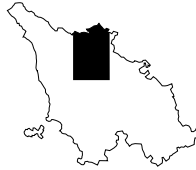


Florence



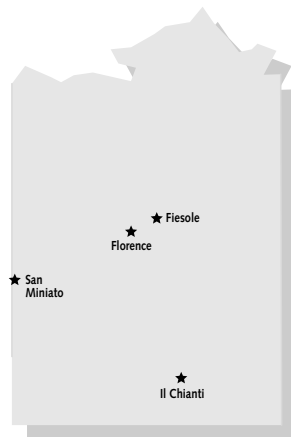
Return time and again and you still won't see it all. Stand on a bridge over the Arno several times in a day, and the light, the mood and the view change every time. Surprisingly small as it is, this city is like no other. Cradle of the Renaissance and of the masses of globe-trotting tourists who flock here to feast on world-class art and extraordinary architecture, Florence (Firenze) is magnetic, romantic, unrivalled and too busy. A visit here is madness, in fact, for anyone who can remain completely unmoved after viewing Botticelli's *Spring*, Michelangelo's muscular warrior, or the Brancacci Chapel's emotive frescoes of Adam and Eve being hurled out of Paradise.

Yet there's more to this river-side city than priceless masterpieces. Strolling its narrow streets evokes a thousand tales of the past: medieval dyers coloured wool in *caldaie* (vats) on Via delle Caldaie; Renaissance *calzaiuoli* (hosiers) hand-crafted fine shoes in workshops on Via dei Calzaiuoli; tanners made a stink in *conce* (tanneries) on Via delle Conce; and yes, those Medici did keep caged *leoni* (lions), although nothing caused quite a stir as the giraffe given to Lorenzo the Magnificent by an Egyptian sultan in 1486.

Plush, decadent and equally exotic is contemporary Florence's flamboyant line-up of designer boutiques around Via de' Tornabuoni. Gucci was born here, as was fashion designer Roberto Cavalli who, like many a smart Florentine, hangs out in the wine-rich hills around Florence today. After a little while in this intensely absorbing city, you might just want to do the same.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Marvel at the world's greatest Renaissance art in the **Uffizi** (p112)
- View the Duomo, baptistry and campanile from atop Brunelleschi's famous red-brick **dome** (p105)
- Do a *David* tour: Michelangelo's original in the **Galleria dell'Accademia** (p119), the famous copies on **Piazza della Signoria** (p108) and **Piazzale Michelangelo** (p127), and those by Donatello and Andrea Verrocchio in **Museo del Bargello** (p108)
- See the *bistecca alla fiorentina* (loin steak or T-bone steak), alongside other Florentine specialities in the city's colourful **food market** (p143), then sample one at **Trattoria Mario** (p137) or **Trattoria Angiolino** (p141)
- Flee the city for a breath of fresh air in **Fiesole** (p154)
- Hunt white truffles and learn about Chianina cattle on an estate near **San Miniato** (p170)
- Swill and spit some of Italy's finest wines on a tasting tour through **Il Chianti** (p164)



HISTORY

Florence's history stretches to the time of the Etruscans, who based themselves in Fiesole. Julius Caesar founded the Roman colony of Florentia around 59 BC, making it a strategic garrison on the narrowest crossing of the Arno so he could control the Via Flaminia linking Rome to northern Italy and Gaul.

After the collapse of the Roman Empire, Florence fell to invading Goths, followed by Lombards and Franks. The year AD 1000 marked a crucial turning point in the city's fortunes when Margrave Ugo of Tuscany moved his capital from Lucca to Florence. In 1110 Florence became a free *comune* (city-state) and by 1138 was ruled by 12 consuls, assisted by the Consiglio di Cento (Council of One Hundred), whose members were drawn mainly from the prosperous merchant class. Agitation among differing factions in the city led to the appointment in 1207 of a foreign head of state called the *podestà*, aloof in principle from the plotting and wheeler-dealing of local cliques and alliances.

Medieval Florence was a wealthy dynamic *comune*, one of Europe's leading financial, banking and cultural centres, and a major player in the international wool, silk and leather trades. The sizable population of moneyed merchants and artisans began forming guilds and patronising the growing number of artists who found lucrative commissions in this burgeoning city. But a political crisis was on the horizon.

Struggles between the pro-papal Guelphs (Guelfi) and the pro-Holy Roman Empire Ghibellines (Ghibellini) started in the mid-13th century, with power yo-yoing between the two for almost a century. Into this fractious atmosphere were born revolutionary artist Giotto and outspoken poet Dante Alighieri, whose family belonged to the Guelph camp. After the Guelphs split into two factions, the Neri (Blacks) and Bianchi (Whites), Dante went with the Bianchi – the wrong side – and was expelled from his native city in 1302, never to return.

In 1348 the Black Death spirited away almost half the population. This dark period in the city's history was used as a backdrop by Boccaccio for his *Decameron*.

The history of Medici Florence begins in 1434, when Cosimo il Vecchio (the Elder, also known simply as Cosimo de' Medici), a patron of the arts, assumed power. His eye for talent

and tact in dealing with artists saw the likes of Alberti, Brunelleschi, Luca della Robbia, Fra Angelico, Donatello and Filippo Lippi flourish under his patronage.

In 1439 the Church Council of Florence, aimed at reconciling the Catholic and Eastern churches, brought to the city Byzantine scholars and craftsmen, who they hoped would impart the knowledge and culture of classical antiquity. The Council, attended by the pope, achieved nothing in the end, but it did influence what was later known as the Renaissance. Under the rule of Cosimo's popular and cultured grandson, Lorenzo il Magnifico (1469–92), Florence became the epicentre of this 'Rebirth', with artists such as Michelangelo, Botticelli and Domenico Ghirlandaio at work.

But Florence's golden age was not to last, effectively dying along with Lorenzo in 1492. Just before his death, the Medici bank had failed, and, two years later, the Medici were driven out of Florence. In a reaction against the splendour and excess of the Medici court, the city fell under the control of Girolamo Savonarola, a humourless Dominican monk who led a stern, puritanical republic. In 1497 the likes of Botticelli gladly consigned their 'immoral' works and finery to the flames of the infamous 'Bonfire of the Vanities'. The following year Savonarola fell from public favour and was burned as a heretic.

The pro-French leanings of the subsequent republican government brought it into conflict with the pope and his Spanish allies. In 1512 a Spanish force defeated Florence and the Medici were reinstated. Their tyrannical rule endeared them to few, and when Rome, ruled by the Medici pope Clement VII, fell to the emperor Charles V in 1527, the Florentines took advantage of this low point in the Medici fortunes to kick the family out again. Two years later, though, imperial and papal forces besieged Florence, forcing the city to accept Lorenzo's great-grandson, Alessandro de' Medici, a ruthless transvestite whom Charles made Duke of Florence. Medici rule continued for another 200 years, during which time they gained control of all of Tuscany, though after the reign of Cosimo I (1537–74), Florence drifted into steep decline.

The last male Medici, Gian Gastone, died in 1737, after which his sister, Anna Maria, signed the grand duchy of Tuscany over to the House of Lorraine (at the time effectively

under Austrian control). This situation remained unchanged, apart from a brief interruption under Napoleon from 1799 to 1814, until the duchy was incorporated into the Kingdom of Italy in 1860. Florence briefly became the national capital a year later, but Rome assumed the mantle permanently in 1871.

Florence was badly damaged during WWII by the retreating Germans, who blew up all its bridges except Ponte Vecchio. Devastating floods ravaged the city in 1966, causing inestimable damage to its buildings and artworks. However, the salvage operation led to the widespread use of modern restoration techniques that have saved artworks throughout the country. In 1993 the Mafia exploded a massive car bomb, killing five, injuring 37 and destroying a part of the Uffizi. Just over a decade later, this world-class gallery amid a fair amount of controversy embarked on its biggest-ever expansion, set to double its exhibiting area by 2012 if it's lucky.

ORIENTATION

Central train station Stazione di Santa Maria Novella is a good reference point. Budget hotels and *pensioni* (small hotels) are concentrated east of it around Via Nazionale and south around Piazza di Santa Maria Novella. The main route to the city centre (a 10-minute walk) is Via de' Panzani then Via de' Cerretani. Spot the Duomo and you're there.

Most major sights are within easy walking distance. From Piazza di San Giovanni around the baptistry, Via Roma leads to Piazza della Repubblica and beyond to Ponte Vecchio. From Piazza del Duomo follow Via de' Calzaiuoli for Piazza della Signoria, the historic seat of government. The Uffizi is on the piazza's southern edge, near the Arno. The trendy, less touristy area south of the river is known as Oltrarno.

Maps

Tourist offices dole out free maps and bookshops sell Touring Club Italiano's *Florence* (1:12,500), with a city-centre cutaway (1:6500).

INFORMATION

Bookshops

BM Bookshop (Map p103; ☎ 055 29 45 75; Borgo Ognissanti 4r) British and American books in a pleasing old-fashioned environment.

THE RED & THE BLACK

Florence has two parallel street-numbering systems: red or brown numbers (which usually have 'r' for *rosso*, or red, after the number) indicate commercial premises, whereas black or blue numbers are for private residences.

Black/blue numbers may denote whole buildings, while each red/brown number refers to one commercial entity – and a building may have several. It can turn you purple if you're hunting for a specific address in a hurry.

Edison (Map pp100-1; ☎ 055 21 31 10; Piazza della Repubblica 27r; 9am-midnight Mon-Sat, 10am-midnight Sun) Stocks maps, travel guides and reference books on Florence and Tuscany; novels and nonfiction in English.

McRae Books (Map pp100-1; ☎ 055 238 24 56; www.mcraebooks.com; Via de' Neri 32r; 9am-7.30pm Mon-Sun) English-language bookshop covering the whole gamut of genres; brilliantly organised.

Mel Bookstore (Map pp100-1; ☎ 055 28 73 39; www.melbookstore.it; Via de' Cerretani 16r) Tuscan travel literature, guides, reference books and maps.

Paperback Exchange (Map pp100-1; ☎ 055 29 34 60; www.papex.it; Via dell'Oche 4r) Anglo-American bookshop, new and second-hand.

Emergency

Police Station (Questura; Map pp98-9; ☎ 055 4 97 71; Via Zara 2; 24hr) Report thefts at the foreigners' office here.

Tourist Police (Polizia Assistenza Turistica; Map pp100-1; ☎ 055 20 39 11; Via Pietrapiana 50r, Piazza dei Ciompi; 8.30am-6.30pm Mon-Fri, 8.30am-1pm Sat)

Internet Access

Internet Pitti (Map pp100-1; www.internetpitti.com; Piazza Pitti 7; per hr €4; 11am-11pm Mon-Sun) Excellent bulletin board crammed with ads for flatmates, room rentals etc.

Internet Train (www.internettrain.it) Via Porta Rossa 38r (Map pp100-1; per hr €4.30; 9.30am-midnight Mon-Sat, 10am-midnight Sun); Borgo San Jacopo 30r (Map pp100-1; per hr €3.20; 11am-10pm Mon-Fri, noon-10pm Sat & Sun); Via dell'Ortiuolo 40r (Map pp100-1; per hr €3.20; 10am-10.30pm Mon-Fri, noon-8pm Sat, 3-7pm Sun); Via Guelfa 24 (Map pp98-9; per hr €3.20; 9am-midnight Mon-Fri, 11am-9pm Sat & Sun) In all, 10-odd branches.

Internet Resources

Locally generated blogs are also useful; see p56.

City of Florence (www.comune.firenze.it) City information.

Firenze-Oltrarno (www.firenze-oltrarno.net) Loads a' links south of the river.

Firenze Net (http://english.firenze.net) Up-to-the-minute information on city life.

Florence for Fun (www.florenceforfun.org) Practical info aimed at international students in Florence.

The Florentine (www.theflorentine.net) English-language newspaper.

Studentsville (www.studentsville.it) Everything about studying, living and lodging in this student-busy city.

viviFirenze (www.vivifirenze.it) Another student perspective: practical guide to living and studying in Florence.

Laundry

Wash & Dry (wash or dry €3.50; 8am-10pm) Via de' Serragli 87r (Map p103); Borgo San Frediano 39r (Map p103); Via dei Servi 105r (Map pp98-9); Via del Sole 29r (Map pp100-1); Via della Scala 52-54r (Map pp98-9); Via Nazionale 129 (Map pp98-9)

Left Luggage

Stazione di Santa Maria Novella (Map pp98-9; per item for 5hr €3.80, for every hr thereafter €0.60; 6am-midnight) Find it on platform 16.

Medical Services

24-Hour Pharmacy (Map pp98-9; ☎ 055 21 67 61; Stazione di Santa Maria Novella) Inside the main train station.

Dr Stephen Kerr (Map pp100-1; ☎ 055 28 80 55; www.dr-kerr.com; Via Porta Rossa 1; 3-5pm Mon-Fri) Resident British doctor, by appointment or open clinic.

Emergency Doctor (Guardia Medica; ☎ 055 28 77 88) For a doctor at night or on a public holiday.

Farmacia all'Insegna del Moro (Map pp100-1; ☎ 055 21 13 43; Piazza di San Giovanni 20r; 24hr) Pharmacy in business since 1521.

Farmacia Molteni (Map pp100-1; ☎ 055 28 94 90; Via de' Calzaiuoli 7; 24hr) Pharmacy.

Ospedale di Santa Maria Nuova (Map pp100-1; ☎ 055 2 75 81; Piazza di Santa Maria Nuova 1)

Tourist Medical Service (Map pp98-9; ☎ 055 47 54 11; Via Lorenzo il Magnifico 59; 11am-noon & 5-6pm Mon-Sat) English-speaking doctors on call 24 hours.

Money

American Express (Map pp100-1; ☎ 055 5 09 81; Via Dante Alighieri 22r; 9am-5.30pm Mon-Fri)

Post

Central Post Office (Map pp100-1; Via Pellicceria)

Tourist Information

Comune di Firenze Tourist Office Train Station (Map pp98-9; ☎ 055 21 22 45; www.comune.fi.it in Italian; Piazza della Stazione 4; 8.30am-7pm Mon-Sat, 8.30am-1.30pm Sun); Santa Croce (Map pp100-1; ☎ 055 234 04 44; Borgo Santa Croce 29r; 9am-7pm Mon-Sat, 9am-2pm Sun)

Information on the city, run by Florence's city council.

Florence Tourist Board (Map pp100-1; ☎ 055 233 20; www.firenzeturismo.it; Via Manzoni 16; 9am-1pm Mon-Fri)

Provincia di Firenze Tourist Office City Centre (Map pp98-9; ☎ 055 29 08 32/3; www.provincia.firenze.it in Italian, www.firenzeturismo.it; Via Cavour 1r; 8.30am-6.30pm Mon-Sat, 8.30am-1.30pm Sun); Florence Airport (Map pp96-7; ☎ 055 31 58 74; infoaeroporto@aeroporto.firenze.it; 8.30am-8.30pm)

Information on the city and province of Florence: stocks lists of recommended guided tours, updated museum opening hours and accommodation; sells books and maps. Also runs the **SOS Turista** **phoneline** (☎ 055 276 03 82) for tourists in trouble (disputes over hotel bills etc).

Travel Agencies

CTS (Map pp98-9; ☎ 055 28 95 70; www.cts.it in Italian; Via de' Ginori 25r) Florence branch of national youth-travel organisation.

DANGERS & ANNOYANCES

Florence's most annoying feature is its crowds, closely followed by street vendors flogging tack.

Solo travellers should avoid the area around Stazione di Santa Maria Novella and Parco delle Cascine, frequented by pimps and prostitutes after dark. Pickpockets are active in crowds and on buses and Florence has many bag snatchers. Watch out for the 'You-have-gunk-on-your-suitcase!' scam (p402).

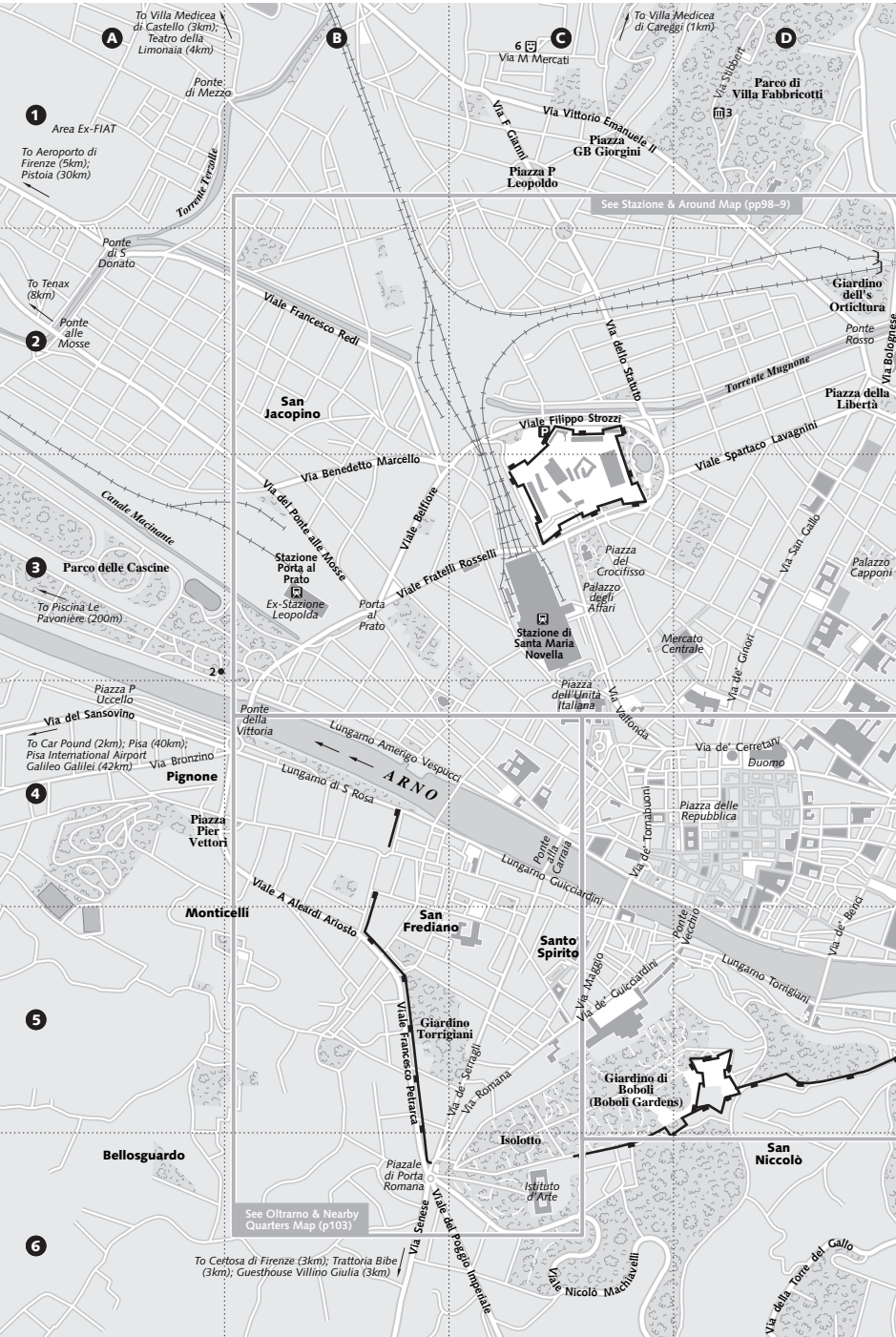
Readers warn women not to walk/jog alone along the Forte di Bebedere footpath.

SIGHTS

Florence seriously overwhelms. Its wealth of museums and galleries house many of the world's most important and exquisite examples of Renaissance art and its architecture is unrivalled. Yet the secret is not to feel pressured to see and do everything: combining your personal pick of the major sights with ample meandering through the city's warren of narrow streets is the trick.

In true Italian fashion, state museums and monuments (Uffizi and Galleria Accademia

(Continued on page 104)



See Stazione & Around Map (pp98-9)

See Oltrarno & Nearby Quarters Map (p103)



See Central Florence Map (pp100-1)

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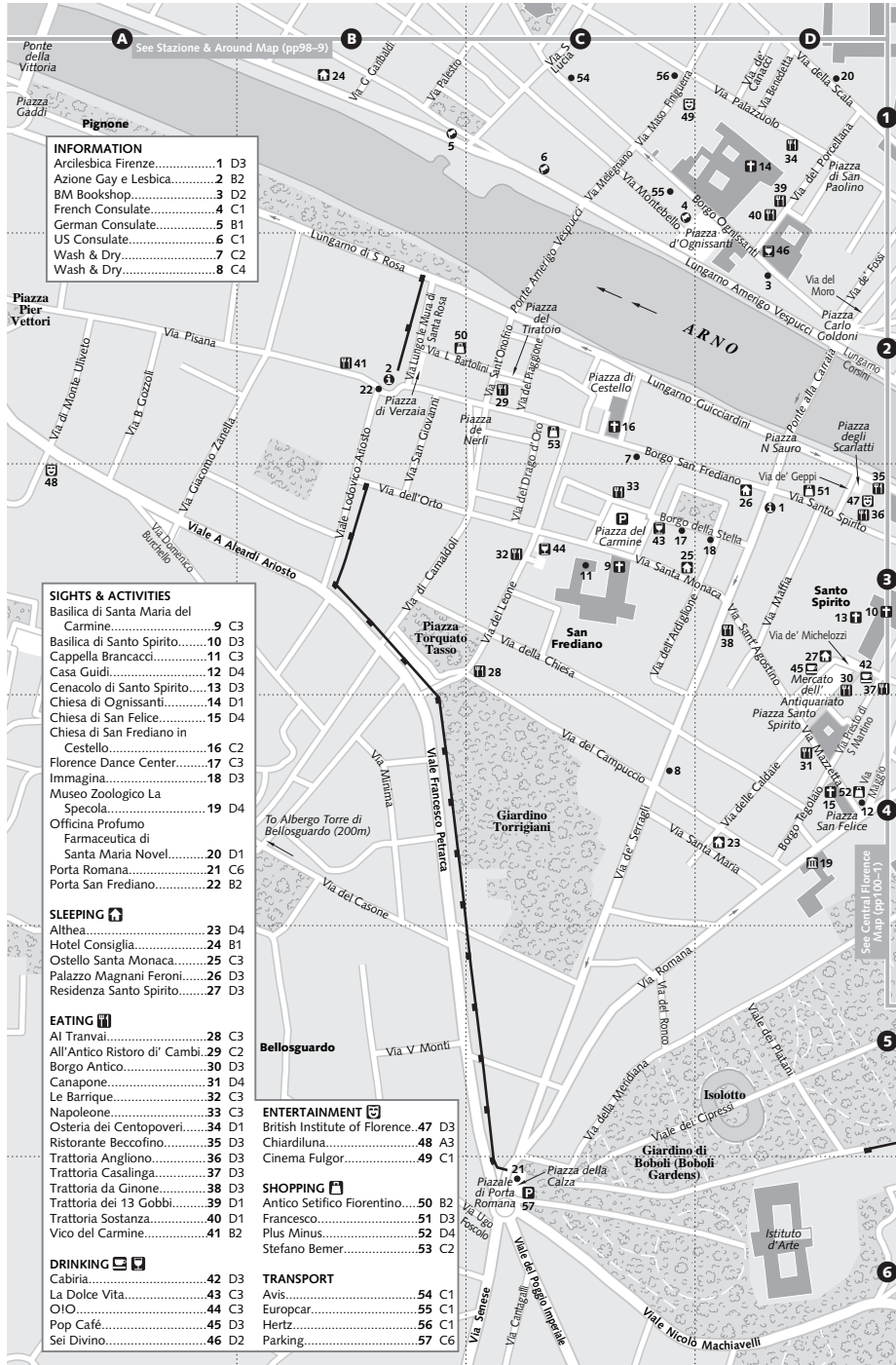
See Oltrarno & Nearby Quarters Map (p103)



See Central Florence Map (pp100-1)



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included) close on Monday. But Florence is a year-round destination and there are plenty of major sights open whichever day of the week you are in town. Note that museum ticket offices usually shut 30 minutes before closing time.

Most churches enforce a strict dress code for visitors: no shorts, sleeveless shirts or plunging necklines.

FLORENCE IN...

Two Days

If you don't have prebooked tickets for the Uffizi and Galleria dell'Accademia, race straight to a ticket office (opposite) to book slots for later that day and day two. Then concentrate on enjoying yourself, starting with a cappuccino in **Caffè Gilli** (p143). Explore the splendid **Duomo** (opposite) and adjoining **Baptistry** (p107) and, assuming you have a head for heights (and no heart problems), scale either **Brunelleschi's dome** (p107) or the **Campanile** (p107). When hunger beckons, zip north for a speed lunch to remember at **Trattoria Mario** (p137) near Florence's central food market – but get there by noon at the latest to ensure a table; if you're too late, nip into the Mercato Central for a tripe sandwich at **Nerbone** (p137) instead.

Devote the afternoon to **Piazza della Signoria** (p111) and the neighbouring **Uffizi** (p112). Recover afterwards with a stroll along the Arno, crossing **Ponte Vecchio** (p123) for a glimpse of the Oltrarno district, where you could dine in one of the traditional Tuscan restaurants along Via Santo Spirito. Should a spot of theatre appeal, dine at **Teatro del Sale** (p141).

Start day two with the **Fra Angelico frescoes** (p177) in the **Museo di San Marco** (p119), followed by the **Galleria dell'Accademia** (p119), home to Michelangelo's *David*, and a simple lunch at **La Mescita** (p137). Take a break from museums in the afternoon: go **shopping** (p149), discover the fine art of **Florentine craftsmanship** (p150) or enjoy a green stroll through the **Boboli and Bardini Gardens** (p124) instead. End the day with an all-essential Florentine **aperitivo** (p146) or a spot of **wine-tasting** (p144).

Four Days

Follow the above itinerary for the first two days. Use the morning of day three to discover Renaissance sculpture in the **Museo del Bargello** (p108), followed by lunch at either **Osteria del Caffè Italiano** (p140), **La Canova di Gustavino** (p139) or the more upmarket **Gustavino** (p139). Spend the afternoon outside the city in **Fiesole** (p154), enjoying fantastic views over Florence, exploring its Roman and Etruscan remains, walking in the hills, and relaxing in the cafés and restaurants on its main square. Back in Florence, **Alle Murate** (p139) is a smart sightseeing dinner choice.

Next day, visit **Basilica di Santa Croce** (p121), followed by a long lazy lunch over an English-language newspaper or art magazine at Fabio Picchi's **Teatro del Sale** (p141). In the afternoon cross the river and hike up to **Piazzale Michelangelo** (p127) and **Chiesa di San Miniato al Monte** (p127) for feisty views, then descend for dinner at one of the Oltrarno's many excellent eating choices (p141).

One Week

Follow the previous itinerary, and on the fifth day consider heading north of the old city to the Medici villas (p128) or making a day trip to **Il Chianti** (p164). Spend your last day scooping up the bits you missed or back-tracking to bits that left you wishing you had more time to explore. Otherwise, **Palazzo Vecchio** (p110) is fun to tour; or what about the **Basilica di Santa Maria Novella** (p115) and **Basilica di San Lorenzo** (p118), followed by a peek in the **Cappelle Medicee** (p118).

FREE ENTRY & DISCOUNTS

Those with an EU passport (have it on you as ID) aged under 18 and over 65 get into Florence's state museums for free. EU citizens who are aged between 18 and 25 pay half-price.

For one week of the year (usually some time in spring), admission to state museums is free of charge; dates change making it impossible to plan a trip around this, but keep your eyes open.

One date that doesn't shift is 18 February, the day Anna Maria Louisa de' Medici (1667–1743) died. In honour of the last of the Medici family who bequeathed the city its vast cultural heritage, admission to all state museums is free on this day.

Duomo & Around

As the city's most iconic landmark, not to mention an icon of Italy alongside Pisa's Leaning Tower and Rome's Colosseum, the **Duomo** (Cathedral; Map pp100-1; ☎ 055 230 28 85; ⌚ 10am-5pm Mon-Wed & Fri, 10am-4pm Thu, 10am-4.45pm Sat, 10am-3.30pm 1st Sat of month, mass in English 5pm Sat) thrills. Its famous red-tiled dome dominating Florence's skyline is packed with drama and intrigue, while the sheer size and vivacity of its breathtaking pink, white and green marble façade – as you approach the building from the piazza – turns you into a very tiny Alice in Wonderland.

Begun in 1296 by Siennese architect Arnolfo di Cambio, the world's fourth-largest cathedral took almost 150 years to complete. Its neo-Gothic façade was designed in the 19th century by architect Emilio de Fabris to replace the uncompleted original, torn down in the 16th century. The oldest and most clearly Gothic

part of the cathedral is its south flank, pierced by **Porta dei Canonici** (Canons' Door), a mid-14th-century High Gothic creation (you enter here to climb up inside the dome). Wander around the trio of apses, designed to appear as the flowers on the stem that is the nave of the church and so reflecting its proper name – **Cattedrale di Santa Maria del Fiore** (St Mary of the Flower).

DOME

When Michelangelo went to work on St Peter's in Rome, he reportedly said: 'I go to build a greater dome, but not a fairer one'. One of the finest masterpieces of the Renaissance, Florence's famous cathedral **dome** (adult/under 6yr €6/free; ⌚ 8.30am-7pm Mon-Fri, 8.30am-5.40pm Sat) is indeed a feat of engineering and one that cannot be fully appreciated without staggering up the 463 stone steps inside it.

At the first stop for breath on the ascent – one of four decorative exedrae around the octagonal drum already completed in 1417 – winches used to build it bring home just how much of a gargantuan task 15th-century builders faced. No supporting frame was used during construction of the dome (1420–36), actually two concentric domes built from red

CUT THE QUEUE

In summer and busy periods such as Easter, ridiculously long queues to get into key museums can mean a hot and sticky wait of four to seven hours! Booking ahead, however, slashes waiting time to zero (or, in the case of the Uffizi at peak times, an hour or so).

For a fee of €3 per ticket, tickets can be reserved up to one day in advance to all 13 *muzei statali* (state museums), including the Uffizi, Galleria dell'Accademia (where *David* lives), Palazzo Pitti, Museo del Bargello, Museo Archeologico and the Medici chapels (Cappelle Medicee). Free tickets for those aged under 18 also incur the €3 booking fee. Make yourself a coffee then call **Firenze Musei** (Florence Museums; ☎ 055 29 48 83; www.firenzemusei.it; ⌚ ticket reservations 8.30am-6.30pm Mon-Fri, 8.30am-12.30pm Sat) and loiter in the inevitable phone queue. Once connected with a real person, you'll be allotted a date and time to visit and a booking number, which you need to quote when you arrive at the sight to pay for your ticket. At the Uffizi, signs point pre-booked ticket holders to a different entrance; in summer you might well have to queue twice – first to pay for/collect your ticket then again to actually get into the museum.

In Florence, tickets can likewise be prebooked at **Firenze Musei information desks** (⌚ 8.30am-7pm Tue-Sun) at the Uffizi (p112) and Palazzo Pitti (p123) – for travellers in town for a few days, reserving tickets on day one for one or two days hence is the savvy thing to do. For those with no Uffizi ticket in hand, set the alarm for 6am to be ready and waiting in the queue outside the gallery by 7am; when the doors open at 8.15am, you should be among the stream of visitors that swing through with the first flush.

Online, museum tickets can also be booked through **Weekend a Firenze** (www.weekendafirenze.com), a web service for booking museums, galleries, shows and tours (commission €5.70). Reserve at least one day in advance, print out the email confirmation and present it at the cashier's desk on the day of your visit.

Many hotels and B&Bs also prebook museum tickets for guests.

TOP FIVE TRICKS TO FLEE THE CROWDS

Mission impossible it might seem, but play your cards right and it is possible to get away from everyone else – or at least the vast majority. Our top tricks:

- Forget the big sights; instead, devote time to tracking down hidden treasures such as Michelangelo's curvaceous staircase and vestibule in the Biblioteca Laurenziana Medicea (p118)
- To visit the Boboli Gardens (p123), skip the main entrance (and horrid queue) it shares with Palazzo Pitti. Enter the gardens instead from neighbouring **Giardino Bardini** (☎ 055 261 22 14; Via dei Bardi 1r; adult/concession incl Boboli Gardens & Silver Museum €6/3; ʘ 8.15am-4.30pm Jan, Feb, Nov & Dec, to 5.30pm Mar, to 6.30pm Apr, May, Sep & Oct, to 7.30pm Jun-Aug), allowing plenty of time to stroll around these smaller but substantially better-kept gardens first.
- When prebooking your ticket for the Uffizi (p105), take a slot for the late afternoon when there are supposedly less people.
- If you succeed in getting into Florence's infamous **Corridoio Vasariano** (Map pp100-1; ☎ 055 29 48 83; ʘ guided tour on special request), you'll leave the crowds behind you. Only a privileged few are allowed into this enclosed walkway commissioned by Cosimo I in 1565 as a private promenade between Palazzo Vecchio with Palazzo Pitti and strung with art today.
- Forget Piazzale Michelangelo (p127) with its tacky souvenir stalls; continue higher to Chiesa di San Miniato al Monte (p127) to watch the sun set over the city.

brick to designs by Brunelleschi. Though he was initially commissioned with arch-rival Ghiberti to build what would be, at the time, the world's largest church dome, he quickly took the lead on a project that had defeated every architect before him. More than a decade on, the Florentine maestro had to prove himself again when authorities threw open the crowning lantern to competition – which Brunelleschi won, only to die months later; see his tomb in the cathedral crypt.

From the exedrae, steps spiral relentlessly up to a balustrade at the base of the 91m-high and 45.5m-wide dome, from where you get an aerial view of the octagonal *coro* (choir) of the cathedral below and the seven round stained-glass windows piercing the octagonal drum. Look up and study the mesmerising late-16th-century frescoes by Giorgio Vasari and Federico Zuccari, depicting the *Giudizio Universale* (Last Judgment), that blaze a fiery trail of colour across the interior of the dome.

Continuing up (puff puff), snapshots of Florence flash past through small windows as the gruelling maze of narrow stone steps and airless passageways cut from the outer to inner wall of the double-walled dome. The final leg – a straight flight up the curve of the inner dome – rewards with an unforgettable 360-degree panorama of one of Europe's most beautiful cities. Allow yourself at least half an hour up here to enjoy (and recuperate).

INTERIOR

After the visually tumultuous façade and extraordinary frescoes of the dome, the sparse decoration of the cathedral's vast interior, 155m long and 90m wide, comes as a surprise. It is also unexpectedly secular in places (a reflection of the sizeable chunk of the cathedral not paid for by the church): down the left aisle two immense frescoes of equestrian statues portray two *condottieri* (mercenaries) – left Niccolò da Tolentino by Andrea del Castagno and right Sir John Hawkwood by Uccello – who fought in the service of Florence in the 14th century; while 'divine' poet Dante is honoured with Domenico di Michelino's *Dante e I Suoi Mondi* (Dante and His Worlds).

From the central choir beneath the frescoed dome, the two wings of the transept and the rear apse spread out, each containing five chapels. The pillars delimiting the entrance into each wing and the apse are fronted by statues of Apostles, as are the two hefty pillars just west of the choir stalls.

Between the left (north) arm of the transept and the apse is the *Sagrestia delle Messe* (Mass Sacristy), its panelling a marvel of inlaid wood carved by Benedetto and Giuliano da Maiano. The fine bronze doors were executed by Luca della Robbia – his only known work in the material. Above the doorway is his glazed terracotta *Resurrezione* (Resurrection).

Throughout, stained-glass windows by Donatello, Andrea del Castagno, Paolo Uccello and Lorenzo Ghiberti positively glow.

A stairway near the main entrance of the cathedral leads down to the **crypt** (admission €3; ʘ 10am-5pm Mon-Fri, 10am-4.45pm Sat), where excavations have unearthed parts of the 5th-century Chiesa di Santa Reparata, which originally stood on the site. There's a small display of Roman pottery, architectural fragments and sections of the original mosaic floor, typical of early Italian churches. Brunelleschi's tomb is also here, beside the gift shop.

CAMPANILE

Equally physical is the heady 414-step climb up the graceful, 82m-high bell tower (adult/under 6yr €6/free; ʘ 8.30am-7.30pm), another escapade not recommended for the faint-hearted (literally).

Architect Giotto died before the building of the bell tower was complete, leaving Andrea Pisano and Francesco Talenti to finish it. The first tier of bas-reliefs around the base of the campanile are copies of those carved by Pisano, but possibly designed by Giotto, depicting the Creation of Man and the *attività umane* (arts and industries). Those on the second tier depict the planets, the cardinal virtues, the arts and the seven sacraments. The sculptures of the Prophets and Sibyls in the niches of the upper storeys are copies of works by Donatello and others; see the originals in the Museo dell'Opera del Duomo.

MUSEO DELL'OPERA DEL DUOMO

Light, airy and surprisingly overlooked by the crowds, the **Cathedral Museum** (Map pp100-1; Piazza del Duomo 9; www.operaduomo.firenze.it; admission €6; ʘ 9am-7.30pm Mon-Sat, 9am-1.40pm Sun) behind the cathedral safeguards treasures once adorning the Duomo, baptistry and campanile.

Make a beeline for the glass-topped courtyard with its awe-inspiring display of seven of the original 10 panels from Ghiberti's glorious masterpiece – the *Porta del Paradiso* (Doors of Paradise) designed for the baptistry – that took 27 painstaking years to complete. The remaining three panels, currently on tour in the US, will return to the Museo dell'Opera del Duomo by this book's publication.

The main room is devoted to statuary from Arnolfo di Cambio's original never-to-be-completed Gothic façade. Pieces include several by Arnolfo – *Pope Boniface VIII*, *The*

Virgin and Child and *Santat Reparata* – and Donatello's *St John*, which, with its long flowing beard, stands out among the four mighty evangelist statues.

On the mezzanine is the museum's best-known piece, Michelangelo's *Pietà*, a work he intended for his own tomb. Vasari recorded in his *Lives of the Artists* that, dissatisfied with both the quality of the marble and of his own work, Michelangelo broke up the unfinished sculpture, destroying the arm and left leg of the figure of Christ. A student of Michelangelo's later restored the arm and completed the figure.

Continue upstairs, a pair of exquisitely carved *cantorie* (singing galleries) – one by Donatello, the other by Luca della Robbia – face each other. Originally in the cathedral's sacristy, their scenes of musicians and children at play add a refreshingly frivolous touch amid so much sombre piety. Most striking of several carvings by Donatello are the haunted gaze of his *Prophet Habakkuk*, originally in the bell tower, and, dramatically placed in the centre of an adjoining room, his wooden representation of a gaunt, desperately desolate *Mary Magdalene*.

BAPTISTRY

Ghiberti and Brunelleschi competed for domes...and doors, as the gilded bronze doors at the eastern entrance of this wonderful, 11th-century Romanesque baptistry (admission €3; ʘ noon-7pm Mon-Sat, 8.30am-2pm Sun) testify. An octagonal striped structure of white and green marble (hard to make out these days amid the thick black dirt covering the façade), it was built on the site of a Roman temple.

The baptistry has three sets of doors, conceived as a series of panels in which the story of humanity and the Redemption would be told. The earliest by Andrea Pisano (1336) illustrate the life of St John the Baptist. Lorenzo Ghiberti sculpted the second and third, following a contest in 1401 between six leading artists, including Brunelleschi, who cast the Old Testament tale of the sacrifice of Isaac in bronze. A victorious Ghiberti spent the next 20 years completing the northern doors: the top 20 panels recount episodes from the New Testament, and the eight lower ones show the four Evangelists and four fathers of the Church.

Decades of toil for Ghiberti climaxed with the eastern doors. Another 28 years of work,

they depict scenes from the Old Testament in 10 panels. So extraordinary were the bas-reliefs that, many years later, Michelangelo stood before the doors in awe and declared them fit to be the Porta del Paradiso (Gate of Paradise), hence their name. What you see are copies (in turn, pawed so much they too have been taken away for restoration); turn to the Museo dell'Opera Duomo for the originals.

