

## OUR HISTORY

While Leonardo da Vinci is universally renowned as the author of the Mona Lisa, perhaps not everyone knows that between the end of the fifteenth and the start of the sixteenth century he performed numerous studies and surveys along the River Arno to create a navigable channel that would link the city to the nearby towns of Prato, Pistoia and Serravalle. In the period when he was making his observations the Lungarno della Zecca Vecchia, where the Plaza Hotel Lucchesi is situated today, did not exist, and in its place were the city walls.

The place where the hotel would be situated was adjacent to the lands of the Spedale dei santi Filippo e Jacopo, a hospital also known as “della Torricella”, because of the tall, narrow towers that overlooked the Arno there, or “del Ceppo” due to the hollow tree trunk where believers left charity for the poor. The institution was first documented in the early fifteenth century, and as of 1530 was inhabited by the nuns of San Miniato al Monte, who hosted pilgrims and lent them assistance. Nevertheless, in 1557, the sisters had to abandon it owing to one of the Arno’s numerous floods.

Since there were walls instead of the present-day embankments, access to the Spedale del Ceppo was from what is now called Via Tripoli. At the time, however, the first part of the street was called (from what is now Piazza dei Cavalleggeri to Via dei Malcontenti) “della Torricella”, while the second was known as “delle Poverine”, in reference to the convent of sisters of the same name who come to settle here from Siena towards the end of the fourteenth century. So the area where the Plaza Lucchesi is found today was inhabited by two orders of nuns, while opposite was the vegetable and ornamental garden of the church of Santa Croce, built by the Franciscans in the thirteenth century.

Piazza Santa Croce marked the centre both of the neighbourhood and its social life: the large rectangular space in front of the church was brought to life not only by religious ceremonies, but also by festivals, shows and matches of calcio storico. This team game, considered by many to be the forerunner of modern-day football even though in some ways it is more similar to rugby, is still played in the same square today, every year in June, by players donning period costumes.

While in time the piazza has remained the same, it was not until the Unification of Italy that the Lungarno area took on its present-day appearance: in 1865 Florence became the capital of the Kingdom of Italy which, unified only four years earlier, as yet did not include the region of Lazio, since it was still part of the Papal States. Until 1871, the year of the capture of Rome and its annexation to the Kingdom, Florence would therefore be the most important city in the country. As a result, the need was felt to modernize the urban layout and make it more grandiose and majestic, following the model of the great European capitals. The work to plan the “new city” was entrusted to the architect Giuseppe Poggi, who had the medieval walls surrounding the centre knocked down to be replaced by a ring of wide avenues which could comfortably be driven around in a carriage like the Parisian boulevards.

Another of the great goals of his urban plan was to defend Florence from the disastrous floods of the Arno: the one experienced by the sisters of the Spedale del Ceppo in 1557 was but one of the many, and in the nineteenth century they had already experienced two, one in 1844 and another just a few years before the work was carried out, in 1864. So it was that in 1867, in a city at this stage resembling a building site, the walls overlooking the Arno and the tightly packed row of towers or “torricelle” built there were knocked down: only the Torre della Zecca, nowadays open to visitors, was saved as a memory of the city’s past. The Lungarno embankment built in place of the old walls was therefore named “della Zecca” after the remaining tower, and the buildings situated there, including the former Ospedale del Ceppo and the ex-convent “delle Poverine”, were renovated and given the typical noble façades of the period. This was how the “Pension Lucchesi” (the original name of the present-day Plaza Hotel Lucchesi) came into being. The pension or guest house, which had adopted a French name (pension), not because that was where all its clients came from, but because at the time internationally it was the most commonly used language, a bit like English today, also bore the family name of its founders, Demetrio and Emilia Lucchesi. It was these owners who, on 21 September 1890, had the pleasure of hosting the king of Italy, Umberto I, with his family, on occasion of a fireworks display, as commemorated in a plaque found in the hotel.

To be suitable for a king, the pension must have possessed the latest mod cons, and one of the first postcards made by the Lucchesi does indeed advertise, in French, the presence of electric lights, a lift and the tram linking the guest house to the station. A few years later, the establishment had also been equipped with central heating and a garage. And of course there had to be one of the most innovative inventions of the time too: the telephone, which arrived in Florence in 1881. The Lucchesi, together with very few other guest houses, was present in one of the very first telephone directories of the city, dating from 1884: to contact it, you just had to ask the operator to dial the number 732.

It was the family’s son, Ermenegildo, who took the pension into the new century and saw the transformation of the nearby Piazza dei Cavalleggeri, situated a stone’s throw from the guest house. At the turn of the century, this square had been chosen to host the National Library, whose construction began in 1909: the old barracks and the monks’ infirmary were demolished, then in 1914 Via Magliabechi was opened up for other parts of the library, after which, with the outbreak of the First World War and Italy’s entry into the war in 1915, everything was forced to a halt. The building work only recommenced in 1922 and the complex was inaugurated in 1935. Since the realization of the library had led to the destruction of existing buildings, upset the balanced layout of the monastery of Santa Croce, and shaken up the road network, the Florentines did not like it at all and so in their characteristic cutting manner, they nicknamed the two anachronistic little towers above the building as the “architect’s ears” or “ass’s ears”.

