

Molto Italia: Florence

by Cheryl Pendry, PassPorter Featured Columnist

There are some places in the world that you never seem to hear a bad word about. It doesn't happen often, but when it does, you know you're in for a treat. Florence, Italy is one of those places.

On our visit to Rome, we met a lot of other tourists, nearly all of whom had come straight from Florence with tales of how beautiful the city was and how amazing the art and the museums in the city were. That was one of the reasons that I wanted to be on board the Disney Magic when it set sail around the Mediterranean, so that we could see this wonderful treasure for ourselves.

So did it live up to our expectations? Absolutely. Florence is a photographer's paradise, with stunning architecture everywhere you turn, but what is really amazing is that it's all still standing. The city's historic bridges were all destroyed during the Second World War, except for the Ponte Vecchio, literally translated into English as the old bridge. And, looking at the bridge today, you can imagine how beautiful the waterside must have looked in the 1940's before war broke out.

Ponte Vecchio dates from 1345 and has always been home to traders. When the bridge was first built, the traders were butchers, tanners and blacksmiths, but today you'll find jewelers and goldsmiths along this narrow bridge. As well as offering some superb views along the River Arno, it's also a photo opportunity in its own right, with special viewpoints along the banks of the river.

The river itself has presented its own threats to Florence over the years, most recently in 1966, when the Arno rose to a staggering 19 feet above street level. Although much has been done to restore both the buildings and the art treasures damaged in the floods, to this day, more than 40 years later, restoration work is still carrying on behind the scenes, with some items unlikely to ever return to public display again. Since then, unsurprisingly, measures have been put in place to ensure that the city doesn't suffer such devastating floods again - and with good reason, as many of the main tourist sights lie close to the River Arno.

The Uffizi is one example of this. It's the oldest art gallery in the world, originally created in 1581 to display the Medici family treasures, and offers visitors the chance to see some of the greatest work of the Renaissance period. Even as you walk through the courtyard, the importance of this gallery is brought home through the statues lining this area, representing names familiar to most of us, such as

Michaelangelo, Donatello and Dante.

Carry on walking and you'll come to Piazza della Signoria, the real center of Florence. On one side of this square is Palazzo Vecchio, the Old Palace, which has been the town hall since 1322. Standing in front of it is a replica of one of the most famous pieces of art in the world, Michaelangelo's David. The original stands in the Academia museum, dedicated to fine art, but on our tour, this was the closest we would get to seeing that.

Everywhere you look in the square, you find more sculptures, with the Rape of the Sabine Woman, carved from a single block of flawed marble by Giambologna, and Perseus, a bronze statue by Cellini. It was intended as a warning to enemies of Cosimo I, one of the Medici family, and depicts a man holding a head up high, standing over the body of his victim. A far more pleasant vision is just opposite in the form of the Neptune Fountain, which shows the Roman sea god surrounded by water nymphs, although this commemorates Tuscan naval victories.

The Piazza della Signoria really is a place to just stand and take it all in, with fine art everywhere you look. It has to be one of the world's most breathtaking squares and it's no surprise that we spent more time here than anywhere else in Florence on our tour.

Somewhere I would have liked to have spent more time was to the north of the Piazza at the Duomo (or Cathedral, in English). As someone who's seen a lot of amazing churches all over Europe and indeed in America, it takes a lot to astound me, but this building was simply breathtaking. Had we not been on a tour, I could have stood there quite happily admiring all the intricate detail for hours on end. Even today, no building stands taller in Florence than the Duomo, with its revolutionary dome designed by Brunelleschi. At the time it was constructed, it was the largest dome in the world built without scaffolding, with an inner shell instead providing a platform for the timbers that support the outer shell. The Duomo also boasts a campanile (bell tower), 276 feet tall, which is clad in white, green and pink Tuscan marble. As we drove into Florence earlier in the day, we had seen the enormous gorges in the nearby countryside, evidence of marble production and in the city; you could see the beautiful uses it had been put to over the centuries.

Just opposite the Duomo is the Baptistery, a place you can hardly miss with crowds gathered around to admire its glittering golden East Doors. Also referred to as the Gates of Paradise, they depict stories from the Old Testament and the detail on them is extraordinary. Although what you see today are copies because the originals were becoming so dirty from pollution, they're still eye catching and well worth a look.

That really sums up Florence as a whole -- the city is definitely well worth a look. After having heard so many good reports about it before we visited it, we weren't disappointed. The only disappointment is the one that you always get with cruises - you just get a taste of a city in a very brief visit. If you want to see and learn more about the place, then a return visit is a must. That's something that's a distinct possibility for us, as there is much more to Florence than we managed to experience in a half-day tour. It easily lends itself to a weekend of exploration.

About The Author: Cheryl and husband Mark live in England and love to travel, particularly to America. They are in the process of visiting every Disney theme park around the world, having already been to Disneyland Resort Paris, Hong Kong Disneyland and both American Disney resorts. They are now planning for their trip to Japan in the spring to visit the Tokyo Disney Resort. [Click here to view more of Cheryl's articles!](#)

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