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# Where high art meets

## THE PERFECT BREAK

*Florence at this time of the year offers a perfect chance to see Renaissance treasures without the hordes, says Gill Charlton*

### Why go there?

To see the world's greatest collection of Renaissance art and architecture when it is not completely swamped by tourists. Most visitors still make a beeline for the famous galleries – the Uffizi, the Bargello and the Accademia. But there is also huge pleasure in seeking out lesser-known 15th-century treasures in the city's churches, monasteries and palaces.

Florence is renowned for its frescoes. Cleaned and restored, their jewel-bright colours glow in even the gloomiest chapels. Among the best are Ghirlandaio's *Life of St Francis* in Santa Trinita and Fra Angelico's beatific scenes from the life of Christ in the monks' cells at San Marco. On a more domestic scale, the newly restored Palazzo Davanzati gives an insight into the home life of a well-to-do merchant of the period.

High fashion is Florence's other draw and the big names – Gucci, Valentino, Ferragamo – have flagship stores on via de Tornabuoni, with prices around 20 per cent lower than in Britain.

Tour groups rarely cross the river to explore the more workaday Oltrarno with its neighbourhood markets, antiques and artisan workshops – a welcome respite from the cultural treadmill, which can exhaust even the most eager visitor.

For what's on in the city each month, visit [www.firenzeturismo.it](http://www.firenzeturismo.it).

### Travel by...

Meridiana (0845 355 5588, [www.meridiana.it](http://www.meridiana.it)) is the only airline to fly from Britain into Florence's city airport, a 15-minute taxi ride to the historic centre. Three flights daily from London Gatwick; returns from £123.

Other airlines fly to Pisa, 80km to the west, including BA (0870 850 9850, [www.ba.com](http://www.ba.com)) from Gatwick and Manchester, Ryanair ([www.ryanair.com](http://www.ryanair.com)).

### Stay at...

The newly restored Residenza del Moro near Piazza Goldoni for the luxury and service of a top hotel but the feel of staying in a private palazzo: 11 rooms and suites, some frescoed all over, others lined with silk or garlanded with flowers and cherubs. A rare tree-shaded garden for meals. Doubles from £400; book through Small Luxury Hotels (00800 525 48000, [www.slh.com](http://www.slh.com)).

Among the three-star hotels, the Hotel Hermitage (00 39 055 287 216, [www.hermitagehotel.com](http://www.hermitagehotel.com)), beside the Ponte Vecchio, wins on location and has a roof terrace for breakfast and drinks; doubles £86-£175. For good value, bright rooms and helpful staff, try the new Hotel Il Perseo (00 39 055 212 504, [www.hotelperseo.it](http://www.hotelperseo.it)) near the Duomo; doubles £96.

Best of the b&bs is Johlea 1 (00 39 055 463 3292, [www.johanna.it](http://www.johanna.it)) in a 19th-century townhouse a 10-minute walk north of the Duomo. Panoramic roof terrace and honest bar. Singles £50, doubles from £68.

### Spend the morning in...

The Uffizi Gallery ([www.polomuseale.firenze.it/english](http://www.polomuseale.firenze.it/english)).

The greatest museum of Renaissance art in the world restricts visitors with timed tickets. Three unmissables are Botticelli's *Primavera* in Room 10, Leonardo da Vinci's *Adoration of the Magi* in Room 15 and Titian's *Venus of Urbino* in Room 29. To avoid horrendous queues, book at least a fortnight ahead (on 00 39 055 294 883); tickets cost 9-50 euros, paid on collection.



choice from small, less-known Italian vineyards sold by the glass, and an equally impressive selection of French and Italian cheeses, smoked meats and breads.

For a light lunch, the rooftop view, the fifth terrace of the Rinas department store or the piazza della Repubblica. Delicious hand-drawn pizza and stuffed 150g to eat in or take away the hole-in-the-wall.

Pizzacchiere on the corner of San Miniato.

### Stroll around...

The Renaissance city with AA\* (00 39 055 264 5033, [www.it](http://www.it)).

**Renaissance city: the Bell Tower of Giotto and a view over the rooftops of Florence (top), and the Ponte Vecchio bridge over the**