

TRAVEL

WHETHER YOU'VE COME TO PROPOSE IN THE UFFIZI OR JUST TO FOLLOW IN DANTE'S FOOTSTEPS, THE BIRTHPLACE OF THE RENAISSANCE OOZES ROMANCE. BY **BEATRICE SAYERS**



An enduring desire and a heroic Jewish nude bring lovers to Florence. In a house in one of its narrow streets the poet Dante was instantly smitten with Beatrice, and in a workshop a few minutes' walk away Michelangelo freed from white marble the carnal force of his *David*.

All the senses are satisfied here: smell the leather from the stalls in Piazza del Mercato Nuovo, touch the statue of the *cinghiale* (wild boar) to bring luck, gaze at the ice-creams and chocolate on sale at Venchi opposite, and taste the *schacciata*, olive oil bread that makes heavenly sandwiches. While some visitors just bask in the romance others arrive with a purpose: so popular are the Uffizi Galleries as a venue for marriage proposals that it has banned accompanying professional photographers, though it is happy to welcome those who get down on one knee – perhaps in front of Botticelli's *Birth of Venus*.

Lovesick singles as well as couples flock to Dante's Church, the Chiesa di Santa Margherita dei Cerchi, a building dating to



Michelangelo's *David*

the 11th century and said to be where the poet married his wife, Gemma Donati. It contains the tomb of Beatrice and other members of the Portinari family from which she came.

Nearby and well worth a visit is the Casa di Dante, an interactive museum over three floors of a townhouse. Visitors can experience an immersive *Divine Comedy* and see editions of Dante's masterpiece in 49 languages; a Hebrew translation is prominently displayed.

Dante himself (1265–1321) may not have known any Jews, and it was not until the century after his death that a community began to flourish in Tuscany, albeit concentrated for more than 250 years in the Florentine ghetto.

Thirty years after the ghetto was abolished, in 1882 the copper-clad dome of the Great Synagogue joined Brunelleschi's giant 15th-century cupola on the city's skyline. A recently renovated museum on the building's upper floors pays tribute to David Levi, a president of the community who bequeathed his possessions for the



Breakfast at La Gemma



Terrace at Antica Torre di Via Tornabuoni 1

construction of a synagogue "worthy of the city". Now Florence also has its first Jewish mayor, Sara Funaro, elected last June.

Couples who aren't yet engaged can browse for a ring in the jewellery shops that line the Ponte Vecchio before continuing to the Giardino di Boboli, established by the Medici behind Palazzo Pitti and a wonderful place to unwind. Around every corner is a surprise: sculptures, fountains, an amphitheatre and a chestnut meadow. From the Giardino del Cavaliere, the highest point, you can gaze across to the hills south of the city.

Stay in the historic centre of Florence and you will walk to most of the sights, in which case some luxury is deserved. I sampled five-star hotels old and new.

At La Gemma, which offers a spa with sauna, steam and treatment rooms, a 60-minute massage melted away the hours spent on my feet. Fuel for the next day's



The bar at La Gemma

walking is inventive, and prepared in a *cucina a vista* (open kitchen) overseen by Michelin-starred chef Paulo Airaud. La Gemma, which opened in 2023, works hard to ensure your comfort and my suite had an iPad on which to discover more about the hotel, two large TVs, an espresso maker and, on the shelf above, an English translation of the *Divine Comedy*, a history of the fashion house Prada and a pop-up book on Florence. A heady mix.

Away from the bustle of narrow streets is the Antica Torre di Via Tornabuoni 1. This historic mansion, which hosted aristocratic guests in the early 20th century, reopened in 2001 following careful restoration and has a professionalism born of experience. My room had shelves lined with antiquarian books and a breathtaking view over the Arno. Along with the 25 rooms and suites the Antica Torre has a large apartment for rent and is experienced in hosting weddings and engagement parties.

After dinner I enjoyed a walk across the Ponte Santa Trinita, rebuilt after its destruction by the Nazis, to Oltrarno, the lively area south of the river, which houses the wine bars of Piazza Santo Spirito and a chocolate and gelato shop still open at 10pm.

Come to Florence with a lover or come with your curiosity and be seduced by the city. You will leave wanting more.

Hotel La Gemma, from €666 a night: lagemmahotel.com
Antica Torre di Via Tornabuoni 1, from €395 a night: tornabuoni1.com



Lovers say a prayer at Dante's church



Schiacciata in Oltrarno



The Great Synagogue