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# The Art of VACATION

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After years of being associated with the European art crowd, Florence is going through a renaissance of its own, welcoming both the partying elite and culture-vultures in a mix of history, high-fashion and some intriguing parties

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I braced myself, on visiting Florence for the first time, for the crush of people typical of ‘tourist meccas’: fearing swarms of touring school kids sticky with gelato and the inevitable sparring to get a decent table. And actually (although I did visit in the spring rather than in the city’s peak time between June and August) I found a quietly confident place. The kind of city where – being the art and cultural hub of the Renaissance and consequently needing no bells and whistles to attract visitors – the chalkboard signs outside restaurants are in the native Italian and not English, tiny cafes have only a couple of tables huddled outside, and where you can walk through the streets, pause and look at the sculptures, without being jostled off your perch by someone brandishing a camera phone.

As a city, Florence is a web of medieval streets and old buildings that rise up tall and thin, making the whole city compact and accessible on foot – a positive when you come face-to-face with Italy’s infamously unpedantic drivers. The city splits over the Arno River,

an expansive chunk of water that mirrors the ochre buildings that line the walled bank. Niche boutiques stand next to designer stores such as Gucci and Salvatore Ferragamo – both brands having originated in Florence and both having quirky museums dedicated to them in the centre of the city. Be sure to visit the leather market, crammed with good-quality handbags and jackets with price tags that can be haggled down.

For art, you’re spoilt too. Aside from the usual tourist sights, on top of Michelangelo’s David at the Accademia Gallery and da Vinci at the Uffizi Gallery, you can find exceptional exhibitions throughout smaller galleries with shorter lines, such as Palazzo Stozzi’s current

exhibition on the works of Pontormo and Rosso Fiorentino. After, if you just want to wander around and take in the city, do so with gelato. Although avoid the stores where the gelato is piled in small mountains on the till – this gelato is full of preservatives to make it firm. Instead, head to Perché no! Family-owned since 1939, it makes its variety of classic and

*You will often find guests walking into ‘the pink room’: a quirky den for cocktails and the kind of parties that reveal stories the management would discreetly not repeat*