

Katie's
Florence
Guide



*Disclaimer: This is by no means comprehensive. My suggestions are not necessarily the best way to do things, merely what my roommate, Mary, and I found worked for us. Take our advice or not, it's up to you. Most of all, I encourage you to explore for yourself. Find *your* favorite hill town, *your* favorite gelateria, restaurant, place in Florence. Enjoy the unexpected. Make the city your own. Don't be afraid to get a little lost. Also, all prices are subject to change. I can only provide the cost from when we were in the city (spring 2008).

Before You Leave

Guidebooks/Maps

- Definitely purchase an Italy guidebook (before you leave as they will be more expensive in Italy). We used *Rick Steves' Italy* and were very happy with it. It more than adequately covers the large cities and even smaller hill towns. You can get a guidebook specifically for Florence, but *Rick* had a fairly detailed section on the city. Combined with our guides from school and from our real estate agency, we had more than enough information to get what we needed (with the exception of what is in this guide that we had to figure out on our own...which is why we're writing it for you). When it comes to outside Italy, that all depends on where you want to go. Consider a "Best of Europe" book, but check that the locations it covers lines up with where you want to go.
- You really need a good, detailed map of Florence. The city can be a bit confusing at first.
- A small, pocket-sized Italian-English dictionary is also a good idea.

Packing

No doubt you have been told to "pack light." This is excellent advice. Don't just pack light, though—pack smart. Remember that you will be buying stuff over here that you want to take back; so leave extra space, especially if no one is visiting you who can bring things back for you.

Clothing

- You really only need to pack about 3 weeks worth of clothes (no more than 2 weeks worth if you're just coming for a month in the summer). This goes along with packing light. Also, washing machines are small there, so you can't do large loads at a time anyway.
- Think layers—especially if you will be here for more than one season. Layers also give you the chance to switch up your wardrobe so you won't get tired of wearing the same thing (though, honestly, you really won't care).
- Good, sturdy walking shoes aren't just a good idea—they're a necessity. Go ahead and bring your cute flats for class, but you *will need* good shoes for taking day trips. Flip-flops don't count. You NEED arch and ankle support.
- Pack a rain jacket—it rains almost daily in the spring.

Toiletries

- I brought all my toiletries with me. This ended up being a good idea because pretty much everything is more expensive over there. Also, because they were disposable, I used them up and had extra space in my suitcases for bringing other stuff back.
- Bring tampons. You will find little to no selection there and they will be super expensive.
- Make sure you bring enough to last the entire time—multiple toothpaste tubes, deodorant sticks, etc.

Hair dryer/straightener

- Basic advice—buy them over here (if you're only coming for the summer, you may be willing to just do without.)
- You probably won't save money by bringing a hair dryer with you—we had several friends blow multiple converters because of their dryer from the States (which cost at least \$20 each). They ended up just buying one over here after all, thus wasting a considerable amount of money.
- A blow dryer will end up costing between 15-20 euro, but you can split the cost with a roommate or two.

Electronics

- We both brought our laptops with us, and were very glad we did. You may or may not have wireless in your apartment, but there is wireless in all the school buildings.
- LDM has a computer lab, but it's always busy. You will also want to be able to put your pictures on your computer.
- You shouldn't need a voltage converter, just a plug adapter. Double check, though--your computer should list the voltage options on the laptop itself or on the plug.
- Don't forget to pack chargers and adapters for your computer, camera and ipod.

Medications

- Pack ALL medications in your carry-on to insure you have them.
- Make sure you bring all the medication you will need for the semester—don't count on someone bringing more over for you and DO NOT have them mail it. You may never get it.
- Medicine is much more difficult to obtain over here. Bring whatever basics you normally use—Tylenol, Ibuprofen, decongestant/antihistamine, etc. You don't need to pack an entire pharmacy, but if you know you're probably going to want it, bring it.

