosities amassed for the **Museo Stibbert**, from splendid 16th-century Asian armour to snuff boxes and shoe buckles. Or I fast-forward a few hundred years to the collection of 20th-century art in the new **Museo del Novecento**, which is housed in the cloistered Spedale delle Leopoldine, with paintings and sculptures by Filippo de Pisis, Giorgio de Chirico, Lucio Fontana and Marino Marini.

Elsewhere, **Palazzo Strozzi** (now under the directorship of Arturo Galansino, fresh from the Royal Academy of Arts in London) is brilliant for its creative exhibitions, such as *Divine Beauty from Van Gogh to Chagall and Fontana*, which runs until January 2016. The whitewashed vaulted cellars of **Strozziina** gallery has more challenging contemporary shows (in the past: Bill Viola, Francis Bacon and Gerhard Richter). For a complete break from fine art, check out **Museo Salvatore Ferragamo** and its fascinating

collection of shoes made for A-listers, including Ava Gardner and Judy Garland, or head to **Museo Gucci** for the brand's customised 1979 Cadillac Seville and fabulous, red-carpet dresses (there's also a sleek café-restaurant and terrace with ringside views of Piazza della Signoria). Take the 10-minute, puff-inducing walk up to the newly renovated **Forto di Belvedere** to see why Kim Kardashian and Kanye West chose this rambling 16th-century defensive structure as the venue for their wedding; the views over Florence's celebrated red rooftops are magnificent, but I suspect the big draw were the formidable walls to keep the photographers out.

Opera plays an important part in the cultural life here, and now after endless delays and financial hiccups, the £175-million **Opera di Firenze**, designed by Paolo Desideri, has opened near Cascine Park. Even if you don't like opera, the architecture is spectacular: a soaring, asymmetrical cubic complex ➤

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From left: retro design at Amblé furniture shop-cocktail bar; one of the rooms at JK Place hotel; a small bar on the way to Santo Spirito church

➤ that lords it over its neighbours, lights twinkling at night through gaps in the tiled cladding. Inside, the wood-panelled, 1,800-seater main theatre will host an impressive line-up of productions headlining the winter season: Verdi's *Rigoletto*, Bizet's *The Pearl Fishers* and Mozart's *Così fan tutte*.

Florence's food scene is thriving, with the **Taste** festival pulling in 300 stalls and 15,000 visitors every March, the opening of Oscar Farinetti's emporium **Eataly** and last year's transformation of the first floor of the splendid 19th-century iron-and-glass **Mercato Centrale** into a sprawling marketplace. It showcases the region's best artisanal producers, selling freshly made mozzarella, pasta, cured meats, fried fish, ice cream and, at **Sud Pizzeria**, Romualdo Rizzuti's puffy Neapolitan pizzas, which are among the finest in town.

I often go to **Amblé**, a vintage interiors store-café hidden in a tiny *piazzetta* near Ponte Vecchio, which specialises in made-to-order *tramezzini* (triangular sandwiches). The unusual fillings at **Semel**, a tiny sandwich bar overlooking the Sant' Ambrogio market, are amazing (try the venison) as is the *panino con la mortadella* at pared-down deli **Ino** near the Uffizi Gallery – a favourite with Renzi when he was mayor. For something a bit more sophisticated, try the lunchtime tapas at Michelin-starred **Ora d'Aria** next door. But the name on everybody's lips these days is **La Ménagère**, a multi-functional vaulted space near San Lorenzo

market that combines a restaurant, tapas bar, flower shop and a home-accessories collection. Elsewhere, award-winning barista Francesco Sanapo brews some of the best coffee around at **Ditta Artigianale**, a bustling white-tiled and stripped-wood space that wouldn't look out of place in Brooklyn. There are more than 40 different gins on the menu too, making it one of the hottest aperitivo addresses.

Increasingly, savvy visitors are going across the river to the boho **Oltrarno** district where stylish eateries, independent

THE NEW OPERA HOUSE, WITH ITS SOARING CUBIC ARCHITECTURE, LORDS IT OVER ITS NEIGHBOURS

shops and contemporary-art galleries are replacing traditional workshops. For an early-evening Negroni, join cool young things in the bars and restaurants around the lovely Piazza Santo Spirito. **Volume**, once the Bini brothers' wood-turning atelier, is a good choice and it's close to **Il Santo Bevitore**, which, after 13 years and despite the recent influx, is still everyone's favourite dinner spot, thanks to its buzzy atmosphere and simple menu (porcini mushroom soup, excellent steak tartare). Or feast on earthy, Florentine-inspired *taglierini* with cavolo nero and walnut pesto at rustic **Il Magazzino** on pretty Piazza della Passera (there's also

a brilliant wine list with remarkably modest mark-ups). I was also recently impressed by up-and-coming chef Simone Cipriani's contemporary riff on regional food at **Il Santo Graal**, where dishes such as a sinfully rich chicken-liver pâté with grappa, and tortelli filled with spicy sausage and fresh ginger, are earning him a solid, local fan base.

