

36 Hours in Florence

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By ONDINE COHANE
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WITH its Renaissance treasures and centuries-old stately palazzi, Florence is sometimes treated like a living museum rather than a vibrant city with contemporary culture. That myth is harder to sustain these days, thanks in part to Matteo Renzi, the city's 35-year-old mayor, who was elected last year with promises to stir up the Tuscan capital. Evidence of a more youthful and revitalized Florence is everywhere. Dilapidated piazzas have been refreshed, contemporary art galleries have sprung up, and old-school palazzi have been turned into trendy restaurants. Traffic has also improved, making the city even more pleasant to navigate.

Friday

4 p.m.

1) DECONGESTED DUOMO

Yes, that Duomo. As one of Mr. Renzi's first moves as mayor, Florence's symbolic heart is now a pedestrian-only piazza. Without buses, taxis and cars jamming up the street, it is a pleasant and totally new experience, even as it remains one of the city's most popular attractions. Don't miss the stunningly detailed bronze doors of the Baptistry. Another landmark that's received the car-free touch is the piazza of Santa Maria Novella. With the scaffolding down and parked vehicles replaced by strolling Italian families, the restored black-and-white marble facade of the basilica is all the more striking, as is the thriving neighborhood around it.

5 p.m.

2) MODERN MAESTROS

Florence may be known for old masters, but its contemporary art scene is heating up. For Gallery (Via dei Fossi, 45r; 39-055-094-6444; forgallery.it) is a sleek space that specializes in photography including portraits and cityscapes. Biagiotti Arte Contemporanea (Via delle Belle Donne 39r; 39-055-214-757; artbiagiotti.com) focuses principally on young Italian artists. And the new outpost of Galleria Alessandro Bagnai (Via del Sole 15r; 39-055-680-2066; galleriabagnai.it) represents better-known names like Sandro Chia and Mario Schifano. Photo buffs will also want to check out the Museo Nazionale Alinari della Fotografia (Piazza Santa Maria Novella 14a; 39-055-216-310; www.mnaf.it), when it is expected to reopen on Sept. 8, and Palazzo Strozzi (Piazza Strozzi; 39-055-277-6461; palazzostrozzi.org; tickets: 10 euros, about \$12 at \$1.24 to the euro) for major retrospectives.

8 p.m.

3) A TUSCAN SUPPER

Florence cherishes its classics, and new restaurants are few and far between. That may explain the instant popularity of Osteria Tornabuoni (Via dei Corsi 5r; 39-055-277-3502; osteriatornabuoni.it). Opened last May by Silvio Ursini (who also owns the stylish Obikà mozzarella bars that are popping up globally), the Tuscan-centric restaurant occupies a historic palazzo on a fashionable shopping street. Unpretentious dishes include bread maccheroni with lamb ragù and risotto with purple artichokes. It also features a well-priced selection of Tuscan wines, including a 2007 Montevervine Super Tuscan. The knowledgeable sommelier (and influential wine blogger) Andrea Gori will happily lead you through the offerings. Entrees run from 17 euros, pastas from 11.

Saturday

11 a.m.

4) PRETTY PLEASE

Making a *bella figura* (a good impression) is an important Italian custom, both in terms of how you look and how you act. Do your part with a facial at the new spa at the Four Seasons Hotel Firenze (Borgo Pinti 99; 39-055-26-261; fourseasons.com/florence). It's one of the only places in town that features *Officina Profumo-Farmacia di Santa Maria Novella*, the apothecary potions concocted by monks in the 13th century. And the small white marble spa also looks onto one of the city's largest private gardens with peaceful green lawns, towering trees and winding pathways that lead past tucked away statues. It's a great way to enjoy the city's luxurious new arrival without the price tag of a room — a 20-minute back and neck massage costs 80 euros, room rates from 500 euros.

1 p.m.

5) PASS THE PANINO

Custom-made panini sandwiches were once the norm in Italy, until the generic, plastic-wrapped variety took over. A new deli and wine bar near the Ponte Vecchio called 'Ino (Via dei Georgofili 3r-7r; 39-055-219-208; ino-firenze.com) is seeking to bring that lunchtime pleasure back, one fresh focaccia at a time. Choose from 20-plus cheeses including pecorino and gorgonzola, and add some mortadella and salami. Paninis from 5 euros.

3 p.m.