The grubby two-coloured marble on the baptistry's façade continues inside (less grubby) where mosaics form the single most arresting decorative feature. Those in the apse were started in 1225 and the glittering dome spectacle was designed by Tuscan artists, including Cimabue, and carried out by Venetian craftsmen over 32 years towards the end of the 12th century. The stars of this vibrant ceiling are its *Christ in Majesty* and *Last Judgment*.

To the right of the apse lies the magnificent tomb of Baldassare Cossa (1370–1419) sculpted by Donatello. Better known as the antipope John XXIII, Cossa was hardly a saint, but as antipope he had helped Giovanni di Bicci de' Medici (1360–1429) – the Medici credited with making the Medici rich – break into papal banking. So when Cossa asked in his will to be buried in the baptistry, it was the least Giovanni could do.

From the Duomo to Piazza della Signoria VIA DEL PROCONSOLO

Bernardo Buontalenti started work on the Palazzo Nonfinito (literally 'Unfinished Palace', Map pp100–1), a residence for members of the Strozzi family, in 1593. Buontalenti and others completed the 1st floor and courtyard, which is Palladian in style, but the upper floors were never completely finished, hence the building's name.

On the other side of Borgo degli Albizi stands the equally proud Palazzo dei Pazzi (Map pp100–1), constructed a century earlier and clearly influenced by Palazzo Medici-Riccardi. It's used as offices these days, but you can peek into the courtyard.

BADIA FIORENTINA

Recently restored 10th-century Badia Fiorentina (Florence Abbey; Map pp100–1; Via del Proconsolo; 7:15 frescoes cloister 3–6pm Mon, church 7am–6pm Tue–Sat & Sun pm) was founded by Willa, the mother of Margrave Ugo of Tuscany. Ugo continued her work after experiencing a hellish vision of the punishment awaiting him in the afterlife should he

not repent his sins. Visit simply to see Filippo Lippi's *Appearance of the Virgin to St Bernard* (1485), to the left as you enter the church through the small Renaissance cloister. At the left end of the transept is Mino da Fiesole's monument to Margrave Ugo. Stairs to the right of the altar lead up to an open gallery overlooking the cloister, decorated with 15th-century frescoes illustrating the life of St Benedict. The bell tower and front cloister remain closed for renovation.

PALAZZO DEL BARGELLO

It was inside the gaunt exterior of Palazzo del Bargello (Map pp100–1), Florence's earliest public building also called Palazzo del Podestà, that the *podestà* (governing magistrate) meted out justice from the late 13th century until 1502. As the Museo del Bargello (Map pp100–1; 055 238 86 06; Via del Proconsolo 4; admission €4, audioguide for 1/2 €5.50/7; 7:15 8.15am–1.50pm Tue–Sat, 2nd & 4th Sun of the month) today, the place houses Italy's most comprehensive collection of Tuscan Renaissance sculpture.

Crowds claw to see *David* but few rush to see his creator's early works in the Bargello. Michelangelo was just 22 when a cardinal commissioned him to create the drunken grape-adorned *Bacchus* displayed in the ground-floor hall devoted to Michelangelo and 16th-century sculpture. Unfortunately the cardinal didn't like the result and sold it to a banker. The artist's large roundel of the Madonna and Child with the infant St John, the *Tondo Pitti*, portrays the halo-bare pair in a very human light.

After Michelangelo left Florence in 1534, sculpture was dominated by Baccio Bandinelli (see his *Adam & Eve* here) and Benvenuto Cellini, whose playful marble *Ganimede* (Ganymede) feeding a falcon meat is uplifting. In the same room, exponent of the Renaissance's later mannerism, Vincenzo Danti, demonstrates how a sculpture should be able to be viewed from all angles with his magnificent *Honour Triumphs over Deceit* (1560), a powerful portrayal of dominance notable for being carved from a single block of marble. Giambologna's *Florence Triumphs over Pisa* – Florence portrayed as a woman, Pisa as a bearded man – is equally impressive. Moving upstairs to the Loggia, Giambologna's portrayals of Architecture, Geometry and a menagerie of animals jostle for the limelight with *Jason* (1589), the formidable

late-mannerist sculpture of his pupil Pietro Francavilla; note the detail of the dead ewe's fleece.

Keen to discover Renaissance sculpture in chronological order? Save the Michelangelo hall until last and start instead with the Sala di Donatello on the 1st floor. Here, in the majestic Salone del Consiglio Generale where the city's general council met, works by Donatello and other early-15th-century sculptors can be enjoyed. Originally on the façade of Chiesa di Orsanmichele and now within a tabernacle at the hall's far end, Donatello's *San Giorgio* (St George; 1416) brought a new sense of perspective and movement to Italian sculpture.

Yet it is Donatello's two versions of David, a favourite subject for sculptors, which really fascinate: Donatello fashioned his slender, youthful dressed image in marble in 1409 and his fabled bronze between 1440 and 1450. The latter is extraordinary – the more so when you consider it was the first free-standing naked statue to be sculpted since classical times. Compare these two early boyish Davids with the *David* (1465) – Goliath's decapitated, heavily bearded head at his feet – sculpted 15 years later by Andrea Verrocchio, another Renaissance master whose Florence workshop took on a 17-year-old Leonardo as apprentice in 1469. The deft hand of the young maestro is said to be seen in Verrocchio's *Noblewoman with Bouquet* (1475–80), a highlight of the museum's last 15th-century collection.

Criminals received their last rites before execution in the palace's 1st-floor Capella del Podestà, also known as the Mary Magdalene Chapel, where *Hell* and *Paradise* are finely frescoed on the walls. These frescoes by Giotto were not discovered until 1840 when the chapel was turned into a store room and prison. All the more remarkable was Giotto's portrait of Dante, standing as part of a crowd, in Paradise.

The 2nd floor moves into the 16th century with a superb collection of terracotta pieces by the prolific della Robbia family, including some of their best-known works, such as Andrea's *Ritratto Idealizza di Fanciullo* (Bust of a Boy; c 1475) and Giovanni's *Pietà* (1514). Instantly recognisable, Giovanni's works are more elaborate and flamboyant than either father Luca's or cousin Andrea's, using a larger palette of colours.

MUSEO CASA DI DANTE & AROUND

The Museo Casa di Dante (Dante's Museum House; Map pp100–1; 055 21 94 16; Via Santa Margherita 1; admission €3; 7:15 10am–5pm Tue–Sat, 10am–1pm Sun, 10am–4pm 1st Sun of month, closed last Sun of month) was built in 1910 above the foundations of Dante's dwelling, so don't believe any claims that he lived in it! Those with a special interest in the poet may find the limited display inside mildly diverting.

Up the road, 11th-century Chiesa di Santa Margherita (Map pp100–1; Via Santa Margherita), also known as the Chiesa di Dante, is where the poet first spied muse Beatrice Portinari and married Gemma Donati; both women are buried in the church.

CHIESA DI ORSANMICHELE

Unusually the arcades of an old grain market were walled in during the 14th century to create a church. The *signoria* (city government) ordered the guilds to finance its decoration and commissioned sculptors to erect statues of their patron saints in niches and tabernacles around the building's exterior.

These statues, commissioned over the 15th and 16th centuries, represent the work of some of the greatest Renaissance artists; many are in the Museo del Bargello, but several such as Ghiberti's bronze *San Matteo* (St Matthew; in the middle on Via Arte della Lana) remain in the Chiesa e Museo di Orsanmichele (Map pp100–1; 055 2 38 85; Via Arte della Lana; admission free; 7:15 10am–5pm Tue–Sun). The main feature of the interior is the splendid Gothic tabernacle, decorated with coloured marble, by Andrea Orcagna.

PIAZZA DELLA REPUBBLICA

Originally the site of a Roman forum and the heart of medieval Florence, this people-busy square was created in the 1880s as part of an ambitious plan of 'civic improvements' involving the demolition of the old market, Jewish ghetto and surrounding slums. Vasari's Loggia del Pesce (Fish Market; Map pp100–1) was saved and re-erected on Via Pietrapiana (see p123). Several of the city's oldest cafes (p143) flank the square today.

MERCATO NUOVO

A stroll south down Via Calimala brings you to this loggia, built in the mid-16th century to protect merchandise such as wool, silk and gold traded at the Mercato Nuovo (New Market; Map pp100–1; Via Porta Rossa). Sadly it now only shelters tacky souvenir and leather stalls.

At its southern end is the *Fontana del Porcellino* (Piglet Fountain) and the bronze statue of a boar, an early-17th-century copy of the Greek marble original in the Uffizi. Rub the porker's snout, throw a coin into the fountain and – so goes the legend – you're bound to return to Florence.

Piazza della Signoria

The hub of the city's political life throughout the centuries and surrounded by some of its most celebrated buildings, this lovely café-lined piazza pierced at its centre with an equestrian statue of Cosimo I by Giambologna has witnessed more events in Florentine history than any other.

Whenever Florence entered one of its innumerable political crises, the people would be called here as a *parlamento* (people's plebiscite) to rubber-stamp decisions that frequently meant ruin for some ruling families and victory for others. Scenes of great pomp and circumstance alternated with those of terrible suffering: it was here that vehemently pious preacher-leader Savonarola set light to the city's art – books, paintings (Botticelli and Michelangelo both hurled a couple of pieces onto the pyre), musical instruments, mirrors, fine clothes and on – on his famous *Bonfire of Vanities* in 1497, and where the Dominican monk was hung in chains and burnt as a heretic along with two other supporters a year later.

The same spot where both fires burnt is marked by a bronze plaque embedded in the ground in front of Ammannati's *Fontana di Nettuno* (Neptune Fountain). With its pin-headed bronze satyrs and divinities frolicking at its edges, this huge fountain is hardly pretty and is much mocked as *il biancone* (the big white thing), not to mention a waste of good marble, by many a Florentine.

No, the much-photographed David guarding the entrance to Palazzo Vecchio since 1910 is *not* the original (which stood here until 1873 but is now in the Galleria dell'Accademia; p120). Ditto for Donatello's *Marzocco*, the heraldic Florentine lion (for the original see Museo del Bargello; p108) and *Giuditta e Oloferne* (Judith and Holofernes; original inside Palazzo Vecchio).

PALAZZO VECCHIO

The traditional seat of government, Florence's imposing fortress palace with its striking

crenellations and 94m-high *Torre d'Arnolfo* is as much a symbol of the city as the Duomo. It was designed by Arnolfo di Cambio between 1298 and 1314 for the *signoria* that ruled medieval and Renaissance Florence, hence its original name Palazzo della Signoria. During their short time in office the nine *priori* – guild members picked at random – in the *Signoria* lived in the palace. Every two months nine new names were pulled out of the hat, ensuring ample comings and goings.

In 1540 Cosimo I made the place his ducal residence and centre of government, commissioning Vasari to renovate and decorate the interior – to the horror of his snooty wife, Eleonora de Toledo, who turned her nose up at the result and persuaded her consort to buy Palazzo Pitti instead.

But it took time to fit out Palazzo Pitti just the way the demanding Eleonora wanted. Ironically, and with a dash of poetic justice, she died before the work was finished, but the Medici family moved in anyway in 1549. From then onwards, the ducal palace was called *Palazzo Vecchio* (Old Palace; Map pp100-1; ☎ 055 276 82 24; Piazza della Signoria; adult/18-25yr/3-17yr €6/4.50/2, visit plus guided tour adult/18-25yr/3-17yr €8/6.50/3, each additional tour €1, family of 4/5 €14/16; ⌚ 9am-7pm Fri-Wed, 9am-2pm Thu). It remains the seat of the city's power, home to the mayor's office and the municipal council.

The best way to discover this den of political drama and intrigue is by thematic guided tour: there are several for children (p130) and the best of the adult bunch is the secret-passage tour. Groups of 12 are led along the secret staircase built between the palace's super-thick walls in 1342 as an escape route (emerging at a tiny door on Via della Ninna) for French Duke of Athens Walter de Brienne who seized the palace and nominated himself Lord of Florence, only to be sent packing back to France by the Florentines a year later.

Another narrow stone staircase links the *tesoretto* (treasury) of Cosimo I – a tiny room no larger than a cupboard for his private collection, entered by one carefully concealed door and exited by another – with the equally intimate but substantially more sumptuous *studiolo* (study) of his introverted, alchemymad son Francesco I. Cosimo commissioned Vasari and a team of top Florentine mannerist artists to decorate the study, Francesco appearing in one of the 34 emblematic paintings covering the walls, not as a prince, but as an

inconsequential scientist experimenting with gunpowder. The lower paintings concealed 20 cabinets in which the young prince hid his shells, stones, crystals and other curious treasures.

Completely oversized by contrast is the magnificent 53m-long, 22m-wide *Salone dei Cinquecento* (16th-Century Room), created within the original building in the 1490s to accommodate the Consiglio dei Cinquecento (Council of 500) that ruled Florence at the end of the 15th century. Star of the show at floor level is Michelangelo's sculpture *Genio della Vittoria* (Genius of Victory), destined for Rome and Pope Julius II's tomb, but left unfinished in the artist's studio when he died.

What impresses most about this room though, sheer size aside, are the swirling battle scenes, painted floor to ceiling by Vasari and his apprentices, which glorify Florentine victories by Cosimo I over arch rivals Pisa and Siena: unlike the Sieneese, the Pisans are depicted bare of armour (play 'Spot the Leaning Tower'). To top off this unabashed celebration of his own power, Cosimo had himself portrayed as a god in the centre of the exquisite panelled ceiling – but not before commissioning Vasari to raise the original ceiling 7m in height. Viewing the result from above – from between the 25 hefty fir-wood trusses reached by yet another hidden staircase accessible only to secret-passage tours – is a staggering experience. It took Vasari and his school, in consultation with Michelangelo, just two years to construct the ceiling and paint the 34 gold-leafed panels, which rest simply on a wooden frame. The effect is mesmerising.

Across the balcony taking you above the hall, Cosimo's fractious wife comes to life in the *Quartiere di Eleonora di Toledo*. The private apartments for both her and her ladies-in-waiting bear the same heavy-handed décor blaring the glory of the Medici as the rest of the palace. Of note is the ceiling in the Camera Verde (Green Room) by Ridolfo del Ghirlandaio, inspired by designs from Nero's *Domus Aurea* in Rome; and the vibrant frescoes by Bronzino in the chapel. In all, Eleonora had 11 children with Cosimo, dying so the story goes from a broken heart in 1562 at the age of 40 after one of her sons stabbed the other, only for the other to be stabbed to death by Cosimo: investigations have since proved that all three died from malaria.

CENT SAVER

Visiting the Basilica di Santa Maria del Carmine (p126), Cappella Brancacci (p126) and Palazzo Vecchio? Buy a **combined ticket** (per adult/18-25yrs/3-17yrs €8/6/3, family of 4/5 €21/24).

In the *Sala dei Gigli*, named after its frieze of fleur-de-lys, representing the Florentine Republic, that decorates three of the walls, look at the remarkable coffered ceiling and enjoy Donatello's powerful carving of *Guiditta e Oloferne* (Judith and Holofernes). Domenico Ghirlandaio's fresco on the far wall, depicting figures from Roman history, was meant to be one of a series by other artists, including Botticelli.

A small study off the hall is the chancery, where Machiavelli plotted for a while. The other room, *Sala delle Carte Geografiche* (Map Room), houses Cosimo I's fascinating collection of 16th-century maps, often rudimentary and of varying degrees of accuracy, charting everywhere in the known world at the time, from the polar regions to the Caribbean.

LOGGIA DELLA SIGNORIA

Built in the late 14th century as a platform for public ceremonies, this *loggia* (Map pp100-1) subsequently assumed the name of Loggia dei Manzi when Cosimo I stationed his Swiss mercenaries, armed with lances, here to remind people who was in charge. It shelters sculptures and tourists from the rain today.

To the left of the steps stands Benvenuto Cellini's magnificent bronze statue of *Perseus* (1545) brandishing the head of Medusa. To the right is Giambologna's Mannerist *Ratto delle Sabine* (Rape of the Sabine; 1583), his final work. Inside the *loggia* is another of Giambologna's works, *Ercole col Centauro Nesso* (Hercules with the Centaur Nessus), which originally stood near the southern end of Ponte Vecchio.

MUSEO DI STORIA DELLA SCIENZA

Telescopes, instruments for the measurement of distance, time and space, and a room full of wax and plastic cutaway models of the various stages of childbirth are highlights in the bizarre collection of the *Museum of the History of Science* (Map pp100-1; ☎ 055 26 53 11; www.imss.fi.it; Piazza de' Giudici 1; adult/concession €6.50/4; ⌚ 9.30am-

4.30pm Mon-Fri, 9am-1pm Sat). But the *pièce de résistance*, preserved like a saintly relic, is Galileo's desiccated middle finger, raised skywards, as if a timeless riposte to his Inquisition accusers.

The Uffizi

Forget the world-famous masterpieces for a second: just the ridiculous (is it *really* necessary?) circus of snagging a ticket (p105) casts an immediate awe-inspiring mystique over this world-famous art gallery that every visitor to Florence, art lover or not, feels obliged to visit. Incredibly really, given getting in invariably involves setting the alarm for 6am and standing in line for several hours. The actual visit moreover, depending on how many tour groups you jostle with, works temporarily on loan to other museums etc, can be a real anticlimax.

Yet that is the power of the *Galleria degli Uffizi* (Uffizi Gallery; Map pp100-1; Piazzale degli Uffizi 6; ☎ 055 238 86 51; adult/18-25yr with EU passport/under 18yr €6.50/3.25/free, 85-min audioguide for 1/2 €5.50/8; ⌚ 8.15am-6.35pm Tue-Sun), a legend in its own

right up there with the Hermitage, Louvre and Tate. Filling the vast, oversized U-shaped *Palazzo degli Uffizi*, its sheer size alone impresses (don't dream of viewing the 50-plus rooms and 1555 masterpieces properly in one visit – preselect which artists or period of art interests you most).

Should you have the mental stamina to spend the day here, the Uffizi has a lovely rooftop café (only accessible once you're in) serving light snacks (pizza/panini €3.50/4.50, cappuccino standing up/sitting down €1.60/4.50) and fabulous views. During the grand old days of the duke, this was the terraced hanging garden where the Medici clan gathered to listen to music performances on the square below.

THE PALACE

Cosimo I commissioned Vasari to design and build this gargantuan U-shaped palace – a government-office building (*uffizi* means offices) for the city's administrators, judiciary and guilds – on the banks of the Arno in 1560.

THE UFFIZI: FACE OF THE FUTURE

The lighting in places is atrocious; the vital statistics of some works are not even marked, let alone explained in English; and world-class masterpieces jostle for limited wall space. Historic, vast, world famous and rammed to the rafters with the very best of the Renaissance it might be, but Italy's iconic art gallery sucks in terms of museum design and efficiency.

In short, the Uffizi urgently needs a facelift. Yet this in itself is not the issue (a €49 million revamp project pledging to more than double the 5400-sq-m state gallery in size was announced way back in 1997); implementing it is the problem. Eventually, finally, years too late, the first crane hit the Florence skyline in early 2007. Hoped-for completion date: 2010, maybe, possibly, don't hold your breath.

'The backbone of the gallery, the sequence of current rooms, will remain the same', said Dr Angelo Tartuferi, chief curator of the Uffizi's medieval to 15th-century art collection. 'But we will have many new rooms, for example a new room for the 13th-century Italian paintings and so on', he added referring to the greater period of art history the so-called Nuovi Uffizi (literally 'New Uffizi'; www.nuoviuffizi.eu in Italian; and a constant 'work in progress') will embrace. For years hundreds if not thousands of art works have been kept under wraps in storage, simply because of lack of display space.

Asked if new media would play a part: 'The traditional way of presentation is important; new media distracts from the originals', continued Dr Tartuferi, shaking his head dogmatically at the preposterous idea of interactive exhibits aiding visitors in their navigation of some of the world's most priceless art.

Indeed tradition seems determined to doggedly reign over the Uffizi: the startlingly modern and cutting-edge exit designed for the 16th-century gallery on Piazza Castellani by Japanese artist Arata Isozaki in 2000 was shelved five years later after bulldozers dug up archaeological ruins of medieval Florence – much to the glee of critics who'd already slammed it as an 'abandoned bed frame'. Isozaki's wise response: a contemporary, cutting-edge reflection of Florence's historic Loggia della Signoria framing the other side of the Uffizi on Piazza della Signoria.

Vasari was also the design brain behind the *Corridoio Vasariano* (p106), a private corridor begun a year later than the Uffizi to link Palazzo Vecchio and Palazzo Pitti, cutting through the Uffizi and across Ponte Vecchio en route.

Following Vasari's death in 1564, architects Alfonso Parigi and Bernardo Buontalenti took over the Uffizi project. Buontalenti modifying the upper floor of the palace to house the works of art keenly collected by Francesco I, a passion inherited from his father. In 1580 the building was finally complete. By the time the last of the Medici family died in 1743, the family's private art collection was enormous – and the fortune of lucky old Florence who inherited it from Anna Maria when she died, the deal being the collection should never leave the city. Florence's fate as bearer of the world's single greatest collection of Italian and Florentine art was sealed.

Over the years, sections of the collection have been moved to the Museo del Bargello and the Museo Archeologico, and other collections in turn have been moved here. Several artworks were destroyed or badly damaged in 1993 when a car bomb planted by the Mafia exploded outside the gallery's west wing, killing five people. Documents cataloguing the collection were also destroyed.

THE COLLECTION

Arranged in chronological order by school, the collection spans the whole gambit of art history from ancient Greek sculpture to 18th-century Venetian paintings. But it is its masterpiece-rich Renaissance and mannerist collections that are the most striking.

As in the 16th century, works are displayed on the 3rd floor in a series of numbered rooms off two dramatically long corridors – east (*corridoio di levante*) and west (*corridoio di ponente*). They are linked at one end by a loggia (*secondo corridoio*), from where you can enjoy the finest view in Florence of crowded Ponte Vecchio and the mysterious *Corridoio Vasariano*. A good hour can be spent in these corridors, admiring the grotesques decorating the ceiling and the Medici family portraits hanging in the east corridor where the seeds of the Uffizi were sown in 1580. The portraits and antique sculptures line the west corridor that was turned into gallery space in the late 17th century.

As expansion plans slowly come to fruition, some rooms are likely to be temporarily closed

and the contents of others changed; the main area affected will be the 1st-floor hang-out of Caravaggio and his chiaroscuro cronies.

Upon arrival at the gallery, boards at the ticket booth and at the main entrance say what's closed that day. For an updated room-by-room breakdown, visit www.polomuseale.firenze.it/English; search the gallery catalogue at www.virtualuffizi.com.

Tuscan Masters: 12th Century to 14th Century

Three large altarpieces from Florentine churches viewed in chronological order – *Madonna in Maestà* (Madonna Enthroned) by Tuscan masters Duccio di Buoninsegna, Cimabue and Giotto – and a polyptych by Giotto likewise featuring the Madonna enthroned in room 2 clearly reflect the transition from Gothic to the precursor of the Renaissance. Note the overtly naturalistic realism overtones in Giotto's portrayal of the Madonna and child among angels and saints, painted some 25 years after that of Buoninsegna and Giotto master Cimabue.

Dating to the same period, Simone Martini's shimmering *Annunciazione* (Annunciation; 1333) sets the Madonna in a sea of gold and is a masterpiece of the Siennese school of the 14th century – the focus of room 3. Also of note is the triptych *Madonna col Bambino e Santi* (Madonna with Child and Saints) by Ambrogio Lorenzetti, which demonstrates the same realism as Giotto; unfortunately both Ambrogio and his artistic brother Pietro died from the plague in Siena in 1348.

Masters in 14th-century Florence paid as much attention to detail as their Siennese counterparts, as works in room 4 demonstrate: savour the depth of realism and extraordinary gold-leaf work of *San Remigio Pietà* (1360–65) – displayed in the Uffizi since 1851 – by gifted Giotto pupil, Giotto (otherwise known as Giotto di Stefano).

Renaissance Pioneers

A concern for perspective was a hallmark of the early-15th-century Florentine school (room 7) that pioneered the Renaissance. The one panel (the other two are in the Louvre and London's National Gallery) from Paolo Uccello's striking *La Battaglia di San Romano* (Battle of San Romano) shows the artist's efforts to create perspective with amusing effect as he directs the lances, horses and soldiers

to a central disappearing point: the painting celebrates Florence's victory over Siena.

Piero della Francesca's famous profile portraits (1465; room 8) of the crooked-nosed, red-robed Duke and Duchess of Urbino – the former always painted from the left side after losing his right eye in a jousting accident and the latter painted a deathly white reflecting the posthumous portrait the diptych was – are wholly humanist in spirit. So, too, is the portrait of solemn humanity reflected in *Madonna col Bambino* (Madonna with Child) painted jointly by Masaccio and Masolino.

Carmelite monk Filippo Lippi had an unfortunate soft spot for earthly pleasures, marrying a nun from Prato and causing huge scandal. Search out the artist's self-portrait as a podgy friar in *Coronation of the Virgin* (1439–47), which hangs alongside works by his son Filippino.

Another related pair, brothers Antonio and Piero del Pollaiuolo, fill room 9, where their seven cardinal and theological values

of 15th-century Florence – commissioned for the merchant's tribunal in Piazza della Signoria – burst forth with fantastic energy: Charity holds a burning flame as a baby boy suckles at her breast; Faith bears a cross and chalice; Prudence poses with a mirror and a serpent; and Temperance is traditionally portrayed pouring liquid from one vessel to another. *Fortezza* (Strength; 1470) – an elegant young woman dressed in shining armour, cloak draped across her knee – is the first documented work by Botticelli, the clarity of line and light, and the humanity in the face, setting it apart from Pollaiuolo's. In their haste to reach the next room wholly devoted to Botticelli, most visitors miss the twin set of Botticelli's miniatures depicting a sword-bearing Judith returning from the Camp of Holofernes and the Discovery of the Decapitated Holofernes in his Tent displayed in a glass cabinet in room 9.

The spectacular Sala del Botticelli, numbered 10 to 14, but one large hall in fact – a

former Medici theatre, hence the fine high beamed ceiling – gets packed: it is a definitive Uffizi highlight. Of the 15 works by the Renaissance master known for his ethereal figures, *Nascita di Venere* (Birth of Venus), *Primavera* (Spring) and the deeply spiritual *Annunciazione* (Annunciation) are the best known. Contrast these with *Calunnia* (Calumny): for some, a disturbing reflection of Botticelli's loss of faith in human potential as he aged; for others, a deliberate reining in of his free spirit in order not to invite the attentions of the puritanical Savonarola.

La Tribuna

It was in this exquisite octagonal-shaped treasure trove (room 18), created by Francesco I, that the Medici clan stashed away their most precious masterpieces. Today their family portraits hang on the red upholstered walls (red evoking the element of fire) and a walkway leads visitors around the edge of the stunning mosaic marble floor (representing earth). Delicate mother-of-pearl (water) inlays make the domed ceiling a feast for the eyes, crowned with a lantern (representing air).

The celebrated *Medici Venus*, a 1st-century-BC copy of a 4th-century-BC work by the Greek sculptor Praxiteles and part of the Medici collection since 1688, takes pride of place in the Tribuna. Several other lovely classical statues (frustratingly unlabelled) serenade the famous nude, including *The Wrestlers*, a 1st-century AD copy of a 3rd-century BC work.

High Renaissance to Mannerism

Arriving in the west wing, Michelangelo dazzles with his brilliant *Tondo Doni*, a depiction of the Holy Family that steals the High Renaissance show in room 25 hands down. The composition is unusual, Joseph holding an exuberant Jesus on his muscled mother's shoulder as she twists round to gaze at him, the colours as vibrant as when they were first applied in 1506. It was painted for wealthy Florentine merchant Agnolo Doni (who hung it above his bed) and bought by the Medici for Palazzo Pitti in 1594.

Raphael (1483–1520) and Andrea del Sarto (1486–1530) rub shoulders in room 26, where Sarto's classical *Madonna col Bambino* (1517) fills the room with terror: a distressed Madonna sits on a pedestal smothered in horrid winged creatures ('the harpies') with bloated

tummies, bony legs and cries of distress ripping across their monstrous faces. The work of Florence's two main mannerist masters, Pontormo and Rosso Fiorentino, represented in the next room, are often equally disquieting.

Previous works by Tuscan masters can be compared with the greater naturalism inherent in the work of their Venetian counterparts in room 28 where – in another defining Uffizi moment – 11 Titians kick in. Masterpieces include the world's most powerful nude (opposite), painted in 1538 and hung disguised with a cover portraying *Sacred Love* in the Uffizi's Tribuna from 1736; the highly sensual *Flora* (1515); and an exquisitely tender study of *Madonna delle Rose* (Madonna of the Roses), in which the Christ child plays with flowers proffered by the infant John the Baptist, Mary observing with a hint of amusement on her face.

Painter of portraits with a penchant for the more figurative thought of an older face, Tintoretto was the Venetian school's greatest mannerist painter. His *Ritratto di Ammiraglio Veneziano* (Portrait of a Venetian Admiral) in the Sala al Bassano e del Tintoretto (room 32) is astonishing: the admiral's dark solemn eyes peer out from a canvas that is almost entirely black bar a hint of rich purple velvet and a pair of hands.

Baroque & Neoclassicism

Downstairs on the 1st floor (something of a building site as the Uffizi revamps itself; p112), intense, dramatic, invariably bloody and loaded with tension are the baroque hallmarks of Caravaggio (1573–1610), leading exponent of the baroque movement, and his admirers. Take one look at Artemisia Gentileschi's gruesome *Judith Slaying Holofernes* (1620–21) – dead man's eyeballs strewn, dagger thrust in bloody throat – in the Sala del Caravaggio and you get the picture. One of the first female artists to be acclaimed in post-Renaissance Italy, Artemisia Gentileschi (1593–1653), victim in a highly scandalous seven-month rape trial, painted strong women seeking revenge on evil males. Like Caravaggio, she used *chiaroscuro* (contrast of light and dark) to full dramatic effect.

Santa Maria Novella & Around

BASILICA DI SANTA MARIA NOVELLA

Just south of Stazione di Santa Maria Novella, this church (Map pp98–9; ☎ 055 21 59 18; Piazza di Santa

FIVE TOP FIVES

Ditch the traditional room-by-room audio guide: set yourself an alternative tour.

- Masterpieces: Botticelli's *Primavera* (Spring) and *La Nascita di Venere* (Birth of Venus; rooms 10–14); Titian's *Flora* (room 28); Ruben's *Enrico IV alla Battaglia di Ivry* and *Ingresso Trionfale di Enrico IV a Parigi* (portraying French King Henri IV at the Battle of Ivry and his triumphal march into Paris (room 41); Rembrandt's *Self-Portrait*, *Portrait of an Old Man* and *Self-Portrait as an Old Man* (room 44); and Caravaggio's *Sacrificio d'Isacco* (Sacrifice of Isaac; Sala del Caravaggio).
- Hidden Treasures: Leonardo da Vinci's *Annunciazione* (room 15), painted when he was a student of Verrocchio; Botticelli's twin set of miniature panels (room 9) starring warrior Judith and Hercules' decapitated head; the ceiling frescoes (1588) of weapon and gunpowder workshops by Ludovico Buti in the Sala di Mantegna e di Correggio (room 23); the secret entrance to the mysterious Corridoio Vasariano, wedged between room 25 and 34 at the far end of the west wing; and the world's second-largest collection of miniatures comprising 472 small portraits shown off in the small oval room built to house the dowry of Ferdinando I's wife.
- Adoration of the Magi: Gentile Da Fabriano (International Gothic Style; rooms 5 and 6); Filippino Lippi (Renaissance; room 8); Botticelli (Renaissance; rooms 10–14); Ghirlandaio (Renaissance; rooms 10–14); Leonardo da Vinci (Renaissance; room 15); and Dürer (German Renaissance; room 20).
- Madonna and Child: *Madonna col Bambino e due Angeli* (Madonna with Child and Two Angels) by Filippo Lippi (room 8); Sarto's *Madonna col Bambino* (room 26); Raffaello's *Madonna del Cardellino* (Madonna of the Goldfinch; room 26); Titian's *Madonna delle Rose* (Madonna of the Roses; room 28); and Parmigianino's *Madonna col Bambino e Angeli* (Madonna with Child and Angels), otherwise known as *Madonna dal Collo Lungo* (Madonna with the Long Neck; room 29).
- Nudes: *Medici Venus* (La Tribuna); *Sleeping Hermaphrodite* (room 17); Lukas Cranach's *Adamo* (Adam) & *Eva* (Eve; both room 20); Titian's *Urbino Venus* (room 28); and Tintoretto's *Leda e il cigno* (Leda and the Swan; room 32).

Maria Novella; admission €2.50; 11 9am-5pm Mon-Thu, 1-5pm Fri) was begun in the late 13th century as the Dominican order's Florentine base. Although it was mostly completed by around 1360, work on the façade and embellishment of the interior continued well into the 15th century. It was here that the Church Council of Florence was held in 1439. The tomb of the Patriarch of Constantinople, who died in the city, is near the **Cappella Rucellai**.

The lower section of the green-and-white marble façade is transitional from Romanesque to Gothic, while the upper section and the main doorway were designed by Alberti and completed around 1470. Halfway along the north aisle, the highlight of the Gothic interior is Masaccio's superb fresco *Trinità* (Trinity; 1428), one of the first artworks to use the then newly discovered techniques of perspective and proportion.

The first chapel to the right of the altar, **Cappella di Filippo Strozzi**, features spirited frescoes by Filippino Lippi, depicting the lives of St John the Evangelist and St Philip the Apostle. Domenico Ghirlandaio's series of frescoes behind the main altar was painted with the help of artists who may have included the young Michelangelo. Relating the lives of the Virgin Mary, St John the Baptist and others, the frescoes are notable for their depiction of Florentine life during the Renaissance, and feature portraits of members of the Tornabuoni family, who commissioned them. Brunelleschi's crucifix hangs above the altar in the **Cappella Gondi**, the first chapel left of the choir. Giotto's crucifix (c 1288) hangs above the centre of the nave.

To reach the **Chiostr Verde** (Green Cloister), which takes its name from the green earth base used for its frescoes, go out of the church and follow signs for the *museo*. Three of its four walls are decorated with fading frescoes recounting Genesis. The most interesting artistically, by Paolo Uccello, are those on the party wall with the church. *Il Diluvio Universale* (Great Flood) is outstanding.

Off the next side of the cloister is the **Cappellone degli Spagnoli** (Spanish Chapel), set aside for the Spanish retinue that accompanied Eleonora de Toledo, Cosimo I's wife. It contains some well-preserved frescoes by Andrea di Bonaiuto.

On the west side of the cloister, a museum (9 055 28 21 87; adult/concession €2.70/2; 11 9am-5pm Mon-Thu & Sat) showcases ecclesiastical relics.

MUSEO NAZIONALE ALINARI DELLA FOTOGRAFIA

Thoughtfully laid out inside a former Leopoldine convent, the **Alinari National Photography Museum** (Map pp100-1; 9 055 21 63 10; www.alinarifondazione.it; Piazza Santa Maria Novella 14a; adult/child €9/6; 11 9.30am-7.30pm Tue-Fri, Sun & Mon, 9.30am-11.30pm Sat) provides a snapshot of photography from its early-19th-century origins to contemporary art. Temporary exhibits add an up-to-the-minute angle and there's an itinerary for blind visitors.

OFFICINA PROFUMO-FARMACEUTICA DI SANTA MARIA NOVELLA

Take a step back in time to Renaissance Florence at this venerable **perfumery-pharmacy** (Map p103; 9 055 21 62 76; www.smnovella.com; Via della Scala 16), in business since 1612. The fruit of cures concocted from medicinal herbs grown by Dominican friars at the monastery here since 1221, the pharmacy continues to honour its natural roots in the many fragrances and face- and body-care products it carefully crafts today. Particularly fun are the old-fashioned Renaissance remedies it still sells (acqua di Santa Maria Novella to cure hysterics, acqua di Melissa to aid digestion, and smelling salts) and the dietary supplements available in the herbalist shop (dandelion to purify, devil's claw to aid joint function etc, bladderwrack algae to spur on weight loss etc). Visit the free museum adjoining the shop to learn more.

CHIESA D'OGNISSANTI

This 13th-century church (Map p103; Borgo Ognissanti; 11 7am-12.30pm & 4-8pm Mon-Sat, 4-8pm Sun) was much altered in the 17th century, when its baroque façade was added. Domenico Ghirlandaio's fresco, above the second altar on the right, features Madonna della Misericordia, protector of the Vespucci family. Amerigo Vespucci, the Florentine navigator who gave his name to the American continent, is supposed to be the young boy whose head peeks between the Madonna and the old man. Ghirlandaio's masterpiece, *Ultima Cena* (Last Supper), covers most of a wall in the former monastery's refectory, reached via the cloister, while his detailed portrait, *St Jerome*, is in the nave. Opposite is Botticelli's pensive *San Augustin*. All three of these works date from 1480.

LE CASCINE

About 10 minutes' walk west along Borgo Ognissanti and Via il Prato brings you to Porta

al Prato, part of the walls demolished in the late 19th century to make way for the ring of boulevards that still surrounds the city.

A short walk south is Florence's great green lung, **Parco delle Cascine** (Map pp98-9), a private hunting reserve of the Medici dukes, opened to the public in 1776, with boulevards, fountains, bird sanctuaries and an open-air swimming pool. Come dusk parts of it become a stomping ground for pimps and prostitutes.

Via de' Tornabuoni & Around

Renaissance mansions and classy designer fashion shops (p151) border **Via de' Tornabuoni**, the city's most fashionable and expensive shopping street named after a wealthy Florentine noble family (which died out in the 17th century) and often referred to as the 'Salotto di Firenze' (Florence's Drawing Room). The street follows the original course of the Mugnone tributary into the Arno.

Head east down **Via della Vigna Nuova** and turn into **Via dei Palchetti**; you'll pass the classically inspired **Palazzo Rucellai** (Map pp100-1), designed by Alberti for another of the city's wealthiest noble families whose good fortunes originated in wool and silk, and climaxed with the marriage of Bernardo Rucellai to Lorenzo the Magnificent's daughter in 1466.

Continuing south to **Lungarno Corsini**, you reach **Palazzo Corsini** (Map pp100-1; 9 055 21 28 80; www.palazzocorsini.it; Via del Parione 11b; admission free; 11 9am-1pm & 4-7pm Mon-Fri), residence of the Corsini family who arrived in Florence in the 13th century. The once-grandiose but now rather shabby, late-baroque edifice previously belonged to the Medici family, but they sold it in 1640, and work on the exterior wasn't completed until 1735. The most interesting feature inside is a spiral staircase known as the *lumaca* (literally 'snail').

Head east for **Ponte Santa Trinità**, a harmonious and charming bridge with statues of the seasons by Pietro Francavilla and prime views of Ponte Vecchio. Cosimo I put Vasari in charge of the project, and he in turn asked Michelangelo for advice. In the end the job was handed over to Ammannati, who finished it in 1567. The bridge was painstakingly restored after being blown up by the Nazis in 1944.

Turning inland, you arrive at the 14th-century **Chiesa della Santa Trinità** (Map pp100-1; Piazza

Santa Trinità), rebuilt in Gothic style and later graced with a mannerist façade of indifferent taste. Eye-catching frescoes by Domenico Ghirlandaio depict the life of St Francis of Assisi in the south transept's **Cappella Sasseti**. Lorenzo Monaco, Fra Angelico's master, painted the altarpiece in the fourth chapel on the south aisle and the frescoes on the chapel walls.

Across the road looms **Palazzo Spini-Feroni** (Map pp100-1), built for Geri Spini, the pope's banker, in the 13th century and now part of the Ferragamo shoe empire. A **Salvatore Ferragamo boutique** – styled as it was in the 1940s and 1950s – languishes on the ground floor and in the basement the **Museo Salvatore Ferragamo** (Map pp100-1; 9 055 336 04 56; Via de' Tornabuoni 2; adult/under 10yr €5/free; 11 10am-6pm Wed-Mon) shows off classic Ferragamo shoes, many worn by Hollywood stars such as Marilyn Monroe, Greta Garbo and Katherine Hepburn. Money made by the museum helps fund scholarships for young shoe designers.

