

## 19: Venice

We are woken at seven this morning by a Venetian cacophony: people greeting each other loudly – ‘*Ciao, Luigi! Ciao! Ciao!*’ – church bells ringing, a nearby café opening, and the sound of fluttering doves. Who says that Venice is quiet? However, it has been absolutely still all night as there is no traffic. Best of all, there have been no mosquitoes – despite the presence of the nearby canals.



Ca' d'Oro, Grand Canal, Venice

I get up, breakfast on bread and cheese, leave Marta to spend her day sightseeing, and head off for the nearby Ca' d'Oro, the magnificent palazzo or ‘Gold House’ nearby. Unfortunately I discover that this is closed for restoration. From here I catch *vaporetto* No. 1 down the Grand Canal and alight at the Accademia. Travelling along the canal is something of an anti-climax; the constant spluttering of motor boats and the stink of diesel is rather off-putting.

At the Accademia the charming buildings shine in the early morning sun, and the air is fresh and sharp with a salty tang of the sea. I enter the Accademia, pay 1,000 lire, and go upstairs to the first room. It is magnificent; the fifteenth-century ceiling is decorated with gold, and the room is filled with fabulous altarpieces, which also glisten with gold. It is no wonder that I have been encouraged to visit this place; I can sense its special atmosphere. The collection here includes Venetian medieval masterpieces, painted by the likes of Paolo and Lorenzo Veneziano (who lived during the fourteenth century), and some elaborate polyptychs depicting Madonnas and various religious subjects. The detail in these early paintings is incredible, especially in the clothes of the saints. The colours are vibrant and the intricate patterns on the clothing are highlighted with sparkling gold. It is interesting to follow the progression from the stiff Byzantine style to the Gothic, and then to the more realistic style of the early Renaissance.

The next room is small and dark. It contains two very striking masterpieces: the tender *Presentation of the Virgin at the Temple* by Titian (1530s) and the familiar

*Annunciation* in two sections (one on each side of the doorway) by Giovanni Bellini, painted c. 1500. The following rooms are not so interesting, though they do contain some fine works of art. In the large chapel are many early paintings and a temporary exhibition of weird modern sculpture made of fibreglass. In another room I find a set of huge paintings, such as the *Procession of Relics in Saint Mark's Square* by Gentile Bellini (brother of Giovanni) and Carpaccio's *Miracle of the Holy Cross*. I find these quite fascinating, as they provide a unique glimpse of life and festivities during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. The detail in these paintings is astonishing.

Following this I view a bewildering array of later works by artists such as Tiepolo, Canaletto, Longhi and Guardi. The paintings by Tiepolo are very fine but are rather melodramatic. The domestic scenes by Pietro Longhi are also interesting to a point, though they are a little quaint and stiff. The paintings that make the biggest impression on me are in two little rooms back near the entrance: the famous and very strange *Tempest* by the Venetian painter Giorgione (d. 1510), some small works by Giovanni Bellini, and a depiction of the Virgin Mary surrounded by saints and angels playing music below. One of the angels, who can be seen playing a lute, looks very familiar to me.

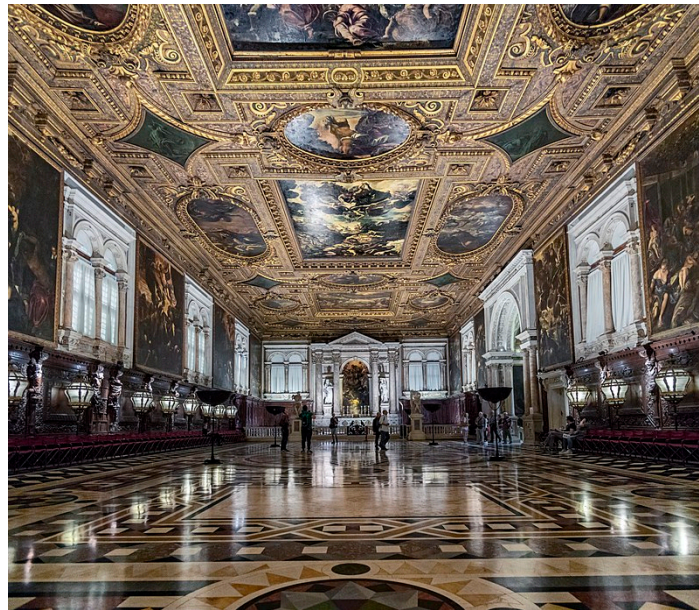
After nearly three hours here, I stagger out and look for a quiet spot by one of the canals. Not too far away I find steps down to the water's edge, and here I sit to eat my picnic lunch. Afterwards I take a leisurely walk around the block, passing through quiet streets, and arrive at the magnificent church of Santa Maria della Salute, which is closed. I return by the other side, facing San Giorgio and Giudecca islands. As it is so hot, I stop to buy an ice cream: this time I choose strawberry. It is nice but not as delicious as Monday's pineapple!

