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THE SUNDAY TIMES

The big weekend: Florence

Go before the summer crush and experience your own renaissance in the ultimate art city

Vincent Crump Published: 12 April 2015

Go with the Flo: the Duomo's exterior (Dave Yoder/Getty)



Saturday

Morning

Do Florence the wrong way and it's crowded, stressful and hot. Do it right, though, and it's a dream. All that art, all that architecture, all that Tuscan cooking... all you need is a plan. What's imperative is to visit in spring, before it gets sticky, and to book the unmissable stuff before you go.

Your first morning begins big, in the company of the Renaissance golden boy, Michelangelo's David. Two reasons: you will beat the queues if you book ahead and arrive at the Accademia for its 8.15am opening (£16; accademia.org); and the experience will make you feel marvellous for the rest of the weekend. Rounding the corner into the room he dominates is perhaps art's best example of how a hyper-familiar artefact can still stun in the flesh.



Pick up picnic supplies in the Mercato Centrale (Richard I'Anson/Getty)

Prepare for more sensory overload a few minutes' walk away at the Mercato Centrale. Europe's biggest covered market is a foodie Uffizi: a cornucopia of fruit and veg, beside stalls devoted to biscotti, honey and pasta (mercatocentrale.it). Brunches come no more authentically Florentine than at the market's Da Nerbone. Line up with the locals for a boiled-beef bun with pesto and chilli (£2.50).

Now you've an hour to visit the nearby Medici Chapels (£5; operamedicealaurenziana.org), with their eye-popping polychrome mausoleum stacked with ducal coffins, and Michelangelo's final, unutterably sad take on the Madonna and child.

Afternoon

What Michelangelo did with marble, Trattoria Mario does with T-bone steak. Cram on to a communal table, rub thighs with some new friends and order the monumental bistecca alla Fiorentina – three-fingers thick and easily enough for two (£22.50; trattoria-mario.com).

After lunch, by all means go for a gawp inside the Duomo, but the climb into Brunelleschi's dome is claustrophobic; instead, scale Giotto's Campanile

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The frescoed interior of Brunelleschi's dome (Alamy)

dunk the ochre and orange city in florid Raphaelite light.



Piazzale Michelangelo at sunset (Maurizio Rellini/SIME)

that the Rembrandt selfies are relegated to a side room, alongside paintings by Rubens, Goya, Velazquez... the works.



Cool off with a gelato (Alamy)

bellowing chefs, who announce the dishes as they emerge. At £27 all-in, the food is terrific (dare you to take on the lampredotto, Florentine tripe in spicy broth). Afterwards, they draw back the tables for some music, comedy or dance.

(£7.30; operaduomo.firenze.it) — 414 steps corkscrew up, and the sweep from the summit is better, if only because it includes the Duomo. You also get to spook yourself tiptoeing across the open grille on level three, designed 600 years before the Sears Tower thought of the idea.

Your reward is a honey-and-sesame ice cream at downtown Florence's top gelateria, Perche No! (£1.80; www.percheno.firenze.it). Slurp it among the statuary in Piazza della Signoria, where Cellini's Perseus brandishes the head of Medusa, her neck spouting gore. Not far away, the likes of Hercules, David and Neptune are frozen in stone.

Evening

South of the River Arno, the Oltrarno is the city's grittier side, its alleyways pitted with artisan workshops and aperitivo joints. Sharpen up for your evening stroll at Fuori Porta, with a negroni — Campari, gin and vermouth, invented in 1919 by a Florentine count, and James Bond's second-favourite cocktail (fuoriporta.it). On the hillside above, Piazzale Michelangelo becomes a scrum at sunset: the trick is to keep on climbing till you reach the 1,000-year-old church of San Miniato al Monte, from where you can watch the day's last rays

Afterwards, make like an Oltrarno barfly, hopping along the riverside from Le Volpi e l'Uva (levolpieluva.com) to Il Santo Bevitore (ilsantobevitore.com) for dinner — a library-like enoteca fortified with wine bottles, where they lift down the Brunellos with a grappling hook. Still thirsty? There's a younger, grungier vibe until late on Piazza Santo Spirito — especially at Volume (volume.fi.it), part music bar, part wood-turner's workshop.

Sunday

Morning

The Uffizi Gallery warrants at least two hours — and you'll spend that long queuing unless you phone for a timed admission ticket (£16; uffizi.org). It dazzles from the off, with a whole roomful of Botticellis (including The Birth of Venus) and some seminal Leonardos, such as his Annunciation. Further astoundment comes from Michelangelo's luminous Doni Tondo, while things get earthier in the new galleries downstairs: gird yourself for the come-hither eroticism of Titian's Venus of Urbino and Caravaggio's petrifying head of Medusa. Such is the glut of Renaissance and baroque masterpieces, in fact,

Five minutes away is the best cheap feed in Italy: a fistful of the oily Florentine flatbread called schiacciata, stuffed with pork, pecorino and truffle sauce by the boys at the cubbyhole sandwich joint All'Antico Vinaio (£3.50; Via dei Neri 65r).

Afternoon

Mosey across the Ponte Vecchio for a glass of carefully curated Chianti Classico at Pitti Gola e Cantina (Piazza Pitti 16), run by the dashing Fioravanti brothers, then cross the square to the Palazzo Pitti, former manor of the Medicis. Its Palatine Gallery has acres more art, and frescoed ceilings crammed with rampaging gods and bungee-jumping cherubs. You may prefer to cut straight to a lazy afternoon in the Boboli Gardens (£5.90; polomuseale.firenze.it), stacked like a giant green grandstand above the city and staked out by Roman and Renaissance statuary. Seek out Grand Duke Cosimo's favourite dwarf, astride a giant tortoise.

Evening

Teatro del Sale (edizioniteatrodelsalecibreoofirenze.it), the spin-off of Fabio Picchi's celebrated restaurant Cibreo, is the most idiosyncratic night out in Florence: a buffet of eight or nine courses served in a little theatre from a glass-walled kitchen fizzing with spits and

Where to stay

Garibaldi Blu is a dapper new boutique hotel near Santa Maria Novella station (doubles from £117;

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B&B, hotelgaribaldiblu.com). For a treat, Villa Cora is a mansion in high Renaissance style on a hillside behind the Boboli Gardens (doubles from £267, B&B, villacora.it).

Getting there

Vincent Crump was a guest of Garibaldi Blu, Villa Cora and Sunvil, which has two nights at the Garibaldi Blu from £687pp, B&B, including flights (020 8758 4722, sunvil.co.uk). Airlines flying to Florence include BA, CityJet, Flybe and Vueling.

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