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TRAVEL FOR THE CONNOISSEUR

ART *Express*

FLORENCE FLORENCE

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There are two very special ways to see Florence for the first time — perhaps each time. If you arrive in the evening, savor Florence by twilight: start at the darkly medieval **Palazzo Vecchio**, on the Piazza della Signoria that has been the political heart of the city for seven centuries, then walk the Via dei Calzaiuoli up to the **Piazza del Duomo**. You will flow along in crowds performing the nightly *passeggiata* — the ritual of strolling to see and be seen, as much an Italian art form as the fresco. Take your eyes off the well-dressed couples and grunge-attired teens to shop the sparkling high-end windows, then look up higher, to the spectacularly illuminated facades of 15th-century palazzi. The city at twilight is an ancient, knowing, sophisticated place.

Then there is Florence by morning: rise early and shake off the aches and cramps of travel with a brisk climb up the **Campanile** at the **Duomo (Santa Maria del Fiore)**, the fine-boned bell tower designed by none other than **Giotto**. It is during the day's early blush (around 8:30; 9:00 from November to March) that the cathedral looks its finest. Ascending, you'll glimpse bits of the church and its baptistry through narrow windows, and the sun-washed pink, green and white marble forms become glittering abstractions that seem to glow on the tower walls. At the top: panoramic views of the waking city in its coat of red tiles — birthplace of the art of our culture — accompanied by the music of pealing church bells. Morning in Florence—eternally youthful, a place to take your breath away.

Youthful, yes, but you don't come to Florence seeking the hip, the now. You come, as did so many expatriates before—Henry James, D.H. Lawrence, E. M. Forster—to find the Renaissance. Still, the Renaissance is continually changing in Florence; a **Lorenzo Ghiberti** bronze of St. John the Baptist is restored, and the saint's eyes stare with a renewed, other-worldly gleam that haunts one for days. **Masaccio** frescoes are cleaned, and the figures leap alive.

The city's changes are not always for the best. Florence's greatest museum, the **Uffizi**, is still recovering from the May 1993 terrorist bombing that ripped its western wall, killing five people and damaging some 32 paintings. Only a few of the ravaged galleries have been reinstalled; key is the **Michelangelo Room**, with the artist's *Tondo Doni*, a muscular Madonna and Child. Room 35 is eerie: it is hung with photographs of 21 paintings just after the explosion, their surfaces pummeled by flying debris, and with the 16th- and 17th-century paintings themselves, now restored. But the museum's Baroque painting rooms—including the **Veronese Room**, which had been slated to reopen last year—remained closed as of January.

Of course, the grand museum does offer a few consolations! There is the stunning room of **Botticelli**. And there is the didactic gallery that holds the most basic of art history lessons: a side-by-side comparison of three paintings of the *Maestà*, the Mother of Christ enthroned. **Duccio's Rucellai Madonna**, drawing on **Cimabue's** example, is medieval art at its apex; **Giotto's** rendition steps directly toward the Renaissance. This is a gallery that can be revisited over a lifetime.

Other old haunts to which we return include the **Galleria Dell'Accademia**, where tourists of every stripe come to gawk at **Michelangelo's David**, ignoring the roughly elegant "nonfinito," the unfinished sculptures of **Quattro Prigioni** (the four prisoners) and *Saint Matthew*; the foreboding **Bargello** (Museo Nazionale del Bargello), the

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only museum dedicated to Florentine sculpture of the Renaissance; and the fabulous **Palazzo Pitti** and its **Boboli Gardens** (though the garden's surreal Grotta Grande is currently shuttered for repairs). But why not some smaller museums, too, even if they are a bit off the track? The **Museo dell'Opera di Santa Croce**, right next to **Brunelleschi's** solemnly overpowering **Capella de' Pazzi**, might be overlooked in the heady aftermath of a visit to one of the key Renaissance masterworks of architecture—but it shouldn't be. The little museum collection is one of the most carefully displayed in Florence, an example for its somewhat haphazard larger siblings in the city. And, notwithstanding the guidebooks' dismissal of **Casa Buonarrotti**, because **Michelangelo** never actually lived in these houses he once owned, his model of a proposal for the facade of **San Lorenzo**, along with several sculptures and an important collection of drawings (shown in rotation in a special gallery designed for the purpose), are well worth repeated visits.

