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**F**OR many people Florence is a city they've always dreamt of visiting. Fortunately, like those other great romantic escapes Paris and Venice, the reality does not disappoint.

I get more and more wrapped up in my dreams of the scheming Medicis and the miraculous Michelangelo every time I'm lucky enough to visit this Tuscan gem.

I hadn't been to Florence for a couple of years so I hopped back at the end of this summer.

I soon realised the city had lost none of its magic as I sat watching the sun melt over the ridiculously ambitious freestanding cupola of the Duomo and the medieval mayhem of the Ponte Vecchio from my favourite vantage spot high up at Piazzale Michelangelo.

From this lofty position the compact city centre unfurls like a 3D art history class, with perhaps the world's finest art gallery — and certainly the globe's most impressive renaissance treasure trove — in the form of the Uffizi Gallery.

**Great art**

Just across from where I stood was a hulking copy of Michelangelo's David, impressive in its own right in a city where even the copies of great art excel.

My first hotel was the Plaza Hotel Lucchesi (www.summithotels.com). This was ideal as my room sported a big balcony, which bravely turned its back on the river to reveal the city's rambling rooftops.

Rising up through the TV aerials and tight streets was the hulking vision of Santa Croce, my favourite Florentine church.

I made a point of getting up at the crack of dawn just to see the Tuscan sun break over its dreamy facade.

It says a lot about Florence that I have a second and a third favourite church, too.

The Duomo itself is a stunning second. This epic cathedral, landed like some great renaissance time machine right at the heart of the city, is breathtaking.

**Views**

You can lose hours just trying to take in all the details of the facade and then there's the tower you can climb for arresting views.

Coming third is San Spirito. Conjured up by the same seminal talent behind the Duomo, Brunelleschi, its rather austere facade (Brunelleschi died before he could finish it) helps repel the crowds, but inside this is every bit as much a perfectly composed renaissance masterpiece as the Duomo.

My second Florentine bolthole was a work of art in itself.

At the Relais Santa Croce history

breathes through the expansive public rooms and luxurious bedrooms with 18th-Century frescoes and priceless period pieces de rigueur (www.preferredhotels.com).

What I loved about the Relais, though, is that, like the city that

unfurls around the palace, heritage and tradition is married with stylish modernity with design touches bringing the former palace bang up to date.

The restaurant echoes the mood, equally adept at turning out a traditional Florentine t-bone steak

as it is a very en vogue truffle and potato foam creation.

If you've never really been a great lover of high culture then Florence is still worth visiting as it boasts a unique buzz that makes just strolling around its stone streets a pleasure. It abounds with piazzas large and small, that all have in common is there's at least one cafe and decent place to eat. Then there's the shopping, with all the designer names here in abundance, as well as some more esoteric local options.

If you've always dreamed of going to Florence, but feared it could never meet your lofty expectations then fear not. With cheap flights from Scotland there's never been a better time to discover a city that has

