



CUT-OUT-AND-GO GUIDE | HIDDEN FLORENCE



instant escapes

# Hidden Florence

Unearth beautiful, peaceful parts — where tourist hordes fear to tread

Birthplace of the Renaissance and a cultural powerhouse, Florence can be too gorgeous for its own good, those queues and selfie sticks spoiling every heartstopping moment. Head off-piste to savour the city's splendour without the crush — in beguiling churches, artisan workshops and gardens the locals don't want you to find... **By Helen Pickles**



**Eye icon** • Every first-time tourist aims for the Boboli Gardens, but Baroque-Romantic Giardino Bardini ([bardinipeyron.it](http://bardinipeyron.it); £6; ① on map) is more intimate — and has better city views. Afterwards, visit the Bardini Museum ([museivicifiorentini.comune.fi.it](http://museivicifiorentini.comune.fi.it); £5; ②), a neo-Renaissance *palazzo* filled with the eclectic collection of 19th-century antiques dealer Stefano Bardini. **Its coffered ceilings and bright-blue walls are as striking as the Roman arches and elaborate urns on show.**

• The Duomo dome hogs the limelight, but few people know you can find **Brunelleschi's trademark elegance** in the loggia and cloisters of the city's 15th-century orphanage, too. Now home to a museum, its exhibits include **heart-breaking scraps of ribbons and medals** left to identify abandoned children ([istitutodeglinnocenti.it](http://istitutodeglinnocenti.it); £6; ③). Also, while the exterior of Santo Spirito basilica, his swansong, is dull, a sequence of 38 side chapels ripples around the interior with breathtaking serenity ([basilicasantospirito.it](http://basilicasantospirito.it); free; ④).

• See Renaissance art in the churches: **unlike the Uffizi, they're usually quiet and mostly free.** Ghirlandaio's *Last Supper* in the refectory of Ognissanti (free; ⑤) is second only to Da Vinci's (don't miss the Botticelli in the church itself), while his frescoes in Santa Trinita (free; ⑥) and Santa Maria Novella ([smn.it](http://smn.it); £4.25; ⑦) are a whirl of colour. In the latter, also check out Masaccio's fresco: it's revolutionary perspective had 15th-century Italians queuing to gawp.

**DREAM ICE CREAM**  
On the way back down, reward yourself with an ice cream from **Il Gelato di Filo** (Via San Miniato 5r), a little store where only seasonally fresh fruit is used in the gelati, made in the kitchen behind.

**WRITER'S TIP**  
The tree-covered Piazza Santo Spirito is the city's prettiest square, lined with bars and cafes. Buy a slice of focaccia from **Gustapanino** (Piazza Santo Spirito 1) and sit on the church steps to enjoy the scene.

**Through the roof:** Brunelleschi's magnificent Duomo; below, frescoes in the basilica of San Miniato al Monte; the Giardino Bardini

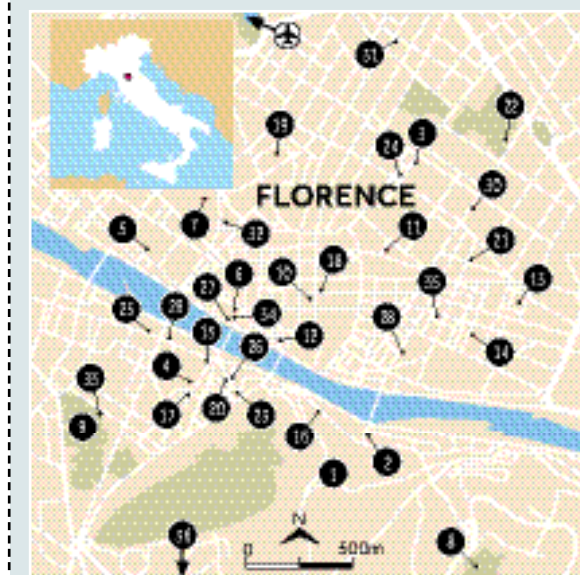
• Lots of people march up to Piazzale Michelangelo to take the classic snap of the city below — and stop there. Not you. Shake off the crowds and climb all the way to San Miniato al Monte ([sanminiatoalmon.te.it](http://sanminiatoalmon.te.it); free; ⑧), the strikingly patterned Romanesque church that looms over the city. Time your visit for 5.30pm evensong in the crypt, when **monks in white fill the air with a Gregorian chanting that makes time stand still.**