And there are a few "new" sights in Florence. The recently (1989) restored frescoes in the **Brancacci Chapel** at the church of **Santa Maria del Carmine**, the great masterpiece of **Masaccio** and his teacher **Masolino**, are a revelation. Heavily damaged by mold, dirt and censorious scribbling, the paintings had previously served as only a faint reminder of one of the most influential works of the early 15th century—and thus of the entire history of Western art. Now, Adam and Eve suffer again their naked shame, buildings and alleyways recede exuberantly into the depths provided by the new invention of perspective, and such true-to-life details as the initiate, shivering unclothed while he waits to be baptized, are sparkling in their clarity.

At the **Palazzo Medici-Riccardi**, a St. John the Baptist by **Lorenzo Ghiberti** from the facade of the strange, rectangular church of **Orsanmichele** is on long-term exhibition. Painstakingly restored, the larger-than-life bronze gleams magnificently, awesomely. It is one of the masterpieces of sculpture, from anywhere, from any time. All thirteen of the big Orsanmichele sculptures (by the likes of **Donatello** and others) are slated for restoration, after which they will be assembled in a museum specifically designed to house them. (No visit to the Palazzo, certainly, should exclude the short trip upstairs to the little chapel housing **Benozzo Gozzoli's** fresco masterpiece, *The Procession of the Magi to Bethlehem*).

If your interests extend to the history of photography — or simply to wonderful photographs of Florence and Italy in the 1800s — a stop at the **Museo di Storia della Fotografia Alinari** is a must. The Alinari brothers' operation was famous in the 19th century as one of the world's most prolific suppliers of landscape views and photographs of art and architecture. Now housed in one of the few contemporary architectural structures in the city, a bright yellow metal insert in a street level hall of the **Palazzo Rucellai**, Alinari presents well-designed exhibitions on photographic themes, both historical and contemporary. An excellent museum book shop is supplemented by an attractive (if more commercial) gift shop next door, featuring reproductions on everything from posters to jewelry boxes.

The Alinari museum is just off Florence's main shopping drag, **Via dei Tornabuoni** in the Santa Maria Novella neighborhood. The street and its environs may not offer the range of goods found in Milan or Rome, but the selections here are elegantly choice.

Look for **Gucci**; this is the famous fashion house's flagship store, with the status-conscious staff and soaring prices that one would expect.

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From the United States, to access Florence telephone numbers precede each by 011.39.55.

HOTELS

City Center

Hotel Hermitage, Vicolo Marzio 1, Tel. 28.72.16, Fax 21.22.08. The Hermitage's 29 rooms on the top floors of a medieval tower next to the Ponte Vecchio enjoy fabulous views high above the street noise. Breakfast on the rooftop terrace lays the Arno and all of historic Florence out for inspection (moderate).

Hotel Loggiato dei Serviti, Piazza S.S. Annunziata 3, Tel. 28.95.92, Fax 28.95.95.

Grand Hotel Villa Cora, Viale Niccolò Machiavelli 18, Tel. 229.84.51, Fax 22.90.86. A beautiful 19th-century Renaissance-style mansion, Villa Cora is set in a grand formal garden featuring a heated pool. The decor is neo-Classical, including frescoed ceilings in the public rooms overlooking the Oltrarno district. Rooftop terrace views are splendid (very expensive).

Hotel Torre di Bellosquardo, Via Roti Michelozzi 2, Tel. 229.81.45, Fax 22.90.08.

Albergo Albion, Via Il Prato 22r, Tel. 21.41.71. A small family-owned-and-run hotel cared for by Susanna and Massimo Ravalli, who pride themselves on personal service. Mama, the chef, hands down her own mother's recipes; sisters are sous chef and chamber maid, uncle is the waiter, olive oil comes from the family farm — it's definitely a family affair. Located near the Excelsior and the Grand, it is the only neo-Gothic hotel in Florence; three stories, no elevators (moderate). See *Restaurants*.

