



A trattoria-lined cobblestone street in Florence. Opposite: a Florentine pedals alongside the Arno River.

Photography MORIAH SAWTELLE

FLORENCE, *singular*

Solo but more connected than ever, ALEXANDRA CARLTON takes an uncompromising tour through the Renaissance city.

On my first evening in Florence I set off from my riverside hotel, the wonderfully eccentric Antica Torre di Via Tornabuoni with my brain buzzing with recommendations. I'm awash with lists from Italian and expat friends. My WhatsApp bulges with trattorias and osterias and the one forno you have to try and my Google maps app is a sea of green "Want to Go" dots. In mid-April the air is crisp, my sneakers are sturdy. My plan is to weave along the narrow, cobblestone streets until I find the most exquisite Florentine meal, to mark the start of my five-day solo Florence journey.

Except that's not what happens. One by one, even in the furthest outskirts of Santa Croce and San Frediano, I arrive at towering wooden 16th-century doors, rough, sand-coloured pietraforte limestone walls with flowery-script signs overhead that have stood for hundreds of years. And beside them, queues of tourists with exactly the same idea.

This is what travel can be like these days, particularly in the more popular European cities. Throngs. Hordes. Everyone thinking they've deep-dived far enough into obscure recommendations that they'll be the only person who knows about that untouched mom-and-pop place that makes the best traditional bistecca Fiorentina. Yet the algorithm has made sure that thousands of others know about it too.

After three or four of these disappointments, I trudge back into the packed crowds around the touristy centre of the city. If I can't go obscure I may as well just eat, I think.

Then an unremarkable trattoria catches my eye. It looks like my parents' circa 1992 "Tuscan era" kitchen: yellow sponged walls, brown-and-yellow checked tablecloths. It isn't in an unknown area, nor is it charming in the sort of aesthetically pleasing way ▶





Above: a Fiat on the streets of Florence. Opposite, clockwise from top left: a quiche at S Forno Panificio; Cibrèo in Florence; an espresso; a bicycle rests on a wall; an automatic photo booth; a wine window in Florence; a cobblestone street; an exhibition at Museo Salvatore Ferragamo; panini at Antico Noè.

that’s ever going to earn it a tonne of Instagram posts or a namecheck in Goop. It simply looks like a workaday place serving honest Florentine food.

I push open the heavy door, sit down, and a basket of that polarising saltless Florentine bread appears at the table. I order a bowl of thick ribollita and a glass of house Chianti. The classic cucina povera soup is soft and comforting, swimming with folds of bottle-green cavolo nero, the wine is floral and tannic. The waiter is sweetly encouraging as I stutter through a mashup of Italian/French/Spanish that is always my gateway language when I arrive in a Latin-based European country before I get used to the local tongue. None of this was in the plan. And it’s just lovely.

Over the next five days I begin to realise that slipping solo around Florence, sometimes using my friends’ suggestions but mostly on instinct, is the very best way to experience this magical Renaissance city. Alone I can dart through these narrow streets swiftly. I can duck into enotecas and pasticcerias with a soft “permesso!” while others crowd the doorways. As the days go on I feel like I connect deeply to this city because my connection to it is one-on-one.

It’s a sentiment shared by former *Gourmet Traveller*

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writer Harriet Davidson, who now lives and works in Italy and France. “To move through Italy as an outsider requires connection, and not the kind we’ve all gotten used to via screens,” she tells me. “Connection to ourselves and connection to the people and world around us. Real connection. Just go. Walk, talk, watch, and listen to yourself.”

And what better way to listen to yourself when there’s only yourself to listen to. “Travelling solo comes with a whole lot of luxury,” she adds. “You get to decide everything based purely on what you want. There’s usually a spare seat at the bar for you, you can spend three hours in a bookshop, you can walk for hours on end, nipping into delis and bakeries to snack as you go. You get to talk to strangers in a way that only happens when you’re alone. And that’s just wonderful.”