• For a slice of aristocratic Florentine life, **slip behind the walls of the Giardino Torrigiani** with the Marquis Vieri Torrigiani Malaspina himself ([giardinotorrigiani.it](http://giardinotorrigiani.it); £85 for up to five people; ⑨). He'll show you around the **folly temples, lemon trees and bamboo groves** of his romantic 19th-century garden, sharing family anecdotes (forbidden childhood climbs up the Neo-Gothic tower), then offer wine and *crostini* (£26) in his rambling villa.

• To take the iconic Florence photo, you need to rise above the sea of selfie sticks. The museum of Orsanmichele church ([orsanmichele.net](http://orsanmichele.net); free; ⑩), noted for its fine sculptures, has **eye-level views of Brunelleschi's dome**, while from the rooftop cafe of the Oblate library ([caffetteriadelleoblate.it](http://caffetteriadelleoblate.it); ⑪), the dome seems just a rooftop hop away. Or peer down on tourist-rammed Ponte Vecchio, cocktail in hand, from La Terrazza bar atop Hotel Continentale ([lungarnocollection.com](http://lungarnocollection.com); ⑫).

• Collect picnic fare from Sant' Ambrogio market (Piazza Ghiberti; ⑬) — scruffier and more gutsy than Mercato Centrale. Taste cheeses and prosciutto at Innocenti Urbano's stall, buy bread at Panificio Chicco di Grano, **sniffing and prodding fruit as the locals do.** Then head to tiny Giardino di Borgo Allegrì (⑭), tucked behind Santa Croce, with its painted-tyre flower tubs.

• Potter among artisan shops a world away from Santa Croce's dodgy leather stalls. In L'Ippogrifo (Via Santo Spirito 5r; ⑮), Gianni Raffaelli hand-tints copper etchings; at Il Torchio (Via dei Bardi 17; ⑯), **artists bind marbled paper into notebooks**; and in Roberto Ugolini's slip of a shoe shop (Via dei Michelozzi 17r; ⑰), apprentices sit on tiny stools to hand-stitch leather shoes. >



CUT-OUT-AND-GO GUIDE | HIDDEN FLORENCE

**EAT**

● **Lunchtime filler**

**CANTINETTA DEI VERRAZZANO**

(Focaccia and coffee about £4)

**Because:** This bakery-cum-cafe makes some of the best focaccia in town, and heats slices to order. **Travel's tip:** Avoid the waiter-served area at the rear — table service costs extra, so sit on the benches opposite the display cabinets instead. *Via dei Tavolini 18/20r; 18.*

● **Late-night food fix**

**MERCATO CENTRALE**

(Mains about £8)

**Because:** This lively food court on the first floor of the covered market is open until midnight, with counters of pizzas and lasagne, cheeses and meat. Pay, then find a table beneath the grand glass-and-iron canopy. **Travel's tip:** No need to juggle drinks and food — servers circulate taking drinks orders. *Via dell'Ariento; mercatocentrale.it; 19.*

● **The locals' hang-out**

**OSTERIA TRIPPERIA IL MAGAZZINO**

(Mains about £10)

**Because:** Despite the name, tripe (the city's speciality) isn't the only dish at this scrubbed-wood-and-paper-placemat restaurant. Other favourites: pasta with cavolo nero or veal ossobuco. **Travel's tip:** Skip pud for an ice cream from the gelateria on the other side of the piazza, and enjoy the buzz outside. *Piazza della Passera 2-3; 00 39 055 215969; 20.*