In no hurry whatsoever, I set off again, wandering around back streets and crossing canals, then make my way to the Scuola Grande dei Carmini. According to my information, this should be open at 2 p.m., but a notice outside states that it is closed until three o'clock. To kill time, I walk around the area, on the lookout for cheap restaurants. I end up at the Palazzo Rezzonico, which I discover is a museum. As I do not know what it contains, I decide to return at some other time when I am better informed.



Downstairs chapel of Scuola Grande dei Carmini, Venice  
(Courtesy of Didier Descouens)<sup>1</sup>

Back at the Scuola Grande dei Carmini, a confraternity building founded in 1594, I discover that it is now open and pay 1,000 lire to visit it. The chapel on the ground floor contains a reasonably interesting exhibition of modern photographs taken in Venice and San Francisco. Because of this, it is difficult to see the remarkable frescoes in *grisaille* (different shades of grey, in imitation of marble) that adorn the walls. The grand staircase and corridor with barrel vaults at the top have highly ornate stucco work. The oval medallions are empty, save for the last three; they depict allegories of Faith, Hope and Charity. Upstairs is a very richly decorated chapel containing splendid paintings by Tiepolo and various frescoes. I find this place quite fascinating. According to my information, at one time there were six of these *Scuole Grandi* (literally 'Grand Schools'), which had acted as charitable organizations. This particular one is small and intimate, and has a pleasant atmosphere.



*Sala Terra, Scuola Grande di San Rocco, Venice  
(Courtesy of Didier Descouens)<sup>1</sup>*

Once I have seen everything to my satisfaction, I walk by the Church of San Pantalon to the Scuola Grande di San Rocco, a much bigger and grander affair. I do not care very much for the *Sala Terra* (ground floor hall) as it is dark and grim. Here there are huge canvasses painted by Tintoretto: the first one, the *Annunciation*, is by far the best and the clearest. The others are dark and difficult to discern in the gloom. In contrast, the *Sala Superiore* (upper hall) is magnificent: it is richly decorated and very elaborate. The ceiling here is really splendid. A temporary stage on which amplifiers and loudspeakers have been mounted looks totally out of place. In the *Sala dell'Albergo* is a huge and impressive painting of the Crucifixion on one of the walls.

When I return to the *Sala Superiore*, I bump into Marta. Together we look around briefly, then leave for our hotel via the Rialto Bridge. We stop to buy some cheese and ham, leave it in our room and hurry towards the train station to meet Cathy at her little place, the Albergo Gobbo. We are a little late arriving, but Cathy is outside, waiting. We then retrace our steps towards a nearby restaurant, where we have an excellent meal for 5,900 lire (about £3) each. The waiter speaks English and jokes with us. We all order the same dishes: ravioli soup, followed by delicious squid with a mixed salad. We order wine and the waiter places a bottle of white on the table. The

girls are deep in conversation; when Marta notices the bottle, she says to me, 'We want to drink red wine'. I summon the waiter and, lowering my voice, I apologise to him. Speaking in Italian, I explain to him that the *ragazze* want to drink red wine. Indicating by my facial expression that I realize that this is not an appropriate accompaniment to fish, I ask him to bring a bottle of red for the girls and a glass of white for me. '*Va bene, signore,*' he says, taking the bottle away. Moments later it is replaced with red wine and I receive my glass of *vino bianco*. However, I help the girls finish their bottle later and we conclude the meal with a cups of coffee. By now the total has risen to 8,600 lire (about £4.60 each). The meal and the lively conversation has proved to be a pleasant way of spending the evening. We dally after our meal and the waiters begin to pace up and down. Eventually we get the hint, say goodnight and leave. We find it strange to discover how early everything closes here in the evening. We wander out into the darkness in search of a gondola but find no sign of life anywhere. Expressing our disappointment, we walk back to the Albergo Gobbo, leave Cathy there, and return to our hotel at a leisurely pace. It has been a most enjoyable day and it has ended pleasantly. It is a pity that no gondola was available, as everyone was in the right mood for a romantic trip around some of the canals. I certainly would not have objected to cuddling Marta in the dark!