Sneak briefly eastwards along **Borgo Santissimi Apostoli** to visit the lovely **Chiesa dei Santissimi Apostoli** (Map pp100-1; Piazza del Limbo 1), a refreshingly sober church when set against Florence's Renaissance splendour. Tucked away in a sunken square that was once the cemetery for unbaptised babies, it is often overlooked by most visitors. Most of the 11th-century façade is still intact, and the rounded arches of its Romanesque interior soar heavenwards. Put €0.50 in the slot to the left of the entrance and it bursts into muted light. You will find a terracotta tabernacle by Giovanni della Robbia located at the end of the north aisle.

Most impressive of the Renaissance mansions bordering **Via de' Tornabuoni** is **Palazzo Strozzi** (Map pp100-1), a great colossus raised by one of the most powerful of the Medici's rival families. Although never completed, its three finished façades in heavy rusticated *pietra forte* (literally 'strong stone', a local sandstone), designed by Benedetto da Maiano, speak naked power. Inside is a grand if somewhat gloomy courtyard. The palazzo hosts art exhibitions today.

Two blocks north looms the baroque façade (1683) of **Chiesa di San Gaetano** (Map pp100-1), a church around since the 11th century. Opposite and a few strides north, **Palazzo Antinori** (Map pp100-1) was built in the 15th century by Giovanni da Maiano.

San Lorenzo Area

BASILICA DI SAN LORENZO

In 1425 the Medici commissioned Brunelleschi to rebuild what would become the family's parish church and funeral chapter – 50-odd Medici are buried here. Considered one of the most harmonious examples of Renaissance architecture, the **Basilica di San Lorenzo** (Map pp98-9; Piazza San Lorenzo; admission €2.50; 10am-5pm Mon-Sat) stands on the site of a 4th-century basilica. But it looks nothing from the outside: Michelangelo was commissioned to design the façade in 1518 but his design in white Carrara marble was never executed, hence its rough unfinished appearance.

Inside, columns of *pietra serena* (soft grey stone) crowned with Corinthian capitals separate the nave from the two aisles. Donatello, who was still sculpting the two bronze pulpits adorned with panels of the Crucifixion when he died, is buried in the chapel featuring Fra Filippo Lippi's *Annunciation*. Rosso Fiorentino's *Sposalizio della Vergine* (Marriage of the Virgin Mary; 1523) is in the second chapel on the south aisle. Left of the altar is the *Sagrestia Vecchia* (Old Sacristy), designed by Brunelleschi and decorated in the main by Donatello.

Biblioteca Laurenziana Medicea

From another entrance off Piazza San Lorenzo you enter the church's peaceful cloisters. Off the first cloister, a staircase leads to the **Biblioteca Laurenziana Medicea** (% 055 21 15 90; www.bml.firenze.sbn.it; Piazza San Lorenzo 9; 11 by guided tour on special request only) commissioned by Giulio de' Medici (Pope Clement VII) to house the extensive Medici library and restricted today to researchers. The real attraction is Michelangelo's magnificent vestibule and a staircase, designed in walnut but subsequently executed in grey *pietra serena*. Its curvaceous steps are a sign of the master's move towards mannerism from the stricter bounds of Renaissance architecture and design.

Medicean Chapels

Nowhere is Medici conceit expressed so explicitly as in their mausoleum, the **Cappelle Medicee** (Medicean Chapels; Map pp98-9; % 055 238 86 02; Piazza Madonna degli Aldobrandini; admission €6; 11 8.15am-1.50pm Tue-Sat, 1st & 3rd Sun & 2nd & 4th Mon of month), principal burial place of the Medici rulers, sumptuously adorned with granite, the most precious marble, semiprecious stones

and some of Michelangelo's most beautiful sculptures.

In 2004 forensic scientists exhumed 49 members of the dynasty buried here as part of a research project to learn more about the Medici lifestyle, genetic make-up, diseases (syphilis and malaria were common) and – more importantly – how they died: Anna Maria Luisa (1667–1743), the last in the Medici line who bequeathed all the family art treasures to the city of Florence, died from breast cancer it was discovered. More sensational was the discovery that Francesco I and his wife Bianca Cappello, who suddenly died 11 days apart from each other in 1587, did not have malaria but rather died from acute arsenic poisoning. Francesco I lies in the *Cappella dei Principi* (Princes' Chapel) alongside Ferdinando I & II and Cosimo I, II & III. Statues of each Medici were planned for the niches, which, bar bronzes of Ferdinando I and Cosimo II, remain bare, lending the chapel a surprisingly austere air.

From the Princes' Chapel, a corridor leads to the stark but graceful *Sagrestia Nuova* (New Sacristy), Michelangelo's first architectural work and showcase for three of his most haunting sculptures. *Aurora e Crepuscolo* (Dawn and Dusk) lounge on the sarcophagus of the unpopular Lorenzo Duke of Urbino (1492–1519), to whom Machiavelli dedicated *The Prince*. *Notte e Giorno* (Night and Day) mark the spot opposite where a son of Lorenzo il Magnifico is buried. Michelangelo never finished the grandiose funerary monument planned for the tomb of Lorenzo il Magnifico, simply adorned with a serene *Madonna col Bambino* (Madonna and Child).

PALAZZO MEDICI-RICCARDI

When Cosimo il Vecchio felt fairly sure of his position in Florence, he decided to move house and entrusted Michelozzo with the design in 1444. The result is this **palace** (Map pp98-9; % 055 276 03 40; www.palazzo-medici.it; Via Cavour 3; adult/concession €5/3.50; 11 9am-7pm Thu-Tue), a blueprint that influenced the construction of Florentine family residences, such as Palazzo Pitti and Palazzo Strozzi, for years to come.

The fortress townhouses with their towers reminiscent of Gothic Florence were no longer necessary, and Cosimo's power was more or less undisputed, allowing Michelozzo to create a self-assured, stout but not inelegant pile on three storeys. The rusticated façade of

the ground floor gives a rather stern aspect to the building, though the upper two storeys are less aggressive, maintaining restrained classical lines – already a feature of the emerging Renaissance canon – and topped with a heavy timber roof whose broad eaves protrude over the street below.

The Medici stayed here until 1540, making way for the Riccardi family a century later who gave the palace a comprehensive remodelling and built the sumptuously decorated *Galleria* on the 2nd floor. Luca Giordano adorned the ceiling with his complex *Allegory of Divine Wisdom* (1685), a rather overblown example of late baroque, dripping with gold leaf and bursting with colour.

Cappella dei Magi

Also known as *Capella di Benozzo*, this tiny Chapel of the Magi upstairs flaunts a series of wonderfully detailed serene frescoes (1459) by Benozzo Gozzoli, a pupil of Fra' Angelico. His ostensible theme of *Journey of the Magi* is but a slender pretext for portraying members of the Medici clan in their best light; try to spy Lorenzo il Magnifico, Cosimo il Vecchio and the artist's self-portrait in the crowd.

Only eight visitors are allowed in at a time for a maximum of just seven minutes; reserve your slot in advance at the palace ticket desk.

San Marco Area

GALLERIA DELL'ACCADEMIA

A lengthy queue marks the door to this **gallery** (Map pp98-9; % 055 238 86 09; Via Riccasoli 60; adult/concession Dec-Aug €8/4, Sep-Nov €6.50/3.25; 11 8.15am-6.50pm Tue-Sun), simply because it contains one of the greatest masterpieces of the Renaissance, Michelangelo's original *David*.

He doesn't disappoint. The subtle detail (not quite as illuminated on copies) of the real thing – the veins in his sinewy arms, the muscles in his legs, the change in expression as you move around the statue – is impressive. Spend time encircling it, viewing it from different angles, digesting its history and playing with Digital David, an interactive visualisation of the statue to see his locks, sling and so on in 3D on a computer screen. Carved from a single block of marble already worked on by two sculptors before him (both of whom had given up), Michelangelo's most famous work was also his most challenging – he didn't choose the marble himself, it was veined and its dimensions

were already decided. For this reason alone the resultant masterpiece (dubbed Colossus by Florentines) gained near-mythical status even before assuming its pedestal in front of Palazzo Vecchio on Piazza della Signoria in 1504. This coupled with Florentines embracing the larger-than-life nude as a symbol of power and liberty and civic pride in their Republic ensured lasting notoriety for David, depicted for the first time as a man in the prime of life rather than a young boy.

Michelangelo was also the master behind the unfinished *San Matteo* (St Matthew; 1503) in the same hall and the four *Prigioni* ('prisoners' or 'slaves'; 1530), who seem to be writhing and struggling to free themselves from the marble; they were meant for the tomb of Pope Julius II, itself never completed. A plaster model of Giambologna's *Ratto delle Sabine* (Rape of the Sabine) dominates the *Sala del Colosso*, the first room you cross before hitting *David*.

Off to the left, in the *Sala dell'Ottocento* (19th-Century Room), shelves heavy with the weight of dozens of nameless, ghostly busts commissioned by wealthy Victorian 'Grand Tourists' – members of the moneyed middle and upper classes who toured Europe, especially Italy, to soak up the culture and history, and round off their classical education. Elsewhere in the museum, the works by Botticelli and Taddeo Gaddi are worth scouting out.

MUSEO DI SAN MARCO

At the heart of Florence's university area sits Chiesa di San Marco and the adjoining Dominican convent where gifted painter Fra Angelico (c 1400–55) and the sharp-tongued Savonarola piously served God. Today the **Museo di San Marco** (Map pp98-9; % 055 238 86 08; Piazza San Marco 1; adult/concession €4/2; 11 8.15am-1.50pm Tue-Fri, 8.15am-6.50pm Sat, 8.15am-7pm 2nd & 4th Sun & 1st, 3rd & 5th Mon of month), is one of Florence's most fascinating museums.

Essentially a showcase for Fra Angelico's art, you enter via Michelozzo's *Chiostro di Sant'Antonio* (1440). Turn immediately right to enter the *Sala dell'Ospizio* where Fra Angelico's attention to perspective and the realistic portrayal of nature comes to life in the *Deposizione di Cristo* (Deposition of Christ; 1432), a commission taken on by the friar after the original artist, Lorenzo Monaco, died. Many critics deem the end result one of the first true paintings of the Renaissance.

Giovanni Antonio Sogliani's fresco *La Providenza dei Domenicani* (The Miraculous Supper of St Dominic; 1536) dominates the former monks' refectory in the cloister; and Fra Angelico's huge *Crocifissione* (Crucifixion) fresco (1442) decorates the former Chapterhouse. But it is upstairs where the monk cells remain that is the most haunting: At the top of the stairs, Fra Angelico's most famous works, *Annunciazione* (c 1440), faced on the opposite wall by a Crucifixion featuring St Dominic, leaps off at the walls at you. A stroll around each of the 20 cells reveals snippets of many more fine religious reliefs by the Tuscan-born friar, who decorated the cells in 1440 and 1441 with deeply devotional frescoes to guide friars' meditation. Most were executed by Fra Angelico himself, others by aides under his supervision, including Benozzo Gozzoli. Among several masterpieces is the magnificent *Madonna delle Ombre* (Virgin of the Shadows; c 1450), on the external wall between cells 25 and 26.

After centuries of being known as 'Il Beato Angelico' (literally 'blessed angelic') or simply 'il Beato' (the blessed), the Renaissance's most blessed religious painter was made a saint by Pope John Paul II in 1984. See p41 and p173 for more on Fra Angelico's art.

Contrasting with such pure beauty is the cell – a three-room suite in fact – which Savonarola called home from 1489. Rising to prior at the Dominican convent, it was from here that the fanatical monk railed against luxury, greed and corruption of the clergy. Kept as a kind of shrine to the turbulent priest, it houses a portrait, a few personal items, the linen banner Savonarola carried in processions and a grand marble monument erected by admirers in 1873. Ten visitors at a time are allowed in Savonarola's cell.

CENACOLO DI SANT'APOLLONIA

Here in the refectory (Map pp98-9; Via XXVII Aprile 1; admission free; 7-8.15am-1.50pm Tue-Sat & alternating Sun & Mon) of what was once a Benedictine convent,

WHO'S THAT BLOKE?

Name: David

Occupation: world's most famous sculpture

Vital Statistics: 516cm tall, 19 tonnes of mediocre-quality pearly white marble from the Fantiscritti quarries in Miseglia, Carrara

Spirit: Young biblical hero in meditative pose who, with the help of God, defeats an enemy more powerful than himself. Scarcely visible sling emphasises victory of innocence and intellect over brute force.

Commissioned: In 1501 by the Opera del Duomo for the cathedral, but subsequently placed in front of the Palazzo Vecchio on Piazza della Signoria where it stayed until 1873.

Famous journeys: It took 40 men four days to transport the statue on rails from Michelangelo's workshop behind the cathedral to Piazza della Signoria in 1504. Its journey from here, through the streets of Florence, to its current purpose-built tribune in the Galleria dell'Accademia in 1873 took seven long days.

Outstanding features: (a) His expression which, from the left profile, appears serene, Zen and boyish; from the right, concentrated, manly and highly charged in anticipation of the gargantuan Goliath he is about to slay; (b) the sense of counterbalanced weight rippling through his body, from the tension in his right hip on which he leans to his taut left arm.

Why the small dick: In classical art a large or even normal-sized packet was not deemed elegant, hence the daintier size.

And the big head and hands: *David* was designed to stand up high on a cathedral buttress in the apse, from where his head and hand would have appeared in perfect proportion.

Beauty treatments: body scrub with hydrochloric acid (1843); clay and cellulose pulp 'mud pack', bath in distilled water (2004)

Occupational hazards: Over the centuries he's been struck by lightning, attacked by rioters and had his toes bashed with a hammer. The two pale white lines visible on his lower left arm is where his arm got broken during the 1527 revolt when the Medici were kicked out of Florence. Giorgio Vasari, then a child, picked up the pieces and 16 years later had them sent to Cosimo I who restored the statue, so the story goes.

restoration work revealed some remarkable frescoes, including a *L'Ultima Cena* (Last Supper) in rich shades of red, blue and purple, painted by Andrea del Castagno around 1450. Above it, another three frescoes of his portray Jesus' crucifixion (with a rare example of a beardless Christ figure), burial and resurrection.

PIAZZA DELLA SANTISSIMA ANNUNZIATA Giambologna's equestrian statue of Grand Duke Ferdinando I de' Medici commands the scene from the centre of this square, teeming with students rather than tourists.

The church that gives the square its name, **Chiesa della Santissima Annunziata** (Map pp98-9; Piazza della Santissima Annunziata; 7.30am-12.30pm & 4-6.30pm), was established in 1250 by the founders of the Servite order, and rebuilt by Michelozzo and others in the mid-15th century. It is dedicated to the Virgin Mary, and in the ornate tabernacle, to your left as you enter the church from the atrium, is a so-called miraculous painting of the Virgin.

No longer on public view, the canvas is attributed to a 14th-century friar, and legend says it was completed by an angel. Also of note are frescoes by Andrea del Castagno in the first two chapels on the left of the church, a fresco by Perugino in the fifth chapel, and the frescoes in Michelozzo's atrium, particularly the *Nascita della Vergine* (Birth of the Virgin) by Andrea del Sarto and the *Visitazione* (Visitation) by Jacopo Pontormo. The mannerist Il Rosso Fiorentino (the Redhead from Florence) is also an important contributor to the frescoes. Above the main entrance to the church is a mosaic lunette of the *Annunciation* by Davide Ghirlandaio, Domenico's little brother. Within the church's official opening hours, you'll need to time it just right in order to squeeze yourself in between each morning's seven masses.

The **Spedale degli Innocenti** (Hospital of the Innocents, Map pp98-9) was founded on the southeastern side of the piazza in 1421 as Europe's first orphanage, hence the 'innocents' in its name. Brunelleschi designed the portico, which Andrea della Robbia (1435-1525) famously decorated with terracotta medallions of babies in swaddling clothes. At the north end of the portico, the false door surrounded by railings was once a revolving door where unwanted children were left. A good number of people in Florence with surnames such as degli Innocenti, Innocenti and Nocentini can

trace their family tree only as far back as the orphanage. Undoubtedly, life inside was hard, but the Spedale's avowed aim was to care for and educate its wards until they turned 18.

Works by Florentine artists, including Domenico Ghirlandaio's striking *Adorazione dei Magi* (Adoration of the Magi; 1488), fill the **Galleria dello Spedale degli Innocenti** (9% 055 249 17 08; www.istitutodeglinnocenti.it; Piazza della Santissima Annunziata 12; adult/concession €4/2.50; 7-8.30am-7pm Mon-Sat, 8.30am-2pm Sun) on the 2nd floor.

About 200m southeast of the piazza is the **Museo Archeologico** (Map pp98-9; 9% 055 23 57 50; Via della Colonna 38; admission €4; 7-2-7pm Mon, 8.30am-7pm Tue & Thu, 8.30am-2pm Wed & Fri-Sun), whose rich collection of finds, including most of the Medici hoard of antiquities, plunges you deep into the past and offers an alternative to Renaissance splendour. On the 1st floor you can either head left into the ancient Egyptian collection or right for the smaller section on Etruscan and Greco-Roman art.

Santa Croce Area

PIAZZA DI SANTA CROCE

The Franciscan stands haughty watch over the piazza of the same name, today lined with restaurants and souvenir shops. The square was initially cleared in the Middle Ages, primarily to allow hordes of the faithful to gather when the church itself was full. In Savonarola's day, heretics were executed here.

Such an open space inevitably found other uses, and from the 14th century it was often the colourful scene of jousts, festivals and *calcio storico* matches. This last was like a combination of football and rugby with no rules. Look for the marble stone embedded in the wall below the gaily frescoed façade of **Palazzo dell'Antella** (Map pp100-1), on the south side of the piazza; it marks the halfway line on this, one of the oldest football pitches in the world.

Curiously enough, the Romans used to have fun in much the same area centuries before. The city's 2nd-century amphitheatre took up the area facing the western end of Piazza di Santa Croce. To this day, Piazza de' Peruzzi, Via de' Bentaccordi and Via Torta mark the oval outline of the north, west and south sides of its course.

BASILICA DI SANTA CROCE

The French writer Stendhal was so dazzled by the **Basilica di Santa Croce** (Map pp100-1; 9% 055 246 61

05; adult/concession incl Museo dell'Opera €5/3; 11 9.30am-5.30pm Mon-Sat, 1-5.30pm Sun) that he was barely able to walk for faintness. He is apparently not the only one to have felt so overwhelmed by the beauty of Florence; Florentine doctors treat a dozen cases of 'stendhalismo' each year so they say.

Designed by Arnolfo di Cambio between 1294 and 1385, the church's name stems from a splinter of the Holy Cross donated to the Franciscans by King Louis of France in 1258. The magnificent façade enlivened by the varying shades of coloured marble is a 19th-century neo-Gothic addition, as indeed is the bell tower. Inside, its massive, austere interior is divided into a nave and two aisles by solid octagonal pillars. Peer up to see a fine example of the timber, A frame-style ceiling occasionally used in Italy's Gothic churches.

It is the famous Florentines buried inside this church that draw most visitors, though. Michelangelo's tomb, designed by Vasari (1570), is along the southern wall between the first and second altars. The three muses below it represent his three principal gifts: sculpture, painting and architecture. Next along is a 19th-century cenotaph to the memory of Dante (whose remains, in fact, are in Ravenna), and Galileo Galilei's (1737), easy to spot with its bust of the great scientist clutching a telescope and gazing skywards, lies directly opposite, in the left aisle.

Otherwise, Santa Croce's artistic treasures come in the shape of frescoes, some substantially better preserved than others. Five chapels on either side of the Cappella Maggiore line the transept, the two nearest the right side of the chapel being decorated with fragmentary frescoes by Giotto – these are the best examples of his work in Florence. Those depicting scenes from the life of St Francis (1315–20) in the Capella Bardi are the best preserved, but still too poor quality to make any decent comparison with the frescoes painted by his assistant and most loyal pupil, Taddeo Gaddi (1300–66), who frescoed the neighbouring Chapelle Majeure and nearby Cappella Baroncelli; the latter features the life of the Virgin.

Taddeo's son Agnolo (1345–96), meanwhile, painted the Cappella Castellani (1385) with delightful frescoes depicting the life of St Nicholas (later transformed into 'Santa Claus') and was also responsible for the frescoes above the altar.

From the transept chapels a doorway designed by Michelozzo leads into a corridor, off which is the Sagrestia, an enchanting 14th-century room dominated on the left by Taddeo Gaddi's fresco of the *Crocifissione*. There are also a few relics of St Francis on show, including his cowl and belt. Through the next room, the church bookshop, you can access the Scuola del Cuoio (p150), a leather school and shop, where you can see the goods being fashioned and also buy the finished products. At the end of the corridor is a Medici chapel with a fine two-tone altarpiece in glazed terracotta by Andrea della Robbia.

Cloisters & Cappella de' Pazzi

Brunelleschi designed the serene cloisters just before his death in 1446. His Cappella de' Pazzi, at the end of the first cloister, with its harmonious lines and restrained terracotta medallions of the Apostles by Luca della Robbia, is a masterpiece of Renaissance architecture. It was built for, but never used by, the wealthy banking family destroyed in the Pazzi Conspiracy – when papal sympathisers sought to overthrow Lorenzo il Magnifico and the Medici dynasty.

The Museo dell'Opera di Santa Croce (Map pp100-1; admission incl basilica adult/concession €5/3; 11 9.30am-5.30pm Mon-Sat, 1-5.30pm Sun), in the first cloister, features a Crucifixion by Cimabue, restored to the best degree possible after flood damage in 1966 when more than 4m of water inundated the Santa Croce area. Other highlights include Donatello's gilded bronze statue *St Louis of Toulouse* (1424), originally placed in a tabernacle on the Orsanmichele façade, a wonderful terracotta bust of St Francis receiving the stigmata by the della Robbia workshop, and frescoes by Giotto, including an *Ultima Cena* (Last Supper; 1333).

MUSEO HORNE

Herbert Percy Horne was one of those eccentric Brits living abroad with cash. He bought this house in the early 1900s, renovated it to re-create a Renaissance ambience, and installed his eclectic collection of 14th- and 15th-century Italian paintings, sculptures, ceramics, furniture and other oddments to create his own Horne Museum (Map pp100-1; 055 24 46 61; www.museohorne.it in Italian; Via de' Benci 6; adult/concession €5/3; 11 9am-1pm Mon-Sat). There are a few works by masters such as Giotto, Filippo Lippi and Lorenzetti, though most are by minor

artists. More interesting is the furniture, some exquisite.

PONTE ALLE GRAZIE

The first bridge here was built in 1237 by Messer Rubaconte da Mandella, a Milanese *podestà*. It was swept away in 1333 and chapels were built on its replacement. The bridge was called after one of them, the Madonna alle Grazie. The Germans blew up the bridge in 1944, and the present version went up in 1957.

PIAZZA SANT'AMBROGIO & AROUND

From Casa Buonarroti, walk north up Via Michelangelo Buonarroti and continue to Piazza dei Ciompi, venue for a small flea market.

The Loggia del Pesce (Fish Market; Map pp100-1; Via Pietrapiana) was designed by Vasari for the Mercato Vecchio (Old Market), which was at the heart of what is now Piazza della Repubblica. The loggia was moved to the Convento di San Marco when the Mercato Vecchio and the surrounding area were cleared in the 19th century, and finally re-erected here in 1955.

A block east, the plain Chiesa di Sant' Ambrogio (Map pp100-1; Via Pietrapiana) presents an inconspicuous 18th-century façade on the square of the same name. The first church here was raised in the 10th century, but what you see inside is a mix of 13th-century Gothic and 15th-century refurbishment. The name comes from Sant' Ambrogio (St Ambrose), the powerful 4th-century archbishop of Milan, who stayed in an earlier convent on this site when he visited Florence. The church is the last resting place of several artists, including Mino da Fiesole and Verrocchio.

Just north of Piazza Sant' Ambrogio rises the shiny copper-turned-vibrant pea-green domes of Florence's Sinagoga (Synagogue; Map pp100-1; 055 234 66 54; Via Luigi Carlo Farini 6; adult/concession €4/3; 11 10am-6pm Sun-Thu Jun-Aug, to 3pm Apr-May & Sep-Oct, to 2pm Nov-Mar, 10am-2pm Fri year-round), a fanciful structure built between 1874 and 1882 with Moorish and neo-Byzantine elements. Inside its Museo di Arte e Storia Ebraica, Jewish ceremonial objects and richly embroidered vestments are displayed. A memorial in the garden lists the names of Florentine Jews who died in Nazi concentration camps.

Oltrarno

Literally 'Beyond the Arno', trendy Oltrarno takes in all of Florence south of the river.

PONTE VECCHIO

The first documentation of a stone bridge here, at the narrowest crossing point along the entire length of the Arno, dates from 972. The Arno looks placid enough, but when it gets mean, it gets very mean. Floods in 1177 and 1333 destroyed the bridge, and in 1966 it came close to being destroyed again. Many of the jewellers with shops on the bridge were convinced the floodwaters would sweep away their livelihoods, but this time the bridge held.

They're still here. Indeed, the bridge has twinkled with the glittering wares of jewellers, their trade often passed down from generation to generation, ever since the 16th century, when Ferdinando I de' Medici ordered them here to replace the often malodorous presence of the town butchers, who used to toss unwanted leftovers into the river.

The bridge as it stands was built in 1345 and was the only one saved from destruction by the retreating Germans in 1944; some say on Hitler's express orders, others that the German commander disobeyed those very orders (yet still wreaked havoc by razing the medieval quarters at either end).

At the southern end of the bridge is the medieval Torre dei Mannelli (Map pp100-1), which looks rather odd as the Corridoio Vasariano was built around it, not simply straight through it as the Medici would have preferred. Across Via de' Bardi as your eye follows the Corridoio, you can glimpse the Torre degli Ubriachi (Map pp100-1), the Drunks' Tower.

CHIESA DI SANTA FELICITA

The most captivating thing about the façade of this 18th-century remake of what had been Florence's oldest (4th-century) church (Map pp100-1; Piazza Santa Felicità; 11 9am-noon & 3.30-6pm Mon-Sat, noon-1pm Sun) is the fact that the Corridoio Vasariano (p106) passes right across it; the Medici could stop by and hear Mass without being seen.

Inside, in Brunelleschi's small Cappella Barbadori, on the right as you enter, Jacopo Pontormo (1494–1557) left his mark with a fresco of the *Annunciazione* (Annunciation) and a *Deposizione* (Deposition), depicting the taking down of Christ from the Cross in disturbingly surreal colours.

PALAZZO PITTI

Wealthy banker Luca Pitti commissioned Brunelleschi to build this forbidding-looking

palace (Map pp100-1; 055 238 86 14; Piazza de' Pitti; adult/concession €11.50/5.75; 11 8.15am-6.50pm Tue-Sun) In 1457, but by the time it was completed, the family fortunes were on the wane, forcing them to sell it to arch-rivals, the Medici, in 1549 – to the joy of Eleonora de Toledo, wife of Cosimo I, who took it upon herself to oversee the extensions, which continued for centuries.

Incredibly the original design was consistently respected, making it almost impossible to distinguish the various phases of construction: the original nucleus of the palace embraced the space encompassing the seven sets of windows on the second and third storeys.

Following the demise of the Medici dynasty, the palace remained the residence of the city's rulers, the dukes of Lorraine and their Austrian and (briefly) Napoleonic successors. When Florence was made capital of the nascent Kingdom of Italy in 1865, it became a residence of the Savoy royal family, who presented it to the state in 1919.

Museums

Irrespective of how much you do – or don't – want to see, one ticket covers admission to everything: the palace's royal apartments and art galleries, silver museum and gardens with porcelain museum. Reserve at least an afternoon to take it all in.

A stroll around the ground-floor **Museo degli Argenti** (Silver Museum) reveals far more than extraordinary silverware, amber, ivory and *pietre dure* (hard stone) pieces amassed by the Medici. The first room you enter, the Sala di Giovanni da San Giovanni, stuns with its lavish head-to-toe frescoes (1635–42) celebrating the life of Lorenzo the Magnificent – spot Michelangelo giving Lorenzo a statue. 'Talk little, be brief and witty' is the curt motto above the painted staircase in the next room, the public audience chamber, where the Grand Duke received visitors in the presence of his court. Only a lucky few were granted a private audience in the smaller chamber next door.

Raphael and Rubens vie for centre stage in the enviable collection of 16th- to 18th-century art amassed by the Medici and Lorraine dukes in the 1st-floor **Galleria Palatina**, reached by a staircase from the palace's central courtyard. The backdrop is the **Appartamenti Reali** (Royal Apartments), a series of rather sickeningly furnished and decorated rooms, many embellished with ceiling frescoes of mythological scenes, where the Medici and their successors

lived, slept and received their guests. The style and division of tasks assigned to each room is reminiscent of Spanish royal palaces, all heavily bedecked with drapes, silk and chandeliers. Each room has a colour theme, ranging from aqua green to deep-wine red.

Among Tuscan masters, you can see work by Filippo Lippi, Botticelli, Vasari and Andrea del Sarto. The collection also boasts important works by other Italian and foreign painters. Foremost among them are those by Raphael, whose *Madonna della Seggiola* (Madonna of the Chair; 1515) is particularly intriguing. Caravaggio's *Amore Dormiente* (Sleeping Cupid; 1608), Guido Reni's grinning *Bacco Fanciullo* (Young Bacchus; 1620), Guercino's dramatic *San Sebastian* and Tintoretto's *Deposizione* (Deposition) are just a few of the many highlights. Other artists represented include Titian, Veronese, Velasquez, Rubens and Van Dyck. Among the lesser-known works, Dosso Dossi's *Ninfa e Satiro*, featuring a grotesque satyr snarling at a nervous-looking nymph, Lorenzo Lippi's gruesome portrait of *Santa Agata* and Orazio Riminaldi's *Amore Artifice* (False Cupid) are worth seeking out.

Only the most dedicated make it to the 2nd-floor **Galleria d'Arte Moderna** (Modern Art Gallery) and **Galleria del Costume** (Costume Gallery), displaying 18th- to mid-20th-century Tuscan works and high fashion respectively.

Giardino di Boboli

Relax in the palace's Renaissance **Boboli Gardens** (Map p103; adult/concession €6/3; 11 8.15am-7.30pm Jun-Aug, 8.15am-6.30pm Apr, May, Sep & Oct, 8.15am-5.30pm Mar, 8.15am-4.30pm Nov-Feb), laid out in the mid-16th century according to a design by architect Niccolò Pericoli, aka Il Tribolo.

A shabby shadow of its former glorious self, Boboli remains a prime example of a formal Tuscan garden nonetheless and is fun to explore: skip along the **Cypress Alley**; let the imagination rip with a gallant frolic in the walled **Giardino del Cavaliere** (Knights' Garden); dance around 170-odd statues; discover bird song and species in the garden along the signposted **nature trail**; or watch a fleshy *Venere* (Venus) by Giambologna rise from the waves in the **Grotta del Buontalenti**, a fanciful grotto designed by the eponymous artist. Other typical Renaissance garden features include a six-tier **amphitheatre**, originally embellished with 24 niches sheltering classical statues surrounded by animals; an **orangery** (*limonaia*; 1777), which stills keeps around 500 citrus trees

snug in winter; **botanical garden**; and **Rococo kaffeehaus** (1775), where afternoon tea can still be supped. The 17th-century maze, a Tuscan horticultural standard, was razed in the 1830s to make way for a driveway for carriages. Don't miss the monumental 'face' sculpture (1998) by Polish sculptor Igor Mitoraj (b 1944), at home in Pietrasanta near Carrara today.

At the upper, southern limit of the gardens, fantastic views over the palace complex and Florentine countryside fan out beyond the decidedly neglected **rose garden**, overlooked by the **Museo delle Porcellane** (Porcelain Museum; Map pp100–1), home to Sèvres, Vincennes, Meissen, Wedgwood and other porcelain pieces collected by Palazzo Pitti's wealthy tenants. At the top of the hill are the rambling fortifications of the **Forte di Belvedere** (p126), built by Grand Duke Ferdinando I towards the end of the 16th century to protect the Palazzo Pitti. It was closed for renovations when we last visited.

Giardino di Bardini

Smaller, better tended and more manicured are Florence's little-known **Bardini Gardens** (Map pp100-1; 055 29 48 83; Costa San Giorgio 4-6 via Boboli Gardens & Via de' Bardi 1r; adult/concession incl Boboli & Porcelain Museum €5/2.50; 11 8.15am-sunset), named after art collector Stefano Bardini (1836–1922) who bought the villa and gardens in 1913, restored much of the medieval garden, created an English garden and so on. Accessible from neighbouring Boboli or down by the Arno, they have all the features of a quintessential Tuscan garden – artificial grottoes, orangery, marble statues, fountains, loggia, amphitheatre and a monumental baroque stone staircase staggering up the beautiful tiered gardens – but not the crowds. A springtime stroll is an extra-special joy when its azaleas, peonies, wisteria (all April and May) and irises (June) are all in bloom.

CASA GUIDI

Robert and Elizabeth Browning lived in Florence at **Casa Guidi** (Map p103; 055 28 43 93; www.browningsociety.org; Piazza San Felice 8; admission free; 11 3-6pm Mon, Wed & Fri Apr-Nov), Robert writing *Men and Women* in the apartment they called home for 14 years and poetess Elizabeth giving birth to their only child and later dying here. Britain's Eton College owns the literary-rich apartment today, which can be rented for short stays.

MUSEO ZOOLOGICO LA SPECOLA

Further down Via Romana from Piazza San Felice, this rather fusty **zoological museum** (Map p103; 055 228 82 51; Via Romana 17; admission €4; 11 9am-1pm Thu-Tue, until 5pm Sat) offers for your delectation, the stuffed-animal exhibit apart, a collection of wax models of bits of human anatomy in varying states of bad health. An offbeat change from all that art and history!

PORTA ROMANA

Rome-bound pilgrims headed down Via Romana as they left Florence behind them. At the end of the street is the **Porta Romana** (Map p103), an imposing city gate that was part of the outer circle of city walls knocked down in the 19th century. A strip of the wall still stretches north from the gate. If you follow the inside of this wall (the area is now a car park), you soon come across an entrance that allows you to get to the top of the gate.

VIA MAGGIO

This was a posh address in the 16th century as the line-up of fine Renaissance mansions duly attests. **Palazzo di Bianca Cappello** (Map pp100–1), at No 26, is named after Bianca Cappello, Francesco I de' Medici's lover, who eventually became his wife. Across the street, a series of mansions, more or less following the same Renaissance style, include **Palazzo Ricasoli-Firidolfi** (Map pp100–1) at No 7, **Palazzo Martellini** (Map pp100–1) at No 9, **Palazzo Michelozzi** (Map pp100–1) at No 11, **Palazzo Martelli** (Map pp100–1) at No 13 and **Palazzo di Cosimo Ridolfi** (Map pp100–1) at No 15. All were built and fiddled around with over the 14th, 15th and 16th centuries. Over the road, take a glance at the squarely imposing **Palazzo Corsini-Suarez** (Map pp100–1) at No 42.

PIAZZA SANTO SPIRITO

From Via Maggio turn into Via de' Michelozzi to reach lively **Piazza Santo Spirito**. At its northern end, the square is fronted by the flaking façade of the **Basilica di Santo Spirito** (Map p103; 11 10am-noon & 4-5.30pm Mon-Sat, 11.30-noon Sun, closed Wed afternoon), one of Brunelleschi's last commissions. Inside, the entire length of the church is lined by a series of semicircular chapels, and the colonnade of grey *pietra forte* Corinthian columns lends an air of monumental grandeur.

One of the most noteworthy works of art is Filippino Lippi's *Madonna con il Bambino e Santi* (Madonna with Child and Saints) in

the Cappella Nerli in the right transept. Other highlights include Domenico di Zanobi's *Madonna del Soccorso* (Madonna of the Relief; 1485), in the Cappella Velutti, in which the Madonna wards off a little red devil with a club, and Giovanni Baratta's marble and stucco *L'Arcangelo Raffaele e Tobio* (The Archangel Raphael and Tobias; 1698), which illustrates an episode from the Apocrypha. The main altar, beneath the central dome, is a voluptuous baroque flourish, rather out of place in the spare setting of Brunelleschi's church. In the sacristy is a poignantly tender wooden crucifix (it's not often you see Christ with a penis) attributed to Michelangelo.

Next door to the church is the refectory, *Cenacolo di Santo Spirito* (Map p103; % 055 28 70 43; Piazza Santo Spirito 29; admission €2.20; 11-10.30am-1.30pm Sat Apr-Nov, 9am-5pm Sat Dec-Mar). Andrea Orcagna decorated the refectory with a grand fresco depicting the *Last Supper* and the *Crucifixion* (c 1370). Also on display is the sculpture collection bequeathed to the city in 1946 by the Neapolitan collector Salvatore Romano. Among its most intriguing pieces are rare pre-Romanesque sculptures and works by Jacopo della Quercia and Donatello.

BASILICA DI SANTA MARIA DEL CARMINE

West of Piazza Santo Spirito, Piazza del Carmine is an old square used as a car park. On its southern flank is the 13th-century Basilica di Santa Maria del Carmine (Map p103), all but destroyed by fire in the late 18th century. Fortunately the fire spared the magnificent frescoes in its *Cappella Brancacci* (Map p103; % advance reservations 055 276 82 24, 055 76 85 58; admission €4; 11-10am-5pm Wed-Sat & Mon, 1-5pm Sun), entered via a separate entrance next to the basilica on the square. A maximum of 30 visitors are allowed into the chapel at a time and visits are strictly by guided tour; places *must* be booked in advance.

This chapel is a treasure of paintings by Masolino da Panicale, Masaccio and Filippino Lippi; see p173 for an in-depth look. Masaccio's fresco cycle, illustrating the life of St Peter, is considered among his greatest works, representing a definitive break with Gothic art and a plunge into new worlds of expression in the early stages of the Renaissance. The *Cacciata dei Progenitori* (Expulsion of Adam and Eve), on the left side of the chapel, is his best-known work. His depiction of Eve's anguish in particular lends the image a human touch hitherto little

seen in European painting. Masaccio painted these frescoes in his early 20s, taking over from Masolino, and interrupted the task to go to Rome, where he died, aged only 28. The cycle was completed some 60 years later by Filippino Lippi. Masaccio himself features in his *St Peter Enthroned*; he's the one standing beside the Apostle, staring out at the viewer. The figures around him have been identified as Brunelleschi, Masolino and Alberti. Filippino Lippi also painted himself into the scene of *St Peter's Crucifixion*, along with his teacher, Botticelli.

BORGO SAN FREDIANO

Heading northwards from Piazza del Carmine, you reach Borgo San Frediano. The street and surrounding area retain something of their traditional feel – that of a working-class quarter where artisans have been beaver- ing away for centuries.

At the western end of the street stands lonely *Porta San Frediano* (Map p103), another of the old city gates left in place when the walls were demolished in the 19th century. Before you reach the gate, you'll notice the unpolished feel of the area neatly reflected in the unadorned brick walls of *Chiesa di San Frediano in Cestello* (Map p103; 11-9-11.30am & 5-6pm Mon-Fri, 5-6pm Sun), its incomplete façade hiding a restrained baroque interior.

BACK TO PONTE VECCHIO

From the front of *Chiesa di San Frediano* in Cestello, you can follow the river bank as far as Ponte Santa Trinità along Borgo San Jacopo. Along the way you pass several family mansions, including *Palazzo Frescobaldi* (Map pp100-1) on the square of the same name. Two 12th-century towers, the *Torre dei Marsili* and *Torre de' Belfredelli*, keep watch over the area.

PONTE VECCHIO TO FORTE DI BELVEDERE

Continuing east away from Ponte Vecchio, the first stretch of *Via de' Bardi* shows clear signs of its recent history. This entire area was flattened by German mines in 1944, and hastily rebuilt in questionable taste after the war.

The street spills into Piazza di Santa Maria Soprarno. Follow the narrow *Via de' Bardi* (the right fork) away from the square and you enter a pleasantly quieter corner of Florence. The powerful Bardi family once owned all the houses along this street, but by the time Cosimo il Vecchio wed Contessina de' Bardi in 1415, the latter's family was on the decline.

