



ÓL·TRE

OLTRÉ

TRAVEL BEYOND



Time and Place: Bedroom of the Santa Maria Novella suite at The Place Firenze. (Opposite) Detail of a vintage scagliola from Bianco Bianchi's collection, which includes pieces that date to the early 1600s.

Wonders Never Cease

**HOW THE OWNERS OF ONE HOTEL
IN ITALY ARE KEEPING THEIR CITY'S
ANCIENT CRAFTS ALIVE.**

Florence, Italy

The thick drapes of my suite draw open, and the magnificent Santa Maria Novella comes into focus. I tug the double-paned windows open to feel the morning breeze, and the streets below my balcony buzz with pedestrian traffic and people on bicycles. It feels like Florence is putting on a show.

The morning sun brings my suite into clearer view: the fabric on the headboard, the leather-topped desk, the antique wooden floors, a cashmere throw, decorative pottery and crystal chandelier.

On the one hand, The Place Firenze feels brand new. Indeed, the hotel reopened last year after a meticulous refresh. But it doesn't feel *new* new. Rather, it feels like I've stepped back in time.


And it's not just my suite. Everywhere I turn in this 20-room hotel, there's an intentional reference to the Renaissance that forged Florence's reputation — from the many details of the studiolo, a delightful reading room inspired by Alberti's Basilica, to the soothing pastel color schemes throughout. It's in the luxurious drapery and decorative plaster, the hand-etched crystal goblets and mismatched Ginori tableware. And that's not by accident. The hotel's owners want to connect their guests with authentic Florentine craftsmanship.

A few years ago, the Babini family, owners of The Place, along with general manager Claudio Meli, gave rise to The Place of Wonders foundation, a philanthropic mission to celebrate and preserve the rich heritage of Florentine crafts. And through the program, they offer guests a rare opportunity to visit workshops and historic bottegas scattered around the city and its environs — to go behind the scenes with some of the city's most revered artisans who make jewelry, ceramics, cashmere, glass and more, with opportunities to purchase or place orders, if desired. Included are hidden gems like the small Moleria Locchi, the only surviving glasswork factory in the Oltrarno district, where crystal vases, delicate wine glasses and intricately carved goblets fill every inch of the shop's floor-to-ceiling shelves. Hunched over ancient, whirring sanders under the glow of spotlights, artisans Enrico and Arben intently etch and carve motifs into moving pieces of glass. It feels like I've traveled back in time once again.

A 30-minute drive across a countryside blanketed in olive groves takes me to the workshop of Bianco Bianchi. Here, descendants of the late founder are creating scagliola, inlaid decorative plaster tiles, crests and molding. This craft dates to the Baroque period and involves a painstaking process of hammering, chiseling, pigment mixing, pouring and polishing. A single piece can take three months. The result is a smooth, marble-like surface brimming with details. It almost looks like a painting.

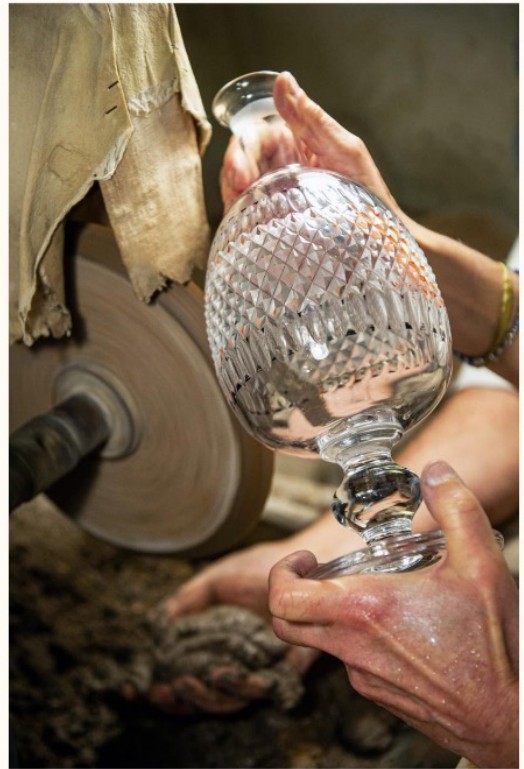
"My grandfather Bianco started to collect antique scagliola and soon turned his passion for this long-forgotten art into a job," explains third-generation heir Leonardo. The large showroom features pieces from various origins and dates, some as old as the early 1600s. This is another must-see.

Visits to the workshops are complimentary, but the foundation welcomes donations. Proceeds fund a grant that helps aspiring craftspeople complete their studies and apprenticeships. And The Place of Wonders just expanded to Venice, where the Babinis operate another hotel and have begun nurturing a fresh batch of Venetian artisans.

"The human being is at the heart of our world, be it a guest, a craftsperson or a young apprentice," says Meli. That sentiment encapsulates both the hotel's philosophy and the foundational values of the Renaissance. And in Florence, he insists, surrounded by endless beauty, it could not be otherwise. 

The Place, Florence, Italy

Your travel advisor can secure Select perks, including a \$100 resort credit and daily breakfast for two. \$\$\$\$



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History Department: A quiet corner at The Place Firenze. (Opposite) Hand etching at Florence glassworks shop Moleria Locchi, and chiseling and carving a slab of scagliola at Bianco Bianchi in Pontassieve.