

The Place Firenze Will Show You a New Side of Florence

By Annie Fitzsimmons Aug 13, 2021



Courtesy of The Place Hotel

The Place Firenze overlooks Piazza Santa Maria Novella.

With Florence hotelier Claudio Meli in charge, The Place hotel is leading the way by connecting visitors to distinctive local experiences.

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In a city like Florence where crowds spill off the narrow sidewalks into the streets (even now), it helps to have a friendly host show you the way and provide special access. Many hotels claim to be that bridge, that insider friend—but few actually are.

[The Place Firenze](#)—which originally opened as the first-ever J.K. Place hotel in 2003—is going all in on local experiences in the rebranding of the 20-room property. It also benefits from a prime location on Piazza Santa Maria Novella, within a five-minute walk of the train station, overlooking Leon Battista Alberti's masterpiece basilica. (Though construction of the church started in 1270, Alberti finished the facade in 1470.)

While sipping a spritz or shakerato on the Place's outdoor terrace, you can see letters on the church's facade in the distance. These letters inspired the Place's new font, now copyrighted.

The Basilica Santa Maria Novella is where general manager Claudio Meli started when thinking about the rebranding. "I studied the facade, interviewed art historians, and realized how Leon Battista created not just a piece of art, but how he put the human being at the center of the universe—finally, after the Middle Ages, after the Black Plague," he says.

The parallels now, in the recovery from COVID trauma, are not lost on him. "We are coming out of a very dark moment of humanity. But we are coming back to life. And we put the human being at the center of our universe."

When I surveyed hundreds of expert travel advisors in my AFAR newsletter asking who their favorite general manager was around the world, Claudio's came up most often. He was born and raised in Florence, rare for a hotelier here, and cares so deeply about guests' experiences—texting ideas on where to shop, connecting them to local friends, ensuring they find the best restaurant reservations for their needs. You see the same passion in the entire team.

I recently stayed at the Place while attending the [DUCO Travel Summit](#). While the rooms and common spaces are impeccably designed and comfortable, it is the connections to Florence that you'll remember the most.

Here's a side of the city I saw, with recommendations from the Place:

A hidden treasure in a contemporary art museum

The streets of Florence are scented with craftsmanship, literally. You catch whiffs of wood, leather, and perfume as you walk past tiny shops piled high with lace and fabric, sandals and boots.

To help preserve these and other cultural traditions, the Place created the [Place of Wonders](#) project, a collection of uncommon, inspiring ways to see Florence. Guests can donate to help protect these experiences—the owners also donate a substantial amount.

One such "wonder" is less than five minutes away from the hotel: the [Museo Marino Marini](#), a former church and tobacco factory. It is now a center for contemporary art, housing more than 170 bronze sculptures by artist Marino Marini. In a city bursting with Renaissance treasures, it is a welcome contrast but not known by many visitors. (I wouldn't have gone unless Claudio had insisted.)

Turning a corner in the Scandi-meets-factory interior, you see its magnificent hidden treasure, the Sacellum Rucellai by Leon Battista Alberti, the artist who was a great inspiration for the Place. I'm told by the guide that it is an exact copy, scaled down, of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem, believed to be the tomb of Jesus Christ. Buried in this tomb are Giovanni Rucellai and his family, wealthy 15th-century Florentines.

The guide also tells me that a famous movie director dropped to the floor in tears here, and, though I remain upright, I feel the same overwhelming emotion at the perfect marble, the etched-on graffiti from April 1592, and the similarities to the tomb I have seen in Jerusalem.

Guests of the hotel can do private visits after-hours with an English-speaking guide.

Two dining experiences in the hills above Florence

Of course, food is another ultimate craft in Florence. Claudio introduced me to two new favorite spots, both a 15-minute taxi ride into the hills above Florence. Most restaurants don't open until 7:30 p.m. for dinner, so if you have kids, book that first reservation.

[Le Lune ristorante nel vivaio](#) is a family-owned garden center and restaurant, surrounded by lemon and olive trees and hundreds of potted flowers, plants, and herbs. Our table, set with candles for ambience and crayons for our toddler, overlooked a Tuscan pink villa on one side, and the bright moon above a greenhouse on the other. We worked our way through simply prepared vegetables from the on-site farm, grilled Tuscan meats and local wines, and slices of bright orange cantaloupe. (What better dessert on a hot Florence night?)

Close by is [Fattoria di Maiano](#), an incredibly special agriturismo with a swimming pool, farm, olive oil mill, honey production, restaurant, and more. Book a dinner on the loggia with Florence in the distance, and a safari experience beforehand, with Tommaso, one of the young owners, if you can. (Bet you didn't think you'd be doing a safari in Florence.) From a well-loved Land Rover Defender, you can spot the wild boar, rabbit, and deer; hop out to pick perfect cherry tomatoes; and visit a quarry where Michaelangelo personally sourced marble.

Our fellow diners were families staying in the on-site apartments with kitchens, and couples from Florence enjoying the summer evening. The Place uses Fattoria di Maiano's olive oil, and Tommaso had just dropped off a large order of eggs that morning.

Two things to eat at the Place

Chef Asso Migliore at the Place has a pretty cool name—it literally translates to "the best ace." (How could he not get the job with a name like that?)

One of his signature dishes is "Lo Spaghetti," a simple pasta pomodoro. But the pasta comes from [Pastificio Artigiano Fabbri](#) in the Chianti area, and it takes 18 minutes to boil. "The pasta maker has more than 80 years of history," says Meli, "and there is even a museum of pasta there. They explain everything about the difference of gluten. Artisanal pasta like this has almost zero gluten because of how they prepare it and the temperature. It took three days instead of three hours for regular industry pasta."

You can offset too much pasta with several healthy options, like the avocado tartare made with green apples, and vegan mayonnaise made of almonds and saffron.

A few more things to notice at the Place

- The linen sheets, a rarity even in a luxury hotel, because of the maintenance level required.
- The fact that they never ask you to sign a check, until checkout, of course. They know what room you're in.
- The [Ginori 1735 ceramics](#), from the coffee cups to the fruit bowls in the rooms. The big flagship store is a five-minute walk away and worth a visit.
- The perfect pop music mixes in the common spaces. Ask Claudio about his former life as a D.J. many years ago.

Italy now requires a [COVID pass](#) to enter museums and restaurants. Check the [official Italian government website](#) for the latest entry rules and restrictions for travel to Italy.

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