

TO get away in a proper manner I need to change climate, language, culture and, perhaps most vitally, to change centuries. How life-affirming it is to appreciate the artistic skill of Florence's forebears.

I stayed in the city centre overlooking the Ponte Trinita at Antica Torre di Via Tornabuoni 1, a four-star hotel set on the top three floors of the former 13th century Palazzo Gianfigliuzzi. It has an old-fashioned wooden reception beyond its gorgeous mosaic marbled floor.

It's perfectly situated overlooking the river and only one bridge along from the famous Ponte Vecchio.

My room, one of 24, was both tastefully and traditionally furnished with classic cloth and damask motifs. My shutters opened on to swifts darting among the rooftops of the Santa Trinita Church. The terrace breakfast room and, above it, the 'panoramic bar' both look across to the hill of Belosguardo and along the Arno river and its bridges, churches and cypress trees.

I start my trip with dinner in the Santa Croce district, at Boccanegra. It's a member of Vetrina Toscana, a project that combines the region's authentic and traditional production with care for the environment.

Above the tiles and parquet flooring, the walls have facsimiles of the Impressionists while upstairs there's a romantic loggia and below an impressive wine cellar. It's a restaurant popular with the locals, which is always a good sign.

For its specialist tours and expert advice, I strongly endorse Destination Florence, the official marketplace of the city. It also sells the FirenzeCard, the official museum pass that spared me much queueing.

When I find a church door open, I go straight in. All the museums and most of the churches offer some delight for the eye, some masterpiece of craftsmanship.

The hills are visible from the city centre, where the Cathedral of Santa Maria del Fiore is still the tallest building with its 'duomo' towering 375 feet above, the largest brick dome ever constructed.

Its interior is vast and empty, resonating its holy and hollow echo. Opposite is the baptistery. Images extend from the dome's vastness like unfurling petals with their symmetry broken only by Christ from above to welcome the child reassuringly into his Church.

For a proper respite, on the fifth floor of the Baglioni Grand Hotel is B Roof, a romantic setting with 'Florence under your feet' as its mantra and overlooking the duomo and its 'campanile' (bell tower). There are divine pergolas with trellises and lilac ortensia flowers as well as Brunelleschi's Terrace, a truly panoramic offering with direct views of the architect's stunning feat.

The interior is traditional and, with ceiling-to-floor windows, it's all about the light and the view. It serves Tuscan food with an international inflexion and has a



The duomo and the Ponte Vecchio are impressive, but the FLORENCE'S

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TRAVEL FACTS

Fly Dublin to Pisa with Ryanair from €80 return, ryanair.com. Rooms at Antica Torre di Via Tornabuoni 1 start from €255 a night, see tornabuoni1.com. Rooms at Hotel La Gemma from €475 a night, see lagemmahotel.com.

strong emphasis on its 'wellness menu with taste'.

Anyone trying to understand the greatness of European culture over the last 500 years has to grasp the Tuscan journey of human confidence. From the fertile plains of Pisa and Siena to Florence herself, the monastic medieval origins fashioned a revival in pride for Rome's former glory.

Yes there were wars and bitter rivalries but popes and powerful regional families, fortified by the fortunes of their banks, created an unparalleled patronage for artistic talent in this cradle of the Renaissance. I loved examining the pinched features of Michelangelo, the grace of Lippi, the sentimentality of Botticelli and the serenity of Perugino.

What a joy to stay next at a former palazzo: the new Hotel La Gemma. It's so conveniently located, tucked away down a cobbled side street, between the cathedral and the Palazzo Vecchio.

This five-star boutique hotel is both sumptuous and chic. The foyer has black and white chequered marbled flooring, the walls are lined with black and white photographs and gorgeous mirrored ceilings.

The hotel's signature emerald and olive greens permeate throughout the thick carpets and velvet drapes. Here I was able to sit outside the entrance, enjoy an impressive massage at the Allure Spa, have a romantic dinner on the roof and have breakfast in an open courtyard with palm leaves.

