

Florence ‘emptied’ by Airbnb boom

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More than 4,000 flats in central Florence are listed on the holiday rental website ALAMY

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Airbnb rentals are transforming Italian cities into “large hotels” according to a report which reveals that almost one in five apartments in Florence is rented through the website.

More than 4,000 flats in the historic centre of the renaissance city — 18 per cent of the total — are listed on Airbnb, researchers from the University of Siena discovered.

“There is a crazy concentration of Airbnb rentals in the heart of Florence which risks emptying out the town and turning it into a theme park,” warned Cristina Capineri, who led the research.

The spending power of the 15 million tourists drawn to the city every year is encouraging Florentines to list their homes on Airbnb and move out, abandoning their piazzas to the growing throngs of visitors.

Dario Nardella, the city’s mayor, ordered street cleaners to hose down the steps of major churches to stop tourists picnicking on them as the crush worsened last month. “There are entire buildings in Florence taken over by Airbnb where there are no locals left,” said Anna Paola Concia, Florence council’s tourism assessor.

“The irony is that a ban was put on new hotels in the centre of Florence to stop it becoming just a tourist town but the market has found a way around that,” Lorenzo Perra, the city’s finance assessor, said.

The report found that Airbnb rentals in Naples grew by 219 per cent between 2015 and 2016 and that there was a 135 per cent increase in apartments listed in Bologna.

Rome topped the table for the number of apartments listed, with more than 21,000. Matera, in southern Italy, had the highest concentration, with a quarter of all properties listed.

In Venice, which is struggling to keep mass tourism under control, Airbnb’s penetration was surprisingly low, at 9 per cent. “That’s because there was already a saturation of bed and breakfasts and hotels before Airbnb arrived,” Antonello Romano, one of the researchers, said. The report also revealed that Airbnb rentals in Italy were steadily being taken over by professionals who buy apartments and put them on the site, with one entrepreneur in Milan taking in half a million euros in rents last year.

In response, the Italian government has passed legislation to force Airbnb landlords to pay a standard tax on their proceeds, and towns including Florence are striking deals with the website to impose city taxes on customers.

Tourist numbers in Italy have increased by 56 per cent since 2001 to 55 million a year so it is likely that the demand for apartments will not abate, creating what researchers described as “Disneyfication”.

“I grew up in the centre of Florence and the bookshops are now gone, as is the café where my grandfather took me for an aperitivo and a chat with his friends,” Ms Capineri said.