

The Florentine flourish

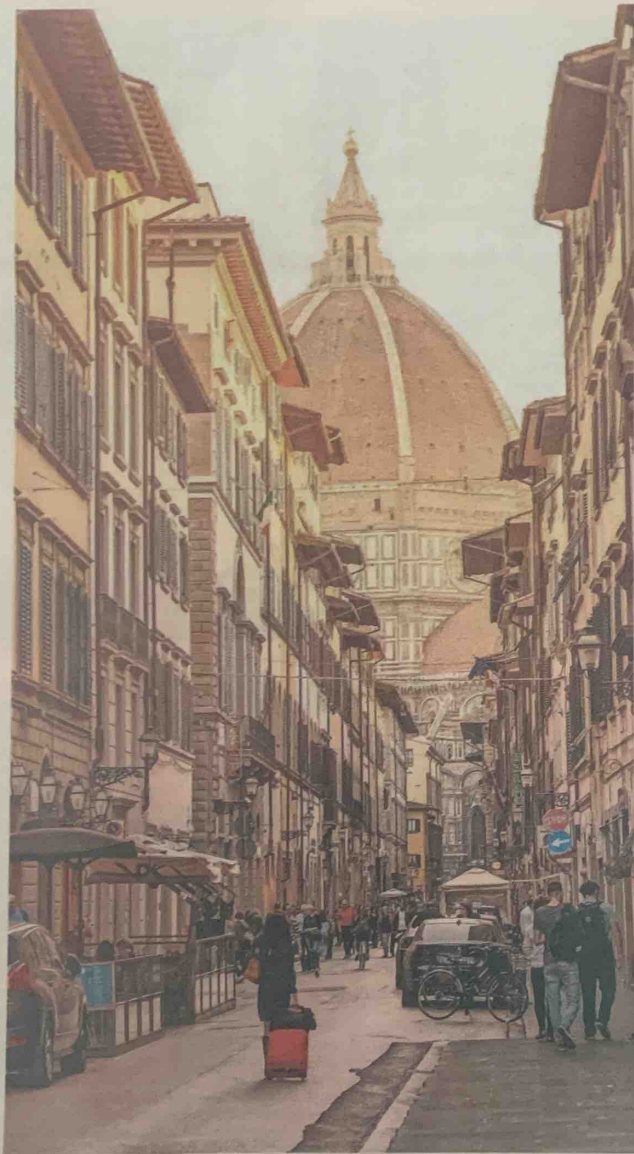
Demand has remained high since the start of the pandemic for homes in the historic centre of this compact, cosmopolitan and ever-inspiring city, writes *Liz Rowlinson*

On deciding to move to Italy with her Italian husband and three children, Tami Schrader chose Florence for its international school. The family relocated from London last July and are renting in the Gavinana district until their renovation project completes – a former orangery near the city walls at Porta Romana.

"The International School of Florence was the main factor, but we liked the small, compact city with its cosmopolitan community," says the East Coast American who used to teach the international baccalaureate syllabus in the UK. "The centre of Florence is too touristy, too hot in summer and lacking in green space – we wanted the scope to have a large garden and a swimming pool."

Not all Tuscan buyers feel the same. Demand for homes in the historic centre of Florence has remained high since the start of the pandemic, especially in the area south of the Duomo, where the big attractions are clustered around the Piazza della Signoria, the Uffizi Gallery – Italy's most visited cultural attraction in 2021 – and the ancient Ponte Vecchio that seems permanently clogged with tourists.

In July, a property sold there for just over €9m at, according to its selling agents, Knight Frank, the highest price per sq m ever recorded in Florence: €21,428. The property, a 420 sq m penthouse, is in Palazzo Portinari Salviati, a



(Main) Florence's Duomo by Filippo Brunelleschi; (far right) selling fresh produce in the medieval streets
Frankie/Alamy; Kirk Fisher/Alamy

House&Home



for new residents. "Tax-driven buyers will often start off in Milan or Rome because that is where many of their tax advisers or notaries are based, yet some end up in Florence when they get to see the lifestyle it offers."

An American couple recently purchased a three-bedroom pied-à-terre in a converted palazzo on Borgo Pinti, for €3m, after frequent visits to the city. The strength of the US dollar has been a factor in drawing more American buyers to Florence, says Thomson, pointing out that buyers at the top end "never seem particularly affected" by increasing mortgage rates across the continent. He's got "another couple of €5m plus" deals currently going through.

It is too early to know if international buyers will be affected by the policies of Italy's new rightwing government, though local buyers may be helped by pledged tax cuts and higher state salaries.

During the travel restrictions of 2020, when many Airbnb apartments sat empty, some owners in Florence sold up, says Thomson. According to short-term rentals analyst AirDNA, in the historical centre, the number of rental listings in August was still down 36 per cent from August 2019, although its figures show demand has recovered.

A number of flats in the *centro storico* with price reductions can be found on idealista.it. "Sales below €1.5m have slowed because of the drop in tourism [last year] and its impact on some Airbnb owners had a negative impact on the market but also because net wages are low in Italy," says Thomson.

prestigious family home converted into high-end apartments and hotel suites on Via del Corso, with views over Brunelleschi's cathedral dome.