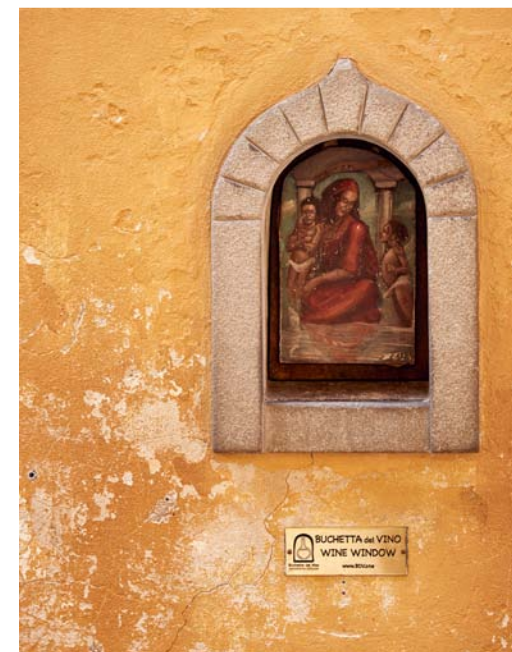
Over the next few days, I do plenty of that. Florence, as Australian tour guide Dr Kathleen Olive from Limelight Arts Travel told me before I left Australia, is ideal for solo travel. “In Italy, dining by yourself is not odd. They assume you’re there to appreciate a good meal and so they give you good tables. And because there is so much to do culturally your days can be really full.”

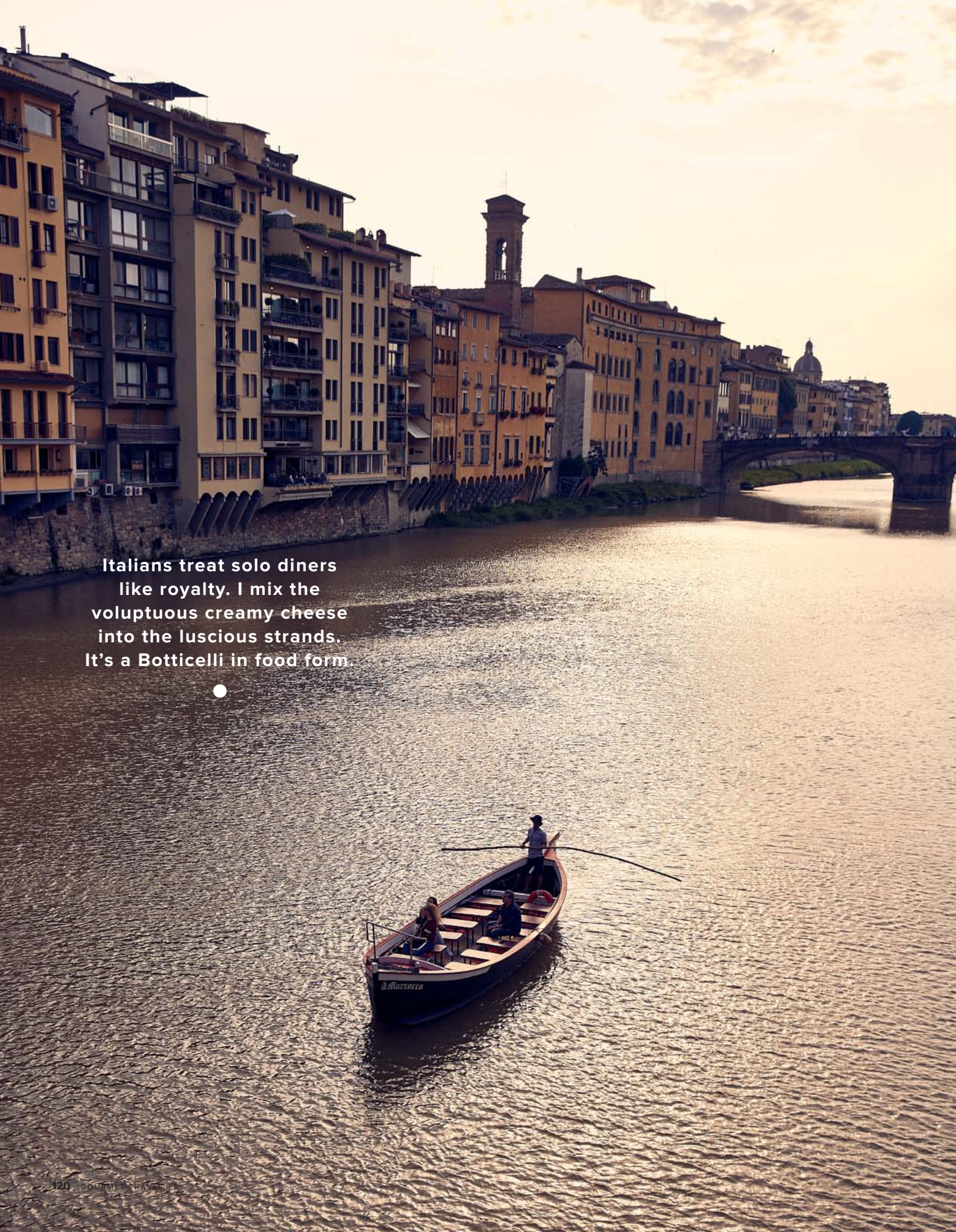
She’s right. My days are jammed, though more with eating than anything else. Breakfasts are leant against bars sipping at macchiatos and picking at pistachio cornettos, sharing a smile with whoever’s sipping their macchiato next to me, or on one memorable morning eating a soft-as-a-cloud budino di ricotta beneath the ribbed vault ceiling of a light-filled bakery called S Forno Panificio in Santo Spirito.