Via de' Bardi expires in *Piazza de' Mozzi*, surrounded by the sturdy façades of grand residences. Pope Gregory X stayed at *Palazzo de' Mozzi* (Map pp100-1; *Piazza de' Mozzi* 2) when brokering peace between the Guelphs and Ghibellines.

Next, turn east down *Via dei Renai*, past leafy *Piazza Nicola Demidoff*, dedicated to the 19th-century Russian philanthropist who lived nearby in *Via San Niccolò*. At the end of *Via dei Renai*, 16th-century *Palazzo Serristori* (Map pp100-1) was home to Joseph Bonaparte in the last years of his life until his death in 1844; a humble end to the man who, at the height of his career, had been appointed king of Spain by his brother Napoleon.

Turn right and you end up on *Via San Niccolò*; walk east along this street to emerge at the tower marking *Porta San Niccolò* (Map pp100-1), all that is left of the city walls. To get an idea of what the walls were once like, walk south from *Chiesa di San Niccolò Oltrarno* through *Porta San Miniato* (Map pp100-1). The wall extends a short way to the east and for a stretch further west, up a steep hill that leads you to *Foro di Belvedere* (Map pp100-1), a rambling fort designed by Bernardo Buontalenti for Grand Duke Ferdinando I at the end of the 16th century. From this massive bulwark soldiers kept watch on four fronts – as much for internal security to protect the *Palazzo Pitti* as against foreign attack. The views are excellent.

PIAZZALE MICHELANGELO

Turn your back on the bevy of tacky-tacky souvenir stalls flogging *David* statues and how-to-make-*limoncello* tea towels and take in the soaring city panorama from this vast esplanade (Map pp100-1), pierced by one of Florence's two David copies: the square is a 10-minute uphill walk along the wiggly road, paths and steps that scale the hill side from the river and *Piazza Giuseppe Poggi*. Should it be the right season, nip into the hill-side *Giardino delle Rose* (Rose Garden; *Viale Giuseppe Poggi* 2; admission free; 11-8am-8pm Mon-Sun May & Jun) en route where 1000 types of roses in bloom – including 350 antique varieties – make a pretty picture.

Bus 13 links *Stazione di Santa Maria Novella* with *Piazzale Michelangelo*.

CHIESA DI SAN MINIATO AL MONTE

The real point of your exertions is five minutes further uphill, at this wonderful Romanesque church (Map pp96-7; *Via Monte alle Croci*; admission free;

11-8am-7pm May-Oct, 8am-noon & 3-6pm Nov-Apr). The church is dedicated to St Minius, an early Christian martyr in Florence who is said to have flown to this spot after his death down in the town (or, if you care to believe an alternative version, to have walked up the hill with his head tucked underneath his arm).

The church was started in the early 11th century. Its typically Tuscan multicoloured marble façade, featuring a mosaic depicting Christ between the Virgin and St Minius, was tacked on a couple of centuries later. Inside 13th- to 15th-century frescoes adorn the south wall and intricate inlaid marble designs line the length of the nave, leading to a fine Romanesque crypt. The raised choir and presbytery have an intricate marble pulpit and screen, rich in complex geometrical designs. The sacristy, in the southeast corner, features marvellously bright frescoes depicting the life of St Benedict. The four figures in its cross vault represent the Evangelists.

Slap bang in the middle of the nave is the bijoux *Capella del Crocifisso*, to which Michelozzo, Agnolo Gaddi and Luca della Robbia all contributed.

The *Capella del Cardinale del Portogallo*, beside the north aisle, features a tomb by Antonio Rossellino and a tabernacle ceiling in terracotta by della Robbia.

Come around 4.30pm (in winter) or 5.30pm (in summer) and you can hear the monks' Gregorian chant wafting up from the crypt.

Bus 13 stops nearby.

North of the Old City

FORTEZZA DA BASSO

This huge defensive fortress (Map pp98-9) was built in 1534 on the orders of Alessandro de' Medici. It was a statement of Medici power, aimed at overawing the potentially rebellious Florentines, rather than a defence against invasion. Nowadays it's used for exhibitions, cultural events and a catwalk to Italy's annual children and menswear fashion shows (p60).

CHIESA RUSSA ORTODOSSA

A couple of blocks east, the onion-shaped domes on this Russian Orthodox church (Map pp98-9) colour the skyline. Built in 1902 for the resident Russian populace, it was designed in the northern-Russian style, with two interior levels decorated in part by Florentine artists but mostly by Russians who were experts in iconography.

MUSEO STIBBERT

Anglo-Italian, Florence-born Frederick Stibbert (1838–1906) was one of the grand 19th-century wheeler-dealers on the European antiquities market and amassed an intriguing personal collection, showcased in Villa di Montughi, aka the **Stibbert Museum** (Map pp96-7; % 055 47 55 20; www.museostibbert.it; Via Stibbert 26; adult/child €5/2; 10am–2pm Mon–Wed, 10am–6pm Fri–Sun), north of Fortezza da Basso.

Great for kids is the **Sala della Cavalcata** (Parade Room) where life-sized figures of horses and their riders in all manner of suits of armour from Europe and the Middle East rub shoulders. Other varied exhibits include clothes, furnishings, tapestries and 16th- to 19th-century paintings.

Take bus 4 from Stazione di Santa Maria Novella to the 'Gioia' stop on Via Fabroni, from where it is a short walk.

MEDICI VILLAS

In the 15th and 16th centuries as their wealth and prosperity grew, the Medici built several villas in what was then countryside around Florence – now city suburb and industrial sprawl. Only the gardens of this trio are open to visitors.

Villa Medicea La Petraia (Map p155; % 055 45 26 91; Via della Petraia 40; admission free; 8.15am–8pm Jun–Aug, to 7pm Apr, May & Sep, to 6pm Mar & Oct, to 5pm Nov–Feb, closed 2nd & 3rd Mon of the month), 3.5km north of the city in Castello, was commissioned by Cardinal Ferdinando de' Medici in 1576. Its magnificent gardens feature a fountain by Giambologna, and May, when its flowering tubs are brought out from the lemon groves and hothouses, is an exceptional time to visit. Take ATAF bus 28 or the City Sightseeing bus (p131) from Stazione di Santa Maria Novella.

Lorenzo il Magnifico's summer home, **Villa Medicea di Castello** (Map p155; % 055 45 47 91; Via di Castello 47; admission free; 8.15am–8pm Jun–Aug, to 7pm Apr, May & Sep, to 6pm Mar & Oct, to 5pm Nov–Feb, closed 2nd & 3rd Mon of the month), a little further north in Castello, was a favourite of Cosimo I and is framed by sumptuous gardens with an animal-sculptured grotto, all the rage in Renaissance Florence. Same bus routes as La Petraia.

Lorenzo il Magnifico breathed his last in 1492 at **Villa Medicea di Careggi** (Map p155; % 055 427 97 55; Viale Pieraccini 17; admission free; 9am–6pm Mon–Fri, 9am–noon Sat), administrative offices for the local hospital today in Careggi. The

gardens here can also be visited; take the ATAF bus 14C from Stazione di Santa Maria Novella.

**South of the Old City
BELLOSGUARDO**

The hill of Bellosguardo (Beautiful View), southwest of the city centre, was a favourite spot for 19th-century landscape painters. A narrow, winding road leads up past a couple of villas from Piazza Torquato Tasso to Piazza Bellosguardo. You can't see anything from here, but if you wander along Via Roti Michelozzi into the grounds of **Albergo Torre di Bellosguardo** (Map p103; www.torrebellosguardo.com; Via Roti Michelozzi 2), you'll see what the fuss was about. The top-end hotel, long appreciated as a bucolic escape from the city heat, started life as a 14th-century castle.

CERTOSA DI FIRENZE

From Porta Romana located at the southern tip of the Oltrarno, follow Via Senese south for 3km to the village of Galluzzo and its remarkable 14th-century Carthusian monastery, the **Certosa di Firenze** (Map pp96-7; % 055 204 92 26; Via Senese 206-208r, Galluzzo; admission free; 1 guided tour 9am, 11.30am, 3pm & 4.30pm or 5.30pm Tue–Sun), also called Certosa del Galluzzo, where Carthusian monks make liqueur and honey between prayers. The great cloister is decorated with busts of the della Robbia workshop, and there are frescoes by Pontormo in the Gothic hall of Palazzo degli Studi. Take bus 37 from Stazione di Santa Maria Novella.

ACTIVITIES

On those torrid summer days when they pull back the roof over the Olympic-size pool, **Piscina Bellariva** (Comunale Nannini; Map pp96-7; % 055 67 75 21; Lungarno Aldo Moro 6; 10am–6pm daily, 8.30–11.30pm Tue & Thu Jun–Aug) is heaven. Bus 14 from Piazza dell'Unità and the Duomo passes nearby.

Piscina Le Pavoniere (Map pp96-7; % 055 36 22 33; Viale della Catena 2; 10am–6pm & 8pm–2am Jun–mid-Sep) has a pizzeria and bar. Dip in the evening when admission is free.

From mid-September to June, opening times are restricted in both pools; call to check before diving in.

WALKING TOUR

This route introduces you to many of the city's brightest highlights.

WALK FACTS

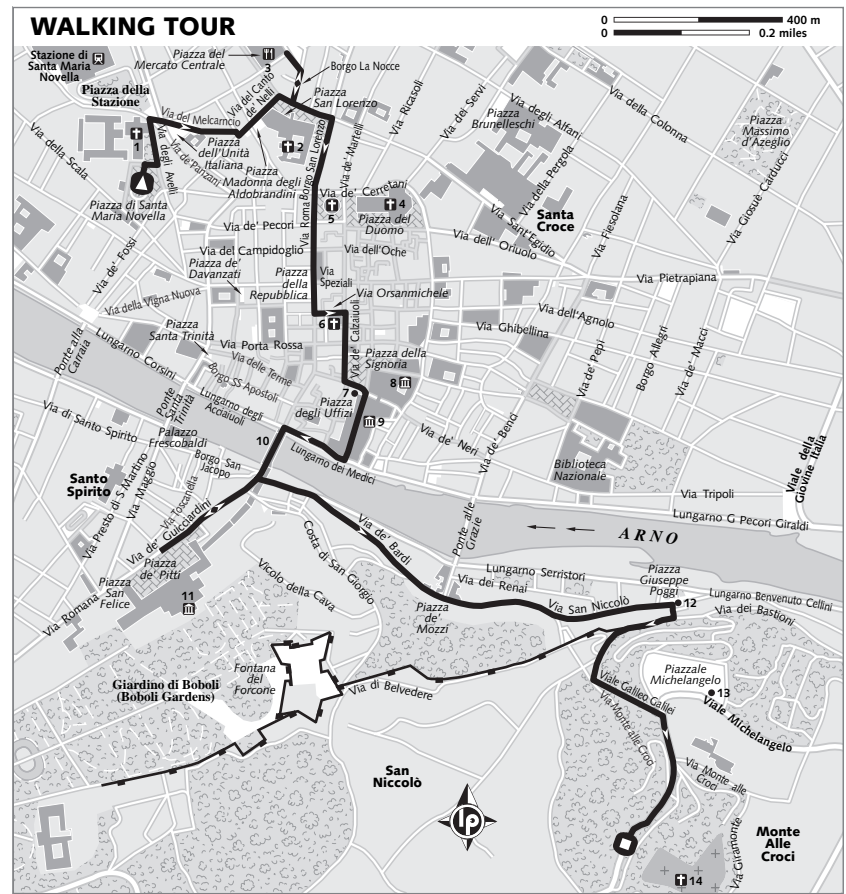
Distance 5.25km

Duration Two to three hours

Begin in Piazza di Santa Maria Novella, overlooked by **Basilica di Santa Maria Novella** (1; p115). Then take Via degli Avelli north, as far as busy Piazza dell'Unità Italiana, and continue east on Via del Melarancio, past Piazza Madonna degli Aldobrandini, and on to Piazza San Lorenzo, with its market stalls and **Basilica di San Lorenzo** (2; p118). From here, slip in a quick detour northwards up Borgo La Noce to enjoy the contemporary bustle of **Mercato Centrale** (3; p143), Florence's pre-

mier produce market. Back at the basilica, walk south along Borgo San Lorenzo until you see the **Duomo** (4; p105) and baptistry (5; p107). Take a spin around Piazza del Duomo, then walk southwards along Via Roma, on into Piazza della Repubblica, an ideal coffee stop (p145). Just beyond the square, turn left (east) into Via Orsanmichele, where you'll find **Chiesa di Orsanmichele** (6; p109) with its ornate statuary.

Turn right to follow Via de' Calzaiuoli southwards as far as Piazza della Signoria with its **Loggia della Signoria** (7; p111) and the commanding presence of **Palazzo Vecchio** (8; p110), home of Florentine government since the Middle Ages. South just a few steps is the **Uffizi** (9; p112), housing one of the world's



most precious collections of primarily Renaissance art. Piazza degli Uffizi leads on to the River Arno.

Face west to see the **Ponte Vecchio** (10; p123). Cross this bridge, and you will be in the Oltrarno. Continue south along *Via de' Guicciardini* as far as the brooding hulk of **Palazzo Pitti** (11; p123), one-time seat of the Medici dynasty.

Returning to the river and Ponte Vecchio, head upstream along altogether quieter *Via de' Bardi* as far as *Piazza de' Mozzi*, surrounded by grand residences, and continue along *Via San Niccolò* as far as **Porta San Niccolò** (12; p126), one of Florence's few surviving city gates. Behind the gate, you'll find a steep, winding footpath leads up to **Piazzale Michelangelo** (13; p127) with its breathtaking panorama over the city. From here, barely five minutes more of sturdy uphill work along *Viale Galileo Galilei* brings you to the **Chiesa di San Miniato al Monte** (14; p127), a beautiful Romanesque jewel and a fitting end to your exertions.

COURSES

Florence has dozens of schools offering courses in Italian language and culture. Numerous others teach art, art history, film, dance and so on. For general information, see p402; for courses covering food and wine, see p76.

FLORENCE FOR CHILDREN

Children are welcomed pretty much anywhere, any time, in Florence, families frequently going out with young children in the evenings, strolling with a *gelato* or dining with gusto in a restaurant. That said, Florence is not the easiest city to visit with very young children; green spaces and playgrounds are

scarce and, while some of the pricier hotels can provide baby-sitters, there's no organised service for tourists.

Several locally published books and games help children discover Florence – the bookshop in **Palazzo Vecchio** (p110) has a particularly tip-top selection. Nancy Shroyer Howard's activity-driven book *Fun in Florence* kits out kids aged six to 10 years with pencils and do-and-find sections for major sites. Ellen & Marvin Mouchawar's *Treasure Hunt Florence* sets the same age group chasing around the city looking for items or opportunities to carry out simple tasks. For older children, try *Florence, Just Add Water* by Simone Frasca and *Florence: Playing with Art* by Maria Salvia Baldini.

La Bottega dei Ragazzi (Map pp98-9; ☎ 055 247 83 86; www.istitutodeglinnocenti.it; Via dei Fibbiai 2; one/three workshops €10/20; ⌚ 9am-1pm & 3-7pm Mon-Sat), an inspirational 'play and learn with art' space next to the **Spedale degli Innocenti**, runs workshops for children aged three years to five years and six to 11 years; book in advance or simply turn up. Any time, parents and kids can pop in to play with its many toys, books and games.

At the **Palazzo Vecchio** (p110), younger children aged three to seven years can watch a shadow theatre about a theft from Francesco's studiolo and visit the latter; while those aged eight years or more can learn about Michelangelo though a theatre sketch, meet Cosimo I and Eleonora de Toledo (actors dressed up) or take a tour of the place with Vasari.

Boys can drool over knights in shining armour at the **Museo Stibbert** (p127), and 'Galileo' talks kids through the exhibits at the **Museo di Storia della Scienza** (p110), which has a gory medical section.

Watching Giovanni Franchini make spaghetti in his old-fashioned **Laboratorio** (☎ 055 28 09 09; Via dei Rustici 6) is a fun escapade, as is racing up the bell-tower and dome of the **Duomo** (p105); playing hide-and-seek between statues in the **Giardino di Boboli** (p124) or tearing round **Parco delle Cascine** (Map pp96-7), which in summer has an open-air swimming pool to splash around in. The vintage carousel on *Piazza della Repubblica* never stops enchanting.

If you speak Italian, the musical activities at the **Ludoteca Musicale** (Map pp100-1; ☎ 055 263 86 00; www.musicarte.it in Italian; Via Pandolfino 18; admission free; ⌚ 9.30am-12.30pm Mon-Sat) offer a good opportunity to mingle with Florentine parents and their children.

The best playgrounds for children under six years are in the Oltrarno: the river-side space along **Lungarno Santa Rosa** (cross the river using **Ponte Amerigo Vespucci** and turn right) and on *Piazza Torquato Tasso* (lunch before/after at **Al Tranvai**, p141).

Otherwise there's **Mondobimbo** (Map pp98-9; ☎ 055 553 29 46; Via del Ponte Rosso; admission €5; ⌚ 10am-midnight May-Sep, 10am-7pm Oct-Apr), a soft-play area in a tent with bouncy castles, ball pools etc for kids aged two to 10 years.

TOURS

Bus

CAF Tours (☎ 055 21 06 12; www.caftours.com; Via Sant'Antonino 6r) Half- and full-day city coach tours (€42 to €90); designer-outlet shopping tours (€23 to €30; p151) and trips to Pisa, Lucca and other towns (€40 to €115); book online, at its office or at Consorzio ITA (Map pp98-9; p132) inside *Stazione Santa Maria Novella*.

City Sightseeing Firenze (Map pp98-9; ☎ 055 29 04 51; www.firenze.city-sightseeing.it) Tour Florence by open-top bus, hopping on and off as you please at bus stops sprinkled around the city; line A links *Stazione di Santa Maria Novella* (bus stop next to ATAF bus stops opposite the station's southeastern exit) with *Piazzale Michelangelo*; line B yo-yos between *Porta San Frediano* and *Fiesole*; and line C tours the Medici villas. Tickets valid 24 hours including audioguide: lines A & B adult/five to 15 years/family €20/10/60, line C adult/six to 15 years €28/20. If you intend using public transport and route A or B, buy a one-day *PassoPartour* (€22/11).

Cycling

Accidental Tourist (☎ 055 69 93 76; www.accidentaltourist.com) Become an accidental tourist (membership €10) then sign up for an activity tour – sunset strolls, natural trails, picnics, walking and snoozing tours as well as walking and one-day bike tours (€75).

A GARDEN TOUR

It is quite astonishing just how many exquisitely landscaped, lovingly tended gardens, many of a historical nature, hide behind high walls in Florence and around. Mostly privately owned, **Hortibus** (☎ 348 910 07 83; www.hortibus.com) holds the key. Working with the Italian Historical Homes Association, the horticultural society organises private tours of gardens in Florence and around Florence every Thursday and Saturday afternoon (€25), always with a specialist guide and invariably with the owner of the garden. Advance reservations are obligatory.

Bicycle Tuscany (☎ 055 22 25 80; www.bicycltuscany.com; ⌚ Mar-Nov) One-day bike rides in the Tuscan countryside (including transport, bike and equipment, lunch and vineyard visit €60).

Florence by Bike (Map pp98-9; ☎ 055 48 89 92; www.florencebybike.it; Via San Zanobi 120-122r) Straight bike rental (per hour/five hours/day/three days including self-guided city itineraries €2.70/7.50/14/34.50) and a 32km-long day tour of Chianti (including lunch €75).

I Bike Italy (☎ 055 234 23 71; www.ibikeitaly.com) 'No museums, no churches and no annoying crowds' is the pledge of this tour company, which runs one- and two-day bike tours in the Tuscan countryside.

I Bike Tuscany (☎ 335 812 07 69; www.ibiketuscany.com; Via Belgio 4) One-day rides on the outskirts of Florence, Siena and Il Chianti led by former bike racer Marco Vignoli: 'professional, accommodating, extremely fun and easy-going', says Lonely Planet reader Katie J, USA.

Tour Bike Florence (☎ 055 234 30 48, 340 635 18 00; www.tourbikeflorence.it; Via Fiesolana 14r) Bike rental (per one/three/five/seven days including self-guiding itineraries €13/32/50/65), three-hour city tours (€35), and day trips to Fiesole and Il Chianti (both €65 including lunch).

Walking

Florence Guided Tours (☎ 055 21 03 01, 349 316 46 77; www.florapromotuscany.com; Via Pellicceria 1) Florence in a Day (€70), the Uffizi (€30), Galleria dell'Accademia (€25) and various theme tours by Florapromotuscany.

Mercurio Tours (☎ 055 21 33 55; www.mercurio-italy.org) Three-hour walking tours of the city (€42.50) and half-day Il Chianti trips (€67.50). Reserve by phone or online.

Walking Tours of Florence (Map pp100-1; ☎ 055 264 50 33, 329 613 27 30; www.italy.artviva.com; Via de'Sassetti 1) Excellent one- to three-hour walks of the

TOP FIVE COURSES

Alice Atelier (Map pp100-1; ☎ 055 28 73 70; www.alicemasks.com; Via Faenza 72r) Mask-making courses with Professor Agostino Dessi and daughter, Alice.

British Institute of Florence Language Centre (Map pp100-1; ☎ 055 267 78 200; www.britishinstitute.it; Piazza degli Strozzi 2) Much-respected institution dating to 1917; language, art history, cooking and wine appreciation.

Centro Lorenzo de' Medici (Map pp98-9; ☎ 055 28 73 60; www.lorenzodemedici.it; Via Faenza 43) Language with huge variety of supplementary courses, including jewellery design, archaeology and film production.

Florence Dance Center (Map p103; ☎ 055 28 92 76; www.florencedance.org in Italian; Borgo della Stella 23r) Classical, jazz and modern dance.

Istituto per l'Arte e il Restauro Palazzo Spinelli (Map pp100-1; ☎ 055 24 60 01; www.spinelli.it; Borgo Santa Croce 10) Fresco restoration, interior and graphic design, gilding and marquetry.

city (€25 to €39) led by historians or art history graduates, including an evening Medici murder stroll (€25, 1½ hours).

FESTIVALS & EVENTS

Carnevale in February aside, festivals abound.

Festa di Anna Maria Medici (Feast of Anna Maria Medici) 18 February, the date of the death in 1743 of the last Medici, Anna Maria, is marked with a costumed parade from Palazzo Vecchio to her tomb in the Cappelle Medicee.

Scoppio del Carro (Explosion of the Cart) A cart of fireworks is exploded in front of the cathedral at 11am on Easter Sunday.

Festa di San Giovanni (Feast of St John) On 24 June Florence celebrates its patron saint with the *calcio storico* (medieval football) matches on Piazza di Santa Croce and fireworks over Piazzale Michelangelo.

Maggio Musicale Fiorentino A major summer music festival (see p148).

Festa delle Rificolone (Festival of the Paper Lanterns) A procession of children carrying lanterns, accompanied by drummers, *sbandieratori* (flag throwers), musicians and others in medieval dress, winds its way from Piazza di Santa Croce to Piazza SS Annunziata to celebrate the Virgin Mary's birthday on 7 September.

SLEEPING

The city has hundreds of hotels in all categories, some excellent hostels and a burgeoning bed and breakfast (B&B) scene. Many places in central Florence have rooms with a view (across burnt-red rooftops interspersed by at least one church spire or bell tower), while the city's plethora of beautiful historical palaces is not reserved strictly for the top-end of the market. Several good-value budget and midrange sleeping options ooze that distinct Florentine charm of hundreds of years too.

But get in quick. Florence is a hot destination for much of the year and rooms are in constant demand, reflected by the city's inflated prices. Places in this section have been selected for their good value for money; plenty more Florence options are reviewed online at www.lonelyplanet.com.

Tourist offices don't recommend or reserve places, but do carry lists of what is available, including *affittacamere* (rooms in private houses). Towns like Arezzo, Prato and Pisa are a short train trip away and offer cheaper accommodation.

For general information on reservations, seasonal rates, the costly nightmare hotel parking is etc, see p397.

Accommodation agencies

For free or a small fee, these agencies – two of which have offices inside the main train station – can find/reserve a hotel room for you.

Agenzie 365 Hotel Reservation (Map pp98-9; ☎ 055 28 42 01; firenze1.gb@agenzie365.it; h 8am-9pm Mon-Sat, 10am-7pm Sun) Platform 5, Stazione Santa Maria Novella; reservation fee €5.50.

Consorzio ITA (signposted Informazione Turistiche Alberghiere; Map pp98-9; ☎ 055 28 28 93; h 8am-7.30pm) In the main hall of Stazione di Santa Maria Novella next to the pharmacy; reservation fee €3.

Florence Promhotels (☎ 055 55 39 41, 800 86 60 22; www.promhotels.it; h 9am-7pm Mon-Fri, 9am-1pm Sat) Online and telephone reservations for one- to five-star hotels in and around Florence.

Top Quark (☎ 055 33 40 41, 800 60 88 22; www.familyhotels.com; Viale Fratelli Rossi 39r) B&Bs, apartments and hotels in Florence and Tuscany; book online or by telephone.

Apartment Rental

Self-catering apartments can be expensive and hard to source; see p398 for a list of spots to look online.

Guesthouse Villino Giulia (Map pp96-7; ☎ 055 20 40 085; www.trattoriabibe.com; Via Della Bagnese 11r, Galuzzo; s €50-70, d €60-120) Run by one of Florence's most-loved inns (p138), this 1930s house with garden contains three beautifully furnished apartments – unbeatable value for money. From floor rugs to toilet-paper holder, everything is top-notch quality and breakfast is provided for short stays. The neighbouring road is busy but you are just 3km from central Florence.

Palazzo Alfani (Map pp98-9; ☎ 055 29 15 74, 346 033 99 31; www.palazzoalfani.com; Via Ricasoli 49; apt for 4 people €200-350, 6 people €350-500; a i j) There's no reason to queue outside Galleria dell'Accademia for guests staying in the five beautiful apartments inside this convent-turned-palace with interior garden pierced by a medlar tree: it's bang-slap opposite the gallery. Original prints decorate the walls; dressing gowns, slippers and self-pamper products add to the pleasure of the Jacuzzi showers; and father Marco Alfani and daughter Francesca could not be friendlier.

Camping

Campeggio Michelangelo (Map pp100-1; ☎ 055 681 19 77; www.ecvacanze.it in Italian; Viale Michelangelo 80; adult/car & tent low season €8.90/10.70, high season €9.90/11.90;

A ROOM WITH A VIEW

Looking for the most romantic room with a view in town? Then look no further than those tucked up high on the roofed veranda atop the Renaissance palazzo on Piazza Santo Spirito (No 9), where Zeffirelli shot several scenes of *Tea with Mussolini*. Run for years as shabby, over-priced but wholly irresistible Pensione Bandini, this noble old Renaissance palazzo is now shut and awaiting a facelift. Don't miss it when it reopens.

ρ) The closest site to the city centre, just off Piazzale Michelangelo, south of the River Arno. Big and comparatively leafy with lovely city views, it's handy for the historic quarter, though it's a steep walk home. A backpacker with tent can pitch for €10.50 year-round. Take bus 13 from Stazione di Santa Maria Novella.

The leafy grounds of Ostello Villa Camerata (below) or Campeggio Panoramico (p156) are the other alternatives.

Hostels

Ostello Santa Monaca (Map p103; ☎ 055 26 83 38; www.ostello.it; Via Santa Monaca 6; dm €17-19; i j) Once a convent, this large Oltrarno hostel, run by a cooperative since the 1960s, comes warmly recommended. There is a kitchen for guests' use, a laundrette, free safe deposits and two computers to surf (per hour €3). Single-sex dorms sleep four to 22 and are locked between 10am and 2pm. Curfew 2am.

Ostello Archi Rossi (Map pp98-9; ☎ 055 29 08 04; www.ostelloarchirosi.com; Via Faenza 94r; dm incl breakfast & sheets €18-26; h closed 2 weeks Dec; i j) Guests' paintings and graffiti brighten up the walls at this private hostel near Stazione di Santa Maria Novella. Bright white dorms have three to 12 beds (those across the garden are quieter); there are washing machines (€3), frozen-meal dispensers (€3.50), microwaves for guests to use and free unlimited wi-fi in the five-terminal internet corner. No curfew (knock to get in after 2am).

Ostello Gallo d'Oro (Map pp98-9; ☎ 055 552 29 64; www.ostellogalldoro.com; Via Cavour 104; dm/d incl breakfast €30/75; i j) Play happy families at this dynamic 24-bed hostel, run by bubbly young duo Florentine Silvia and Umbrian Max, who serve guests a free *aperitivo* and tablecloth

dinner (€10) each evening. Dorms max at five beds and three have a tiny balcony.

Ostello Villa Camerata (Map pp96-7; ☎ 055 60 14 51; florenceaighostel@virgilio.it; Viale Augusto Righi 2-4; dm €18, d/tr/q with bathroom €60/69/80, all incl breakfast; ρ i j) In a converted 17th-century villa surrounded by extensive grounds a 30-minute bus ride from town, this HI-affiliated hostel is among Italy's most beautiful. Bus 17 from Stazione di Santa Maria Novella stops 400m from the hostel.

East of Stazione di Santa Maria Novella BUDGET

Soggiorno La Pergola (Map pp100-1; ☎ 055 213 886; www.soggiornolapergola.it; Via della Pergola 23; s €45-60, d €72-103, tr €80-134) This budget place around the corner from Teatro della Pergola oozes character – that of larger-than-life host Letizia Barlozzi. A jungle of orange trees and other plastic plants greets guests in the cupboard-sized hallway and rooms (no greenery) are equally exuberant. Look for the electric buggy parked nearby.

MIDRANGE

Hotel Paris (Map pp100-1; ☎ 055 28 02 81; www.parishotel.it; Via dei Banchi 2; s €80-125, d €110-165; ρ a i j) Designed by Bernardo Buontalenti in the 15th century, this twin-set of palaces linked on the 2nd floor by a glass walkway is the place to sleep the Renaissance experience. Three-star rooms sport high ceilings, and window pelmets and bed heads are adorned with rich, embroidered drapes. The painted ceiling in the breakfast room is breathtaking.

○ **Hotel Morandi alla Crocetta** (Map pp98-9; ☎ 055 234 47 47; www.hotelmorandi.it; Via Laura 50; s €80-115, d €140-180; ρ a j) This medieval convent-turned-hotel away from the madding crowds is a stunner. Rooms are refined, tasteful, and full of authentic period furnishings and paintings. A couple of rooms have handkerchief-sized gardens to laze in, but the *pièce de résistance* is frescoed No 29 – the room where the nuns 'attended' Mass at the chapel they weren't allowed to enter next door. Breakfast is €11 and parking is €16.

Hotel Casci (Map pp98-9; ☎ 055 21 16 86; www.hotelcasci.com; Via Cavour 13; s €60-110, d €90-150, tr €120-190, q €150-230, all incl breakfast; h closed 2 weeks Jan; ρ a i j) Run by a super-efficient mother-and-son team, Casci was the first hotel in Florence in 1926 to have hot-and-cold running water in its rooms. Flat-screen TVs,

TIP-TOP B&BS

Bed and breakfast (B&B) is a booming business in busy old Florence where visitors are increasingly turning to the extraordinary value for money, charm and hospitality that staying in a local Florentine home offers. Unusually, the owner rarely lives in. **Associazione Bed & Breakfast Affittacamere** (AB&BA; ☎ 055 654 08 60; www.abba-firenze.it) is a great one-stop shop for B&Bs. Some favourites:

- **Alle Rampe** (Map pp100-1; ☎ 055 680 01 31; www.villaallerampe.com; Piazza Ferrucci 6-7; d €60-140; a p) Step behind this mustard house across from the Arno and an olive grove staggers down the hill towards you, making this five-room B&B a lovely spot to escape the city mayhem – in the city. Virgin Mary guards the entrance, pots of flowers add a warm welcome and there's space for five cars to park on the driveway.
- **Il Salotto di Firenze** (Map pp100-1; ☎ 055 21 83 47; www.ilsalottodifirenze.it; Via Roma 6r; s €70-80, d €90-130; a j) Nestled above Gucci, the Drawing Room of Florence is well named. Quality and stylish furnishings become incidental to the soul-stirring views from the windows of this six-room B&B overlooking the baptistry, cathedral and busy square. Every room has its own bathroom, the Giovanni Fattori room has a little terrace peeking down on Via Roma and there are plenty of books in the library to borrow.
- **Johanna & Johlea** (Map pp98-9; ☎ 055 463 32 92; www.johanna.it; Via San Gallo 80; s €70-120, d €85-175, all incl breakfast; a) One of the most established B&Bs in town, J&J has more than a dozen tasteful, impeccable, individually decorated rooms split between four historic residences. Those desiring total luxury can ask about its suite apartments; last-minute offers online.
- **Relais del Duomo** (Map pp100-1; ☎ 055 21 01 47; www.relaisdelduomo.it in Italian; Piazza dell'Olio 2; s €50-90, d €75-130; a) Location is the prime selling point of this upscale B&B, perfectly placed in a 17th-century *palazzo* on a quiet traffic-free street around the corner from the cathedral. Push open the hefty wooden door to be greeted by the lovely Maria and four elegant, pastel-coloured rooms. There is an Irish pub next door but rooms are sound proofed. Minimum stay two nights.
- **Residenza Santo Spirito** (Map p103; ☎ 055 265 83 76; www.residenzasspirito.com; Piazza Santo Spirito 9; d €110-130, tr €145-170, q €180-210; a) Brilliantly placed on Florence's most buzzing summer-time square, this romantic trio of rooms with sky-high ceilings in Palazzo Guadagni (1505) is remarkable. The frescoed Gold Room is the first to go and the Green Room with two connecting double rooms is the family favourite.
- **In Piazza della Signoria** (Map pp100-1; ☎ 055 239 95 46; www.inpiazdellasignoria.com; Via dei Magazzini 2; s €140-210, d €200-280; a) Alessandro and Sonia bought this house, a split second off Piazza delle Signoria, in 2000 and spent a year doing it up. The result: a stylish, refined *residenza d'epoca* (historical residence), with the family's portraits in the hallway, period furnishings and plenty of knick-knacks to make it feel like home.

shell-shaped corner baths as well as a feisty breakfast buffet with a bottomless cappuccino could make its twin set of stars become three soon. Free internet station and wi-fi are also available.

TOP END

Hotel Monna Lisa (Map pp100-1; ☎ 055 247 97 51; www.monnalisa.it; Borgo Pinti 27; s €116-158, d €193-308, tr €262-460, q €286-520, all incl breakfast; p a) **Monna Lisa** is a Renaissance *palazzo* packed with family heirlooms. Nonchalantly adorning the old-

world palace are works by Giovanni Dupré, the 19th-century sculptor, whose descendants own the hotel. Some rooms overlook the bijou flower-bedecked garden where guests sit for breakfast in summer. Hotel parking costs €15.

Around Piazza di Santa Maria Novella
BUDGET & MIDRANGE

Hotel Pensione Ferretti (Map pp100-1 ☎ 055 238 13 28; www.pensioneferretti.it; Via delle Belle Donne 17; s €40-75, with bathroom €50-85, d €50-85, with bathroom €60-105,

extra bed €30, all incl breakfast; j) **Roberto and Sandra** will make you feel right at home in their no-frills, unpretentious hotel with 16 rooms. Those of the 3rd floor have been refurbished, making them the most white and sparkly. No air-con but ceiling fans. Free internet point.

Hotel Abaco (Map pp100-1; ☎ 055 238 19 19; www.abaco-hotel.it; Via dei Banchi 1; d €45-75, tr €65-110, q €80-135; a j) The seven rooms in this simple establishment are each named after a Renaissance artist and furnished in high-baroque style with canopy beds; three have private bathrooms. Pay €5 extra a night to get the air-con switched on – or settle the bill in cash and get air-con and breakfast (€5) for free.

Tourist House (Map pp100-1; ☎ 055 26 86 75; www.touristhouse.com; Via delle Scala 1; s €50, d €60-85, tr €100-120, q e €100-140, all incl breakfast; a) The nine basic rooms with air-con to cool things down on steamy summer days may not set hearts racing, but they represent good value for money, and breakfast on the plant-bedecked terrace between rooftops is a welcome breath of fresh air.

○ **Hotel Scoti** (Map pp100-1; ☎ 055 29 21 28; www.hotelscoti.com; Via de' Tornabuoni 7; s €50-75, d €75-115, tr €100-140, q €130-165) Wedged between Dior, Prada and McQueen, this *pensione* dating to 1875 is a splendid mix of old-fashioned charm and great value for money. Run with smiling aplomb by Australian Doreen and Italian Carmello, the hotel is enthroned in a 16th-century *palazzo* on Florence's smartest shopping strip. Rooms have antique pieces and contemporary private bathrooms, but the star of the show is the floor-to-ceiling frescoed living room (1780).

Hotel Consiglia (Map p103; ☎ 055 21 41 72; www.hotelconsigli.com; Lungarno Amerigo Vespucci 50; d €100-150, tr €120-170, all incl breakfast; p a) A short walk from town, this river-side Renaissance palace is perfect for peace-seeking guests happy to cycle to dinner. It is next door to the road-blocked US embassy, meaning motorised vehicles are kept well away, and its flowery terrace with deck chairs is a star gazer's dream. Parking is €15.

TOP END

Grand Hotel Minerva (Map pp100-1; ☎ 055 272 30; www.grandhotelmilnerva.com; Piazza di Santa Maria Novella 16; d €155-440; p a i s) Stand-out features of this four-star hotel with cream façade and oyster shutters include a winter garden (you could be several kilometres from the obelisk-

studded square outside) and – unusually for this city – a rooftop swimming pool. Parking is €28.

JK Place (Map pp100-1; ☎ 055 264 51 81; www.jkplace.com; Piazza di Santa Maria Novella 7; d €290-330, penthouse €610-750, all incl breakfast; p a i) With an interior designed by one of Florence's top architects, Michele Bonan, and a James-Bond penthouse with views guaranteed to make you swoon, this boutique hotel means business. Design-driven with a mix of old and new – retro 1950s lamps, Charles X fireplace and breakfast in a glass-topped courtyard – it is all very *alla moda* .

Between the Duomo & the Arno

BUDGET

Hotel Dalí (Map pp100-1; ☎ 055 234 07 06; www.hoteldali.com; Via dell'Oriuolo 17; s/d €40/65, d with bathroom €80; h closed three weeks Jan; p) This spruce, simple hotel on Clock Rd is run with unrelenting energy and smiles by busy parents-of-three Marco and Samanta. Rooms overlooking the leafy inner courtyard are serene; those facing the street can be noisy. Doubles are big and easily sleep four or five (extra bed €25) and there's free parking for motoring guests – a concept as rare as icebergs in Florence. Low season rates are 10% to 15% less.

Hotel San Giovanni (Map pp100-1; ☎ 055 28 83 85; www.hotelsangianni.com; Via de' Cerretani 2; s €40-58, d €50-95, tr €68-98, q €80-108; a) Buzz to enter and ride the rattly old cage lift (forget jumbo-sized suitcases) up to this former bishop's private residence – a 14th-century *palazzo* – where fresco traces still adorn room No 3. Lofty ceilings top off the other eight light and spacious rooms, just two of which have a private bathroom and four of which have air-con: Nos 6, 7 and 8 face the cathedral. Breakfast is €5.

○ **Hotel Castelli** (Map pp100-1; ☎ 055 21 42 13; www.hotelcastelli.com; Borgo SS Apostoli 25; s €45-55, d €60-75, d with bathroom €80-110, extra bed €15-25; h closed 2 weeks Jan, 3 weeks Aug) The scent of joss sticks and flicker of night lights add a soothing Zen air to this eight-room hotel, stylish home of Florentine photographer Alessio and Japanese massage therapist Asumi. Each room is different and the couple brim with dependable dining recommendations.

Hotel Orchidea (Map pp100-1; ☎ 055 248 03 46; www.hotelorchideaoflorence.it; Borgo degli Albizi 11; s €35-55, d €50-75, tr €75-100, q €80-125) This old-fashioned *pensione* in the mansion where the Donati (p109) family roosted in the 13th-century

(Dante's Gemma was allegedly born in the tower) is charm itself. Its seven rooms with sink and shared bathroom are simple; Nos 5, 6 and 7 have huge windows overlooking a gorgeous garden while No 4 spills out onto a terrace. Have a cuppa and let Miranda answer all your questions. No credit cards.