In 1926, when the National Library was under construction, a great British writer chose to stay at the Lucchesi: D.H. Lawrence, renowned for his scandalous novel, *Lady Chatterley’s Lover*, which he would start to write at the end of that year. Lawrence and his wife Frieda von Richthofen stayed at the guest house for sixteen days, from 21 April to 6 May 1926. Right from the start of their sojourn, it was such a wet spring that in the many letters sent to friends the writer never stopped complaining: “We are here in the most atrocious weather, pouring cold rain all the time. I loathe it. [...] If this weather continues, I shall go. I feel the North Pole would be better than Florence, in any more of this weather.” The political climate at the time also added to the writer’s nery disposition: in those years Italy was governed by Benito Mussolini and his National Fascist Party, which, according to Lawrence, the Florentines were not taken with: “Florence, too, is irritable and out of temper – over-crowded for one thing, and perhaps out of sorts with the present régime”. A few days earlier, on 21 April, the writer had been able to take part in the Natale Romano celebrations, a festival established by the Duce in remembrance of the foundation of Rome, and he duly made his reflections: “It’s the Natale Romano, here: Fascist substitute for 1st May, and a great buzzing and playing of ‘Giovanezza! Giovanezza!’ in Piazza della Signoria. But of course it is raining – it always rains in Florence. – It is queer, this Fascist movement: one wonders what the end will be.” The odd sign of the regime’s presence had made itself felt at the Lucchesi too since a few years before it had had to abandon the French name of pension to adopt the Italian equivalent. Indeed, on 11 February 1923, Mussolini had initiated a forced Italianization campaign, introducing a tax on foreign signs and diffusing the initiative in an intimidating manner in schools, on the radio and in the press. He wanted the Italians to stop copying foreign words and customs and return to their cultural and linguistic traditions, to strengthen their sense of identity and pride in their origins.

The blithe comings and goings of guests to the Pensione would only last a few more years: in 1940, Italy’s entry into the war would paralyse tourism all over the country, as well as cause the civil population great suffering. In Florence, occupied by the Nazi-Fascist forces, the Allies started to bomb the crucial supply hubs on 25 September 1943 and continued until the month of May 1944, causing numerous victims and the destruction of many centuries-old buildings. On 3 August 1944, against the unstoppable Anglo-American advance, the Germans decided to withdraw. This they did after blowing up all the bridges in Florence, an operation which must have been clearly visible from the Pensione Lucchesi; they only saved Ponte Vecchio, in homage to its history and beauty. Fighting continued between the Anglo-American and Nazi-Fascist forces in the city streets, and it would seem that it was from the guest house, on the night between the 3 and 4 August, that the shot was fired killing the first fatality among the Allies engaged in liberating Florence. The victim was a lieutenant of the Scots Guards, Hugh M. Snell, today remembered by a plaque on Lungarno Serristori, opposite the hotel, in the alleyway called

Via Lupo.

In the years following the war, the whole of Italy was concerned with rebuilding what had been destroyed in the conflict, and in 1952 Pensione Lucchesi underwent renovation work too. Two floors were added to the original guest house and the difference between the old and the new parts is still visible today, as the wrought iron and grey pietra serena stone staircase to the first, older floor, makes way for a marble staircase to the two upper floors. In this period the establishment changed not only appearance, but also type, name and owners: from a guest house it became a hotel with the name “Plaza-Lucchesi”, and after a short period owned by the Bonazza family, it was purchased by the Possenti family.

From that moment, the story of the modern Plaza Hotel Lucchesi began. With its new luxury allure, between the end of the 1950s and 1960s it hosted a great deal of famous international celebrities: first of all, in 1962, Domenico Modugno, who four years earlier had given the world the song *Volare*, 22 million copies of which have been sold to date, with countless covers made by many artists. In the same period, two famous Frenchmen stayed at the Plaza too, actor Philippe Noiret and politician François Mitterrand, who in 1981 would become president of the French republic. Among the film stars, on 22 May 1956 Swedish actress Anita Ekberg stayed at the Plaza, later becoming famous the world round for the scene in *La dolce vita*, the film by Federico Fellini, in which she wades into the Trevi Fountain in Rome with

Marcello Mastroianni.

In 1966 the hotel’s golden age was broken off by another of the Arno’s numerous floods, the most important of the twentieth century: at 6.50 on the morning of 4 November, the river, which had been swollen for days due to the heavy rain, knocked down the embankments in Piazza dei Cavalleggeri, not far from the hotel, and flooded the National Library and numerous hotels and palazzi in the Santa Croce neighbourhood, including the Plaza Lucchesi. Thousands of young people came to the city’s aid from all over the world. Known as the “mud angels”, they helped to recover the countless works of art that had been submerged, as well as the great many volumes in the historic library.

As soon as Plaza Lucchesi started to operate normally again, its top-quality hospitality became available once more to all its clients. In recent years these have included famous singers such as Amii Stewart, Céline Dion and David Byrne of Talking Heads, actors such as Mark Hamill, who played the Luke Skywalker in the *Star Wars* saga, and David James Elliott, famous protagonist of the 1990s US television series *JAG*, but also personalities like the former US boxer Ray “Boom Boom” Mancini and psychologist Philip Zimbardo, known for his studies on the origin of violence.

Following its 2014 renovation, and the construction of the rooftop swimming pool with its views over Florence, today it is the privilege of Plaza Hotel Lucchesi of the ToFlorence Hotels group to host you and wish you a pleasant stay in Florence.