

Far from the Madding Crowds:

Two Days in Florence

Florentines pay an intense, almost savage attention to life's fine print. A surprising number of people here care deeply about the floral aftertastes of sheep cheese, the correct way to cut marble and the nuances of a Gregorian chant. At the root of Tuscan pathology is a dedication to living life well. So you'd best start your weekend readjusting to this otherworldly refinement.

ONE STEP AHEAD OF THE CROWD

While others less Tuscan than you race to join the crocodile queue snaking around the Uffizi, you'll be taking a leisurely stroll west to Santa Croce for a cornetto in **I Dolci di Patrizio Così** (Borgo Albizi 15r; closed Sundays; www.patriziocosi.com) or a honey-and-cinnamon-flavoured coffee in **Caffèlatte** (Via degli Alfani 39r). *Tutto bene?* Then it's time to sort out a bicycle for the weekend so you can comport yourself with suitable style up and down those cobbled streets. You can rent one for €13 at **Florence by Bike** (Via San Zanobi 91r; www.florencebybike.it).

Then head south across the river for the **Basilica di Santa Maria del Carmine** (Via Santa Monaca) where you can view Masolino and Masaccio's revolutionary frescoes in the **Brancacci Chapel**. The area of Oltrarno where the basilica is located is something of a Florentine Left Bank and if you feel the inclination you could also stick your head into the walled garden of the **Antico Setificio Fiorentino** (Via L. Bartolini; www.anticosetificiofiorentino.com) to see women handweaving expensive silks on 18th-century looms. The iridescent fabrics made here are the same as those you've just seen in the Masaccio frescoes.

For lunch join well-heeled locals at cosy **Olio e Convivium** (Via Santo Spirito 4; www.conviviumfirenze

.com), an upmarket grocer with two restaurant rooms. Another little 'conciierge secret' is **Trattoria Cavolo Nero** (Via dell'Ardiglione 22). If it seems criminal to sit inside on one of those blistering blue Florentine days then settle for a spritz at **La Dolce Vita** (Piazza del Carmine) before pedalling on to the **Giardini di Boboli** (to avoid the crowds enter at Annalena entrance on Via Romana) for a picture-perfect picnic. Then freewheel down Viale dei Cipressi, a magnificently classic avenue lined with cypress trees. It's a pure Audrey Hepburn moment.

AFTER DARK

After an afternoon nap you'll want to rouse yourself for a sundowner. You can buy your own bottle of bubbly, catch the No 7 bus and head north to **Fiesole** to watch those pantiled roofs catch fire. Alternatively, join the crowds in the **Piazzale Michelangelo** (Bus Nos 12 & 13) for a wide-angle view of the city. Stay in the **Albergo Torre de Bellosguardo** (Via Roti Michelozzi 2; www.torrebellosguardo.com) and you'll have this view pretty much all to yourself.

After all the oohing and ahing you'll probably need a little pick-me-up in chic **Negroni** (Via dei Renai 17r; www.negronibar.com) or **Il Rifrullo** (Via di San Niccolò 55r). And if views aren't you, then forgo the city lights for those glittering *vetrini* along **Via de'Tornabuoni**, Florence's Bond Street. Along this label-dressed drag you can refuel at swanky **Procacci** (Via de'Tornabuoni 64r) where you can nibble on *panini tartufati* (truffle paste on mini rolls).

You'll have booked dinner, of course, perhaps at arty **Osteria Santo Spirito** (Piazza Santo Spirito; ☎ 055 238 23 83) or sleek and fashionable **Ristorante Beccofino** (Piazza degli Scarlatti 1r; ☎ 055 29 00 76). After dinner

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join the boho crowd in the **Piazza Santo Spirito** beneath the glittering mosaics of Brunelleschi's gorgeous 18th-century church, the **Chiesa di Santo Spirito**. As the night wanes clubbers will head to the huge party shed **Tenax** (Via Pratese 46; www.tenax.org) in the western suburbs. Those in a more mellow frame of mind should take their trusty two-wheeler and glide around the backlit historic centre, *sans* crowds, *sans* queues. Florence was never more beautiful.

GREAT SIGHTS, GOOD FOOD

The next morning plump for the obvious and head down to the **Duomo**. It simply can't be ignored. But instead of heading inside let yourself be diverted to the **Museo dell'Opera** (Piazza del Duomo 9), the cathedral museum and one of the most gratifying in Florence, not least for its delicious air-con interior and our favourite Renaissance masterpiece, Michelangelo's *Pietà*.

There are only so many wonders you can see in a weekend. It's tiring looking at amazing things, so you'll probably be considering your lunch options around now. Go west, we say, to the **Sant'Ambrogio market** where you'll probably see Fabio Picci dashing between his various restaurants. You can choose between expensive, inventive **Cibrèò** (Via Andrea del Verrocchio 8r), trattoria-style **Cibreino** (Via dei Macci 122r) or delightful **Caffè Cibrèò** (Via Andrea del Verrocchio 5r) with its carved wood ceilings and antique furniture. A little tip: Fabio Picci is married to comic actress Maria Cassi and they've now opened the members club **Teatro del Sale** (www.teatrodelsale.com; closed Sundays and Mondays). For the paltry annual fee of €5 the Teatro can be your Florentine home. It's certainly worth it just to be able to hang out and eat here, read some of the books from their library and catch the daily *spettacolo* in

the evening, which can be anything from dance to live jazz. It couldn't be more cosy.

SLEEPING

Budget:

Due Mori (www.bnb.it/deimori; ☎ 055 238 2216) Bright, tasteful design and laudable attention to detail.

Midrange:

Hermitage (www.hermitagehotel.com; ☎ 055 287 216) Cute and comfortable, with a superb location overlooking the Ponte Vecchio. Book in good time.

Top End:

Casa Howard (www.casahoward-florence.com; ☎ 06 69 924 555) Inventive, eccentric Casa Howard is the most stylish pied-à-terre in town.

For more reviews of Florence accommodation, check out the Sleep section on www.lonelyplanet.com/accommodation.

By Paula Hardy

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