





Italian Renaissance, revisited

Can a city be a living memory of the Renaissance era? In Florence, the buildings, cathedrals and museums are a great testament to a time when art changed the world.

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Touching down at the quaint Amerigo Vespucci Airport, I felt as if my flight had transported me into a parallel universe. Barely 24 hours earlier, I was working in Patna. “*Benvenuto in Firenze*” (Welcome to Florence), said the Italian customs officer as he flashed me a smile, and barely 15 minutes after landing, I was out of the airport, and in a taxi bound for Hotel Montreal.

Florence, called *Firenze* by the locals, lies on the beautiful river, Arno. The city is the capital of the picturesque Tuscany region of Italy and is especially known for the architecture, history, art and culture of its compact *centro storico* (the historical centre). Declared a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1982, the historic city’s elegant *piazze* (squares), *palazzi* (Renaissance palaces), parks, churches, monasteries, museums and art galleries attract millions of tourists, like me, each year.

Exploring Florence

Widely regarded as one of the most attractive cities on the planet, a global traveller poll recently nominated Florence as the most desirable tourist destination in the world. A centre of medieval European trade and finance, and one of the wealthiest cities of the time, Florence is considered the birthplace of the Italian Renaissance and has been called ‘the Athens of the Middle Ages’. However, before I immersed myself in the art and culture of this ancient city, I needed to stretch my legs due to the long flight.

From the conveniently located Hotel Montreal, a short stroll took me down to the river and the Ponte Vecchio (old bridge). Rebuilt last in 1345, this was the first bridge to span the Arno River and it is also Florence’s only medieval bridge to have survived World War II. I spent some time soaking up the atmosphere and enjoying the great views over the river and beyond, but the old bridge’s real attraction was the lines of shops selling gold and silver jewellery. After browsing through the stalls, I drifted across the river to reach the Giardino di Boboli (Boboli Garden): a huge park on a hillside in the middle of Florence, behind the Pitti Palace. Here, I experienced peace and solitude among the fountains and beautiful, manicured gardens. The view of Florence atop the Forte di Belvedere was fantastic.

▲ The magnificent Duomo Santa Maria del Fiore, which took 140 years to complete, is Florence’s most-visited tourist site.



▲ Clockwise from above: The best 'ice cream' in the world, a gelato is a must-try in Florence; Chauffeured wine tours are possible in Florence and take you to a good number of wineries around the area during the new wine season which comes around during winter; Fresh fruits and vegetables add a splash of colour to the otherwise grey buildings.

Culinary delight

After a few hours of relaxation in the garden, I slowly picked my way through street-markets selling absolutely everything, until I eventually relocated my hotel and family. By this stage I was ravenous and itching to sample some of the city's globally celebrated Italian cuisine. We tucked into pizzas and pastas before devouring a main course of succulent lamb and finished off the delectable feast with bowls of mentha gelato (Italy's regional variant of mint-flavoured ice cream). I thought I had died and gone to heaven... Such was the flavour!

The gluttonous feasting ensured we felt sufficiently fortified to immerse ourselves in the culture and history in the city often called the cradle of Renaissance. The first stop was the Duomo Santa Maria del Fiore, which, for good reason, is Florence's most popular tourist site, attracting a staggering two million visitors each year. The huge Gothic cathedral, begun in 1296 but only completed in 1436, can hold an amazing 20,000 people. It's an incredible structure with an exterior of green, pink, and white marble, finished with several elaborate doors and interestingly carved statues. From the inside, seemingly defying gravity, Filippo Brunelleschi's Dome is an undisputed masterpiece of construction. Although I wasn't feeling particularly energetic, I needed to work off our lunch, and so I joined the others to climb 463 old stone steps that led us to the top of the dome. It was well worth the effort and we were treated to stunning views of Florence from our lofty vantage point.

