



## FIRENZE FOREVER

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Memories re-visited in Italy's most artistic Renaissance city

The first time I crossed the iconic Ponte Vecchio (Old Bridge) was nearly six years ago, while struggling to find the address for my temporary living quarters. I walked up and down deserted, amber-colored alleyways – taking notice of the decorative doorways and knobs despite my growing anxiety. Those cobble-stoned streets, so charming in the glossy travel books, now appeared endless and indifferent to my plight. Finally surrendering to fatigue, I asked for directions and learned the first of many local particularities; many doors are marked with two numbers – a red number for businesses and a blue one for residences. Blocks away from where I needed to be, it started to rain pour actually. And with few businesses open on Sunday mornings, there was nowhere to take cover. This was not the perfect break I had envisioned.

Upon reaching my destination, all

worries evaporated. There, behind a large, wooden door, complete with an antique keyhole, were the magnificent rooms and courtyard of a former 16th century *palazzo* (nobleman's residence) – one of several such housing options in the area forming part of the *città vecchia* (old town). I was the first of four international roommates to arrive and fully appreciated the time alone to explore my new surroundings. That evening, after selecting a bedroom featuring marble tiles, high ceilings and a glittering, yellow-hued chandelier, I sat in the plant-covered open courtyard that seemingly reached the stars.

The weeks during my six-month study program quickly disappeared into a frenzied blur of delightful afternoons spent wandering the streets of a city so proud of its storied past: Brunelleschi's Duomo in all its architectural splendor, Piazza della Signoria with its celebration of famed sculptural figures including a replica

of Michael Angelo's David and Neptune, king of the sea; sipping cappuccinos or a *spumante aperitivo* (sparkling wine aperitif) on or near the lively Piazza della Repubblica – the city's main meeting point since medieval times. Nights were inexorably spent in the eclectic bars and clubs of trendy areas such as the bohemian Santo Spirito district.

As our final weeks drew near, our shared experiences made it hard to imagine we'd soon be going our separate ways. Despite our different cultures and motivations for being there, somehow we meshed together perfectly: Dina, the rebellious design student from Bahrain; Jeannie, the sensible grade-school teacher from Sydney; Ben, the shy lawyer-in-training from London; and me – an aspiring writer yet to find her voice, but eager to get started.

On the day of our final class, we silently crossed the statue-adorned Santa Trinita Bridge overlooking the Arno River, as we had done so many times before. Together, we had learned that it was better to stand while enjoying a terrace drink to

avoid extra charges, visited world-class museums with the finest collections of classic art, and sat on this very bridge to watch the chic locals strut by. In six short months, I had become one of them, devastated for the approaching end to my adventure. Unanimously, we decided the best way to nurse our sadness was with a final brunch the following day at our apartment.

During our marvelous get together we enjoyed wine, cheese and cold cuts bought during various visits to neighboring towns, when suddenly the stereo system gave out. All at once, lovely, harmonious voices filled the silence. For nearly an hour we searched for the source. In vain.

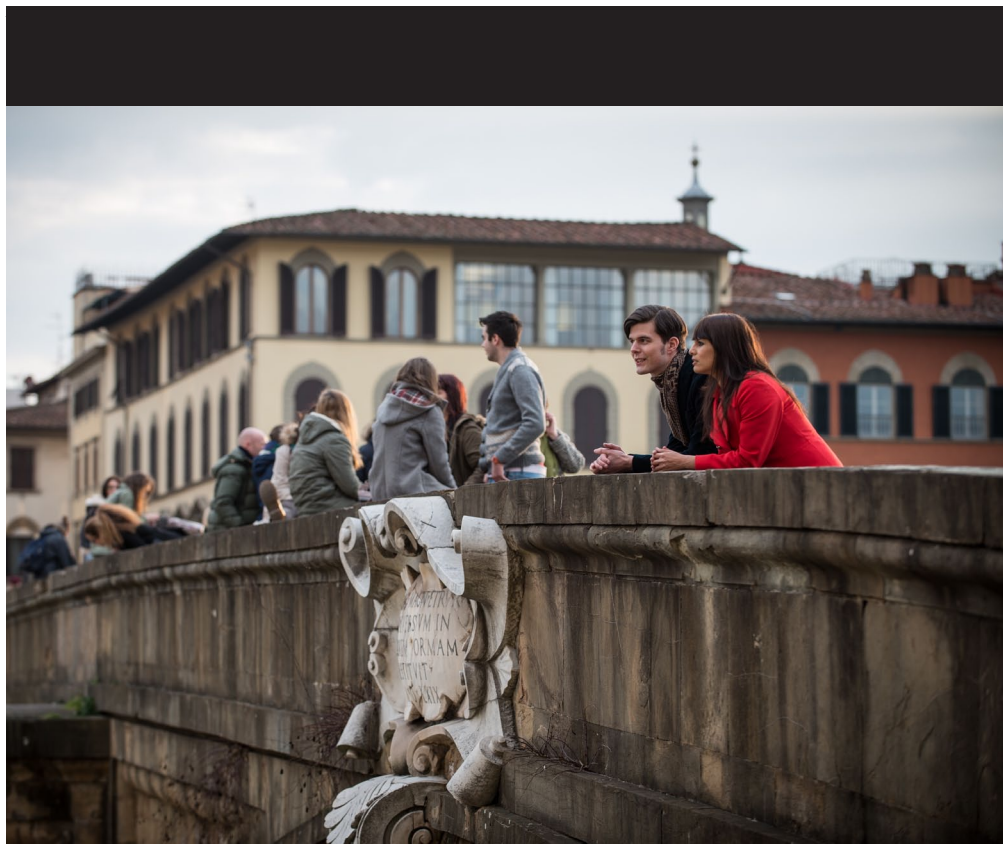
And then, I saw the light.

