

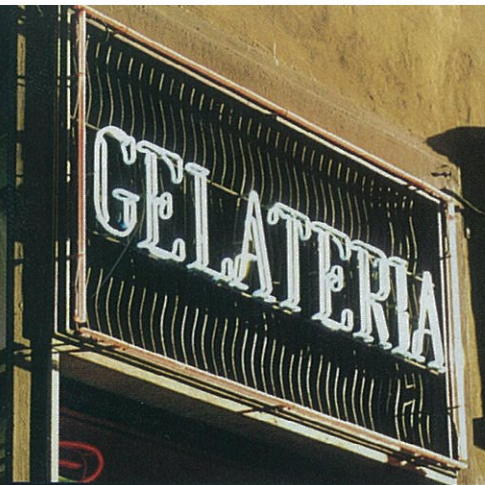
OFF THE BEATEN PATH IN ITALY'S RENAISSANCE EPICENTER

US AIRWAYS

magazine

Insider's Guide to

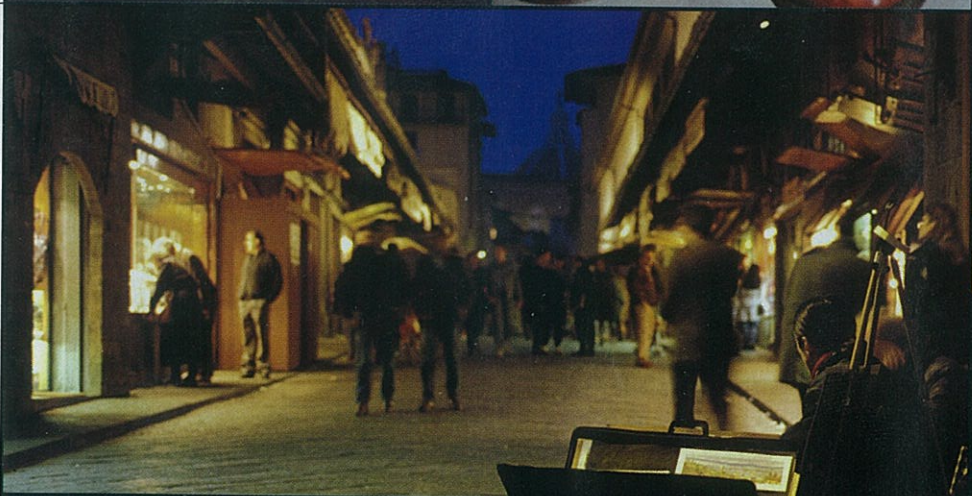
FLORENCE



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by JUDITH RITTER

usaairwaysmag.com

Here's the thing about Florence. It's maddening. There is no absolute escape from the crowds.

The streets are chaotic with tourists, pompous guides, and American college kids. It is as if there is some sort of tourism script that seizes all who enter. It calls for a visit to the Uffizi and the *David*, to have dinner at a classic *ristorante*, and to spend an evening in Piazza della Repubblica dodging pushy Senegalese merchants selling leather bags. But we'd been here before and this time sought a Florence beyond the glorious pieces of sculpture and the sirens in the Renaissance paintings. We sought more than ubiquitous souvenir sellers with ashtrays of cathedrals and jockey shorts imprinted with Michelangelo's iconic statue. On this visit we were determined to go a little off script, a little off road — and when we did, we discovered a Florence luxuriant, seductive, and earthy.

On our first day we decided simply to lose ourselves walking in the less frenetic Oltrarno district on the southern side of the river, away from the tourist epicenter. We began at the market, not the famous, giant Mercato Centrale where tourists in epicurean overdrive wander among the fruit, vegetable, pasta, and fish vendors, but the one in the Santo Spirito neighborhood. At this local market, piles of cotton panties and beige *bras vie* with baskets of tomatoes and stacks of zucchini for the attention of housewives. Church bells ring as men in undershirts lounge on benches and play the card game *briscola* under the watchful eye of a pensive statue of Cosimo Ridolfi. The streets around the market and the 15th-century Brunelleschi-designed Santo Spirito church that anchors the district are home to hole-in-the-

wall fruit stores crammed with fresh figs and watermelon, tiny hardware stores with knives and fruit bowls, and small doorways that open into shops where artisans ply ancient crafts.

