

A Visit to Venice

The magic is powerful, simply strolling along the narrow ancient streets allows your imagination to soar. No matter the adventure you seek, the eerily lit side paths, or some not at all, the glow in the canals and ancient brick walls, summon you forth. In the distance a single house light shines upon a small canal and reflects in the water, and as you cross that old bridge, you wonder who else walked along the same trail.

Was it Casanova in search of a damsel in distress to whisk away for some fun? His face covered by a mask as he celebrated *Carnivale*? Maybe it's the shadow of Andrea Palladio, admiring his design of *Il Redentore*, the glorious church built in the 16th Century on the waterfront of the *Canale della Giudecca* to save Venice from an outbreak of the plague. Such is the lure of Venice. Steeped in history and romance, the stunning architecture, the art, and the beautiful tranquil canals, all pull together to form this magical place.

I can't possibly detail everything, but I can give you a glimpse of my Venice. If I see a church I go in, the same for a museum, an interesting side street, and in Venice there are many. As the saying goes, I leave no stone unturned. Visit an old church, and you might find a concert being given. Tour the Church and stay for the concert.

There is a moment in *A Hotel in Venice* where Minola comes upon a few ladies sitting on a bridge enjoying their dinner, an opened bottle of wine resting on a stair, and they were deep in discussion, linguistics was one of the topics-that happened to me, and I participated in the lively conversation, and along the way learned a few things. I was so taken with the scene that I decided to include it in my book. Those are the moments I treasure when I travel. I'm normally a rather shy person, but somehow find it easy to chat up strangers when on the road.

Venice often called the "Floating City" began in the 5th Century AD. There are 118 or so small islands connected by canals and bridges. It is amazing that Venice is built upon a wooden platform, driven by wooden stakes. The wood has survived because it is underwater and not exposed to oxygen, and the fact that the flowing salt water petrified the wood, and turned into a hard as stone substance is remarkable. More amazing are all those gorgeous buildings that seemingly are floating on water.

That in itself is stunning, and must be seen, add to that the architecture, the incredible art, music, and history, and you have the perfect venue for an incredible vacation, and in my case an added bonus, the perfect setting for my third book in the hotel series. I also happen to love the food, a definite added bonus. The black pasta made with cuttlefish ink is incomparable, the sardines with onions another favorite, along with an abundance of gelaterias, not to mention I love pizza, and the grilled vegetable pizza, especially the ones that include roasted eggplant are superb.

Much of the delight centers around the Grand Canal, as it flows majestically, alive with commerce and joie de vivre as palaces, vaporettos, water taxis and gondolas, and various

working boats seem to glide on water, swiftly shifting to and fro to evade a collision, it is a choreographed waltz on water, a persistent and expert dance of avoidance.

Along the way there are palaces, homes, cafes and shops that line the Grand Canal and the sound of music and traffic echoes in the distance, and you seem to sway to the sound of life, as the famous Rialto Bridge stands guard. The bridge offers shopping, restaurants, but most of all, it offers a superb view of the Grand Canal.

I stood on top for quite a while, mesmerized by the intense machinations of the traffic below. The Grand Canal is essentially a grand street, comparable to Paris, New York and Chicago. It meanders through the heart of Venice, two and a half miles long, and offers terrific public and commercial transport, and of course romance-just like the major avenues of the world, only better, because it's all on water.

I always think that the magnificent Rialto Bridge stands guard over the Grand Canal. The outside stairs have an unmatched and spectacular view of the Grand Canal, inside the bridge, the street is lined with tourist shops and even a Rialto Market that has been in business for over a thousand years; if you plan to visit the market, best to arrive early before the crowds do.

The Rialto is the oldest bridge crossing the Grand Canal, its origin in one shape or another dates back to 1181. The stone bridge as it stands today was completed in 1591, and I would say every visitor to the city visits the bridge. Pundits said the design was too risky, and predicted it would collapse. It still stands today and is one of the most iconic architectural delights in Venice.

Take a day and evening vaporetto ride along the Grand Canal, travel like the locals. There is a marked difference in a morning ride and an evening ride. Sunlight provides the hustle and bustle of people going to work, going about their daily business, the city comes to life, deliveries are made, restaurants open, the jostle of life begins.

Shadowy lights during the evening vaporetto ride envelopes Venice in a mysterious glow, that mystifying allure you won't find anywhere else, where shadows beckon you to follow. The moonlight glows and shimmers, the dimly lit palaces reflect in the water, and the sound of music resonates and amplifies to create that perfect moment. The trips are remarkable and since it's public transport it is affordable

Venice is expensive, that is not a secret, yet reasonable meals can be had, but if you eat in the tourist areas, you will pay handsomely for the privilege. I always include breakfast with my hotel stay, prices tend to be sensible when booked with room. For one, I need my coffee first thing in the morning, for another it takes less time than looking for a spot other than cafes. I'm a breakfast person, it is my time to relax, plan the daily activities, and if I'm lucky chat with a few tourists.

There are things you may not want to miss, and need to include in your budget, like a gondola ride, that will set you back about a hundred dollars, it is far more romantic than a

vaporetto ride, and it will take you where a vaporetto won't-the small canals and intimate side alleys. Watching a gondolier in action is a delight in its own right, often times the ride includes a passionate Italian love song, and the swish of the oars as they hit the water adds to the sublime moment.

The biggest tourist draw, and there are so many to choose from, is the Piazza San Marco, it is a piazza like no other, and again to simply walk around it, is best to arrive early in the morning, and in the evening-the time in between is packed with tourists, and I do mean packed. The lighting in the evening is subdued, and if it's a moonlit night, magical.

