



The big picture

When is a sinkhole not a sinkhole?

Florence, Italy



1 When a stretch of land next to Florence's Arno river swallowed a cluster of cars this week, there was talk of a sinkhole. In fact, the incident

was more of a maintenance issue. The ditch was caused by a damaged water pipe below the surface leading to a build-up of water

pressure, which eventually forced a wall to bulge towards the river. That, says Tom Dijkstra, of the British Geological Survey, would have

triggered the ground to slump. True sinkholes, by contrast, crop up when the surface covering an underground cavity gives way.

2 Florentines had little cause for relief. Critics said the event highlighted bad water management in the city. A database compiled by Mario

Parise of the Research Institute for Geo-Hydrological Protection lists 900 such incidents in Italy since 276 BC, resulting in around 25 deaths.

3 About 15 cars were affected. And while no one was injured in the Florence incident, the repercussions are likely to go beyond a flurry

of insurance claims by unlucky car owners. According to the latest estimates, the bill for repairs could be as high as €5m.

4 Besides the immediate damage, the incident caused fears for the integrity of the medieval Ponte Vecchio bridge. But mayor Dario

Nardella insisted that the incident posed no danger to the people of Florence – or to its historic architecture.
Nicola Davis