In just such a doorway we found master shoemaker Stefano Bemer. Wearing a stained and worn apron, he sits in his cramped, unassuming shop and arduously creates fashionable men's shoes from rare leathers, traditional vegetable glues, and hand-twisted threads. Bemer tells us he committed himself to centuries-old



Stefano Bemer

shoemaking techniques the first time he saw a pair of beautifully handmade footwear: "The moment I saw those shoes, I understood what I wanted to do until I was old." We watch him work for a while, and as we leave he insists we visit his favorite neighborhood hangout, Bar Gori di Gori Alfiero. The coffee bar is decorated with both posters of massive chrome motorcycles and framed needlepoint pastoral scenes. The latter are the handiwork of the proud owner, who gestures for us to come up to the old wooden bar to have our steamy espresso with the gossiping locals.

The rest of the day we went where whim took us, strolling down streets where Florentines hung out and chatted or hurried to and from work. On Via di Santo Spirito we stopped by a shop smelling of fresh wood where, among stacks of boards and rows of chisels, Leonardo Romanelli makes picture frames. As he worked, he

happily told us stories about the neighborhood where his family has handcrafted wood since the 1880s.

Reaching Via Sant'Agostino we ducked into Le Gemme, another small family business. For almost two centuries the Leolini family has imported precious stones from around the world. Franco Leolini has spent his life creating one-of-a-kind pieces of jewelry. "Sometimes it can take up to two years of searching to find the right stone," Leolini tells us as we sit around the back room sipping coffee with his family. Once he discovered amber with more than 1,000 insects in it, and in Sri Lanka he found a rusted can filled with dirt and sapphires. As he speaks, he opens boxes of rough peridot from Somalia, aquamarine from Namibia. It's not about the money, his daughter Elena explains — it's about the beauty. "Papà," she says, "talks about entering the stones like entering into a liquid, water, or a dream."

As if tasked by fate to preserve the old traditions, artisans like Bemer, Romanelli, and Leolini live unplugged and outside of time. Santo Spirito is full of dreamers, odd little shops, bakeries, and *caffè*. But there are also some new and chic places like the eatery Olio & Convivium, which is not only hipster headquarters, but also the best place to taste both wine and oil. The Florentine obsession with wine and with olive oil is widely known. The Sangiovese grape is so beloved by Florentines they seem to speak of it in hushed tones. And where else in the world does a city's chamber of commerce have official olive-oil tasters? Olio & Convivium bills itself as a gastronomic atelier. Translated that means 250 types of wine and dozens of varieties of olive oil, all for tasting. We just had time to have some samples along with a bite of local cheeses before continuing our walk.

In addition to the artisan workshops around Via della Chiesa and Via delle Caldaie, the area now also has its share of funk and fashion. Borgo San Frediano is among the newest alternative haunts. And shops like Le Conquiste, run by the Magherinis, a stylish mom-and-son team, have limited-edition indie designer dresses. The most fashion-forward shopping in the quarter, however, takes a look backwards. There are up-and-coming, vintage-cool boutiques like Pitti Vintage with its treasures such as Jackie O-style dresses, lacy Victorian blouses, and Elvis-era jeans.

For all our wanderings, we couldn't visit Florence and *not go* to a museum. There are scores of museums, some of which are off the radar. Certainly, anyone visiting for the first time must take in the Western world's best art, and as a result, succumb to a minor version of "Stendhal syndrome" (temporary insanity in the face of great art). Florence not only has the world's most famous museums, but it also has a couple of the planet's weirdest. We began our second day with a visit to Museo Zoologico "La Specola." The exhibits include items such as flasks of sea slugs and a frayed collection of preserved specimens of large (a hippo) and small (mice) mammals. The curiosities are the 18th-century Anatomical Waxworks, gruesomely accurate wax cadavers in satin-lined glass "caskets." The models look so real (and creepy) that the tension of the visitors is palpable.

