

| TRAVEL |



Camping Michelangelo

On a bright sunny August afternoon, the view from the Camping Michelangelo—a camp site set on a hill above the city of Florence—is spectacularly exhilarating. The city scene is dominated by the towering dome of the Cathedral of Saint Mary of the Flower, popularly known as “Duomo”. Further afield is the river Arno meandering across the city. My love for Florence, one of the most beautiful cities of the world, was not, I must confess, a love at first sight. It grew. And it is growing, even after the third visit.

The year was 1976. We arrived, for the first time, in Florence from Verona, home of Shakespeare’s Romeo and Juliet, in a car loaded from London with tents, cookers, utensils, rice, daal, spices, etc. “We” included Shirin, my late wife and the navigator-in-chief of the trip (as satellite navigation had not even been conceived of back then), and friends and fellow travellers, Asoke and Anamita. We had, I think, at least three objectives—not counting the joy of adventure—to see some areas of Europe from close quarters, soak in the culture of the places we visited and do it as economically as possible, as money, in those days, was not aplenty.

# LOVE IN FLORENCE

SHAMSUL ALAM

Hence we were at the Camping Michelangelo—to set up tents, cook rice, daal and fish, eat and feel at home, far away from home, as we did in several camp sites in France, Switzerland and Northern Italy before arriving in Florence.

Film buffs may remember the famous speech made by Orson Welles, one of the 20th century’s great actors, in his role as Harry Lime in Carol Reed’s 1949 film noir, “The Third Man”, which goes like this: “You know what the fellow said—in Italy, for 30 years under the Borgias, they had warfare, terror, murder and bloodshed, but they produced Michelangelo, Leonardo da Vinci and the Renaissance. In Switzerland, they had brotherly love! They had 500 years of democracy and peace! And what did they produce? The cuckoo clock.” Without entering into a polemic of the virtues of warfare or the limits of peace, let me state that Harry Lime was correct in saying that the birthplace of European Renaissance is Italy and in particular, Florence.

The expression Renaissance literally means “rebirth” in French. When used in the context of Europe, it means the cultural rebirth that occurred in Western Europe during the 15th and 16th centuries, heralding the end of the Dark Ages—a period between the fall of Rome around the fifth century when cultural and economic deterioration occurred in



The Uffizi Gallery in Florence

Western Europe and the beginning of “rebirth,” although some contemporary scholars are claiming that the Dark Ages were not completely dark.

Next morning, four of us took a short bus ride from Michelangelo Hill down to Florence city to have a look at some of the landmark buildings and sites. Every building, church, museum, and gallery contained almost inexhaustible list of treasures to see and absorb, which made us decide to have a cursory look the first time round and return at some future date to get an in-depth look.

Florence, the capital of Tuscany, was

established by Julius Caesar in 59 BC as a settlement for his former soldiers who were given parcels of land in the rich farming valley of the river Arno. A kind of state pension in modern parlance, I suppose. It was transformed into one of the most important cities in Europe and the world between the 14th and 16th centuries, earning the name of “the Athens of the Middle Ages” for its contributions to politics, economics, and above all, culture.

The Republic of Florence was led by the House of Medici, a wealthy banking family and political dynasty from the

first half of the 15th century. The Medici Bank was the largest in Europe during the 1400s, which helped the family gain political power in Florence. However, they remained citizens. Under the patronage and active encouragement of the Medici, there was an explosion of activities in the fields of literature, music, art, architecture, sculpture, discovery, and finance. Makes one wonder what banks of today are up to!

A walk through Florence shows you that every building, piazza, lane, and by-lane has a story to tell of the Renaissance. A most amazing galaxy of talented people bursting with creative energy not only transformed Florence, but created waves that pushed Europe forward. During my travelling life I came across two other cities on the Silk Road in Central Asia, namely Bokhara and Samarkand, which similarly produced a number of talents and polymaths between the eighth and 12th centuries who pushed the boundaries of human civilisation forward. There were, to mention only a few, polymaths like Al-Biruni; Ibn Sina (Avicenna); Omar Khayyam; the father of chemistry, Ibn Hayyan; and the political scientist Nizam al-Mulk.

