Merchant Ivory’s costume drama is not only the most enjoyable cinematic adaptation of EM Forster’s work – it also inspired a generation of travellers to ditch their guidebooks and attempt to experience authentic Italy. To see what has happened in the three decades since the 1986 film, Gavin Plumley follows in the footsteps of Lucy Honeychurch to Florence.

It started with a kiss. Julian Sands and Helena Bonham Carter were lip-locked in the middle of a barley field. Seeing Merchant Ivory’s A Room With a View for the first time was a light-bulb moment in my teenage years. I fell in love with Florence – and I wasn’t alone. Because that film, released three decades ago this month, prompted legions of lovelorn optimists to follow EM Forster’s eccentric Edwardians to Tuscany and secure ‘south rooms with a view’.

For years I’ve wanted to find the very meadow in which that famous kiss occurred, so the film’s 30th birthday seemed like the perfect moment to grab my 1903 Baedeker guidebook, download some Puccini and head off to Florence. I’m joining a long tradition of Brits in Tuscany. Bewigged young gents came here on the Grand Tour to look at art, read Dante and relish local delights (both savoury and unsavoury). Many stayed, trying to swap northern sense for southern sensuality. With the advent of the railways, the middle class followed, no longer travellers but tourists, ‘handed about like a parcel of goods from Venice to Florence, from Florence to Rome,’ as the priestly Mr Eager patronisingly informs Helena Bonham Carter’s Lucy Honeychurch, the heroine of director James Ivory’s film.

Like any good holidaymaker, Lucy has curiosity on her side. Swinging her shutters open, she hopes for a view of the Arno, the river that runs right through Florence. Sadly, she’s out of luck, seeing nothing but a dim alleyway from the fictitious Pensione Ivory towers. A view across the Florentine skyline, dominated by the Duomo (above); Julian Sands and Helena Bonham Carter in that window (left).
Bertolini. But the handsome George Emerson (Julian Sands) and his father intervene, giving Lucy and her cousin Charlotte (Maggie Smith) their rooms with a view. While today’s Hotel degh Drachi, next to the Uffizi, promises that vista, it has to gloss over the fact that the titular scene was filmed in a private residence on the other side of the Arno.

Rather than search in vain for the Bertolini or the (long-closed) Pensione Simi, where Forster stayed on his first Italian trip, I choose the hotel listed at the top of Baedeker’s 1903 entry on Florence. It’s the St Regis (once appropriately named the Grand), which boasted steam heating more than 100 years ago; the list of amenities is more extensive now. The frescoes on the walls may not be genuine, but the charms and service certainly are.

And I cannot fault the view from my balcony, which looks over the Santa Rosa weir and upriver to the Ponte Vecchio. Lucy would definitely approve.

A Room with a View

For me, the film is a study in the overwhelming power of culture. Out of nowhere, the Italian highlife is suddenly everywhere. In a single film, the world no longer has time. Culture can take its toll in Florence, giving birth to endless pillage and crucifixions, proving violent enough for me. For centuries, Florence has been the unrivalled epicentre of Lucy’s story.

...two lone females in an unknown city'. Miss Lavish and Miss Bartlett have meanwhile ventured off, ‘two lone females in an unknown city’. Following their lead, I leave the church and ‘simply drift’ down one of the dark alleys that knot together to form the medieval heart of Florence. A sharp burst of light announces the Piazza della Signoria. This central square now boasts a replica of Michelangelo’s David, where George mysteriously tells her that ‘something tremendous has happened’. The really momentous events of A Room with a View don’t occlude here, but when the young couple and the rest of the Pensione Bertolini’s mokey crew decide to picnic up in the hills. As Miss Lavish insists, it is ‘by going off the track that you get to know the country… there one meets the Italians unspoiled: in all their simplicity and charm’.

Lucy’s education begins at the Santa Croce Basilica, a Franciscan church in which she gets to know the curious Emersons better. ‘Built by faith in the full fervour of medievalism, this ecclesiastical pantheon of Italian history boasts monuments to Dante, Rossini, Galileo, Michelangelo and Machiavelli. Unlike the crowded church that features in the film, Santa Croce is almost empty the morning I visit. I don’t even have to elbow my way in to see its famous series of Giotto frescoes, featuring what Mr Emerson describes as a ‘fat man’, (more commonly known as St John the Evangelist) ‘shooting into the sky like an air balloon’.

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Maiano, where the Ristorante Lo Spaccio cooks up produce from the estate’s 270 hectares. Ivory and his team set up a studio here for 40 days during the spring of 1985. Once owned by Englishman John Temple Leader, the Villa di Maiano and the surrounding acreage have been in the hands of Count Francesco Miari Fulcis’s family since 1917. Today, as well as working the extensive farmland, Francesco’s family harvests the olives, tends the botanical garden and offers agrotourism in farmhouses and apartments.

Francesco was here 30 years ago when the filming took place, including that famous kiss, so when he offers to take me on a tour I wolf down my rocket gnocchi and jump into his four-by-four. Having ascended the Via Vecchio, Lucy would definitely approve.

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pulled out and taken to that terrace on the banks of the Arno as the backdrop to George and Lucy’s kiss.

While Maiano offers a welcome break from Baedeker-bound tourism, I also find corners of the city that provide an equally potent tonic for cultural fatigue. I wander up to the San Miniato al Monte Basilica, where you can hear all the bells in Florence ring the midday Angelus. I pop to Sant’Ambrogio, behind Santa Croce, for a meander through the market where you can feast your eyes on local delicacies before gorging on them at chef Fabio Picchi’s Caffè Cibrèo.

Compared with Rome or Milan, Florence can seem sleepy, but Oltrarno, south of the river, is a real antidote to all that. I start my last evening in the city at Zoe, the heart of its aperitivo scene and the perfect place to watch the theatre of the daily passeggiata. Floating on a couple of Negronis – the king of cocktails was invented in Florence – I drift along the Arno to Piazza Santo Spirito and its eponymous osteria, thronged with locals and tourists alike. Devouring a plate of tagliata di manzo, I chat with my neighbours, Jenny and Jake. She’s refreshingly outspoken while he dotes, unobtrusively. They’re newly engaged, beaming with joy at being in Florence for the first time. There isn’t a copy of Baedeker between them, but Forster’s Lucy and George are clearly still alive and well. I can’t resist asking them if they have a room with a view.

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A ROOM WITH A VIEW: THEN AND NOW

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Now Crumpled character actor, fresh from Gotham, in which he plays Dr Crane, prone to serial killing, destined for a fall.
Claim to fame She magazine’s Britain’s Sexiest Man of 1998.

HELENA BONHAM CARTER
Then Big-haired brunette, corset queen, clever-crowd wannabe, playing down yuppiedom.
Now Backcombed bourgeois, ex-Tim Burton muse, north London mama, turning down costume dramas.
Claim to fame Most convincing simian in Planet of the Apes.

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Claim to fame The first female boss of James Bond.

MAGGIE SMITH
Then Purse-lipped chaperon, go-to matron, superlative Shakespearean, Sister Act round the corner.
Now Snarky countess, go-to dame, Harry Potter veteran, beatification round the corner.
Claim to fame Has never seen a single episode of Downton Abbey.