

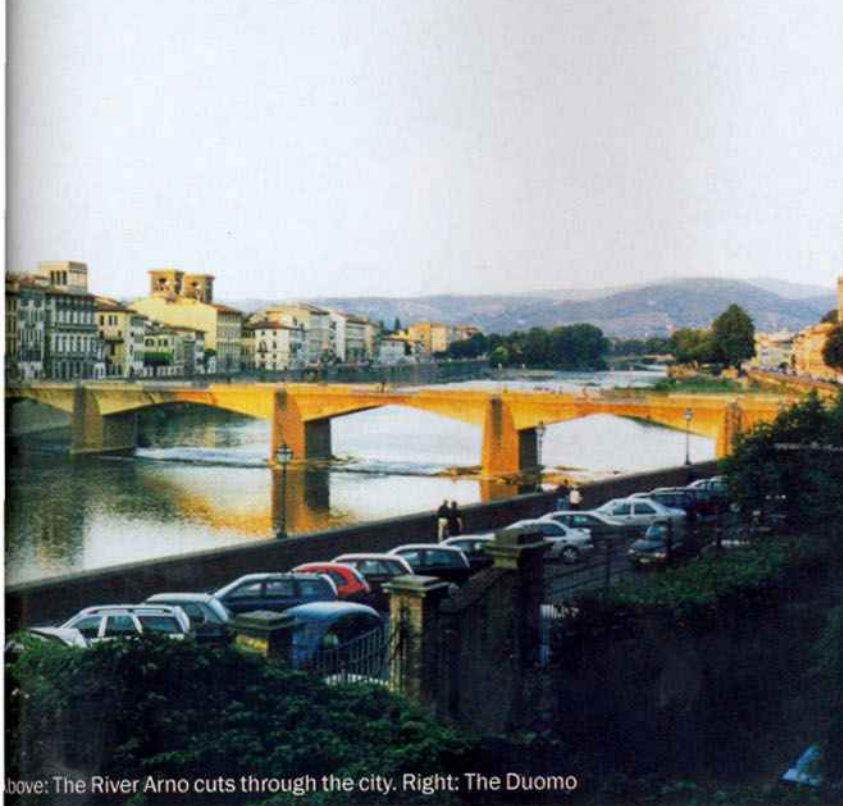
great escapes

# Bravo Firenze

Celebrated for its beauty, the charming and sophisticated city of Florence has everything to offer – from historic architecture to a glamorous nightlife, it's all there in Toscana's capital

by Thomo Setshogo

Villa Mangiacane



above: The River Arno cuts through the city. Right: The Duomo



**I**t was a late drizzly afternoon as we approached Florence en route to its city centre known as the old city. The murky weather blurred the outline of the approaching medieval buildings on the other side of the River Arno that separates the new from the old city, putting a dampener on my arrival at this much-loved destination. But matters changed for the better as we crossed the Ponte S. Trinita Bridge: the sun unexpectedly appeared from behind angry clouds to unveil a breathtaking sight that must make angels sing – the beauty of this ancient city.

Founded in 200 BC as a colony of the Etruscan City of Fiesole, Florence has a long and illustrious history that is rich in art and culture, war and natural disaster. However, the latter are no longer evident, and this enchanting city resembles a fairytale village.

## The city centre of Florence is typical of most old European cities, with plenty of narrow cobbled streets lined with picturesque buildings

The best place to start your visit in Florence is in the city centre (old city). There are plenty of hotels and B&Bs in this area that give you easy access to the countless landmarks, art galleries, basilicas, restaurants, bars, shops, markets and theatres. My stay started in the decadent Louis XIV-style hotel called Helvetia & Bristol Firenze, tucked away on the narrow Vespa clad street of Via dei Pescioni.

Although it was already dusk when I checked

into the hotel, the view of the Piazza Strozzi from the huge wooden framed shutters of my room enticed me to explore the area *pronto!* As I left the hotel and turned the corner onto Via Strozzi, I was confronted by a massive double volume Louis Vuitton outlet, as well as dashing dressed Italians with oversized designer glasses (although the sun was barely there). They walked down the street in an almost hopping style as if they don't have a care in the world. Who would, living in a place like this?

Mesmerised by the whole scene, I unfortunately tripped, only to hear the chorus of the notoriously flirtatious Italian men: "Bella bella bellaaa... are you okay?"

The city centre of Florence is typical of most old European cities, with plenty of narrow

cobbled streets lined with picturesque buildings. Exploring is an absolute pleasure as there are hidden gems around every little corner: minuscule vegetable and fruit shops, modern art galleries, jewellery and ornament shops. Best of all are the little cafés and bistros scattered throughout, allowing you respite from walking, where you can collect your thoughts and soak up the laid-back atmosphere while listening to the gypsies playing in the

street. There are also piazzas around almost every corner, often with interesting landmarks to admire. For example Piazza Della Signoria has the renowned Galleria degli Uffizi, which houses artworks by Bellini, Raphael and Michelangelo, and Piazza Giovanni is home to the magnificent Duomo. This larger-than-life cathedral is grander than you could ever imagine and can be seen from a distance.

And no matter where you are in the city centre, the cobbled streets lead to the river that runs under Florence's most famed landmark, the Ponte Vecchio, in a matter of minutes. This 9th Century bridge that simply translates as 'old bridge' has survived great floods and World War II. It houses the city's oldest gold merchants whose shops reside on top of the bridge, making it a charming sight. The walk across the Ponte Vecchio is short, but the reasonably priced jewellery will slow your pace, as will the spectacular backdrop of the high Tuscan hills that are often capped with snow until spring. Over the bridge you'll find Via de Bardi and Lungarno Torrigiani – home to Florence's trendy restaurants and bars that overlook the river – as well as Borgo S. Jacopo, with its string of ornament and memorabilia as well as designer eyewear shops.