Hotel Brunelleschi, Piazza Santa Elisabetta 3, Tel. 56.20.68, Fax 21.96.53. Steps from the Duomo, this very elegant 94-room hotel with its own tiny piazza encompasses a 6th-century prison tower and a top terrace with lovely views (very expensive).

Hotel Excelsior, Piazza Ognissanti 3, Tel. 26.42.01, Fax 21.02.78.

Hotel Grand, Piazza Ognissanti 1, Tel. 28.87.81, Fax 21.74.00. Another CIGA hotel just across the piazza from the Excelsior, the Grand is said to have been a noble 15th-century palazzo. Today it has 109 rooms in the Renaissance style (very expensive).

Hotel Helvetia e Bristol, Via de' Pescioni 2, Tel. 28.78.14, Fax 28.83.53. A member of the Relais & Châteaux group, the

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hotel has been restored to its former 19th-century grandeur, when it was Florence's finest. Beautiful antiques grace the 18th-century building close by the Duomo (very expensive).

Outside the City

Villa San Michele, Via Doccia 4, Fiesole (5 miles NE of central Florence), Tel. 594.51, Fax 59.87.34. A truly legendary respite, thought to have been designed in part by Michelangelo (the facade), the villa began as a monastery but, by the time of Napoleon, it had become a private palazzo. It has 28 fabulously appointed rooms, most with Jacuzzis and views; dining in pleasant weather in the lovely open loggia; a renowned Tuscan restaurant; glorious gardens and pool — what can we say! Open mid-March through November (very expensive).

RESTAURANTS

Enoteca Pinchiorri, Via Ghibellina 87, Tel. 24.27.77. Perhaps because it is often said to be among Italy's finest restaurants, with one of the continent's great wine cellars, you pay dearly for Pinchiorri's fame, but the fare here, extraordinarily artful, Michelin-three-star *cucina nuova*, and the setting — the ground floor of the 15th-century Palazzo Ciofi-Iacometti — are equally sublime. There is a fixed-price tasting menu with special wines selected for each course (very expensive).

Alle Murate, Via Ghibellina 52r, Tel. 24.06.18. Italian-Mediterranean cuisine that is innovative and light is served in a cool modern setting punctuated by soft jazz — neither Tuscan nor rustic! Try the wine bar — with a fine selection — for a quick bite (moderate).

Cibrèo, Via de' Macci 118r, Tel. 234.11.00. Not to be confused with **Trattoria del Cibrèo**, Piazza Ghiberti 35 (the back room with a different address, informal atmosphere, and communal seating — but the same kitchen), or **Cibrèo Caffè**, across the street at Via Andrea del Verrocchio 5r, where you can pop in for a glass of wine or an espresso with snacks, Ristorante Cibrèo is a local classic noted for its "Florentine comfort food" (expensive).

Cantinetta di Palazzo Antinori, Piazza de' Antinori 3, Tel. 29.22.34.

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Emilio Pucci's company has headquarters in **Palazzi Pucci**, a grand conglomerate of townhouses where one can buy not only the loud, brash scarves but olive oil and other produce from the Pucci Tuscan estate. Also in the Santa Maria Novella district is **Passamaneria Valmar**, with exquisite needlepoint and brocade fabrics and trimmings, by the piece or done up in throw pillows. And do not miss **Officina Profumo-Farmaceutica di Santa Maria Novella**, a 750-year-old "pharmacy" that must be seen to be believed. Muster your courage and enter a store more like the churches you've been visiting, following a long red carpet through a Renaissance-style hallway to a huge Gothic salesroom. You make your selections of heavenly soaps, perfumes and health elixirs, all manufactured by the Officina, from vitrine displays that will remind you of chapels in the Duomo. Your order is dispensed from a grand altar of carved oak.

