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YOUR GUIDE TO HEAVEN ON EARTH **AUTUMN 2016**

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ART *and* SOUL

Hotelier **Olga Polizzi** has visited Italy since she was a child and has known its finest artisans for decades, using them to mend mirrors, carve bedsteads and blow glass for her hotels. Here, she guides us around her favourite haunts in Florence. Plus, our top six Tuscan places to stay

photography MATTEO & DOVILE



HEAVENLY VIEW
Olga Polizzi on the wall
of the piazza outside
San Miniato basilica,
overlooking Florence

‘T here is nothing quite like the view of Florence from the hillside piazza outside the San Miniato basilica. I hate the word unique, but this really is exceptional. From here, the city appears to have changed little since the Middle Ages when Brunelleschi constructed his incredible duomo at its heart. You only have to look at maps of that time to see how little has been altered: the traditional terracotta-

roofed houses along the Arno, the Ponte Vecchio lined with tiny medieval jewellery shops, the grand palazzos, elaborate churches such as Santa Croce and Santa Maria Novella... Then, of course, there's the art.

There is no other city like Florence for artworks, thanks in large part to the Medicis – probably the greatest benefactors the world has known. There are magnificent pieces everywhere, from the well known – *David*, the *Pietà*, the Baptistry's Gates of Paradise – to relatively unknown statues in little squares and churches. There is beauty wherever you look.

One of the nicest things about Florence is that, after just a few days, you feel like you know the city and have got under its skin; it's not like Rome or Milan. And our hotel, the Savoy, is right in its heart. The wonderful new Duomo Museum is round the corner and the Palazzo Strozzi, which always has good exhibitions, is about five minutes' walk – that is, if you have flats or wedges on; this city isn't built for heels.

I adore Italy, and have been visiting all my life. I am proudly British but my blood is all Italian. My father came to Italy when he was two in the 1920s and my mother was born in England of a Venetian mother. Every summer we'd go to my father's small family house in the hills, near Montecassino. It was very simple, and although my father had several hotels and large houses in England, he always said the small Italian one was his favourite. He loved nothing more than all six of us being squashed together. I'm not sure it was my mother's favourite, though – for a long time it didn't have running water, so she would have to soap us five girls down outside in a big bowl of well water she'd warmed in the sun – to the delight of the local boys, who'd watch over walls.

When I travel to Italy I always think carefully about what I am going to pack, as Italians have real style. I almost always end up buying something extra in Florence. There are wonderful handmade leather-bag and shoe shops – you can still see monks making leather goods in Santa Croce. And there's Angela Caputi, whose chunky necklaces I can't resist.

For someone who spends most of her life creating interiors, as I do, one of the greatest pleasures of coming to Florence is working with its artisans. It still has so many family businesses whose work ethic and customer care has been passed down through the generations, and who really look after you; they treat you like a friend.

You can also get anything made or fixed here, which is increasingly rare in Britain. For instance, if you have a broken chandelier, need glass salt liners for silverware, or want crystal goblets made, Paola Locchi can do it. Her grandfather started the business more than a century ago and her craftsmen can replicate old pieces, fix new ones and engrave. If you want leather bags made, table-tops relined or photo albums created, look up the Gori family at the School of Leather. There are woodworkers, the Castorinas, who can copy anything, be it a table or a broken rose on an antique. Riccardo Barthel can find almost anything you need when renovating a house, from original tiles to antique handles (I bought a lot

for Endsleigh, our hotel in Devon; he also made our bathroom cupboards). Then, Giovanni Baccani at The Blue Shop can gild frames or trays the old-fashioned way, using terracotta, rabbit glue and fine sheets of gold.

But these artisans often tell me it's getting more difficult to make a living; that people want things quickly, the young aren't as interested in old crafts. So I think it's important to support them. When you see someone etching glass, or blowing crystal, or gilding a frame, you realise what skill it takes. It would be such a shame if that disappeared.

There are, thankfully, still lots of people who appreciate traditions here – particularly when it comes to food. The old-fashioned little coffee shops such as Gilli, opposite our hotel, are full of Florentines, as are wine bars such as Procacci, which makes tiny delicious sandwiches of anchovies, and truffle butter. There are still old-fashioned delis such as Mariano and old-style restaurants such as Tortino – which my brother [Sir Rocco Forte] adores, as does Fulvio Pierangelini, the best chef in the world.

One of the reasons the food in Florence is so wonderful is because Tuscan ingredients are so good: the sun-ripened tomatoes they use in panzanella and bruschetta; the delicious vegetables in thick winter soups; the shrimp served with chickpeas; the pecorino they grate on to *pici* pasta. And of course the creams and natural flavours of the ice creams – particularly almond – and the nutty *cantucci* that are served with cold dessert wine. I love the professionalism of the waiters in Italy, too: they are often people who have served all their lives, and are so friendly, so courteous, and who add so much to the experience.