Luca's Restaurant is where chef Tommaso dreams up his creations, with a menu strong on the likes of pigeon and Jerusalem artichokes.

My luxurious room had wonderful wallpaper, featuring palm fronds, and was truly pampering. When the morning chorus of church bells chimed on the hour I could almost smell the frankincense in the air.

When I sat lapping up the

holy energy of the monastic cells in San Marco, I imagined myself as a medieval monk cocooned and ascetic looking out at the stillness of the cloisters and their cypress trees. Likewise moving towards the altar through the columns within Santo Spirito was truly uplifting as I savoured the silence with just me and a sacristan lighting a candle.

A circular walk at night along the river and across a bridge before returning was special. The streets teemed with opera singers: a truly superior form of busking.

A minute's walk from San Lorenzo is a restaurant within a concept store called La Ménagère. It's uber-cool and popular with women at rest among books on design and gardens, a grand piano, kitchenware and glassware, and candlesticks and dried flowers for sale. It's a top spot for brunch for smoothies and centrifuges, smashed avocados and salads.

All books and brochures

take you to the majority of the well-known sites and they have their rightful prominence. Tourists come for the Ponte Vecchio, Michelangelo's David and Botticelli's Birth of Venus. But it's my own discoveries that I cherish most.

I love the pure and harmonious proportions of The Pazzi Chapel in Santa Croce. Based on a simple geometric plan of the square and circle, this extraordinary early Renaissance masterpiece was built as the chapter house.

Also the Cloister of the Scalzo near San Marco houses the work of Andrea del Sarto, a small cocoon of Florentine grace and poise.

I also strongly recommend The Golden View Firenze. It's south of the river on Via de' Bardi, overlooking one way the Ponte Vecchio and the other upstream with the hills and beyond. There's an open kitchen, wines on display, a piano and contemporary art. I sat in the airy, spacious second room with its



Florentine magic: The city, dominated by the duomo of the Cathedral; Inset from left, Cloister of the Scalzo; the Pazzi Chapel; Piazza Duomo; and the Ponte Vecchio

best offerings are off the beaten track SECRETS

own balcony and tucked into the delicious Tuscan pasta, steak and dessert on offer.

All cities have their golden suburbs and nowhere more than Florence. Fiesole, a village 15 minutes north, is home to the San Michele hotel, a converted 15th-century convent, with stunning landscaped gardens.

Also Bellosguardo, a small collection of houses, is delightful in the south of the city. I walked down through orchards and cypresses to the Porto Romano city gate. It's where Galileo contemplated the stars and where to get a fabulous view of the entire city and beyond.

Slightly off the beat, as part of the elegant Sina Villa Medici hotel, is the wonderful new restaurant, Harry's Bar The Garden. It overlooks the hotel's swimming pool — unique in the city centre — which is adorned with statues, roses and urns. I enjoyed a bellini before choosing from a menu impressively strong in its veal options.

Be sure to make time for a shopping spree. Florence abounds in leather, scent and jewellery shops but, for even more specialist shopping, I recommend Ricceri Giuliano in Via dei Conti for ceramics and Fabio Innocenti in the Piazza dei Ciompi for antiques. Try Galleria d'Arte Pietro Bazzanti e Figlio in Lungarno Corsini for your very own sculpture or Occasioni Musicali on Via dell'Oriuolo for pop memorabilia and vintage rarities.

If you happen to be there for the last Sunday of the month go to Piazza Sant' Ambrogio to rummage around for a bargain from its bric-a-brac market.

The district is dominated by the Cibreo brand of five restaurants, comprising a café, trattoria, restaurant, private dining and theatre club. I experienced the delights of both Cibrèo Restaurant and Cibrèo Caffè. The helpings are generous and fairly priced using raw materials from farmers,

breeders and fishermen who all share the passions of the legendary Fabio Picchi.

At the restaurant I always recommend the fish of the day and I was treated to I Giullari, Fabio's special olive oil. Meanwhile the caffè, 'the bon vivant's favourite place', is ideal for a light lunch.

