

48 HOURS IN FLORENCE

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The city that's a work of art in itself is at its most benign in spring. And after Da Vinci, don't forget to track down some Versace. By **Harriet O'Brien**

WHY GO NOW?
Late spring is the best time to visit the work of art that is Florence. As the city sits in a river basin, winters tend to be wet and cold, while summers can be insufferably warm. Right now, you can expect fine weather without the high-season hordes.

BEAM DOWN
The Amerigo Vespucci airport is served from Gatwick by Meridiana and is a 15-minute drive from the centre; the shuttle bus to the central **Santa Maria Novella station** (1) costs €4.50 (£3.20). Far more choice is available from a wide range of UK airports to Pisa; through www.opodo.co.uk, fares of £99 return are available from Gatwick for late April. You can travel by bus (£8/£5.70) or train (£5.20/£3.70) in about 90 minutes to Santa Maria Novella station (1).

GET YOUR BEARINGS
Elegantly bisected by the River Arno, Florence is surprisingly compact. The narrow streets of its *centro storico*, or historic centre, are best explored on foot. Most sights are north of the river, in an area encompassed by broad roads, or *viale*,

which replaced the city's medieval walls in a mad moment of late-19th-century planning. Across Florence's four historic bridges, the *Oltrarno* (literally, "the other side of the Arno") was traditionally a poorer and quieter quarter but it has become chic. The city's **central tourist office** (2) is near the cathedral at Via Cavour 1 (00 39 055 290 832; www.firenzeturismo.it; 8.30am-6.30pm daily, closing 1.30pm Sundays).

CHECK IN
Set in the heart of the city, off glamorous Via degli Strozzi, the **Helvetica & Bristol** (3) (00 39 55 26651; www.royaldemeure.com; doubles from €280/£200 including breakfast) is a gracious art deco hotel that originally served those on the Grand Tour. Its 67 rooms are generously sized, each furnished with handmade wallpaper, oil paintings, Murano chandeliers and the like. West of the **S Ambrogio food market** (4), the

Monna Lisa (5) at Borgo Pinti 27 (00 39 055 247 9751; www.monnalisa.it; doubles from €193/£138 including breakfast) is a pretty palazzo dating back to 1300, owned by descendants of the sculptor Giovanni Dupre, whose works are shown among other art here. Conveniently close to Santa Maria Novella station (1), the four-star **B&H Hotel Diplomat** (6) at 9 via Luigi Alamanni (00 39 55 260 8400; www.bh-hotels.com) has 54 comfortable rooms, many with balconies giving good views (doubles from €80/£52 including breakfast).

TAKE A HIKE
Start your walk where the Renaissance began: at the **Baptistry** (7), opposite Florence's great cathedral. The dramatic Old Testament scenes

were designed by Ghiberti in 1425; the ones in situ today are replicas, while the originals are in the cathedral's museum (9am-7.30pm daily, except Sundays to 1.40pm; €6/£4.30). Turn left past the cathedral's facade and walk down Canto della Misericordia, offering interesting perspectives of Brunelleschi's huge dome. Turn right and walk down Via del Proconsolo. On the left is a striking fortress, once Florence's prison and now the **Bargello Museum** (8) housing some of the city's finest sculpture, including Donatello's David. Its hours are of Florentine complexity: 8.15am-

1.50pm daily except the first, third and fifth Sunday of the month and the second and fourth Monday; €4 (£2.85). Continue through **Piazza S Firenze** (9) and turn right into Via di Gondi and on to the **Piazza della Signoria** (10), historically the city's political hub, where tournaments and rallies took place. Head to the south side and turn into Piazzale degli Uffizi, built as the secretariat of Cosimo de Medici in the 1560s and now home to

what is probably the most revered art gallery in the world. The **Galleria degli Uffizi** (11) includes Uccello's *Rout of San Romano* and Botticelli's *La Primavera* as well as works by Da Vinci and Michelangelo; open 8.15am-6.30pm daily except Monday (and some public holidays, including

1 May); €6.50 (£4.60). To avoid a long wait, you could book ahead on www.yourwaytoflorence.com/uffizi, although ticket prices more than double.

