

No stone unturned

The artistry of Florence is clear for all to see but only a knowing eye will spot the hidden delights, writes **Kylie Lang**



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It was small, as far as paintings go, and dark with age. Yet even unrestored, anyone could see it was a stunning work. "Oh, that's a Botticelli," my host said, a little too casually, when I enquired after the portrait of the Madonna and child above the marital bed.

That would be Sandro Botticelli (1445-1510), one of the masters of the Italian Renaissance whose celebrated *Primavera* and *The Birth of Venus* hang in the Uffizi gallery.

"It was a gift from my husband's grandmother," explained Elenora Frescobaldi, as we went in search of our children who'd eaten before us then disappeared to build Lego.

It was your typical family night in, except that the family we were with were Frescobaldi, one of Italy's prestigious dynasties. As financiers and winemakers, the Frescobaldi name has been central to the political and socio-economic fabric of Tuscany since the Middle Ages. The family would give Michelangelo wine in exchange for paintings. King Henry VIII was also a client.

Lamberto Frescobaldi, whom I met a few years ago in Brisbane, heads the wine business these days and, as you might imagine, this further elevated the dinner to something rather special. Over rare roast beef and the finest Chianti, the conversation shifted from wine to good works, something about which the Frescobaldis are also passionate. Elenora, a mother of three, explained that as the Italian Government did not assist charities, it was her duty to step in. Lamberto's cousin concurred and as they discussed an upcoming fundraiser, I took in the exquisite Persian rugs, the marble-framed doorways and a not-insignificant Picasso.



TUSCAN SUNSHINE ... the view of the Arno River from the writer's room in the Antica Torre di Via Tornabuoni 1 hotel, *opposite*; the 15th-century fresco in Santa Trinita; the Basilica di Santa Maria del Fiore from the Antica Torre rooftop; stallholders at the San Lorenzo markets; the Strozzi Palace. **Photographs** // Kylie Lang

Our tour guide had been spot on that morning as we trawled the city's historic streets when he said: "Florentines are not showy people, they hide their wealth and are not pretentious."

Indeed, the exterior of the Frescobaldi residence, like so many other buildings we visited, belied the treasures within. It helps if you have a local to show you around. By all means, join the masses and mill through the Duomo, Giotto's Campanile and the Uffizi, but also hire a guide and explore Florence on foot.

Ugo met us at our hotel, the Antica Torre di Via Tornabuoni 1 – which has rooms with shuttered windows opening to the Arno River and stunning views from its rooftop terrace – and our two-hour adventure began a few paces away at Santa Trinita church. I might have passed right by but for Ugo, who took us inside to see an important Domenico Ghirlandaio fresco from the 15th century, which depicted major figures, including a young Giovanni di Lorenzo

de Medici, who went on to become Pope Leo X. The church, founded in 1092, also contains an early Christian sarcophagus and the marble and glazed terracotta tomb of Bishop Benozzo Federighi, by Luca della Robbia (1400-1482).

Back in the sun, we strolled past the Column of Justice, a marble pillar which dates to Roman times, and admired the symmetry of the Strozzi Palace (1489-1520s) which could have passed for a bank, such was its stoic exterior.

One reason for the lack of obvious grandeur, Ugo contended as we neared the overpriced cafes in Piazza della Repubblica, was that Florentines were fiercely protective of their culture and didn't want to attract curious foreigners.

When you get to the Duomo you see why. The Basilica di Santa Maria del Fiore has the largest brick dome constructed, and the cathedral was built with funds from the people of Florence.

We were transfixed by the intricate relief sculptures on the bronze doors of the smaller

Baptistry of St John. The work of Lorenzo Ghiberti (1378-1455), they were dubbed by Michelangelo as "the gates of paradise" because of their beauty, and it was in this minor basilica, built between 1059 and 1128, that the Italian poet Dante Alighieri, and all Catholic Florentines until the end of the 1800s, were baptised.

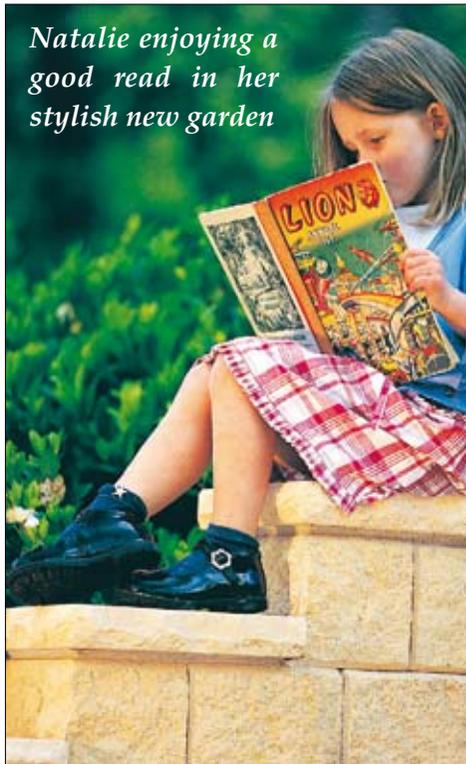
Ugo, disgusted at us for committing only four of 28 days in Italy to Florence, begged us not to leave without visiting the church of Santa Maria Novella, nearby the bustling San Lorenzo markets. Here, Giotto's crucifix is magnificent in the sacristy and, if you think to look up as you leave, there is a wonderful nativity scene by Botticelli just above the door. That's the way it is in Florence – keep your eyes peeled or you might miss something truly breathtaking.

THE WRITER was assisted by Passion for Italy, ph: 3262 1345; www.passionforitaly.com; Antica Torre di Via Tornabuoni 1, www.tornabuoni1.com

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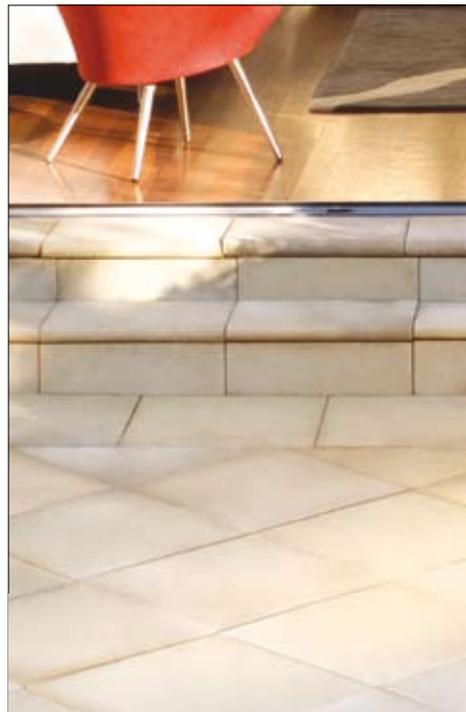


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