

Strangers in the night

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36 steps to the discovery of the parts of Florence not mentioned in the guides.



Estimated time : about 2h 30'

1. Piazza S. Annunziata – the window that must not be closed



We begin our walk from the middle of *Piazza S. Annunziata*, location of the conference; stand on with your back to the church: in the building on the right side in front of you, notice the last window in the top right corner: you will see that it's partly open: legend says that it must remain like this so the ghost of *Bianca Cappello* can lean out. This Lady was the favourite of *Francesco I de' Medici*. She was poisoned in 1587 from the successor and brother of *Francesco I, Ferdinando I de' Medici* (the horseman that seems to be look toward that window).

It's obviously pure invention, considering that building was completed only in 17th century. The legend has sometimes been adapted to a young widowed bride that, always from the same window, waited for her beloved who had gone to war. From then on, hundreds of years have passed and the window is still open, and should, according to the tradition, remain that way....

2. Piazza S. Annunziata – The queen bee and the worker bees



Now look at the equestrian statue of *Ferdinando I*. It has a peculiarity: on the back there is a bronze plate with, in relief, a queen bee surrounded by a swarm of worker bees: it symbolizes the ruling one surrounded by the people; it seems very difficult to count them precisely, but let's try...!

3. Piazza S. Annunziata – The fountains of Livorno

Behind *Ferdinando I*, on the two sides of the square, two splendid bronze fountains can be admired, masterpieces completed by *Tacca*, realized in 1600.

They have a sea subject (fish, molluscs, oysters) because originally *Ferdinando* had intended them for the city of Livorno that he founded on the sea

which he wanted to make more beautiful; after his death, his successor, *Cosimo*, positioned the fountains here, ignoring the wish of his father; only in 1963 did the city of Florence make up for this forgetfulness by giving two identical copies of the fountains to the city of Livorno.



4. Via degli Alfani – The Brunelleschi rotunda

Let's take the street on the left side of the square and arrive at the corner of *Via Alfani*. Here you can admire the *Brunelleschi Rotunda*; it is a sort of octagonal plan chapel surmounted by a dome, designed by *Brunelleschi* (also the designer of the dome of the Cathedral) but remained incomplete. Originally it was part of a monastery; today it's used by the University of Florence (who has converted the side chapels into classrooms for Language study).



5. Via dei Servi – Canto del Tribolo

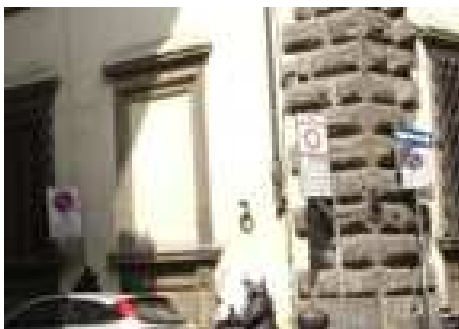
Let's turn right, into *Via Alfani*, to reach the intersection with *Via dei Servi*. Look up to the left, on the corner and you can see a marble plaque carved with "*Canto del Tribolo*". This was the ancient Florentine way to identify the places of the city; In ancient times, except for the squares, only a few streets had names; for this reason the reference points were the street corners, named "*Canto*" or "*Cantone*" (in ancient Italian); A lot of similar plaques are present in the historical center, we will point them out along the walk.

6 . Via dei Servi – Masaccio's house

Along *Via dei Servi*, on the right side, a great plaque can be seen that remembers where *Masaccio*, the painter called "The Poet of Perspective", lived in 1427. In Florence many historical personalities were born, and even more those that have been, for a longer period, illustrious guests; The whole city is carpeted with plaques, and you can amuse yourself by discovering where Elizabeth Barrett Browning stayed, or Jesse White Mario, and many other.

After a few steps, on the left, at the intersection with *Via del Castellaccio* there is **Canto del Castellaccio**. After, almost at the intersection with *Via dei Pucci*, is the sign for **Canto di Balla**.

7. Via dei Servi – The walled-up window



In *Via dei Pucci*, at the corner with *Via dei Servi* (after the intersection you must look back) you can see a walled-up window; This is in memory of an attempted attack that the family *Pucci* (owner of the building) had planned against *Cosimo I de' Medici*, who usually crossed *Via Pucci* and *Via dei Servi* to approach the church of *S. Annunziata* (the family church); *Medici* secret services discovered the plot, and the authors were sentenced to death; *Cosimo*, in memory of this and as a warning for everybody, walled-up the window from which the "killer" would have shot him with an arquebus.