Back in our room, we prepare for bed but sit up and write our diaries. Marta hits the sack first. I glance up and see her discreetly wriggling out of her underwear beneath the bedclothes, and tossing it on to the floor. I wonder if she would have done this if we had taken the room in the first hotel with the *letto matrimoniale*.

Shortly afterwards I finish writing, turn out my light, and prepare to sleep. I roll over to my right, as is my wont, and imagine Marta beside me in the double bed, turned away from me. I snuggle up to her, wrap my arms around her and kiss her gently on the nape of her neck...

I am woken at seven this morning by the familiar racket out in the street, having slept badly – no doubt this is due to yesterday evening's coffee. I go out to buy bread and orange juice, eat my knocked-up breakfast in the bedroom with Marta, then leave with her for the Piazza San Marco, which we reach by about ten o'clock. It is a cool, misty morning; at this hour there are few people about. We enter the great basilica, take a brief look around, then pay 300 lire to go up to a little museum and see the famous four horses on the loggia above the porch. There is little of interest in the museum – just a few early mosaics and some tapestries. From here we find our way back into the basilica, where we enjoy an excellent view of the fabulous domes and their mosaics from the galleries. Because of the Byzantine architecture and décor, everything looks quite exotic. As well as this, the darkness makes it very mysterious. We delay here, taking in everything and enjoying the dramatic view of the whole basilica, with people far below us. Although there is no concrete proof that it was performed here, it strikes me that this magnificent basilica must have been the ideal location for a full performance of Claudio Monteverdi's impressive choral work, the *Vespro della Beata Vergine* (Vespers for the Blessed Virgin). This ninety-minute work, scored for soloists, choirs and orchestra, was published here in Venice with a dedication to Pope Paul V, in 1610.

Retracing our steps, we emerge on the loggia, from where we have a spectacular view of the square below. Crowds of tourists are now beginning to appear and the hawkers are wheeling out their stands. Up here, we can only see one of the famous four Roman bronze horses taken by the Venetians after the sack of Constantinople in 1204 during the Fourth Crusade. The horse is surrounded by ugly scaffolding. Indeed,



the main entrance of the basilica is blocked from sight by a wooden hoarding. We take some photographs of the square and return to the main body of the basilica.



The Piazzetta viewed from the Basilica di San Marco, Venice

We now buy tickets to visit the treasury, which contains some interesting religious artefacts such as chalices, goblets and highly decorated large candlesticks. We then walk up to see the magnificent Byzantine *Pala d'Oro* (Golden Pall or Cloth) over the altar, made of precious stones and several enamels. The gold shines in the spotlights, but because of the way they are positioned, it is very difficult to see any detail. We can just about make out rows of saints and religious scenes in archways.



Clock Tower, Piazza San Marco

As the basilica is now becoming quite crowded, we leave and part company. I walk to the famous clock tower at the corner of the square nearest the basilica, and stop to take a good look at it. At the top is the bell, which is struck by two bronze figures, popularly known as 'The Moors'. Beneath this is the Lion of Saint Mark with the

open book against a blue background with gold stars. Under this is a semi-circular gallery with statues of the Virgin and Child, who are both seated. On either side are panels that display the time. Twice every year, these panels open and the Three Magi, led by an angel with a trumpet, emerge from one of these openings, bow to the Virgin and Child, and disappear into the other. Finally, beneath this is the main clock face, which tells the time and shows the phases of the moon and the position of the sun in the zodiac. Both the tower and clock date from the last decade of the fifteenth century.

Determined to see inside, I pay 1,000 lire to climb to the top. Just beyond the little ticket office I see a man who is busy repairing clocks and watches. Halfway up the staircase I stop to look through a glass door at the large and interesting movement of the main clock. The pendulum swings once every two seconds and ticks loudly – I can hear it plainly through the locked door. The figures that emerge during the Epiphany and Ascension Day are to be seen in a glass case farther up. Through another door I am able to see the mechanism for indicating the time in hours and minutes. Up on the roof I look at the famous Moors in their familiar state of undress and sit down to admire the view. Behind the square is a fascinating array of red slate roofs, which I photograph. I relax for a while up here, following the example of the other people – an Italian couple are engrossed in their newspapers – and just before midday I go back down the stairs to watch the movement in action as the Moors strike the time, one after the other. I find the mechanism quite fascinating, although I am no expert in horology.