Off a quiet side street in the **Oltarno** (the south bank of the Arno River, where tourists less often venture) is **Antico Setificio Fiorentino**, an ancient silk factory that was, in recent years, revived by that connoisseur of fine fabrics, **Emilio Pucci**. You can make an appointment with the director to see the 17th-century looms in action (Tel. 21.38.61). Or simply stop in the dusky, slightly musty retail outlet, where expert fabric workers can show you gorgeous linens and silks in colors muted and bright—wonderful for unique draperies or upholsteries. (Just ring the bell at the iron gate).

Between the Ponte Vecchio and the Pitti Palace, on the lively Via de' Guicciardini, look for **Freon**. The owner of this small handbag shop creates her own designs. And what designs they are! Long, cylindrical bags in brown suede with little metal "feet"—a bag seemingly made to transport a dachshund. Or a cone-shaped evening bag with a drawstring top and spindly metal tripod legs. Nothing you buy here is sold in the U.S., and the prices (\$100-\$200) are reasonable. Perhaps there have been no great ceramists in Florence since the days of the della Robbia workshops, but **Andreini Antica Bottega Artigiana** must feel something like the Quattrocento studios of that famous family of sculptors. The artist Andreini makes his living doing restoration work and copying—loosely—the more popular works of the masters.

One craft that is going strong in Florence: cooking. The city is filled with good restaurants and several exceptional ones. Always the food harks back to the country; it is hearty and often plain, but always respectful of tradition. With winter comes such seminal Florentine dishes as *ribollita*, a cross between a soup and porridge, that combines bread or cormeal, white beans (*fagioli*) and the distinctive Tuscan vegetable, *cavolo nero* or black cabbage, a kind of chard. Also be on the lookout for wild game, from hare to boar to quail. And always, always drink the Tuscan wines.

Friends led us to many delicious spots. Among them:

Cantinette were once but little holes-in-the-wall, the shops where vintners from beyond the city walls sold their wine in town. Today, *le cantinette* can be chic places for lunch, a late afternoon glass of wine or a relatively informal dinner. Lorie and Michael Porter (active at the Newport Harbor Art Museum) recommended **Cantinetta di Antinori**, an elegantly masculine wine bar tucked into the ancient, rugged Palazzo Antinori; the family dates its wine-making business to 1385. Dine on *fettucine di coniglio* (hare) or fabulous *crostini di cavolo nero*. **Cantinetta dei Verranzo** is the newest of these wine bars and easily the most casual-yet-upscale. You order slices of freshly-baked *focaccia* or *cecina* (a flat,

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savory cake made of chickpea flour) at one counter, grab a seat in the next room and order a glass of the house wine.

Among the best of Florence's true restaurants is **Il Cibrèò**, a deceptively informal, trattoria-like place always crowded with foodies, who come for chef-owner Fabio Picchi's innovative, but tradition-based, cuisine. Typical not-so-typical dishes: calf's liver stuffed with strong herbs and slow-cooked for hours, or game hen stuffed with mustard-preserved winter fruits. Pasadena art patrons Sue and Jim Cross recommended **Alla Vecchia Bettola** in the Oltarno—their favorite trattoria, now ours, too. Brisk but cordial service, great Florentine classics and communal seating at marble-topped tables. This is one place the tourists won't be.

Alla Vecchia Bettola also comes highly recommended by the proprietor of **Torre di Bellosguardo**, one of the city's truly unique hotel hideaways. This 15th-century villa with a 13th-century tower perches high above the city in the hills south of the Arno, with postcard-perfect views of all Florence's monuments. Ask for the vast room 5, with its small fresco of the Virgin and Child, an 18th-century canopy bed, rich red tile floor, and city views that not even a Merchant-Ivory film can match. The villa is surrounded by gorgeous gardens and olive groves. (One drawback: though Torre is not far from the Pitti Palace and other Florentine sights, the steep, narrow lane up must be navigated by a cab. That can tack on \$12 or more each way—if there isn't a taxi strike).

The center of Florence is filled with small hotels, but a particularly charming one is **Hotel Loggiato dei Serviti**. On the grand Piazza Santissima Annunziata, this mid-priced hotel is freshly redecorated in contemporary villa style.

