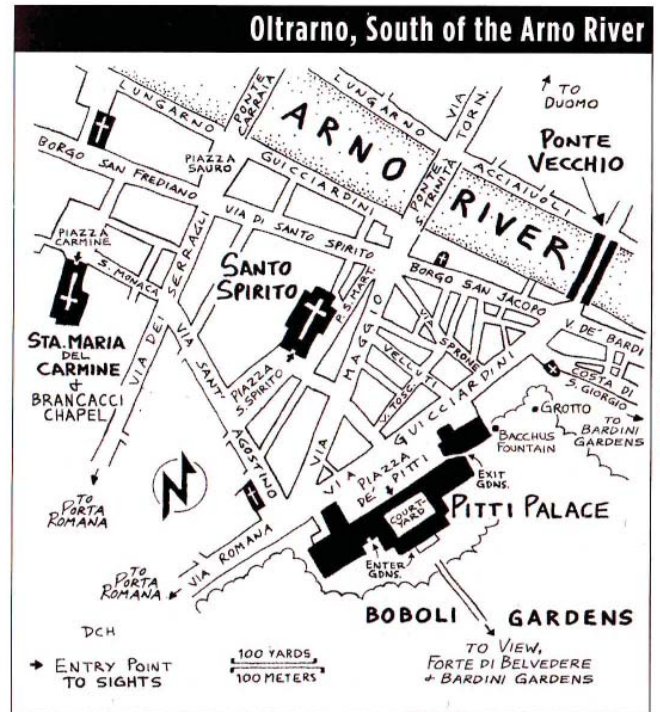


# Oltrano



west side of the piazza is a somewhat hidden terrace, an excellent place to retreat from the mobs. After dark, the square is packed with local school kids licking ice cream and each other. About 200 yards beyond all the tour groups and teenagers is the stark, beautiful, crowd-free, Romanesque San Miniato Church.

▲**San Miniato Church**—The martyred St. Minias, this church's namesake, died on this hill and is buried here in the crypt. Imagine this fine church all alone, without any nearby buildings or fancy stairs, a peaceful refuge for white-robed Benedictine monks to pray and work in. (The church remains part of a functioning monastery today.) Its green-and-white marble facade is classic Florentine Romanesque, while the eagle on top—with bags of wool in his talons—symbolizes the wool guild that paid for the church.



Step inside. Right away, you notice a little Renaissance chapel front and center. It was built by the proud Medicis in response to the splendid altar (left side of the nave) for Jacopo of Portugal. Jacopo died in Florence in about 1450, when he was 26. His very wealthy family mourned him by hiring the best artists of the day to decorate this sumptuous chapel (made by cutting a hole in the wall). It's a resumé of the best of Renaissance humanism, with wonderfully 3-D paintings and a plush ceiling of glazed terra-cotta panels by Luca della Robbia. The throne on the left was for the family to meditate before the tomb in their private chapel.

For me, though, the highlight is the brilliantly preserved art in the sacristy (behind altar in the room on right) showing scenes from the life of St. Benedict (c. 1350) by a follower of Giotto. Drop a euro into the box to light the room for five minutes. Stroll through the cemetery behind the church to marvel at the showy crypts and headstones of Florentine hotshots from the last two centuries (church is free, daily April–Oct 8:00–19:00, Nov–March 8:00–13:00 & 14:30–18:00, Gregorian chants April–Sept daily at the 17:30 Mass—17:00 in winter, 200 yards above Piazzale Michelangelo, take bus #12 or #13 from train station, tel. 055-234-2731).

**Oltrarno Walk**—If you never leave the touristy center, you won't really see Florence. There's more to the city than tourism. Most of its people live and work outside of the touristy zone.

While tourism has crept into the Oltrarno neighborhood, south of the Arno River, you can still feel the rustic, old Florence in this area. To keep things easy, I've limited this self-guided tour to a perfectly straight line (you can't get lost). But be sure to venture down inviting side streets. Cross Ponte Vecchio, turn right, and walk west on the busy, noisy road toward Pisa—it changes names, from Borgo San Jacopo and Via di Santo Spirito to Borgo San Frediano—until you reach the city wall at Porta San Frediano. Along this route, you can check out several recommended restaurants (see Eating, page 241). As you walk, consider these points:

After one block, at the fancy **Hotel Lungarno**, step up to the Arno River viewpoint for a great look at Ponte Vecchio. Recall the story of Albrecht von Kesselring, the Nazi commander-in-chief of Italy who happened to be an art-lover. As the Nazis retreated in 1944, he was commanded to blow up all the bridges. Rather than destroy venerable Ponte Vecchio, he disabled it by blowing up the surrounding neighborhood. Turn around and cross the street to see the ivy-covered nub of a medieval tower—ruined August 6, 1944.

Along this walk, you'll see plenty of artisans at work and lots of inviting little **shops**. You're welcome to drop in, but remember, it's polite to say "*Buon giorno*" and "*Ciao*." "Can I take a look?" is "*Posso guardare?*" (POH-soh gwahr-DAH-ray).

The streets are busy with *motorini* (Vespas and other motor bikes). While these are allowed in the city, nonresident cars are not (unless they are electric). Notice that parked cars have a *residente* permit on their dash. You might see a police officer (likely a woman) later on the walk, keeping out traffic.

Look for little architectural details. Tiny shrines protect the corners of many blocks. Once upon a time, the iron spikes on the walls impaled huge candles, which provided a little light. Electricity changed all that, but notice that there are no electric wires visible. They're under the streets.

This street is lined with apartment buildings punctuated by the occasional *palazzo*. The skyline and architecture are typical of the 13th to 16th centuries. Huge *palazzi* (recognized by their immense doors, lush courtyards, and grand stonework) were for big-shot merchants. Many have small wooden doors designed to look like stones (like those at #3b on Borgo San Frediano). While originally for one family, these buildings are now subdivided, as evidenced by the huge banks of doorbells at the door. Hooks high on the building facades are reminders of the 13th- and 14th-century textile trade, when newly dyed fabrics were hung out to dry.

The **Church of Santa Maria del Carmine**, with its famous Brancacci Chapel and Masaccio frescoes, is a short detour off Borgo San Frediano (see 🗺 Brancacci Chapel Tour on page 175).

A couple of blocks up, before Porta San Frediano (and its tower), look left up toward Piazza de' Nerli. The bold, yellow schoolhouse was built during Mussolini's rule—grandly proclaiming the resurrection of the Italian empire.

**Porta San Frediano**, built in about 1300, is part of Florence's medieval wall, which stretches impressively from here to the river. In medieval times, a three-quarter-mile-wide strip outside the wall was cleared to deny attackers any cover. The tower was originally twice as high, built when gravity ruled warfare. During the Renaissance, when gunpowder dominated warfare, the tower—now just an easy target—was lopped. Notice the original doors—immense and studded with fat iron nails to withstand battering rams. Got a horse? Lash it to a ring.

Tour over. You passed several fun eateries, and the colorful Trattoria Sabatino is just outside the wall (all described in Eating, page 241). *Ciao*.