I now book tours to the *must see places*, the lines are horrifically long, you pay a little extra but you get in much faster, and an added bonus are the lectures on the history of the place you are seeing. You can linger long after the tour guide finishes, and this way you do get a little history, a bit of background and sometimes a little about the daily life of the Venetians.

There is of course a great deal of free information on the many sites-it is up to you and your budget how you want to view them. Many travel books offer all the advice you can possibly need, all the places that should be seen, taking into consideration how much time you have, they list hotels in all price ranges, and if budget is really tight, you can borrow the book from your library and take it on your trip-just remember to return it when you get back.

The treasures at the Piazza San Marco are not to be missed, it is one of the key tourists sites. Given that the Basilica San Marco was began in 832, the history is vast and rich, and for almost a thousand years it served as the Doge's private chapel, you can just imagine the political intrigues within these walls.

The Ducal or Doge's Palace was home to many leaders of Venice for almost a thousand years. It is filled with art, sumptuous rooms, and the famous Bridge of Sighs so aptly named by Lord Byron; it was a last lonely view of Venice for those who were going from the palace to prison.

The first palace was a fortress finished in 814, change through history included fires in 976, in 1106, 1574, and 1577. Many masterpieces were destroyed, and restoration continued slowly until the 1880's. The palace survived and to this day reflects the massive and majestic power that was once Venice.

It is evocative to be sure, it's a place where you can get lost in the history, go back in time, daydream, and imagine as things were, and still come back to the present enjoy the sites, delicious coffee, black pasta and incomparable gelato.

Visiting the Campanile or Bell Tower is easy, a small elevator will take you to the top, from where you have a bird's eye view of the piazza, and the rest of Venice, and sometime on a clear day the Alps are visible. It has been written that the tower was

started in 912. Due to erosion and a shallow foundation, the Campanile collapsed in 1902. It was rebuilt in 1912 as the Venetians wanted, “where it was and how it was.”

There are of course the *must see* things, but there are others that are a surprise. Walk into a small church, and wonder at the beauty, peace and charm that is offered. Go during the Biennale Art Festival and you just might see the church converted into an art gallery, and not necessarily religious art. Many of the places I found just by accident are free. There are many little niches filled with flowers, and little gardens, a piazza with beautiful fountains and charming cafes. Many of these places become galleries during the festival.

You will not get lost, there are signs everywhere that will point you to a landmark. Unless of course you're like me, have no sense of direction, and easily gets lost. On my first trip to Venice upon settling in the hotel the first evening, I was determined to see Piazza San Marco. I was given the routine hotel map, the concierge circled the hotel location, and the location of the piazza.

I wondered for two hours, followed all the signs marked on the walls, there were arrows pointing where to turn next. I turned and circled places so many times I was dizzy, and I never found the piazza. By the time I found my way back to the hotel, I was convinced the piazza was not real, and could not possibly exist. The following morning, after a hearty breakfast and many cups of coffee, I found it.

Returning to the hotel was an adventure in itself, holding a map upside down and looking lost, exhausted and downright pitiful helped in my attempt to find my way back to a shower and bed. At that point I was so tired, any hotel would have done-jet lag was beginning to take its toll.

If you like glass, Venice offers that too, many buildings and hotels proudly show their Murano masterpieces in the shape of sconces, table lamps, vases and of course chandeliers.

If you want to see for yourself how glass is blown and the intricacies involved, visit a furnace. Murano is thirty minutes away by vaporetto, or fifteen minutes by water taxi, a choppy fast ride, and since the traffic is considerable as you head to more or less open water, the taxi basically rides the waves. It is a fun and often times bumpy ride.

Murano does not have the charm, or majesty of Venice. It is more or less a working island that produces world renowned, magnificent glass, and the economy revolves around glass that is shipped all over the world, and of course there is the tourist trade. One store after another lures you in. There are the inexpensive shops that sell glass trinkets made in China, some blown in Murano, you have many options, and as always know your product. There is a logo on many of the bigger pieces that identify it as Murano glass, but be vigilant.

There are galleries where you can spend thousands of dollars and pick up a unique treasure, some of the chandeliers are beyond elaborate, and I always wonder who would

clean them. The selection is vast, from the modern to period pieces, and anything in between. On my last trip, I was fortunate to have the concierge at the hotel arrange a visit to the Schiavon Art Team furnace. I was allowed to take pictures, and speak with the master designer. Even in a gift shop I always ask if I can take pictures.

He was generous with his time, and I received a great deal of information that helped with my research for *A Hotel in Venice*. Their work is imaginative, creative, and simply amazing, and on my next visit to Venice, I plan on going back. There is something magical about seeing glass in liquid form and watch as it changes and becomes a solid. It is hard work, but the results are sublime.

Glass is the business of Murano, and has been for centuries, since the guild moved from Venice in 1291, because the citizens were afraid of fires. The first documented Venetian glass product dates back to 982. In 1224 the Guild of Glassmakers, Arts Fiolaria was established, and the guild protected the glassmakers under strict guidelines, but the guild was now controlled directly by the Republic of Venice.

The glass blowers became the elite members of society and mingled with the aristocracy and the very wealthy, powerful marriages were formed influencing the political climate of the time. It was a mysterious and sometimes deadly world of secrets, the formulas for blending and glass blowing techniques were protected sometimes with fatal results. I've been assured that the secrecy prevails even today. It is an ever changing and evolving industry, much like many others, but with a creative insight that for me is hard to beat—sheer artistry at work. I can watch glass being blown for hours, to me it is a mesmerizing process, and the final result be it a vase, or hat that looks real is astonishing.

Venice is enchanting, and I'm looking forward to my return trip to this mysterious, romantic and magical city. The ideal trip would include a book signing in a bookstore or maybe a furnace in Murano.

Cheers,
Margot Justes