MIDRANGE

Hotel Perseo (Map pp100-1; % 055 21 25 04; www.hotelperseo.it; Via dei Cerretani 1; s €85-99, d €110-140, tr €135-170, q €160-200; a i) Don't be deceived by the grubby façade. Once out of the cage lift in this three-star hotel overhauled in 2006, décor is all sweetness, light and modern – flat-screen TVs, walk-in showers and mellow natural hues. Doubles cleverly turn into bunk-bed quads, making it a great family choice.

Hotel Hermitage (Map pp100-1; % 055 28 72 16; www.hermitagehotel.com; Vicolo Marzio 1; d €160-220; a) With a flowery rooftop terrace, reception and breakfast room on the 5th and 6th floors of a river-side building near the Uffizi, the Ponte Vecchio view is hard to beat. But don't expect the same panorama from your room; they're lower down. Observe how high the Arno rose in 1966 before getting in the lift.

TOP END

Borghese Palace Art Hotel (Map pp100-1; % 055 28 43 63; www.borghesepalace.it; Via Ghibellina 174r; s/d €190/350; p a) A key address for art lovers, this stylish ode to design with glass-topped courtyard and sculptures looming up large in reception showcases original works of art from the 18th century to the present day. Décor verges on the theatrical and dinner by candlelight on the terrace is an impressive affair.

Continentale (Map pp100-1; % 055 2 72 62; continentale@lungarnohotels.com; Vicolo dell'Oro 6r; d incl breakfast €300-380; p a) Same designer, funkier design is the thrust of this next-door neighbour, an ugly concrete block opposite. But dip inside and be bowled over by a glamorous (very pink) celebration of Italian creativity and cinema in the 1950s. Rooms are hi-tech and the glass lift with cushioned sofa is cutting edge indeed.

Gallery Hotel Art (Map pp100-1; % 055 2 72 63; www.lungarnohotels.com; Vicolo dell'Oro 5; d €350-450, ste €640-1110, all incl breakfast; p a i) Owned by the Ferragamo fashion house and designed by Florence architect Michel Bonan, this mod-ish gallery hotel is true 21st century. Peace reigns in its 74 minimalist, edgy and soft-

hued rooms – a night in its rooftop penthouse is unforgettable. Contemporary art dresses public areas, including its hip Japanese-style Fusion Bar (p143).

Oltrarno

BUDGET & MIDRANGE

Althea (Map p103; % 055 233 53 41; www.florencealthea.it; Via delle Caldaie 25; s €40-60, d €60-90, tr €80-105, all incl breakfast; j) The décor might be 1970s flower power with plenty of chintz, but the good value for money provided by these seven rooms is outstanding. Each is spotlessly clean, has its own bathroom, fridge, and computer terminal with Skype and free internet access.

Hotel La Scaletta (Map pp100-1; % 055 28 30 28; www.hotellascaletta.it; Via de' Guicciardini 13; s €55-100, d €65-140, tr €85-160, q €100-180, all incl breakfast; a i) An austere air wafts through this maze of a hotel, hidden in a 15th-century palazzo. But rooms are spacious, and breakfast and *aperitivi* taken on the roof terrace overlooking Boboli is an inspiring experience; rooms Nos 20, 21 and 22 peep down on the gardens.

Hotel Silla (Map pp100-1; % 055 234 28 88; www.hotelsilla.it; Via dei Renai 5; s €90-125, d €100-170, tr €140-220, all incl breakfast; p a) Briefly Allied headquarters in 1944 and a *pensione* since 1964, Silla sits in a palace well away from the crowds in one of the leafiest parts of Florence. Once the leaves fall in autumn, several rooms and the breakfast terrace enjoy beguiling views across the Arno; otherwise, the look out is green. Parking is €16.

TOP END

Palazzo Magnani Feroni (Map p103; % 055 239 95 44; www.florencepalace.com; Borgo San Frediano 5; ste incl breakfast €335-800; p a i) This extraordinary old palace is the stuff of dreams. Languishing across four floors with the family's private residence wedged in between, the 12 suites are vast and ooze elegance with authentic period furnishings, rich fabrics, Bulgari products in the bathroom and a choice of handmade Florentine soaps. The 360-degree city view from the rooftop is unforgettable. Parking costs €40 to €47.

EATING

Dining is more expensive here than elsewhere in Tuscany. Count on paying a minimum of €25 for a meal (three courses as well as house wine). Places listed in midrange command between €25 and €50 for a full meal, while

FAST-FOOD FLORENCE

When Florentines fancy a fast munch-on-the-move rather than a slow full lunch, they flit by a *trippaio* – a cart of wheels or mobile stand – for a juicy tripe burger. Think cow's stomach chopped up, boiled, sliced, bung in a bun and doused in hot chilli sauce. Yum!

Much loved by Slow Food (p21) as a bastion of good old-fashioned Florentine tradition, *trippaio* are increasingly far and few between these days. One faithful still going strong is **Tripperia Pier Paolo e Sergio** (Map pp100-1; Via de' Macci; 11 8.30am-7pm Mon-Sat Sep-May, 8.30am-3pm Mon-Sat Jun & Jul), a tripe cart parked in front of one of the city's busiest trattoria where old men sit propped up on bar stools in the street reading newspapers between tripe bites. Pay €2.30 for tripe *panini* (sandwich) doused in *salsa verde* (pea-green sauce of smashed parsley, garlic, capers and anchovies) or *salsa piccante* (chilli sauce), and not a lot more for a bowl of *lampredotto* (cow's fourth stomach chopped 'n simmered for hours 'n hours).

Or there's **Nerbone** (Map pp98-9; % 055 21 99 49; Mercato Centrale, Piazza del Mercato Centrale; primi/secondi €3.50/6; 11 7am-2pm Mon-Sat), a market stall in business since 1872, where crowds queue for lunchtime platters of *trippa alla fiorentina* (tripe and tomato stew), tripe *panini* and – should tripe simply be too offal (!) for you to stomach – *panini con bollito*, a boiled beef bun infamously dipped in the cooking pot immediately before serving (no, it's not soggy, incredibly). Dine standing up or around a handful of tables. Complete the experience with a stroll around the market's many tripe stalls where the frilly offal, piled high, costs €6 per kg.

the bill in top-end places will be at least €50 a head.

For a look at traditional Florentine and Tuscan dishes to expect, see p66.

East of Stazione di Santa Maria Novella

The streets around the Mercato Centrale (p143) predictably cook up several tasty cheap options. The eastern side of Piazza del Mercato Centrale is lined with restaurant terraces, and tripe-hot Nerbone (above) is inside the market.

BUDGET & MIDRANGE

La Mescita (Map pp98-9; % 347 795 16 04; Via degli Alfani 70r; meals €12; 11 10am-3pm Mon-Sat) No concessions are made to the swarms of *David*-bound tourists milling past this historic pearl with 16th-century wooden ceiling, bottle-lined walls and five tables. In business since 1927, this *fiaschetta* (traditional tuscan wine bar) cooks tripe Monday, *lampredotto* (a type of tripe) Tuesday, *porchetta* (roast pork) Wednesday, *peposo* (a fiery spicy Tuscan beef stew) Thursday, *baccalà* (salted cod) Friday and whatever the chef fancies (*i'cche c'e c'e*) Saturday. *Panini* (€1.60 to €3) and pasta (€4) are daily staples.

Il Vegetariano (Map pp98-9; % 055 47 50 30; Via delle Ruote 30r; meals €15; 11 lunch & dinner Tue-Fri, dinner Sat & Sun Sep-Jul) This self-service veggie restaurant cooks up a great selection of Tuscan vegetable dishes, build-your-own salads and mains eaten around shared wooden tables. There's

always a vegan option and the chalked-up menu changes daily.

Trattoria Mario (Map pp98-9; % 055 21 85 50; www.trattoriario.com; Via Rosina 2; meals €20; 11 noon-3.30pm Mon-Sat, closed 3 weeks Aug) It is in every guidebook but has not lost its soul or lure with locals: a 100% family affair opened by Mario's parents in 1953 and continued by his two sons and their children today, Trattoria Mario dishes up unforgettable dining. Tell Fabio you want a table and join the gaggle waiting outside for him to yell their name. Once in, lunch elbow-to-elbow on market produce expertly cooked by older brother Romeo. Monday and Thursday are tripe days, Friday fish day and the *bistecca* (€30 per kg) is Florence's best. Ingeniously, Mario's requires no forward planning: order one course, eat it and order the next. No credit cards.

Da Sergio (Map pp98-9; % 055 28 19 41; Piazza San Lorenzo 8r; meals €20; 11 lunch Mon-Sat Sep-Jul) Push your way into this Slow Food–recommended bolt-hole hidden behind market stalls since 1915 and be greeted by a collection of old Florentine men dining solo – the ultimate sign of a real trattoria. The choice on Sergio's handwritten menu is simple: four *primi*, 10-odd *secondi* and a solitary *dolci* (*cantuccini* dunked in *Vin Santo*).

GELATERIE

Carabè (Map pp98-9; % 055 28 94 76; www.gelatocarabe.com; Via Ricasoli 60r) Run with a sizzling passion

by Antonio and Loredana, whose family has been in the ice-cream making business for generations, this wholly Sicilian *gelateria* is the hot spot for traditional Sicilian *gelato*, *granita* (sorbet) and brioche (a Sicilian ice-cream sandwich).

Around Piazza di Santa Maria Novella

BUDGET & MIDRANGE

Trattoria Marione (Map pp100-1; % 055 21 47 56; Via della Spada 27; meals €20; h lunch & dinner) Red-and-white checked tablecloths, legs of ham strung from the ceiling, lace curtains and a menu built solely from *cucina tipica casalinga fiorentina* (typical home-made Florentine cuisine) ensures the authentic trattoria experience seven days a week. Its price moreover will see you coming back for seconds.

Il Latini (Map pp100-1; % 055 21 09 16; www.il-latini.com; Via dei Palchetti 6r; meals €35; h lunch & dinner Tue-Sun) Request a menu (as a tourist, you might not be offered one) at this Florentine favourite or put yourself in the hands of the exuberant waiters and feast on melt-in-your-mouth crostini, Tuscan soups and a huge hunk of finely roasted meat – rabbit, lamb or veal with white beans. The wine and water flows and if you're lucky you might get a complimentary plate of *cantuccini* and *Vin Santo* with the bill.

Also recommended:

Trattoria dei 13 Gobbi (Map p103; % 055 21 32 04; Via del Porcellana 9r; meals €25-30; h lunch & dinner Tue-Sun) Low-ceilinged and snug with plant-filled rear courtyard.

Trattoria Sostanza (Map p103; % 055 21 26 91; Via del Porcellana 25r; meals €25-30; h lunch & dinner

Mon-Fri) An authentic Tuscan eatery that simmers a mean minestrone.

TOP END

Osteria dei Centopoveri (Map p103; % 055 21 88 46; Via del Palazzuolo 31r; meals €45; h lunch & dinner) The 'hostel of the hundred poor people' is far from being a soup kitchen. It's a top-quality dining option serving creative variations on traditional Tuscan cuisine in a down-to-earth setting.

Trattoria Garga (Map pp100-1; % 055 239 88 98; Via del Moro 48r; meals €55; h 7.30-11pm Tue-Sun) With more than 25 successful years in business, Garga offers imaginative, creative fare – think veal kidneys or a veal escalope with avocado, asparagus and mustard, artichokes or simple lemon and butter – in a wildly colourful interior.

Between the Duomo & the Arno

The city's historic cafés (p145) likewise offer some fine, if wholly touristic, dining.

BUDGET

Several pizzerie are tucked away in the streets between the Duomo and the Arno, many touting a cent-saving takeaway option – anything from a full round disc to a simple slice (around €2).

I Fratellini (Map pp100-1; % 055 239 60 96; Via dei Cimatori 38r; panini €2.10-2.60; h 8am-8pm, closed Sat & Sun Jul & Aug, 2 weeks Mar & Aug) A legend in its own time and in business since 1875, this hole in the wall whips out imaginative *panini* (fennel sausage with goat cheese, spicy wild boar etc), freshly filled as you order, like you've

never seen it before. Wash it down with a shot, glass or beaker of wine and Bob's your uncle – the perfect pavement lunch. Etiquette requires you leave your empty on a wooden shelf outside.

Leonardo (Map pp100-1; % 055 28 44 46; Via de' Pecori 35r; meals €11; h Sun-Fri) Regional dishes – *bolito misto*, *trippa alla Fiorentina* and *osso buco* – are cooked up alongside burgers at this self-service restaurant, a spot hard to beat if want to eat primarily to pinch pennies. Readers give it mixed reports.

Trattoria Bordino (Map pp100-1; % 055 21 30 48; Via Stracciatella 9r; meals €20; h lunch & dinner Mon-Sat) Get here fast to score a table at this astonishingly simple bistro, hidden on a dead-end street, seconds from the Ponte Vecchio crowds. Fare is wholly traditional Tuscan and the €6 lunch deal is a steal.

MIDRANGE

La Canova di Gustavino (Map pp100-1; % 055 239 98 06; Via della Condotta 29r; meals €25; h noon-midnight) The bread comes in a bucket and the oil and vinegar in a wooden box at this laidback *osteria* (restaurant focussing on wine) arm of Gustavino (below) where cultured locals flock to lunch. Its cheese and cold meat platters are perfect wine companions and it hosts daily tastings. And yes, that misty blue glass box is the toilet.

Trattoria Coco Lezzone (Map pp100-1; % 055 28 71 78; Via Parioncino 26r; meals €25; h Mon-Sat) Another cheerful, homey spot with white tiled interior and photographs of famous customers. No credit cards, bizarrely no coffee, just a handwritten menu and very good food at this kitchen-style trattoria where unnecessary concessions simply don't need to be made. *Ribollita* (included in the excellent-value 'Florence nostalgia' menu, €25 including 25cL of wine and mineral water) is the house speciality and Friday is fresh-fish day.

Buca dell'Orafo (Map pp100-1; % 055 21 36 19; Volta dei Girolami 28r; meals €30; h Tue-Sat) There's no escaping tourists at this quaint pocket-sized eating spot whose simple *cucina fiorentina* was, for many years, a favourite haunt for Florentines. Find it charmingly tucked beneath the arches a stone's throw from the Uffizi.

TOP END

Gustavino (Map pp100-1; % 055 239 98 06; Via della Condotta 37r; meals €50; h lunch & dinner Fri-Sun, dinner Mon-Thu) Ricotta-stuffed artichoke cloaked in puff

pastry and sprinkled with honeyed pine nuts or lard smothered in hot chestnuts and caramelised in grappa are Italian staples given an imaginative make-over at this inventive glass-, stone- and steel-dining space. Gustavino is among the city's most stylish.

Angels (Map pp100-1; % 055 239 87 62; www.ristoranteangels.it; Via del Proconsolo 29-31r; meals €50; h noon-2am) The city's best-dressed beauties clink champagne flutes beneath vaulted frescoes at this restaurant and American bar, a stylish minimalist dining space, drinking and DJ space with a popular Sunday brunch (p143). Food is unexpectedly Tuscan with a dash of Mediterranean.

Alle Murate (Map pp100-1; % 055 24 06 18; www.artenotai.org; Via del Proconsolo 16r; meals €65; h dinner Tue-Sat) Feast on extraordinary art (the earliest known portraits of Dante and Boccaccio included) and raved-about contemporary Tuscan cuisine with a feisty southern Italian kick at this unique restaurant nestled beneath 14th-century frescoes. Décor is strictly modern, chefs beaver away behind glass and remnants of Roman Florence lurk in the cellar. Wine – an insatiable passion of charismatic owner Umberto Montana (p68), who says his mother 'never made one acceptable dish', hence his own passion for food – is the other big reason you should dine here.

GELATERIE

Festival del Gelato (Map pp100-1; % 055 29 43 86; Via del Corso 75r) Just off Piazza della Repubblica and with more than 70 flavours on offer, this ice-cream parlour will satisfy the most demanding of children and tastes.

Perchè No? (Map pp100-1; % 055 239 89 69; www.perche.firenze.it; Via dei Tavolini 19r; h noon-7.30pm Wed-Sun) In business since 1939, this one-stop shop for top-notch ice in cones or tubs recommends marrying almond ice-cream with fig sorbet and ginger ice-cream with green-tea sorbet.

Santa Croce & East of the Centre

BUDGET

The 18 different types of imaginatively stuffed *panini* (€2.50 to €4.50) served to munch on the move at Antico Noè (see next section, p140) make for a cheap lunch.

The Oil Shoppe (Map pp100-1; % 055 200 10 92; www.oleum.it; Via Sant'Egidio 22r) Stand in line at this student favourite, an olive-oil and sand-

A BREATH OF FRESH AIR

When the city heat smothers, do what Florentines do – flee to Fiesole (p154) or one of these twin set venues:

- La Capponcina** (Map pp96-7; % 055 69 70 37; www.capponcina.com; Via San Romano 17r, Settignano; meals €30-35; h lunch & dinner Tue-Sun) This kitchen is renowned for its *tagliata di manzo*, beef fillets sliced and served on a bed of rocket – in a garden several degrees cooler than central Florence. Take bus 10 (bus 67 after 9pm) from Stazione di Santa Maria Novella to Piazza San Tommaseo, from where the bus terminates.
- Trattoria Bibe** (Map pp96-7; % 055 20 40 085; www.trattoriabibe.com; Via Della Bagnese 11r, Galuzzo; meals €25-35; h lunch & dinner Sat & Sun, dinner Mon, Tue, Thu & Fri Dec-Jan & Mar-Oct) Pigeon, frogs legs, hare and guinea fowl are among the many meats roasted (count on at least 40 minutes) at this wonderful old-fashioned inn – so legendary Italian poet Eugenio Montale wrote a poem about Grandfather 'Bibe' in 1927. Dine elegantly inside or amid flowers outside. Find it 3km south of Florence, a stone's throw from the Certosa di Firenze; take bus 46.

wich shop, which builds the best meal-sized sandwiches in town. Choose your fillings or let chef Alberto Scorzon take the lead with a 10-filling wonder. Queue at the back of the shop for hot subs; at the front for cold.

Kosher Market (Map pp100-1; % 055 24 05 08; www.koshermarket.it; Via dei Pilastrini 7r; 11 8.30am-1pm & 3-8pm Sun-Thu) Kosher sandwiches to take away.

Caffè Italiano Sud (Map pp100-1; % 055 28 93 68; Via della Vigna Vecchia; meals €20; 11 12.30pm-1am Tue-Sun) This latest Umberto Montano project – an ode to southern Italy – promises great things. Loads of home-made pasta, including lasagne baked in a wood-burning oven, and other typical dishes from the south can be eaten in or taken away (pay a deposit for the terracotta dish). Wash it down with one of nine house wines displayed in 58L straw-cushioned glass flasks.

Ruth's (Map pp100-1; % 055 248 08 88; www.kosheruth.com; Via Luigi Carlo Farini 2a; meals €15-25; 11 lunch & dinner Sun-Thu, lunch Fri, dinner Sat) Dine at Ruth's for tasty dishes, at once kosher and vegetarian, served in the shade of the synagogue: think couscous, humus, felaful, filo pie, potato salad, tabouleh, moussaka and fish of the day.

MIDRANGE

Antico Noè (Map pp100-1; % 055 234 08 38; Volta di San Piero 6r; meals €30; 11 noon-midnight Mon-Sat) Don't be put off by the dank, rough-and-ready alley in which this legendary place (an old butcher's shop with white marble-clad walls and wrought-iron meat hooks) is found. The drunks loitering outside are generally harmless and the down-to-the-earth Tuscan fodder in the company of slow jazz and blues is a real joy.

Osteria de' Benci (Map pp100-1; % 055 234 49 23; Via de' Benci 13r; meals €35; 11 8am-midnight Mon-Sat) Deep burgundy walls, a vaulted brick ceiling and a menu that makes no bones about what it cooks contribute to the relaxed, unpretentious air of this friendly place. Old favourites like honest slabs of *carbonata di chianina* (grilled Tuscan steak) – even more tender and succulent than the ubiquitous *bistecca alla fiorentina* – are (as the English-language menu so beautifully puts it) '... SERVED BLOODY!'

○ **Osteria del Caffè Italiano** (Map pp100-1; % 055 28 93 68; www.caffeitaliano.it; Via Isola delle Stinche 11-13r; meals €35, menu €50; 11 12.30pm-1am Tue-Sun) *Osteria*, white-table cloth restaurant, wine cellar and pizzeria: this address – another

Umberto Montano venture (p68) listed in every Florentine's mobile phone – caters to all tastes. Be it tagliatelle with chickpeas and Parma ham, and skewered meat that turn heads or a *bistecca* (per kg €50) with beans, greens and roast spuds, discerning palates will be thrilled. A choice of three pizzas (€8) woo simplicity lovers in the pizzeria (11 dinner Tue-Sun), which is an artfully simple dining space. It sticks to a strict 'no coffee, no credit cards' policy.

TOP END

La Pentola dell'Oro (Map pp100-1; % 055 24 18 08; Via di Mezzo 24r; meals around €35; 11 lunch & dinner Mon-Sat) Long a jealously guarded secret among Florentine gourmands, Florence's old-style Golden Pot doesn't need to advertise. Word of mouth draws the culinary curious here to sample Renaissance dishes reinvented for modern tastes by culinary artist Giuseppe Alessi. Dine at sub-street level or at the street-level offshoot with marble-topped tables, wooden benches and 25 place settings.

○ **Ora d'Aria** (Map pp100-1; % 055 200 16 99; www.oradariatristorante.com; Via Ghibellina 3Cr; meals from €55; 11 dinner Mon-Sat) Named after that precious hour in the day when inmates cooped up in the city prison opposite (shut in the 1980s) were let outside to exercise, this stylish gallery restaurant is different. Swing through the glass and steel door, past the empty dove cage and indulge in a *tradizione* or *creatività* feast in the company of contemporary art. Traditional or creative, everything oozes imagination. How about pigeon-stuffed tortelli with foie gras and a pecorino cream or warm hen and spider-crab salad with artichoke puree and vanilla-scented oil followed by baked pigeon breast in a white-corn crust with coffee and pepper sauce?

GELATERIE

Vestri (Map pp100-1; Borgo degli Albizi 11r; 11 7.30am-9pm Tue-Sat, 9.30am-9pm Sun) Chocolate is the flavour to be had at this sweet chocolate maker, which sells ice-cream too. Should hot chocolate be your heart's desire, top off what has to be the thickest, creamiest, most chocolately hot chocolate in Florence with a decadent dash of ginger, chilli or cream.

Gelateria Vivoli (Map pp100-1; Via Isola delle Stinche 7; 11 9am-1am Tue-Sat) It only has tubs (€1.60 to €9) but this pocket-sized ice-cream shop and

FABIO PICCHI

Memorable dining is guaranteed at this trio of eating spaces near the Mercato Sant'Ambrogio (food market; Map pp100-1), each dramatically different and run with a striking dose of panache by one of Tuscany's best-known chefs, Fabio Picchi. For a look at his culinary philosophy, see p69.

- **Trattoria Cibrèo** (Via dei Macci 122r; meals €30; 11 12.50am-2.30pm & 6.50-11.15pm Tue-Sat Sep-Jul) Dine here and you'll instantly understand why a queue gathers outside each evening before it opens. Once in, revel in old-fashioned Tuscan cuisine: perhaps ricotta and potato flan with a rich meat sauce, puddle of olive oil and grated parmesan (divine!) or a simple plate of polenta, followed by home-made sausages, beans in a spicy tomato sauce and braised celery. Arrive before 7pm to snag one of the eight tables and bring cash – no advance reservations, no credit cards, no coffee and no pasta (to learn why, see p69).
- **Ristorante Cibrèo** (% 055 234 11 00; Via dei Macci 118; meals €80; 11 12.50am-2.30pm & 7-11.15pm Tue-Sat Sep-Jul) Incredulously, many of the dishes on the menu at this justifiably famous Florentine restaurant are identical to those served at the trattoria next door – but cost loads more. Not that the extremely well-dressed punters who flock to the formal arm of the Picchi empire seem to care: this extremely elegant, stylish and upmarket restaurant is always full, rendering advance reservations essential.
- **Teatro del Sale** (% 055 200 14 92; www.teatrodelsale.com; Via dei Macci 111r; breakfast/lunch/dinner €5/15/25; 11 9-11am, 12.30-2.30pm & 7.30-11pm Tue-Sat Sep-Jul) Extraordinary value for money and fabulous entertainment, this old Florentine theatre steals the show. Join the club (annual membership fee €5) and make yourself at home in a leather armchair between bookshelves in the cosy wood-pannelled library or in a director's chair around fold-up tables in the airy theatre space. Serve yourself water and wine, then wait for the chef to yell out what's cooking through the glass hatch – a help-yourself feast of antipasti, a *primo*, *secondo*, *dolci* and coffee. Lunch is a laid-back affair, while dinner is followed by a performance (advance reservations required): clear away your table, line up your chair, and sit back for an evening of drama, music or comedy arranged by artistic director Maria Cassi (p64), famous Florentine actress and wife of Fabio Picchi.

café is much-loved nonetheless by Florentine families out on a Sunday afternoon *passaggiata* (evening stroll). Notable flavours: chocolate with cinnamon, orange or pistachio.

Oltrarno

To taste a different side of Florence, cross the river and make a beeline for busy Piazza Santo Spirito, awash with outdoor terraces to eat and drink during the warmer months; Pop Café (p143) is perfect for a light lunch with students. The neighbouring quarter of San Frediano hides a couple of gems too.

BUDGET

Borgo Antico (Map p103; % 055 21 04 37; Piazza Santo Spirito 6r; pizza €7-10, meals €20-30; 11 lunch & dinner) Prince to pauper, local and tourist is indiscriminately welcomed with a grin (and complimentary glass of sparkling wine when queues form) at this packed-to-the-rafters eatery. A vege-stuffed calzone is a steal at €7, salads are jumbo and the pricier chef's specials

offer good value. Summer seating on the lively square outside.

○ **Napoleone** (Map p103; % 055 28 10 15; www.trattorianapoleone.it; Piazza del Carmine 24; pizza €7-12, meals €30; 11 7pm-12.30am) Hip Florentines are just mad about this pizzeria, despite an oh-so-cool staff that screams attitude and an outside terrace plump in a parking lot. That said, Napoleone cooks up a laid-back but super-sleek vibe – and its pizzas are excellent. Pre-empt the experience with an *aperitivo* at La Dolce Vita (p143), on the other side of the car park.

Trattoria Casalinga (Map p103; % 055 21 86 24; Via de' Michelozzi 9r; meals €15; 11 Mon-Sat) Family run and loved locally, punters hungry for a filling meal at a bargain-basement price can't go wrong at this unpretentious spot. Look for the red-and-white telephone sign flanked by a line-up of *motorini* (scooters) outside.

Trattoria da Ginone (Map p103; % 055 21 87 58; Via de' Serragli 35r; meals €20; 11 Mon-Sat) Established by Big Gino after WWII and run by his son

today, this trattoria dating to 1949 serves wholesome food like hare, wild boar, a well-marketed choice of vegetarian dishes and juicy fruit tarts. Opt for the set €9 or €13.50 menus, or go à la carte.

Al Tranvai (Map p103; ☎ 055 22 51 97; Piazza Torquato Tasso 14r; meals €20; ⌚ Mon-Fri) The menu could not be simpler at this rustic Tuscan eatery, known as The Tram and designed as such, where old men arrive at noon to bag their regular lunch spot. Sit nudged up with the locals, slurp house wine (€4 per 500mL) and take your pick from the day's dishes chalked on the board. Since it's so deservedly popular, reserve ahead of time your bench space.

Vico del Carmine (Map p103; ☎ 055 233 68 62; <http://vicodelcarmine.fol.it>; Via Pisana 40r; meals €20-30; ⌚ lunch & dinner Tue-Sun) 'Vico' means alley – the inspiration behind the interior design of Carmine's Neapolitan pizzeria in trendy San Frediano. Much loved, it is Florence's best address for pizza. *Pesce* (fish) is the other speciality.

All' Antico Ristoro di Cambi (Map p103; ☎ 055 21 71 34; www.anticoristorodicambi.it; Via Sant'Onofrio 1r; meals €22; ⌚ lunch & dinner Mon-Sat) Very much a family affair strung with hanging hams, cobs of corn and woven garlic garlands, Di Cambi (b 1950 in a former 16th-century convent) is the love child of Silvano and Bruno; their children run it today. The menu changes daily but feisty old-timers, including several tripe variations, are always bubbling away on the stove.

Trattoria Angiolino (Map p103 ☎ 055 239 89 76; Via Santo Spirito 36r; meals €24; ⌚ lunch & dinner Mon-Sun) The open-all-hours policy at this meat-driven trattoria makes it a great bet on Sunday, especially in August when the searing heat sees many kitchens shut. If you've never seen a Real McCoy *bistecca alla Fiorentina* in the flesh before, come here.

Le Barrique (Map p103; ☎ 055 22 41 92; Via del Leone 40r; meals €25; ⌚ dinner Tue-Sun) Hidden deep in the San Frediano area, this charming little spot with a dark-wood interior is much loved locally. Originally an *enoteca* (wine bar), Le Barrique's wine list is superb and its repertoire now embraces excellent food, too: under no circumstances miss the gorgonzola and pear-in-wine tart.

MIDRANGE

Osteria del Cinghiale Bianco (Map pp100-1; ☎ 055 21 57 06; www.cinghialebianco.it; Borgo San Jacopo 43r; meals €30; ⌚ lunch & dinner Sat & Sun, dinner Mon, Tue, Thu & Fri)

The White Boar opens for dinner at 6.30pm, making it a popular choice with kid-laden families keen to eat early. Pappadelle in boar sauce or boar with polenta are among the meaty specialities.

Canapone (Map p103; ☎ 055 38 17 29; www.canapone.org; Via Mazzetta 5a) – A pea-green door and flower pots mark the entrance to this secretive Santo Spirito address, where diners definitely need to be in the know and a member (€5). Love child of disillusioned software designer Antonella, her creation is a mellow alternative dining room with soothing pink walls, art by local students and a fresh fusion cuisine.

Rifrullo (Map pp100-1; ☎ 055 234 26 21; Via San Niccolò 55r; meals €30; ⌚ 7am-1am) East along the Arno in trendy San Niccolò sits this Florence institution – hybrid restaurant, café and lounge bar in a series of modern stylishly furnished rooms. Its Wednesday evening tasting dinners (€28) are particularly tasty, as is its patio seating beneath the beautiful cypress trees.

Olio & Convivium (Map pp100-1; ☎ 055 265 81 98; Via di Santo Spirito 4; meals €35; ⌚ 10am-3pm Mon, 10am-3pm & 5.30-10.30pm Tue-Sat) A key address on any gastronomy agenda: not only will tastebuds groove over the legs of hams, conserved truffles and other delectable delicatessen products sold in its shop; its €15 lunchtime menu – a cold mixed platter, wine, water and dessert – is the best lunch deal in town. Come dusk, try veal-stuffed fresh artichokes or *taglierini* (narrower type of tagliatelle) with tiger prawns and black cabbage.

Ristorante Beccofino (Map p103; ☎ 055 29 00 76; www.beccofino.com; Piazza degli Scarlattini 1r; meals €35; ⌚ Tue-Sun) Innovative restaurant and stylish *enoteca* with more than 50 wines to taste by the glass, Beccofino is decidedly nouvelle chic. Francesco Berardinelli (www.francescoberardinelli.com) is the hot name in the kitchen.

TOP END

Trattoria Cammillo (Map pp100-1; ☎ 055 21 24 27; Borgo San Jacopo 57r; meals €45; ⌚ lunch & dinner Thu-Mon) Crostini topped with aphrodisiacal white-truffle shavings, deep-fried battered green tomatoes or zucchini flowers, lamb with artichokes, veal's brain and home-made walnut liqueur are seasonal highlights gracing the menu of this staunchly traditional trattoria where the quality of products used is just

TOP FIVE SUNDAY BRUNCHES

Our favourite spots on Sunday for...

- An egg-and-pancake American brunch – **Angels** (p139)
- A designer brunch – **Fusion Bar** (p136), the minimalist, design-driven bar of Gallery Hotel Art
- A cheap €8 student brunch served all day – **Pop Café** (right)
- A river-side brunch with the hip set – **Noir** (p144); or a brunch (€9/20) across the Arno at **Rifrullo** (opposite)
- Those in the know: **Canapone** (opposite)

top-notch. Service is gentlemanly, bow tied and impeccable.

Borgo San Jacopo (Map pp100-1; ☎ 055 28 16 61; Borgo San Jacopo 62r; meals €50; ⌚ dinner Wed-Mon) This very stylish number struts the catwalk in gleaming glass and stainless steel. Dress well to feel the part. It's just as innovative as you'd expect from an offshoot of the design-driven Gallery Hotel Art (p136) and, ultimately, the Ferragamo fashion house.

Filipepe (Map pp100-1; ☎ 055 200 13 97; www.filipepe.com; Via San Niccolò 39r; menus €55 & €75; ⌚ dinner) A theatrical, rustic and modern décor rolled into one makes a real change at this stylish dining space with street terrace at the front and romantic, three-table courtyard out the back. Dishes ooze innovation: fancy pearl barley crowned with goat's cheese, honey and a pear cooked in red wine? Octopus with polenta and cheese? Trendy moneyed couples are the prime clientele.

Self-Catering

A market stroll exposes a dramatically different face of Florence (not to mention a cornucopia of edible delights): **Mercato Centrale** (Map pp98-9; Piazza del Mercato Centrale; ⌚ 7am-2pm Mon-Fri, 7am-5pm Sat), inside an iron-and-glass structure dating to 1874, is the oldest and largest; while **Mercato Sant' Ambrogio** (food market; Map pp100-1; Piazza Sant' Ambrogio; ⌚ 7am-2pm Mon-Sat) retains a more intimate, local flavour.

Fill your water bottle with wine for as little as €1.30 per L at *Enoteca Vitae* (Map pp100-1; ☎ 055 246 65 03; vitae@email.it; Borgo La Croce 75r), near **Mercato Sant' Ambrogio**, or **Divino** (Map pp98-9; ☎ 055 21 41 21; Via Taddea 8r), near San Lorenzo

market, which also sells sweet *Vin Santo* (€12.50 per L).

Antico Forno Santi (Map pp98-9; ☎ 055 28 35 66; www.biscottisanti.com; Via Nazionale 121r; ⌚ 9.30am-1.30pm & 3.30-7.30pm Tue-Sat) Gorge on *cantuccini* (€14.50 per kg) studded with almonds, chocolate, figs or apricots at this artisan biscuit maker.

La Botega del Cioccolato (Map pp100-1; ☎ 055 200 16 09; www.bottegadelcioccolato.it; Via de' Macci 50; ⌚ 10am-1pm & 3-7.30pm Mon-Fri) Designer olive oil, saffron or balsamic-vinegar chocolates (€49 per kg) are the speciality of chocolate maker Andrea Bianchini, who also makes chocolate and sea-salt biscuits. Even more extraordinary are his white chocolates, which are filled with rosemary ganash and a single grain of sea salt at the centre.

DRINKING

Florence's dynamic drinking scene embraces the whole gambit of genres – historical café, cutting-edge lounge bar, grungy student-packed pub and old-fashioned *enoteca*, invariably dark and topped with traditional red brick, where sophisticates come to savour fine wines. From spring through to autumn, the scene shifts outside, drinkers spilling onto the street be there an official terrace or not.

There is no better time to savour all this than at sunset, the bewitching hour when the city seems to stop in its tracks for that all-essential *aperitivo*. From around 6.30pm to 9pm, many of the most fashionable bars whet appetites with a complimentary feast (what being the operative word) of sumptuous *hors d'oeuvres* – don't be shy; just grab a plate and help yourself.

Firenzenotte (www.firenzenotte.it in Italian) is an indispensable online guide to Florence nightlife. In town, monthly mag **2night** (www.2night.it) with some English text can be picked up for free.

Cafés

Practically every piazza has at least one or two cafés with outdoor pavement terraces: Piazza della Signoria, Piazza della Repubblica, Piazza San Lorenzo and Piazza Santo Spirito are particularly lovely for hanging out for hours over cappuccino and cake.

Key fact to *never forget* about cafés in Florence: it is substantially cheaper to drink standing up at the bar; sit down at a table and prices instantly double or triple.

Procacci (Map pp100-1; % 055 21 16 56; Via de Tornabuoni 64r; h 10.30am-8pm Tue-Sat) The last remaining bastion of genteel old Florence on Via de' Tornabuoni, this tiny café was born in 1885 opposite the English pharmacy as a delicatessen serving truffles in its repertoire of tasty morsels. Bite-sized *panini tartufati* (truffle pâté sandwiches) remain the thing to order.

La Terrazza (Map pp100-1; Piazza della Repubblica 1; h 10am-9pm Mon-Sat, 10.30am-8pm Sun) For a bird's eye view of the square and Duomo way below, ride the escalators to the top floor of central department store Rinascente and cut through the kitchen and homeware section to this small jam-packed rooftop café.

Caffè Cibrèo (Map pp100-1; % 055 234 58 53; Via Andrea del Verrochio 5r; h 8-1am Tue-Sat) The perfect spot for a mid-morning stop after shopping at the neighbouring Mercato Sant' Ambrogio, this dark old café with wood-coffered ceiling, panelled walls and lace tablecloths is well known for its excellent coffee and famous chef (p141).

Cabiria (Map p103; % 055 21 57 32; Piazza Santo Spirito 4r; h 11am-1.30am Wed-Mon) Buzzing buzzing day and night is what this Oltrarno café, one of several on Florence's most happening bohemian squares, is all about. Come dusk it turns into a music bar.

Pop Café (Map p103; % 055 21 38 52; www.popcafe.net; Piazza Santo Spirito 18r; meals €25; h 8am-2am Sep-Jul) Students in the know have adopted this pocket-sized space as their own: grab a seat on the wooden bench (mind your head on the hanging metal) and tuck into a superhealthy breakfast, vegetarian lunch or all-day Sunday brunch (p143).

Enoteche

While the sign *vinaio* (wine merchant) seldom appears above doorways these days, the tradition has won new life in the past few years – meaning there are dozens and dozens of intimate *enoteche* scattered across the city, where the cheapest to finest of Tuscan and Italian wine can be savoured with a bite to eat.

Coquinarius (Map pp100-1; % 055 230 21 53; www.coquinarius.com; Via delle Oche 15r; h noon-10.30pm Mon-Sat) 'Try the Vermentino' says one Lonely Planet reader, 'it is like flying to the moon...'. Indeed, a heady choice of Tuscan wine in the company of an equally heady choice of crostini is reason enough to wine and dine beneath red bricks at Coquinarius.

Cantinetta Antinori (Map pp100-1; Via de' Tornabuoni 7; meals €45; h lunch & dinner Mon-Fri) This *enoteca* is a 1960s creation of the city's most famous wine-making dynasty; the Antinoris had the palace built in 1502 and still live here. Titillate tastebuds with a Tignanello or Solaia accompanied by Tuscan *lettunata di cavolo nero* (toasted bread topped with black cabbage). Afterwards you can view models of the family's Tuscan, Umbrian and Californian wine-producing estates.

Baldovino (Map pp100-1; % 055 234 72 20; www.baldovino.com; Via di San Giuseppe 18r; h lunch & dinner Tue-Sun) The patterned tiles behind the bar add a moody touch to this large *enotecum-trattoria*, which serves a wide choice of sophisticated food in the shadow of Santa Croce.

Enoteca Fuori Porta (Map pp100-1; % 055 234 24 83; www.fuoriporta.it in Italian; Via Monte alle Croci 10r; meals around €25; h Mon-Sat) In this fine old *enoteca* the wine list has more than 400 varieties – and an impressive roll call of Scotch whiskies and other liquors, too. Pick a plate or two from the limited list of *primi* (first courses) for a pleasant evening meal.