If grand style is your style, the old and justly famous **Hotel Excelsior**, proudly dominating its neighbors on the bank of the Arno, is worth consideration. You can spend over a million lire for a night of luxury (slightly tattered luxury, to be sure—this is old Florence) in a Royal Suite, but even at 490,000 lire you'll get a grandly canopied bed, perhaps an elaborate art deco bath, and views of the river.

Finally, an art destination on the periphery of Florence: Until a few short years ago, if you took the twenty-minute train ride to Prato it was to visit the 14th-century **Palazzo Datini**, an important example of early Renaissance secular architecture. But in 1988, with the opening of the **Centro per l'Arte Contemporanea Luigi Pecci** (Museo d'Arte Contemporanea Prato), Prato became home to the most significant contemporary art facility in Tuscany. The Centro is an oasis of good recent art, housed in a striking building designed by architect **Italo Gamberini**. Clearly taking his cue from the light industrial district on the city outskirts where the museum is situated, Gamberini offers us a kind of art factory, in gleaming white enamel framed by primer-red girders, topped by long rows of skylight sheds. A huge **Barbara Kruger** billboard across the street, a fallen column of stainless steel by **Anne and Patrick Poirier** on the lawn and a **Sol LeWitt** wall drawing behind the reception desk announce the concerns of the museum: European and American avant-garde art.

But, Prato aside, for us there is one more Florentine umber dusk, and a brief return to the avant-garde of that art tradition which had its beginning beside the Arno some 600 years ago.

By **Charles Desmarais & Kitty Morgan**, *Artexpress Florence* correspondents, respectively, a noted museum director, curator and arts administrator; and a sought-after writer on food, architecture and travel.

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La Baraonda, Via Ghibellina 67r, Tel. 234.11.71. Hearty Tuscan fare is the rule and the famous dish is *risolata* (risotto cooked with romaine lettuce). *Crostini* with goat cheese or black olive paste are favorite starters and pine nut gelato with rich chocolate sauce is the perfect dessert (moderate).

Cammillo, Borgo San Jacopo 57r, Tel. 21.24.27. An old favorite rustic haunt where, in season, you can dive into pasta with white truffles (moderate).

Trattoria Garga, Via del Moro 48r, Tel. 239.88.98. "New-wave Florentine" with dining rooms presided over by chef Giuliano Gargani and his Canadian wife Sharon, who is the hostess, pastry chef and mural artist. Witty and unconventional, the cuisine is still Tuscan at heart (moderate).

Gauguin, Via degli Alfani 24r, Tel. 234.06.16. Fabulous crêpes (*crespelle*) or ravioli in Gorgonzola sauce at student prices.

Trattoria Bibe, Via delle Bagnese 1r, Tel. 204.90.85. Just outside the city, Bibe is on the pastoral Bagnese River where simple pastas, grilled meats, and tasty desserts are especially nice on the pleasant terrace (expensive).

Alla Vecchia Bettola, Viale Ludovico Ariosto 32-34r, Tel. 22.41.58 (no credit cards).

MUSEUMS & SITES

Museo Alinari, Palazzo Rucellai, Via della Vigna Nuova 16r, Tel. 21.33.70.

Galleria degli Uffizi, Loggiato degli Uffizi 6, Tel. 238.86.51.

Brancacci Chapel, Santa Maria del Carmine, Piazza del Carmine, Tel. 238.21.95.

Palazzo Medici Riccardi, Via Cavour 1, Te. 276.03.40. Home of the Medici for 100 years (1444-1544) and site of Benozzo Gozzoli's *The Procession of the Magi* fresco.

Palazzo Pitti, Piazza Pitti, Tel. 21.03.23.

Santa Maria del Fiore (Duomo, Campanile and Baptistry), Piazza del Duomo, Tel. 29.45.14.

Museo Nazionale del Bargello, Via del Proconsolo 4, Tel. 238.86.06.

Museo dell'Opera di Santa Croce, Piazza di Santa Croce, Tel. 24.46.19, and Capella de' Pazzi.

Casa Buonarroti, Via Ghibellina 70, Tel. 24.17.52.

Galleria dell'Accademia, Via Ricasoli 60, Tel. 238.86.09.