8. Florentine Hospital – Thanks to florentine doctors ...

History cannot be made up with "ifs" or "buts"... but, a wayfarer, on pilgrimage from Germany in 1510, got seriously ill in Florence, and recovered in the principal Florentine Hospital (*Santa Maria Nuova*, founded in 1288 by *Folco Portinari*, father of *Beatrice* loved by *Dante Alighieri*) positioned behind the *Brunelleschi Rotunda* (the entry is on the opposite side). Thanks to this cure the wayfarer could continue his trip to Rome, where he became disgusted by the situation of the Papacy, which made him decide to take a strong stand: A few years later, in Wittenberg, he began the Protestant reform: the wayfarer was Martin Luther. .

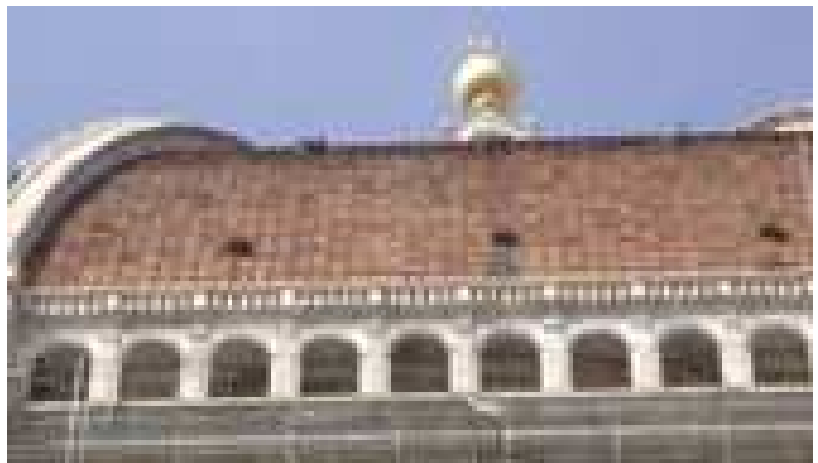
9. Piazza del Duomo – Where, statistically, it's better to avoid standing to admire the dome !



Continue the walk down Via dei Servi and reach the Cathedral Square, turning to the left, turn around the Dome: once you have reached the back, where a little square is almost formed, you can see in the center of the floors: there is an insert of white marble of about 50 cms in diameter: It identifies the point where, in 1600, during a strong storm, because of a lightning, strike the great brass ball that adorns the summit of the Cathedral Dome fell. During a storm, therefore, it is suggested to stay far away from it: in 100% cases the great ball falls has fallen here !

10. Piazza del Duomo – “a cage for crickets”

From the marble circle, looking toward the dome, you will notice a sort of "terrace" with some columns at the base of the dome, it is a part of the Cathedral that has never been completed, because in 1515, when *Baccio d'Agnolo* had completed the first piece, he was criticized (fancy that) by *Michelangelo Buonarroti*, who compared it to a "cage for crickets": this high-profile reprimand induced him to interrupt the work, and it has never been finished. Still today the



"drum" at the Dome base is in the raw state of naked stone. Over your shoulders, to the corner of *Via del Proconsolo*, *Via dell'Oriuolo* and the Square, there is *Canto dei Bischeri* and *Canto dei Falconieri*.

11. Piazza delle Pallottole – Semantic gap ?



Skirting along the Cathedral, after few metres, you will find a vary little square named "*Piazza delle Pallottole*" (with the meaning, in English: "Pellet" or "Bullet"); In medieval times this word had a different meaning than it has today: "pallottole" was the term for "bowls", and this was the only square in the city where the ancestor of Bowling was authorized.

12. Via dello Studio – Where the University of Florence born (1350)

Turning to the left, take *Via dello Studio* where, in 1358, "Florentine Study" was founded, practically the ancestor of what is today the University of Study in Florence; The ancient classrooms were in the building towers, of which only one remain almost intact. In this towers was also born a saint: *Sant'Antonino*.

A few meter after, in a small square, you can notice a door surmounted by a circular glass: it is the Factory of the Cathedral, or, rather, the laboratory where, today, capable artisans still work full time to produce pieces (and also real statues) in marble and various stones to replace those that deteriorate because of the rain, wind and time. Cathedral works are always in progress, practically endless

At the end of *Via dello Studio*, you have **Canto allo Studio**.