● **The back-street surprise**

**PENTOLA DELL'ORO** (Mains about £11)

**Because:** The rough-and-ready appearance (step off an anonymous street into the kitchen) belies a creative take on Tuscan favourites; bistecca is a speciality. **Travel's tip:** Ask for a ground-floor table, rather than eat in the cellar restaurant, and hear the kitchen banter. *Via di Mezzo 24; 00 39 055 241808; 21.*

● **The Michelin star turn**

**IL PALAGIO AT THE FOUR SEASONS**

(Mains about £42)

**Because:** Amid gardens once owned by a Medici, this place is the closest you'll get to dining in a country palazzo without leaving the city. Sumptuous canapés and amuse-bouches soften the prices. **Travel's tip:** Ask nicely to see the private rooftop dining pavilion: wow! *Borgo Pinti 99; 00 39 055 262 6450; ilpalagioristorante.it; 22.*

**CAFES & BARS**

● **Serious about coffee**

**DITTA ARTIGIANALE**

**Because:** The owners started out as coffee suppliers, so know their beans — and buy direct from producers. The cool, retro design attracts both students and business folk. **Travel's tip:** If it's sunny, use the back entrance to bag a table in the tiny courtyard. *Via dello Sprone 5r; dittaartigianale.it; 23.*

● **Sweetly traditional**

**PASTICCERIA ROBIGLIO**

**Because:** Unlike the central branch of this cafe-bakery, this one's locals-only. The cakes are sinfully good — try the millefoglie — and are prettily wrapped if you want another for later. **Travel's tip:** The hot chocolate is considered the best in the city. *Via de' Servi 112/114r; 24.*

● **Boho and bookish**

**LA CITE**

**Because:** There's an agreeably bohemian air to this cafe-bar, with its armchairs and primary-coloured walls lined with dozens of books. **Travel's tip:** Check the website for upcoming live music sessions. *Borgo San Frediano 20r; lacitelibreria.info; 25.*



**ASK THE LOCAL**

Born in Florence, Giulia Mondolfi is a landscape architect, and garden and fashion designer (albertaforfence.com)

"I meet friends at Caffè degli Artigiani in lively little Piazza della Passera; its apple cake is the best. In spring and summer, Rivalta (Lungarno Corsini 12/14r; 27) by Santa Trinita Bridge is good for an aperitivo; sit on the riverside wall and they bring drinks to you. For fashion, I like Boutique Nadine (Via de' Benci 32r; 28). It has a good mix, from vintage '60s bags and dresses to pieces by young designers. But for pure design jewellery, it has to be Angela Caputi (Via Santo Spirito 58r; 29). It's very Florentine: bold and colourful. And a lovely church that people miss is Santa Maria Maddalena (Borgo Pinti 58r; 30). It's a sensational bit of peace in the city centre."

**WHILE YOU'RE HERE**

Learn to make iconic dishes from Italian chefs with a lesson at the Cucina Lorenzo de' Medici. It's not for the shy — onlookers will gather to watch you cook through the glass walls (cucinaldm.com; class £55pp)

**WANT MORE TO EAT?**

For £10 (with wine) you can lunch very well, while befriending local students and architects, at Da Rocco in Sant' Ambrogio market (Piazza Ghiberti)



**STAY**

● **The neighbourhood retreat**

**ANTICA DIMORA JOHLEA** (Doubles from £68, B&B)

**Because:** It's charming and homely, from its polished-tile floors to help-yourself cakes. It's a 20-minute walk from the centre, but you'll feel like a local as you mingle with neighbours. **Travel's tip:** Take your evening aperitivo from the honesty bar to the rooftop terrace for views of the city's floodlit monuments. *Via San Gallo 80; 00 39 055 463 3292; antichedimoreflorentine.it; 31.*