The most expensive homes in Florence typically sell for around €10,000 per sq m, but the average figure in 2021 Q2 was between €3,500 and €4,600 per sq m, according to the Agenzia della Entrate, the Italian tax office. The overall number of sales in Florence, at 5,433, was 9.4 per cent higher in 2021 than in 2019, according to the OMI, the Italian Ministry of Economy and Finance.

Bill Thomson of Knight Frank says the penthouse buyer was motivated by tax – specifically the flat tax of €100,000 per year on foreign income

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BUYING GUIDE

In 2021, the average property price in Florence was €2,772 per sq m, 0.4 per cent higher than 2019's €2,761, according to the OMI, Italy's Ministry of Economy and Finance.

Florence is cheaper than the other major Italian cities. According to Knight Frank, €1m buys 111 sq m of prime property in Florence, compared with 87 in Rome, 80 in Milan and 56 in Venice.

Purchase tax on resale properties is 2 per cent of book value for primary homes and 9 per cent for secondary homes; estate agent commission is 3 per cent each for buyer and seller.

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As with Venice, there have been discussions about a new local law to limit short-term lets – to 90 days per year and to two properties per owner. “There is a risk that buyers banking on the returns might get caught out if this is introduced,” he says.

Space-seeking families will look south of the Arno to Porta Romana, the entrance to the walled city of old Florence, the Via San Leonardo and Piazzale Michelangelo, on a hill with panoramic views over the city. It's possible to find villas, rather than apartments, in these areas: expect to pay around €4,000 per sq m if they need to be renovated, says Diletta Giorgio Spinoia of Sotheby's International Realty.

The ancient narrow streets behind the city walls in Pian dei Giullari, as well as Bagno a Ripoli and Poggio Imperiale, are convenient for families with children at the International School of Florence, where the number of pupils has increased 10 per cent since 2019. Schrader only got two of her children into the school this year; she's awaiting a space for the third, who's had to go to a different school.

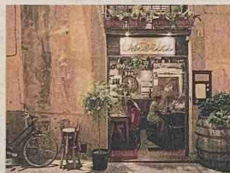
She describes her property search as “difficult”. Standalone houses with land tend to sell – and rent – quickly through discreet networks, says Jeremy Onslow-Macaulay of agent Casa & Country. “It's tricky to find them. We had more inquiries for a three-bedroom town house on Via San Leonardo this year than any other property – it sold for just under the €2m asking price.”

French-American Alexander Zeleniuch has been renting in Porta Romana



(Clockwise from main) The timeless view of the Ponte Vecchio on the river Arno; an intimate osteria; views of Florence from the hills

Peter Honowitz/Alamy; Gary Yeowell/Getty Images; Eddy Galeotti/Shutterstock



since he moved to the city in July 2020 with his artisan coffee company Ditta Artigianale. He will be moving into a new two-bedroom flat he has bought in Manifattura Tabacchi in the north-west of the city. The former tobacco factory designed in the 1950s by Pier Luigi Nervi – who helped design Milan's Pirelli Tower – is the city's largest regeneration project and includes the Polimoda fashion school (presided over by Ferruccio Ferragamo, son of Salvatore), artist workshops, a theatre and hotel.

Sold through estate agency Savills, two-bedroom flats start at €570,000, at

€4,000–€6,000 per sq m. Zeleniuch appreciates he is paying a premium. In Novoli, the neighbouring district, the average price is €3,600 per sq m.

“I am whizzing around the city centre for work so wanted to live somewhere a bit removed and calmer to retreat to,” he says. “It's easy to bike it into the centre, though too far to walk.” A new tram line, due to arrive in 2025, will stop outside the development and better connect it with the centre.

After 34 years in the city, arriving as an art school graduate, Jane Harman and her partner have finally moved out of the centre to an old stone villa and studio 25 minutes east in Pelago. Her work as a furniture restorer takes her back into the city every week or so. “I sold our small house near the Artemio Franchi [football] stadium very quickly earlier this year – we were thinking of moving out but the pandemic pushed us faster,” says Jane, from Glasgow. “Now we have the best of both worlds, peace and quiet yet not over-seclusion. Tourism in the centre feels like it's bounced back this year.”

PROPERTIES FOR SALE
FLORENCE

▲ Apartment, San Marco, €850,000

A 158 sq m apartment a short walk from both the Sant'Amrogio market and the Piazza del Duomo. The two-bedroom, two-bathroom flat has 4.8m-high ceilings, frescoes, parquet floors and views of the Duomo from French windows in the living area. For sale with Knight Frank.



▲ Apartment, San Marco, €1.3m

A three-bedroom, three-bathroom apartment overlooking the Giardino Della Gherardesca, central Florence. The property, which measures 240 sq m, has undergone extensive renovation and features frescoes and mosaic floors. Listed with Casa & Country.



▲ Apartment, Piazza d'Azeglio, €2.7m

One of 10 newly developed apartments set in a 19th-century palazzo, this property includes three bedrooms and five marble bathrooms. Within walking distance of the Sant'Amrogio market, it is scheduled for completion in December. Available through Knight Frank.