13. Dante's House

At the end of *Via dello Studio*, turn to the left into *Via del Corso* and immediately pass to the right under an arc, to arrive at the House of *Dante Alighieri*, one of the Fathers of the Italian language.

14. Badia Fiorentina – In memory of a politician

Going on, to the corner of *Via del Proconsolo* (**Canto del Proconsolo**) take the right; after about ten meters, on the right, you can find the entrance of the Badia Fiorentina (an Abbey), one of the most ancient churches in Florence. It is also remembered because an ancient governor of Tuscany, after his death, was honored by the population, for his "good government", with the dedication of a yearly mass "in perpetuity"; This remembrance, the 21st December of every year, anniversary of the death of Ugo di Toscana, was initiated in 1001 a.d., thousand years ago.... in a thousand years, in 3000 a.d., how many politicians will have left a similar trace?

15. Bargello – Medieval Police.

In front of the Abbey of *Badia Fiorentina* there is Bargello Castle, historically the head office of the Middle Age "police" chief. He was, in some ways, the equivalent of a "sheriff". The bell of Bargello Castle is rung only for very serious reasons: the beginning or end of a war, the passage of century, the flood of 1966.

16. Via del Proconsolo – Over ancient walls

Florence has roman origins, but only rare traces of that age still remain: in *Via del Proconsolo*, in front of Bargello Castle, you can see on the road some metallic strips: they trace the position of walls and towers of the town-walls of roman times; other small vestiges are recognizable: near here there is "*Via Tòrta*" (curve) that follows the perimeter of what in roman times was the amphitheater. Today it has completely disappeared and been replaced with medieval buildings.

17. Via dei Leoni – Florentine power symbol

Over *Piazza S.Firenze* (**Canto dei Cartolai**), continue behind the "Palazzo Vecchio" along "*Via dei Leoni*"; the symbol of the Florentin Signoria is a lion that supports a shield, named "*Marzocco*"; *Via dei Leoni* has this name because in the Middle Ages the lordship maintained a collection of lions right here, a living symbol of the lordship's power.

18. Piazza della Signoria – Michelangelo self-portrait?

Turn right around the Palazzo Vecchio and you will arrive at the beginning of the splendid “Uffizi Gallery”; on the corner of Palazzo Vecchio, near *Loggia dei Lanzi*, on the side of the public square, a human face profile, engraved in a stone of the palace, can be observed. Legend says that it is a self-portrait of *Michelangelo*, that he made with a nail, behind his back so that no-one would notice him doing it...



19. Piazza della Signoria – In memory of a saint or a heretic ?

Now stand in the middle of the public square. In the pavement there is a circular marble slab, with an inscription; it remembers the exact point where *Girolamo Savonarola*, a Dominican friar of *S.Marco* church, was burned at the stake. He was accused of heresy because he criticized the luxury with which the ecclesiastical hierarchy of that age was surrounded, and the customs, not so religious and moderate, of the Pope. In 1997 started the process to make him a saint...

20. Antico Fattore: nearly a Nobel Prize...

Go to the right side of “*Loggia dei Lanzi*”, a real open air museum, in order to take “*Chiasso dei Baroncelli*”, one of the medieval alleys preserved despite 19th-century Florence renovation, in order to reach *Via Lambertesca*. In front of you there is a typical Florence restaurant, *Antico Fattore*: worthy of mention not only for the good kitchen (typical restaurants of high quality are many, and would demand a separate guide...) but because this restaurant, for more than 70 years, has been the seat of a literary prize, thanks to a weekly meeting of poets and



men of letters. This literary prize has an interesting reputation: on three occasions the winners of the prize “*Antico Fattore*” have gone on to win the Nobel Prize for Literature: *Eugenio Montale*, *Salvadore Quasimodo* and *Toni Morrison*.

Go to the right, covering *Via Lambertesca*, (*Canto de'Girolami*) till you arrive at *Via Por Santa Maria*; here go right till the corner with *Via Vacchereccia*, from which we can admire a beautiful view of Palazzo Vecchio.



21. Piazza della Signoria – But which is the political side of this palace ?

About Palazzo Vecchio, notice an unusual detail: the palace battlements are plains, which indicates it's belonging to the “*Guelfa*” side (in favour of the Emperor), while the tower battlements are “swallow tail”, typical of the “*Ghibellina*” side (in favour of the Papacy); in reality the “*Ghibellines*” battlements were made during a refurbishment in 15th century, when these divisions had no more meaning.

