

I agree that less than a week in Tuscany sounds like sacrilege. In my defense: I was solo, relying on public transport; I definitely didn't want to go to Siena/San Gimignano; and possibly most importantly - I didn't want to see the museums in Florence on this particular trip as I felt it would be culture-overload with Paris & London to follow. So all I can tell you is how to walk through Florence (ta, Rick Steves), and how to see Chianti on public transport.

Chianti

- They say the best way to travel around Tuscany is by car. Watching Letters to Juliet definitely convinced me of that. That said, it's still easy to do Chianti by public transport (Verona's also easy, and I was tempted to go there for a couple of days, but the timing didn't work out on this trip).

- The main SITA bus stop is opposite the SMN train station. You'll also find bus schedules here. Don't bother trying to search for them online - they change.

- Decide what time you'll take the last bus back before boarding. This is especially important on Saturdays when buses from Chianti stop running by about 5 (8 on weekdays). And it's probably not worth going at all on Sundays when the bus frequency slows down considerably.

- You'll need bus 365 to Gaiole (check the last stop as well as the bus number - some only go as far as Greve). I recommend getting off at Panzano, which is one picturesque hour away from Florence, going through Greve & Rada.

It's a charming town to wander around, and there's a restaurant in the village with a great lunch-time burger deal for non-vegetarians (Dario DOC). A little south of the village you get great views of the Conca D'Aro, considered one of the most scenic wineland tracts.

You can get back on the bus to Greve, well known for being Chianti's wine 'capital' (or walk 3km, but if you're doing this, I suggest walking from Greve to Panzano after getting directions at the TI).

Another bus takes you 2km away to Greti, where there are roadside tastings.

All the buses combined should cost you no more than 9-10EU.

- Again, it depends on how into wine you are - if you're just there for the surroundings and the ambience, then feel free to wander around without a plan. If you're there for the wine, book ahead; several wineries offer tours + tastings + lunch for prices ranging between 65 and 200EU. Of course, if you're doing this, it strikes me that you may as well just do one of the guided tours from Florence.

- These enotecas offer tasting 'without obligation' to buy:
At Panzano: Accademia del Buon Gusto

At Greti: Castello di Verrazzano

Florence

Near the train station: Farmacia di Santa Maria Novella – palatial perfumery run by the Dominicans of SMN, it started as a herb garden by the monks of the SMN church. The third room selling herbs dates back to 1612.

Duomo

A church has been on this spot since 500 AD. It was started in the Gothic style in the middle ages, but left unfinished. In 1296, the present church was started under architect Arnolfo di Cambio who also built Palazzo Vecchio. By 1420, it was done except for the hole in the ceiling - technology to create a dome hadn't yet been invented. Filippo Brunelleschi was called in to finish the job. He capped it Roman style with a tall self supporting dome inspired by the Pantheon. It's a dome within a dome – first a grand white skeleton, then filled in supporting itself like an igloo. Built in only 14 years, the dome's the largest since the Pantheon. It's the model for St Peters, the White House and so much more. The façade is from 1870, 600 years after it started being built.

What to look for: Brunelleschi's tomb, The Last Judgment by Giorgio Vasari & Federico Zuccari; Donatello's round stained glass window below it showing the coronation of the Virgin.

To the right, **Campanile/Giotto's Tower** – Considered the father of modern painting, Giotto was called the ugliest man in Florence in his time but created what's called the most beautiful bell tower in Europe today. Replicas of Donatello's four prophets are on the west side.

The octagonal building in front is the **Baptistery**; Florence's oldest building dating back to the 11th century. Some say the Renaissance began when Florence held a competition for artists to build the north door for the baptistery in 1401. 25 year old Lorenzo Ghiberti won over other greats including Brunelleschi.

He later built the east door as well, and brought the idea of depth into art with the panels he created over 27 years (look for the panel depicting him - the balding guy). Michaelangelo called these the Gates of Paradise. In both cases, the doors you see today are replicas.

Detour a block north up to the **Medici-Riccardi palace**. The Medici family is the one which rebuilt the city after half the population had been wiped out by the plague. They were a little defensive about being nouveau rich, and built their house in great glamour to counter it.

Back to the Duomo, continue south to **Via de Calzaiuoli**, a pedestrian-only old street connecting religious & political centers, which was part of original street grid the Romans created.

Orsonmichele

A block further, is the Orsonmichele Church, which used to be a granary. You can still see pillars from 1300's which were likely used to transport grain down chutes; the rings on the ceilings were likely for pulleys. When it became a church in 1400, the government was a republic, working for merchant guilds rather than a king. So the guilds fashioned statues for the church as a PR gesture.

Circling the church clockwise, you'll see:

- Nanni di Banco's Quattro Santi Coronati (1415-17) representing 4 early Christian sculptors killed by Roman emperor Diocletian for not building pagan gods (look for the guilds' tools).
- A bronze reproduction of Donatello's St George (original was in marble)
- Donatello's St Mark, the first statue to have its weight on one foot since antiquity. It looked 'off' on the ground, but was well proportioned when raised into its niche.

Inside, look for Andrea Orcagna's tabernacle built to display Bernado Daddi's Madonna della Grazie, built to thank her for sparing the city from the bubonic plague of 1348.

(If hungry, I Fratellini has cheapish sandwiches).