Enoteca Pinchiorri (Map pp100-1; % 055 24 27 77; www.enotecapinchiorri.com; Via Ghibellina 87r; h lunch & dinner Thu-Sat, dinner Wed) The *crème de la crème* of Florentine *enoteche*, this temple to fine wine and dining very well indeed in a 16th-century palace has stayed at the top since 1972. There are several hundred wines to taste and the bill will be in the hundreds. Dress well to come here.

Bars

Sharp savvy designer space to rustic taverna and traditional pub, you won't go thirsty in this bar-busy city. The most hip tend to be across the water in Oltrarno.

Fiddler's Elbow (Map pp100-1; % 055 21 50 56; www.thefiddlerselbow.com; Piazza Santa Maria Novella 7; h 11am-2am Mon-Fri, 11am-2.30am Sat & Sun) Not far from Stazione Santa Maria Novella, this is one of many Irish pubs popular with the expat and foreign-student set.

BETWEEN THE DUOMO & THE ARNO

Noir (Map pp100-1; Lungarno Corsini 12-14r; h 11am-3am) Once upon a time it was called Capocaccia – until the peppermint-green tables on the street terrace and pretty much everything else turned a moody shade of black. Different name yes, but ex-Capocaccia lures the

TOP FIVE HISTORIC CAFÉS

The waiter might well ask if you mean espresso or cappuccino when you order coffee after a meal, and yes, the tourist-targeted menu is in five languages and stars club sandwiches alongside risotto, but few cafes have seen or heard as much as these old Florentine beauties.

- **Caffè Concerto Paszkowski** (Map pp100-1; % 055 21 02 36; www.paszkowski.com; Piazza della Repubblica 31-35r; h 7am-2am Tue-Sun) Born as a brewery overlooking the city's fish market in 1846, this Florentine institution with heated terrace and elegant, piano-clad interior lured a literary set a century on. Today it pulls the whole gambit of punters, mobile-touting Florentine youths, suit-clad businessmen and well-dressed old ladies sipping tea.
- **Caffè Giacosa** (Map pp100-1; % 055 21 16 56; Via della Spada 10r) This small café with claustrophobic plastic-covered street terrace and just a handful of tables inside (but loads of bar-standing space) is more famous for what it was – an 1815 child, Negroni inventor (p146) and hub of Anglo-Florentine sophistication during the interwar years – than what it is now (the café of local hotshot designer Roberto Cavalli, whose boutique adjoins it). The bar counter is original.
- **Caffè Gilli** (Map pp100-1; % 055 21 38 96; Piazza della Repubblica 3r; h 8am-1am Wed-Mon) The last of the historic trio aplomb the city's old Roman forum, Gilli has been serving formidable teas, cakes and chocolates to die for since 1733. But be warned: this elegant ode to all things sweet topped with Art Nouveau ceiling frescoes isn't cheap. A pot of Earl Grey and a slice of cake sitting down is €13.
- **Giubbe Rosse** (Map pp100-1; % 055 21 22 80; Piazza della Repubblica 13-14r; mains around €15; h 8am-2am) This is where die-hard members of the early-20th-century futurist artistic movement used to drink and debate. Inside, long vaulted halls lined with old photographs, sketches and artwork make a great place for coffee over a newspaper – some hang up for customers' use.
- **Rivoire** (Map pp100-1; % 055 21 44 12; Piazza della Signoria 4r; h 8am-11pm Tue-Sun) The golden oldie in which to refuel inside or out after a Uffizi or Palazzo Vecchio visit, this pricey little number with unbeatable people-watching terrace has produced some of the city's most exquisite chocolate (€55 per kg) since 1872. Black-jacketed barmen with navy ties set the formal tone in this classy spot.

same beautiful set with its generous *aperitivi* buffet, balmy river-side setting, theatrical chandelier-clad (black) interior and Sunday brunch.

Mayday Club (Map pp100-1; % 055 238 12 90; www.maydayclub.it; Via Dante Alighieri 16r; h 8pm-2am Mon-Sat) Tagging itself as club and lounge café, this three-room drinking spot with eclectic furnishing defies description...almost: a place 'to explore, observe, to familiarise and to experience' is what its virtual bumpf says. Theme nights, art exhibitions and live bands are frequent.

Colle Bereto (Map pp100-1; % 055 28 31 56; Piazza degli Strozzi 5r; h 9am-3am Mon-Sat, 5pm-3am Sun) The dark oversized shades are vital at this hip bar where a fashion-conscious set sits cool on a sleek, wooden-decked terrace located opposite Palazzo Strozzi. Inside, pea-green neon and transparent Kartell chairs scream design.

Naima (Map pp100-1; % 055 2654 098; Via dell'Anguillara 54r; h 8am-2am) 'Cocktails and more' is the tag line of this chic sharp bar with industrial metalwork, pretty-in-pink lampshades and DJs spinning tunes after dark. *Aperitivi* are served 6.30pm to 9pm and the bar stool-clad place is a wi-fi hotspot.

Slowly Café (Map pp100-1; % 055 45 354; www.slowlycafe.com; Via Porta Rossa 63r; h 12.30-2.30pm & 7pm-2.30am Mon-Sat, 7pm-2.30am Sun) Wednesday is party night for students at this stylish cocktail bar that otherwise lures a middle-of-the-road set with its generous early-evening buffet, moody lighting and happy hour well over an hour.

JJ Cathedral (Map pp100-1; % 055 265 68 92; www.jjcathedral.com; Piazza San Giovanni 4r; h 10am-2.30am Mon-Sun) This busy pub's street terrace in the shade of the baptistry is always buzzing. But it is on the lone table for three perched on a wrought-iron balcony above where everyone

TOP FIVE APERITIVI

Our favourites for unusual *aperitivi* (aperitifs) and/or a handsome free fill alongside that all-essential early-evening drink...or buy a bottle of wine and head to the hottest seats in town – the east-facing stone brick supports of Ponte Santa Trinità (p117) – where you can sit above the water, drink and stare out at a romantic star-lit Ponte Vecchio.

- Noir (p144) – The hottest in town: vast banquet of a buffet inside, seating outside on the street and across the traffic-busy road on the riverside wall.
- Negroni (below) – A comparable feast of a buffet and river-side à-la-traffic-fume seating on the other side of the Arno.
- Angels (p144) – Stylish finger-food buffet (€8 includes cocktail) and supersleek barman's specials, including a balsamic, mint or chocolate martini or a don't-mess-with-me dirty martini (€9); dress right (to kill preferably.)
- Gilli (p143) – No buffet, but how 'bout a sunset glass of champagne (€15) at one of Florence's most historic bars or a chocolate-inspired cocktail (€10.50: vanilla vodka with splash of white-cream chocolate and garnished with Gilli chocolates).
- Caffè La Torre (below) – The trendy XL choice; drink with jazz.

wants to sit – its cathedral views are heart-stopping.

Eby's Latin Bar (Map pp100-1; ☎ 055 24 00 27; www.ebysbar.com; Via dell'Oriuolo 5r; 11am-3am Mon-Sat) Indulge in days of being happy at this student-loved Mexican joint where happy hour lasts two days and cocktails have never been fruitier or more exotic.

OLTRARNO & NEARBY QUARTERS

South of the river the streets buzz with bars and clubs, atmospheric Piazza Santo Spirito becoming one vast drinking space in summer.

Sei Divino (Map p103; ☎ 055 21 77 91; Via Borgo Ognissanti 42r; 11am-2am) No, it's not a wine bar; it's not a lounge bar; it's an open bar with great wine, great music, DJs, video projections and wi-fi, no-fuss €7 lunch deal and themed *aperitivi* buffet (7pm to 10pm) – Indian charm, Mexican passion, Tuscan, sushi and so on.

Caffè La Torre (Map pp100-1; ☎ 055 68 06 43; www.cafelatorre.it; Lungarno Benvenuto Cellini 65r; 10.30am-3.30am Mon-Sun) Loud wallpaper and legendary *Aperitivo XL* (above) at this river-facing jazz bar, a drop from Piazzale Michelangelo, spells hot with a capital H. Free wi-fi, jazz-driven DJ sets and a chef who cooks until 3am.

Plasma (Map pp100-1; ☎ 055 051 69 26; www.virtualplasma.it; Piazza Ferrucci 1r; 6.30pm-1.30am Wed, Thu & Sun, to 2.30am Fri & Sat) This cutting-edge art bar and kitchen is a minimalist fiberoptic-lit drinking space where the hip set sip cocktails

on Level 0 and get lost in video art projected on eight 42-inch plasma screens or a waterfall on Level 1. DJs spin 'til late.

Negroni (Map pp100-1; ☎ 055 24 36 47; www.negroni.bar.com; Via dei Renai 17r; 8am-2am Mon-Sat, 6pm-2am Sun) Negroni shakes up cocktails galore, including its namesake invented in the 1920s, so the story goes, when Florentine Count Camillo Negroni asked the barman at Caffè Giasoca (p145) to add gin to his Americano. To make it at home: shake equal parts gin, Campari and red Martini. Should you drift by Negroni around noon, its lunchtime buffet is a steal. Art exhibitions, DJs and dancing.

Zoe (Map pp100-1; ☎ 055 24 31 11; Via dei Renai 13r; 3pm-2am Apr-Oct, 6pm-2am Tue-Sun Nov-Mar) With its innards glowing red and bedecked with changing art exhibitions, this busy San Niccolò bar heaves as its squadrons of punters – young locals – spill out onto the street across from the river.

OIO (Map p103; ☎ 055 21 29 17; Piazza Piattellina Tr; meals €20; 9pm-3am Mon-Fri, 5pm-3am Sat) A '100% organic' motto drives this *bar con cucina* (bar with kitchen) located in San Frediano, where a right-on set slurps yoghurt smoothies and munches salad around fruit-patterned tables. Cocktails and concerts kick in around dusk. NB: the wallpaper is hardly sweet bedtime reading.

La Dolce Vita (Map p103; ☎ 055 28 45 95; Piazza del Carmine 6r; 5pm-2am Mon-Sun) Just a piazza away from Santo Spirito, La Dolce Vita attracts a very stylish crowd, especially on weekends.

Sip an *aperitivo* in the evening sun outside or enjoy the bold retro interior. Live bands and DJs.

James Joyce (Map pp100-1; ☎ 055 658 08 56; Lungarno Benvenuto Cellini 1r; 6pm-2am Thu-Mon) What makes this Irish pub stand out from the crowd is its leafy outside seating. It might well overlook a single-pump petrol station on Piazza Ferrucci but it's the closest thing to a beer garden in central Florence.

SANTA CROCE AREA

In Santa Croce a rash of American- and British-style bars and pubs spot Via de' Benci.

Rex Café (Map pp100-1; ☎ 055 248 03 31; Via Fiesolana 23r; 6pm-3am Sep-May) A vast *aperitivi* buffet (oysters and champagne Friday and Saturday), DJs, live bands and well-shaken cocktails ensure this American bar, styled after the interior of an Italian transatlantic liner called *Rex* that sunk, remains firmly on Florence's hip-hot drinking circuit. Décor is gaudy in-your-face and the air could be fresher at times, but the city's sassy set still love it.

Moyo (Map pp100-1; ☎ 055 247 97 38; www.moyo.it; Via de' Benci 23r; 8am-2am Sun-Thu, until 3am Fri & Sat) Another drinking establishment held in great esteem by Florence's party-mad student crowd, this wi-fi-wired Santa Croce favourite with a minimalist interior (and free wi-fi) gets packed with laptop-wielding internet natives early on. DJs and cocktails kick in later.

ENTERTAINMENT

Bookshops sell *Firenze Spettacolo* (€1.60; www.firenzespettacolo.it in Italian), the city's definitive entertainment publication, published monthly. Otherwise, a clutch of freebies – including *Florence Concierge Information* (www.florence-concierge.it), *Informacittà Toscana 2Aore* and *Florence Tuscany News* (www.informacittafirenze.it) – list what's on. The city listings in the local edition of *La Repubblica* (p398) are also useful.

Tickets for many cultural events are sold at central ticket outlet **Box Office** (Map pp98-9; ☎ 055 21 08 04; www.boxol.it in Italian; Via Luigi Alamanni 39; 10am-7.30pm Tue-Sat, 3.30-7.30pm Mon). Otherwise you can also try **Ticket One** (www.ticketone.it in Italian).

Live Music

Open-air concerts are a regular feature on hip Piazza Santa Spirito in summer where half of

Florence seemingly hangs around the stage here on hot sultry evenings. In May live jazz sets Piazza Santissima Annunziata jiving until the wee hours during the Jazz & Co festival and Piazza Poggi throbs with different sounds during Rime Rampanti.

Most venues for live music are well outside the town centre, with many closing in July and/or August. Admission depends on the line-up and is occasionally charged using a pesky drinks-card system – clock up drinks on your card and pay substantially more than anticipated when you leave.

Loonees (Map pp100-1; ☎ 055 21 22 49; Via Porta Rossa 15; admission free; 8pm-3am Wed-Sat) Definite hot spot among the city's notable Anglophone and international set, this subterranean dance club run by a Danish-English duo is as much drinking hole as dance-'til-dawn venue. Live bands play most nights and look out for some great drink deals.

Caruso Jazz Café (Map pp100-1; ☎ 055 28 19 40; www.carusozazzcafe.com; Via Lambertesca 15-16r; admission free) Jive to jazz a stone's throw from the Uffizi; live concerts most Thursday and Friday evenings.

Jazz Club (Map pp100-1; ☎ 055 247 97 00; Via Nuova de' Caccini 3; compulsory 12-month membership €6; 9.30pm-1am Sun-Thu, 9.30pm-2am Fri & Sat Oct–mid-Jun) This is Florence's tip-top strictly jazz venue and it stages some quality acts, both local and from wider afield, in an atmospheric vaulted basement.

Be Bop Music Club (Map pp98-9; ☎ 055 21 97 99; www.bebopclub.com; Via dei Servi 76r; admission free-€10; 8pm-2am Mon-Sat) Live music to suit every taste – everything from Led Zeppelin and the Beatles to vintage guitar, swing jazz, soul and 1970s funk – is the aim of this fresh little club.

Tenax (Map pp96-7; ☎ 055 30 81 60; www.tenax.org; Via Pratese 46; admission variable; 10pm-4am Tue-Sun Oct-Apr) Florence's biggest venue for live bands since the 1980s, northwest of town, doubles as a club when there are no bands in town; download flyers online. Bus 29 or 30 from Stazione di Santa Maria Novella.

La Pavonière (☎ 055 63 233 39 79; Via della Catena 2; admission free; 8pm-late May-Sep) DJ sessions and live bands by the pool is the thrust of this fabulous Miami-style summer project by Tenax – *aperitivo* and cocktail bar with music until late around the swimming pool in Parco delle Cascine.

Auditorium Flog (Map pp96-7; ☎ 055 49 04 37; www.flog.it in Italian; Via M. Mercati 24b; admission free-€15;

GAY & LESBIAN FLORENCE

Florence, with its unrivalled artistic and creative history, has a long tradition of openness and tolerance. Its gay community is one of Italy's most vibrant and well established, boasting several well-attended bars and clubs, not to mention its own week-long arts, cinema and video festival, the **Florence Queer Festival** (www.florencequeerfestival.it in Italian), held each year in late September. All said, Florence is no Amsterdam and there are no specifically 'gay areas' – what nightlife exists tends to be relatively low-key.

Key contact points for information on the scene is **Azione Gay e Lesbica** (Map p103; ☎ 055 22 02 50; www.azionegaylesbica.it in Italian; Via Pisana 32-34; ⌚ 6-8pm Mon-Thu) and **Arcilesbica Firenze** (Map p103; ☎ 338 88 74 205; www.arcilesbicafirenze.it in Italian), based inside service centre for the queer community, **IREOS** (Centro Servizi per la Cumunità Queer; ☎ 055 21 69 07; www.ireos.org in Italian; Via de' Serragli 3). Lesbian bookshop **Libreria delle Donne** (Map pp100-1; ☎ 055 24 03 84; Via Fiesolana 2/b) is also helpful.

Bars and clubs:

Piccolo Café (Map pp100-1; ☎ 055 24 17 04; Borgo Santa Croce 23r; ⌚ 5pm-2am) Not strictly gay but a casual meeting spot in Santa Croce for the local gay and lesbian scene; hosts occasional art exhibitions.

Silver Stud (Map pp100-1; ☎ 055 68 84 66; www.silverstud.it in Italian; Via della Fornace 9; ⌚ 9pm-4am Mon-Sat) Latest gay kid on the block: disco and club for men with strip rooms, video bar, labyrinth, and DJ Lorenzo spinning tunes Friday and Saturday.

Tabasco (Map pp100-1; ☎ 055 21 30 00; www.tabascogay.it in Italian; Piazza di Santa Cecilia 3r; admission free; ⌚ 10pm-4am, disco until 6am Tue, Fri & Sat) Florence's only hardcore gay club around incredibly since 1974, with disco, cocktail bar and dark room.

Y.A.G B@r (Map pp100-1; ☎ 055 246 90 22; www.yagbar.com; Via de' Macci 8r; ⌚ 5pm-2am) Hip, trendy and a retro mix of 1950s and industrial, this wholly gay bar is a relaxed vibrant venue with buzzing bar, live music, computer terminals to surf and video games.

⌚ 9.30pm-4am) Major venue for bands, this is in the Rifredi area north of the city centre. Not nearly as big as Tenax but has a reasonable stage and dance area. Bus 14 from Stazione di Santa Maria Novella.

Clubbing

It's a far cry from London or Berlin. In fact, city slickers could well be disappointed by Florence's decidedly lame tame slow dance scene which – bar Central Park and Meccano, both with outdoor dance floors – grinds to a halt in summer (June to September).

Central Park (Map pp98-9; ☎ 055 35 35 05; Via Fosso Macinante 2-6; admission incl 1st drink €20; ⌚ 11pm-6am Tue-Sat) Flit between five different dance floors in city park Parco delle Cascine where everything from Latin to pop, house and drum 'n bass plays – many a top Ibiza DJ has spun tunes here. From May the dance floor moves outside beneath the stars.

Meccano Club (Map pp98-9; ☎ 055 331 33 71; Viale degli Olmi 1; admission incl 1st drink men/women €16/13; ⌚ 11pm-5am Tue-Sat) Flo's other big-crowd disco, also in the city park, touts three dance spaces spinning house, funk and mainstream commercial music to a mainstream youthful set.

Ex-Ex (Map pp100-1; ☎ 055 263 85 83; www.ex-ex.it in Italian; Corso dei Tintori 4; admission €9-15; ⌚ 9pm-4am Wed-Sat) Underground in mood and quite literally, this happening club attracts top DJs from Berlin, Amsterdam and other hot-sound European cities, giving it a great cutting-edge vibe. Music is predominantly house.

YAB Club (Map pp100-1; ☎ 055 21 51 60; www.yab.it in Italian; Via dei Sasseti 5r; admission incl 1st drink €20; ⌚ 9pm-4am Wed-Mon) It's been around since the 1970s but it remains a hit with students (despite its cringing tag line 'glamour club – you are beautiful'). Various sounds play here and Yabsmoove on Monday is the hottest hip-hop night in town; Wednesday is student night.

Full Up (Map pp100-1; ☎ 055 29 30 06; www.fullupclub.com in Italian; Via della Vigna Vecchia 23-25; admission €15; ⌚ 11pm-4am Mon-Sat) Full Up aptly describes this small club that gets packed with a hip-hop loving crowd: Wednesday is happy music; Friday cool and hip hop; and Saturday a return to the house with resident DJ Emijay.

Classical Music & Opera

Summer ushers in beautiful concerts of chamber music to churches across the city; Orchestra

da Camera Fiorentina (Florentine Chamber Orchestra; www.orcafi.it in Italian) performs *March to October* and is a name not to be missed.

Teatro del Maggio Musicale Fiorentino (Map pp98-9; ☎ information 055 27 793 50, tickets 055 28 72 22; www.maggiofiorentino.com; Corso Italia 16) The curtain rises on opera, classical concerts and ballet at this lovely theatre, host to an international concert festival in May and June.

Teatro Verdi (Map pp100-1; ☎ 055 21 23 20; www.teatroverdifirenze.it in Italian; Via Chibellina 99) Home to the prestigious Orchestra della Toscana (www.orchestradelatoscana.it in Italian).

Teatro della Pergola (Map pp100-1; ☎ 055 2 26 41; www.pergola.firenze.it in Italian; Via della Pergola 18) Beautiful city theatre with stunning entrance that hosts classical concerts organised by the Amici della Musica (☎ 055 60 74 40; www.amicimusicafirenze.it in Italian), October to April.

Cinema

Few cinemas in Florence screen *versione originale* (subtitled films), **Odeon Cinehall** (Map pp100-1; ☎ 055 21 40 68; Piazza Strozzi) and **Cinema Fulgor** (Map p103; ☎ 055 238 18 81; Via Maso Finiguerra 22r) being exceptions.

British Institute of Florence Library & Cultural Centre (Map p103; ☎ 055 267 78 270; www.britishtinstitute.it; Lungarno Guicciardini 9; membership €5, ticket €5) Films, often with a Florence connection, in English 6.30pm Wednesdays; full programme online.

Mid-June to September, several outdoor cinemas show films in Italian. Private ventures include **Chiardiluna** (Map p103; ☎ 055 233 70 42; Via Monte Uliveto 1) and **Cinema Poggetto** (Map pp96-7; ☎ 055 48 12 85; Via M Mercati 24b), while the municipality puts on outdoor screenings at Palazzo dello Sport (Map pp96-7), in the Campo di Marte, and Palazzo dei Congressi (Map pp98-9).

Theatre & Dance

The season runs from October to April/May when summertime festive arts events enjoy centre billing instead. Mainstream theatre takes to the stage in all the theatres listed earlier in this section under Classical Music & Opera; online see www.firenzedeiteatri.it in Italian. Exciting stages for experimental theatre and dance:

Ex-Stazione Leopolda (Map pp98-9; ☎ 055 247 83 32; www.stazione-leopolda.com; Viale Fratelli Rosselli 5) Theatre, predominantly of the avant-garde variety, is frequently the star of this industrial

performance space split between an old train station, defunct since 1861, and a warehouse called Alcatraz next door. Concerts, trade fairs, exhibitions and fashion shows are also held here.

Teatro della Limonaia (Map pp96-7; ☎ 055 44 08 52; www.teatrodellalimonaia.it; Via Gramsci 426, Sesto Fiorentino) One of Italy's leading avant-garde theatres, north of Florence. Bus 28A or 28C from Stazione Santa Maria Novella.

Sport

Local Serie A side **ACF Fiorentina** (www.acfflorentina.it) clings on tenaciously to its place in Italy's premier football division. See the side in action at its home ground, 45,000-seater **Stadio Comunale Artemio Franchi** (Map pp96-7; ☎ 055 262 55 37; Campo di Marte). Buy match tickets here, at **Chiosco degli Sportivi** (Map pp100-1; ☎ 055 29 23 63; Via Anselmi), or online at www.listicket.it (in Italian), Box Office or Ticket One (see p147). Scarves, T-shirts and all the gear is sold at **Soccer Town** (Via Ricasoli 27; ⌚ 3.30-7.30pm Mon, 10am-7.30pm Tue-Sat).

SHOPPING

Flimsy Italian-flag boxers (€6) emblazoned with David's packet where it matters most and other mass-produced souvenirs are rampant. But for serious shoppers, it is the city's fine leather and extraordinary variety of quality goods that tempts. Florence has been synonymous with craftsmanship since medieval times when goldsmiths, silversmiths and shoemakers were as *alta moda* as sculptors and artists.

For the truly dedicated shoppers, bookshops sell *Firenze Nonsolo Shopping* (€14), an annual glossy shopping guide by Dacia Maraini.

In categories all of their own are the sweet-smelling unguents, balms, soaps, lotions and potions at 17th-century *Officina Profumo-Farmaceutica* di Santa Maria Novella (p115); and the cutting-edge street fashion and art fused with happening evening entertainment (*aperitivi*, DJs etc) at **Open** (☎ 055 263 82 58; www.open-mutabileassoluto.com; Corso Tintori 43r), a 'concept store for happy people'.

Leather

Via de' Gondi and Borgo de' Greci are lined with leather shops selling jackets, trousers, shoes and bags, as are the street markets (p152).

Stefano Bemer (Map p103; ☎ 055 22 25 58; Borgo San Frediano 143r) The finest shoes that money can buy for contemporary men; made-to-measure shoes come in a beautiful wooden shoebox.

Francesco (Map p103; ☎ 055 21 24 28; Via di Santo Spirito 62r) Hand-stitched leather is the cornerstone of this tiny family business; men's and women's shoes.

Il Bisonte (Map pp100-1; ☎ 055 21 57 22; Via del Parione 31r) Accessories, such as handbags, desktop items, leather-bound notebooks, briefcases and the like.

Soft-as-silk leather gloves in every length and colour of the rainbow are the speciality of **Pusateri** (Map pp100-1; ☎ 055 21 41 92; Via de' Calzaiuoli 25r) and **Madova** (Map pp100-1; ☎ 055 239 65 26; Via de' Guicciardini 1r)

Paper

Florence is famous for its exquisite marbled paper; *carta fiorentina* is floral in design.

Il Papiro (Map pp100-1; ☎ 055 28 16 28; www.ilpapirofirenze.it in Italian; Piazza del Duomo 24r) One of five branches selling all manner of paper and stationery, including delightful old-fashioned notebooks to scribe your favourite hotels, restaurants, wines and *viaggi* (travels).

Pineider (Map pp100-1; ☎ 055 28 46 55; www.pineider.com; Piazza della Signoria 13r) Florence's most exclusive stationer opened here in 1774 and once designed calling cards for Napoleon no less.

Parione (Map pp100-1; ☎ 055 21 56 84; www.pari.one.it; Via del Parione 10r) Paper art comes to life with enchanting music boxes and miniature Renaissance theatres, all beautifully bound in Florentine paper still hand-crafted at the Laboratorio Palazzo Pucci (☎ 055 277 63 00; Via de' Pucci).

Lory (Map pp100-1; ☎ 055 21 32 46; Piazza de' Frescobaldi 4-9r) Sketchpads, pencils, artist journals, paint and other fine art supplies for those in town to paint Florence.

San Jacobo Show (Map pp100-1; ☎ 055 239 69 12; Borgo San Jacopo 66r) Assemble-yourself, corrugated-cardboard mannequins are among the art pieces for sale at this contemporary art gallery – an ode to the torso.

Gold, Silver, Marble & Bronze

Goldsmiths have dominated Ponte Vecchio (Map pp100-1), Florence's infamous tourist-packed jewellery strip, since the 16th century: Gherardi at No 8 is the best-known name on the bridge.

TOP FIVE: SEE IT BEING MADE

In true Florentine fashion, the fine art of craftsmanship, fast disappearing as it is, is staunchly upheld in these highly refined workshops.

- **Alessandro Dari** (Map pp100-1; ☎ 055 24 47 47; www.alessandrodari.com; Via San Niccolò 115r) A couple of the fantastical, incredibly castellated pieces crafted by Florence's most innovative contemporary jeweller are in Palazzo Pitti; visit his Oltrarno showroom and workshop to see how he does it. The flamboyant jeweller also plays the guitar.
- **Antico Setificio Fiorentino** (Map p103; ☎ 055 21 38 61; www.anticosetificiofiorentino.com; Via L. Bartolini 4) Precious silks, velvets and other luxuriant fabrics are woven on 18th- and 19th-century looms at this world-famous fabric house where opulent damasks, brocades and so on of Renaissance Florence have been made since 1786.
- **Jamie Marie Lazzara** (Map pp100-1; ☎ 055 28 05 73; www.masterviolinmaker.com; Via dei Leoni 4r) Jamie Marie lovingly crafts just four custom-made violins of professional soloist quality in her cupboard-sized workshop; Carlo Vettori at Arte Liutaria (Map p103; ☎ 055 21 98 48; www.arteliutaria.it; Via Guelfa 3) is another Florentine *maestro liutaio*.
- **Scuola del Cuoio** (p121) Watch leatherworkers fashioning goods and buy their finished products at this atmospheric workshop in the cloisters of Basilica di Santa Croce.
- **Lorenzo Villoresi** (Map pp100-1; ☎ 055 234 11 87; www.lorenzovilloresi.it; Via de' Bardi 14; 9am-1pm & 2-5pm Mon-Fri) Watch out for the new perfumery that Florence's famous perfumer is likely to open near Ponte Vecchio soon after this book's publication; features will include workshops, lessons, children's visits, a unique collection of aromatic raw materials and an aromatic garden. Contact his de' Bardi workshop for details.

Jewellers to drool over include **Alessandro Dari** (opposite) and **Torrini** (Map pp100-1; ☎ 055 23 02 401; Piazza del Duomo 10r), established in 1369 when **Jacopus Torrini** started forging armour for Florentine knights.

Florentines rate two addresses for silver: **Pampaloni** (Map pp100-1; ☎ 055 28 90 94; Borgo Santo Apostoli 47r), founded in 1902 and known for its angular, radically untraditional designs; and **Paolo Pagliai** (Map pp100-1; ☎ 055 28 28 40; Borgo San Jacopo 41r).

Pietro Bazzanti & Figlio (Map pp100-1; ☎ 055 21 56 49; www.galleriabazzanti.it; Via del Parione 37-39) Founded in 1822, this is the place to shop should a Renaissance marble cherub or bronze Neoclassical nude be your heart's desire.

Designer Outlet Stores

Driving yourself or taking a day tour (p131) is the easiest way to reach these out-of-town factory outlets.

FLORENCE FASHION

It might not be Milan, Paris or London, but this *is* the city where the Italian fashion industry was born (p60) and where a clutch of world-renowned rag-trade greats still turn heads.

Legendary **Via de' Tornabuoni** (Map pp100-1) – a fashionably quaint street with a pharmacy, bookshop, several cafes and so on until Florence Fashion dug in her manicured claws and turned it into the glittering catwalk of designer boutiques it is today – is the spot to start a shopping spree. Naples-born, Florence-adopted designer **Salvatore Ferragamo** (1898–1960), fashioner of footwear for the world's most glamorous women, has strutted his shoes into Palazzo Spini Feroni at No 16r since 1927. Across the road, the swirly-whirly psychedelic prints that belong to Florence's fashion king struggle hard not to leap out the window: Neapolitan marquis **Emilio Pucci** (Via de' Tornabuoni 20-22r) – creator of stylish, garish, look-at-me-or-else women's wear – opened his first shop in Florence in 1947, where he hob-knobs with Cartier (No 40), Tiffany & Co (No 25), Versace (13-15r), Dior (No 24r), Giorgio Armani (No 48) and Prada (No 53r) on the city's most fashionable street today.

Gucci (No 73r) is the indisputable icon of Florence fashion, creator as much of sensational scandal as men and women's fashion since 1921 when **Guccio Gucci** opened a saddlery shop selling leather goods on Via della Vigna Nuova, followed by another two years later on Via del Parione. It was not until 1967 that the Florentine empire, public since 1995, moved into the city's best-dressed street.

Zippering back to Via della Vigna Nuova (Florence's other fashion-hot street), leg-wear designs by anti-establishment **Emilio Cavallini** dazzle at No 52r; 'a triumph of technology and design' is how critics rate his hosiery and other seamless garments. Great women's wear is to be envied at **BP Studio** (No 15). Around the corner, **Elio Ferraro** (Via del Parione 47r) woos vintage lovers with her retro 1950s and 1960s couture and Italian furniture – all designer, of course, darling. **Soquadro Living** (Borgo Pinti 13r) and **Ceri Vintage** (Via de' Serragli 26) are other vintage-clothing addresses.

The sensuality-driven, animal-print designs of another rebel-yell Florentine designer **Roberto Cavalli** (his use of denim at the Palazzo Pitti fashion show in 1972 caused a riot among straight-laced Florentines) shine bright as a button at **Via de' Tornabuoni 42**. Ever faithful to his home town, the designer lives in the Florentine hills with his ex-Miss Universe wife today. Exquisite hand-embroidered linens meanwhile are the handiwork of **Loretta Caponi** (Piazza Antinori 4r), another old family name to dress aristocracy for aeons.

Elsewhere, **Via Roma** (Map pp100-1) sizes up well with **Luisa** (No 19-21r), a one-stop shop for the best of designer fashion, not to mention a pioneer in state-of-the-art window and interior shop design. For clothing and design by Italian designers yet to make it big, head for **Plus Minus** (Map p103; Via Mazzetta 22r); everything sold in this boutique is handmade, from natural or recyclable material. Customers at **Ethic** (Borgo degli Albizi 37) can listen to the latest club mix and gem up on art trends and architecture with the latest mags as well as shop for affordable casual wear; while true romantics mad about getting hitched in a rose-petal wedding dress should visit **Le Spose di Laila** (Map pp98-9; Via Cavour 68), lovechild of extraordinary frock designer **Laila Pappalardo**.

Wanna know a secret? Rose-petal creations aside, most of the big labels – albeit last season's collection – can be bought for 20% to 70% less at a flurry of designer-outlet stores (above) around the city.

Barberino Designer Outlet (☎ 055 84 21 61; barberino.mcarthurglen.it; A1 Florence-Bologna, exit Barberino di Mugello; 10am-8pm Tue-Fri, 10am-9pm Sat & Sun, 2-8pm Mon Jan, Jun-Sep & Dec) Outlet shuttle buses (return €9, three times daily) link the SITA bus station with the 95 boutiques at this outlet, 40km north in Barberino di Mugello. Regular buses to/from Barberino (€3.10, five a day Monday to Saturday) stop 1km short of it.

Dolce & Gabbana (☎ 055 833 13 00; Località Santa Maria Maddalena, Via Piana dell'Isola 49, Rignano sull'Arno) Train from Stazione Santa Maria Novella to Rignano Sull'Arno (€4), then taxi (€10, five minutes).

The Mall (☎ 055 865 77 75; Via Europa 8, Leccio; 10am-7pm Mon-Sat, 3-7pm Sun) The biggest and the best, 35km from Florence; Gucci, Ferragamo, Yves St-Laurent, Tod's, Armani, Valentino et al. Buses (€3.10, two or three daily) leave from the SITA bus station; by car, take the Incisa exit off the northbound A1 and follow signs for Leccio.

Prada (☎ 055 978 94 81; Località Levanella, Montevarchi; 9.30am-7pm Mon-Sat, 3-7pm Sun) Known as the *spaccio* (Pogge), with Miu Miu, Helmut Lang and Jil Sander bargains as well as Prada. Get the train from Florence's Campo di Marte train station to Montevarchi (30 minutes), then a taxi (€15).

Roberto Cavalli (☎ 055 31 77 54; www.robertocavallioutlet.it; Via Voltorno 3, Sesto Fiorentino; 10am-7pm Mon-Sat, until 6pm Sat summer) Ride the ATAF bus 29 to the Voltorno stop in Sesto Fiorentino.

Olive Oils

For other food and wine to buy, see p143. To taste and buy olive oil from Tuscany and elsewhere shop at The Oil Shoppe (p139); oil specialist **La Bottega dell'Olio** (☎ 055 267 04 68; Piazza del Limbo 2r) or **Olio & Convivium** (p142).

Markets

Bargaining's on for cash buyers. For food markets, see p143.

Mercato de San Lorenzo (San Lorenzo Market; Map pp98-9; Piazza San Lorenzo; 9am-7.30pm Tue-Sun) Leather, clothing and jewellery of varying quality on and around Piazza San Lorenzo.

Mercato Nuovo (Map pp100-1; Loggia Mercato Nuovo; 8am-7pm Tue-Sat) Tourist kitsch and leather.

Mercato dei Pulci (Map pp100-1; Piazza dei Ciompi) Flea market, especially large on the last Sunday of the month.

Mercato delle Cascine (Map pp96-7; Parco delle Cascine; 10 Tue morning) Big market in the city park.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Air

Aeroporto di Firenze (Florence Airport; Map pp96-7; ☎ 055 30 61 300; www.aeroporto.firenze.it), 5km northwest of the city centre, caters for domestic and a handful of European flights.

Substantially larger is **Pisa International Airport Galileo Galilei** (☎ 050 84 93 00; www.pisa-airport.com), one of northern Italy's main international and domestic airports. It is closer to Pisa (p191), but well linked with Florence by public transport (opposite).

Bus

From the **SITA bus station** (Map pp98-9; ☎ 800 37 37 60; www.sitabus.it in Italian; Via Santa Caterina da Siena 17r; 10am-12.30pm Sat & Sun), just west of Piazza della Stazione, there are *corse rapide* (express services) to/from Siena (€6.50, 1¼ hours, at least hourly) or add 30 minutes to your journey and change in Poggibonsi (€4.30, 50 minutes, half-hourly), from where there are also connecting buses for San Gimignano (€5.90, 1¼ hours, 12 daily). Direct buses also serve Arezzo, Castellina in Chianti, Faenza, Grosseto, Greve, Redda and other smaller cities throughout Tuscany.

Lazzi (Map pp98-9; ☎ 055 21 51 55; www.lazzi.it in Italian; Piazza Stazione) forms part of the Eurolines network of international bus services and sells tickets for buses to various European cities. Locally, it runs buses to/from Prato (€2.40, 45 minutes, hourly), Pistoia (€3, 50 minutes, 10 daily), Lucca (€4.70, 1½ hours, frequent) and Pisa (€6.20, two hours, hourly). Several other bus companies, including **CAP** (Map pp98-9; ☎ 055 21 46 37; www.capautolinee.it in Italian) and **COPIT** (Map pp98-9; ☎ 800 57 05 30), share the same bus station.

Car & Motorcycle

Florence is connected by the A1 northwards to Bologna and Milan, and southwards to Rome and Naples. The Autostrada del Mare (A11) links Florence with Prato, Lucca, Pisa and the coast, but most locals use the FI-PI-LI – a *superstrada* (dual carriageway, hence no tolls); look for blue signs saying FI-PI-LI (as in Firenze–Pisa–Livorno). Another dual carriageway, the S2, links Florence with Siena.

The much more picturesque SS67 connects the city with Pisa to the west, and Forlì and Ravenna to the east.

Train

Florence's central train station is **Stazione di Santa Maria Novella** (Piazza della Stazione). The train information counter (10am-7pm) faces the tracks in the main foyer, as does Consorzio ITA (signposted Informazioni Turistiche Alberghiere; p132), which makes hotel reservations (€3) and sells tickets for guided tours (p131) and shuttle buses to/from Pisa airport (below). During busy periods, the train information office (10am-10pm) on platform 5 also functions. The left-luggage department (p95) is located on platform 16.

International train tickets are sold at booth Nos 8, 9 and 10 in the ticketing hall (10am-10pm); No 19 has a ramp suitable for wheelchairs. For domestic tickets, skip the queue and buy your tickets from the touch-screen automatic ticket-vending machines next to the train information counter; machines have an English option and accept cash and credit cards.

Florence is on the Rome–Milan line. There are regular trains to/from Rome (€30, 1½ to two hours), Bologna (€14.20, one hour), Milan (€29.20, 2¼ to 3¼ hours) and Venice (€26.60, three hours). To get to Genoa (€18), change in Pisa; for Turin (€35), in Milan.

Frequent regional trains run to Prato (€1.70, 25 minutes, every 10 minutes), Pistoia (€2.70, 45 minutes, half-hourly), Pisa (€5.20, 1¼ hours, 40 daily) and Lucca (€4.80, 1½ hours, hourly).

GETTING AROUND To/From the Airports

Buses to/from **Aeroporto di Firenze** (€4.50, 20 minutes, every 30 minutes between 6am and 11pm) depart from the SITA bus station. A taxi costs €20.

Terravision (www.terravision.eu; single/return €8/16; 1¼ hours, from Florence hourly 6am-7pm, from Pisa hourly 8.30am-midnight) coaches shuttle passengers between the bus stop outside Florence's Stazione di Santa Maria Novella on Via Alamanni (Map pp98-9) and Pisa International Airport Galileo Galilei. In Florence tickets are sold at the Hotel Reservations Office inside the train station and at the Terravision desk (Via Alamanni 9r; 10am-7pm) inside Deanna Bar opposite the Terravision bus stop; at Pisa airport, the

Terravision ticket desk dominates the arrival hall.

Equally comfortable, cheaper (and more reliable in the early morning when coach timetables have been known to change at the last minute) are the regular trains that link Florence's Stazione di Santa Maria Novella with Pisa International Airport Galileo Galilei (€5.20, 1½ hours, at least hourly from 6.30am to 5pm).