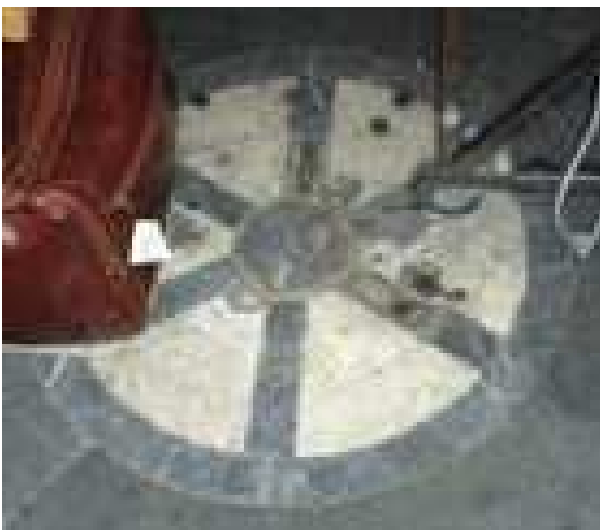
22. Loggia del Porcellino – Piglet? It seems like a wild boar to me...



Continue along *Via Vacchereccia* in order to arrive at “Market Lodge”; on the left side you can see a Fountain, named “*Porcellino - Piglet*”; the tradition tells tourists to put a coin on the wild boar’s tongue and leave it fall down; if the coin falls directly in the appropriate hole it grants a wish, if instead the coin does not fall in but it remains on the outside, you must put it into the hole yourself, and try again with another coin... since all the coins are donated to one of the Orphanages of the city, we hope that you have many and many wishes...

The Market Lodge represents one of three corners of an ideal triangle that comprises: the Palazzo Vecchio, seat of temporal power, the Duomo, seat of ecclesiastical power, and Market lodge itself, seats of mercantile power.

23. Loggia del Mercato Vecchio – to be with one’s ass on the ground



It is night, and therefore the Lodge is clear of stalls; go to the center of the lodge and see a point where the stones are replaced with an inlay in marble, that represents a wheel with six spokes: it is the place where the punishment “*acculata*” was carried out. The bankrupt merchant was lead over the marble wheel, and “*ostendendo pudenda, et percutiendo lapidem culo nudo*”, ie his trousers were removed, he was taken by hands and feet and, butt naked, was slammed against the wheel; It was an ignominious punishment, after which a merchant “lost face”; and was practically forced to emigrate, since nobody would have done business with him.

From this historical fact derived a typical Italian Phrae: “to be with one’s ass on the ground”, which means to be

in a very bad economic situation.

Now go left and notice “*Canto del Saggio*”. “*Saggio*”, in Italian, usually means “wise” but, in this case, this term refers to the Office of the Essay, that controlled measures and validity of coins. Its aim was to control dishonest merchants.

Take “*Via di Val di Lamona*” to reach *Piazzetta del Palagio di Parte Guelfa*, a glimpse of the charming medieval Florence.

Beside the little church, now restored and used as a library, you can see the staircase outside the building wich today is seat of the Historical Florentine Football Federation, or bareknuckle football, another subject that would require separate discussion.

Let’s take, beside the staircase, the alley that leads to *Via delle Terme*, and go right, after a few steps turn left on *Chiasso Cornino*, walk to arrive in *Borgo Santi Apostoli*, and go right.

24. Pazzino de'Pazzi and the Crusades

Along *Borgo Santi Apostoli*, after about a hundred of meters on the left, there is a small square which is overlooked by a small church; This church has nothing remarkable, apart some frescoes that in any other country of the world would probably make the point of reference for more than a museum! But the church preserves an important relic for Florence: two splinters of stone removed from the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem that *Pazzino de'Pazzi* brought back from the Crusades, and that are used, during Easter, to start the "holy fire".

This "holy fire" lights an artificial "dove" that travels down a steel wire along the aisle of the Cathedral, and arrives in the square outside to set fire to the "carro" (wagon) called "Brindellone", resulting in an explosion of fireworks to the joy of thousands of tourists crammed in to the square. It is not a tourists show, but a true Florence tradition, that comes from the Middle Age ...

