

# FLORENCE'S MOST BEAUTIFUL FREE PLACES

Before you explore: Hours, policies, and access can change throughout the year. We recommend verifying current information on official websites before visiting, especially for sites requiring timed entry or reservations.

**THE DUOMO COMPLEX** Start your journey in Piazza del Duomo, the beating heart of Florence. While the famous Cupola climb requires a ticket, Santa Maria del Fiore Cathedral opens its doors to everyone, free of charge; just respect the dress code (covered shoulders and knees). **Opening hours:** Typically Monday to Saturday, 10:15am-4:30pm (last entry varies). Due to worship, the Cathedral is closed to visitors on Sunday and religious celebrations. This means your window for visiting is relatively short, so plan accordingly. Arriving right at opening (10:15am) gives you the quietest experience before tour groups arrive around 11am. The afternoon slot from 2:30pm onward also tends to be calmer as many visitors move on to other attractions.

Just outside, take your time with the Baptistry's famous bronze doors. The replicas of Ghiberti's *Gates of Paradise* that adorn the east entrance are still breathtaking to behold. The original doors, restored and preserved, are displayed in the Museo dell'Opera del Duomo, but these 1990 replicas — crafted with meticulous care — allow you to appreciate the work exactly as it was meant to be seen, in natural light, as part of the Baptistry's architecture.

**RENAISSANCE CHURCHES: FAITH, ART & ARCHITECTURE** Florence's churches offer some of the city's most profound artistic experiences, and many welcome visitors without charge.

**Basilica della Santissima Annunziata** sits on one of Florence's most refined squares, away from the main tourist crowds. This Marian basilica houses 28 chapels decorated with works by Giambologna and Perugino, along with five historical organs. Before entering the church itself, pause in the *Chiostro dei Voti* (Votive Cloister), designed by Michelozzo and adorned with some of the city's finest Mannerist frescoes by Andrea del Sarto, Pontormo, and Rosso Fiorentino. **Opening hours:** Daily 7:30am-12:30pm and 4:00pm-6:30pm. **Mass times - visitors cannot tour during services:** Weekdays: 9:00am and 6:00pm Sundays and holidays: 8:30am, 10:00am, 11:00am, 12:10pm, 6:00pm Plan your visit between masses for a peaceful experience. Early morning (right at 7:30am opening) or mid-afternoon (4:00-5:30pm) tend to be quietest. The church closes for several hours in the early afternoon (riposo), so timing is important. **Accessibility:** The basilica is wheelchair accessible. The entrance from Via C. Battisti has a ramp, and the interior is easily navigable for visitors with mobility needs. Located on the beautiful Piazza Santissima Annunziata, which is also home to the Spedale degli Innocenti (Foundling Hospital), one of Brunelleschi's architectural masterpieces.

**Basilica di Santo Spirito** in Oltrarno is Brunelleschi's last architectural work and one of Florence's most harmonious Renaissance spaces. The facade is remarkably plain — almost humble — but step inside and you'll discover elegant proportions and perfect architectural rhythm. The basilica itself is always free to enter, but there's an exceptional paid access

(approx. 2-3 euros) that's absolutely worth considering. **Opening hours for the basilica (free entry):** Monday-Saturday (**CLOSED ALL DAY WEDNESDAY**): 10:00am-1:00pm and 3:00pm-6:00pm Sundays and holidays: 11:30am-1:30pm and 3:00pm-6:00pm Special closure: May 22 (Saint Rita's Day) Closed during liturgical services. **The Augustinian Itinerary (Small Fee)** - "The Young Michelangelo in Santo Spirito" For a small fee (coins/card usually accepted), you can access areas normally closed to the public, including the **Sacristy with Michelangelo's wooden Crucifix**, carved when the artist was just 17 years old. Thanks to the Friends of Florence Association, the crucifix is now displayed so you can view it from all angles — a rare opportunity to see early Michelangelo up close. The visit also includes the **Cloister of Parigi**, offering special views of the dome and bell tower.