Miscellaneous

- Bring Zip-locs. You won't find them over there and you will want them for various things. Bring various sizes—sandwich and gallon. You'll also need at least one pint-sized for liquids in your carry-on for the airplane.
- Peanut butter doesn't really exist over here. You can find it if you're desperate, but it's ridiculously expensive—almost \$6 for a jar that could

make maybe 2 or 3 sandwiches. So, if you want it, you should bring it. Just make sure you pack it in your checked baggage as it might count as a liquid.

- Be sure to bring photocopies of all important documents—including multiple copies of your passport.
- Bring a bag for day trips—a small backpack or large purse that slings across your shoulder.

Student vs. Private Housing

- We chose to find housing on our own. We went through Florence and Abroad Realty Agency. Their website is www.florenceandabroad.com. Our agent gave us a list of apartments (with pictures) to choose from. It ended up being about the same price as student housing, but we were able to arrive 2 weeks before classes started. Some apartments' rent will come with a standard fee for utilities included in the price. Others, you will pay based on your usage. Utilities are usually 150-200 euros a month.
- If you don't have a roommate, or don't want to deal with the hassle of finding an apartment and paying rent each month, go with student housing. Just be aware that you will won't know much about who you are living with—or where—until shortly before you arrive.

Money Matters

Credit/Debit Cards

- The best way to get money is to pull it out of an ATM with your debit card.
- Be sure to check with your bank about conversion and withdrawal fees. Also, let them know you will be abroad.
- Make sure you bring the phone number(s) to call if you have any problems with your card(s).

Budget

- Your budget really depends on your preferences, how much you travel and how much shopping you do.
- I spent an average of 50 euros a week on food, but I mostly cooked for myself and didn't go out that much.
- Be sure to factor in an emergency fund and allow for rises in exchange rates.

Across the Ocean

Buses

City-wide

- The main lines in Florence are ATAF and Li-nea.

- Before you get on the bus, you need to buy a ticket. (If necessary, you can buy it on the bus from the driver, but it will be at least 50 percent more.) You can buy a ticket just about anywhere that cigarettes are sold—newspaper stands, tabacchi shops, sometimes even gelaterias, bars, or bakeries.
- A ticket is not for a specific time, instead you validate it when you first board, starting the time.
- One ticket lasts for 70 minutes—meaning you can ride as many buses as you want within that 70 minutes.
- You **MUST** validate your ticket when you board—look for a box on either side of the aisle of the bus and insert the end of your ticket with the arrow. The drivers don't always check that you have a valid ticket. However, if they catch you without a validated ticket, you will have to pay a fine up to 240 euros. Don't take the chance.
- Price: One Ticket: €1.20
4 Tickets: €4.50 (Actually a single paper ticket that you can validate 4 times)
10 Tickets: €10.00 (A pass that you swipe at the validating machines. To validate, press "ok" and swipe. It should tell you "ticket decreased" and give you the number of tickets left.)
- The website for ATAF is www.ataf.net. It has routes and times for all the ATAF buses.

Inter-City

- Once again, you **MUST** validate your ticket when you board. If they catch you without your ticket validated (regardless of whether you have a non-validated ticket or not), you will have to pay a very big fine. This happened to a woman on one of our trips. We believe her fine was close to €50. Don't take the chance! Remember to validate!
- SITA—will take you to Siena, San Gimignano, and various other cities. The SITA station is near the main train station. Facing the train station (with Santa Maria Novella more or less to your back), it will be on the left on the same side of the main street as the station. Look for "SITA Autostazione SITA" and go through the large doorway. There you can buy your ticket and wait for the next bus.

Trains

- Like on the bus, remember to validate your ticket as it is not for a specific time.
- You must validate **BEFORE** getting on the train at the bright yellow boxes, usually at the beginning of the train bin.
- You can buy your ticket either at the biglietteria in the station, or at the self-service machines in the main section of the station.

