

The



# Gallivanter's Guide<sup>©</sup>



IDYLIC PLACES FOR DEDICATED TRAVELLERS

## FLORENCE

ITALY

Everyone asks me where to stay in Florence and I say that it depends upon what you want to do, as location is key. If you want to be 30 seconds from the Duomo and the shops, then Hotel Savoy will be your choice. If you want to look onto the Arno and the Ponte Vecchio, then Lungarno Hotel is on the water. If you prefer to escape the bustle and head into the Tuscan hills, then Villa San Michele is the historic option; but if you want to stay in a Palazzo, be 10 minute's walk from the Duomo and have a spa, pool and 11-acre garden at your disposal, then it has to be the Four Seasons. That said, although location is paramount, service, cuisine and comfort have to be considered and this is what we were looking for on our trip, because, like you, we want it all.

### Hotel Savoy.

On Piazza della Repubblica, in the cen-

tre of the centre, Hotel Savoy is a marvellously fashionable people-watching hotel that really captures the soul of this vibrant city. Either ensconced on the terrace with a rich espresso, where you are automatically misted by your cantilevered parasol; or in L'Incontro Bar & Restaur-

we were very impressed that our guest history was right up to date; passport details all on file from previous Rocco Forte hotels.

The classic modern design here is chic yet approachable and if you stay, as we did, on the second floor, the ceilings are

so high and the windows so tall that light floods every corner.

Our Executive Suite, #214, comprised a very well designed space; compartmentalised from entrance lobby and office area (with a bookcase filled with collectible English and Italian novels reflecting the Anglo-Italian heritage of the Forte family), to a comfortable sitting area with Bang & Olufsen flat screen and

integral DVD and the now ubiquitous iPod dock; and thence to the airy king-size bedroom with its walk-in closet. OK, as with all Rocco Forte hotels, the bed was not the most comfortable, but the linen sheets and merino blankets served us rather well. Bathrooms, as with sister



LOCATION  
LOCATION  
LOCATION  
LOCATION



Clockwise from top left: Hotel Savoy is right next to The Duomo. Hotel Lungarno looks onto the Arno River. Four Seasons is a destination in itself. Villa San Michele overlooks the Tuscan hills.

ant, where the most elegant people gather, this is where you learn that the latest colour is mauve and that you are much too old to wear the new short smocks. No wonder that all the art in this hotel is devoted to shoes and hats.

The welcome is exceptionally warm and

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#### Gallivanter's Ratings.

★★★★★ One in a million    ★★★★★ Extraordinary    ★★★★★ Highly recommended    ★★★ An acceptable choice    ★★ Good in parts    ★ Go if you must

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Entrance to Hotel Savoy.

hotel, De Russie in Rome, are gorgeously clad in marble and original mosaic but tend to be on the small side, with in-tub showers and curtains. A nice touch was a bottle of herbal cologne from the famed Farmaceutica di Santa Maria Novella.

Suite guests enjoy lots of extras, including packing and unpacking, if you wish, in-room check-in, a useful mobile phone, complimentary internet and pressing upon arrival.

There are various decorative schemes throughout the rooms, from green, to white and beige, but generally, the look is *en serie*, although given the historic nature of the building, configurations vary considerably. #409, for instance, is another Executive

Suite but is smaller in feel, which is why I prefer the second floor accommodation. That said, two-bedroom Executive Suite, #414 is quite special as it has a rather nice balcony. Opt, at least, for a Studio Room, as Doubles can be overly cosy.

A simple lunch on the terrace was a delight; my Salad Niçoise originally presented and as fresh as could be. Service can be slow out here, probably because staff has to fight its way through hordes of tourists, but it was always utterly charming, and frankly, we did not mind, given the peo-



Desk area of an Executive Suite at Hotel Savoy.

ple-watching opportunities and the fragrant hedge of rosemary and sage that created the terrace boundary.