Most lunches I spend playing a game of “pursue the perfect panini”, switching it up between the rich, chunky speck, rocket, brie and walnut sauce version at an almost invisible panini shop called Antico Noè Panini of Florence in Santa Croce, or experimental combinations like mussels and spinach or herring, cheese and fresh tomato from tiny hole-in-the-wall Semel near the Mercato Sant’Ambrogio.

In the evenings I develop a taste for Florentine pizza. Controversial I know – as one Roman food writer friend insists, nowhere makes good pizza anywhere in Italy except Rome or Napoli but I learn to love the ones I find in this bread-obsessed city, from the thick sourdough crusts they bake at Divina Pizza, or the schiacciata bases from Bondi Le Focaccine close to the train station, which I order topped with fresh ricotta and sautéed zucchini.

Italian isn’t a language I’m overly confident using but because I’m on my own I push myself to speak it and listen to it much more than if I had an English-speaking ►





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companion to fall back on. By day three I'm opening conversations with such ease that people assume I'm Italian and fire back with rapid responses that I have no chance of understanding, leading me to burst into apologetic laughter. No one seems to mind at all.

Antico Noè's panini kitchen transforms into a restaurant at night and it's here that I discover the truth to Dr Olive's promise that Italians treat solo diners like royalty. I'm led to the very best window seat, where I get to watch groups of students swarming the kebab shop on the other side of the funny little ancient stone archway of the Volta di S. Piero, and eavesdrop on their happy chatter as they fill the wooden tables around me.

The menu, which changes daily, is handwritten in round, impenetrable Italian cursive which I doubt I could read even if it were English, so I ask for help. The server closes her eyes in rapture as she assures me that the spaghetti with burrata, chilli and anchovies is the most delicious pasta on the pass that night. I order it and mix the voluptuous creamy cheese into the luscious strands. It's a Botticelli in food form. The floor team sends me looks as I eat that say "We're so happy you love it. We're happy you're here."

I spend one afternoon dawdling through the nine rooms of the Museo Salvatore Ferragamo which I'm surprised to discover has very little to do with either the famous designer shoes, nor the designer himself. It turns out Salvatore's wife, Wanda, was the real brains and talent behind the brand. The museum isn't a tribute to her either – its creators respect her desire to stay out of the spotlight – instead it chronicles the progress of Italian women's lives in general in the 1950s and '60s. I spend hours lingering over old *Grazia* magazines and packs of 1950s Barilla spaghetti. What a luxury it is to be able to sit as long as I like in the room playing an old black and white film from the 1960s without anyone telling me I have to be anywhere else.

There's only one moment when my devil-may-care approach to my wanderings takes a slightly unsettling turn.



BOOKING INFO

Antica Torre di Via Tornabuoni Hotel is in central Florence. Prices start from \$520 per double room per night. tornabuoni1.com

Florence is 90 minutes from Rome or three hours from Milan on a high-speed train. italiarail.com

Clockwise from top left: an apricot tart at S Forno Panificio; ornate details of classic Florentine architecture. Opposite: sunset on the Arno River.

Late one night my phone battery dies and I'm lost. The alleyway is unusually dark and I have no idea if I'm walking in the right direction to reach my hotel. I feel vulnerable, verging on nervous. What takes place next feels so dreamlike, so unlikely that in hindsight I wonder if I imagined it.

Behind me, a woman approaches slowly on a bicycle and begins singing in a sweet soprano voice. She rides behind me, then a little ahead, and then slows down until I catch up and pedals ahead again until eventually her aria leads us both to a light-filled street next to the Arno River where I get my bearings. I'm safe.

I'd love to say she was an angel from a Fra Angelico fresco come to life. In reality she was one solo woman helping another, embodying the unending kindness of this warm-stoned welcoming Tuscan town. ●