● **Central cool**

**GARIBALDI BLU** (Doubles from £112, B&B)

**Because:** It's handy for the station and manages to be designer-cool, yet relaxed: polished-resin floors and pared-down furnishings mix with fake palm trees and life-size superhero models. **Travel's tip:** Breakfast can be cramped (served in a room shared with the next-door hotel) — go early or late. *Piazza di Santa Maria Novella 21; 00 39 055 277300; hotelgaribaldiblue.com; 32.*

● **Private view**

**ADASTRA SUITES** (Doubles from £122, B&B)

**Because:** Hidden behind an anonymous wall, this B&B overlooks the private Giardino Torrigiani (see 29), so you feel both privileged and peaceful. Rooms are vast, arty (No. 7 was inspired by a vintage Pucci scarf) and dotted with calligraphied witticisms. **Travel's tip:** The two garden suites offer privacy but the terrace rooms have the best views. *Via del Campuccio 53; 00 39 055 075 0602; adastraflorence.com; 33.*

● **The rooftop surprise**

**ANTICA TORRE DI VIA TORNABUONI**

(Doubles from £172, B&B)

**Because:** It's on the city's most fashionable street, near the River Arno, but the discreet entrance makes it (almost) your private palazzo. The roof-terrace views are surely the city's best. **Travel's tip:** On Sunday mornings, take your breakfast coffee on the terrace and listen to the church bells. *Via de' Tornabuoni 1; 00 39 055 265 8161; tornabuoni1.com; 34.*



**Bathing beauty:** clockwise from top left, bathroom at Adastra Suites; rustic Pentola dell'Oro restaurant; the lobby at designer-cool Garibaldi Blu; find the best focaccia in town at Cantinetta dei Verrazzano; elegant Il Palagio restaurant

● **Under the radar**

**RELAIS SANTA CROCE** (Doubles from £215, room only)

**Because:** Unlike most of the swanky hotels in the city centre, it is not on a tourist-thronged piazza or riverfront but in relatively quiet Santa Croce. **Travel's tip:** Breakfast here is overpriced and poor. Instead, head to nearby Via dei Neri for coffee at Ditta Artigianale (No. 32r) and a slice of focaccia at All'Antico Vinaio (No. 65r). *Via Ghibellina 87; 00 39 055 234 2230; baglionihotels.com; 35.*

● **Money no object**

**VILLA CORA** (Doubles from £320, room only)

**Because:** Florence's grand-palazzi hotels, while guaranteeing peace from tourist hordes, tend to be a limo-ride from the city. But this marbled and frescoed affair is a 20-minute walk away, and there's also a free shuttle. **Travel's tip:** Breakfast is steep (£26), but the feast — Tuscan salamis, cheeses, omelettes, pancakes, pastries — will set you up for the day. *Viale Machiavelli 18; 00 39 055 228790; villacora.it; 36.*

**FASHION FIX — FOR LESS!**

Opposite the hotel, step into the Ferragamo Museum: shoes by the footwear designer include beauties created for Judy Garland and Marilyn Monroe (ferragamo.com; £5)

**GET ME THERE**  
**GO INDEPENDENT**

**BA** (ba.com) flies from London City to Florence from £52 one way; **Vueling** (vueling.com) flies from Gatwick from £47 one way. Many airlines fly to Pisa, including **EasyJet** (easyjet.com), from four UK airports, including Luton and Manchester, from £29 one way. Or try **Ryanair** (ryanair.com) or **Jet2** (jet2.com). Direct buses from Pisa to Florence take 70 minutes (£4.25 one way), or take the shuttle to Pisa Centrale station for the hour-long train journey (£10 one way).

**GO PACKAGED**

**Kirker Holidays** (020 7593 2283, kirkerholidays.com) has three nights at Antica Torre di via Tornabuoni 1 from £678pp, B&B, with Gatwick-Florence flights and private transfers. **Citalia** (01293 765006, citalia.com) has three nights in a three-star hotel from £319pp, B&B, including Heathrow-Pisa flights. Or try **Secret Escapes** (secretescapes.com).

**FURTHER INFORMATION**

See [firenzeturismo.it](http://firenzeturismo.it)