If you fancy some fish, head to relaxed former warehouse **Pescheria San Pietro** near the train station, which has a no-fuss menu of hopping-fresh fish and seafood (the sautéed clams and sizzling *fritto misto* are superb). Finally, there's **Bottega del Buon Caffé**, still glowing from its recent Michelin star and recent riverside relocation. It's now owned by two Danes, Claus and Jeanette Thottrup (of rural boutique beauty Borgo Santo Pietro), and you can expect accomplished modern Italian cooking from Antonello Sardi, a weighty wine list, a wine bar with squashy sofas and a terrace with Arno views.

For somewhere to stay, **SoprArno Suites** (doubles from about £110) in Oltrarno is a relaxed home-away-from-home with 11 gorgeous rooms, some with painted ceilings and free-standing baths, all with an intriguing collection of recycled, reclaimed and reconditioned furniture, lamps and objects. Its owners are opening a new hotel this month. A more edgy option, if you don't mind its suburban location, is super-cool **Riva Lofts** (doubles from about £125): local architect Claudio Nardi converted artisan workshops on the south bank of the Arno into 10 minimalist studios ➤

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From left: Il Palagio restaurant at Four Seasons Hotel Firenze; a street on the left bank of Arno river; a Superior Room at SoprArno Suites

➤ with a garden and lap pool. Back in the thick of things, the Ferragamo-owned **Portrait Firenze** (doubles from about £280), last year's most headline-grabbing opening, has Ponte Vecchio views and gadgets galore in its 37 dove-grey suites. There are more river vistas, and a Clarins spa just downstream at the palatial **St Regis** (doubles from about £225), where Valeria Piccini's Michelin-starred cooking at the rather formal Winter Garden By Caino is worth staying in for. Or you can nip across the piazza to the recently refreshed **The Westin Excelsior** (doubles from about £325) and its rooftop restaurant Sesto, where young Tuscan chef Matteo Lorenzini has just taken the helm. His

dishes showcase regional, strictly seasonal ingredients with a hint of Asia thrown in. **Four Seasons Hotel Firenze** (doubles from about £235) may not be located right in the city centre, but the 11-acre gardens, huge pool, serious spa and Il Palagio restaurant more than make up for it.

For something more intimate, try **Al Palazzo del Marchese di Camugliano** (doubles from about £170). It was the former residence of the Marchesi Niccolini, who raided the family vaults to furnish rooms with fine antiques and paintings. Stylish **JK Place Firenze** (doubles from about £330) is still the fashion crowd's favourite with its immaculate Michele Bonan interiors, cocooning, club-like

atmosphere and JK Lounge – a must on the cocktail circuit. The more affordable and newly opened **Garibaldi Blu** (doubles from about £95) shares the same views of Piazza Santa Maria Novella and has a spectacular vaulted sitting room. Its 22 smart rooms are done out in moody blues, greys and dusky pinks with Sixties-inspired custom-made furniture and hardwood floors.

This has been a big year for Florence: the city is celebrating the 150th anniversary of its short stint as capital of Italy. The headline news is the recent re-opening of the magnificent but underrated **Museo dell'Opera del Duomo** (it will be almost double the size). And then the Pope is coming to town any time now... 

THE INSIDE TRACK



Top Florence addressés from shoe-designer Tommaso Melani, who also heads up the city's leather-making school

'I enjoy seeing any artisan at work, but some stand out for the sheer genius of their creations. **Alessandro Dari** is one: he makes jewellery in a totally innovative way, like an alchemist. Master perfumer **Lorenzo Villoresi** is another; if you're lucky to bag an appointment at his atelier, you will

enter another world. I recommend the small **Bottega delle Antiche Terme** for exquisite made-to-measure shirts and **Grevi** for hats. At **Scuola del Cuoio**, you can buy beautiful leather goods and see experts working with a team of young people from all over the world.

I tell visiting friends to start the day at **Caffè Cibrèo** before a wander around the **Sant'Ambrogio** market. The church of **Orsanmichele** is interesting for its history (it was once a market and grain store) and for the statues commissioned by the Florentine guilds that stand in the niches. On a fine day **Boboli Gardens**

is magical, especially the lower part where the locals go. For an aperitivo, try either the little bar tucked under **Piazzale Michelangelo** – the views are breathtaking – or **Rivalta** on the Arno, where you can sit on the river wall. **Zeb** is good for a quick lunch of homemade pasta and the owners are delightful. I eat at **Sostanza** at least 10 times a year and always order the same thing: artichoke *tortino*, sautéed chicken breast, *bistecca alla Fiorentina* and meringue cake. The place is timeless.' *Tommaso Melani is CEO of Stefano Berner shoes and co-owns Scuola del Cuoio*