

# FLORENCE and around



by  
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On my return from Venice in February last year I offered to write some reflections on a holiday of a lifetime. Since then several members of the Saint Bartholomew Church community have visited *La Serenissima*, some with a frequency that has made me rather green!

This year it was the frescoes of Tuscany – and Assisi – that influenced our planning and Anne and I have just returned from another wonderful trip. I'd be delighted to share further details should anyone be tempted to follow.

The magic of the city itself was sufficient to bring us to Venice, but it was the art of Arezzo and Assisi, and memories of previous visits to Siena and Florence that decided our itinerary. As Mr Ryan flies direct to Pisa (one flight a day, arriving late), we planned to stay the first night there. There is actually a bus which meets the flight and goes direct to Florence, which is just an hour away, but if you want to stay in Pisa, beware: as there were only two taxis for about seventy people, we and a few others had to walk for twenty minutes in order to get into Pisa. We met not a soul, but found our hotels easily. The Campo dei Miracoli in which you can see the Duomo, the Baptistry and that Tower is stunning, and the sun shone for us. Our first of many train rides took us smoothly to Florence along the Arno; the Italian system is very efficient and so cheap – unless you take the very fast Eurostar trains.



On our first Florence visit five years ago we found, after considerable adventures, a lovely hotel near Santa Maria Novella – the name of the station and a stunning church nearby. The owners now run a really fantastic B and B called A' Loro, near San Lorenzo (five minutes from the Duomo), which we most strongly recommend.<sup>1</sup> Prices will vary depending on the time of year. One of the great advantages of a February visit is that the cost of accommodation is at least half of the summer rates: €75/90 a night for a double room! We went down to the Uffizi (half price for couples on St Valentine's Day!), walked straight in without joining a queue, and stopped to admire our 'old friends' in the

Botticelli Room. The new work that demanded our attention was the stunning *Adoration of the Magi* by Gentile da Fabriano, featuring the gold spurs and buckles, which has been restored recently. We are always on the lookout for Visitations and that by Albertinelli, with Elizabeth's golden cloak, was a delight. The view of the Ponte Vecchio from the Uffizi is one of the great thrills of Florence (though sadly the Vasari corridor which links the Uffizi with the Pitti Palace via the Ponte Vecchio was not open). The view in the other direction up to San Miniato is lovely too. There is a restaurant on the left at the far end of the second floor corridor that is easy to miss, but it is a must for a strength-giving *espresso* or maybe even a *Prosecco* (a lovely dryish sparkling wine, much nicer than Asti). The restaurant offers views in all directions. We were warmly welcomed that evening by Gianni in the Accademia Trattoria in the Piazza San Marco – just say you're from *Dublino*. He did a wedding in Powerscourt once and has good memories. The food is as good as anywhere we have experienced – apart from Bologna, the gastronomic capital of Italy. (Italian bread is quite awful. It is white and tasteless even if fresh; there's a market gap there somewhere!) The bells of the Duomo are wonderful, though they ring at the weirdest times: 17.45 and 18.45! The tenor bell reaches parts of me that I didn't know I had!

On the next morning the train took us to Arezzo. We took a taxi up to the Duomo at the top of the hill, where the place was abuzz with crowds of all ages, and there were stalls selling sweets and biscuits of all sorts. The huge church was packed, and a full choral Mass was in progress (not bad four-part singing, but more Verdi than Monteverdi!). There were confessions going on in the midst of the crowds; this was Italian rural Catholicism at its most colourful and fascinating. It was all in celebration of a Marian feast unique to this lovely town: *la Madonna del Conforto*: the Virgin of Comfort, who is said to have given Arezzo hope in time of an earthquake in 1796.

We then proceeded slowly down the hill, through the gorgeous square where the film *Life is Beautiful* was made, and to our first 'new' frescoes: the Finding of the True Cross by Piero della Francesca – breathtakingly lovely. We thought that Arezzo would be a good place to stay and explore at leisure, as the people were extremely friendly. We bought a Vespa for our daughter – well, a tiny model of one!

Our journey to Assisi was delayed due to getting poor information from the train booking office; it's worth checking carefully. Buying the tickets beforehand will save you hassle, especially at rush hours, but don't forget to stamp them in the little yellow boxes just before you travel.

Anne's web work on hotels came up trumps again: the Windsor Savoy!<sup>2</sup> The friendly people here offered us a very comfortable room with bath (in Italian hotels you have to specify a bathtub, otherwise they may say an en suite bathroom but mean a shower). However, don't eat there! It is very close to the Basilica San Francesco – a *very* special place. The upper church has some fine frescoes by Giotto (they've done some restoration work since the 1989 earthquake). Go there before the lower church, as it really is an anti-climax the other way around. The lower church is utterly stunning: frescoes by Martini, Giotto and Lorenzetti, and the tomb of St Francis. We paid three visits during our thirty-six hours there; unlike most places where there is great art in Italy, it's free! Again there are huge advantages of a visit outside summer and at the obvious pilgrimage times, Holy Week and around 4th October, the saint's feast day. It's wonderful to be alone in these sacred spaces rather than milling around with millions of tourists, though there were a



few Franciscan pilgrims with what must have been very cold sandalled toes! The town is charming; it is very hilly with steep steps and a great view down to the plain, where you will find the town of Maria Degli Angeli. The Basilica there is worth a visit – not for itself, but for the little church within a church (the Porziuncola chapel with its glorious altarpiece), where Francis and his monks first worked.