25. The square with three sides and four styles

Continue along *Borgo Santi Apostoli* and till reaching *Piazza Santa Trinita* (notice that the church name, in Florence, is pronounced Trìnita, not Trinità). It is appreciated for splendid buildings; an interesting detail: it is a triangular square, but with:

- *Palazzo Feroni* (1300), today seat of Ferragamo, a world famous fashion brand, in stone with a castle type battlement.
- *Palazzo Buondelmonti* (1400) plastered in "Tuscan yellow", with bugnate windows and an elegant lodge above.
- *Palazzo Bartolini-Salimbeni* (1500) the first example of pure Renaissance architecture, work of Baccio d'Agnolo (that of the "Cage for crickets", do you remember?) widely criticized also on this occasion, for its "novelty". (**Canto degli Scali**)
- The Church of *Santa Trinita* (1600) with a Baroque style façade.

In conclusion, three sides, four buildings, four centuries of history, four architectural styles: practically a condensed course of architectural history in only one square.

Take *Via Tornabuoni*, continuing from the opposite side from which you arrived; *Via Tornabuoni*, is one of the temples of world shopping, with shops of the best brands such as Gucci, Pucci, Ferragamo, Tiffany, Cartier, Bulgari. For husbands: pay attention to your wives and hide credit cards! (luckily the shops are closed at night.)

26. Palazzo Strozzi – The Lantern of "Caparra"

Along *Via Tornabuoni* on the right is *Palazzo Strozzi* widely considered to be one of the most beautiful Renaissance buildings, home of an historical library named after Viesseux, and today also home of the ISU, National Institute of High Formation in the Humanistic Studies. On the corner of the building you can admire some splendid lanterns in wrought iron from around 1400, work of a famous artisan nicknamed "Caparra" (in Italian meaning "deposit") because he never began a job without having received a large advance;

The lanterns have, in the top part, an onion form, to remember a fruit and vegetable market that was held in the square near the building.



27. Piazza Repubblica – Returned to new life: fools of the '800



Turn to the right, (*Canto dei Tornaquinci*) on the corner of *Palazzo Strozzi* and continue in *Via degli Strozzi* (*Canto dei Sassetti* and *Canto dei Diavoli*). You will arrive, after a few hundred meters and passing under an arch, in the most “modern” square of Florence; completed in 1860, when Florence, for a few years only, was capital of Italy. This work destroyed the whole medieval ghetto and turned it into an anonymous and not particularly beautiful 19th-century square. Above, on the arch, you can see a witticism to celebrate the work: “*a nuova vita restituita*” (Returned to new life); it was a not so clever witticism, since today the destruction of the medieval fabric is regretted and traces of this remain only in the zone near the river Arno and in pictures and illustrations of that epoch.

28. Piazza Repubblica – Caffè Giubbe Rosse: the literates' pub

In the square, on the right side, is situated “*Caffè Giubbe Rosse* (Red Coats)”, that at the beginning of the '900, was frequented by important figures of Italian literature, and where the cultural movement named Futurism was born..

29. Piazza Repubblica – The Florence Navel

Almost in the middle of the square there is a column that identifies the point of intersection of “*Cardo Maximo*” and of “*Cardo Decumano*” of the Roman Florentia, practically the middle of the primitive city born in the first century b.c.

From the square take the road on the right in the opposite corner from the arch from which you arrived, and cross *Via Calimala*. After about ten



meters, you can probably see some “*Madonnari*” that are painting, with some common pieces of chalk, on the pavement of the road in outlined panels: often these are real artworks, so beautiful because they are ephemeral and destined to disappear with the first rain.

See, on the left, a small “*Loggia*” on the corner of the building, and turn into that road (*Via Orsanmichele*) to reach the church of *Orsanmichele*, with eccentric forms (for a church). It is practically a *Loggia* with closed and decorated niches with splendid statues. The church has a cubic form: effectively before being turned into the church (by closing the lower walls) it was the wheat market, and, in the upper part, there was the barn of the city.





The statues that adorn the niches represent the protecting saints of the various "arts" (guilds of arts and works) that regulated the access and the operation of the professions: physicians, notaries, gunsmiths, silk workers, wool workers, butchers etc.etc.

The first you see is remarkable, representing a young St George with a shield, the work of Donatello. The following one, with four narrow saints in one niche is the work of Nanni di Banco,. Because of the difficulty in placing four statues in one niche he required the



assistance of Donatello.

Immediately after the niche on the corner is St. Peter, the work of Brunelleschi.

In short: practically an open air museum of sculptures.