Straw Market/Mercato Novo shows what the church may have looked like as a market. The circled x in the center marks the spot people hit after being hoisted to the top and dropped as a punishment for bankruptcy. Also look for the Porcellino wild boar which tourists rub & give coins to, in the hope of returning to Florence. This is a new copy, a few years old.

Piazza della Repubblica used to be the Jewish ghetto, it was hastily changed as a nationalistic statement in 1865, when Florence became the capital of Italy for 5 years (that lasted till Rome was 'liberated' from the Vatican). Between here & the river is typical Middle Age style stuff – apparently the city was so dense that when it rained, no one got wet).

Piazza Della Signorina

Palazzo Vecchio – this was the political centre; the City Hall of the Medicis, built to withstand riots, with a lookout window above stone throwing range. Michaelangelo's David stood here till 1873, despite being damaged in the 1527 riots - pollution eventually made it unsafe to leave it out. Step into the courtyard and enjoy luxurious art built for the sake of art – a major deal back then. The cherub with dolphin by Da Vinci's teacher, Verrochio, was one of the first intended to be enjoyed from any angle. The one that stands there now is a copy, and it replaced Donatello's Michael, which was the first male nude sculpted in 1000 years.

Loggia della Signorina was once a forum for public debate in a city that prided itself on its democracy. Medici decided good art was more important. Statues at the back are Roman originals. In front are Giambologna's Rape of the Sabines (the 3 bodies are sculpted from 1 piece of marble, it dates back to 1583 - the Mannerist period. Note the IV wire on the husband's arm is electrocuted to keep pigeons away); Cellini's Perseus (Perseus is the Greek hero who

defeated Medusa).

Across the square is the **Fountain of Neptune** by Ammanati, considered by many to be a waste of marble. I believe Michaelangelo even said, "What a beautiful piece of marble you've ruined!" or something to that effect - I read it somewhere but can't remember where.

The round bronze plaque on the ground ten steps away is the **Savonarola plaque** for the monk who briefly overthrew the Medicis by calling for abandonment of vanity – rich people used to come burn their personal wealth here. He was burned in the same spot at the Pope's encouragement in 1498.

Uffizi (offices during the Medici days). The courtyard has statues of the greats from the Renaissance period. Left to right, in the direction of the river: Lorenzo de' Medici, cunning power broker; Giotto; Donatello; Alberti, the author of a book on painting which had the maths of perspective; Da Vinci; Michaelangelo; Dante, the first Italian to write a popular book in non-Latin, known today as Italian; Petrarch; Boccaccio; Machiavelli, known best for writing The Prince in which he postulated that the end justifies the means; Vespucci, the explorer who gave his first name 'Amerigo' to a fledgling new world; and Galileo.

Around the river

Originally, the city itself was on the north side, and the poor were on the other side of the river - Oltrarno. That slowly changed as the Pitti Palace was built 4 blocks beyond the bridge. This stretch is only recommended if you're not tired from walking.

Ponte Vecchio/old bridge – a bridge's been here since Roman times, spanning the narrowest part of the Arno river. It's the commercial hub, and boats from Pisa used to come to the river with everything including marble for Michaelangelo. It was taken over by goldsmiths & silversmiths in the time of the Medici, replacing the original butchers & tanners.

The Nazis were given orders to bomb the bridge so that Hitler couldn't be followed, but it was saved by an art loving German man who bombed the buildings on either side instead. There's a plaque for him on the middle of the bridge.

Vasari Corridor - The Medicis had to walk from the city hall to their palace daily. They built a new path for themselves, razing through houses in 5 months in 1565.

Torre dei Barbadori & Torre dei Belfredelli - 12th century towers built by 2 families with as much drama as the Montagues-Capulets clearly, since they fortified their mansions.

Via Toscanella - The street's named for Paolo Toscanelli, a scientist who used Brunelleschi's dome as a giant sundial and convinced Columbus to reach east by sailing west. Thank you from India. You'll see artisanal shops on this street & neighboring streets where people like Da Vinci would have apprenticed.

Pitti Palace - Sits in front of a quarry from where stone was cut to build it. Originally built for the Pitti family in the 15th century when Oltrarno became a fashionable place for nobles to build palaces, the Medicis bought it & bigged it up in the 16th century. In the 1860s, when Florence was capital, it was briefly the 'White House' for the Savoy family. It's much grander on the inside with famous Bobli Garden inside. (The meta supermarket opposite the palace is a good place to grab a snack).

Oltrarno

Santo Spirito church - As a boy, Michaelangelo was allowed to dissect bodies from a nearby monastery to study anatomy. He made a crucifix for the church as thanks, later in life. The nearby Ricchi Café shows 100s or entries from the neighborhood who tried to reimagine the church's blank façade.

Santa maria del Carmine church – see 3D Baroque work on the ceiling (Baroque originated in Rome & came to Florence, just as Renaissance originated in Florence and went to Rome).

Porta san Frediano is one of the gates in Florence's medieval wall, from 1333. It straddled the road to Pisa. The tower used to be twice as high but when gunpowder was introduced, it had to be chopped down as it was an easy target.

Just for ambience value, walk from Carraia bridge to Piazza de Frescobaldi, Borgo San Jacopo, Torre di Marsili, and back to Ponte Vecchio.