Shopping

Markets

- Mercato Centrale--a massive covered market accessible from Piazza del Mercato Centrale or Via dell' Ariento. Look for the green and red warehouse-like building. Meat, cheese, bread, and wine are located on the ground floor, fresh produce on the upper floor. Generally really good prices (be sure to compare the various vendors, as some are pricier than others) and a fun experience.
- San Lorenzo—located in Piazza San Lorenzo and branching off towards Mercato Centrale, the San Lorenzo market is full of plenty of touristy merchandise—scarves, leather goods, t-shirts, etc. Prices are soft (meaning it's ok to haggle.)

Grocery Stores

- There are several mini-marts around the city (Conad, Il Centro, etc.) where you can find your basic needs.
- Esselunga is a large supermarket with much better selection and prices than the mini-marts. However, it is a 15-20 minute from the city center. We usually took our backpacks and made the trip every week or two. To get there from the Duomo, head north on Via Cavour. At Piazza Libertá, take Via Don Giovanni Manzoni. Turn right on Via Masaccio. Esselunga will be on your left (the sign outside the building says “supermarket”).

House wares

- IKEA—a Swedish furniture and home décor warehouse (in case you didn't know, there's also one in Atlanta). By far your best bet for anything you need for your apartment—from mattress toppers to measuring cups. Best part—there is a free IKEA bus that shuttles every hour or so between IKEA (on the outskirts of Florence) to the train station (near Santa Maria Novella), by the McDonald's. If you need help, just ask someone where the IKEA autobus comes. *Tip: While in the States we call it AY-KEE-AH, here they say EE-KAY-AH.
- Italy has several versions of the Dollar Tree—Euro Store, One Price and 99 Cent Paradise (no, I'm not making that up). These are also good sources for house wares, cleaning supplies, etc.

Favorites in the City

Gelato

- I don't think I've ever had bad gelato, but some places are better than others.
- Don't buy gelato anywhere near the Duomo (with the exception of Grom's), the Ponte Vecchio or San Lorenzo. Those gelaterias tend to be over-priced and not really exceptional.

- For good gelato starting at 1 euro, go 2 bridges down from the Ponte Vecchio (away from the Duomo/Uffizi). Named simple “Gelateria,” it is located right on the corner just over the bridge on the south side of the Arno.

View

- Piazzale Michelangelo—walk east along the Arno on the south side until you get to a large tower on your right. Follow the steps and road to the terrace.
- San Miniato—farther up hill than the piazzale, San Miniato’s terrace offers an even wider view. Facing the fake David in the piazzale, walk ahead and to the right and follow the signs up the hill.

Nature

- Boboli Gardens—a massive garden on the south side of the Arno, a combination of impeccably manicured landscaping and natural woods with fun statues and fountains thrown in. Boboli offers a much needed break from the stone and concrete labyrinth of the city. Entrance is 10 euros, but it is included in the Uffizi Pass.

Food and Drink

- Rivoire (located on Piazza della Signoria (where the fake David is) has both the best cappuccino and the best cioccolata calda (Italian hot chocolate—amazing).
- Nutella—you may have had it in the States, but it’s supposedly better here. Try Ringo cookies—more or less an oreo-like cookie, except with Nutella.

Outside Florence

- San Gimignano—I highly recommend a trip to my favorite Tuscan hill town.
 - Grab a bus from the SITA Autostazione. You will probably have to take the “Siena Diretta” bus and change buses in Poggibonsi. A bus leaves Florence every hour at the 0:40.
 - Favorite site: We took Rick’s advice and found a shorter tower in the gardens at the top of the town. Not only is it free to climb, it has an amazing 360 degree view of the countryside. Definitely worth a visit.
- Fiesole—located just a 20 minute bus ride outside the Florence city center, it is ideal for an afternoon or evening trip.
 - Check out the sunset from the veranda overlooking Florence, the wonderful public gardens and the church on the very top of the hill.
 - Take ATAF bus # 7 all the way to the end. The bus comes by each stop about every 20 minutes.
 - The actual town of Fiesole isn’t that exciting; however, behind the main drag are some fun back roads with amazing views of the Tuscan countryside.