30. Via Calzaiuoli – Stretta è la via...

Continue ahead and reach *Via dei Calzaiuoli*, one of the streets for "Struscio" (to rustle, a phrasal verb for "to walk to show oneself") the most typical and elegant street of Florence; turn to the left toward the Cathedral. On your left you can see a not particularly large street, without exit: it is called *Via dell'Onestà* (Street of Honesty)... but only because in ancient times it was the home of what we would call today the "moral police" of the time who checked the decorum of the city and the customs of its inhabitants. (at the corner with *Via del Corso*, notice *Canto del Giglio*)

31. Piazzetta del Giglio – "Divorce" by death ...

Crossing *Via Calzaiuoli* on the right you will find *Via delle Oche* (*Canto alla Neghittosa*). Make a brief detour because from *Via delle Oche*, after about ten meters, on the right you will enter a narrow passage (closed by a bollard against vehicles) that brings you in to the *Piazzetta del Giglio*, where you would be able to meet, but only the first Tuesday of the month, another Florentine ghost: *Ginevra degli Almieri*.

She was a young desperate bride of an old merchant (an *Agolanti*), believed dead. During the night, while her body was exposed in an open coffin, she woke up and looked for help but found all doors locked and nobody would open them because of their fear. She was sheltered in the house of a youth of with who she was in love; the day after the old husband, discovered the situation and tried to recover his young wife, but a judgement of the bishop prevented him, declaring "the first marriage ceased with death, and therefore *Ginevra* free to marry the young person she is in love with". The story of *Ginevra degli Almieri* and her love, was made in to a film in 1936 with as protagonist a young *Amedeo Nazzari*, and still today this story is reenacted in theaters.

32. Piazza del Duomo – The center of Mercy: where altruism begins



Return to *Via dei Calzaiuoli* and continue on arrive in Cathedral Square; you can see, on the right corner, (**Canto della Misericordia**) a palace with ambulances outside; it is the historical seat of the "*Misericordia (Mercy) di Firenze*", the first volunteer organization in the world that devote time to help and transport patients; in old times the volunteers had to give their service hooded, because they wevr not to be recognizable: their work was not to be repaid with the gratitude of the people they helped, but to

be rewarded in heaven.

The "*Misericordia*" was born in 1244 (note that the International Red Cross was born in 1864, about 620 years later) and still today lives on thanks to the volunteers and donations; on the façade you can still see the slot into which coins could be deposited, with the writing "alms for the ill poor men."



33. Battistero – The broken Pillars



Observing the "Gates of Paradise" of the Baptistery (the one that looks toward the Cathedral) two columns of Porphyry can be seen to the sides: they are one of the few (perhaps the only one) gift of the city of Pisa to Florence (Pisa and Florence are separated by secular enmity), but they represent a trick: they should have had the magic power to reflect the face of traitors and thieves only, but the Pisani, before sending them, made them opaque with smoke so they didn't work!

34. Piazza Duomo – The miracle column

Moving to the right of the Baptistery you can see, isolated in the road, a column surmounted by a cross: it is in memory of a miracle that happened in the IV century a.d.: the coffin of St. Zanobi, first bishop of Florence, was being transfered from the church of *St. Lorenzo* to the ancient Cathedral; the coffin, carried on shoulders, grazed an old elm that immediately bloomed; since then, every year, on the 26 of January the commemorative column (the original one of 430 a.d. was destroyed by a flood, the actual one is of the 1300) is decorated with flowers in memory of that event.

Let's take the left side of the Cathedral to reach the intersection between the square and *Via Ricasoli* (**Canto del Cornacchione**)



35. Piazza del Duomo – Monument to the hard work



Observing above, under the Cathedral dome, above a prominence, a bovine head can be seen: according to someone it is in memory of a betrayal (horns, in Italy, are a symbol of unfaithfulness) while, it is, more prosaically, in memory of the thousand of Cattle that provided "strength" for the stone and lumber transport necessary for the construction of the Cathedral.



36. Way back



Now head back, from the side of the dome, down *Via dei Servi* to return toward *Piazza SS. Annunziata*, whose façade is the final image of the walk..

We hope you have had a good time and hope to have shown you some curious and interesting details, selected from hundreds in our city, that you probably won't find in an official guide. Good-bye until next time

For those who want to dig deeper into the stories, or find new and interesting curiosities of Florence and its history, we suggest a small Bibliography. .

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ⁱ To satisfy your curiosity, there are ninety-one, queen bee included.