View from the top of the Clock Tower, Piazza San Marco, Venice

As it is closing time by now, I leave and amble over to the Piazzetta. I sit on the base of one of the columns near the water's edge and eat my lunch while listening to the band playing. It is most pleasant to be here, even with the crowds of tourists, for there is a great atmosphere in the square and a wonderful feeling of festivity. I notice people coming along, sitting down at an outside table of one of the expensive caf  s, and having their photographs taken – then hastily moving off when a waiter appears. One of the waiters catches a group of Dutch women unawares. '*Signore...*' he begins and the ladies flee. '*Allora!*' he mutters, scowling at them. Other people sit down, order drinks and surreptitiously eat their own sandwiches, hoping that the waiters won't notice. Because of the prices charged, people are genuinely wary of these caf  s, but many succumb because of the ambience and the music. Although very syrupy, I am beginning to enjoy these rather dated and hackneyed melodies, for they are

pleasantly relaxing and very much part of the scene. Beyond the cafés, the ubiquitous pigeons flutter, fed and encouraged by the crowds of tourists.



The Doge's Palace, Piazzetta San Marco, Venice

After I have dallied here for a while, just watching the world go by – a very enjoyable occupation here in Venice – I walk over to the Doge's Palace nearby and pay 2,000 lire for a ticket. I am suitably impressed by the central courtyard of this great Gothic palace, founded in 1340, and the famous Scala dei Giganti (the Giants' Stairway). Inside, the stucco work on the staircase is magnificent.



Scala dei Giganti, Doge's Palace, Venice

The first set of rooms are superbly decorative and interesting; on the ceiling of the Four Doors Room is a painting by Tintoretto. In the *Anticollegio* or Antechamber to the Hall of the Full College I stop to admire Veronese's *Rape of Europa* and some more Tintoretto's; in the Hall there is a beautiful ceiling by Veronese. Although there are people coming and going all the time, it is not too busy. Guides lead groups of weary-looking tourists into the rooms and rattle off their explanations: I encounter Americans, Germans and French. Many of the elderly folks can hardly walk and



hobble on sticks. How on earth do these people survive these gruelling sightseeing tours? I wonder. Many of them look bored stiff and have to sit down for a rest.

The next room is the large and fantastic Senate Chamber, with two interesting early clocks and Tintoretto's *Descent from the Cross*. From here I pop out to view a couple of tiny rooms decorated with bright frescoes, which are in a totally different style from what I have been seeing. On returning to the Senate Chamber, I suddenly become aware of a high-pitched whine. I find it full of well-dressed Chinese tourists, possibly from Taiwan. Most of them are men of different ages, and every single one of them carries a large camera with an electronic flash unit. They spend their time in the room just taking photographs of each other and exchanging cameras. There is great commotion as they arrange poses, change lenses and load films. Their leader then calls them – '*Lái, lái!*' ('Come on, come on!') – and, without stopping to look at anything, they leave at top speed and hurry off to the next room of interest.

I linger in the Chamber to take a good look around and then proceed to the next room of note: the Chamber of the Council of Ten. This has a breathtaking ceiling, two ovals of which are painted by Veronese. Next come the Armouries, which do not interest me much, though some of the highly decorated guns are quite splendid. I then enter the tremendous Chamber of the Great Council, the biggest in the palace, with Tintoretto's huge masterpiece, *Paradise*, over the Doge's throne. This is considered to be the longest canvas painting in the world. Again, the ceiling is magnificent. The whole scale of the palace is overwhelming. Another huge chamber follows: the Ballet Room, which is at the front of the palace, facing the Piazzetta. Like the others, it is beautiful. I notice that most of the tourists skip this room.

From here I go down to the Bridge of Sighs (not particularly exciting but I am curious to see it) and the dark, damp cells of the prisons. While crossing the bridge, everyone heaves a loud sigh and stops to look out at the gondolas sailing along the narrow canal.

I had noticed it raining outside earlier but when I leave at about three o'clock it has stopped. I walk along the Riva by the water's edge and turn off towards the large church of San Zaccaria, but find it closed. I like this part of the city; the canals are very pretty, it is quiet, and the houses look more homely. It is a pity that there is not more sunshine this afternoon.