As for things to notice about the city: when you're by the Uffizi, spot the secret corridor that crosses the river above the shops on the Ponte Vecchio. It was designed for Cosimo I to move between his two palaces (Vecchio and Pitti).

When in the Piazza della Signoria look up at the extraordinary revolving outdoor staircase right at the top of the Palazzo Vecchio, spot the boats emanating from the rowing club under the Uffizi, or the ambulance service opposite the campanile. Go to a Gregoria chant in Latin at San Miniato at 5.30pm.

Off the beaten track is where the real fun happens.



Tulfarris House perfectly merges the past with the present

STEPPING into the luxurious new entrance of Tulfarris Resort, expect to be dazzled by the impressive sculptures and paintings of wild deer that are found commonly in the surrounding landscape.

We felt instantly transported to an oasis of calm having only left the M50 a few minutes before. The hotel and golf club have seen massive upgrades since changing hands recently. On the way to our room we climbed the impressive staircase and wandered through the mezzanine library, which is a lovely addition to the hotel and perfect for an after-dinner drink.

The resort is set on 210 acres, and includes the Manor House, which is perfect for a wedding or private function. All of the 98 bedrooms have been extensively upgraded but I was eager to explore the new spa and treatment rooms, which officially opened last month.

I was with my partner Terry and we opted for a couple's treatment with massage and facials. It was Terry's first time getting a facial and it won't be his last. The treatment room has a luxurious whirlpool bath and the treatment left us both walking on air as we return to our gorgeous room.

Tulfarris is well known for its superb lakeside golf course designed by Patrick J Merrigan. Set over three peninsulas, it has breathtaking views of the water. There's plenty of additional facilities for golfers including a six-bay, floodlit driving range, outdoor teeing zone, putting green and chipping area and dedicated teaching bay. Using Trackman technology, the Tulfarris Golf Club PGA pro Tom O'Neill offers lessons to golfers of any level from beginner to elite.

Non-golfers can enjoy exploring Wicklow by bike, foot or boat, with cycling along the Blessington Lakes or hiking up the Wicklow

THE NOVEL TRAVELLER
MICHELLE JACKSON



Tranquil: Tulfarris House and, inset above, Michelle at dinner

Mountains an option. The lakeside sports include boat trips, kayaking and fishing.

A lovely treat on return is the afternoon tea created by executive head chef Eddie McDermott, served on the stylish new mezzanine.

The new culinary addition is The Brasserie, a relaxed and social restaurant, popular for post golf debriefing or gathering with friends and family. The menu offers classic favourites with contemporary dishes, vegetarian options and a clever children's menu.

We enjoyed a fabulous evening meal at the Fairways Restaurant, with breathtaking views of the Wicklow Mountains and the golf course. The menu includes dishes to suit every palate using local ingredients sourced from Irish producers and organic where possible.

I opted for the scallop starter and delicious fish special while Terry enjoyed the pork belly. We were given a tasty amuse bouche to start and finished off with crème brûlée.

Tulfarris Hotel has rustled up an interesting collaboration with one of Ireland's most beautiful historic houses, neighbouring Russborough House. Guests can enjoy an exclusive bespoke experience at this opulent 18th century estate as part of a stay and dine package.

It's a great opportunity to view and learn about the wonderful art and enjoy access to the landscaped gardens and entertaining 2km maze. The excursion finishes with the Birds of Prey Experience, which is a wonderful mid-term activity with something for couples or all the family to enjoy and a chance to make unforgettable memories.

There are four self-catering properties available for short-term hire, perfect for family holidays, groups of friends or golfers with guests given use of the hotel and resort amenities.

With the fabulous new spa now open there's something for everyone in this beautiful resort that's sure to satisfy all tastes.

TRAVEL FACTS

The Autumn Escape includes one night B&B, a three-course evening meal served in The Fairways Restaurant, an exclusive tour of Russborough House and the Birds of Prey and Russborough Maze experiences, and costs from €249 for two people sharing. Wellness treatments start at €65 per person and afternoon tea starts at €35 per person. See tulfarrishotel.com for more.