



Four Seasons Hotel, Florence

# Florence

*For this month's column, Susan Llewellyn discusses her recent trip to Florence – a city full of beauty, art and culture, which is only exemplified by a stay at the grand Four Seasons Hotel.*

I have been to Florence more than any other city in Europe. Every time I visit, I always learn something new. This visit in late December was no exception. I would like to share my new experiences with you.

For starters, I stayed at the Four Seasons Hotel, a living museum of art history and beauty, set within the walled tranquillity of Florence's largest private garden. It is an oasis of joy and a feast of spiritual uplift, housing wonderful contemporary and period sculptures.

Created around 1760, the Della Gherardesca Garden is a combination of ornamental collectionism and productivity, filled with Seville oranges, citrons, orange-blossom trees, Maltese oranges, Naples lemon trees, Arabian jasmynes, jasmynes, roses, carnations, aromatic herbs, almond and peach trees. Sensuous aromas filling the air as you stroll include Salamanna and Regina vines, apple, pear, plum and apricot trees, raspberries, blackcurrants and strawberries – to name a few.

1807 saw the building of a small Ionic temple dedicated to Apollo, attributed to Giuseppe Cacialli. The garden was not opened to the public for 500 years – we are so lucky to enjoy it today, thanks to the acquisition of the 15th century Palazzo Della Gherardesca and the 16th century Conventino (Convent). The Palazzo was originally commissioned in 1473 by Bartolomeo Scala, chancellor to Florence's legendary Medici family.

Come forward to now and the property is owned by the Fingen Group and was fully restored to become The Four Seasons Hotel in 2008. Experience elegance, beauty and opulence in the interiors. A feast of colour, the restoration has been strictly overseen by Florence's Soprintendenza per il Patrimonio Storico Artistico. The hotel has examples from the 15-19th centuries for guests to view, from frescos, bas-reliefs, stuccos and silk wallpapers, scenic panoramas of trailing flowers and exotic birds; so fascinated were they by the interior design of the 19th century and nobility, and of all things oriental.

During the 18th century the Della Gherardesca family commissioned a series of paintings depicting their own family history. A popular trend of the time, they can be seen in the Hotels Della Gherardesca, painted by the late Baroque artist Vincenzo Meucci (1694-1766) and others.

The main restaurant, Il Palacio, is housed in the old stables of the palace. The vaulted ceiling gives a lofty elegance, hung with huge and exquisite crystal chandeliers reflecting on the grey and white chequerboard marble floor. Monochromatic grey panelled walls, crimson damask curtain, heavy, draped pelmets with swags and tails – the artwork giving accents of colour picked up with sumptuous pink roses, crisp white tablecloths, classic china, crystal candlesticks with white candles, classic grey and upholstered armed chairs, Greek black urns on small brackets – all highlighted in gold.

The food is very Italian, using Tuscan ingredients. Excellent and caring service, everything is delicately

presented to whet the appetite and give the feeling of occasion. The winery specialises in Tuscany's finest wines.

I have to add a very important point: the impeccable standard of cleanliness of my room was to be admired. From the shiny taps and quality bed-linen, all common aspects of the room followed the same high standard. It gives such pleasure that so much time and effort has gone into this service.

Now I would like to share with you something extraordinary and extra special: Vincenzo Daschio and his beloved flowers. Vincenzo is an artist of flowers, a theatre director of unique performances. He has a quality which is personal to him. He brings fantasy and dreams come true in his arrangements. Each blossom is there to interpret his vision for a reason and a necessity to complete the whole – he uses each bloom as a member of a cast.

Each one needs the other for final look. He adds drama and colour to enhance a background. I cannot praise him enough. Vincenzo launched and directed Armani Flowers for five years. He then started his own successful company advising names like Louis Vuitton, Cartier, Dior, Rolex, Bulgari, Piaget – to name a few – to make their events more exclusive.

The hotel is within walking distance of the Piazza Della Signoria, the Duomo and Palazzo Pini as well as the elegant shopping street Via de Tornabuoni. For me, having luxuriated in the beautiful Four Seasons, a visit to the Gucci Museo is a must. Upon Gucci's 90th year in 2011, Frida Giannini, creative director of Gucci, has celebrated so many of Gucci's iconic products. She has gathered them together from all over the world. Until the mid-1990s, when the label was founded, nothing had been archived; there was not the culture to conserve pieces from production. Now, things have changed.

On display are the elegant travel goods that fascinated the young Guccio Gucci. He had worked as a lift boy at the Savoy in London. He was fascinated by the elegance of the upper-class guests and their luggage. On his return to Italy he opened a workshop specialising in the production of travelware and accessories. Defining the brand in English highlighted its founder's international vision. The inscription as G Gucci gave it the confidence and style of finest workmanship and quality status, of luxury. Jet-setting goods for jet-setting destinations.

The museum has an excellent bookshop and coffee shop. The building itself is very well designed. But before we move on, there are two particular exhibits I would like you to view – apart from the 1953 loafer and wonderful fashion house's signature bags. One is the classic Seville convertible Cadillac, lined in the fabric of the founder Guccio Gucci's initials. Wire wheels – the red and green stripe runs along the sides. The bonnet has the GG symbol on its tip: there is a small horse-bit detail above the front tyre.

Femininity was inspired and brought to the brand by Princess Grace of Monaco – she visited the Milan



store. Its director, Rudolfo Gucci, wanted to present her with a gift. All she asked for was a scarf. He thought there wasn't one beautiful enough for her, so he commissioned his friend, the artist Vittorio Accornero to create patterns of flowers, insects and butterflies. The flora design was born in all its beauty.

There are no Gucci family members involved now but the archives are in safe hands and care of Frida Gannini. Aldo Gucci has the last word: "Quality is remembered long after the price is forgotten" – his quote he calls 'Forever Now', that the museum aims to convey.

In contrast to the Gucci Museum is the Salvatore Ferragamo Museum, a private museum paying homage to its founder Salvatore Ferragamo and his creations of footwear. Born at Bonito in the province of Irpinia in 1898, he had an obsession and desire for making shoes from early childhood.

He moved to the United States and Hollywood in 1914, where he opened a shop selling custom-made shoes. He soon acquired the names 'Shoemaker to the Stars' and 'Shoemaker of Dreams'. Returning to Italy in 1927, he decided to settle in Florence, the city renowned for its art, his workshop and shopping.

Palazzo Spini, purchased in 1938, became the home to work from and showcase for his shoes. His fame for his shoes, which were not only admired for their beauty, fine workmanship and comfortable fit, spread through Italy and across the world. Soon the international jet set and movie stars like Sofia Loren, Audrey Hepburn, Greta Garbo, Marilyn Monroe, Rita Hayworth, Ava Gardner, the Duchess of Windsor, Lauren Bacall, Silvar Mangano became regular visitors.

Palazzo Spini is a medieval palace built by a wealthy merchant banker to Pope VIII in 1289. The exhibitions on display show wonderful examples of Salvatore Ferragamo's imagination and genius for design.

W [thesusanllewellynacademy.co.uk](http://thesusanllewellynacademy.co.uk)

**"I stayed at the Four Seasons Hotel, a living museum of art history and beauty, set within the walled tranquillity of Florence's largest private garden"**