LUNCH ON THE RUN
Grab a cappuccino and panino at a café in the covered food hall at S Ambrogio market (4),

where stalls are variously stocked with great legs of ham, olive oils, cheeses and more, while fruit and veg are traded outside.

CULTURAL AFTERNOON
Head to the **Monastery of San Marco** (12) where Fra Angelico lived from 1436 to 1447 and painted a series of ethereal frescoes in the cells. The hospice houses a sublime collection of his altarpieces, including a lively Last Judgement (open Mon-Fri 8.15am-

1.50pm; Sat 8.15am-6.50pm; Sun 8.15am-7pm but closed on the first, third and fifth Sunday of the month and the second and fourth Monday; admission €4/£2.90).

WINDOW SHOPPING
You'll find Bulgari, Versace, Gucci and the like along Via de' Tornabuoni and Via degli Strozzi. For leather, head to the artisans' outlets around the basilica of **Santa Croce** (13). One of the oldest, most glorious shops is close to the station (1): the current **Officina Profuma Farmaceutica di Santa Maria Novella** (14) at Via della Scala 16 was started

in the early 1600s. Complete with frescoed ceilings and glass cabinets, it offers a range of old herbal remedies as well as soaps, oils and room fragrances. If you are in town on Monday, there is a market around the basilica of **San Lorenzo** (15) with leather shoes for about €25 (£18).

AN APERITIF
The chic **Colle Bereto bar and shop** (16) on Piazza degli Strozzi attracts a stylish crowd. It serves Chianti from the Colle Bereto estate, about 40km from Florence.

DINING WITH THE LOCALS
Snug and creaking with atmosphere, **Cibreo** (17) at Via dei Macci 118 (00 39 055 234 1100) is a local favourite. It serves Tuscan specialities with a gourmet twist – such as

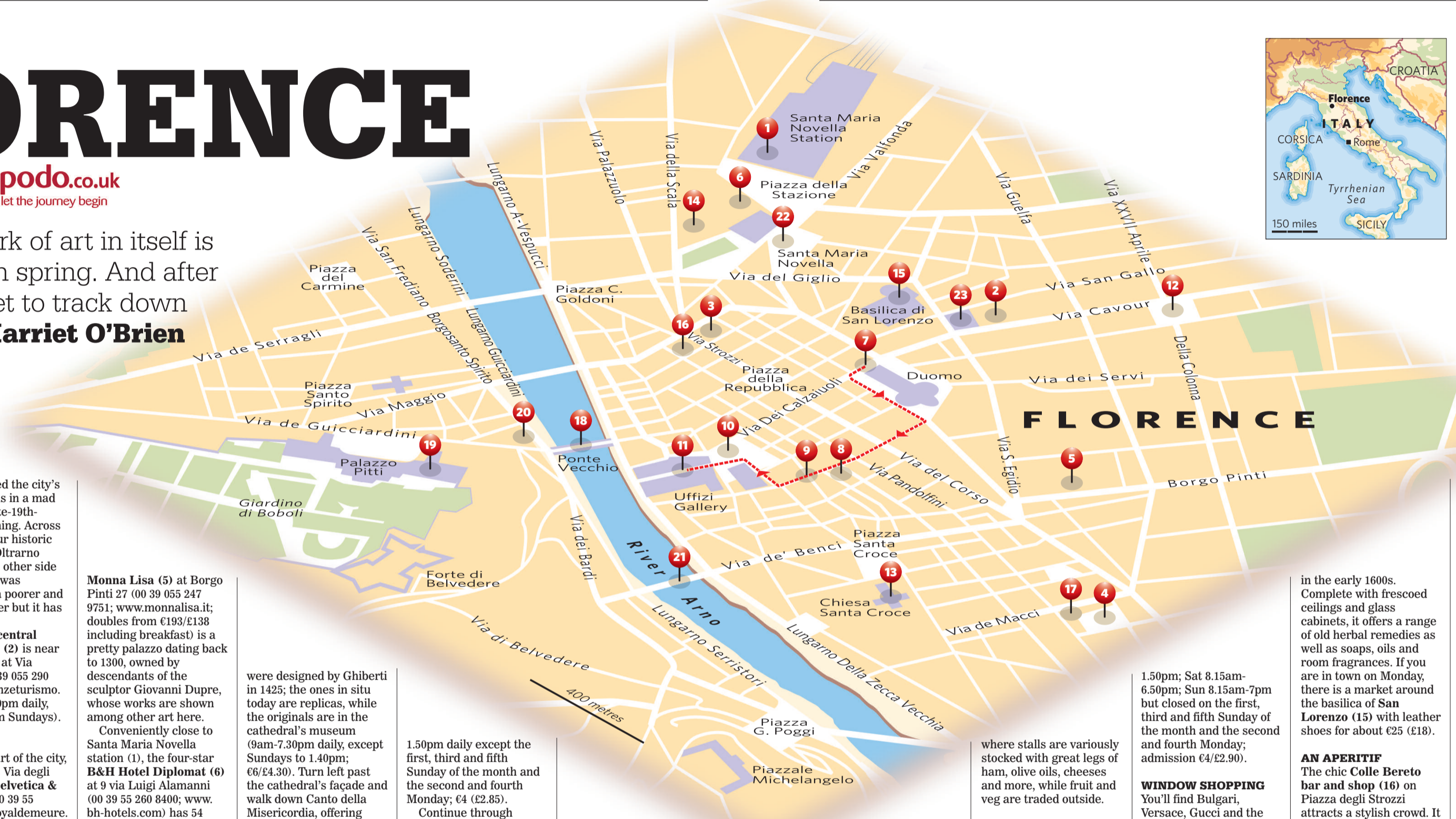
spinach pie (€12/£8.60) and leg of lamb with artichokes (€34/£24). A few doors down at Via dei Macci 122, **Cibreino** is the cheaper trattoria outlet.

