



THE OTHER SIDE OF FLORENCE

MY FIRST TRIP TO FLORENCE WAS A SHORE VISIT FROM A CRUISE SHIP.

BY SARAH STAPLES

I had exactly a day to follow the summer crowds around the historic downtown, and it was all I needed. Standing before Michelangelo's David in the Galleria dell'Accademia, and admiring a few da Vincis and Botticellis at the Galleria Uffizi, I felt I was getting to know the city.

Now, years later, I'm back. It's autumn, and a handful of tourists wielding selfie sticks are on the famous Ponte Vecchio bridge as I check into Portrait Firenze, a boutique hotel virtually across the street along the Arno River. Two and a half days is a typical length of stay for visitors to Florence, I'm told, and it's all I have. But on this getaway, I'm determined to avoid the obvious attractions.

CROSS OVER TO THE OTHER ARNO

Instead of a traditional bus tour, I hire Giovanni Fattori of Florence by Driver, who picks me up in his golf cart and we start by zipping across Ponte Vecchio to Oltrarno—"beyond the Arno." Carpenters, mosaic makers, sculptors, goldsmiths and other artisans live and keep tiny shops in Oltrarno, an epicentre of Florentine craftsmanship since the Middle Ages. It's on the Arno's less touristy, more residential south bank, a neighbourhood that outsiders have recently begun to discover.

I stop at the showrooms of Riccardo Barthel, an upscale kitchen-design business within an old apartment block. There's a mesmerizing Italian-Vogue-meets-Restoration-Hardware



TOP: To get oriented in Florence (and snap some great cityscapes), head to the outskirts of the city, high up to the lookouts of Piazzale Michelangelo (pictured) and Abbazia di San Miniato al Monte.

ABOVE: Tourists taking selfies are a regular fixture on Florence's most famous bridge, Ponte Vecchio. Sarah Staples

RIGHT: Somewhere between Florence and Pisa—exactly where is a secret—the Savini family's truffle-hunting dog, Giotto, noses into a tree. Sarah Staples

BELOW CENTRE: Views of the Arno and Ponte Vecchio come standard at *Portrait Firenze*, one of four properties owned by the Ferragamo family in their Lungarno Collection situated on the river, in the UNESCO heritage downtown district of Florence. Lungarno Collection

BELOW BOTTOM: Cordon Bleu-trained chefs help tourists pinch pasta into raviolis at *Desinare*. Sarah Staples



assortment of vintage tiles and crown mouldings, salvaged artwork and antique bric-à-brac from the estate sales of Tuscan palazzos. Upstairs, at the *Desinare* cooking school written up in *Vanity Fair*, I learn how to pinch fresh pasta into raviolis stuffed with walnut and ricotta, and eat my lesson for lunch.

Soon, Fattori arrives to continue our energized golf-cart tour. We pass the Pitti Palace of the Medici family (bankers and de facto rulers of the city for centuries) and weave through back alleys no tour bus could fit into, ever higher, toward the panoramic lookouts of Piazzale Michelangelo and then Abbazia di San Miniato al Monte.

Palazzo Vecchio's turreted medieval clock tower, and the unmistakable dome (Il Duomo) of the Cattedrale di Santa Maria del Fiore, puncture the low-slung silhouette of the city, and eventually, Florence disappears into the hilly Tuscan countryside, my next destination.

COUNTRYSIDE PLEASURES

Wine country is an easy daytrip a little more than an hour away from Florence, and I love the contrast of urban and rural perspectives I get by stepping away from a city to compare it to nearby geographies.

Marquis Piero Antinori's winery is a curved terra-cotta slab set into 4.5 hectares

of neatly braided vines. Unlike the area's traditional-looking villas and farms, this is smooth, modernist architecture, and very precise—the cellar alone is lined with 130,000 tiles that took seven years to lay without mortar. And it's a mighty operation processing grapes from two of the family's 14 estates around Italy that go into making some 120 labels of wine.

I taste a few *Chianti Classicos*, a prelude to dinner at *Osteria di Passignano*, a Michelin-starred restaurant in one of umpteen villages nearby. The restaurant occupies the ground floor of a monastery surrounded by vineyards in every direction and it's all owned by the Antinoris. Allegra Antinori, one of Piero's three daughters, plays host for the dinner.

Between courses of veal and pasta, we sip *Badia A Passignanco Gran Selezione 2010*, and I think about the time the Antinoris have had to get their technique just right. They've been winemakers for 26 generations dating back to 1385. Throughout the evening, Allegra whispers to staff to make little improvements to our meal: "Heat this more. Serve that wine next."

"If I'm out with friends at their place, I enjoy myself immensely," she laughs, "but if it's one of my restaurants, I'm the worst critic."

The next morning, I take a walk in the woods with a mutt named Giotto, some-



LEFT: From November through May, children can ride the colourfully painted horses of the Picci family's antique carousel operated for generations in Piazza della Repubblica by the Gucci Museo.

BELOW: Thousands of shoes custom-designed for movie stars and VIPs are on display at the Salvatore Ferragamo Museum, below the shoemaking family's flagship store on Piazza Santa Trinita.
Sarah Staples



rowers glide noiselessly past. With *gelato artigianale* from Gelateria La Carraia in hand, I step onto Ponte Alle Grazie. Then I set the cup down and pick up my camera: from the lesser-known bridge, there's a perfectly framed shot of Ponte Vecchio in the distance. **DS**

where between Florence and Pisa—exactly where we are is a secret guarded by the Savini family, whose truffle tourism business is about 15 minutes away.

Suddenly, the dog stops, excitedly noses the roots of a tree, and sits, tail wagging.

“Dove, Giotto?” (Where is it?)

Giotto is trained not to eat or even leave a scratch on the truffles he finds; only to point them out in exchange for a doggy treat. Seems like a raw deal if you consider that in 2007, Giotto pointed to a 1.5-kilogram truffle that fetched a world-record US\$330,000 when it was sold to a billionaire buyer from Macao. A cauliflower-size replica sits throne-like on a velvet cushion back at the Savini's store-restaurant.

Lunch as part of my Truffle Experience tour is a multi-course affair of the good stuff: white truffle currently selling for about 3,000 euros per kilo, shaved, grated, diced or infused into every dish. It's a stinky feast that not even Thomas Keller, one of the family's regular clients, could match for extravagance.

UNIQUE FINDS DOWNTOWN

I arrive back downtown in the late afternoon and, on a sommelier's tip, I stop in at wine merchant Enoteca Bonatti to pick up a bottle of Sangiovese as a souvenir.

Then I spend an hour at the Salvatore Ferragamo Museum, in the basement of the shoemaker's flagship store on Piazza Santa Trinita, admiring displays of thousands of examples of heels, wedges and wooden models custom-made for the feet of movie stars and other VIPs from the mid-1920s on. (Prince George's adorable baby feet are among those immortalized.)

According to some sources, two-thirds of Italy's 15 most important national public galleries are in Florence, and many churches and palaces, such as the Ferragamos' Palazzo Spini Feroni, house their own stunning private collections. The city is an artistic and cultural marvel deserving of the tourists it welcomes. But my trip has been about discovering more unusual treasures.

The sun sets over mustard-coloured homes along the Arno, and from time to time,

TRAVEL PLANNER

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Città Metropolitana di Firenze:
firenzeturismo.it/en
Desinare @ Riccardo Barthel: desinare.it
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Lungarno Collection:
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Salvatore Ferragamo Museum:
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Savini Truffle Experience: savinitartufi.it