Florence produced the likes of Amerigo Vespucci, the explorer, navigator, cartographer, and financier who proved that Brazil and West Indies did not form part of Asia, but an entirely separate land mass which came to be known as America after his name; Niccolò Machiavelli, poet, lyricist, diplomat, politician, historian, philosopher, playwright and the father of modern political science who is infamous for his book “The Prince” where he promoted the theory that “the end justifies the means”; Dante Alighieri, a major Italian poet of his time and

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whose “Divina Commedia” is considered a masterpiece of world literature; and Giovanni Boccaccio, poet and scholar, notable for his work “The Decameron” and who laid the foundations for humanism. Then there was Michelangelo, the sculptor, painter, architect and poet who is accepted today as one of the greatest artists of all time; Leonardo da Vinci, a polymath whose interest and expertise covered invention, science, painting, architecture, sculpting literature, anatomy, music, mathematics, engineering, geology, botany, astronomy, writing, cartography and history; and Sandro Botticelli, artist and painter extraordinaire. The list here is not exhaustive.

The mention of Botticelli prompts me to tell the love story I came across while researching on Renaissance Florence. On average, every year, about two million people visit the Uffizi Gallery, a u-shaped building designed by Giorgio

Vasari (an Italian painter, architect, writer and historian in the 16th century) to house government offices and which now contains Botticelli’s “The Birth of Venus”—undoubtedly one of the world’s most appreciated and famous works of art. And no visitor at the gallery misses it. In the painting, Venus, the goddess of love and beauty, a Roman version of the Greek goddess Aphrodite, is portrayed naked atop a shell on the seashore; on her left the wind gently caresses her long hair with a shower of roses; on her right a handmaid waits for the goddess to come closer to dress her naked body.

A love story of 15th century Florence surrounded the central figure of the painting, the goddess Venus. Simonetta Vespucci, also nicknamed “La bella Simonetta”, was the model for Venus. Born Simonetta Cattaneo in 1453, 198 kilometres away from Florence in Genoa (as the Italian crow flies), her mother was Cattochia Spinola and her father Gaspare Cattaneo, a Genoan nobleman. Simonetta was married to Marco Vespucci, a cousin-in-law of Amerigo

Vespucci, at 16. Legend has it that she was known as the greatest beauty of her age in Northern Italy. Young Marco was sent by his father to Genoa to study banking and met Simonetta at a church. He returned to Florence with Simonetta on completion of his studies. Marco’s family was well-connected with the Medici family and Simonetta became instantly popular in the Florentine court of the Medicis. Her captivating beauty attracted a number of members of the court, including the two Medici brothers Lorenzo and Giuliano.

In the days before the paparazzi, it was difficult to shed light on the convoluted love life, if any, of the Medicis. As the story goes, Lorenzo the Magnificent, head of the Medici family, and his younger brother Giuliano took an instant liking and developed a kind of infatuation with Simonetta. Lorenzo, a great patron of the arts, was too busy with affairs of the state, but Giuliano was free to pursue her. It was Giuliano who suggested to Lorenzo to have “The Birth of Venus” painted by his friend Sandro

Botticelli with Simonetta as the model, perhaps with a view to get an opportunity to get closer to her. Lorenzo agreed and the masterpiece was born. Simonetta was not just the model for Venus, she was the model for several other female figures in Botticelli’s paintings, including the famous “Primavera”.

Simonetta died of tuberculosis, an incurable disease in those days, in April 1476 at the age of 22. She was carried through the city of Florence in an open coffin for all citizens to admire her beauty.

