

PERFECT 10 travel

There's a lot more to Florentine culture than the Renaissance, writes Kelly Carter

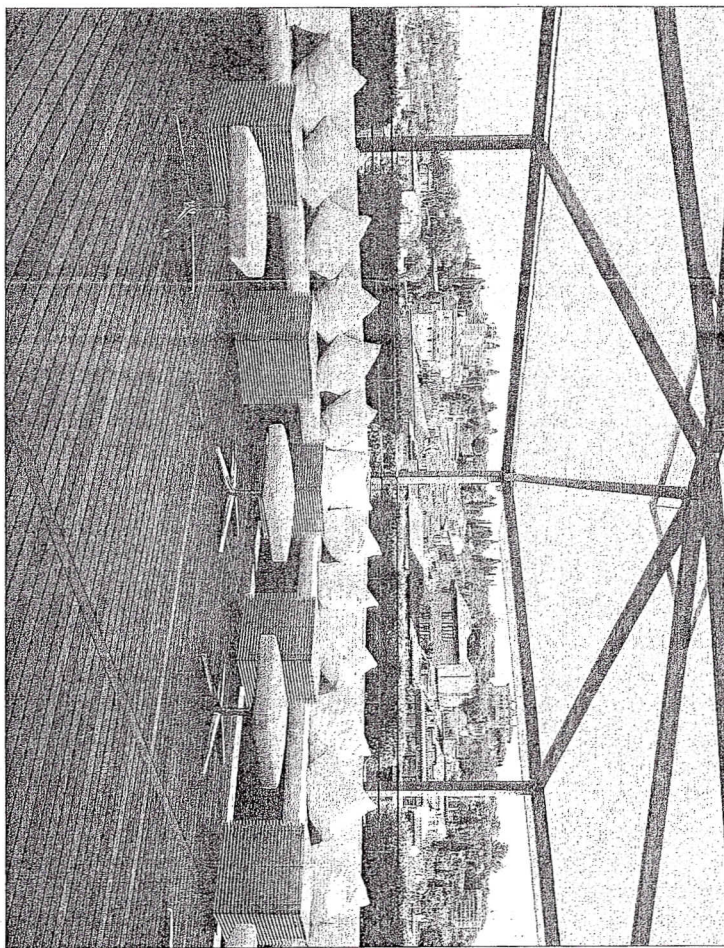
1 Sky Lounge at Continental Hotel. The Ferragamos are reknowned for fashion so it makes sense that the family, which owns four hotels in Florence, boasts the city's most stylish rooftop venue. With its contemporary off-white decor, the Sky Lounge, which opened this year, bucks the traditionalism usually found in this classic Italian city. Its suitably discreet door, just steps from Florence's famous bridge, the Ponte Vecchio, is easy to miss. Set beneath a huge canopy, this chic, music-filled setting boasts an L-shaped banquette covered with comfy cushions, beige candles ensconced in clear vases and funky, steel-gray tables. It's a look reminiscent of hotelier Ian Schrager's user-popular haunt in Los Angeles, the Sky Bar, and is just as popular with the hip crowd. The view is arguably better at the Sky Lounge, where the panorama includes the Arno River, Ponte Vecchio, the Duomo, Fiesole, Piazza Santo Spirito, Boboli Gardens and Orsanmichele. (Via del'Orto, 6; Florence, 50123; tel: 3910155 27282; www.lungarnohotels.com)

2 Galleria Degli Uffizi. You don't have to be an art buff to appreciate the Uffizi. Not only is it one of the great art galleries, with an amazing collection of Renaissance masterpieces,

you want to visit all 45 rooms. Five must-see pieces: Gioto's *Ugnissanti Madonna* in Room 2, Sandro Botticelli's *The Birth Of Venus* in Room 10, Leonardo da Vinci's *Annunciation* in Room 15, Michelangelo's *Holy Family* in Room 25 and Caravaggio's *The Sacrifice Of Isaac* in Room 43. A terrorist attack in 1993 damaged many paintings and sculptures, but there is still much to see. Apart from mid-winter and early spring, the queues are long, so reserve a viewing time by calling 3910155 294883. Admission is 6.50 euros (HK\$76); reservations an additional three euros. (Piazza degli Uffizi, 6; tel: 3910155 238665). Open Tuesday to Sunday, 9.10am to 6.50pm; closed Mondays.)

