

Beautiful Florence

As well as its wonderful architecture and culture, great bars, discos and restaurants, Florence is also said to be where one of the purest forms of Italian is spoken. GILLIAN EVANS reports.

Florence is known all over the world as the city of art, the capital of the Renaissance,' says Carlo Lipparini at Istituto Il David, which takes its name from the famous statue by Michelangelo. Andrea Moradei of Centro Koine calls Florence 'a microcosm of the Humanistic times' because of its abundance of works of art, with the Uffizi Gallery housing paintings and sculptures by Giotto, Botticelli, Raphael, Michelangelo and da Vinci.

But it is not only in the city's many museums where you will find its treasures. Florence is a living art museum because, around almost every street corner, there is another amazing building or church. 'Students have expressed delight when they have come across less famous churches that are just as beautiful,' reports Massimo Pasquinelli from Parola. '[For example], the chiesa di San Frediano is beautiful and contains the brancacci chapel, which has a fresco by Masaccio, said to herald the beginning of Renaissance art.'

For Titanya Hughes at the Centro Linguistico Italiano Dante Alighieri (Clida), the Duomo (cathedral) is 'the crown jewel of Florence'. Dressed in pink, white and green marble and topped with a magnificent dome designed by Brunelleschi, the Duomo

dominates the city's skyline. Next to the cathedral is the Campanile, a square, 85-metre tall bell tower designed by Giotto in 1334. Then there is also the white marble Romanesque Baptistry, which is the oldest building in Florence, believed to have been built between the 5th and 11th centuries. The rest of the city is largely made up of beautiful churches and palaces, and

piazas and courtyards, where students can relax and watch the world go by.

'Students enjoy reading, writing and gathering in [Piazza Santo Spirito],' says Hughes. 'It is not the most central piazza, in fact, only a maze of narrow streets and alleys, which are home to many working

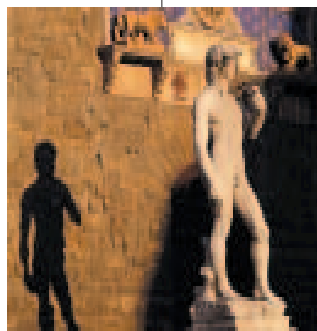
artisans, leads to Piazza Santo Spirito.' Pasquinelli adds that, in the summer, there is an open-air bar in the middle of the piazza, and usually some live entertainment.

Indeed, Florentines enjoy a laid-back lifestyle, which suits students well. Moradei lists some favourite student pastimes.

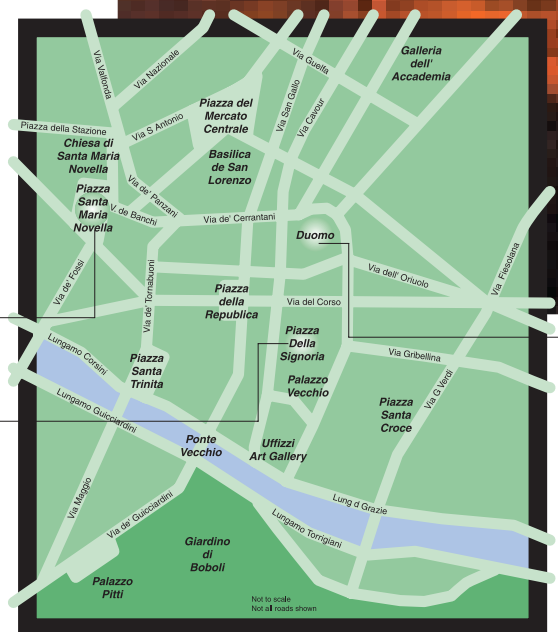
'[Students] like to enjoy the sun at Boboli Gardens,



Piazza Saint Maria Novella
This square is dominated by the Church of Santa Maria Novella, whose facade is said to be one of the earliest and most beautiful in Florence. It boasts extensive use of black and white marble



Michelangelo's David in Piazza della Signoria
Michelangelo's David is intended to portray David before his battle with Goliath. Finished in the early 1500s, it shows him strong-willed and ready to fight



eat ice-cream at Vivoli Gelateria, drink good coffee in Rivoire café, read in the café at the Edison Library and listen to music at the Jazz Club,' he says.