**Chiesa di Santa Trinità**, smaller but historically significant, is a Gothic church that's easy to overlook but shouldn't be missed. The real treasures are inside: the famous Sassetta Chapel features Ghirlandaio's stunning frescoes depicting the life of Saint Francis, set against backdrops of 15th-century Florence. You'll also find works by Lorenzo Monaco and beautiful della Robbia ceramics. **Opening hours:** Monday-Saturday: 7:00am-12:00pm and 4:00pm-7:00pm Sunday: 8:00am-10:45am and 4:00pm-6:00pm **Mass times:** Daily: 7:30am and 6:30pm Sunday: Also at 11:00am **Important:** Entry to the church is free, but **bring 1 and 2 euro coins** to illuminate the chapels. Each chapel has a coin-operated light system that turns on the lights for a few minutes. This is essential for properly viewing the frescoes — the church is quite dark otherwise. Budget around 4-6 euros in coins if you want to see all the major chapels. The crypt also requires coins for lighting. The coins go toward the church's maintenance expenses, so it's money well spent. Some visitors find this system frustrating (especially if you don't carry cash), but it allows the church to remain free while covering costs.

For something truly special, climb the hill to **San Miniato al Monte**. This 11th-century Romanesque gem is one of Florence's most beautiful churches, and from its terrace, you'll have sweeping views across the city. The church is usually open from 9:30am-1:00pm and 3:00pm-7:00pm (winter hours may be shorter, often closing at sunset). Late afternoon visits are particularly magical when the setting sun illuminates the geometric marble facade.

## OPEN-AIR MASTERPIECES: SCULPTURE FOR EVERYONE

**Piazza della Signoria** The square itself costs nothing to enter, yet it's filled with some of the city's most important artworks.

- **Fountain of Neptune (Fontana del Nettuno)** — the large marble fountain facing Palazzo Vecchio, created by Bartolomeo Ammannati in the 16th century.
- **Equestrian statue of Cosimo I de' Medici** — the bronze equestrian statue by Giambologna, celebrating the Medici ruler who shaped Florence's power.
- **Replica of Michelangelo's David** — placed in front of Palazzo Vecchio (the original is in the Accademia Gallery).
- **Hercules and Cacus (Ercole e Caco) by Baccio Bandinelli** — the large marble group next to the David replica at the entrance of Palazzo Vecchio.

But the real treasure here is the **Loggia dei Lanzi**, an elegant 14th-century covered arcade that houses a remarkable collection of Renaissance and Mannerist sculptures. Walk straight under its three wide arches — there's no barrier and no ticket required. Here you'll find

Cellini's bronze *Perseus* holding Medusa's severed head, a technical marvel of Renaissance casting, and Giambologna's powerful *Rape of the Sabine Women*, carved from a single block of marble. These aren't replicas or minor works — they're museum-quality masterpieces, standing exactly where they've been for centuries, completely accessible. The loggia is particularly beautiful in the early morning light before the crowds arrive, or in the evening when most tour groups have dispersed.

**HIDDEN CENACOLI: THE LAST SUPPER TRAIL** Florence has a secret collection of Last Supper frescoes painted in monastery refectories across the city. Three of the finest can be visited free of charge.

- The **Cenacolo di Sant'Apollonia** houses Andrea del Castagno's powerful interpretation from 1447. His version is dramatic and psychologically intense, with Judas isolated on the near side of the table. The museum is typically open Tuesday-Saturday, 8:15am-1:50pm, though hours can vary. Arrive early for a peaceful viewing.
- At the **church of Ognissanti**, the old refectory contains Ghirlandaio's serene Last Supper, painted in 1480. The fresco is luminous and calm, with remarkable detail in the background flora and fauna. The refectory generally opens Mondays and Saturdays (9am-12pm), though it's best to confirm current hours on the door.
- Slightly outside the historic center in San Salvi, the **Cenacolo di Andrea del Sarto** is considered by many to be the finest Last Supper in Florence after Leonardo's in Milan. Del Sarto's 1527 fresco is beautifully preserved, with brilliant colors and an atmosphere of profound serenity. The museum is usually open Tuesday-Sunday, 8:15am-1:50pm. It's quieter than the central locations, often with just a handful of visitors. The slightly longer journey (bus #6 from the center) is absolutely worthwhile.

