

## VILLA SAN MICHELE – FLORENCE JUNE 2010

Orient Express has a reputation for luxury from a bygone era and the Villa San Michele in Florence is no exception. I have just enjoyed a memorable stay at the hotel and here is a short report and notes on my visit.

Florence airport is the obvious venue to fly to, but the low cost airlines offer better value and a wider choice of flights into Pisa. Is it worth the effort? If the cost and time work then book Florence, but Pisa is just over an hour away and is definitely worth considering. Taxis are expensive (€200) but a train transfer is easy to use and very cheap (€7 per person).



Florence is a small city and the location of the Villa San Michele in the village of Fiesole is perfect. Only 15 minutes by complementary shuttle bus to the centre of Florence means that after a hard day on your feet shopping or in the museums you can return to a calm oasis and enjoy a gin and tonic in the hotels gardens. The gardens are beautiful, as is the pool area, which again suggests the Villa San Michelle is a perfect venue for guests who holiday looking for the excitement of a city, but also wants to rest.





The Villa San Michele is a 15<sup>th</sup> century monastery nestled on a hilltop overlooking the city of Florence below. It is the most romantic of venues although many families stay here. The hotel is very elegant, but again the option of a beautiful swimming pool area does appeal to families and they are warmly welcomed, if of course they are well behaved. The hotel is all about the building and location. It has a small gym, but most guests will move from their room to the restaurant, to the gardens and then to Florence. I personally felt like I was a guest in somebody's home, as no part of the hotel felt over crowded.

The rooms are in keeping with the monastery. Tall ceilings, stone floors, big furniture yet soft and welcoming. I was lucky to stay in the Michelangelo suite which was in the sun all day. However, I saw their lead in doubles and they again were large and luxurious. In the gardens the hotel has added rooms that sympathetically blend in with the hotel's surroundings and forest, with the added benefit of a terrace. Room 41 is a standalone double and is worth requesting just for the view alone, but be warned you need to be a mountain goat to get to it!



The pool area has a day time restaurant, but the main restaurant "La Loggia" is the main focus of the hotel at night. Some of us will remember that old style Italian service. The Matre'd marshalling his troops, but very welcoming and attentive. Most dishes are served at the table rather than presented as one dish. The menu is Tuscan and the wine list extensive. However, the thing that sets this restaurant apart is the view over the city. It is expensive, perhaps too expensive, but I reconcile this with the fact that no other restaurant can offer such a view and therefore the experience is worth it.

You may choose to eat at the "La Loggia" again during your stay, but I would recommend either a trip back into Florence or better still the village of Friesole has 3 or 4 top quality trattoria's. I spent my last night in one and although not as sophisticated as the "La Loggia" the food and experience was exceptional and half the cost.

With regards to Florence itself, it is as you expect. Great museums, restaurants and shopping. It is small enough to walk, and no attraction is too far apart. The main two are the 'Galleria D'Uffiz', with a magnificent renaissance collection and the 'Accademia', the home of Michelangelo's "David". One of the most spectacular pieces of sculpture I have ever seen. Both venues should be pre booked to avoid lengthy queues and either Westway or the concierge at the hotel will organise this. There are lots of other places to visit. The famous 'Duomo', the 'Plaza de Pitti', but my favourite was the 'Basilica di San Lorenzo' a beautiful library and church.

The shopping as you expect in Italy is superb, featuring plenty of Italian brands including the designers. The biggest and surprising benefit is that Florence is a season ahead. I went in early summer yet winter 2010/2011 was already on sale. Strange I know, but what an opportunity to get in early with an exclusive purchase. I must also say that the market was better quality than most I have seen, as was the food market, a good venue for a cheap lunch.