

How a new Dante-themed hotel in Florence is bringing the author to a new audience

As Florence marks the 700th anniversary of Dante's death, one hotel is offering a new take on the Divine Comedy

By Max Wallis
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The new 25hours Hotel on Piazza San Paolino takes inspiration from Dante's vision of Heaven and Hell

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The first thing I noticed about my room in Florence was "Welcome to Hell" scrawled across the shower door. The second was a mobile, like a child's, above the bed, with what looked like luggage tags dangling from it with the deadly sins written on them. And the bathroom mirror had "Lucifero" daubed on it.

None of this should have come as a surprise, given that, when I walked into the lobby, the first thing a member of staff said to me was: "Are you staying in Heaven or Hell?" Hell, naturally. As you pass through the corridors, you hear the Italian actor Roberto Benigni reading Dante's epic.

The new 25hours Hotel on Piazza San Paolino, in the centre of the Tuscan capital, takes as its theme Dante's Divine Comedy. Its interiors, bloody mirrors included, were designed by Paola Navone, who is based in Milan, to evoke the book. Navone was "very cautious about the idea at first", says Bart Spooenenber, general manager of the hotel. "She was afraid to offend the writer's legacy, but she has succeeded in giving it a light-hearted spin, without being disrespectful." As a hotel group, 25hours isn't known for these kinds of theatrical statements, but here it seems to work.



As Dante's birthplace, Florence has of late been marking the 700th anniversary of his death. All 100 cantos of The Divine Comedy were recited over 24 hours by Italian actors in the city. At the Basilica di Santa Croce, a digital installation by Felice Limosani was set to the sounds of choral music.



The hotel is cosy, bold and modern in a city where everything is ancient

I lived in Florence for the latter half of 2019. As a poet myself, I went there to write and study Italian. It was a surrogate home, one I couldn't wait to return to when I heard about the hotel's aim to bring one of history's great masterpieces to a new audience.

Dante was born in Florence in 1265, to a noble family, the Alighieris, who – as custom dictated – married him off to a richer cousin, called Gemma, rather than to Beatrice whom he adored (more of her later). Still, they were rich, had four children and prospered.

By 1300 he was of such stature that he became a chief magistrate. But he was soon drawn into the roiling political controversy of the day, the battle between the Black Guelphs, who were pro-Pope, and the White Guelphs, who were more circumspect. He joined the latter, and when the Black Guelphs took power, was exiled on pain of being burnt at the stake.

So, he left the city of his birth in a huff. His masterwork and legacy, The Divine Comedy, became in large part a book about Florence. He was not always kind about it, writing of the place: "Florence, rejoice, now that you have such fame,/And over land and sea you spread your wings!/The whole Inferno's ringing with your name!" He died in Ravenna in 1321. Not, it must be said, by fire, but of malaria.

I began my Dante deep dive with the newly restored mosaics of the Baptistery of San Giovanni, where he was baptised and which he refers to as "my beautiful Saint John" in canto 19 of Inferno. In exile, he hoped it would be a place of symbolic amends and where Florence would give him the dignity and rank he was earlier denied.



The main restaurant, San Paolino, is housed in an internal courtyard

"Poet will I return," he wrote in canto 25 of Paradiso, "and at my baptismal font I will take the laurel crown." Gold mosaics glittered high above my head in the baptistry: it shows a scene of Judgment Day. An apt place to baptise the father of the Italian language. Standing there I felt Dante had indeed returned – through his work – to take that crown.

Dante is everywhere in the city. In the medieval centre, between San Martino and Piazza dei Donati is Casa di Dante, the seat of the Alighieri family and now a museum. It is a thin house in a town that often leans to the grandiose.

Around the corner at Santa Margherita de' Cerchi, you can ask Dante's Beatrice to iron out your love life by writing a note and putting it in a basket next to her shrine. At the Palazzo Vecchio his death mask is sombre, plain, sullen. When I visited, it was just me and the mask, an almost eerie experience.

Back at 25hours I entered the third circle of hell – gluttony. The main restaurant, San Paolino, is housed in an internal courtyard topped with a glass dome like a cloche. When I took a seat at 8.30pm it was humming, and the waiter did not demure when I ordered a kilo of Florentine bistecca; in fact, he said, he and four friends once ate nine kilos between them. The slab of beef arrived with a perfect char – the apt work of the inferno grill – and buttery flesh that yielded to my knife.

The 25hours Hotel aims to give Florentine hospitality a shock – and Dante is providing the voltage. It rejects the tradition of hotels in the city – the waiters don't wear black tie, and dogs are welcome. Dripping with theatrics, it is cosy, bold and modern in a city where everything is ancient; using the literary past to shape the future.



The courtyard bar is fast becoming a place for the Florentine smart set to gather

That evening a band played in the courtyard dotted with toadstools, sea-creatures and a panda that perched on the bar while a barman mixed negronis. The young and dazzling arrived to mingle. A woman in a gold lamé dress with a greyhound on her lap smoked a cigarette like something out of La Dolce Vita. This old square could become a new gartering place for Florentines and newcomers alike – or at least the fashion crowd.

On my way out later, I saw a couple entangled against the wall opposite; one clutching a bottle of wine, the other clutching her. Dante would probably have approved: Beatrice, his first love, guided him from Purgatory straight to Paradise in the book, too.

"The path to Paradise begins in Hell," Dante wrote in Inferno. Who knew, then, that he was talking about a hotel room?

25hours Hotel Piazza San Paolino (00 39 055 29 66 911; 25hours-hotels.com) offers doubles from £169 including breakfast

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