

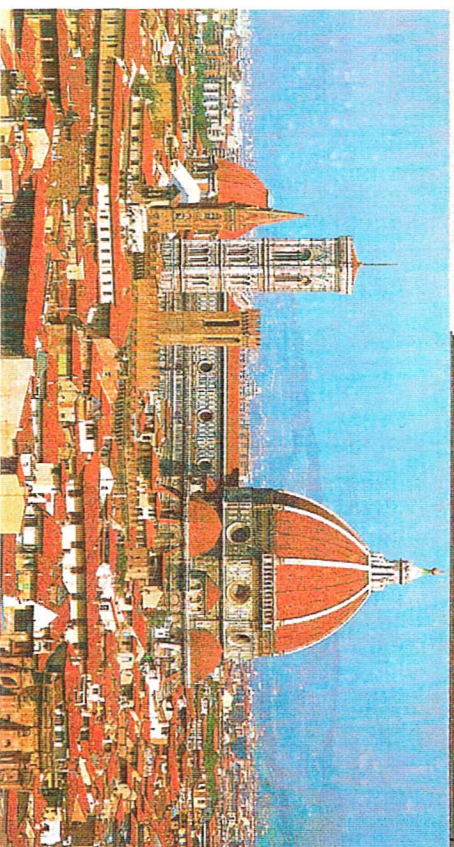
SPREE

Shopping for leather goods in Florence

Finding leather goods in Florence is no more difficult than finding wine in the Tuscan city. However, buying merchandise manufactured from start to finish in Italy is not as easy as you might expect. The open-air markets are flooded with leather goods from South Korea, Taiwan, Pakistan, India, China and, yes, even Hong Kong, as companies strive to avoid paying expensive Italian wages for labour. Many carry the "Made in Italy" imprint but that guarantees only that 30 per cent of a product is made there. If you're in the market for goods that are truly Italian made, don't despair: some stores still sell them. (As to whether or not a purse made entirely in Italy is better than one partly made in India, that's another story.)

One of the first stops should be *Scuola del Cuio*, or Leather School (www.leatherschool.com), located at the rear of the Santa Croce church. It may seem sacrilegious to have a store in a church but it's probably appropriate considering the status of leather in the country. A leather angel is just one of a vast array of goods available: jackets, trousers, handbags, briefcases, luggage, jewellery boxes, belts, book covers, wastepaper baskets, desk sets and wallets. Visitors can not only watch artisans at work, they can also design items to be custom-made. Handbags, which cost from 240 to 900 euros (HK\$2,150 to \$8,000), are usually ready in a week, and the Gori family, leather artisans in Florence since the 1930s, will ship them if you have moved on to your next destination. Tourists feeling particularly creative can take half-, one-, two- or three-day courses offered in English, Italian and French, making products ranging from key-rings to backgammon boards.

Of course, reputable stores such as Gucci and Salvatore Ferragamo sell leather products made entirely in Italy but you can't watch the product being made, and requests for a longer strap or different colour combination are unlikely to be welcome.



Also priding itself on custom-made products is *Cellerini* (www.cellerini.it). The aroma of leather wafts over you the minute you enter the store at Via del Sole, 37/R. Customers can choose colours from 18 smooth and 18 textured leather swatches. I saw one man order several leather tissue-box holders in various hues, and a woman ask for a belt to match a buckle bought from Tiffany & Co. Many of the products are made in the factory upstairs. Started in 1956 by Silvano and Anna Maria Cellerini, the store is known for its handbags, which resemble those of Hermes in style but not price. A beautiful, roomy tan handbag would cost about 3,000 euros at Hermes, but similar styles sell for 852 euros at Cellerini. Gloves, shoes, garment bags and portfolios are among the other items available.

Another must-stop is *Pineider* (www.pineider.it). Founded in 1974, Pineider began offering stationery and desk sets at its store at Piazza della Signoria, 13R, but now sells such goods as handmade wooden baskets encased in leather pouches (600 euros), handbags (one that can be cleverly adjusted to three sizes sells for 800 euros), serving trays with leather bases (400 euros) and jewellery boxes. The original two-storey flagship store still stands today and there are seven more, including one at Via Tornabuoni, 76R. Also worth a look is *Sutor Mantellassi* (www.sutormanellassi.com), located at Piazza della Repubblica, 5. Open since 1959, it offers classic looks and is best known for shoes. Women's pumps cost about 300 euros and boots 350 euros, while men's dress shoes with top-stitching range from 345 to 650 euros.

Those seeking sportier styles should head to *Bojola* (www.bojola.it). Felice Bojola opened its doors at Via dei Rodinelli, 25R, in 1906. Three levels await shoppers. In addition to purses, handbags (washed leather handbags cost 192 euros) and briefcases, it sells a large selection of products such as leather-bound canteens and shaving kits.

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