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*'The pearl of Italy'
'The Athens of Italy' or
'The cradle of the Renaissance'*

Florence is a city like no other. Here an abundance of *world-famous art and architecture* is united with world history. Dante, Michelangelo, Boticelli, and Leonardo da Vinci are only a few of the grand masters who lived and worked in this amazing city. Their influence lives on to the present today. But not everything is history in this formerly small town on the Arno River. The modern feeling for aesthetics is lived by the trendy Florentines who shop in the *designer stores along the Vigna Nuova* and the *Via de Tornabuoni*, as Florence is also the home of Gucci and Ferragamo.

Coffee is part of the *Italian lifestyle* and the Florentines enjoy their many cafés around the city. Whose mouths would not water on hearing names like 'café corretto', 'café macchiato', or 'cappuccino'? How the Italians lovingly name their milk-foam-covered classic. Just as irresistible are the displays of the ice cream shops, the Gelateria, with mountains of gelato in different colors, with fruit, yogurt or chocolate. Florence *stimulates all your senses* and it is no surprise that it's a tourist hot spot all year 'round.

There is so much to do and see here that visitors are often overwhelmed when they try to *make the most of their short stay* with optimal choices. You can relax, however, as your Edelweiss tour guide will show you all the *must-sees*.

In the morning we will take *public transport* to the center of the city, where we will start the day with a quick coffee stop. Your tour guide will tell you more about the coffee culture in Italy - that a coffee is half price when it's drunk while standing at the bar, or that only tourists drink cappuccino after 11 a.m. Following our refreshment, we will leave the Santa Maria Novella station and start our journey to 'the middle ages'.

Walking towards San Lorenzo, we will arrive at the 'Cappelle Medicee', the central tomb of the *old Medici dynasty*, a family that brought a lot of wealth to the city. The tomb's chapel is

Michelangelo's first architectural work. The Medicis' tombs are decorated with his unique and incomparable sculptures: 'Notte e Giorno' (Day and Night) and 'Aurora e Crepuscolo' (Dusk and Dawn). One of the many trendy cafés awaits us here. The café is a place where politics is practiced, *news is spread* and, of course, coffee is consumed. The rattling of the coffee cups, the smell of fresh cornetti, the steaming sound of the milk frother - *this is Italy!*

We will go through the market around the *Basilica San Lorenzo*. This is a very busy place, so it is wise to keep an eye on your belongings here. Turning right, we get closer to Florence's landmark: the Duomo. The full name of the *fourth largest Duomo* on earth is 'Duomo di Santa Maria del Fiore'. You can relish the breathtaking grandeur and the arranged vividness of the pink-green-white marble façade. There was no roof on the Duomo during its first 100 years as the builders and architects of the time simply did not know how to cover such an enormous monument with a cupola. Brunelleschi, whose statue is on the left side of the Duomo, eventually came along to help. The cupola has two layers for structural reasons. In between those layers are the stairs you can *climb to the top* to a view over Florence that will take your breath away. Understandably, the Duomo is the most famous building in Florence today.

Opposite the Duomo is the baptistery with Ghiberti's 'Gates to Paradise', with its bronze doors of unbelievable craftsmanship and beauty. Leaving the tourist crowds behind, we head towards the back of the Duomo, to the Bargello. This is the *home of Italy's largest collection* of Tuscan sculptures from the Renaissance. On the ground level are some of Michelangelo's originals, like the 'Drunken Bacchus' and the 'Tondo Pitti' (a large sculpture of the Madonna with her child).

It is time for a snack. Perhaps one of the Tuscan specialties like panzanella, ribollita, bruschetta, pappardelle al ragu or a gigantic bistecca fiorentino? Maybe one of the *numerous varieties of pizza* or a pasta dish? After all, Italy has around 600 different kinds of pasta to offer and every family has their favorite. Your tour guide will help you with the menu. Afterwards we will stroll over to 'Piazza Santa Croce'. In the Basilica Santa Croce some of Italy's most famous, and sometimes infamous, men found their last peace: Michelangelo, Macciavelli, and Dante. From the 14th century onwards the Piazza was the *stage for festivals, tournaments and the calcio-storico* - a mixture of soccer and rugby without any rules.





On the southern Palazzo dell' Antella is a marble tile marking the halfway line of one of the *oldest soccer fields in the world*.

Next on the landmark list are the Piazza della Signoria and the Uffizi galleries. For centuries the Piazza was the *town's center of political activity*. Glamor, glory and terrible misery took place here. At the entrance to Palazzo Vecchio (the town hall) is a copy of Michelangelo's world-famous 'David'. (The original is in the Galleria dell' Accademia in Venice.) Look at him! Every muscle is anatomically correct, every vein visible and his look into the distance is wistful. Michelangelo was a sculpting genius, but how did he know about the human anatomy? Your tour guide will *tell you the secret*.

We will move from the Palazzo to the huge forecourt of the Uffizi galleries. They are nowhere near the *largest art galleries* in the world, but they house the largest collection of Italian and Florentine art worldwide. A Mafia car bomb exploded in front of the west wing of the gallery in May of 1993, killing 5 people. Damage from the attack, combined with the intense popularity of the Uffizi galleries (more than 1.5 million visitors a year), led to a fundamental renovation and restructuring. Reaching the end of the Uffizi galleries, we stand in front of the Arno River and the next landmark of Florence: the Ponte Vecchio (,old bridge').

The first evidence of a stone bridge on the narrowest point of the Arno is from the year 972. The river seems calm, but it can show a different face. *Floods destroyed the bridge* in 1177 and again in 1333. In 1966 it only just escaped masses of rising water. The butchers used to have their shops on the bridge. That was handy as they could throw all their garbage into the river. The *jewelers dominate this spot* today. The Ponte Vecchio is the only bridge in town that did not get destroyed by German troops in 1944. Some say the survival was due to Hitler's explicit order, while others claim a German commander disobeyed his orders.

From Ponte Vecchio, the Arno leads us towards the *Piazza della Repubblica*. This used to be the Roman forum and, later, the medieval heart of the city. Italy's designers offer their highly desired products in the 'Vigna Nuova'. Very tempting if you can afford the price tags! Who can resist such a *variety of shoes?*

Unfortunately, we have no time for shopping sprees as, right on the southern end of the train station, we see the green-white marble façade of the *Cathedral of Santa Maria Novella*. The young Michelangelo might have worked on this fresco during his apprenticeship years with Ghirlandaio.

Finally, with our motorbikes being still at the hotel, we treat ourselves to an *Aperol spritz* and chat about the day just passed.

FACTS AND FIGURES

- Florence, the capital of Tuscany, has 370,000 citizens.
- The Arno River goes right through the old town.
- To the north of Florence stretches the Apennine Mountains and to the south are the rolling hills of the Chianti.
- Florence, originally named Florentina (after the roman goddess of the flowers), was founded by Julius Caesar in 59 A.D.
- Tourism and wine are the most important industries, as well as the production of Cantuccini.
- Florence is home to 70 museums, the oldest Italian university, and famous fashion labels like Gucci, Prada, Pucci and Roberto Cavalli.
- The AC Florence soccer club plays in the highest division, the A series.

USEFUL INFORMATION

For more information about *availability and pricing* please do not hesitate to contact our Edelweiss Bike Travel team. We are looking forward hearing from you:

EDELWEISS BIKE TRAVEL - Sportplatzweg 14 - 6414 Mieming - Austria

Phone: +43.5264.5690 - From North America call: 011.43.5264.5690

E-mail: worldtours@edelweissbike.com - Web: www.edelweissbike.com

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