At dinner, we decided to try the main dining room of L'Incontro, which was a much more peaceful venue. This was a genuinely good experience, with an excellent red tuna carpaccio, perfect sea bass served with sea asparagus, mash and salsas



Hotel Savoy's L'Incontro Bar.

and a well-priced wine list that included some carefully chosen vintages, and the option of fresh ginger root or mint tea, too. Rocco Forte Hotels do not seek Michelin stars but prefer to offer guests good home-style fare, and this, believe me, was a joy.

There is a small but sensational fitness room on the upper floor which has a panoramic view of the Bell Tower and Duomo,



Bathroom of Executive Suite, #214, at Hotel Savoy.

but as yet, there is no spa. Plans, however, are afoot to create a 4-room facility out of a little used meeting area and this should be completed by 2010.

Stefano Gecnacorsi is the excellent General Manager, and the delightful Mario Zerillo, who is Guest Relations Manager, brings real passion to the hotel and to the unique experiences of the city.

In the centre of Florence, Hotel Savoy is by far the best option and is a most friend-



Executive Suite, #214, at Hotel Savoy, shows the sitting area and bedroom.



Shoe art, in a corridor of the Hotel Savoy.

ly, approachable hotel in which to hang one's hat.

**Gallivanter's Rating: ✓✓✓✓+**

**Villa San Michele.**

Twenty minute's drive from the centre of



*The terrace of the L'Incontro restaurant at Hotel Savoy is a splendid people-watching venue.*

Florence, Villa San Michele sits in splendid isolation on Fiesole's hill, and although you have seen the view many times, you cannot fail to catch your breath; Tuscany laid out in terracotta and green like an ancient carpet.

The original building was a 15th Century



*The façade of Villa San Michele dates from 1600.*

monastery and the present building's façade, with its grand loggia dates from 1600 and is attributed to no other than Michel-

angelo. Of course, this means that Florence's Fine Arts Authority is particularly fussy about any form of restoration; permissions often taking years.

Orient-Express have owned the Villa and surrounding land since 1982 and restored not only the façade and the chapel, which is now the lobby, but also the many pieces of antique oak furniture that fill the rooms and public areas. The latest renovation is of Nicodemo Ferrucci's 1642 fresco of the Last Supper, which dominates the Cenacolo; previously the monk's refectory.

In 1994, six Junior Suites were created between the outdoor pool and the Italian gardens, and in 1996, five more were tucked beneath the garden, allowing for stunning views and small private gardens. These, I must say, tend to be my favourites.

The intervening years saw constant refurbishment of rooms and suites; the latest being the Michelangelo Suite in the main

house; a striking junior suite style habitat with a pretty white marble bathroom and newly curved cornices that add to the sense of history. In the colder months, staying here is ideal (the hotel is open from March to November), but in the summer, I prefer one of the garden-set suites, such as those at the end of the grounds which were cre-



*The new dining terrace at Villa San Michele's pool.*

ated from the old Limonaia, where potted lemons used to thrive. Here, the nicely refreshed Limonaia Suite, #44, grants you plenty of space, stunning views from on high, a little butler's pantry and a small garden with its very own waterfall. Below it are two Junior Suites, so you could take the whole house.



*Villa San Michele's GM, Luca Finardi.*

What is required now, though, is a fresh eye, a designer to enhance this majestic pile, but also to de-clutter it, as many of the public areas are so filled with furniture (and not antiques, I may add) that the original history is diluted. Yes, the hydraulic pop-up flat screen TVs at the base of each bed are of the moment; the bathrooms, all with separate walk-in showers, excellent. The just opened dining terrace by the pool, which has its own kitchen, makes life there much more civilised, as one can order a host of salads, pasta and such without moving very far at all, but generally, there



*Suite #44 in the Limonaia offers mesmeric views of the Tuscan countryside, at Villa San Michele.*



The famous Loggia at Villa San Michele captures the best views.

are too many small tables with lamps, too many potted palms and a lack of pizzazz in the details.

There is a small gym with scenic Tuscan views, but as yet no spa (although this is on the wish-list and they currently offer in-



The refurbished Michelangelo Suite at Villa San Michele.

room treatments). What they do have is a cooking school, which is almost *de rigeur* these days in Tuscany. The best place for lunch and dinner is the Loggia terrace, the views so famous that guests stay here just for the vista.

