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A photograph of a Venetian canal scene. In the foreground, the dark, polished prow of a gondola is visible, pointing towards the center of the frame. The canal is filled with water that reflects the warm, golden light of the sun. Several other gondolas are visible further down the canal, with gondoliers in striped shirts using long poles to navigate. The buildings lining the canal are multi-story, with facades in shades of orange, red, and yellow. Some buildings have ornate architectural details, including arched windows and balconies. A small stone bridge with a metal railing crosses the canal in the middle ground. The sky is a clear, bright blue. The overall atmosphere is peaceful and historic.

HIDDEN

Italy





Italy is packed with so much exquisite art and architecture that some of it may have escaped your attention. From a secret, art-laden corridor in the Uffizi Gallery to the necropolis under St Peter's Basilica, we reveal the cultural treasures you may not know about — but definitely should

WORDS: Julia Buckley



THE SECRET PASSAGE

Vasari Corridor, Florence

It's a beautiful night on the Ponte Vecchio. The Arno River slips below one of the world's most iconic bridges — the lights of the riverside palazzos glistening in the inky water, surrounding bridges lit up like strings of pearls. The shops are buzzing, the fake designer bag hawkers out in force. Buskers jostle for space with tourists under the bust of Cellini, overlooking the water. It's a scrum.

Not where I am, though, looking down, unseen, through a window 20ft above them. I'm passing through the Vasari Corridor, a private walkway designed by architect Giorgio Vasari in 1564 for the Grand Duke of Tuscany, Cosimo I De' Medici, to connect his house, the Palazzo Pitti, with his workplace, the Palazzo Vecchio. It's a view that's always been off-limits to all but Italy's elite. Until recently, that is. The Uffizi Gallery, of which it forms a part, now hosts private tours of the kilometre-long passageway.

I'd first heard about the Vasari Corridor at university. How it emerges from the rooftops of Oltrarno, tiptoes over the Ponte Vecchio and snakes along the riverside, above the famous colonnade, before reaching the Uffizi. I'd heard whispers about it opening — for private tours, occasionally, briefly, to the public — but booking it remained a mystery. Until, on what must have been my 15th visit, I stayed at the Grand Amore Hotel and Spa, which confirmed me a slot.

The main stretch of the corridor — from the Uffizi to the Palazzo Pitti — is open for private tours, but the entrance is so secret I have to ask three gallery staff before someone can direct me. Up on the second floor, between two nondescript classical statues, a man in a cloak stands guard in front of a small door. Once the rest of my group arrives, he opens it, straight onto a dark-carpeted staircase, lined with paintings.

But this is one gallery where the surroundings are more fascinating than the art, and as we drift through (we've less than an hour), it's the details that impress most: the small, round windows, whose acoustics meant conversations could be heard in the street; the rise and fall of the floor, following the rooftops of the houses below; a sudden diversion around the Manelli Tower at the far end of the Ponte Vecchio, because its owners refused to let Vasari tunnel through their home.

As we head uphill towards the Palazzo Pitti, a soprano voice floats towards us; a few steps more, and the walls turn to glass. A Corinthian-columned church spills out below us, and we're at the Medici family's private balcony. Today, they're practising for an upcoming concert; in the 16th century, this is how the grand dukes attended church, unseen by their subjects. They even built a stairwell for the priest to bring them communion.

Before we know it, we're being ushered out into the darkness of the Boboli Gardens, through the staff exit of the Palazzo Pitti and into the vast piazza beyond. The Ponte Vecchio is still heaving as I walk home; as I stop to look back, an American couple pauses beside me, looking up at the colonnade. "It's meant to go from the Pitti Palace to the Uffizi, so it should be right here," she says, irritated. "So where is it?"

It's right above you, I want to tell them. But then I realise I'd rather keep it for myself.

How to do it: Vueling flies to Florence from Heathrow, while other airlines serve Pisa, an hour away. Rooms at Grand Amore Hotel and Spa start from €278 (£211) per person, B&B. Tours of Vasari Corridor, arranged through the hotel, cost €85 (£65) each for a group tour, or €530 (£403) per person for private access. vueling.com grandamorehotel.com

More info: uffizi.org >