For a quieter Renaissance city

Sarah Highfield heads to Florence and discovers how the cooler months reveal a richer side to this historic destination

As the summer crowds depart and cobbled streets become quiet, Florence reveals a softer, slower, and more authentic side. Winter in the Tuscan capital is a time when the city belongs more to the locals; when the galleries can be enjoyed without queues, and

Clockwise from main: Al fresco at The Kitchen & The Bar; local delights at Mercato Centrale; the Duomo di Firenze rises behind the Hotel Savoy

> Head to Mercato Centrale for Tuscan cheese and homemade bread

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the trattorias serve rich, hearty feasts. This off-peak appeal makes it an ideal time to savour this magnificent city at its finest.

Birthplace of the Renaissance

Florence is a city that celebrates history on every corner. Once home to the influential Medici family, it thrived as a centre of art, science, and philosophy from the 14th to 17th centuries. Visionaries such as Michelangelo, Leonardo da Vinci, and Botticelli left their mark, shaping both the city's identity and the course of Western culture. Their legacy lives on through every piazza and fresco, and today, Florence feels like a living museum, seamlessly blending its historic treasures with the bustle of modern life.

The city is compact and diverse. The Centro Storico (historic centre) is home to Duomo di Firenze (Florence Cathedral), Ponte Vecchio, grand piazzas, and many famous museums, making it the ideal base for sightseeing. Across the Arno River, Oltrarno offers a quieter, more bohemian feel, and is filled with artisan workshops, hidden gardens, and cosy wine bars. Meanwhile, San Lorenzo buzzes with energy, thanks to its lively market, leather goods, and homely trattorias.

Out and about

Florence is a city best explored slowly. For lovers of art and architecture, the Uffizi Gallery is unmissable. It houses masterpieces by Da Vinci, Botticelli, and Caravaggio. At the Accademia Gallery, you will find Michelangelo's *David*, while the Duomo dazzles with its intricate façade and Brunelleschi's remarkable dome, a feat of Renaissance engineering.

If you're looking for a taste of local life, then wander through the Mercato Centrale for fresh produce, including Tuscan cheese and homemade bread. In Oltrarno, you'll discover workshops where artisans still handcraft leather goods, jewellery, and marbled paper. For sweeping city views, few spots rival Piazzale Michelangelo at sunset. Another vantage point worth the climb is Giotto's Bell Tower, which offers a close-up of the cathedral's dome alongside other landmarks.

And if time allows, escape the city for a day. The Chianti wine country, with its rolling vineyards, is stunning and Fiesole has fabulous hilltop views of Florence. Meanwhile, nearby Siena boasts a spectacular medieval piazza.

Winter in Florence is full of festive charm. December brings the F-Light Festival and Florence Ice Village with its ferris wheel, Christmas market, and skating rink. January features the Epiphany Parade (Cavalcata dei Magi) and citywide winter sales (saldi), while ➤

From left: Historic surroundings at Stella d'Italia; mixology magic at Saporium Firenze

February delights with Carnevale parades and the Chianti Classico Collection – a celebration of Tuscany's finest wines.

Rooms with a view

Florence's hotels invite you to live the Renaissance dream in style. From five-star grandeur to glamorous rooftops spectacular options abound – The Hotel Guru pointed me in the right direction.

It's hard to beat Hotel Savoy by Rocco Forte for centrally located luxury in Piazza della Repubblica. This grand hotel has recently undergone a redesign by Olga Polizzi, blending Florentine history with a fresh, modern feel. Inside, you will find sleek furniture in muted tones, bold pops of colour, and curated contemporary artwork. The rooms and suites are sumptuously spacious, with added indulgences such as handmade chocolates, champagne, scented wardrobe wax tablets, and my favourite, Irene Forte bath products. Dining is a highlight, with the on-site restaurant Irene serving Tuscan dishes under the direction of chef Fulvio Pierangelini. Breakfast is splendid, with both a cold buffet and à la carte dishes. Step outside, and you are surrounded by Florence's historic centre, along with high-end boutiques and lively cafes.

If you are in search of a more intimate stay, tucked away on Piazza Santa Maria Novella you will find The Place Firenze, which combines discreet elegance with personalised luxury. Its 20 rooms and suites exude sophistication, with soft tones, lavish fabrics, and artisan-crafted decor honouring the city's rich artistic heritage. The hotel's heartbeat is Claudio Meli: apparently this warm, charismatic man is the only General Manager of one of Florence's five-star hotels to be born and raised in the city. Claudio is a delight, brimming with local insight, stories, and recommendations. The concierge team organises bespoke experiences, even arranging a tour of Museo Novecento for me, where I discovered an impressive collection of 20th century Italian art. Location-wise, the city's main attractions are only steps away. Impressively, the hotel's foundation, The Place of Wonders, preserves local craftsmanship by giving exclusive access to Florentine artisans and cultural sites, while funding scholarships for young talent at the LAO goldsmith school.

