

# Firenze Frenzy!

By Dr Martin Chio, Editorial Board Member

My last visit to Florence was more than 15 years ago, while I was a medical student and on a limited budget. That was also during the pre-digital camera era, so I haven't the foggiest idea where the photographs I took are and if the negatives still exist. So this time round, my aim was to photo-catalogue this charming Tuscan city. I crossed my fingers as the train from Roma Termini pulled into Santa Maria Novella station, and hoped everything would go smoothly for this leg of my holiday (my wallet had gone missing at CDG...).

My suitcase was heaved onto the taxi by a very strong lady driver, and off she went, meandering through the streets crowded with pedestrians, patiently trailing them and not using her car horn. I arrived at Lungarno Suites, a part of the Lungarno Hotels Collection founded by Salvatore Ferragamo and a member of the Small Luxury Hotels of the World™. I was then ushered into what looked like a modern art shop, where I relaxed on a chic, designer-looking (I have no furniture sense) sofa while awaiting the check-in. I was given a lovely room at Lungarno Suites (photo 1) with a view of Ponte Vecchio, the oldest of Florence's six bridges, which is built over the Arno.

Lungarno Suites is conveniently located with all the major attractions within five to 15 minutes' walking distance. It was a sunny midafternoon and having done my research online, I slapped on sunscreen and headed to the Palazzo Vecchio town hall (photo 2) to buy the Firenze card (<http://www.firenzecard.it>). This invaluable card is an *absolute* must-have, as it allows one to drastically reduce waiting time in queues to all of the major attractions of the city for €50 (S\$82) and is valid for 72 hours from the time of its first use.

One thing I have learnt over the years is to optimise good weather. Rain was predicted, but as it was still sunny, I strolled over to the Basilica di Santa Maria del Fiore, or the Duomo (photo 3), which dominates the Florentine skyline. The basilica's dome (photo 4), designed by Brunelleschi, was an architectural wonder of its time. Built without the use of scaffolding, it remains the largest brick dome ever constructed. The Firenze

Photos: Dr Martin Chio





card allowed me to join the shorter queue ahead of 60-plus people. Energised by a functional panini lunch, I made my way slowly but surely up the roughly 460 steps. Halfway up the climb was the semicircular corridor, which allowed one a closer view of Vasari and Zuccari's fresco of the Last Judgement (photo 5). The second half of the climb was more challenging, with tight spirals that took its toll on my knees, which were still recovering from climbing 500-odd steps up the cupola at St Peter's Basilica in Vatican City three days earlier. The view from the top was breathtaking and indeed worth the climb: verdant Tuscan hills and picturesque mosaic patterns on the roofs of the city.

Next to the Duomo is the ornate octagonal Baptistery of San Giovanni, which dates from the 5th or 6th century and where Dante was baptised. Its two highlights are the dome's mosaic ceiling (dating from the 13th century), and the Ghiberti bronze doors (dating from the 15th century) in the north and east sides of the building. The bronze door on the east side (actually a replica, photo 6), depicting scenes from the Old Testament, was described as the "Gates of Paradise" by Michelangelo. Meanwhile, the shimmering mosaic of the dome reinforced the influence of Byzantine art in Italy, and the overall effect reflected the magnificent crossroads of civilisations that Florence was part of in medieval Europe.

In need of refreshments, I referred to my trusty DK Eyewitness travel guide to locate what I think is the best gelato in Florence. Tucked away on Via dell'Isola delle Stinche, Vivoli (<http://www.vivoli.it>) has created flavours that danced on my tongue. I especially liked all the nutty flavours, which I managed to try as I popped in there three times over the course of my stay in Florence.

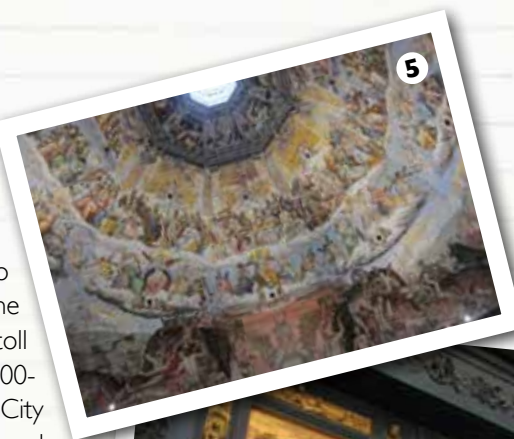
I decided to take the long way back to the hotel, and passed interesting and colourful restaurants and wine shops (photo 7), and browsed at a store selling marbled paper, a Florentine specialty.

Relaxed from a predinner prosecco at the Hotel Continentale's rooftop bar (which has a bird's eye view of the Ponte Vecchio), I then enjoyed a simple dinner of tasty meats at Brown Sugar. Having been told that the city is as pretty at night as it is in the day, I walked back through the piazza again, to admire a copy of the statue of Michelangelo's *David* (photo 8) aglow in the moonlight. It was also very reassuring to see uniformed carabinieri strategically patrolling the city and maintaining law and order even at an hour before midnight.

After a tiring day of walking, Lungarno Suites provided a very luxurious and cosy environment to retreat from the city.