General Manager, Luca Finardi has only



Hotel Lungarno's lobby lounge.

been at the hotel since March and is fired up with good ideas. The service is already vastly improved, there is complimentary water by one's bed and new Head Barman, Riccardo Caloffi has introduced a knowl-

edgeable and well presented Malt Whiskey Collection and a cornucopia of canapés at the cocktail hour. There is one big problem, though. The Executive Chef has been here for 25 years and, frankly, the cuisine remains in the 1980s, with little attempt at presentation. The pasta is good, but we found the fish to be dry and the salads barely composed ingredients thrown onto a Limoges plate. What is required is a young, talented Sous Chef to inject some enthusiasm and style.

As you know, we do not judge hotels on their history or their views, no matter how impressive. If Villa San Michele looks to its design and its kitchen, then this beautiful property will not be famous merely for its panoramas, but could also be a legendary hotel in its own right.

**Gallivanter's Rating: ✓✓✓+**

### Hotel Lungarno.

Although immaculately maintained, Hotel Lungarno, which once inspired me to poetry, now merely renders me speechless. It was a Saturday and the hotel was full, so we found ourselves in the smallest room I have ever encountered. The sacrifice was for the view of the Arno, as Hotel Lungarno sits right on its banks, close to Ponte Vec-



Room #762 at Hotel Lungarno.

hio. Since I last stayed here, hotelkeeping and me have moved on and nowadays, Room #762 would be a bathroom; but no, they had managed to squeeze in linen-clad twin beds, a few sticks of furniture and an old Philips TV. The signature Prussian and cream decor was intact, but I wonder if the Ferragamo family, which owns this hotel, knows that nowadays, size matters.

Ah well, we thought, let's go out to lunch. Across the river is Gallery Hotel Arts,



The discreet entrance to Four Seasons Florence.

which is another Ferragamo property that does a pleasantly informal Asian buffet on Saturday and is frankly less claustrophobic than Lungarno. This calmed us down for a while, but back at Lungarno, things were destined to deteriorate.

We sit in the pleasant sofa-strewn lobby lounge, with its original Cocteau drawings and watch the other tables receiving canapés on attractive glass stands. After three, they run out of stands, so plates are substituted, until ours arrive on a ceramic bread plate.

The newly enlarged restaurant, Borgo San Jacopo, which now has a separate entrance off the street, looks beautiful. Unfortunately, the cuisine is not and the service is student-level; tough pork, dry lamb and indifferent green gazpacho with prawns.

We go back to our room at 9.30pm and there is no turndown. Checking out was the best experience here, apart from the lovely Rigoni di Asiago organic preserves at breakfast. Such a pity.

**Gallivanter's Rating: ✓✓**



**Four Seasons Hotel  
Florence.**

In Florence, you want to gaze at 15th Century courtyards, feast on the theatre of Baroque art, marvel at the heraldry of Scala, Medici and Della Gherardesca, touch history in the form of antique porcelain, furniture and original silk wallpapers. You want to crane your neck to see the unique masonic symbolism of a 19th Century church. You want to stroll through acres of 15th Century gardens, exploring a myriad of secret pathways that meander between rare and ancient specimen trees, resting for a while beneath a shaded cupola as the sound of a fountain cuts through the birdsong. You want to dine on the finest Tuscan cuisine on a balmy terrace or beneath the amber glow of Murano chandeliers. You want to unwind totally, swim in a languid Romanesque pool, sleep beneath the nubile hands of a therapist; the scent of herbs blended by one of the world's oldest pharmacies, Farmaceutica di Santa Maria Novella. You want to be able to walk to the Duomo; but maybe tomorrow, or the day after, for right here, you have it all.

Four Seasons Hotel Florence is a true urban resort; so good



*From top, at Four Seasons Hotel Florence. Bedroom of Royal Suite. The reception gallery of the Royal Suite, with an original ceramic floor by Ignazio Chiaiese.*

that even though you can see the Duomo from the gardens, you do not want to leave. We could have created a coffee table book of this hotel, as there is so much to see, so much to admire.