Bicycle

Beat the traffic. Bike-tour operators Florence by Bike and Tour Bike Florence both rent wheels (p131), as does the open-air rental outlet **Biciclette a Noleggio** (Map pp98-9; Piazza della Stazione; per 8hr/day €1.50; 7.30am-7pm Mon-Sat, 9am-7pm Sun Apr-Sep, shorter hr Oct-Mar), in front of Stazione Santa Maria Novella.

Car & Motorcycle

Nonresident traffic is banned from the heart of Florence and the fines for transgressors are savage. Cyclopan cameras positioned at entry points to the historic centre snap your numberplate as you drive into the zone. Motorists staying in hotels within this zone are allowed to drive to their hotel, but must tell reception their car registration number and the time they were in no-cars-land (there's a two-hour window), so the hotel can inform the authority and ensure no fine is imposed.

Parking anywhere can induce apoplexy; the only practical advice is to dump your vehicle as soon as you can. The cheapest public car parks are in the Oltrarno beneath Piazzale di Porta Romana and Piazza della Calza (Map p103); both cost €1.50 per hour or €15 for a 24-hour period. Otherwise, many hotels can arrange pricey parking for guests; see p399 for details.

Should your car be towed away, call the **Ufficio Depositeria Comunale** (Car Pound Office; ☎ 055 328 36 60; Piazza Artom 13-14; 8am-12.45pm Mon-Wed & Fri, 8am-6pm Thu), 2km west of the city centre.

Major car-rental agencies: **Avis** (Map p103; ☎ 199 10 01 33; Borgo Ognissanti 128r) **Europcar** (Map p103; ☎ 055 29 04 38; Borgo Ognissanti 53-57r) **Hertz** (Map p103; ☎ 199 11 22 11; Via Maso Finiguerra 33r)

Public Transport

Buses and electric *bussini* (minibuses) run by ATAF (Azienda Trasporti Area Fiorentina; Map pp98-9;

800 42 45 00; www.ataf.net in Italian) serve the city and its periphery. Most – including bus 7 to Fiesole and bus 13 to Piazza Michelangelo – start/terminate at the ATAF bus stops opposite the southeastern exit of Stazione di Santa Maria Novella.

Tickets cost €1.20 (on board €2) and are sold at kiosks, tobacconists and the ATAF ticket & information office (Map pp98-9; Piazza Adua; 7am-8pm), next to the bus stops opposite the station. A carnet of 10/21 tickets costs €10/20, a handy *biglietto multiplo* (four-journey ticket) is €4.50 and a one-/three-day pass is €5/12. Only one child shorter than 1m in height can travel for free per adult (additional children pay full fare) and passengers caught travelling without a time-stamped ticket (punch it on board) are fined €40.

Taxi

For a taxi you can call 055 42 42 or 055 43 90.

AROUND FLORENCE

One of the beauties of Florence is leaving it behind. Be it lunching in Fiesole, meandering around less-visited towns to the north and west, tracking down perfect wine in the hilly region of Il Chianti or titillating tastebuds with earthy white truffles in San Miniato, there is no shortage of places to go, pleasures to savour.

FIESOLE

After muggy old Florence this bijoux village, perched in hills 9km northeast of Florence, revitalises. Its cooler air, olive groves, scattering of Renaissance-styled villas and spectacular views of the plain below has seduced for centuries (victims include Boccaccio, Marcel Proust, Gertrude Stein and Frank Lloyd Wright) – and still does.

Founded in the 7th century BC by the Etruscans, Fiesole was the most important city in northern Etruria and makes a delightful foray of a few hours from Florence. Motorists can take the at times nail-bitingly narrow country lane wending 6km east from Fiesole to Settignano (p138): the views of Florence from here rival Fiesole's.

Information

Just off central Piazza Mine da Fiesole, the Tourist Office (055 597 83 73; www.comune.fiesole.it;

Via Portigiani 3; 9am-6pm Mon-Sat, 10am-1pm & 2-6pm Sun Mar-Oct, 9am-5pm Mon-Sat, 10am-4pm Sun Nov-Feb) is a couple of doors down from the archaeological site.

Sights

Make the Area Archeologica (055 5 94 77; www.fiesolemusei.it; Via Portigiani 1; 9.30am-7pm Apr-Sep, 9.30am-6pm Oct & Mar, 10am-5pm Wed-Mon Nov-Dec, 11am-5pm Thu-Mon Jan & Feb) your first port of call where combined tickets (low season adult/concession/family €10/8/18, high season €13/10/20) covering all the main Fiesole sights are sold. Pretty spot to stroll aside, the archaeological area ensnares a small Etruscan temple, Roman baths, an archaeological museum with exhibits from the Bronze Age to the Roman period, and a 1st-century-BC Roman theatre where a fiesta of music and theatre takes to the stage during the Estate Fiesolana (June to August).

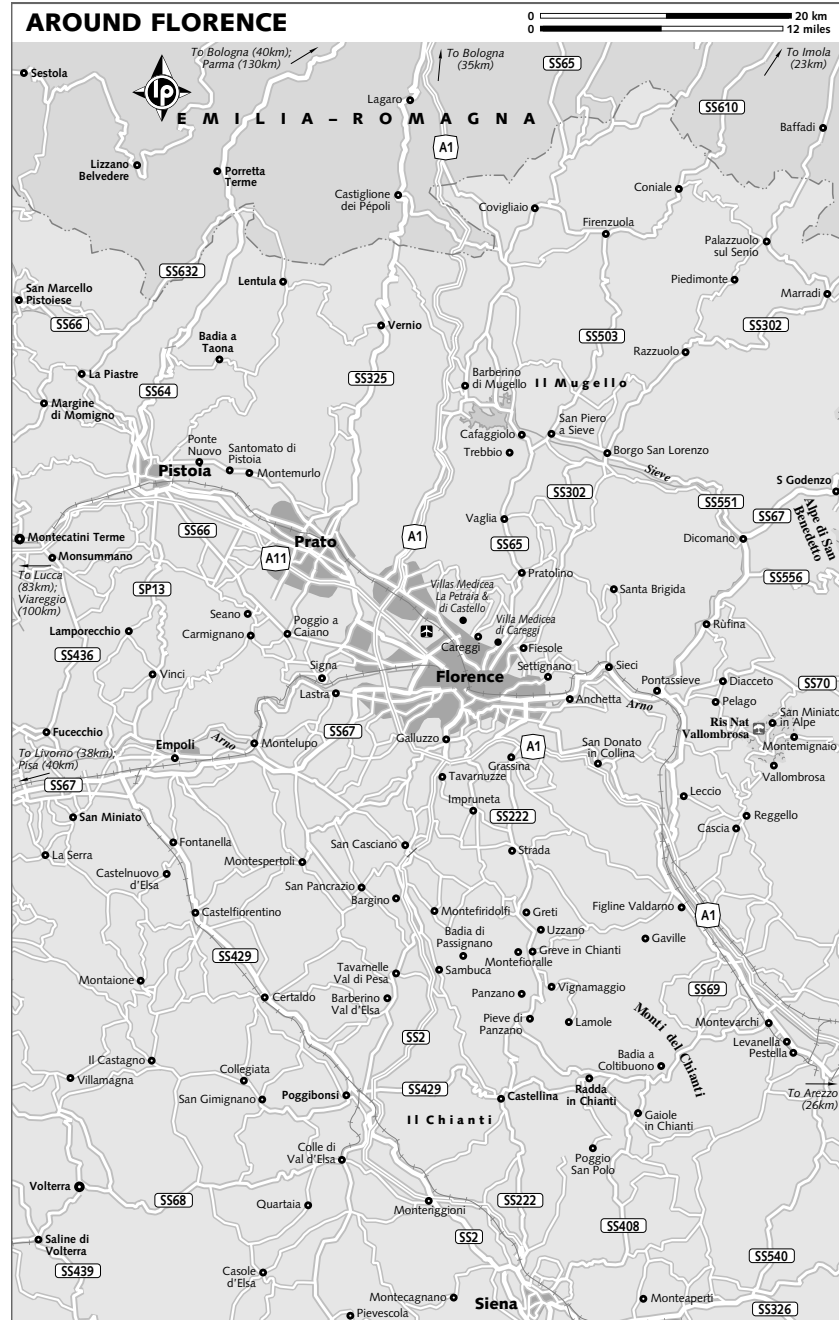
Opposite, the tiny Museo Bandini (055 5 94 77; Via Duprè; 9.30am-7pm Apr-Sep, 9.30am-6pm Oct & Mar, 10am-5pm Wed-Mon Nov-Dec, 11am-5pm Thu-Mon Jan & Feb) has an impressive collection of early Tuscan Renaissance works, including Taddeo Gaddi's *Annunciazione* (Annunciation).

In season a combined ticket also gets you a guided tour of the fabulous Renaissance-styled gardens of Villa Peyron (055 264 321; www.bardinipeyron.it; Via di Vincigliata 2; 10am-sunset by appointment only Mon-Fri), otherwise impossible to visit without an advance reservation. For ticket holders, minibuses (7-3-7pm Tue & Wed, 10am-1pm & 5-7pm Mon & Thu-Sun Mar-Oct) depart from in front of the Area Archeologica.

A lavish villa far in time and style from such Renaissance splendours is the Museo Primo Conti (055 59 70 95; www.fondazioneprimoconti.org; Via Duprè 18; admission €3; 10am-2pm Mon-Fri), about 300m north of the piazza, where the eponymous avant-garde 20th-century artist lived and worked. Inside hang more than 60 of his paintings. Ring to enter.

Rising up behind the central square, the Cattedrale di San Romolo (Piazza della Cattedrale 1; 7.30am-noon & 3-5pm) was begun in the 11th century but heavily renovated in the 19th. Inside, a glazed terracotta statue of San Romolo (St Romulus; 1521) by Giovanni della Robbia guards the entrance.

At the far end of the square, steep walled Via San Francesco ushers five-star view seekers up to the Basilica di Sant' Alessandro (1399), occasional host to art exhibitions. Florence



views from here are staggering and there are plenty of green spots to picnic. The tourist office has a couple of brochures outlining short easy strolls – 1km to 3.5km – for those keen to carry on walking.

Sleeping & Eating

Hotel Villa Bonelli (☎ 055 5 95 13; www.hotelvilabonelli.com; Via Poeti 1; s €60-75, d €90-124; p a) Lacking excitement, maybe, but this friendly, family-run hotel up a little lane (off Via Gramsci) where real people live is a solid midrange choice. Furnishings are typical of a 1964-built hotel and the sun-flooded terrace to lounge on out the front is nice. Rates include breakfast; parking is €10 a night.

Le Cannelle (☎ 055 597 83 36; www.lecannelle.com; Via Gramsci 54-56; d €80-114, tr €120-140, q €180, all incl breakfast; h Mar-Jan) Stroll along Via Gramsci, past the old-fashioned single-pump petrol station by the side of the road, to reach this B&B – a townhouse with salmon-pink façade and oyster-coloured shutters. Inside, five fine rooms ensure sweet dreams, while the quaint breakfast room with dried flowers on each table is a welcome start to the day.

Villa Aurora (☎ 055 5 93 63; www.villaurora.net; Piazza Mino da Fiesole 39; s €135-185, d €120-245, meals €50; p a) Built right on the main square in 1865, its four-star interior is more impressive than its paint-peeling façade suggests. Recently renovated Royal rooms offer a superb sweeping panorama of Florence. No 31 has the best view, or duck down to the pagoda-covered terrace for lunch in the company of the Florentine plain spread out grandly below. How about black and white *tagliolini* with clams and mullet fish eggs in lettuce sauce, followed by roast rabbit or pigeon? Rates include breakfast and parking.

Villa San Michele (☎ 055 56 78 200; www.villa sanmichele.orient-express.com; Via Doccia 4; d €840-1030; h mid-Mar–mid-Nov; p a i s) This is the stuff of millionaire dreams. The 15th-century hill-side monastery with a façade designed by Michelangelo is ranked among Florence's most luxurious haunts. Guests who have signed its Golden Book include Brigitte Bardot, Naomi Campbell, Julia Roberts and a fair few royals. Lunch, afternoon tea or a candlelit dinner on the loggia overlooking Florence could well be the most romantic moment of your life.

Etrusca (☎ 055 59 94 84; Piazza Mino da Fiesole 2; pizzas €6-8) One of a line-up of tree-shaded

lunch spots on the northern side of the main square, this age-old bar-café-pizzeria has seen a thing or two – what a fabulous tree outside (it's a type of ivy)! Hang with a coffee at the bar or revel in a light lunch outside. Out of season, the place is closed on Thursday.

La Reggia degli Etruschi (☎ 055 5 93 85; www.lareggia.org; Via San Francesco; meals €35; h 10am-3pm & 6-11pm) The cuisine – brandy-flavoured braised salt cod with tomatoes, home-made tagliatelle with guinea-hen sauce or *pici umbri* all *agliane* (Umbrian spaghetti in a garlic and tomato sauce) – plays second fiddle to a stunning view at this five-table restaurant tucked up high in an old stone wall. Those who can't climb can ask for a lift.

Getting There & Away

Take ATAF bus 7 (€1.20, 30 minutes) from Stazione di Santa Maria Novella in Florence. If you are driving, Fiesole is signed from Florence's Piazza della Libertà, north of the cathedral.

PRATO

pop 174,600

Virtually in Florence's urban and industrial sprawl and a mere 17km to its northwest, Prato is one of Italy's main textile production centres. Tuscany's second-largest town after Florence, it has the country's biggest concentration of Chinese immigrants, many now second- or even third-generation Pratese. Founded by the Ligurians, the city fell to the Etruscans, then the Romans. As early as the 11th century it was an important centre for wool production. Continuing a tradition, textiles, together with leather working, continue to be Prato's main industries. Its compact historical heart, girdled by near-intact city walls, is worth dropping in on your way to the more picturesque cities of Pistoia, Lucca and Pisa or as a half-day trip from Florence.

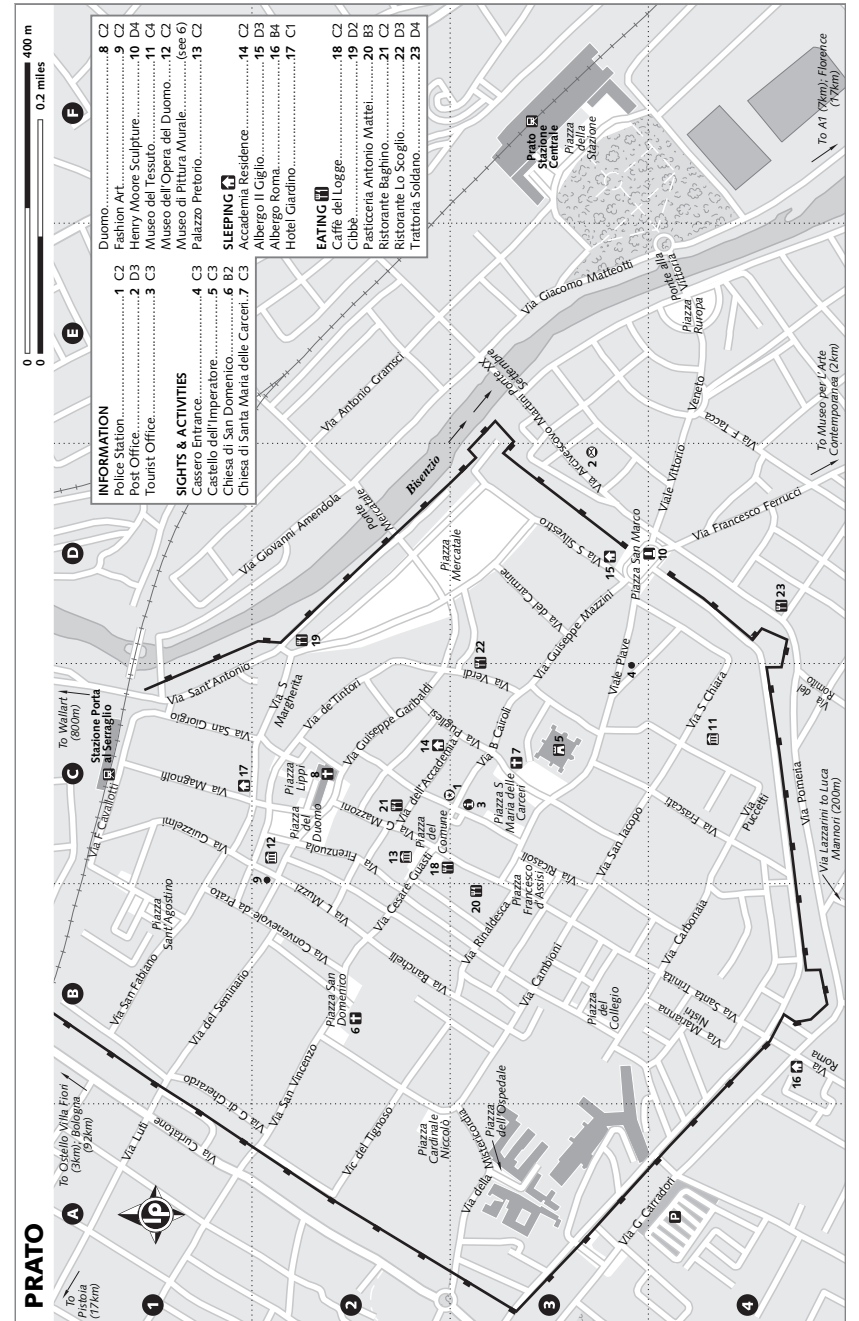
Information

Post Office (Via Arcivescovo Martini 8)

Tourist Office (☎ 0574 2 41 12; www.prato.turismo.toscana.it in Italian; Piazza S Maria delle Carceri 15; h 9am-1pm & 2-6.30pm Mon-Fri, 9am-1.30pm & 2-6pm Sat)

Sights

One day the impressive bulk of Palazzo Pretorio (Piazza del Comune), under renovation for years,



will house again the city's **Museo Civico**. Until then, the highlights of its collection can be found in the following museums.

A combined ticket (€6), bought at any of the three sites, gives entry to the Museo di Pittura Murale, Museo dell'Opera del Duomo and Castello dell'Imperatore.

DUOMO

At first glance Prato's 12th-century **Duomo** (Piazza del Duomo; 11 7.30am-noon & 3.30-7pm), with its stark exterior of white-and-green marble bands, solitary terracotta lunette by Andrea della Robbia and magnificent Filippo Lippi frescoes behind the cathedral's high altar, appears a typical Tuscan affair.

But look closer and the **Pulpito della Sacra Cintola** to the right of the western entrance pops into vision. This highly unusual exterior pulpit was grafted on to the outside of the cathedral to display the Virgin Mary's *sacra cintola* (sacred girdle) five times a year (Easter, 1 May, 15 August, 8 September and 25 December). The girdle, so the story goes, was given by the Virgin to St Thomas, and brought to Prato from Jerusalem by a soldier centuries later after the Second Crusade. Inside the cathedral, Agnolo Gaddi's fresco cycle, *Legend of the Holy Girdle*, in a chapel in the northwest corner of the nave, illustrates the tale.

View the original panels of the pulpit, adorned with playful *putti* (winsome cherubs) designed by Donatello and Michelozzo in the 1430s, in the **Museo dell'Opera del Duomo** (90 0574 2 93 39; Piazza del Duomo 49; adult/concession €4/2; 11 9.30am-12.30pm & 3-6.30pm Mon & Wed-Sat, 9.30am-12.30pm Sun), where paintings by Filippo Lippi, Caravaggio, Bellini and Santi di Tito hang.

MUSEO DEL TESSUTO

Prato's **Textile Museum** (90 0574 61 15 03; Via Santa Chiara 24; adult/concession €4/2; 11 10am-6pm Mon & Wed-Fri, 10am-2pm Sat, 4-7pm Sun) devotes itself to textiles through the ages. It highlights the achievements of the local cloth industry, but you'll also find examples of textiles (some from as early as the 3rd century) from Italy and Europe, and as far afield as India, China and the Americas.

MUSEO DI PITTURA MURALE

The **Museum of Mural Painting** (90 0574 44 05 01; Piazza San Domenico; adult/concession €4/2; 11 9am-1pm

Mon & Wed-Sat, 9am-1pm & 3-6pm Fri & Sat), within the **Chiesa di San Domenico**, houses a collection of largely Tuscan paintings. Artists represented include Filippo Lippi, Paolo Uccello and Bernardo Daddi with his touchingly naive polychrome of the miracle of the Virgin's girdle (see p105). Enjoy, too, the 14th- to 17th-century frescoes and graffiti.

CHIESA DI SANTA MARIA DELLE CARCERI & AROUND

Built by Giuliano da Sangallo towards the end of the 15th century, the high, graceful interior of this church (Piazza Santa Maria delle Carceri; 11 7am-noon & 4-7pm) was a prototype for many a Tuscan Renaissance church. The glazed terracotta frieze and, above it, medallions of the Evangelists are by Andrea della Robbia and his team.

Also found on the same piazza, **Castello dell'Imperatore** (90 0574 3 82 07; Piazza Santa Maria delle Carceri; admission €2; 11 9am-1pm Apr-Sep), Prato's castle, was built in the 13th century by the Holy Roman Emperor Frederick II. It's an interesting enough example of military architecture but, bare inside, is only really worth a visit using a combined ticket.

Down the road, sneak along the **Cassero** (Viale Piave; admission free; 11 10am-1pm & 4-7pm Wed-Mon), a medieval covered passageway that originally allowed access from the castle to the city walls.

CONTEMPORARY ART

Prato's most striking piece of modern art is Henry Moore's sculpture *Forma Squadrata con Taglio* (Cleft Square), an eye-catching white monolith smack bang in the middle of Piazza San Marco.

South of the old city, the **Centro per l'Arte Contemporanea Luigi Pecci** (90 0574 53 17; www.centropecci.it; Viale della Repubblica 277; admission free-€7; 11 variable Tue-Sat or Sun) is devoted to contemporary art. Temporary exhibitions and performances complement its permanent collection, which stars monumental creations by international artists such as Sol LeWitt, Jan Fabre and Julien Opie. Designed by architects Sarreanese and Bacchi, the building alone is a work of art – two walls rotate rendering the exhibition space in a constant state of flux.

VILLA DI POGGIA A CAIANO

Another Medici getaway, this sumptuously decorated **villa** (90 055 87 70 12; Piazza de Medici 14,

Poggio a Caiano; admission free; 11 8am-5pm), 10km south of Prato in Poggio a Caiano, showcases a fine collection of 16th- to 18th-century still lifes in its **Museo della Natura Morta** (Still Life Museum) inside and magnificent sprawling gardens outside.

Festivals & Events

Festival delle Colline (Hills Festival) Concert series of world music, late June to late July, in various locations around Prato and 10km south in Poggio a Caiano.

Courses

Aspiring designers might want to sign up for a fashion workshop or 10-day to two-month course at **Fashion Art** (90 340 460 90 34; www.fashionart.it; Via Guizzelmi 6), a fashion-design school focusing on all aspects of the fashion industry, including textile technology, marketing, trend boards and so on.

Sleeping

Albergo Il Giglio (90 0574 3 70 49; www.albergoilgiglio.it; Piazza San Marco 14; d €55-58, with bathroom €65-70; 11 closed 10 days mid-August; a) Squeaky clean and run with passion and pride by Alvaro Sabini since 1969, this old-style hotel with cosy could-be-home guest sitting room is a family affair. Siblings Stefania and Stefano help Papa run the show and the Tuscan welcome oozes warmth. The same family run **Albergo Roma**.

Albergo Roma (90 0574 3 17 77; www.albergoilgiglio.it; Via G Carradori 1; s €41-68, d €60-72; a) Another Sabini affair close to the heart since 1974, Roma is a one-star place with 12 modest spruce rooms that offer excellent value for your euro. Ask for one at the back; the hotel overlooks a busy road.

Accademia Residence (90 0574 44 81 42; www.accademiaresidence.it; Via dell'Accademia 45; s €52-60, d

€85-98, q €119-135; p a) Stylish fully equipped apartments with every mod-con rather than decades-old hotel, the Academy is a fantastic accommodation option. Each of the seven units is named after a famous person and peeps out onto an interior courtyard in the core of Prato's historic heart.

Wallart (90 0574 59 66 00; www.wallart.it; Viale della Repubblica 4-8; s €75-120, d €95-150; p a i) Those in town for Prato's art can go the whole hog and sleep, dream and eat art, too; marketed as 'a system of spaces to promote and exploit the creative synergy between business, art, history and metropolitan events', this art hotel-cum-gallery-cum-congress centre is large, striking and kitted out with the latest in interior design.

Hotel Giardino (90 0574 60 65 88; www.giardinohotel.com; Via Magnolfi 2-6; s €50-90, d €60-135, tr €75-160; p a) Primely placed a quick roll out of bed from Piazza del Duomo, this 28-room hotel is comfortable if not particularly exciting in décor. The place has wi-fi but it costs. Hotel parking is €11 per day.

Eating

Trattoria Soldano (90 0574 3 46 65; Via Pomeria 23; meals €15; 11 lunch & dinner Mon-Sat Sep-Jul) Prices are dirt cheap and dishes dead simple at this long-standing trattoria on a tatty street corner midway between the city walls and the train station. Mutton is the meat to try and home-made desserts conjured up by Mama and daughter in the kitchen are heaven.

Caffè delle Logge (90 0574 60 00 78; Piazza del Comune; meals €25; 11 Tue-Sun) Sprawled in the shade beneath the loggia on Prato's loveliest fountain-tinkling squares, this café-lounge and cocktail bar is perfect any time. Inside, a white moulded ceiling ensnares 1950s seating, flatscreen TV and boldly painted walls.

THE REAL MCCOY

Practically every tourist shop in Florence sells them; they are dunked in Vin Santo as sweet *dolci* worldwide and have become synonymous with Tuscany at large. Yet it is in Prato that these rock-hard, seriously crunchy ruskiike biscuits studded with almonds were cooked up.

Known around the world, sure, but the Real McCoy only comes in a thick paper, cobalt-blue bag, tied with string and embossed with the mark of its maker: **Antonio Mattei** (90 0574 2 57 56; Via Ricasoli 20-22). Created by the artisan biscuit maker in 1858, *biscotti di Prato* or *cantucci* (as they are also known) are still baked up on the very spot where they were born.

Prato's other sweet name to know is **Luca Mannori** (90 0574 2 16 28; www.mannoriespace.it; Via Lazzarini 2), a world-renowned pastry, confectionery and chocolate chef whose *torta sette veli* (tart of the seven veils) will make the hardest of hearts swoon.

Cibbé (☎ 0574 60 75 09; Piazza Mercatale 49; meals €30; 11 lunch & dinner Mon-Sat Sep-Jul) Wine bottles fill the shelves and tables are marble-topped at this no-frills *osteria* tucked behind a box-hedge terrace. Hailed by Slow Food as a gate-keeper of local culinary custom, Cibbé is the place to try *bozza di Prato* (a round unsalted bread loaf typical to Prato) and *mortadella di Prato* (smoked pork salami spiced with black pepper corns, nutmeg, coriander and garlic).

There are several more dining options on Piazza Mercatale or try:
Ristorante Baghino (☎ 0574 2 79 20; Via dell'Accademia 9; meals €30; 11 lunch & dinner Mon-Sat) Stylishly lit with white table lamps; decent wine list.
Ristorante Lo Scoglio (☎ 0574 2 27 60; Via Verdi 42; meals €25, pizza from €7; 11 lunch & dinner Tue-Sun) Wide-ranging menu: pizza to fresh fish.

Getting There & Away

By car, take the A1 from Florence and exit at Calenzano, or the A11 and exit at Prato Est or Ovest. The SS325 connects Prato with Bologna.

Prato is on the Florence–Bologna and Florence–Lucca train lines. Sample fares to/from its main train station (Prato Stazione Centrale) include Florence (€1.70, 25 minutes, every 10 minutes), Bologna (€9, one hour, 20 daily), Lucca (€4.30, one hour, 20 daily) and Pistoia (€1.70, 20 minutes, half-hourly).

PISTOIA

pop 84,200
 Pleasant Pistoia sits snugly at the foot of the Apennines. Only 45 minutes northwest of Florence by train, it deserves more attention than it normally gets. Although it has grown well beyond its medieval ramparts – and is now a world centre for the manufacture of trains – its historic centre is well preserved. In the 16th century the city's metalworkers created the pistol, which was named after the city.

On Wednesday and Saturday mornings, the main square Piazza del Duomo and its surrounding streets become a sea of blue awnings and jostling shoppers as Pistoia hosts a lively market.

Information

Hospital (Ospedale Riuniti; ☎ 0573 35 21) Off Viale Giacomo Matteotti, behind the old Ospedale del Ceppo.
Post Office (Via Roma 5)

Tourist Office (☎ 0573 2 16 22; www.pistoia.turismo.toscana.it in Italian; Piazza del Duomo 4; 11 9am-1pm & 3-6pm Mon-Sat, 10am-1pm & 3-6pm Sun)

Sights

PIAZZA DEL DUOMO

Pistoia's visual wealth is concentrated on this central square – reason in itself to visit this humble city. The Pisan-Romanesque façade of **Cattedrale di San Zeno** (Piazza del Duomo; 11 8am-12.30pm & 3.30-7pm Sep-Apr, 8am-7pm May-Aug) boasts a lunette of *Madonna col Bambino fra due Angeli* (Madonna and Child between two Angels) by Andrea della Robbia. The cathedral's other highlight – the silver **Dossale di San Giacomo** (Altarpiece of St James; adult/child €2/0.50) begun in 1287 and finished off by Brunelleschi two centuries later – is in the gloomy **Cappella di San Jacopo** off the north aisle. To visit, track down a church official.

Wedged between the cathedral and Via Roma is **Antico Palazzo dei Vescovi** (admission €3.60; 11 10am-1pm & 3.30-5pm Tue, Thu & Fri, guided tours 10am, 11.30am & 3.30pm), guardian of a wealth of artefacts that were discovered during restoration work and dating as far back as Etruscan times.

Across Via Roma is the 14th-century **battistry** (Piazza del Duomo; admission free; 11 10am-1pm & 3-6pm Tue-Sat, 9am-1pm & 3-6pm Sun), elegantly banded in green-and-white marble to a design by Andrea Pisano. An ornate square marble font enlivens its otherwise bare, red-brick interior. A note on the baptistry door indicates what time guided tours of the cathedral's bell tower run.

The Gothic **Palazzo Comunale**, home to the **Museo Civico** (☎ 0573 37 12 96; Piazza del Duomo 1; adult/concession €3.50/2; 11 10am-5pm or 6pm Tue-Sat, 9.30am-12.30pm Sun) with works by Tuscan artists from the 13th to 20th centuries, dominates the square's eastern flank.

AROUND PIAZZA DEL DUOMO

The rich portico of the nearby **Ospedale del Ceppo** (Piazza Giovanni XXIII), with its detailed polychrome terracotta frieze by Giovanni della Robbia, will stop even the monument-weary in their tracks. It depicts the *Sette Opere di Misericordia* (Seven Works of Mercy), while the five medallions represent the *Virtù Teologiche* (Theological Virtues), including a quite beautiful Annunciation.

A short walk westwards from the piazza along Via degli Orafi takes you past the strik-

ing Art Nouveau façade of the **Galleria Vittorio Emanuele** (Via degli Orafi 54), guarded over by a bronze statue of Mercury. Its lovely external wrought-iron balconies and internal painted ceiling above two-tiered galleries merit more than the trashy shops and booths that trade inside it today.

South of here is the **Museo Marino Marini** (☎ 0573 3 02 85; www.fondazionemarinomarini.it; Corso Silvano Fedi; admission €3; 11 10am-5pm or 6pm Mon-Sat), a museum-gallery devoted to Pistoia's most famous modern son, the eponymous sculptor and painter (1901–80).

Festivals & Events

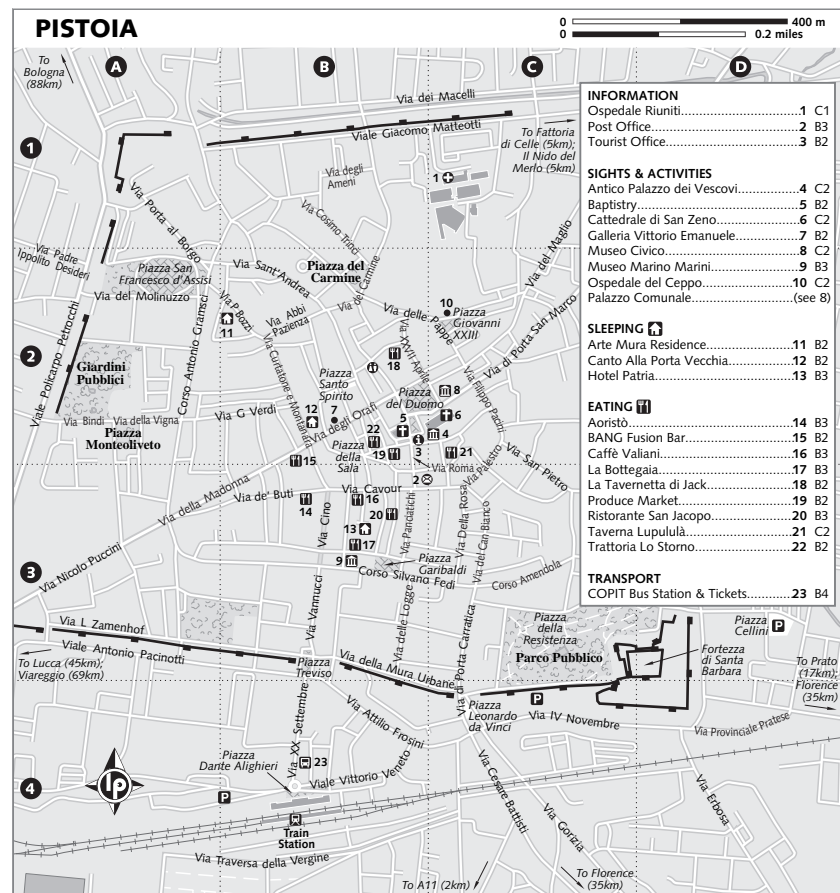
Giostra dell'Orso The Joust of the Bear, a medieval equestrian and jousting festival, fills Piazza del Duomo

in honour of Pistoia's patron saint, San Giacomo, on 25 July.

Pistoia Blues (www.pistoiaiblues.com) This Blues festival pulls in an international selection of artists for one weekend in July.

Sleeping

Canto alla Porta Vecchia (☎ 0573 2 76 92; bbanna01@virgilio.it; Via Curtatone e Montanara 2; B&B €30, d with/without bathroom €70/60) It is impossible *not* to feel at home at this four-room *bed e breakfast*, family home to Anna and Giovanni Bresci, who give guests a warm welcome. Rooms are vast with high ceilings, old period furnishings and the odd fresco for a dash of panache. Breakfast is served around a shared table with a stunning church dome view and there is a



AN EXTRAORDINARY COLLECTION

A tea house, aviary and other romantic 19th-century follies mingle with cutting-edge art installations created *in situ* by the world's top contemporary artists at the **Fattoria di Celle** (☎ 0573 47 94 86, 0573 47 99 07; Via Montalese 7, Santomato di Pistoia; 1 visits by appointment only Mon-Fri Apr-Sep), 5km from Pistoia. The extraordinary private collection and passion of local businessman Giuliano Gori, this unique sculpture park showcases comprises 67 site-specific installations sprinkled around his vast family estate. Visits – reserved for serious art lovers – require forward planning (apply in writing at least five weeks in advance) and entail a three- to four-hour guided hike around the art-rich estate.

A mere 10 minutes away is **Il Nido del Merlo** (The Yellow Beak's Nest; ☎ 0573 47 96 02, 349 806 34 68; www.nidodelmerlo.it in Italian; Via Montalese 67, Santomato di Pistoia; d/tr/qdr €70/105/140, 5-/6-person apt €175/200; a p s), a well-regarded B&B where you can bed beneath beams and breakfast in a state-of-the-art dining room. Rooms bear Tuscan-flower and bird names and the pool proffers a dreamy Tuscan panorama.

small rooftop terrace just made for lounging on. Find it on Pistoia's main shopping street.

Hotel Patria (☎ 0573 2 51 87; www.patriahotel.com; Via Crispi 8; s €55-75, d €75-110; p a) Proffering shelter to travellers since 1927, this 28-room inn has been around a while, giving it a definite old-style mildly fusty air, but staff are impeccably mannered, rooms are spotlessly clean and guests can pick and choose whether they want to share a bathroom or not. Rates include breakfast.

Arte Mura Residence (☎ 0573 3725; www.artemura.residence.com; Via P. Bozzi 6-8; 2-/4-/6-person apt low season from €121/154/308, high season from €154/187/330; p a i) Revel in the refinement of Pistoia's historic past at the lovely old Palazzo Desideri, home to intrepid traveller and Jesuit Ippolito Desideri. Beautifully furnished apartments are self-catering but a continental/buffet breakfast is available for €4/8.

Eating & Drinking

If you're looking for a place to eat or drink, Via del Lestrone is the street to prowl.

Caffè Valiani (☎ 0573 2 30 34; Via Cavour 55) The perfect for a pastry and cappuccino or light lunch beneath frescoed vaults; find the old-fashioned café in the former 14th-century oratory of the neighbouring church.

La Tavernetta di Jack (☎ 0573 2 04 91; Via del Presto 9; meals €20; 1 lunch & dinner Wed-Mon) No, there's no Jack running this great little *trattoria tipica pistoiense* (traditional Pistoian eatery) hidden down a back street next to the theatre. Rather Lucciano – who just happens to look the spitting image of Jack Nicholson – does! Something of a local legend, Lucciano aka Jack cooks up great cheap filling Tuscan fare.

La Bottegaia (☎ 0573 36 56 02; Via del Lastrone 17; meals €25; 1 lunch & dinner Tue-Sat, dinner Sun & Mon) Dishes range from staunchly traditional (black cabbage) to experimental (vegetable flan dipped in a *pecorino* cheese fondue) at this Slow Food–hailed *osteria*, known for its finely butchered cured meats and interesting wine list. Book ahead to snag a table.

Trattoria Lo Storno (☎ 0573 2 61 93; Via del Lastrone 8; meals €25; 1 lunch Mon, Tue & Sun, lunch & dinner Wed-Sat) On the same street as La Bottegaia, The Star has a long pedigree; an *osteria* of one sort or another has existed here for the past 600 years. Today the chef prepares a continually changing array of dishes in full view of the guests. Décor is rustic-retro.

Ristorante San Jacopo (☎ 0573 2 77 86; www.ris.torantesanjacopo.it; Via Crispi 15; meals €30; 1 lunch & dinner Tue-Sun) Rabbit with black olives and tomato sauce, *zuppa di gran farro* (bean and spelt soup) or *maccheroni alla Pistoiese* (macaroni as you've never tasted it, in a meaty duck sauce) are among the local dishes cooked up at this well-kept dining room beneath red bricks.

taverna lupulula (☎ 0573 2 33 31; www.lupulula.it in Italian; Viccolo de' Bacchettoni 10; meals €30; 1 7pm-1am Tue-Sun) So hip it only takes lower case, design-driven lupulula brings a taste of modernity to Pistoia's otherwise traditional dining and drinking scene. From Via Roma, walk west along Via della Torre and turn right onto Viccolo de' Bacchettoni.

Other eating spaces with a definite cosmopolitan flavour:

Aoristo (☎ 0573 2 65 06; www.aoristo.it in Italian; Via de' Buti 11; 1 lunch & dinner Tue-Sun) Stylish dining above the Globo cinema.

BANG Fusion Bar (☎ 0573 99 42 95; www.fusionbar.it in Italian; Via della Madonna 15) Eat in or take away Manhattan cheesecake, devilish brownies and other American delights at this US-styled fusion bar-café.

Produce market (1 Mon-Sat) This market fills Piazza della Sala, west of the cathedral.

Getting There & Around

Buses connect Pistoia with Florence (€2.70, 50 minutes, hourly) and local towns in Tuscany; buy tickets, get schedules and hop aboard at the **COPIIT office** (☎ 0573 363 243; Via XX Settembre 71; 1 6.15am-8.15pm Mon-Sat, 7am-8.10pm Sun) opposite the train station.