If you prefer something more eclectic, Stella d'Italia is a gem, perfectly situated in the heart of the city within a 16th century palazzo. Thanks to creative Florentine hoteliers – designer Matteo Perduca and his calligrapher wife, Betty Soldi – each of the 24 rooms is distinctively styled: bright and airy, with tall windows, vintage furnishings, original artwork, and quirky antiques. Some feature 18th century frescoes, free-standing bathtubs, or private terraces, and all are stocked with swish Lorenzo Villoresi bath products. Breakfast is warmly served in a majestic frescoed dining room with fresh pastries and a hot buffet. The property's loggia terrace overlooks Florence's iconic red rooftops, offering dramatic views

From left: Soak up the sights at The Place Firenze; Hotel Calimala's stunning exterior

that make you feel like a true local.

Finally, Hotel Calimala is perfect if you want to be in the thick of Florence's action. Set in a 19th century palazzo on Via Calimala, the hotel mixes heritage architecture with bold, modern interiors. Think exposed stone walls paired with jewel-toned upholstery, and custom-designed furniture and lighting. All the contemporary artwork on display is by local artists and available for purchase as a memorable souvenir. Rooms are polished and well-equipped, with luxurious bedding and rainfall showers. The crown jewel is Angel Roofbar & Dining, the hotel's panoramic rooftop space boasting 360-degree views of Florence. It is the ultimate spot for a sunset cocktail or a leisurely breakfast above the city.

Buonissimo!

For a memorable dining experience that celebrates sustainability and culinary excellence, head to Saporium Firenze, the only restaurant in Florence to hold a Green Michelin Star in addition to its Michelin Star. Helmed by Florentine head chef Ariel Hagen, the restaurant showcases inventive dishes that honour local tradition, using organic produce from its own 270-acre farm at Borgo Santo Pietro estate. The tasting menus are a joy to explore – the Frisona beef with pumpkin, and the snail with Jerusalem artichoke, garlic and hazelnut, are not to be missed.

Also worth mentioning is the delightful Caterina De' Medici's rose dessert, a modern take on the Florentine zuccotto cake with milk and Alkermes liqueur. Impeccable service is led by Blanca along with Gianluca and Marzia, while Andre, the sommelier, curates perfect wine pairings. At the bar, head barman Nicola crafts inventive cocktails that complement the menu beautifully. With refined flavours, attentive service, and elegant ambience, Saporium Firenze is a must-visit for the foodie in you.

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If you crave sophisticated Tuscan dining in a sleek setting, Michelin-recommended Luca's Ristorante at La Gemma Hotel is the place for you. Head chef Paulo Airaudo delivers a delectable tasting menu of crowd-pleasing dishes, such as parsley risotto with red shrimp from Mazara Del Vallo, pigeon cappelletti in thyme butter, and veal with porcini mushrooms. Service in the emerald-hued art deco dining room is polished and welcoming. Nenad (a.k.a Nicola), the maître d', ensures every detail of your meal is flawless, Lorenzo provides attentive and seamless table service, and Marta crafts delicious drinks at the bar.

On the ground floor of Hotel Calimala, Mezè presents a vibrant experience built around the concept of 'Wild Dining.' The restaurant's focus on bold, shareable plates encourages a sense of adventure, from the zesty wild ceviche to the expertly seared wild steak, each dish bursting with fresh, layered flavours. Paired with the wild salad and an energetic atmosphere, Mezè guarantees a fun and lively mealtime that is perfect if you love to graze and share.

To round off your culinary tour somewhere quintessentially Florentine, The Kitchen & The Bar at The Place Firenze centres around Tuscan flavours by chef Asso Migliore, embracing everything from slow-cooked truffle cacio e pepe pasta to perfectly grilled Calvana beef, all served on chic Ginori 1735 porcelain. The restaurant's commitment to quality is evident in its collaborations with local producers, ensuring the ➤

Above: Delectable deserts at Luca's Ristorante

menu evolves with the seasons. Overlooking Piazza Santa Maria Novella, it combines a relaxed atmosphere with attentive service. Whether you dine indoors or outdoors, Food & Beverage Manager Zaccaria will charm you from the moment you arrive, while brothers and waiters Paolo and Diogo make your dining truly joyful.

A Florence for Florentines

It's always important when visiting cities such as Florence to be aware of the pressure that modern-day tourism puts on them, and travelling mindfully can make all the difference. For instance, staying in hotels and guesthouses can help ensure your money supports jobs and the city's residents. And, if you are self-catering, enjoy eating out at locally owned restaurants. Buy your groceries and goods from markets, small stores and resident artisans, while always researching and respecting local customs and routines. By supporting local businesses, you'll help preserve Florence's magic for generations to come.

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Further information

Links to all hotels, thehotelguru.com restaurants and products in this article can be found at: the-luxuryreport.com/florence

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Born in Hong Kong and based in London, Sarah Highfield is a travel and lifestyle writer. Follow her travels on Instagram: @SarahHighfield.

SUITCASE ESSENTIALS

Our author made sure she packed the following – just for that added injection of style, comfort and convenience.

The Saint + Sofia Saddle Bag, made from the softest Italian leather, is a timeless classic. It is roomy enough to hold your essentials yet durable and water-resistant.

The stylish Vionic Kimmie Court Trainer offers all-day comfort and arch support; perfect for navigating Florence's cobbled streets.

Keep your winter skin soft and protected with Relaxayvoo Face Oil, which harmonises with your skin's natural rhythms, providing nourishing hydration around the clock.

With photo opportunities at every corner, the iWALK LinkPod is your best friend. The lipstick-sized phone charger can provide a complete charge when needed.