In the kitchen, high above the cupboards was a mesh screen allowing sound through flickers of light. Jeannie and I climbed on the countertop to witness a most beautiful sight – a birds-eye view of a traditional church wedding. All this time, we had no idea we were living right next to a church. We ran outside, through the alleyway, to the adjoining easy-to-miss square. We all watched the happy couple exit the church; the bride, blissful and radiant in her lace dress, stood at the entrance of the ancient church and laughed through her tears. It was the perfect farewell to a city married to its cultural past.

It wasn't until earlier this year that I was afforded an opportunity to return – this time, with my long-time boyfriend in tow. Prepared to find the typical 'improvements' that often sully memories of simpler, more charming bespoke experiences, I was pleasantly surprised to discover that in all this time, Florence was virtually unchanged.



Afternoon tea at Four Seasons Florence



The streets I first wandered in 2008 still resembled a postcard for Renaissance living. Cafés continued to charge to sit on their terraces although exceptions were generously offered by locals willing to share the wealth. We rented an apartment in trendy Santo Spirito after unsuccessfully trying to recall where I had stayed before. For a few days, we lost ourselves in the maze of inter-linking walkways and squares. A wonderful afternoon was spent tasting

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mini-cakes and sampling tea at the exquisite Four Seasons Firenze, a glorious 15th-century palazzo turned 5-star luxury

hotel in the posh Santa Croce district. Even in this exclusive environment, the warm, welcoming feeling that comes so naturally to Florentines was unmistakable; we were invited to take a romantic walk in their gardens – the largest private greens in the city. On another day, we toured the breathtaking Chianti wine region, including two wineries owned by the noble Sonnino family.

Throughout, we were delighted to learn that many of the colorful characters we came across were once foreign visitors who came to Florence (Firenze) to study but decided to stay after falling in love. Standouts: Teresa, our energetic Austrian tour guide whose hour-long history of Da Vinci's David was nothing less than riveting; Linda the cheerful, Australian food expert who introduced me to the best gourmet truffle and brie sandwiches I had ever tasted, at the 10th-century Proccaci deli bar; Ulrika, the gracious Swedish apartment owner; and Alberto, our friendly photographer who is Italian, but settled there after meeting his wife years ago. Florence, as it turns out, attracts expats of all wants and likes with its easy-going, social lifestyle.

This group even assisted me in finding that tiny church that had made my last

day in Florence so very special the first time around. I asked everyone we came across if they could piece together the few clues I had retained: it was somewhere between the Santa Trinita and Ponte Vecchio bridges on a small, inconspicuous square. Teresa offered a name and Alberto confirmed it; my magical memory was a precious 11th-century church called Santissimi Apostoli, on Piazza del Limbo. It was the oldest-surviving high Middle Ages church (renovated in the 16th century), with original awnings and fixtures still clearly visible. The inside was stunning, with columned aisles, well-maintained frescos and stain-glass windows.

Though not considered a typical tourist attraction, it was an important discovery I felt like I'd stumbled across – a nostalgic treasure rediscovered within my box of cherished moments. Alberto, who worked with Flytographer, a company specializing in capturing future memories, agreed to take a few shots by the church. Throughout the shoot, the happy faces of wedding guests and my friends vividly reappeared in my mind's eye. We ended the evening sitting alone on the Santa Trinita Bridge, watching the world stroll by.

I returned to Florence hoping for a brief glimmer of a cherished experience and instead was delighted to discover not all cities surrender their essence with the passing of time. ■



## VISITING FLORENCE LIKE A LOCAL

### ART TOWN

Book museum tickets well in advance to avoid long queues.

### ORIENT YOURSELF

Book a city walking tour with the sustainability-minded Walks of Italy ([www.walksofitaly.com](http://www.walksofitaly.com)), offering dozens of options for both private and small group tours.

### LEARN THE BASICS

Download a free Italian language app and translator from World Nomads to get you started.

### WHAT'S ON?

Read the latest local news and current attractions at the English-language newspaper, The Florentine ([www.theflorentine.net](http://www.theflorentine.net))

### AH THE MEMORIES!

Savor a special day/event with a professional photo session via Flytographer ([www.flytographer.com](http://www.flytographer.com)).

### HOME SWEET HOME

Rent a short-term flat in your favorite district. Go with Oh ([www.gowithoh.com](http://www.gowithoh.com)) offers great deals on apartment rentals in 11 European cities.

### CLASSIC INDULGENCE

Traditional Afternoon Tea is served daily from 3pm in the Atrium Bar at the Four Seasons Firenze ([www.fourseasons.com/florence](http://www.fourseasons.com/florence)).