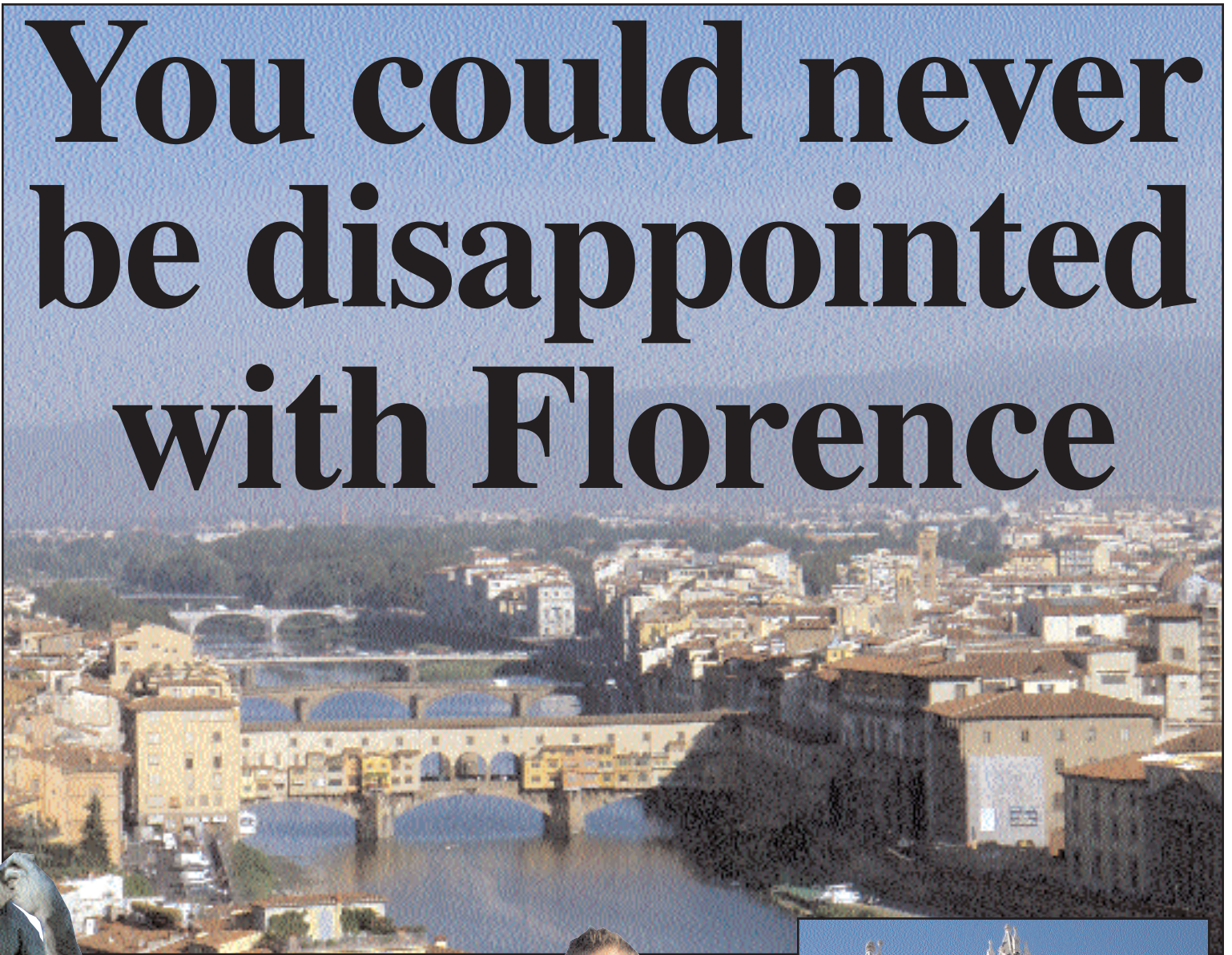
seldom failed to exceed expectations ever since the first tentative travellers on the Grand Tour of Europe ventured to this living museum in the 19th Century.

**Further information**

Ryanair (www.ryanair.com) fly direct to Pisa from Edinburgh and Glasgow Prestwick. There are direct trains from the airport into Florence.

*Time Out Florence And The Best Of Tuscany* is an invaluable guide to the city, while *Lonely Planet's Tuscany And Umbria* is also handy if you want to explore the city or venture further afield.

# You could never be disappointed with Florence



■ The famous Ponte Vecchio, built in 1345.



■ The copy of the famous David sculpture (left) on the Piazzale Michelangelo and Robin with the Duomo in the background.



■ The facade of the Santa Croce, Robin's favourite Florentine church.

**Hotel of the week**

**OBAN BAY HOTEL** — Perfectly located right on the waterfront it enjoys sweeping views of the eponymous bay. We stayed in Kerrera, a junior suite with a four-poster bed my baby daughter loved and stand-alone bath with a view of the Isle of Kerrera that was a big hit with my wife. Add in the new hot tub and a decent restaurant and this is arguably the best place to stay in Oban. Make sure to book a sea view room. Doubles from £90. Corran Esplanade, Oban, PA34 5AE. Tel. 0870 950 6273. www.crerarhotels.com

**Flight of the week**

**BMI HAVE** recently announced the successful flights from Edinburgh out to Copenhagen are now being extended with up to three flights in each direction on weekdays. The Danish capital boasts great restaurants, cafes, museums and a famously relaxed vibe, making it perfect for a fun city break or longer holiday escape. The Little Mermaid is the symbol of the city, but I also like the alternative living oasis of Christiania, the boat cruises and the surrounding countryside — not to mention the nearby bridge across to Sweden. Returns from £258. www.flybmi.com