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[Back to reviews in Italy](#)

ITALY

FLORENCE

BERNINI PALACE HOTEL



The Bernini Palace is a civilized, traditional, comfortable hotel in one the best locations in Florence. It inhabits a handsome period building next door to the Church of St Philip Neri, in a quiet street only a few steps from the epicentre of Florentine life, the Piazza della Signoria. It has been an hotel since the 19th Century – and, indeed, in that century was much used by parliamentarians when Florence was for a brief period the capital of Italy. The Bernini therefore has a pleasing patina, which imparts to it the sort of charm for which more modern establishments can only long. From my observations, I would suggest that those who work here are pleased to be doing so and are proud of their employment, for the atmosphere is one of relaxed contentment. For this the General Manager, Mr David Foschi, deserves a good deal of credit.

As I walked through the stately public rooms towards the lift, the atmosphere seemed entirely right. I stayed in room 404, a 'Double Deluxe' (165€-330€ a night for two, including breakfast, according to season) at the corner of the building. A small hallway led into the bedroom, which measured about 12 feet by 12 feet – not huge, but its height and the clever use of wall mirrors meant it felt spacious enough. The style was resolutely old-fashioned and therefore entirely to my taste. The damask on the walls was light gold, the carpet was pink and the two armchairs were upholstered in green. Lighting was provided by an eight-light crystal chandelier and three table lamps. The bathroom was a place of white tiles, and was in two parts: the first with two wash basins, and the second with the tub (with a shower over), the loo and the bidet.



A dvd player was attached to the television for me, so that I could listen to Maria Callas as I looked out at my view. It was a lovely view, embracing not only the Baroque façade of the adjacent church, but also – towering over the roofs – that miracle of the Renaissance, Brunelleschi's dome on the Cathedral. This was a room with a view, indeed.

The Breakfast Room on the first floor did not have a view. However, it was large and very impressive. Brightly lit by huge chandeliers of wrought iron, its painted ceiling was surrounded by the named portraits of various august gentlemen. I took it these were some of the afore-mentioned members of parliament. There was canned music, but as it was a selection which included melodies from both American musicals and Johann Sebastian Bach I quite enjoyed it.

Many of the tables were on the small side, but I secured a large round corner table, with a cream cloth and pink napkins. To this each morning I brought from the buffet various comestibles, of which I particularly liked the cheeses, the prosciutto, the pineapple and the grilled sweet peppers. Meanwhile, the exceptionally friendly waitress secured for me pots of coffee, dishes of ice cubes and, as always, my concluding *cappuccini*.

Dinner at the Bernini Palace is served in its dining room on the ground floor, La Chiostrina. Here I was looked after by the Restaurant Manager, Franco – a courteous and helpful gentleman, who kindly had the canned music changed from 'popular' to Classical. Once this was sorted out, I sat back in my red velvet chair and noted the beige naperly and the good Bormioli glassware on my round table.



A three course set meal is offered for 45€, but I went for four courses from the carte (60€). The food here is Italian, straightforward and satisfying. I began with the strong flavours of goat's cheese quenelles with olives and sun-dried tomatoes. My pasta was tagliolini, served with veal sauce in a Parmesan basket – a combination which I



would find it almost physically impossible to dislike. My main course of beef tenderloin was the highlight of meal, for the meat was yielding and full of richness, and the sautéed onions I had requested were terrifically good. The concluding panna cotta with strawberry sauce was simple and well done.



The wine list is brief and to the point, and gives not only grape varieties but also alcohol levels. Apart from the champagnes, all the wines are Italian. Prices run from 16€ for a Tuscan red by Antinori (Santa Christina, 2011) to 350€ for a 1997 Brunello di Montalcino Riserva (Sassetti). 2000 Dom Pérignon is 260€, 2010 Tignanello is 164€ and the wonderful 2005 Luce is 180€. My 2009 Chianti Riserva yielded lots of hot, black fruit from its elegant structure (Rufina Nipozzano – 34€).

At the end of my stay, I left the Bernini with some regret, for it had looked after me so well. The epithets with which I began were right. The Bernini Palace Hotel is civilized, traditional and comfortable.



ADDRESSES

BERNINI PALACE HOTEL

Piazza San Firenze 29 (Piazza della Signoria), 50122 Florence, Italy.

Telephone +39 055 288 621

Fax +39 055 268 272

Email: info.hotelbernini@duetorihotels.com

www.hotelbernini.duetorihotels.com

Double rooms from 140€-280€, including breakfast, according to season

Check the hotel website for the rates on specific dates and for special offers

TOP

Home - Austria - Benelux - Channel Islands - France & Monaco - Germany - Italy - Poland - Russia - Spain - Sweden - Switzerland - Turkey - United Kingdom - United States