

UP AT THE VILLAS

# FLORENCE FROM ABOVE

To see the city in a whole new way, head for the hills. **BY BARBIE LATZA NADEAU**



**VILLA CORA**  
The hotel's Le Bistrot restaurant and Villino Eugenia guesthouse overlook the pool and gardens.

For many travelers, Florence is as predictable as an old friend, which is why a day trip to two hills above the city, Arcetri and Fiesole, is such a revelation: Getting above it all lets one look at Florence with fresh eyes. The hills offer not only a new vantage point from which to admire the familiar skyline of domes and belfries that defines Florence below but also the opportunity to appreciate Tuscany without requiring travel through olive groves and along dusty roads. The ambiance is magical, and surprisingly private and quiet, considering Arcetri is just 15-minutes from bustling Florence.

Arcetri, to the south (it's an enviable address), is dotted with astronomy observatories dedicated to its most famous former resident, Galileo Galilei. He spent his first years of exile working at the **Villa il Gioiello** (\$285 for up to 25 people; Via del Pian dei Giullari 42; 39-055/275-6444). Visits to the residence and its private grounds, which are more like a manicured park, are by appointment only



**FIESOLE MUSEUM**  
The archaeological site houses Etruscan artifacts found in the area.



**IL SALVIATINO**  
The gardens on the grounds of the 15th-century villa-turned-hotel.

and are run by the University of Florence.

Across the street is **Trattoria Omero** (Via del Pian dei Giullari 47; 39-055/220-053; ristoranteomero.it), an unassuming restaurant that is divinely intimate. At the front is a delicatessen where locals come for ham cured with Tuscan spices and goat's- and sheep's-milk cheeses. In the dining room, the menu ranges from hunter's fare like pigeon and rabbit, both fried in traditional breading, to more-elegant choices, including wild-boar pappardelle, duck ragù, and thick Florentine steaks. Ask Roberto, the owner, for a tour of the wine cellar, featuring 350 Italian wines, including Sassicaia, Ornellaia, and Tignanello.

Past the Renaissance statues in the **Boboli Gardens** (Piazza Pitti 1; 39-055/238-8786; polomuseale.firenze.it) is **Villa Cora** (rooms from \$465; Viale Machiavelli 18; 39-055/228-790; villacora.it), a 46-room Relais & Châteaux villa-turned-hotel built in the 1860s. If staying overnight, book the Imperial Suite, with its frescoed ceilings and two Carrara-marble bathrooms. Even for those

FROM TOP: MASSIMO LISTRI; ©GIMMI/REDA&CO; COURTESY IL SALVIATINO



sleeping in Florence, the seasonal restaurants here should be considered. In the summer, Le Bistrot, by the pool, does outdoor Sunday barbecues, while in the winter, Il Pasha, in the Moorish Hall, serves such innovative twists on classic Tuscan fare as suckling pig in mango-and-rosemary sauce.

To the east of Arcetri is the abbey of **San Miniato al Monte** (Via delle Porte Sante 34, Florence; 39-055/234-2731), set high on a hilltop with an entirely different view of the Florentine skyline than that seen from Villa Cora. The panorama from here makes Florence look as if it sits in a cradle of lush green trees.

**T**hirty minutes north of Florence is the city's other hilltop oasis, Fiesole, where many wealthy Italians have homes. The expansion of the European University research center into the town has made it a playground for historians and archaeologists, which is reflected in the well-appointed museums and many dig sites. The wealth of Etruscan treasures underfoot here is rare. Little is really understood about this tribe of post-Iron Age pre-Roman people who inhabited the area between the seventh and first centuries B.C. The **Fiesole Museum** (Via Portigiani 1; 39-055/596-1293; museidifiesole.it) has a large archaeological site, with remnants of an Etruscan temple and a Roman theater and baths. It also has hundreds of Etruscan artifacts such as vases, jewelry, and tools.

Up a winding stone street off the town's main road is **Belmond Villa San Michele** (rooms from \$660; Via Doccia 4; 800-237-1236; belmond.com), a hotel built in a 15th-century monastery with a façade painted by Michelangelo. The orangery was converted into the three-bedroom Limonaia Suite, which can be rented in its entirety (with a pool and terraces) or by the suite, each with a bedroom, living area, and bathroom. At the hotel's restaurant, La Loggia, chef Attilio di Fabrizio has become something of a local celebrity. Among his best-known dishes are those in which he reinvents traditional Tuscan cuisine, as he has with *pici senesi*, a thick spaghetti, and duck ragù with pecorino cheese.

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the 86-year-old **Trattoria I Ricchi** (Via della Doccia 14; 39-055/402-045; iricchi.it), farther north in Monte Morello Park. The specialties are Tuscan meats—rabbit, veal brain, chicken—prepared in a crunchy pastry. It's here, high above the city on I Ricchi's veranda, that one can really reflect on the masterpiece below. ♦

**BELMOND VILLA  
SAN MICHELE**

The converted Franciscan monastery features a preserved altar in the reception area.



**TRATTORIA  
I RICCHI**  
The veranda dining area overlooking the Cercina hillside at I Ricchi, which first opened in 1929 as a grocery.



**BOBOLI GARDENS**  
Located behind the Palazzo Pitti, the grounds feature Renaissance statues and reflective fountains.