6) LEFT BANK

Cross the Arno River to the less-traveled left bank for authentic Florentine treasures. Busatti (Lungarno Torrigiani, 11-R; 39-055-263-8516; busattifirenze.com) is a small family-owned shop that carries delicate striped linens and embroidered duvets that have been hand-woven in the Tuscan town of Anghiari since 1842 (from 10 euros for a kitchen towel). Britta in Bicicletta (Lungarno Torrigiani 5/r; 39-055-246-6703; brittainbicicletta.com) is a jewel box of a children's clothing shop, with its own line of cotton dresses in pretty fabrics and soft-as-butter infant essentials (from 25 euros). Meanwhile, Lorenzo Villaresi does a line of Florentine perfumes (from 65 euros) and candles (from 18 euros) that make good presents — and the view from the shop is lovely, too (Via de Bardi, 14; 39-055-234-1187; www.lorenzovillaresi.it).

4 p.m.

7) A FRESH VIEW

After a half-century of neglect, the 10-acre Villa Bardini Gardens (Via de Bardi 1r; 39-055-294-883; bardinipeyron.it) reopened in 2005, and well-heeled Florentines now stroll its terraced flower and vegetable gardens. The sweeping hilltop views offer spectacular views of the Duomo, Santa Croce and Fiesole. If there's time to linger, pop into the Roberto Capucci Museum in the 17th-century Villa Bardini, which recently opened as the impressive fashion archive of the Roman designer (Villa Bardini, 2, Costa San Giorgio; 39-055-200-662-09; www.fondazionerobertocapucci.com).

8 p.m.

8) PRIZED BEEF

Let the rest of the world have their grass-fed, organic burgers. At Lungarno 23 (Lungarno Torrigiani, 23; 39-055-234-5957; lungarno23.it), a stylish restaurant that opened this spring, the owners have their own cattle farm in the Tuscan town of Sinalunga, where they raise Chianina — an ancient Italian breed known for its white hair, long limbs and marbled meat. The Chianina burgers (12 euros) are served on a sesame bun with lettuce, onions, tomatoes and ketchup. Purists may prefer the steak at Trattoria Sostanza (Via del Porcellana 25r; 39-055-212-691), a century-old institution known for its succulent Chianina T-bones (24 euros for a half kilo).

10 p.m.

9) LOUNGE FEVER

Summer night life in Florence is centered around small aperitivo bars that come alive after dinner, spilling into the street. A new hot spot is Volume (Piazza Santo Spirito, 5r; 39-055-238-1460), a bar that opened in April in a former wood workshop. On balmy nights the bar is filled with a varied yet beautiful crowd, from fashion editors to exchange students, who anchor one corner of the festive Piazza Santo Spirito.

Sunday

10 a.m.

10) PARADISE FOUND

In a town of blockbuster art shows, seek out smaller gems. Among the unsung works is Benozzo Gozzoli's "Procession of the Magi," which was recently restored to its Technicolor glory at the Palazzo Medici-Riccardi (Via Camillo Cavour, 1; 39-055-2760-340; www.palazzo-medici.it; 7 euros). Commissioned by Cosimo de' Medici in 1459, the fresco turned the chapel into a vision of paradise, with cheetahs and birds, as imagined by the newly emerging merchant class. Book ahead — the intimate space is open only to small groups.

Noon

11) URBAN TAN

Taking a page from Paris and Berlin, an urban beach has washed up on the Arno River by San Niccolò, a wide swath of sand studded with beach umbrellas, deck chairs and bikini-clad Florentines. Unlike the beaches in those other cities, however, the sand here is a natural phenomenon, an ideal spot for a sun-drenched espresso while watching the city's younger set take their city back.

IF YOU GO

Flights to Florence from New York require a connecting flight. According to a recent Web search, Alitalia flies from Kennedy Airport to Florence, connecting through Rome, starting at \$1,590, for travel in August. Or you can fly to Rome and take the Eurostar (raileurope.com) to Florence. Make your way around town by foot or cab.

Opened in 2003, J.K. Place Firenze (Piazza di Santa Maria Novella 7; 39-055-264-5181; jkplace.com) has 20 small but stylish rooms on Santa Maria Novella piazza, with the Duomo and the Ponte Vecchio five minutes away on foot. Rooms start at 250 euros (\$314) including soft drinks, Wi-Fi, breakfast and taxes.

Il Salviatino (Via del Salviatino 21, 39-055-904-11; salviatino.com) opened in fall 2009 with 45 rooms in a restored villa with an 11-acre garden, spa and terrace overlooking the city. Rooms from 440 euros.

For a more affordable option, Residence Hilda (Via dei Servi, 40; 39-055-288-021; www.residencehilda.com), behind the Duomo, has 12 recently refurbished suites, all with kitchens. Rates start at 230 euros.