
Florence

Few cities are as easy to get on intimate terms with during a short stay as Florence, the city of flowers. The reason the city's charms get a hold on you so quickly is the compactness of its historical center, the Centro Storico, in the middle of which stands the magnificent Duomo. You can cross the old city within an hour, walking at a fast pace and crossing the river Arno on the ancient and picturesque Ponte Vecchio. However if you were to stop along the way at every church containing beautiful frescoes, every gallery housing majestic works of art, every museum and every place of historical significance, the same walk would take days if not weeks.

If you find this abundance of art and history a little overwhelming do not despair, there is more to Florence; take, for instance, its attractive shops, restaurants and outdoor cafes. Or turn to the countryside. Florence is situated in the lovely district of Tuscany, one of the most famous wine-growing areas of Italy, home of the Chianti vineyards. Some of the attractive towns in this area can easily be visited on a day-excursion from Florence

Climate

Italy's climate is as diverse as its landscape. In Florence, the weather in spring can be very changeable, it can get quite cold in winter and oppressively hot and sticky in the height of summer. Rain is most frequent during the months of November, January and April.

Sights and Museums

Il Duomo, Florence's magnificent Santa Maria del Fiori is the fourth largest cathedral in the world and said to hold over 20,000 people. The dome, designed by Filippo Brunelleschi, is over 371 feet high and 149 across, it has double walls between which a 463-step staircase leads to a lantern at the top. The 40 minute climb up and down is well worth the effort for the breathtaking panorama. There are admission charges to visit the cathedral dome (closed Sundays and holidays), the crypt, and the bell tower (both closed afternoons, Sundays, and holidays).

Galleria degli Uffizi, Uffizi Museum and Gallery - Italy's most important art museum is in a Renaissance Palace. The splendor of this museum derives not only from the great works of art it contains but also from the 16th century building itself, which used to house the Medicis' administrative offices or Palazzo della Signoria or Palazzo Vecchio, the old palace. This fortress-like palace, built around 1300, is Florence's Town Hall. For a short period in the 16th century it was the residence of the Medicis. Though it looks austere on the outside the apartments inside are magnificent. The Palazzo is closed on Saturdays and Sunday afternoons. There is an admission charge.

Ponte Vecchio - The "old bridge" is indeed Florence's oldest bridge and the only one to survive the Nazi destruction in 1944. Built on the site of a Roman crossing, the first stone version was swept away in a flood in 1333, and rebuilt in 1345 as it is now, with rows of shops on both sides (the backs of which overhang the Arno river). The shops were first occupied by butchers and assigned to gold- and silversmiths in the late 16th century.

Theatre and Nightlife

The main recreations in Florence on summer evenings are strolling along the streets window-shopping and admiring the sights, relaxing in one of the terraces cafes on the popular Piazza della Repubblica, eating out in one of the busy restaurants, or watching the street entertainers who come from all over the world. Although there is not much in the way of formal nightlife in Florence, there are several nightclubs, piano bars, discos and sometimes open-air dances near the Piazzale Michelangelo.

Shopping

Florence is one of Italy's fashion centers, therefore clothes sold here are usually of high quality and very expensive. Locally produced leather garments and accessories are much better value. Silk and hand-made straw items are also local specialties. Beautifully embroidered articles such as tablecloths and napkins make delightful presents. Bookbinding is another specialty as is the Florentine marbled paper, which can be bought by the sheet.

Most of the best (and most expensive) shops are to be found along the Via Tornabuoni as well as round the Piazza del Duomo and the Piazza della Repubblica. Antique shops are concentrated around the Borgognissanti, Via della Spada and the Ponte Vecchio, which also has small jeweller stores. There are numerous leather shops around Santa Croce as well as a leather factory and more shops inside this church itself. It is worth trying to bargain for discounts, even in big shops, when you are buying several things at once. Most shops will be quite happy to arrange posting your purchases abroad.

Opening times vary enormously but generally 0900-1230/1300 and 1530/1600-1900/1930 (food shops 1700-2000); closed Sun. and Sat. pm (summer), Mon. am (winter) food shops closed Wed. pm. Barbers and hairdressers closed Sunday and Monday.

Excursions

Pisa: Full day excursion. 91 km west of Florence on the A-11 motorway.

The city-state of Pisa once was a university town and rivalled Genoa and Venice as a maritime republic. Today, to most tourists it is the city of the Leaning Tower. This Torre Pendente and most other important monuments are to be found at the Piazza del Duomo (or Campo dei Miracoli) north west of the town center. The reason for the Campanile's slant lies in the nature of the alluvial subsoil into which it began to sink during its construction in 1174. The spectacular Duomo opposite was begun in 1064. The Camposanto (the cemetery), also to be found at the Piazza, is supposed to contain earth brought from Palestine during the Crusades.

Siena: Full day excursion. 80 km south of Florence. Siena is the provincial capital of Tuscany. The "city of the Virgin" is named after the Roman colony Saena Julia which was founded here by Augustus on the site of an Etruscan settlement. From the main Piazza del Campo it spreads over three hills. The hills in the area are of red clay from which the color "burnt Sienna" gets its name. The city is surrounded by seven kilometers of walls with only eight of the original 38 gates surviving. The town's three main streets meet at the Croce del Travaglio. Much of Siena's historic center is closed to automobiles, protecting the red buildings from discoloration. All Siena's chief monuments are signposted, just follow the signs to the Duomo, a stunning black and white marble structure containing a remarkable graffiti pavement executed by 40 different artists.