Two years ago we did a day trip from Florence to Siena and absolutely loved it, and we determined to come back and stay. (We stayed two nights in both Assisi and Siena – reckoning one night was too ‘whistle-stop’; two gives some chance of catching the spirit of the place – and we needed our siesta!) As there are no easy rail links from Assisi to Siena, we took a coach via Perugia and arrived at the Hotel Athene to find a gorgeous room overlooking the Tuscan countryside. It was just inside the city walls and at a very easy walking distance from both the Duomo and the wonderful Campo, where they hold the Palio horse race. We had lovely sunny weather there and loved visiting the Palazzo Pubblico again, which has the second tallest tower in Italy, and where there are superb frescoes. We also visited the Opera del Duomo with a sublime *Duccio Maestà* – and a panoramic view of marvellous rooftops. We went to Mass in the Duomo, with its incredible floor, early on Sunday morning, though the room containing some glorious music manuscripts wasn’t open. Siena is a fascinating city; it is well worth reading a little about its historical background. The Dominican Sisters of St Catherine of Siena is the big name here.



*Annunciation*, Fra Angelico<sup>3</sup>

Within an hour another train brought us ‘home’ to A’ Loro in Florence and we spent four more nights there. An Italian friend of our daughter’s brought us out to dinner and a trip up to Fiesoli, which has a superb view overlooking the city. On the way up we stopped in the Convent of San Domenico, where we saw a lovely painting by Fra Angelico who once was a friar there. It was good to have some social contact and tap into local knowledge. The art highlights in Florence itself were the frescoes in Santa Maria Novella – the Spanish Chapel is breathtaking – but nothing comes near the excitement of the former convent of San Marco (now a museum). You go up a fairly modest staircase, turn a corner and there it is: Fra Angelico’s stunning *Annunciation*. It’s known so well



from innumerable reproductions on Christmas cards and convent walls, but nowhere is more breath taken or heartbeats lost! This was our third visit – at 8:30 a.m. To be alone with such wonders makes such a difference, and it is just as exciting as the first time. It's at the entrance to a whole refurbished floor of observant Dominicans' cells. Beneath a huge and most beautiful ceiling, and in each of the cells, there is a fresco; some of these frescoes are by Fra Angelico, and there are many by his pupils. There are a lot of other interesting works in the ground floor rooms as well.

Two other sets of frescoes are unmissable: those by Masaccio in the Brancacci Chapel across the Arno in Santa Maria del Carmine, though we didn't get there this time. I believe that you have to pre-book and are given only a limited amount of time in the chapel. The other is the chapel in the Palazzo Riccardi Medici, close to the Duomo. This is the most amazing small space I know: a tiny chapel with all four walls covered with the most wonderful depiction of the three kings and their retinues, and with landscapes full of interest: birds and animals, scenery, buildings, portraits of the Medici, and the Florentine great and good – well, I don't suppose many were all that good! The Nativity scene behind the altar is almost an afterthought! The artist is Benozzo Gozzoli. There is a fascinating 'virtual' display of the cycle that is well worth a visit before you see the real thing. Even better, do some preparatory reading. Again, there's a huge advantage in avoiding the hordes. We were in that magical place alone at 6 p.m., but normally you are crowded in for a limited amount of time in lots of twelve!



*The Baptistery and Duomo, Florence*

Florence is pretty hellish in the summer – like Venice, the mosquitoes make life pretty miserable. It's worth putting up with mixed weather; we had torrents in Florence which drove us into the Duomo. The exterior, and the baptistery of course, is stunning but, like Notre-Dame in Paris, the interior is a good deal less so. However, for those who are very fit, not claustrophobic, and who don't mind heights, I'm told that the climb up to

Brunelleschi's astonishing dome is well worthwhile. The story of how he built it is fascinating; it is certainly one of the engineering feats of all time. We stayed at floor level, and when we emerged after three decades of the Rosary, it was nature that reminded us of her overpowering beauty with some winter evening post-rain sunlight that took away some more breath.

One lovely new discovery was what originally was a chapel within the Santa Maria Novella complex: a seventeenth-century pharmacy where one could purchase unguents and pungents of various kinds made from the original recipes – a really lovely place with a view of an upper courtyard of the complex. It turns out that the Dominicans have handed it over to the Italian police! Do persevere with the pharmacy; it's quite a way down Via della Scala.

The train from the station brings you to within yards of the airport in Pisa and Mr Ryan got us home (though he is now strict about the weight of each item of checked-in luggage – we had to repack to save an exorbitant charge).

What a lovely trip! We'd hoped the winter would be over when we returned (not so), but the memory of that spring afternoon in Siena will stay.

Anne and Tim Thurston. March 2006

## Notes

1. See [http://www.bbplanet.com/bed-and-breakfasts/florence/p6\\_en.htm](http://www.bbplanet.com/bed-and-breakfasts/florence/p6_en.htm).
2. See [www.venere.com](http://www.venere.com).
3. Courtesy of carulmare.