Set in Florence's largest private garden, of 11 acres, the hotel consists of two quite separate historic buildings positioned at either end of the garden; the 15th Century Palazzo della Gherardesca and the 16th Century Conventino. Years of respectful restoration explain the endless delays in this hotel's opening, but oh, was it worth it, for every detail is exquisite.

Choosing a room or suite is a dilemma, for there are so many different configurations and unique styles. Perhaps the most secluded can be found in the 37-room Conventino, which is a beautiful piece of architecture, served by its own entrance, reception, concierge, brasserie and business centre, so it feels very private and residential. It also has the most exquisitely painted deconsecrated church within it; a soaring vaulted ceiling brimming with Da Vinci Code style symbolism. Here, the most jaw-dropping suite is the 1-3 bedroom Presidential, #701, which not only has acres of original frescoes, but also wonderful garden views. Within the Con-



*The Romanesque outdoor looks onto the two-storey Spa and gardens at Four Seasons Hotel Florence.*

ventino, La Magnolia brasserie had yet to open when we were there, but promises to be excellent.

In the Palazzo, you are equally spoiled for choice. The most basic Superior, such as



*A corner of the garden at Four Seasons Florence.*

#110, has courtyard views and, as with everything else here, a separate loo and shower. A Premier Room, such as #117, has a street view, but surprisingly, this is of a private garden. What is nice is the roll-top tub and large walk-in shower room with bench. A Junior Suite, such as #115, is

beautiful, with its yellow ochre decor, very spacious configuration and even a balcony, whilst Junior Suite, #311, with its low ceilings is really quite romantic. An Executive Suite, such as #214 is very acceptable. Even better, though, in my view, is the romantic eaves-set #420, which has a perfect view of the Duomo from an attic window and, from the other side, the hills of Florence. As there are only three rooms on the 4th floor, they



*Corridor at Four Seasons Hotel Florence.*

are often devoted to families, but if you can secure #420 on its own, then this is where you should propose marriage! I also really liked Parlour Suite, #314, for its vaulted ceiling and serene views of the garden. There are three of these with high windows. The second Presidential (the other is in the Conventino) is wonderfully light, with purple decorative accents that pay homage to Florence's signature colour, original frescoes, generous balconies and an impressive bathroom. At the very top end, the Royal Suite is, quite simply, a living muse-



*The exquisite Restaurant Il Palagio at Four Seasons Hotel Florence.*

um, with more genuine antiques than most stately homes. Set on the coveted Piano Nobile or first floor, it is a remarkably comfortable suite, with soaring frescoed ceilings, a royal purple dining room, stately reception gallery with an original 18th Century Capodimonte ceramic floor by Ignazio Chiaiese, a cosy office-cum-sitting room, viewsome bedroom and a bathroom that is painted in cream and gold masonic sym-



*Vito Mollica (second from left) with his excellent team at Four Seasons Florence.*

bols, celebrating the birth of the railway.

Throughout the hotel, the custom in-room toiletries are by Lorenzo Villosesi of Firenze, in forest green faceted bottles with silver tops. The exquisite custom china is by Richard Ginoil of Italy; fine silverware is by Sambonet and table linens are by Beltrami, so no expense has been spared.

Florence's fire department is particularly strict on the composition of soft furnishings and beds, so do be prepared for a somewhat less cushy Four Seasons bed (the hotel had to burn around ten of them to finally find one that was approved). Otherwise, this hotel is perfection, and no more so than in its 'slow food' kitchen. Oh, Jean-Luc Naret, head of Michelin, where are you? Have you realised yet that restaurant Il Palagio should



*The Atrium Bar at Four Seasons Hotel Florence.*

be the first ever to receive three stars in less than three months? Because I have. Even the à la carte breakfast defies competition, the Tuscan Breakfast being especially superb. Generally, I find the bread in Florence to be average at best, but here I devour it with a passion, for most is home-baked and all is superlative. Every table



Checking your e-mails, Four Seasons Florence style.

has a ribboned bottle of organic Manni Extra Virgin Olive Oil and every single dish is cooked to perfection; Executive Chef, Vito Mollica, who so wowed us all when he headed up the kitchens at Four Seasons Prague, excelling himself in his native Italy. Steamed scampi with baby new potatoes, violets and Moscato wine vinegar dressing is as soft as butter. Baby lamb in a delicate crust of pine nuts and mint, glazed sweetbreads and baked onion with pecorini, or the delectable slow cooked suckling pig, 'Cinta Senese' with black cabbage and soft polenta, melt on the palate. Then, Pastry Chef, Romain Renard dares you to decline

his moreish fare, and you have to say yes, especially to the unique Violette 'Bubble' with vanilla cream and cassis sorbet.