## Day 2

The next morning, after breakfast at Gallery Hotel Art (a very trendy sister hotel of Lungarno Suites), I made my way south across the bridge to Oltrarno district for the



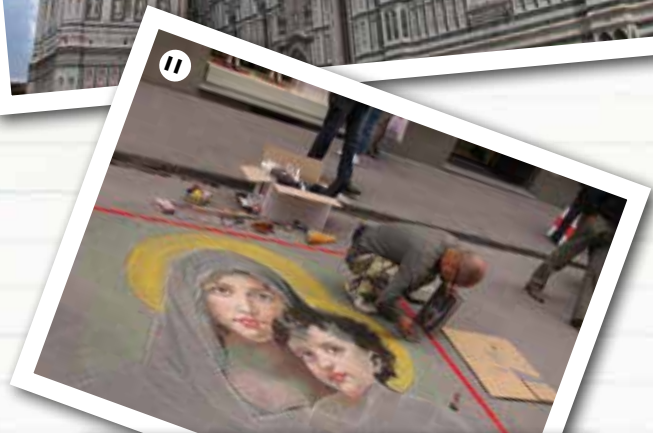




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Palazzo Pitti. This Renaissance palace was initially a stately home for a banker, but it now houses several galleries; I only managed to visit the Palatine Gallery and modern art galleries, royal apartments and silver museum. Unfortunately, they have a very strict no photography (yes, even without flash) rule, but I managed to sneak-snap a beautiful ceiling fresco (photo 9) depicting Alexander the Great. I grabbed a functional lunch (panini again) from the cafeteria, and ate while strolling through the Boboli Gardens.

I was feeling a bit "museum-ed out", so I decided to have a quick workout and climbed more than 410 steps up the 85-metre Giotto's campanile (photo 10). The view of the Duomo was probably prettier than the view from it. After that workout, I decided to reward myself with yet another gelato from Vivoli.



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What is a trip to Florence without some shopping (I limited myself to only an hour); Florentine leather craftsmanship is famed and the Via Tornabuoni is lined with famous brands. I decided to replace my lost wallet with a simple one from the flagship Ferragamo palazzo.

Having completed that minor detour, I thought a switch to modern art would be in order. En route to the Palazzo Strozzi, I stopped to observe a street artist drawing in chalk (photo 11) on the pavement. There were two exhibitions running simultaneously at the museum (photo 12). The first was a modern one, titled *An Idea of Beauty*, featuring eight contemporary international artists whose aim was to encourage visitors to reconsider the concept of beauty. The second, organised in partnership with the Musée du Louvre, was called *Springtime of the Renaissance*, featuring sculptures and masterpieces from 15th century Florence (sorry, no photos allowed again).



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I started winding down for the evening with a predinner prosecco at the Hotel Lungarno's riverside bar and watched the sunset on the Ponte Vecchio (photo 13). A playwright friend happened to be in Florence that evening and suggested we dine at Ora d'Aria restaurant (<http://www.oradariaistorante.com>), which has one Michelin star, located near the Uffizi Gallery. We opted for the six-course tasting menu, "Toscana a moda mio", and I was most impressed, especially with the walnut tortellini, beetroot, buffalo mozzarella and capers (photo 14). Having filled my stomach, I was glad that Florence is such a compact, walkable city, and enjoyed the cool breeze on the stroll back to Lungarno Suites.



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### Day 3

I had saved the two major galleries in Florence for my third and final day. I arrived at the Accademia a little after 9 am, and found that a very long queue had already formed. Firenze card to the rescue and the shorter queue took just five minutes! The original *David* is protected from the weather and elements in the museum and is the most popular exhibit there. There are also masterpieces from 15th- and 16th-century Florentine artists like Botticelli, plaster casts by



Bartolini and a collection of more than 50 musical instruments, which included a viola and cello by Stradivari. The museum also has two rare instruments by Cristofori (inventor of the piano), and the oldest vertical piano in existence.

I decided to have a proper lunch for once at Trattoria Antico Fattore and enjoyed a superb fresh porcini salad followed by a tasty scampi spaghetti (photo 15), accompanied by a local Chianti. It was a very cosy restaurant and I could not help but be amused by the reaction of the waiter when the diner at the next table asked for Tabasco to accompany his bistecca (steak).

I thought I had saved the best for last... the Uffizi, which started out as administrative offices in the 16th century, is now one of the oldest galleries in the world. Hence, it "suffers" from being very popular. Being a must-see/ must-not-miss, the Uffizi was overcrowded with noisy young students and large tour groups. It undoubtedly housed some spectacular works like Botticelli's *Birth of Venus* and *Primavera*, Michelangelo's *The Holy Family*, Titian's *Venus of Urbino* and others by da Vinci, Raphael and Bronzino. Unfortunately, the audio guide was a bit meh and did not do the works justice. (I much preferred the Borghese Gallery in Rome, by the way.) I did manage to capture some photos of beautiful ceilings (photo 16) and the Vasari corridor (photo 17).

Towards the end of the evening, I asked for recommendations from the concierge at Lungarno Suites for the best bistecca and was recommended Simon Boccanegra (<http://www.boccanegra.com>). I was not aware that it was that far up the Via Ghibellina, but the trek was definitely worth it. After a starter of sweet, juicy vine tomatoes, buffalo mozzarella and anchovies, the main course of Bistecca Fiorentina (photo 18) was perfectly done – fragrant, juicy, delectable! I was unable to finish the bottle of Nipozzano Riserva Chianti Rufino, so the very cheerful and friendly waitress received it as extra tip. In need of a sweet ending, I popped into Vivoli for the last time for yet another gelato.

'Twas indeed a lovely time in Florence to end a two-week holiday. The Singaporean in me was delighted that I "spent" €75 in museum admissions on the €50 Firenze card – bargain! I highly recommend Florence as a short trip of two to three days – do try to go during the off-peak season, as more tourists are expected after the release of Dan Brown's latest novel, *Inferno*. **SMA**



Dr Chio's stay at Lungarno Suites was made possible by Small Luxury Hotels of the World™. SMA has partnered Small Luxury Hotels of the World™ to offer a special rate exclusive to all SMA members. Visit <http://slh.com/sma> to find out how you can indulge in an unforgettable experience.



Martin finds travel and food photography (taken with a Canon S95) a pleasurable distraction.