The city is on the A11 and the SS64 and SS66, which head northeast for Bologna and northwest for Parma respectively. Local buses 10 and 12 connect the train station with the cathedral.

Trains link Pistoia with Florence (€2.70, 45 minutes, half-hourly), Prato (€1.70, 20 minutes, half-hourly), Lucca (€3.30, 45 minutes, more than 20 per day) and Viareggio (€4.30, one hour, hourly).

Most hotels provide motoring guests with a pass ensuring free street parking between 9pm and 9am; otherwise private garage parking costs €6 per night. Those keen to free wheel around can hire a bicycle and gem up on cycling itineraries in and around Pistoia at **Panconi Cicli** (☎ 0573 2 23 95; www.panconi.it; Via Battisti 21); unfortunately the communal bikes locked up outside the train station as part of the Pistoia in Bici scheme are only for residents.

AROUND PISTOIA Montecatini Terme

Verdi and Puccini found inspiration in graceful little Montecatini Terme, while many Hollywood stars, from Audrey Hepburn to Woody Allen, have dropped in to unwind. One of Italy's foremost spa resorts, it has a handful of *terme* (hot-spring centres), some lounging in grand *belle époque* buildings in and around a lovely central park. It offers a wide range of health and beauty treatments. Come here to relax.

The **tourist office** (☎ 0573 77 22 44; www.montecatiniturismo.it; Viale Verdi 66-68; 1 9am-12.30pm & 3-6pm Mon-Sat year-round, 9am-noon Sun Easter-Oct) has plenty of information on both accommodation and hot springs (which generally go hand in hand), all of which function May to October, with the exception of **Terme Excelsior** (☎ 0572 77

85 18; Viale Verdi 61; 1 8am-8pm Mon-Sat, 10am-8pm Sun), open year-round.

Those who prefer the more primal could head 4km southeast to **Monsummano Terme** to detox in a cave with underground lake at the **Grotta Giusti Terme** (☎ 0572 9 07 71; www.grottagiusti.spa.com; Via Grotta Giusti; 1 9am-1pm & 3-7pm Mon-Sat 21 Mar-8 Jan). You'll feel purer than pure after wading through paradise, purgatory and hell – three different cave zones, each hotter than the last.

From Montecatini Terme, a 19th-century **funiculer** (one way/return €3/5; 1 10am-midnight mid-Apr-Sep, 10am-7.30pm late-Mar-mid-Apr & Oct) hauls itself uphill every half-hour to **Montecatini Alto**, Montecatini's pretty old town much fought over, besieged and battered throughout the Middle Ages. Great views of the surrounding countryside fan out and its 12th-century **Chiesa di Santa Maria a Ripa** is worth a peek; look for the bizarre, trophy-laden crucifix outside.

Should you want to stay up high, try **Hotel Villa Gaia** (☎ 0572 7 86 37; www.villagaia.it in Italian; Via Mura Grocco 11; d incl buffet breakfast €120) where some rooms come with a view. Otherwise, revel in the panorama from the terrace.

Montecatini has a couple of train stations, Montecatini Centro and Montecatini Montsummano, barely 1km apart. Trains running between Lucca (€3) and Florence (€3.60) stop at both.

IL MUGELLO

Northeast of Florence leading up to the border with Emilia-Romagna is the area known as Il Mugello, birthplace to the Medici no less, with a smattering of family castles, villas and palaces (most closed to the public) to prove it. Traditional Tuscan villages sit between elegant second homes for fortunate Florentines here, while the valley that the River Sieve winds through is one of Tuscany's premier wine areas.

In **Borgo San Lorenzo**, the **Comunità Montana del Mugello** (☎ 055 849 53 46; Via Togliatti 45), **Associazione Turismo Ambiente** (☎ 055 845 87 93; Piazza Dante 29) and **Borga Informa** (☎ 055 845 62 30; infoborgo@tin.it; Villa Pedori Giraldi) are useful sources of information about the area.

Take the SS65 north from Florence. Near **Vaglia**, about 5km north of Pratolino, is the **Parco di Villa Demidoff** (☎ 055 40 94 27; Via Fiorentina 176; adult/concession €3/2; 1 10am-8pm Thu-Sun Apr-Sep, 10am-6pm Sun Mar & Oct), a hopelessly romantic

garden built around a Medici villa, long since demolished.

Follow the SS65 for another 13km and turn right for glimpses of another pair of Medici villas (both closed to the public): **Trebbio** and, further along the same road, **Cafaggiolo**, a fortress converted into a villa by Michelozzo in 1451.

Il Mugello means wonderful walking: **Sorgenti Firenze Trekking** (SOFT; Florence Springs Trekking) is a network of signed day or half-day trails crisscrossing the area. *Mugello*, *Alto Mugello*, *Val di Sieve*, produced by SELCA, is a decent map for hikers at 1:70,000 (its trail No 8 is an easy 3½-hour round-trip walk, starting from the villa at Cafaggiolo and passing by Trebbio).

IL CHIANTI

This is classic Tuscan countryside – olive groves, gentle hills, sun-baked red farmhouses and vines, lots of them, from which some of Italy's best-marketed wines are made. Post WWII, the region suffered severe economic hardship and depopulation. But in the 1960s, waves of sun-hungry foreigners started discovering these beautiful valleys enviably wedged between Florence and Siena. They snapped up holiday homes or moved in permanently to what, by 1989, had been dubbed 'Chiantishire' by playwright John Mortimer in his TV adaptation of *Summer Lease* – set in Tuscany.

Chianti Classico, a blend of red grapes with a minimum of 75% Sangiovese, sold under the Gallo Nero (Black Cockerel) symbol, is the region's oldest, most famous wine. The rest of Il Chianti embraces six more classified wine-growing regions: Colli Fiorentini, Colli Senesi, Colline Pisane, Colli Aretini, Montalbano and Rufina, all with their distinct characteristics. The biggest wine-producing estates have shops where you can taste and

buy wine, but few vineyards – big or small – can be visited without an advance reservation; most only open their doors to tour groups.

The lovely Monti del Chianti rising into the Apennines mark the area's eastern boundary and the scenic Strada Chiantigiana (SS222) snakes from Florence to Siena. Bus hopping is feasible, but your own wheels – two or four – are the only real way to discover the region. Keen walkers can pick up a copy of *Chianti Classico: Val di Pesa-Val d'Elsa*, a map at 1:25,000 with hiking trails superimposed.

Chianti Fiorentino

This is the northern half of Il Chianti in the province of Florence. To get around by pedal or scooter power, rent wheels from **Ramuzzi** (☎ 055 85 30 37; www.ramuzzi.com; Via Italo Stecchi 23; bike/50cc scooter per day €20/30; 11 9am-1pm & 3-7pm Mon-Fri, 9am-1pm Sat) in Greve in Chianti, its main town.

GREVE IN CHIANTI

This small town, 20km south of Florence on the SS222 and the only one in Chianti easily accessible from Florence by SITA bus (one hour, half-hourly), has two claims to fame. They are local *macelleria* (butcher shop) **Antica Macelleria Falorni**, known for its mean cuts since 1729; and **Giovanni da Verrazzano** (1485–1528). Local-boy-made-good and discoverer of New York harbour, Verrazzano was commemorated there by the Verrazano Narrows bridge (the good captain lost a 'z' from his name somewhere in the mid-Atlantic), linking Staten Island to Brooklyn and indelibly printed on the soles of every runner who's done the New York marathon.

Find both in the heart of Greve: at unusual triangular **Piazza Matteotti**, with its porticoes and a riot of wine-fuelled fun during the first or second week of September when the town celebrates its annual wine fair. The **tourist office** (☎ 055 854 62 87; Piazza Matteotti 11; 11 9am-1pm & 2.30-6.30pm Mon-Sat) on the square has little documentation to browse but stocks a mine of electronic info on vineyards to visit and trails to cycle or stroll. Particularly popular is the 3km-long walk west (1½ to two hours) it suggests to **Castello di Montefioralle**, a medieval fortified hill-top village with a 10th-century Romanesque church and a couple of restaurants to lunch at.

GET LOST

Ditch this guide and discover Il Chianti on the hoof. Your only companion: a copy of the life-savingly detailed road map *Le Strade del Gallo Nero* (The Road of the Black Cock; 1:80,000), marked up with wineries and every last back road. Buy it for €2.50 at Greve in Chianti tourist office...even if you don't want to get lost.

LA STRADA DEI VINI CHIANTI RUFINA

Forget Chianti Classico. Blaze an invisible green wine-tasting trail instead through Chianti Rufina land, the smallest of the Chianti appellations covering a privileged pocket of 12,482 hectares east of Florence. Dry and red with hints of violets, this wine has been overshadowed by its Classico big sister for centuries.

Yet international wine critics constantly rank its best-known estates – **Fattoria Selvapiana** (☎ 055 836 98 48; www.selvapiana.it; Via Selvapiana, Rufina) and **Castello di Nipozzano** (☎ 055 27 141; www.frescobaldi.it; Nipozzano, Pelago) tended by Florence's famous Frescobaldi family (yep, they're up there with the Antinori clan) – among Tuscany's best. The Frescobaldi also tend **Castello di Pomino**, Castello DOC infamously being recognised by Cosimo III in 1716 as one of the four best wine-making spots in Tuscany.

○ **Podere Castellare** (☎ 055 832 60 82, 320 407 95 92; www.poderecastellare.it; Via Casa Spasse, Diacetto Pelago; d incl breakfast €58-78 per person; p s i) An outstanding *agriturismo* (farm-stay accommodation) to stay within this little explored wine zone, this is an essential stop for design buffs with its funky design-driven space fashioned in an old farmhouse, olive groves and saffron cultivation. Also ideal for those wanting to flee Florence at the end of the day, it is about 7km from Pontassieve train station, from where there are frequent trains to Florence (20 mins). Arriving by car, drive past the eastern end of Diacetto village, then turn left; for images of Podere Castellare and a complete review, see p313.

For a one-stop wine-taste and shop in Il Chianti, there is no better place than **Le Cantine di Greve in Chianti** (☎ 055 854 64 04; www.lecantine.it; Piazza delle Cantine; 11 10am-7pm), a vast commercial *enoteca* with a small **Museo del Vino** (Wine Museum) and more than 1200 varieties of Chianti and other wines to buy. To taste some of the 140 different wines (including Super Tuscans, sweet *Vin Santo* and grappa), buy a prepaid wine card costing €10 to €25 from the central bar, stick it into one of the many taps and out trickles your tippie.

Alternatively head 3km north to the ancestral home of Greve's New York pioneer, **Castello di Verrazzano** (☎ 055 85 42 43; www.verrazzano.com; 11 guided tours 10am & 11am Mon-Fri), a castle of an estate where the best of Tuscany – Chianti Classico, *Vin Santo*, grappa, honey, olive oil and balsamic vinegar – has been crafted for centuries. Tour its historic wine cellar and gardens then taste four different Verrazzano wines (one hour, €16) or go the whole hog and lunch on five estate-produced courses in the company of five different wines (three hours, €42).

Sleeping

Villa Vignamaggio (☎ 055 85 46 61; www.vignamaggio.it; Via Petriolo 5; d €150-200; p a i s) Reputedly the birthplace of **Mona Lisa** (the daughter of the Gherardini family who owned the villa was supposedly Da Vinci's model) and a location in **Kenneth Branagh's** film *Much Ado About*

Nothing, this exquisite 15th-century manor house is a vast complex 5km south of Greve. It makes wine and grappa; has self-catering apartments and cottages to rent; and sports an Italian garden, and a twin set of pools and tennis courts. From Greve, follow the S222 south for 2km, then turn left towards Lamole.

Greve has a couple of good hotels on its central square:

Albergo del Chianti (☎ 055 85 37 63; www.albergo delchianti.it; Piazza Matteotti 86; d incl breakfast €93-120; 11 mid-Mar–mid-Nov; a s) Pretty garden and pool; minimum three-nights stay June to September.

Albergo Giovanni da Verrazzano (☎ 055 85 31 89; www.albergoverrazzano.it; Piazza Matteotti 28; s/d/tr/q incl breakfast €93/118/155/190; 11 Mar-Jan; i) Run by the same family for three generations; restaurant and cooking school.

Eating

Antica Macelleria Falorni (☎ 055 85 30 29; www.falorni.it; Piazza Matteotti 71; 11 closed Wed pm & daily 1-4pm) The two huge chopping tables under the porticoes outside (please don't sit on them) give a clue to what is happening inside this centuries-old *macelleria* that is renowned throughout Tuscany for its prime-quality meat, including traditional *cinta senese* (a breed of pig native to Tuscany) pork and a gaggle of different salami.

Mangiando Mangiando (☎ 055 854 63 72; Piazza Matteotti 80; meals €35; 11 Mon-Sat) Lovingly selected, quality meats (notice the gleaming

RECYCLED FLOORS & RENAISSANCE FRESCOES

○ **Fattoria di Rignana** (☎ 055 85 20 65; www.rignana.it; Val di Rignana 15, Rignana; d €95-105 incl breakfast, 8-person noble villa per week €350; p s i) This is truly a place never to forget. Dip in the infinity swimming pool with sweeping Tuscan views and pretend you're in paradise at this farmstead and noble villa, 8km west of Greve in Chianti, in Rignana. See p311 for a full review.

scales and slicer on the counter) ensure a permanent crowd at this intimate bistro with heavy wooden tables beneath the porticoes on the main square. Capacity is limited, so reserve.

BADIA DI PASSIGNANO

Founded in 1049 by Benedictine monks of the Vallombrosan order, this massive, towered castle-abbey encircled by cypresses sits in a magnificent setting of olive groves and vineyards about 8km west of Greve. Its church safeguards 17th-century frescoes by Passignano (so called because he was born here) and its refectory, Domenico and Davide Ghirlandaio's *Ultima Cena* (Last Supper; 1476). Given monks still live here, neither can be visited.

But the centuries-old wine cellars of this mighty abbey can. Used first by monks, the cellars today contain the viticulture stash of the Antinori family, one of Tuscany's oldest (think 600 years) and most prestigious wine-making families. Guided cellar visits (2-hr visit €25; 1 3.30pm Mon-Wed, Fri & Sat) followed by a tasting of four Antinori wines must be booked in advance at the **Osteria di Passignano** (☎ 055 807 12 78; www.osteriadipassignano.com; Via Passignano 31; 1 wine shop 10am-11pm Mon-Sat), the Antinori wine shop and restaurant that is situated below the abbey. Wine-tasting sessions (€15, €25 and €40 depending what you taste) must also be reserved in advance, as must the short cooking courses it offers.

Sleeping & Eating

Fonte de' Medici (☎ 055 824 47 00; www.fontedemedici.it; Santa Maria a Macerata; p s) A must for wine buffs, this 15th-century *borgo* (hamlet), where pilgrims en route from Florence to Siena sought refreshment from its natural spring,

is wedged between Solaia and Tignanello vineyards owned by the Antinori family. So, too, are the comfortable self-catering apartments sleeping one to six in the main farmhouse and outbuildings in Santa Maria a Macerata. Apartments in two other farmhouses on the Antinori estate are available for weekly rentals only.

○ **La Cantinetta di Rignana** (☎ 055 85 26 01; www.lacantinettadirignana.it; Rignana; meals €25-35; 1 lunch & dinner Wed-Mon) This marvellous eating spot with quintessential Tuscan views from its spectacular terrace is idyllically nestled in the old oil mill on the Rignana estate (p309) – see the old press inside. Wild boar carpaccio, truffle-stuffed ravioli, warm gooey oven-baked *tomino* (a type of cheese) with locally gathered mushrooms or a simple slab of meat grilled to perfection above an open fire are gastronomic highlights, but the icing on the cake has to be the grand finale shot of cypress- or juniper berry-flavoured grappa – a Rignana speciality. Wow.

Osteria di Passignano (fixed menus €50 & €90; 1 lunch & dinner Mon-Sat) Back at the abbey, the stunningly creative cuisine here is among Chianti's most expensive and exquisite.

PANZANO

There might well appear to be little to see or do in this sleepy medieval village, 7km south along the Santa Chiantigiana from Greve, but nip into the **Antica Macelleria Cecchini** (☎ 055 85 20 20; Via XX Luglio; 1 9am-2pm Mon, Tue, Thu & Sun, 9am-6pm Fri & Sat), the local *macelleria*, and you'll get more than you bargained for. Very much a Tuscan celebrity, exuberant extrovert butcher Dario Cecchini has carved out a niche for himself as guardian of the infamous once-fated *bistecca* (p67) and knife-wielding performer of poetry recitals. Count on staying a good half-hour as Cecchini woos customers with wine, meat platters...and Dante.

Eating

Osteria Le Pazanelle (☎ 055 73 35 11; www.lepazanelle.it; Lucarelli; meals €20; 1 lunch & dinner Tue-Sun) Perfect for a light lunch beneath trees, this road-side inn makes a great lunch stop en route to Siena (p235). Swiss-born chef Angelo cooks up a straightforward choice of around six dishes per course. Don't miss his crostini topped with *lardo di colonnata* (marinated lard from Colonnata, near Carrara) and orange peel, or his pasta dressed in a *pecorino* cheese and

pear sauce. He also does a mean Tuscan-style burger, and the wine list is particularly well suited to those wanting to taste different Chianti wines. Find it 5km south of Panzano on the SP2 to Radda in Chianti.

○ **Solociccia** (☎ 055 85 27 27; Via XX Luglio 11r; fixed menu incl wine €30; 1 by advance reservation only 7pm & 9pm Thu-Sat, 1pm Sun Mar-Jan) If the shopping experience is not enough, share a meal with Chianti's charismatic butcher at **Chez Dario** aka 'Only Meat'. A chance to share his family recipes passed down between generations and show off his meat-cutting and -cooking prowess, Dario (who speaks fluent French and a spot of English) cooks up a five-course feast in his apartment restaurant near the post office.

Chianti Senese

South of Panzano, Il Chianti dips into the province of Siena. Castellina is a great place to pick up information and hire a car if you need to.

CASTELLINA

The huge cylindrical silos at the entry to this town brim with Chianti Classico, the classic nectar that, together with tourism, brings wealth to this small community, long ago a frontier town between warring Siena and Florence.

From the southern car park, take Via Ferruccio, then turn right almost immediately to walk into town beneath the tunnel-like Via del Volte. This medieval street, originally open to the elements, then encroached upon by shops and houses, is now a long, vaulted, shady tunnel, particularly welcome in summer. Wine shops are rife here and there are plenty of places to taste and buy, among them **Antica Fattoria la Castellina** (☎ 0577 74 04 54; Via Ferruccio 26).

Nearby, the area's Etruscan roots form the focus of the modern **Museo Archeologico del Chianti Senese** (☎ 055 74 20 90; www.museoarcheologicochiantini.it; Piazza del Comune 18; adult/child €3/2; 1 10am-6.30pm Tue-Mon Apr-Oct, 11am-6pm Mon-Sat Nov-Mar).

The **tourist office** (☎ 0577 74 13 92; www.essenceoftuscany.it; Via Ferruccio 26; 1 10am-1pm & 2-6pm daily Mar-Nov, 10am-1pm & 2-4pm Mon-Sat Dec & Feb), accessible also from Via del Volte, must be Tuscany's most dynamic. It rents bikes (per day €15), has an internet station (per 30 minutes €2.50), sells books and guides

NO WAY

Yes way. If you really dearly desperately absolutely have to impress, pop open a fruity red Diadema IGT Supertuscan, bottle studded with Swarovski crystals, or a magnum of Diadema Diamente labelled with four carats worth of 40 diamonds embedded in white gold on silver by Torrini (p150). Florence's most famous jeweller. This strikingly contemporary Tuscan wine is the luxurious love child of **Fattoria Villa l'Olmo** (☎ 055 231 13 11; www.relaisfarmholiday.com; Via Imprunetana per Tavarnuzza 19), a wine-producing estate and *agriturismi* (farm-stay accommodation) run with a passion, 10km south of Florence in Impruneta, by the Giannotti family since 1735.

on Il Chianti, arranges cookery classes and sports an action-packed agenda of half- and full-day guided tours, including a one-day wine-tasting tour (€45).

Sleeping & Eating

Locanda La Capannuccia (☎ 0577 74 11 83; www.lacapanuccia.it; Borgo di Pietrafitta; d incl breakfast €90-140; 1 Mar-Oct; p s) Tucked down a valley at the end of a 1.5km dirt road, this is a true Tuscan getaway. Its five rooms are furnished with antiques and hosts Mario and Daniela couldn't be more welcoming. Reserve in the morning for one of Daniela's very special dinners (around €25). To get there, head north along the SS222 from Castellina and turn left to Pietrafitta.

○ **Al Galloppa** (☎ 0577 74 29 39; www.gallopapa.com; Via del Volte 14-16; lunch €20, dinner €40-60, Tuscan tasting menu €65; 1 lunch & dinner Tue-Sun) A cool choice quite literally in summer, this appealing stone cellar with piano for (able) guests to tinkle on is lovely in any season. Its tables on stone-topped Via del Volte are a summer delight, as are the atmospheric dinners it serves after wine-tasting *aperitivi* at a nearby wine-producing estate as part of the innovative cultural programme *Stelle in Cantina* (Stars in the Cellar; www.stelleincantina.it in Italian; €80; advance reservations only 1 7.30pm Thu May-Aug) it runs.

RADDA IN CHIANTI

The tourist hot-spot in Il Chianti, surprisingly souvenir-shop laden Radda sits 11km east of

Castellina. Shields and escutcheons add a dash of drama to the façade of 16th-century **Palazzo del Podestà** (Piazza Ferrucci), facing the church on the main square. **Enoteca Toscana** (☎ 0577 73 88 45; Via Roma 29) is the place to taste and buy local wine and olive oil.

Or head 6km north to the gorgeous old-stone hill-top hamlet of **Castello di Volpaia** (☎ 055 73 80 66; www.volpaia.it; Piazza della Cisterna 1, Volpaia), where particularly lovely wines, olive oils and vinegars have been made for aeons. Buy some in its *enoteca*, inside the main tower of the castle, or enjoy a glass over lunch in its *osteria*. Should walking be more to your taste, pick up the booklet in the wine shop detailing 25-minute to three-hour walks around Volpaia.

Radda tourist office (☎ 0577 73 84 94; Piazza Castello 6; h 10am-1pm & 3-7pm Mon-Sat, 10.30am-1pm Sun mid-Apr-mid-Oct, 10.30am-12.30pm & 3.30-6.30pm Mon-Sat mid-Oct-mid-Apr) has ample information on walking in the area, including several pretty half-day walks.

Sleeping & Eating

Castello di Volpaia (see above) has a handful of farmhouses and apartments to rent on its estate, as well as an inn with top-end doubles; see its website for details.

Noble *palazzo* hotels on Radda's main pedestrian street:

Palazzo San Niccolò (☎ 0577 73 56 66; www.hotel sanniccolo.com; Via Roma 16; d incl breakfast €120-180; h Feb-Dec; p a i s) Four-star hotel.

Palazzo Leopoldo (☎ 0577 73 56 05; www.palazzo leopoldo.it; Via Roma 33; d incl breakfast €160-230; p a i s) Great view from its restaurant terrace.

GAIOLE IN CHIANTI TO SIENA

A beautiful village with little to do, Gaiole in Chianti is a sweet spot to sleep, eat and sip some of Il Chianti's best-known wines aged in old cellars at **Castello di Meleto** (☎ 0577 74 92 17; www.castellomeleto.it; Meleto; guided tours incl bottle of wine €10; h 2 or 3 times daily), 3km south of Gaiole, or at the road-side *cantine* (h 9am-6.30pm Mon-Fri, 11am-6.30pm Sat & Sun) of magnificent **Castello di Brolio** (☎ 0577 73 01; www.ricasoli.net; admission €5; h 9am-noon & 3-6pm or 7pm summer, 9am-noon & 2.30-5pm Sat-Thu winter), Il Chianti's most quintessential castle where the famous Ricasoli family have nurtured vines since the 12th century. Walking its battlements, peeping into the burial chapel of the Ricasoli family and taking in the stun-

ning views through arrow slits is a real treat for aspiring knights and princesses.

Continuing south to Siena, take a walk on the wild art side at the **Parco Sculture del Chianti** (☎ 0577 35 71 51; www.chiantisculpturepark.it; adult/child €7.50/5; h 10am-sunset Apr-Oct, by appointment Nov-Mar), a vast green wooded area studded with contemporary sculptures and art installations in Pieveciata, 20km south of Gaiole and 13km north of Siena.

Sleeping

La Fonte del Cieco (☎ 055 74 40 28; www.lafontedelcieco.it; Via Ricasoli 18, Gaiole in Chianti; s €62-82, d €100-154) Stone walls, beamed ceilings and nine pretty rooms named after Tuscan flowers (mimosa, rose, azalea and so on) make a charming combination at this age-old village inn perched over Gaiole's main square.

Castello di Meleto (☎ 0577 74 91 29; www.castellomeleto.it; Meleto; castle s/d/tr/q €136/148/185/222, farmhouse s/d/tr €113/125/185, all incl breakfast; p s) Pretend you're a princess at this fanciful part-15th-century castle, part noble villa announced by an alley of juniper and cypress. Castle rooms ooze romance (think canopied beds and the like), while those in the Casa Canonica (Priest's House), where farm workers once lived, are marginally more functional. Self-catering apartments are also available.

Florence to the Val d'Elsa

Another route south from Florence starts from the Certosa di Firenze (p128), from where you can wiggle south along the pretty SP4 to **Castelfiorentino** for wine-tasting in splendour at **Castello di Oliveto** (☎ 0571 61 508; www.castellooliveto.it; wine-tasting €13; h 3.45pm Mon-Fri).

Otherwise wind along the wider Strada Chiantigiana (SS222) to **San Casciano in Val di Pesa**. An important wine centre, this town came under Florentine control in the 13th century and was later equipped with a defensive wall, parts of which remain intact. Before reaching San Casciano, you pass the **US war cemetery** (h 8am-6pm mid-Apr-Sep, 8am-5pm Oct-mid-Apr), where the clean rows of white crosses are a powerful reminder of the carnage of WWII.

Just before **Bargino**, take the side road east for **Montefridolfi**, a charming little detour that takes you winding up onto a high ridge through vineyards and olive groves interspersed with the odd farmhouse or, in the

case of **Castello di Bibbione** (☎ 0545 824 92 31; www.castellodibibbione.com; 2-/12- person self-catering apt per night from €120/700), owned by Niccolò Machiavelli once upon a time, picturesque stone manor houses.

Another 1.5km brings you to a large Etruscan tomb. At the crossroads turn west for **Tavarnelle Val di Pesa**, from where you can easily reach the charming little medieval *borgo* of **Barberino Val d'Elsa**, which is worth a brief stroll.

SLEEPING & EATING

This valley shelters some excellent-value accommodation.

Ostello Castelfiorentino (☎ 0571 64 002; www.ostellocast.it; Via Roosevelt 26, Castelfiorentino; dm €15.50, d/tr with private bathroom €39/55.50, all incl breakfast; h reception 7.30-10am & 4pm-midnight mid-Mar-Oct; p i) If Declan at Ostello del Chianti is full, try his gleaming modern red-brick and glass counterpart, a 600m walk from Castelfiorentino train station. Dorms max at four beds and advance reservations are essential November to mid-March.

Hotel Calzaiolo (☎ 055 824 90 09; Via Cassia per Siena 32, Calzaiolo; d €60) It might be dead simple and a tad short on decorative features, but this small two-star hotel with eight rooms in a road-side farmhouse 2km south of San Casciano on the SS222 is the perfect solution for those seeking clean cheap sleep.

Ostello del Chianti (☎ 055 805 02 65; www.ostello delchianti.it; Via Roma 137, Tavarnelle; dm €14.50, d €31, d/tr with private bathroom €40/54; h reception 8.30-11am & 4pm-midnight mid-Mar-Oct; p i) One of Italy's oldest hostels going strong since the 1950s, Ostello del Chianti oozes dynamism. Spotless modern dorms max out at six beds (those in the original wing even have two bathrooms); bike hire can be arranged (per day €10 to €12); it has a great garden for *aperitivi*; and the ultracharming Italian-Irish Declan who co-manages the hostel is a mine of local information (ask him about foodie fests). Breakfast is €1.60.

Castello di Montegufoni (☎ 0571 67 11 31; www.montegufoni.it; Via Montegufoni 18, Montagnan; 2-/4-/8- person self-catering apt per week from €620/690/1180) If it is history you're after, Montegufoni is your man. Ruined by attacking Florentines in 1135, this beauty of a fairytale castle rose from the ashes in the 13th century. It was kitted out with some wonderful works of art from 1909 onwards when eccentric British

aristocrat Sir George Sitwell, out motoring one day, stopped in front of Montegufoni and promptly decided to buy it. Tuscan home to the literary family until the 1970s, it is an amazing place to stay. You can find it located about 700m south of Montagnana on the SP4.

Mammarsosa (☎ 055 82 49 454; www.trattoriariamarosa.it; Via Cassia per Siena 32, Calzaiolo; meals €30; h lunch & dinner Thu-Mon) This is a Slow-Food favourite next door to Hotel Calzaiolo.

Certaldo

This pretty red-brick hill-top town, about 15km west of Barberino, is worth the detour. Its upper town (Certaldo Alto), accessible by funicular (return €1.20, every 15 minutes), has Etruscan origins, while the lower town sprang up in the valley in the 13th century. By that time both had been absorbed into the Florentine republic.

The stout figure of **Palazzo Pretorio** (☎ 0571 66 12 19; Piazzetta del Vicariato; admission €3; h 9.30am-1pm & 2-7.30pm May-Sep, 10.30am-4.30pm Oct-Apr), the seat of power with richly decorated 14th-century façade, commands the upper, walled *borgo*. From here, Via Boccaccio leads past the home of Giovanni Boccaccio (p61), honoured with a bust and a marble slab on the nave floor in nearby Chiesa di SS Jacopo e Filippo. In 1783 the writer's remains were disinterred and scattered by townspeople who considered his work too scandalous.

SLEEPING & EATING

Panorama del Chianti (☎ 0571 66 93 34; www.panoramadelchianti.it; Via Marcialla 349, Marcialla; adult/tent & car €8/8.50; h Mar-Oct; p s) Wake up to a sweeping panorama of classic Tuscan landscape at this immaculate camping ground, perched on a hill in Marcialla with pool, small bar and soft grassy pitches. From Certaldo, 10km south, follow signs to Fiano.

Osteria del Vicario (☎ 0571 66 82 28; www.osteria delvicario.it; Via Rivellino 3; s €55-70, d €85-100, all incl breakfast) Four of the eight rooms here, cosy as can be and rich in antique furnishings, occupy what were once the spartan cells of a 13th-century monastery. There's a tranquil terrace and the restaurant (meals €50-70; h lunch and dinner Monday to Saturday), in the cloister, is absolutely outstanding.

Upper town self-catering guesthouses: **Guesthouse Boccaccio** (☎ 0571 65 24 35; www.guesthouseboccaccio.com; Via Boccaccio 32; d €65-75)

THE TRUFFLE HUNT

It's the smell of the *tartufo bianco* (white truffle) that seduces. Or rather, the smell *is* the taste (think fresh mint without its smell) as my tastebuds gleefully discovered just hours after the deceptively ugly knob had been dug up fresh from the earth and brushed clean with a toothbrush (washing with water is sacrilege).

Imperio has been hunting white truffles at Barbiolla Nuova, a 500-hectare estate 20km south of San Miniato, for 37 years. He might well be knocking on 80 and not quite as nimble as he was, but pair him with Toby and there's still a definite spring in his step. This season alone (the official season runs 15 September to the end of December), the pair has hunted 17kg. Their seasonal record is 24kg.

'Hunting truffles is like looking for gold or diamonds, something precious. It excites people – dogs, people and wild boar', says landowner Guido Manfredi as we walk towards the woods. Imperio marches paces ahead of us, head to toe in camouflage-green, *vanghino* (an L-shaped blade) doubling as walking stick in hand. Toby sprints ahead with canine mate Bobby, a younger more exuberant dog highly likely to wolf back every truffle he finds.

'It takes two years to train a dog, starting from when they are very small', Guido informs me, adding that a well-trained dog who has a good nose can easily be worth as much as €10,000. Unlike in neighbouring France where pigs are often used to snout out the precious truffles, Italy's prime truffle-hunter is the high-energy Lagotto Romagnolo dog breed, similar to a water dog. Ten-year-old Toby, a brown patch hiding one eye, is trained to a T and highly experienced: 'Dove? Dove?' urges his owner Imperio repeatedly in anticipation, to which Toby eventually finds the answer. He sniffs furiously at the ground, twirling his tail like a helicopter blade. His aged master throws a dusting of soil in the air, prompting Toby to rush off helter-skelter in chase while Imperio sinks his blade into the damp soil. Feeling delicately with his forefinger, he digs down further (truffles can be up to 50cm deep) until – aargh – he triumphantly prises out a grubby truffle.

Instantly it goes to every nose. Size, shape and colour don't matter; it is the aroma that is so vital. 'Garlic a bit, honey and pepper', remarks Guido, enthusiastically inhaling the excruciatingly indescribable scent. We are a party of 10 and for the rest of the hunt there is no guessing who has pocketed the 30g truffle – it can be smelled a mile off.

In season Barbiolla Nuova despatches 500g of white truffles a week – wrapped in absorbent paper in an air-tight container – by DHL to the River Café in London where punters pay £69.50 for a *primi di taglierini* topped with 10 mouth-melting grams of shaved white truffle. True aficionados can order an additional 10g for £60. 'White truffles are very expensive. The price here is €1000 per kg and four times more in London', says Guido, adding that for a decent plate of pasta you need minimum 10g.

'White truffles are not actually white at all, but rather a creamy yellow, beige or reddish colour with a grungy-coloured veined interior that looks like the inside of a tree trunk. They are always eaten fresh, best married with plain foods and, unlike black truffles, never cooked: for me, eggs are the best, scrambled or fried, with truffles on top. But they are also very good with pasta, pheasant and steak, or a slice of bread and butter'. For this Florence-born, new-generation farmer in his 30s who inherited the organically run estate, food is as much a part of his daily life as the elegant Chianina cattle he breeds and the *agriturismi* (farm-stay accommodation) he runs at Barbiolla with partners Gianluca and Marco. **Barbiolla Nuova Fattoria** (☎ 0571 67 70 04; www.barbiollanuova.it; Via Casastada 49, Montaione; d/q/6 person room €70/132/186, 2-/4-/6-person apt €430/790/1035; p s) stands on 500 hectares of agricultural land and is located about 20km south of San Miniato village and 20km north of San Gimignano. See the Agriturismo chapter (p314), for images and a full review.

Two hours later, reflecting on the home-made tagliatelle coated in melted butter and topped with pasta-warmed truffle shavings our hunting party has shared in the local village trattoria nearby, I can honestly say white truffle is a taste like no other.

Casa Giulia (☎ 0571 66 43 46; www.casa.giulia.it; Via Fondaccio 6; 2-/4-person apt from €80/120)

WEST OF FLORENCE

West of Florence and south of Pistoia lie several small towns of secondary interest and an extraordinary stash of white truffles from San Miniato. Here you will also find 1st-class DOCG wines, first documented in 1396, from Carmignano. Dash the frenzied belt down the Firenze–Pistoia *autopista* (highway), then fashion yourself a long and lazy tasting tour along this unexpectedly tempting loop of scenic countryside.

Montelupo Fiorentino

This small town, 25km west of Florence at the confluence of the Arno and Pesa Rivers, has been a well-known centre of Tuscan ceramics production since medieval times. Today it has no shortage of shops and markets ready to accept your money: a themed market (flowers, ceramics etc) fills the old-quarter streets on the third Sunday of every month and an international pottery fair rolls into town the last week of June.

Local pots from prehistoric times onwards fill the first two floors of the **Museo Archeologico e della Ceramica** (☎ 0571 5 13 52; www.museomontelupo.it in Italian; Via Sinibaldi 43; adult/concession €3/1.50; 11 10am–6pm Tue–Sun), in 14th-century **Palazzo del Podestà**, where the **tourist office** (☎ 0571 51 89 93; ufficioturisticomuseomontelupo.it; Via Sinibaldi 43; 11 10am–6pm Tue–Sun) is also located. Outside, a garden building explores Etruscan ceramics and contemporary work by students of Montelupo's contemporary ceramics school.

Across the Pesa stream, the imposing Medici villa known as the **Ambrogiana**, built for Ferdinando I, became a psychiatric hospital in 1888.

Frequent trains link Montelupo and Florence (€2.30, 25 minutes).

Empoli & Around

From Montelupo the road winds west to sleepy **Empoli**, an industrial town with a Romanesque **Collegiata di Sant'Andrea** (Piazza Farinata degli Uberti). The original town, documented in the 8th century, stood on the western edge of town – look for the worn profile of 12th-century **Chiesa di Santa Maria a Ripa**.

The only real reason to visit Empoli is to view fine Renaissance art in its **Museo della Collegiata** (☎ 0571 7 62 84; Piazzata San Giovanni 3;

adult/concession €3/2; 11 9am–noon & 4–7pm Tue–Sun). From Empoli train station, turn left along Viale San Martino then right along Via Leonardo da Vinci to Piazzata San Giovanni. Trains to/from Florence (€5.20, 40 minutes) are regular.

From Empoli, motorists might meander north along the winding SP13 to Vinci... as in Leonardo da Vinci. A museum inside the commanding **Castello dei Conti Guidi** (☎ 0571 5 60 55; www.museoleonardiano.it in Italian; adult/child €5/2; 11 9.30am–6pm or 7pm), named after the feudal family that ruled the town and surrounding area until Florence took control in the 13th century, displays various nifty gadgets (a mirror-polishing machine, an underwater breathing apparatus etc) designed by the far-sighted architect and artist. The bastard child of Florentine solicitor Piero (couldn't trust lawyers, even then), Leonardo was born 3km north of Vinci at the **Casa Natale di Leonardo** (☎ 0571 5 65 19; admission free; 11 9.30am–6pm or 7pm), in the *borgo* of Anchiano.

For more information, visit Vinci's **tourist office** (☎ 0571 56 80 12; Via della Torre 11; 11 10am–7pm Mar–Oct, 10am–3pm Mon–Fri, 10am–6pm Sat & Sun Nov–Feb).

San Miniato Hills

White truffles to die for slumber elusively underground in dank sandy-soil woods around **San Miniato**, 10km west of Empoli. One of Europe's most truffle-rich villages, this is where London's River Café shops in season.

An integral part of local culture since the Middle Ages, some 400 truffle hunters in the trio of small valleys around San Miniato snout out the precious fungus, pale ochre in colour, from mid-September to December. The paths and trails they follow are a family secret, passed between generations. The truffles their dogs sniff out are worth a small fortune after all, selling for €1000 in Tuscany and four times as much in London and other European capitals.

There is no time to savour the mystique of this cloak-and-dagger truffle trade than during San Miniato's **Mostra Mercato Nazionale del Tartufo Bianco di San Miniato** (San Miniato National White Truffle Market), the last three weekends of November. The **tourist office** (☎ 0571 42 745; www.cittadisaniminato.it; Piazza del Popolo 1; 11 9am–1pm & 3–6.30pm Mon–Sat, 10am–1pm & 3–7.30pm Sun) has a list of truffle dealers and early morning **truffle hunts** (2hr, 1 to 6 people incl aperitif €200; late

Sep-Dec) can be arranged at Barbiolla Nuovo Fattoria (see boxed text p170).

SLEEPING & EATING

Albergo Quattro Gigli (Four Lilies; ☎ 0571 46 68 78; www.quattrogigli.it; Piazza Michele da Montopoli; d incl breakfast €85 p s) Grab a table on the delightful rear terrace overlooking the greener-than-green

valley, or dine on imaginative Tuscan dishes (meals around €20) in a warren of small rooms and passages at this delightful family hotel-restaurant in Montopoli in Val d'Arno, run by the Puccioni family since 1930. Afterwards, pick up the *Historical Footpaths* brochure from the tourist office and explore the lovely old village.