Despite its historical charm, Florence is also a modern and lively city, as Pasquinelli is keen to point out. '[Florence] is a city that is not only a historical relic but still very much alive. What is nice about it is that there are still Italians living in the centre, not like [some] other cities that now only have tourist attractions in the centre.'

Hughes adds, 'Florence has all the attributes of a big city but it is actually a small



Agent viewpoint

'We send people to Milan, Rome, Siena, Naples and Florence - which is the most popular Italian destination for our clients. I think this is because the city is world renowned for [its] history, art, design, paintings and museums. Many of our clients want to visit the museums and [all of them] want to see the sculpture of David by Michelangelo. Female [students] like shopping in Italy, especially in Florence. Male [students] like to enjoy the good wines and food of Tuscany. Pisa is also close by - everyone is keen to see the leaning tower. But Florence remains for all a must for its architecture and beauty. The weather is also beautiful all year round. However, because of its popularity [with tourists], Florence is overcrowded from June to mid September. Some people may dislike this.'

Philippe Beaudaux, Voyages Université/ Unique Tours, Canada

'We sent one student to Florence about seven years ago now. She wanted to study jewellery making. She studied in Florence for two years and then launched an accessories shop in Tokyo, [thereby] bridging the gap between Florence and Japan.'

Hiroshi Nomura, Nomura Overseas Travel, Japan

'In Monterrey [in Mexico] there are a lot of universities and colleges of design and architecture, and Florence is very popular [among students] at these institutions. They like the atmosphere, the architecture, the people and the food in Florence. In their free time, they go to museums, walk around the city and visit small towns nearby. In the summer, schools may not have enough accommodation, so you have to book in advance.'

Brenda Tafich, BTC Representaciones Mundiales, Mexico

Florence is known as a living museum because of its awe-inspiring sights

PHOTOGRAPHS: ITALIAN STATE TOURIST OFFICE

city compared to Rome or Milan. Students travelling for the first time outside of their country find it easy to navigate in Florence and make their home there quickly.' Another advantage of studying in Florence is that the language spoken there is said to be free from any dialect. 'Students say that in Florence, the people speak the best Italian and for this reason they decide to come here,' affirms Lipparini.

Food plays an important role in the lives of the Florentines, and Lipparini stresses that, despite the fact that there are some expensive restaurants in the city, it is possible to find eateries that serve delicious food at a reasonable price. As well as mouth-watering pizzas and pasta, Tuscan delicacies include *schacciata* (Tuscan bread), *ribollita* (minestrone soup re-boiled with bread in it) and *bistecca alla Fiorentina* (beefsteak Florentine), all washed down with fine Tuscan wine. For dessert, there is, of course, Florence's famous *gelati* (ice-

cream). In fact, Pasquinelli says, 'There is a war going on between certain ice-cream parlours to gain the title of best ice-cream shop!' By all accounts, Vivoli Gelateria is said to be the best. 'The ice-cream there is delicious,' confirms Pasquinelli.

Clida arranges trips to restaurants where students can talk to each other in Italian. 'We try to get students together to speak in Italian over wine or pasta or to speak about their trip to another part of Italy,' explains Hughes. As well as mixing with other international students, it is easy for students to meet Italians, according to the schools in Florence. Hughes says the highlight of a student's stay is often the people they meet. 'When you are with people who live there, you see a very different side of the

city - you get used to its rhythm and you are not overawed by it.'

There is plenty of opportunity to meet Italians in the discos and bars at night, and Moradei says that their students enjoy the fact that they 'find themselves with other young students at night along the streets and the squares of the old town'. For summer fun, there is also a number of festivals, including the festival of Florence's patron

saint, San Giovanni, which is held at the end of June, and is, according to Pasquinelli, 'a great time to be in Florence'. Another popular attraction is the 'calcio storico', the historical football match with players dressed in 16th century costume, and the Maggio Musical Fiorentino, which includes opera, ballet and concerts. □



Duomo
Work on Florence's famous cathedral was started in 1296 by sculptor Arnolfo di Cambio and finished in 1436 by Filippo Brunelleschi, the master sculptor who designed the octagonal dome