The interiors everywhere are exquisitely restored and enhanced by Pierre Yves Rochon, who has, I think, excelled himself. From the delightful, cosy Atrium Bar, which



Spa relaxation room, Four Seasons Hotel Florence.

serves a very good casual lunch, to the frescoed internet room, the endless painted hallways and the Florentine mauves and Murano of the main restaurant, everything takes your breath away. Even the intimate Winery amazes, with its contemporary seating, tapas-style 'assaggini' and extraordinary selection of 50 wines by the glass, selected by Sommelier, Thomas Van-



The top team at Four Seasons Florence, left to right: Hotel Manager, Leonardo Baiocchi, Executive Chef, Vito Mollica and General Manager, Patrizio Cipollini.

denbossche. The two-storey Spa, with its terraced café, sits in the gardens beside the Romanesque style outdoor pool and offers 10 treatment rooms, with therapies by Farmaceutica di Santa Maria Novella, or, if you crave chemical-free, then oils and scrubs by Il Laboratorio dell'Erborista. A separate building houses a bi-level Fitness Centre with the

latest Technogym equipment, yet looks like a refined patrician villa. A third enclave houses a hair and beauty salon.

Service, under the delightful veteran hotelier (ex- Four Seasons Milan), Patrizio Cipollini, is astounding, whilst super experienced Hotel Manager, Leonardo Baiocchi, who has no less than seven hotel openings under his belt, helps ensure this hotel's total perfection. Believe me, this could, quite easily be the next Four Seasons George V. Do go.

**Gallivanter's Rating:** ★★★★★+

## AT A GLANCE

### HOTEL SAVOY.

**Tel:** +39 055 27 35 831/2. **Fax:** +39 055 27 35 666. **Internet:** [www.roccoforte-collection.com](http://www.roccoforte-collection.com) **Affiliation:** Rocco Forte Collection, The Leading Hotels of the World [www.lhw.com](http://www.lhw.com). **Rooms:** 102, inc. 14 suites. **Approx Rates:** *Doubles:* €510-695. *Studio Rooms:* €850. *Classic Suites:* €1,300. *Executive Suites and Suite Brunelleschi:* €1,650. *Suite Signoria:* €1,950. *Suite Repubblica:* €2,600 + 10% tax.

### VILLA SAN MICHELE.

**Tel:** +39 01 852 67803. **Fax:** +39 01 852 67805. **Internet:** [www.villasanmichele.com](http://www.villasanmichele.com) **Affiliation:** Orient-Express Hotels, The Leading Small Hotels of the World [www.lhw.com](http://www.lhw.com). **Rooms:** 46, inc. 25 suites. **Approx Rates:** *Doubles:* €860-1,070. *Junior Suites:* €1,350-1,720. *Suite:* €2,300. *Garden Suite:* €2,800. *Presidential:* €3,200, + 10% tax.

### HOTEL LUNGARNO.

**Tel:** +39 055 2726 4000. **Fax:** +39 055 2726 4444. **Internet:** [www.lungarno-hotels.com](http://www.lungarno-hotels.com) **Affiliation:** Lungarno Hotels, Small Luxury Hotels of the World, [www.slh.com](http://www.slh.com). **Rooms:** 73, inc. 12 suites. **Approx Rates:** *Doubles:* €380-600. *Executives:* €660. *Junior Suites:* €840-1,500, + 10% tax.

