



CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE
LEFT: Ormate Hotel Centurion, Venice. Our gondola ride. It's a dog's life! The Arena in Verona. Modern Escalus Luxury Suites.



Venice must dos

- **Gondola ride** It's a great way to see the nooks and crannies of Venice. Find a gondolier outside the major tourist areas.
- **Taverna San Trovaso** Good, cheap, authentic Venetian fare, and plenty of it!
- **Gelato by the water next to Piazza San Marco** It's creamy and you can take in the gondola traffic jams on the canal.

eat, stay, love

For Bride to Be's Natasha Shaw, Italy was the perfect mix of history, culture and romance for a post-wedding getaway

Verona

Our taxi driver summed it up when he dropped us at the front door of our accommodation and stated: 'You really are close to everything here.' He was right. The Escalus Luxury Suites (slh.com/escalus) was just 100m from the ancient Arena in Piazza Bra in the heart of Verona. Our suite was spacious and modern, with a lounge and kitchen area, separate bedroom and glorious rain shower, not to mention two Juliet balconies. We frocked up for the opera that night – *Aida* in the 15,000-seat Arena, and the next morning set out to explore the city. We couldn't leave Verona without taking the short walk to Casa di Giulietta (Juliet's house) and taking photos of the small marble balcony where she was wooed by her dashing Romeo (get there nice and early to avoid the love-struck crowds). From here, we strolled the ancient vias and marble-paved piazzas and discovered a captivating juxtaposition of modern shopping and city life among the historic buildings. To quote Shakespeare: 'There is no world outside these walls.'

Verona must dos

- **The Arena in Piazza Bra** Go on a tour around the ancient site, dress up for the opera, or take in one of the many concerts. See verona.com
- **Casa di Giulietta** It will add even more romance to your honeymoon.
- **Take a guided walking tour** See julietandco.com for various tours.

Venice

The two of us were excited as the train pulled in. Just outside the station we jumped aboard the Vaporetto for a crowded yet scenic ferry ride up the Grand Canal towards our hotel. From the Accademia ferry stop, it was a meander through the skinny, maze-like streets with about 60kg of luggage, up and down the stairs of *ponte* (bridges) until we found the Centurion Palace (sinahotels.com). It was worth the work-out. Situated on the Grand Canal between the infamous Peggy Guggenheim museum and the ginormous Santa Maria della Salute cathedral, the lobby sparkled with a massive crystal sculpture that hung from the ceiling and framed the bustling boat life of the canal. And the ornate stonework façade is so spectacular it's featured in many postcards. From here it was quite easy for us to walk to all the must-see places, including the Piazza San Marco and Rialto Bridge.

A friend told us we simply must do the typically touristy gondola ride, so we bought a bottle of Prosecco from a nearby shop (the jolly owner was nice enough to give us two plastic glasses) and set off on our water journey under the expert guidance of Andre, a Venice native. Gliding through the narrow canals, gazing at the centuries-old wrought iron and stone work is one romantic, magical hour we will never forget. We adored Venice – the shopping's great (Murano glass and artwork are aplenty), we didn't mind getting lost in the 'streets', many of which were just beyond shoulder-width, and the architecture is awe-inspiring. You truly do 'experience' Venice; you don't just visit it.



FROM LEFT TO RIGHT: The Continentale is very funky. This replica 'David' is on full show in the Piazza della Signoria. The gold-lined Ponte Vecchio.



Florence

Our next stop was beautiful Florence – a mecca of art and culture, surrounded by rolling hills. We arrived at the Continentale (designhotels.com), again in awe. You could literally walk out the door and straight onto the infamous Ponte Vecchio flanked by dozens of gold stores (which I rushed to see, of course, dragging a reluctant husband!). Our fifth level room featured floor-to-ceiling fine white draping over two walls and the windows, as well as curtaining our enormous double king bed. From the hotel's rooftop bar you could see across the skyline of Florence to the nearby dome of Santa Maria Del Fiore and the clock tower of the Palazzo Vecchio.