3 Piazza della Repubblica. Piazzas, or squares, are the lifeblood of Italy and there may not be a better place to people-watch than in this one. There are five cafes or restaurants here, all with outdoor and indoor tables, but the best are Gilli, Caffè Giubbe Rosse and the Hotel Savoy. Gilli (tel: 3910155 2138976; www.gilli.it) is the city's oldest cafe and offers delectable pastries in gorgeous surroundings. It's outrageously overpriced but beauty doesn't come cheap. The Caffè Giubbe Rosse (tel: 3910155 212280), whose name originates from the waiters' Garibaldi red jackets, is a world-famous literary meeting place where poets and artists have gathered for generations. It's also one of the few places in town that serves an American breakfast. VIPs head to the terrace of the Hotel Savoy (tel: 3910155 27351; www.roccofortehotels.com) for breakfast or a light lunch. American actor John Malkovich was recently spotted there sketching designs for his new men's clothing line.

4 Ponte Vecchio. In Italian, *ponte* means bridge and *vecchio* means old. This bridge, which stretches across the narrowest part of the Arno River, was the only one spared by the retreating German forces during the second world war. For years it housed butcher shops. Now it is the place to come if you're looking for a sunset. In the form of jewelry or a gadget. Oodles of jewelry stores, many with blindingly gaudy displays in their windows, line the span. Some offer antique pieces, others a more modern selection. None offer a bargain. Not in a



5 Il Latini Ristorante. Tuscan cooking is all about simplicity and fresh ingredients. Il Latini does it better than most, and in a perfect setting. Don't be put off by the large number of American diners; you'll hear just as many Italians practically shouting to be heard. The restaurant, which opened in 1911 and has been in its current location for 50 years, received a facelift in August but didn't lose any of its character. Diners eat under dangling hams, sometimes sharing their wooden table with strangers, and pour their own house red from two-liter bottles provided on each table (there are other wines available). Feast on Tuscan favourites such as bruschetta (grilled bread drrenched with olive oil, garlic,

usually served bloody, Finish with cantuccini (prato (almond cookies made with egg yolks) dipped in vinsanto (a rich dessert wine made from raisins). Via Dei Palchetti, 6r. Florence 50123; tel: 3910155 210916; www.ilatini.com. Open for lunch and dinner; closed Mondays.)

6 Slowly. After going on pasta and torturing your feet walking the cobblestone streets, Slowly is the perfect late-night spot to unwind. If you can get a seat, that is. Or even through the doors if it's a Friday or Saturday night, when it helps to be beautiful to get into this funky red and black nightclub. Arrive before the door-man, whose shift starts at 9pm, if you

in 1296, but not consecrated until 1426 when Filippo Brunelleschi's dome was completed. Many of the more elaborate items have been moved to the Duomo Museum. However, you can still see the huge fresco of the *Last Judgment* and one of Dante explaining the *Divine Comedy* to the city of Florence. If you're really feeling energetic, hike the 463 spiralling steps to the top and enjoy a spectacular view. Alternatively, go next door to the Campanile Tower; it's only 414 steps to the top and the view is just as magnificent. While in the piazza, check out the Battistero, with its world-famous bronze doors. (Piazza della Duomo; tel: 3910155 2302885.)

9 Designer outlet shopping. For those with champagne taste and a beer wallet, it's best to avoid pricey Via de Tornabuoni and head to the designer outlets where top names including Gucci, Prada, Giorgio Armani and Bottega Veneta dump their surplus. Expect savings of 30 to 50 per cent - and remember, it's tax-free too. Although the prices aren't as fabulous as when they used the lire, there are some bargains, such as Prada shoes for 20 euros and last season's Gucci trousers down from 400 to 185 euros. Inside Prada (Strada Statale, 69, Levanella-Montevarchi, 52025; tel: 3910155 91901) there's also a small selection of Jill Sander and Helmut Lang merchandise. Gucci used to be by itself but now is part of The Mall (Via Europa, 8, Lecce-Reggello, 50060; tel: 3910155 8657775), an elegant brick strip whose other occupants include Loro Piana, Armani, Sergio Rossi, Ferragamo, Yves Saint Laurent, Emanuel Ungaro, Ermengildo Zegna, Agnona and Valentino. In the vicinity are outlets for Fendi (Via Pan dell'Isola 44, Rignano Sudo Arno, 50067; tel: 3910155 834981) and Dolce & Gabbana (Localita S. Maria Maddalena, 49, Incisa Valdarno; tel: 3910155 831300). The outlets are about an hour outside Florence and not easy to find, so either hire a car, take a tour bus (19 euros will take you to Prada and The Mall, or on request to other outlets), or use the shuttle provided by The Mall, which limits you to its stores.

10 Chianti. A trip to Tuscany would be incomplete without a visit to the picturesque Chianti countryside. Its rolling hills, vineyards and olive trees are the perfect antidote to hectic Florence. Less than

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