Because vineyards surround the city, it's easy to get out and taste wonderful wines, whether at a small family vineyard or a grand one like the Antinoris'. And there are glorious towns to visit; my favourite is Siena, particularly when the Palio is on; it's so *Romeo and Juliet* with all those people on balconies. The best time of year is October. The colours are autumnal, it's cooler and it's truffle season. What more could you ask for?"



POLIZZI'S PICK OF FLORENCE

The places I've chosen (below) are small, mostly family-owned businesses, like ours, which still have real Italian soul.

ANGELA CAPUTI

Since I discovered this jeweller's wonderful sculptural necklaces a decade ago, I've bought one every year. Angela said to me once that bold jewellery is the female equivalent of armour to men – and she's right. If I have to go out straight after work, I only have to put one of her pieces on and I feel ready to face anything. angelacaputi.com

ANTICO SETIFICIO FIORENTINO

This tiny family-owned factory is worth trying to get into – on a rare tour – to see some of the oldest looms in Italy that once produced fabric for noble families and the church. The silks can cost about £1,700 a metre, but are handmade by local women and exquisite. anticosetificiofiorentino.com

CASTORINA

This fourth-generation wood workshop can make anything, in whatever woods you want – from tables and beds to fine inlay on a cabinet – and it also has a vault of exotic veneers to re-line broken furniture. They're real

craftsmen; it is the place to get a bespoke frame made or an antique mended. castorina.net

FLAIR

The ground floor of a handsome palazzo has been carefully curated with pieces from the 1930s to 1970s from all over the world. The owners, Franco Mariotti and his wife, Alessandra Tabacchi, have a fantastic eye for young artists, as well as for classic pieces. They also make their own pieces, which are fast becoming modern classics. flair.it

IRENE

Though I say it myself, the restaurant at the Savoy – overseen by the brilliant chef Fulvio Pierangelini – is one of the best in the city. It serves a wonderful plate of spaghetti with tomato sauce, and lasagne and huge fresh green salads. And you can sit in the piazza, right in the centre of Florence, watching the world go by. roccofortehotels.com

MARIANO

The owners of this tiny deli are charming: old-fashioned artisans who know all the best producers, whether that's of wine, or truffles,



SKILL SETS

Olga Polizzi watches an artist in Ginori porcelain shop painting a plate (top) for a set of teacups (above). Bracelet by Angela Caputi (left) and wooden artefacts made by craftsmen at Castorina



or wild pigs for their ham, which they serve in the tiniest round sandwiches. They also still bake *budino di riso*: the delicious little sweet breakfast brioche made with rice. *Via Parione, 00 39 055 214067*

MOLERIA LOCCHI

Paola Locchi is a tiny ball of energy, whose century-old company specialises in glass, whether that's making exquisite hand-blown, gold-etched champagne flutes and bespoke blown tumblers for superyacht owners or fixing mirrors and making new stoppers. She is probably one of the last people who can still make whatever you want, from any period. locchi.com

PROCACCI

A tiny dark-wood-panelled enoteca and sandwich bar that is always full of Florentines having a quick glass of wine and a snack. It offers Antinori wines by the glass, and bite-sized rolls filled with anchovy, truffle butter, or hot-smoked salmon and rocket, as well as fresh truffles, local honey and pastries. procacci1885.it

RICCARDO BARTHEL

More like a little village square than a store: a hotchpotch of Tuscan buildings stocking everything you might need to restore an old Italian house, from tiles and wrought-iron table-legs to fabrics and taps. It has a lovely

cooking school, too. Desinare, where you can learn to make perfect risottos, pastas, cakes... riccardobarthel.it

RICHARD GINORI

This porcelain manufacturer has been making the finest crockery since 1735, and been based in this handsome wood-panelled shop since 1802. My favourites are by Giò Ponti; he worked here in the 1920s, and his pieces still feel so modern. Although the hand-painted birds are wonderful, too. richardginori1735.com

SOSTANZA

This white-tiled little trattoria with shared tables lining its walls is a Florentine institution, which is why it has two sittings a night. I almost always have their *tortino*, which is like an artichoke omelette, and chicken breasts fried in butter. Decadent, but delicious. *Via del Porcellana, 00 39 055 212 691*

From next month, our hotel, the Savoy (roccofortehotels.com; doubles from £230), will be able to offer guests access to Florentine families and institutions previously not available, through a new service, Firenzeyesplease.com. These range from tastings in the Antinori cellars and visits to the Puccis' palace to private tours of the Uffizi and Duomo.

Interview by Lisa Grainger