**PALACE COURTYARDS: GLIMPSES OF POWER** You don't need a museum ticket to experience Renaissance grandeur at **Palazzo Vecchio**. The ground-floor courtyards are freely accessible during the building's opening hours (typically Monday-Wednesday and Friday-Sunday 9am-7pm, Thursday 9am-2pm). Step through the main entrance from Piazza della Signoria into the *Cortile di Michelozzo*, designed in 1453 and later decorated by Vasari with elaborate frescoes depicting Austrian cities, created for the wedding of Francesco I de' Medici to Johanna of Austria. The painted ceilings, elegant columns, and central fountain create an atmosphere of refined power. These spaces offer a taste of the palazzo's magnificence without the museum admission fee. Throughout the historic center, keep an eye out for open palace gates. Many Renaissance *palazzi* have magnificent courtyards that are technically semi-public spaces. A respectful peek through open doorways often reveals beautiful architecture, ancient wells, and sculptural details.

#### **MUSEUMS & HISTORIC HOMES** Officina Profumo-Farmaceutica di Santa Maria

**Novella** is one of Florence's most enchanting free experiences. Founded in 1612 by Dominican friars, this is one of the world's oldest pharmacies still in operation. You can walk through frescoed rooms that have been selling herbal remedies and perfumes for over 400 years. The neo-Gothic salesroom is spectacular, and there's no pressure to purchase — though you might be tempted by their traditional rosewater or potpourri. The pharmacy is open Monday-Saturday, 9am-8pm, Sunday 10:30am-7:30pm. Mid-morning weekdays are quietest.

**GARDENS & GREEN SPACES** Giardino delle Rose (**Rose Garden**) spreads across a hectare on the hillside below Piazzale Michelangelo. Over 1,000 botanical varieties grow here, including 250 species of roses that bloom gloriously from May through June. Japanese architect Yasuo Kitayama designed a Japanese garden section that adds an unexpected serene element. Bronze sculptures by Belgian artist Jean-Michel Folon dot the terraces. The garden is open daily, year-round, from 9am until sunset. May and early June offer the peak rose displays, but any season provides beautiful views across Florence. Entrance is from Viale Giuseppe Poggi — follow the signs uphill from Piazzale Michelangelo.

**Cimitero delle Porte Sante**, just behind San Miniato al Monte, is a peaceful cemetery with remarkable city views. Many notable Florentines rest here, and the terraced layout creates quiet corners for reflection. It's free to enter and respects visitors who approach with appropriate reverence.

For something different, the **Cimitero degli Inglesi (English Cemetery)** is an oval Victorian cemetery in Piazzale Donatello where many notable Anglo-American residents of 19th-century Florence are buried, including Elizabeth Barrett Browning. However, this one requires planning: it's only open Monday-Friday, with limited hours (winter: 2-5pm; summer: Monday 9am-12pm, Tuesday-Friday 3-6pm). A small donation is usually requested at the gate for maintenance. The hours can vary, so call ahead (+39 055 582608) to confirm.

**THE BEST VIEWS: NO TICKET REQUIRED** **Piazzale Michelangelo** is Florence's classic panoramic viewpoint. Yes, it's crowded, yes, it's touristy, but there's a reason: the view is extraordinary. The square is accessible 24 hours and always free. Sunset draws the biggest crowds; consider sunrise instead for a magical, nearly solitary experience. Or visit around 10-11am on weekdays when tour buses have departed and lunch crowds haven't yet arrived.

For a different perspective, **Ponte Santa Trinita** offers the best view of Ponte Vecchio. Stand in the center of this elegant bridge and look back toward the Ponte Vecchio to see it perfectly framed by the river and buildings. Late afternoon light is particularly beautiful here. The bridge is always accessible and free.

The **Lungarni** — the streets running along both sides of the Arno — provide endless free photo opportunities and lovely walks. Early evening is prime time for the traditional *passeggiata*, when locals stroll along the river. The golden hour before sunset paints the Ponte Vecchio and buildings in warm honey tones.

For a perfectly framed Duomo view, walk down **Via dei Servi** from Piazza Santissima Annunziata toward the cathedral. The street is laid out to frame Brunelleschi's dome at its end — a planned Renaissance perspective that still works beautifully 500 years later.