Art galore

Next stop was the Galleria dell'Accademia, where I marvelled at 'The Slaves of the Stone'. These half-finished sculptures, which seem to be trying to pull themselves free of the stone, were my mother's favourite. Below the statues, a very apt quote from Michelangelo read: "I saw the angel in the stone and carved until I set him free." However, most of the tourists thronging to the Galleria had come for another, more famous, but equally impressive Michelangelo sculpture: The David – probably the most famous sculpture in the world.

Florence is regarded by many as the art capital of Italy, and during the days ahead, my family and I visited some of Florence's finest galleries and marvelled at their breathtaking collections of art. The gallery that stood out was the massive Galleria degli Uffizi, which holds the world's most important collection of Renaissance art. As a result, it is also Italy's most crowded museum. Thankfully, we had been tipped off to buy our tickets in advance and we managed to avoid the long queues. The Uffizi holds thousands of paintings dating from medieval to modern times, including works by Michelangelo, Giotto, Botticelli, Leonardo da Vinci, Perugino, and Raphael. There truly was way too much to take in for one visit, so we focussed only on the most famous works from the Renaissance period.

The Museo Nazionale del Bargello (The National Museum of Bargello) was another family favourite: a civic palace with battlements and a great tower dating back to the thirteenth century. The interior courtyard was littered with statues, including a fantastic carving of a little boy gone fishing. A staircase led up to the *loggia* (vaulted gallery) and the Great Council Chamber,



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▲ The dome of the Basilica di Santa Maria del Fiore has an enormous fresco (3,600 sq m of painted surface) with most of the work being done by Giorgio Vasari and Federico Zuccari.

popularly known as the Donatello Chamber because of all his sculptures housed therein, including a lovely little version of a young David.

Florence certainly has plenty of appeal for the culture vultures of this world. Its great climate, historic cobble-stoned streets, outdoor eateries, mouth-watering cuisine, fine Italian wines and, undoubtedly, the best ice cream in the universe, mean that it is a relaxed city that appeals to anyone and everyone. Some of our best times were the hours we simply spent in the Piazza della Signoria – the square at the heart of the centro storico – eating gelato, watching city-life unfold around us, and soaking up the atmosphere of this incredible historical city. The famous piazza has been Florence’s political centre since the Middle Ages, and the cafes and restaurants that surround it were the ideal place to imbibe energy emanating from the City of Renaissance.

Fact file

Getting there

Jet Airways is introducing daily flights from Delhi to Milan from December 5. Milan is connected to Florence by air, rail, and road. Alternatively, you can fly to Brussels aboard Jet Airways from Chennai, Delhi, Mumbai, New York, Newark and Toronto, and fly onwards to Florence with our codeshare partner Brussels Airlines.

Getting around

Florence is best explored on bikes, which can be easily rented. Renting a car is also possible for excursions into nearby towns.

Best time to go

The city becomes hot and crowded during the summer months (June – August) and mildly chilly during the winter. A visit during spring (March to mid-June) and fall months (September to mid-November) is ideal. October is the month of *vendemmia* (wine harvest), and *vino novello* (new wine) is released in November. This is also the time of the olive harvest, which means fresh olive oil for you.

Accommodation

B&Bs to five-star hotels, Florence offers you a host of options to suit your trip. B&Bs can be looked up on www.federbb.it, the official Italian B&B search engine. Hotel Montreal can be contacted at www.hotelmontreal.com

What to do

Florence is one of the cultural capitals of Europe with diverse panoply of art galleries, museums, cathedrals and parks. The city also boasts of a number of street markets and great shopping opportunities. Sampling Italian cuisine, gelato and Tuscan wines is a must. Try Florence Wine Tours – luxurious, chauffeured winery visits to understand the process of wine-making. Visit them at www.cellartours.com

Travel tip

Tourists compulsorily need to be registered with the police within three days of their arrival in Italy. Check with the hotel you are staying in for registration, or simply land up at a police station with an Italian resident, who can register you.

For more information Log on to www.italiantourism.com