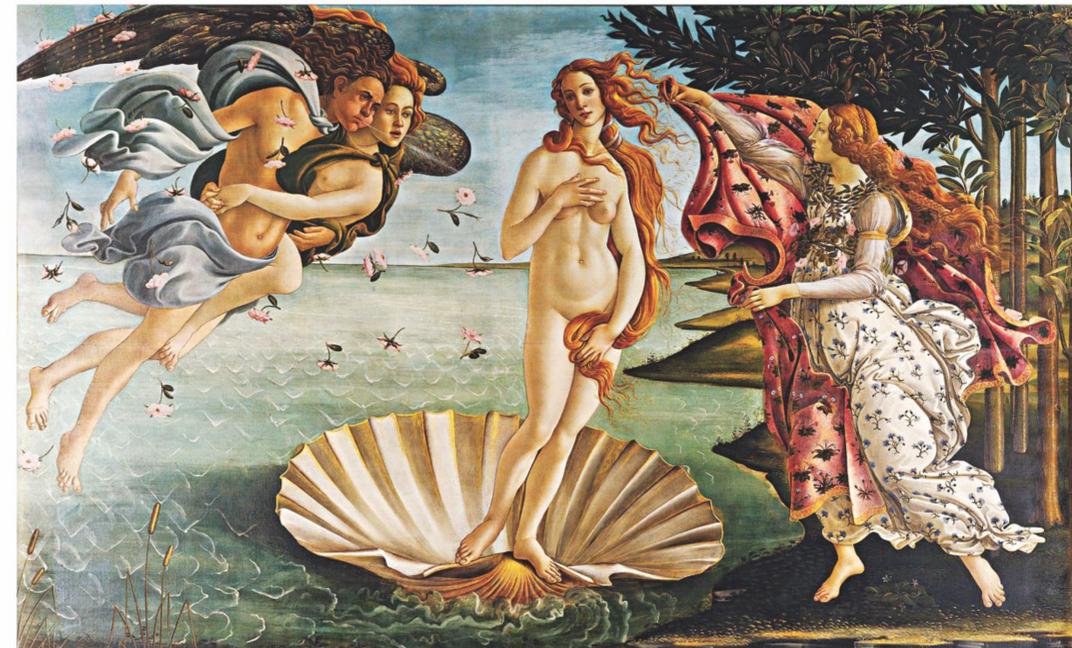
Marco Vespucci re-married soon after the death of Simonetta. Giuliano Medici was assassinated in 1478, two years after Simonetta’s death. There were persistent insinuations that Botticelli too was in love with Simonetta. He lived to 65 but never married and left behind a wish to be buried besides her. That wish was fulfilled 34 years later in 1510. Botticelli is buried besides his beloved Simonetta Vespucci in the church of Ognissanti (Church of All Saints) in Ognissanti Piazza in central Florence.

Weary travellers will find the tombstone of Botticelli set in the church’s floor with his birth name: Alessandro di Mariano di Vanni Filipepi. The name Sandro Botticelli is not on the tombstone. One can only speculate the reason behind the exclusion of the name he was so well known by.

Let me borrow the expression of the poet William Wordsworth in the “Solitary Reaper”. “Stop here or gently pass”, and ask the travellers to stop near the tombstones for a few moments to reflect on the great artist Botticelli, his love for his model and the famous beauty Simonetta, in life and in death. Or, gently pass.

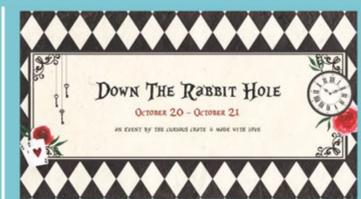
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- Publications consulted and gratefully acknowledged:
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  - 2) “Top 10 Florence and Tuscany” by Reid Bramblett, London 2016.
  - 3) “The Palazzo Vecio in Florence” by Giulia Sinibaldi, Rome 1950.
  - 4) “Florence” by G Allen, New York 1900.
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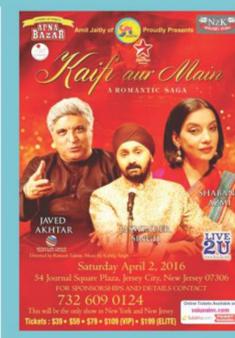


Sandro Botticelli, La Nascita Di Venere

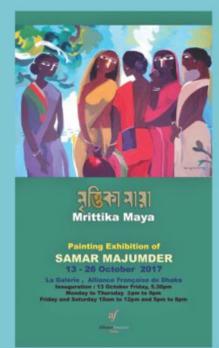
ABOUT TOWN



**DOWN THE RABBIT HOLE**  
 Organiser: The Curious Crate and Made With Love  
 October 20-21, 12 - 8 pm, Clay Station Dhaka, Banani



**KAIFI AUR MAIN**  
 Organiser: Blues Communications  
 October 25, 7-9 pm, Blues Communications, Banani



**MRITTIKA MAYA**  
 2ND SOLO PAINTING EXHIBITION OF SAMAR MAJUMDER  
 Organiser: Proggna Paromita Majumder  
 October 13-26, 6-9 pm, La Galerie, Alliance Francaise de Dhaka