

TRAVEL INSIDER

RIVER VIEWS
The Ponte Vecchio from the Borgo San Jacopo restaurant.

PHOTOGRAPHY: (FROM TOP) LUNGARNO COLLECTION (2); DESINARE AT RICCARDO BARTHEL (3)

Florence & Tuscany

Our editor in chief uncovers supreme, swoon-worthy locales in Italy's most romantic city and region. by Diane Forden

My love affair with Italy began years ago when I first visited and was captivated by this enchanting country and its history, beauty and romance. On a recent trip to Florence and Tuscany I discovered that *la dolce vita* still flourishes in this honeymoon-perfect destination. Hotels boasting chic suites with modern amenities are nestled within centuries-old architecture, restaurants delight with delectable dishes and the gracious Italians embrace visitors with warmth, wit and exuberant hospitality. They had me at *Ciao!*

• **STYLISH RETREATS** Along the Arno River in the heart of Florence four Lungarno Collection hotels, owned by the legendary Ferragamo family, are the ultimate in luxury and relaxation and each possesses a unique sense of style. I loved the pet-friendly **Portrait Firenze's** 1950s and '60s-inspired glamour. Black-and-white images decorate the walls and mid-century style furniture melds seamlessly with luxe linens and cashmere fabrications. All 37 suites feature oversized beds, marble bathrooms, hidden kitchenettes and the latest technology. Terrace views of the Arno and the bustling Ponte Vecchio bridge are a plus. Just next door to Portrait Firenze are the equally chic 74-room **Gallery Hotel Art** that features contemporary art and special exhibits year round and the 43-room **Continentale**. Here, a visit to the rooftop La Terraza Bar affords stunning views of this golden Renaissance city. You can also unwind from a day of sightseeing with a soothing massage at the White Iris Beauty Spa. The 73-room **Hotel Lungarno** is the epitome of classic elegance. Lush antique furnishings and a blue-and-white decor conjure an "at-sea" feel as you sit on your terrace or enjoy cocktails in the lively Picteau Lounge. Bonus: Admission to the Salvatore Ferragamo Museum is free for Lungarno Collection hotel guests. My inner fashionista relished the lavish display of exquisite, custom-made shoes dating back to the 1950s. Room rates for the Lungarno Collection hotels start at \$230 a night; lungarnocollection.com. ➔

PORTRAIT FIRENZE
The serene and stylish interiors.

TRAVEL TIP: *Florence was the first European city to have paved streets and it is still best to navigate this city's winding medieval passageways and many piazzas on foot.*

CULINARY HEIGHTS
Sharpen your kitchen skills at the Desinare cooking school.



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THE GOOD LIFE
Get a taste of it at the Osteria de Passignano in Chianti.

• **TOP CHEF** An opportunity to take a cooking class in Florence both thrilled and terrified me. Culinary skills are not my forte. But who wouldn't want to learn how to create a homemade Italian meal from an expert chef? My fears were soon put to rest upon meeting chef Maria Valiani at the cooking school at Desinare (*desinare.it*). Encouraged by her patience and good humor I was soon making veal rolls, ravioli and a scrumptious chocolate cake. Desinare is also a picturesque event space with about 24 artisans and craftsmen on staff, and features classes on wine tasting, food pairing, tabletop design and food photography.

• **FINE WINES** Tuscany is renowned for its rolling hills, stately forests and miles-long vineyards that produce some of the finest wines on the planet. The Antinori Winery (*antinori.it*) makes more than 100 varietals and boasts a state-of-the-art winery that took 14 years to build. It was fascinating to tour this immense space and sample the fabulous Chianti—the 2012 Peppoli Chianti Classico and 2012 Villa Antinori Chianti Classico Riserva were two favorites. And talk about a family business: Since 1385, 26 generations of Antinoris have been producing wine.

• **HUNTING SEASON** Florence's proximity to Tuscany also affords an opportunity to enjoy a one-of-a-kind experience—truffle hunting. At family-owned Savini Tartufi (*savinitartufi.it*), visitors can join truffle hunters as they venture into the woods with a dog trained to sniff out these tasty treasures. Our canine cutie, Giotto, bounded into the forest eager to forage, and before long had unearthed three rare white truffles. Not bad for a few hours work! Afterward, we feasted on a truffle-infused meal—the tagliolini pasta and fried eggs with truffle were downright knee-buckling.

• **MANGIA!** Meals are truly an art form here. Sip a creative cocktail at the Fusion Bar & Restaurant at the Gallery Hotel Art, and enjoy an Asian-style dinner in the glass-enclosed restaurant. Honeymooners shouldn't miss the Hotel Lungarno's elegant, uber-romantic Borgo San Jacopo restaurant and its mouthwatering risotto with trout eggs and truffles. Be sure to order dessert: Chef Peter Brunel prepared a chocolate feast that I'm still daydreaming about. About 30 minutes from Florence, the Michelin-starred Osteria di Passignano restaurant (*osteriadipassignano.com*) is located in an ancient abbey founded in 395 A.D. Delight in exquisite dishes like red prawns stuffed with cod and veal sirloin topped with zucchini. ■



ROLL OUT THE BARREL
The Antinori Winery's cave.



GALLERY HOTEL ART
Sipping pretty in the Fusion Bar & Restaurant.

TRAVEL TIP: For 360-degree views of the city climb the 463 stone steps to the top of the *Duomo* or the 414 steps of the *Campanile di Giotto*. Reward yourselves with soul-satisfying gelatos afterward.



TREASURE HUNT
Sniffing out the truffles.



HOTEL LUNGARNO
Cozy seating at the Picteau Lounge.

PHOTOGRAPHY: (FROM TOP) MARCHESI ANTINORI (2); LUNGARNO COLLECTION (2); SAVINI TARTUFI; LUNGARNO COLLECTION