

A Hilltop in Tuscany
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My personal history with Firenze

When my publisher indicated an interest in a sequel to A Garden in Paris, I chose to move the next book to Italy (mostly because I'd feel obligated to research the new setting). I sought counsel from other writers who knew Italy well and was advised to move there and stay until I'd written the book. After I stopped laughing and explained the realities of my writing life and budget, Florence became the city of choice. Through the auspices of a professor at my son's college, we were able to rent an apartment in Oltrarno for two weeks. It was our initial plan to see other places in Tuscany during that two week period. What happened was that we were so delighted with Florence that we lingered there for the entire two weeks. We will therefore be forced to return to Italy in the future.

My "philosophy of tourism"

There are some things you can do to enhance your experience in another place and some "ugly American" attitudes that need to be "checked at the door" if you are going to enjoy your time abroad.

- Florence is OLD. The buildings will not be as clean as you would like. Get over it.
- If you don't speak ANY Italian, try this, "I'm very sorry, but I don't speak Italian. Do you by any chance speak a little English?" In other words, blurting out "Do you speak English" is a sure way to get bad service because they tend to assume that you think they SHOULD. Why on earth should they? So try the other approach. If you know even a few phrases like how to say "Grazie, Scuzi, Buon giorno, Prego" it will go a long way towards getting polite treatment. Pimsleur CD's are a good way to learn a few useful phrases before you go. It has been my experience that someone tells you they speak "a little" English can actually be fluent. (We all get intimidated trying to speak someone else's language). Never assume the people around you don't know what you're saying.
- I have never had a bad experience in Florence. I go out of my way to sincerely let them know that I love their city and have tremendous respect for their culture and history. . . . and I apologize for my bad American accent when I try to speak their language. I find Florentines to be delightful.
- If you are the kind of traveler who likes to read about what you are seeing, I like three different guidebooks for three different reasons. The DK book is the one I carry with me because it has "short blurbs" about what I'm looking at. It also has nice walking tours. In my hotel room before and after I see something, I like to read both the National Geographic and the Knopf for the history and the story behind where I am.
- If you can read you can navigate the buses. Don't be afraid.
- Prepare to walk your socks off and be delighted at every turn.

Miscellaneous musings

Decide before you go that you aren't going to be frustrated by what you don't have time to see.

You could move to Tuscany, live there for years, and still not "see everything." So. . . . decide beforehand that you are going to SAVOR where you are. Take time to sit in a café or twelve.

Take some Euros with you so you don't have to exchange money there the first day. You can hit the ground running :-). My local bank ATM card worked just fine in Florence and honestly it felt so very "cool" to slide that card and get euros. (OK, so I'm easy to entertain :-))

GUARD YOUR WALLET/PURSE. Americans are a great target for pick-pockets, as are

visitors to any big city in the U.S. Take copies of your passport, credit cards, etc. and keep them at the hotel so that if you do get ripped off you can very quickly get it all taken care of. Maybe keep an extra credit card at the hotel "just in case" so you have a back-up. If you intend to wear a jacket or sweater, have a small shoulder bag that you were tucked between your arm and your body INSIDE your sweater/jacket. No visible pocket to pick.

Florence Favorites

- **Trattoria Angiolino** I have Luca take Mary here in A Hilltop in Tuscany. The dining room is small and you can watch the chef cook. Eat whatever is on the handwritten menu and if you like wine do not miss the house chianti. We ate here three times in our two week stay.
- **David** I'm something of a Michelangelo junkie so this was a huge thrill for me. . . for more reasons than the "nice buns" comment I have Liz Davis make in A Hilltop in Tuscany. You will want to call ahead and make an appointment so you don't have to wait in quite as long a line. Don't miss the Christian book store across the street, by the way. I saw some of my fellow American fiction writer's books on these book shelves!
- **Oltrarno** Sign up for the tour of artisans workshops. About six of us were given a guided tour of a paper-maker, silversmith, and goldsmith's shops. Intimate and enchanting to see these fabulous artists at work. Walk in Oltrarno and catch glimpses of shoe-makers, sculptors and others at work in their shops.
- **San Lorenzo** Never finished because Michelangelo would not agree on what source to use for the marble. I knelt before the oil painting of the woman clinging to the foot of the cross and shed tears. This is the church where Liz Davis has her conversion experience.
- The **cemetery** outside San Miniato al Monte. I admit to being a cemetery junkie, too. I love traipsing through old cemeteries, and this one captivated me with its many busts and life size sculptures. Liz Davis wanders this cemetery in A Hilltop in Tuscany.
- **Baldovino** a small trattoria by Santa Croce, recommended by a "local" for lunch -- did not disappoint.
- **Vasari Corridor** Our tour guide was the inspiration for my character Luca.
- **The doors** Walk walk walk and look look look.
- **Tiramisu** at Gilli

Recommended Guide Books:

To keep with you wherever you go: *Eyewitness Travel Guide* published by DK

To read for background and history and culture: *Knopf* and/or *National Geographic* (I read both)