SUNDAY MORNING: A WALK IN THE PARK
Cross the Arno at **Ponte Vecchio** (18), built in 1345. Stretching back from **Palazzo Pitti** (19), Boboli Gardens are a theatrical marriage of nature and art, first laid out in the 16th century. There are grottos, sculptures and fountains amid the formal avenues and topiary (open 8.15am-6.30pm daily except the first and last Monday of the month; €6/£4.30).

OUT FOR BRUNCH
In the absence of classy brunch options, make it early lunch. **Osteria del Cinghiale Bianco** (20) at Borgo S Jacopo 43 in the *Oltrarno* (00 39 055 215706; closed Wednesday) serves rustic Tuscan fare such as risotto ai funghi (€9/£6.40) and pappardelle al cinghiale (wild boar) for €10 (£7.15).

GO TO CHURCH
Cross back over at **Ponte alle Grazie** (21) and continue down Via de' Benci to the huge basilica of **Santa Croce** (13), which contains the tomb of Michelangelo, frescoes by Giotto and other treasures (open 9.30am-5.30pm from Monday to Friday, 1-5.30pm on Sundays, €5/£3.50). **Santa Maria Novella** (22), one of Florence's loveliest churches, is undergoing a facelift so its black and white facade is shrouded, but you can still take in the glorious interior. Masaccio's spellbinding *Trinity* is off the nave, while the many chapels contain wonderful frescoes, particularly the Strozzi Chapel, painted by Filippino Lippi. Mass is at 8.30am, 10.30am, noon and 6pm; otherwise the church is open to tourists Mon-Thurs and Sat 9am-5pm, Friday and Sunday 1-5pm, when admission is €2.50 (£1.80).

ICING ON THE CAKE
To see a real gem, make for the **Palazzo Medici Riccardi** (23) on Via Cavour (www.palazzo-medici.it). A small chapel is painted floor to ceiling with a magnificent fresco of the procession of Magi. Working in the late 1450s, the artist, Benozzo Gozzoli, has interpreted the scene as a pageant of kings, courtiers, giraffes, dogs and even a pet leopard sitting with its owner on a horse. The chapel is open 9am-7pm daily except Wednesdays, admission €5 (£3.50).



Old favourite: the Ponte Vecchio that spans the Arno

Graphics: Rob Brooks



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