### FOUR SEASONS HOTEL, FLORENCE.

**Tel:** +39 055 2626 220. **Fax:** +39 055 2626 500. **Internet:** [www.fourseasons.com](http://www.fourseasons.com) **Affiliation:** Four Seasons Hotels & Resorts. **Rooms:** 117, inc. 39 suites. **Approx Rates:** *Doubles:* €500-800. *Junior Suites:* €850. *Parlour Suites:* €1,000. *Executive Suites:* €1,200. *Gallery Suite:* €2,000. *Renaissance Suite:* €3,000. *Noble Suite:* €4,500. *Garden Suite:* €5,000. *1-bed Presidential:* €8,500. *1-bed Royal:* €12,500, + 10% tax.



Terrace of restaurant Il Palagio at Four Seasons Hotel Florence.

# Gallivanter's Gossip



**I**T LOOKS AS THOUGH **Amanresorts** could be planning the takeover of **Portugal!** New projects are rumoured in Porto (architect, Kerry Hill) and Douro (architect, Jean-Michel Gathy). Meanwhile, we hope to welcome the return of Aman to **Mexico**, at the Estero Santa Barbara project at Baja California Sur, just south of Mulege and north of Cabo San Lucas. Designed by Jean-Michel Gathy and centred around a main Lodge, the 1-2 bedroom Casitas, which all have full-size pools, will be complemented by 30 Aman residential Villas, an Aman Beach Club and a serious Spa. The Estero Santa complex will also include championship golf, designed by David Mclay Kidd and operated by Troon Golf.

**A**LSO IN THE DOURO, PORTUGAL, is **Aquapura Douro Valley**, designed by Nini Andrade Silva. With 41 doubles and 9 suites, this exquisite property has jaw-dropping views from its outdoor pool, a stunning spa and plenty of wine activities in the region. Aquapura will also open two further hotels in **Brazil**. 2009 will see Itacaré (formerly Warapura), designed by Annouska Hempel and set in the cocoa zone of Bahia. 2011 will see a second Brazilian Aquapura in Ceará on the Atlantic coast, designed by Claudio Silvestrin. All the Aquapura properties have striking settings, innovative architecture and the group's signature water features - definitely a group to watch. [www.aquapurahotels.com](http://www.aquapurahotels.com)

**I**F YOU WERE WONDERING WHERE **Hector de Galard** went after leaving One&Only (Le Touessrok, followed by Kanuhura were both sold by One&Only), he can now be found in **Beirut** and will open **Le Gray** in May 2009; an 86-room **Gordon Campbell Gray** hotel designed by Kevin Dash, with panoramic vistas of the Mediterranean and the Mount Lebanon hills. Expect a rooftop pool, spa, piano bar and cigar lounge, reflecting Beirut's 'Paris of the Middle East' heritage. This is another group to watch (One Aldwych, Carlisle Bay), as they also plan on opening a 152-room pile (some with private pools) close to the Atlas Mountains in **Morocco**, with two pools, 10 tennis courts, a major spa and a Jack Nicklaus golf course. A second hotel, with around 60 rooms, will open on an adjoining site a few months later. Perhaps even more interesting, though, is Campbell Gray's **Rowallan Castle, Ayrshire**, Scotland, as we all desperately need a great Scottish hotel; this with 65 rooms, two pools, tennis and a Colin Montgomery championship course with a unique par three 19th hole (waiters on hand, with drinks ready?). [www.campbellgrayhotels.com](http://www.campbellgrayhotels.com)

**W**E ALWAYS LOVED THE UNIQUE LOCATION AND STYLE of **Le Beauvallon**, between Port Grimaud and St Maxime, right opposite St Tropez (with its own boat shuttle from a private pontoon), but had a few reservations about the room and suite designs. Excitingly, this beautiful Belle Epoque palace, which is absolutely ideal for families (uniquely, it has its own private beach and lovely pool and is, quite intentionally, very child-friendly), will be undergoing a massive refurbishment and will re-open next Summer with a new contemporary yet comfortable look. [www.lebeauvallon.com](http://www.lebeauvallon.com)

**F**INALLY, DAVID AND I WOULD LIKE TO WISH you all a very happy and hopefully, **prosperous New Year**. We would also like to thank all our long-time readers for their continuing support.

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