Clockwise from top left: Designerwear abounds in Florence; the entrance to the old city; a typical street scene; the Ponte Vecchio

Although it is a city, with many tourists and foreign students, Florence doesn't feel as busy, imposing or as touristy as the likes of Rome or Paris. It has the quaint village feel of St Tropez or Portofino, with the equal air of sophistication, but minus the azure Mediterranean, which is an hour's drive from the city.

And while on the subject of sophistication – if you don't want to stick out like a sore thumb

collection of fashion outlets, including Gucci, Salvatore Ferragamo, Donna Karan, Todd's, Prada and Balenciaga.

After dark Florence transforms into a haven for nightlife lovers. The narrow streets come alive with lights, and little trattorias that are not visible during the day suddenly appear from behind wooden shutters closed during working hours. Most trattorias specialise in

## The cobbled streets lead to the river that runs under Florence's most famed landmark, the Ponte Vecchio Bridge

then may I suggest you pack your smart and trendy wardrobe. Old takkies and surfer T-shirts don't make the grade in this city where most people are elegantly dressed in designer denim or cashmere sweaters; even the men collecting the garbage accessorise with the latest Gucci sunglasses. Fashion high-end brand loyalists will feel at home on Via De' Tornabuon in the city centre; this street boasts an impressive

traditional Tuscan food such as veal stew, stracotto braised steak, artichoke omelette, Florentine-style tripe and pastas that must be sampled with Tuscany's famed Chianti wines. If you feel like a break from the local food there are a few good international restaurants. Like most south European cities, restaurants are open till late, so you can always treat yourself to a ballet, opera or musical before your

typical local meal. After supper you can wander through the cobbled streets and admire the historic buildings under the glow of spotlights or look at the local artists' work.

If you are looking for a romantic setting to round off your evening then you must visit the Piazzale Michelangelo, which boasts a magnificent panoramic view of Florence. Once you are there, you are bound to fall in love all over again. Being a student city there are naturally plenty of pubs, nightclubs and jazz bars that are ideal for night owls, all within walking distance. One of the lovely things about the city centre of Florence is that it is quite safe at night (in fact Florence is considered to be one of the safest cities in Italy), making walking around a pure delight. However, it is advisable not to be too relaxed.

Once you have explored this beautiful city, visited its modern and historic art galleries, basilicas and markets, and of course, Michelangelo's famous statue of David at the Galleria dell'Accademia, venture out to experience the Tuscan countryside. The land-



Villa Mangiacane

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Helvetia & Bristol Hotel

scape is as picture perfect as you imagine.

Just a 20-minute drive from Florence is the picturesque area of San Casciano. Situated in the Chianti Classico region, its rolling hills are home to many farmhouses, villas, wine farms and olive groves. In the heart of the area is the 500-year-old Villa Mangiacane. Sprawled over 300 hectares, with its own vineyard, olive grove and Tuscan forest, Villa Mangiacane is the epitome of decadent Tuscan living. Its 15th Century decor has the unmistakable hand of

architect master Michelangelo, and its Renaissance frescoes have been restored to their former glory. Modern artworks and rare antiques punctuate its vast interiors. The villa's opulent suites include five that overlook the distant city of Florence.

Alas, all good things come to an end – and you can only describe the visit as truly superb by day and glittering by night, a definite must for those who appreciate the finer things in life. □

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**Getting there:** British Airways has double daily flights to London from Johannesburg and daily flights from Cape Town. From Heathrow, transfer to Gatwick for the BA flight to Pisa, 30 minutes outside Florence. British Airways is proud to offer a seat that converts to a fully flat six foot bed in the Club World Cabin for business class travellers (see right). The seats are designed in forward and rear-facing pairs, and are configured to create a lounge type environment, for maximum space and privacy. Book online at [ba.com](http://ba.com) or call British Airways on (011) 441 8600.

**Getting around:** Most tourist attractions are in walking distance, but there are taxis if you prefer. Buy a detailed street map, it makes exploring much easier.

**Where to stay:** **Helvetia & Bristol Hotel** is a five star hotel situated in the heart of the city, with most tourist attractions, restaurants, markets, high street and fashion outlets within walking distance. The hotel features a superb cocktail bar and restaurant, as well as exquisite chandeliers in its rooms. Tel: +39 (055) 26651 or visit [www.hbf.royaldemeure.com](http://www.hbf.royaldemeure.com).

**Villa Mangiacane** is a luxury 15th Century boutique hotel situated 12km out of Florence, nestled in the picturesque hills of Tuscany with its own vineyard, olive grove and Tuscan forest. Tel. +39 (055) 829 0123 or email [info@mangiacane.it](mailto:info@mangiacane.it). The **Villa Belvedere Hotel** in Florence is a quaint hotel just 3km from the city centre, with its own pool, bar and restaurant. Tel +39 (055) 222 501 or visit [www.villa-belvedere.com](http://www.villa-belvedere.com)

**Money:** In Italy they use euros – take plenty of them as Florence is quite expensive. Credit cards are accepted, and you can withdraw money with your debit card from most ATMs.

**Average price:** An average meal – pasta and a glass of wine – is around 15 euros; a three-course dinner in a trattoria costs from 25 euros; a cup of tea or coffee is six euros.

**Shopping:** Plenty of shopping can be done in Florence. It is particularly renowned for leather goods that are not extravagantly priced. There are also lots of high street and labelled shops for those seeking designer wear. The markets are great, featuring everything from memorabilia to clothes and, best of all, you can bargain.



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