

ESCAPE TO THE FOUR SEASONS IN FLORENCE

By Caroline Phillips



There are five-star hotels, and then there are the ones that deserve an entire firmament of stars. Places like the Plaza in New York, Claridge's in London, and the Hôtel Ritz in Paris. I've stayed in the gold list of historical hotels from Mumbai's Taj Mahal to Raffles in Siem Riep and Le Meurice in Paris too. It's with this context in mind that I say that the Four Seasons in Florence is a real corker. A hotel so good that I'd like to live there, *per favore*.

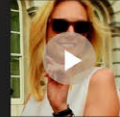
It's made up of two Renaissance buildings: the 15th century 'Palazzo Della Gherardesca' and 'La Villa,' a convent in the 16th century. The suites would probably make Renaissance uber-man Leonardo's heart skip a beat — with up to 1300 square foot of soaring ceilings, Baroque frescoes, chandeliers, and traditional Italian décor. As for the bi-level Duomo Suite, with its two marble bathrooms, and its numero duo sitting room overlooking the Duomo *and* the Hotel's 11-acre private botanical park plus the ooh-ah vista of Firenze rooftops...every last detail is perfect. Even the cupboards are scented with bags of frankincense.



The hotel is a feast for the eyes, soul and stomach. There's the lobby that's a 15th century courtyard with intricate bas reliefs and stuccoes of classical and mythological events. Function and private rooms with ceiling murals, porticoes, barrel-vaults, and ornamental coffering. A *capella* (chapel) turned reading room. And a former church now banquet hall that has been restored to its 19th century splendour. Everywhere the air is heady with fragrances created by Dr. Vranjes, a Florentine artisan perfumer and 'nose' extraordinaire — and, from the scent of profusions of flowers arranged by Vincenzo D'Ascanio, a man who's more flower *artist* than florist.

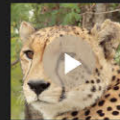
I wander through rooms where a Chancellor of the Florentine Republic under Lorenzo il Magnifico, Pope Leo XI's sister, Costanza, and the Viceroy of Egypt lived. Then order my husband some shoes from Stefano Berner: custom-made ones, priced from 1150 Euros for standard measurements and from 3650 Euros if they're made entirely by hand...in my dreams.

VIDEOS



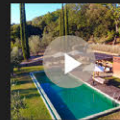
LONDON FASHION WEEK

READ MORE



A CHANCE FOR CHEETAHS

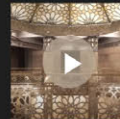
READ MORE



CASTELLO DI VICARELLO - A DAY WITH US

READ MORE

FEATURED CONTENT



BEIRUT WITH ANOUSKA HEMPEL

READ MORE



Afterwards, there are Bellinis in the Atrium Bar, with a live piano tinkling in the background. Then we eat superb regional cuisine in the hotel's Michelin-starred restaurant, Il Palagio — midst tapestries, candelabras and linen tablecloths. The food is cooked by God's right hand man, Executive Chef Vito Mollica. Think roasted scampi with parsnip velouté, Iberian guanciale and hazelnut oil; scallops carpaccio with ox bone marrow and caviar; Cavatelli pasta 'cacio e pepe' with marinated red prawns and baby squid; risotto with raw shellfish and champagne; 'Laura Peri' pigeon cooked in pork bladder with Vin Santo and thyme scented caramelised fruits; and venison loin with chestnut purée and pomegranate reduction. We eat it all. Every last morsel. That's what tasting menus are for. (Five courses just 130 Euros.)

There are also excellent wine pairings, a list of nearly 400 bottles, and 50 on offer by the glass. Tenuta Fessina A Puddara Etna Bianco 2014, Feudo Montoni Etna Ros 2015, Dr Loosen Riesling Ürziger Würzgarten 2013, Fattori Brunello di Montalcino Riserva 2008...they get the thumbs up. Or for people (like me) who don't drink alcohol, there are gourmet juices such as a Sauvignon grape juice or Gazzosa with Amalfi lemons selected to accompany the appropriate dishes.



Next day, a visit to the Four Seasons Spa. It's reached by strolling down a tree-lined path beside lawns, statues, pools and fountain. Not to mention a small Ionic temple. The Spa has 10 treatment rooms — pungent with the scent of pepper, amber and orange — and wet rooms with glass mosaic walls and floors. It's possible to have Black Pearl treatments that contain 24k gold. Or an excellent bespoke massage with therapist Francesca, with oil that smells of Calabrian oranges.

I could stay inside forever. Happily. But Firenze beckons. I spent an entire summer holiday here once, living in a *pensione*, visiting endless churches, the Uffizi, the Accademia Gallery. Falling in love with Giotto's work. Gawping at all those Leonardos and Raphaels and the David. Not to mention visiting the Duomo with its Giorgio Vasari ceiling fresco, and spending endless rapt moments in front of its doors with Ghiberti's bronze relief baptistery doors. So yes, go and see them all. Again and again. And visit the more recent museums, such as the Museo dell' Opera del Duomo with its reliquaries, paintings, wooden models and tapestries. Beautifully designed by architect Adolfo Natalini, its four floors are guaranteed to make the heart soar — and that's before even seeing Donatello's moving penitent Mary Magdalene, and the monumental singing galleries by Luca della Robbia and Donatello. And only the stylish Italians would put a Michelangelo Pieta in the same room as (electronic wizard) Bill Viola's *Observance*. *Bellissimo!*



Then I head off for Via de' Tornabuoni — just a mile from the hotel — for clothes from Armani to Zegna. Despite the invasion of H&M, Zara and the like, there are still a lot of independent shops too. In particular, near the Santa Croce church, the Scuola del Cuio sells jackets, bags, purses, wallets and the like of calfskin to snakeskin — and all handcrafted by folk you see at work in this erstwhile Franciscan friars' dormitory. Afterwards I sit simply to soak up the atmosphere in a cafe beside a piazza with a fountain — whilst licking *il gelato of pistacchio, mandorla e cioccolato* from a gelato heaven that sells mountains of tiramisu, menta and amarena ice-cream. But the Four Seasons soon beckons again....like the best dream-meets-fairytale with a sprinkling of Renaissance angel glitter.

Stay in the Four Seasons Hotel urban resort in the heart of Florence with an outdoor pool, spa and a 5-acre garden, in a Standard Room from 400 Euros per night, with breakfast excluded. Book online at www.fourseasons.com/florence, e-mail flo.reservations@fourseasons.com, or call +39 055 26261. Car hire available from www.holidayautos.co.uk.

Caroline Phillips is an award-winning freelance journalist who contributes to publications from Sunday and daily newspapers to glossy magazines and various luxury websites. To see more of her work, go to www.carolinephillips.net.

HIGHLIGHTS OF THE WEEK



LEWA WILDLIFE
CONSERVANCY – AT THE
CENTRE OF AFRICAN RHINO
CONSERVATION

[READ MORE](#)



BENTLEY MOMENTUM
UNBREAKABLE – A
FRAGRANCE FOR THE
URBAN COOL HUNTER

[READ MORE](#)



TOP DESTINATIONS FOR A
ROYAL HONEYMOON IN 2018

[READ MORE](#)

THE NEWSLETTER

THE

Escape, explore and discover our online magazine where you will find up-to-the-minute articles, news and