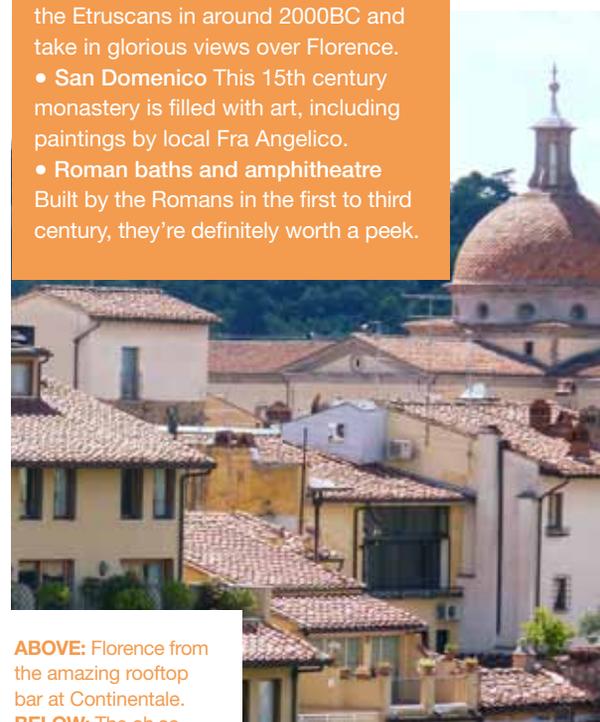
Florence is renowned for its San Lorenzo markets – they literally go for blocks and blocks. You'll find the usual tourist trinkets, but then there's the leather. Oh, boy! Bags, luggage, jackets – hundreds of styles are up for grabs. A couple of purchases later, we were happily shopped out, and headed into the Mercato Centrale – a warehouse-like building filled with cheeses, meats, wines and the most delicious and authentic food stands around. We washed down a cheap-as-chips papardelle ragu for our late lunch with a very welcome tumbler of chianti... It was Florence at its best.

Fiesole

Just north of Florence, you'll find this 7th century BC town settled over steep hills. Originally a powerful Etruscan force in central Italy, it's now a charming place to relax and take in the rural Italian way of life – food, vino and friendly locals. We were over the moon to be staying at the extremely grand Villa San Michele (kiwicollection.com) perched on a very steep slope overlooking distant Florence. It was once inhabited by monks, but is now graced by the rich and famous (I kept expecting George Clooney to walk into the bar) and boasts the only surviving fresco of *The Last Supper*. We spent much of our time lazing by the pool on the top tier of the grounds and indulging in local wine on the ornate stone veranda served by a very cheeky, well-dressed barman. Dinner there, overlooking the lights of Florence was a must and well worth the expense, and it was a pleasure to fall asleep in our Junior Suite, complete with its large marble bathroom, sitting area and our own hedged courtyard. Leaving Fiesole was difficult – there is so much Etruscan and Roman history to explore in this town, from the violence to spectacular artistry in pottery, architecture and paintings. We could have easily spent much longer getting to know this lovely hilly town.

Fiesole must dos

- Walk Wandering the town's slopes (wear good shoes) is worth the effort. You'll see massive stone walls built by the Etruscans in around 2000BC and take in glorious views over Florence.
- San Domenico This 15th century monastery is filled with art, including paintings by local Fra Angelico.
- Roman baths and amphitheatre Built by the Romans in the first to third century, they're definitely worth a peek.



ABOVE: Florence from the amazing rooftop bar at Continentale. **BELOW:** The oh so luxe Villa San Michele.

Florence must dos

- The Ponte Vecchio It's lined only with jewellery shops, mostly 18ct gold in unique Florentine designs – every girl's dream and every guy's nightmare. You'll need space on your credit card!
- The San Lorenzo market Shop around before spending up on beautiful soft leather. The stalls are fab for pressies, too.
- The Galleria degli Uffizi Feast your eyes on works by the extraordinary artists of Italy, including Florence's Michelangelo, Donatello and Machiavelli. On the way out, check out the statue of David in the Piazza della Signoria.



WORDS: NATASHA SHAW. PHOTOGRAPHY: NATASHA AND MURRAY SHAW, PLUS SUPPLIED BY HOTELS