A destination equally odd but considerably cheerier is the colorful and quirky Salvatore Ferragamo Museum. Ferragamo had an intense, mystical, relationship to shoes. He once said, "I love shoes. They talk to you." If you feel the same way and want a good conversation with hundreds of opulent and historic shoes,



Salvatore Ferragamo Museum

don't miss this museum. The collection of footwear is both magical and over the top. There are shoes made of cellophane, shoes encrusted with mirrored glass, and shoes strung with nylon fishing line — all sitting atop their own large, luminescent Plexiglas foot.

Though Florence has streams of sturdy tourists dutifully lining up outside sacred places by daylight, the city has another persona come sundown. The nightlife can be raucous, raunchy, and decidedly upbeat. Cool circa 2007 began in the Santa Croce area with an evening visit to Moyo for an *aperitivo* and some people-watching. Ultra-modern Moyo is the latest boîte for scenesters and techies. Open until 3 a.m., it is among the very few wireless hot-spots in a city that takes more interest in the 15th-century technologies of da Vinci than those of the Gateses and Jobses of the 21st. Moyo keeps the beat into the wee hours and we could have stayed, but we were beckoned by the city's fashionista haunt, The Pink Room at The Lounge. The luxe hangout is bathed in the glow of pink light, and Florence's best-dressed party people (not us) clink

glasses and watch their favorite music videos.

On our last day, we walked the late-afternoon streets in the city center. There still were lines outside the museums. A busker played a James Taylor song on guitar. Hawkers happily swore by the authenticity of their silks and silver, all against the steady background chatter from curious and awed tourists. Although we love this Florence, on this trip we found a different city, our own city. In our Florence, the fine art is in a small market where a white-haired woman in a cotton dress scrutinizes pomodoro with the concentration of a forensic investigator. It's where the sculpture is the moment frozen in time in a bar when a gnarled worker, dusty with plaster, stands perfectly still, a tiny espresso cup in one huge hand, a cigarette in another, and sighs as a soccer ball on a grainy TV screen hits a post and bounces back out onto the field. This is a Florence small and hidden away from plain view. "Firenze, che bella!" ◀

JUDITH RITTER is known for radio journalism. Her work appears on NPR and Public Radio International.



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ARTISANS

STEFANO BEMER
Borgo San Frediano 143/r
011.39.055.222.558
stefanobemer.it

LEONARDO ROMANELLI
Via di Santo Spirito 16/r

FRANCO LEOLINI
LE GEMME
Via di Sant'Agostino 13/r
011.39.089.345.288
legemme.it

ODD MUSEUMS

MUSEO ZOOLOGICO
"LA SPECOLA"
Via Romana 17/r
011.39.055.228.8251

MUSEO SALVATORE FERRAGAMO
Via dei Tornabuoni 2
011.39.055.336.0456
salvatoreferragamo.it

SHOPS

PITTI VINTAGE
Sdrucchiolo dei Pitti 19/r

LE CONQUISTE
Borgo San Frediano 27/r

FOOD & DRINK

BAR GORI DI GORI
ALFIERO
Via dell'Orto 31/r

OLIO & CONVIVIAM
Via Santo Spirito 4/r
011.39.055.265.8198
conviviumfirenze.it

NIGHT LIFE

MOYO
Via dei Benci 23/r
moyo.it

THE LOUNGE
Piazza S. Maria Novella 9/10r
thelounge.it

UNUSUAL HOTELS

JK PLACE
Santa Maria Novella 7
011.39.055.264.5181
jkplace.com

PALAZZO MAGNANI FERONI
Borgo San Frediano 5
011.39.055.239.9544
florencepalace.it