I continue to the Church of San Giorgio dei Greci, situated in a lovely part of this *sestiere* (neighbourhood) of Castello. The approach is through a small but peaceful courtyard with a garden and trees. I notice that the church spire is leaning slightly. It is only when I enter the church that I realize that it is Greek Orthodox. It is a fine building with an impressive iconostasis and various icons hanging on the walls. Just as I am about to leave, an English group led by a professor enters and I stay to listen to his very informative talk. I learn that for centuries, despite the close ties of the Venetian Republic to the Byzantine world, the Greek Orthodox rite was never allowed in Venice. In 1498, the Greeks domiciled here gained the right to found the *Scuola de San Nicolò dei Greci*, a confraternity that would aid the members of the Greek community. Then, after protracted negotiations, the papacy gave permission for the construction of this church in 1539. The venture was financed by a tax on ships from the Orthodox world. The bell tower was added later, in 1592.

When the professor mentions that the collection of Byzantine art in the museum next door is one of the most important in Europe, I decide to follow the group inside and thereby enter free of charge. The professor points out the most important of the works, including three icons brought to Italy before 1453 by the daughter of Loukas Notaras, the last Grand Duke of the Byzantine Empire. I feel very privileged to have



seen these treasures and this interesting church, which I believe visitors to Venice rarely see.

I leave the group and amble through the narrow streets to the Scuola di San Giorgio degli Schiavoni and buy an entrance ticket for 1,000 lire – more money! I feel as though I am paying out small fortunes to visit these places but, of course, it is only about 50 pence at a time. The ticket seller is quite mad and continually mutters to himself. It turns out that the word *Schiavoni* was the term used to describe immigrants from Dalmatia on the other side of the Adriatic. For a long time Venice had had commercial relationships with Dalmatia (now in Yugoslavia) and had conquered the region in the early fifteenth century. A brotherhood of the immigrants was approved by the *Consiglio dei Dieci* or Council of Ten in 1451.



Downstairs chapel, Scuola di San Giorgio degli Schiavoni  
(Courtesy of Teggelaar.com)

This *scuola* or confraternity house is tiny, but very beautiful and homely. The downstairs chapel has a wooden ceiling; hanging on the walls are paintings by Carpaccio depicting various saints. One of the paintings is of Saint George and the Dragon, and another of Saint Tryphon and the Basilisk. However, I prefer some of the smaller pictures here. The décor of the chapel upstairs is richer and it is very beautiful. As it is not open to visitors, I have to make do with admiring it from the doorway. Once I have seen everything in this charming building, I leave.

Next I find my way to the huge and rather gaunt Basilica di Santi Giovanni e Paolo (known in the Venetian dialect as *San Zanipolo*), a Gothic construction in brick completed in the 1430s. This is where the funeral services of all the Doges after the fifteenth century were held – twenty five of them are buried in the church. I do not care very much for the interior; only the sacristy and two of the side altars appeal to me. I stop to admire a familiar altarpiece by Giovanni Bellini and a magnificent ceiling by Veronese. Venetian churches, I am discovering, can become much of a muchness after a while; there are so many of them and some of them are not very remarkable.

Having seen enough, I leave and make my way back to the hotel, window shopping on the way. Back in the Strada Nuova I buy a tiny slice of cake that looks interesting,

called *Torta di Venezia*, and a bottle of cheap sparkling wine for just 1,200 lire. In the room I eat a meal of bread, cheese, cake, some grapes and a little of the wine, which tastes pleasant enough.

Fed, I leave feeling a little tipsy (the wine is quite potent!) and make my way to the Fondamente Nove on the northern side of the island. From here I catch a *vaporetto* to the island of Giudecca, where I want to take a look at the youth hostel. As Marta will be leaving before me, I will need to move out of the hotel to cheaper accommodation. It is a pleasant journey in the dark; the boat weaves its way between the islands, which are now illuminated. Soon we are bouncing over the water towards San Giorgio with lights twinkling all around us. We stop briefly at San Giorgio and nip across to neighbouring Giudecca. The hostel is in a large, dreary building and looks quite full. I ask if I can book for Saturday and Sunday; I am told that I cannot, but that I will have no problem getting a place.

With my mind at ease, I return by *vaporetto* to the Piazza San Marco to enjoy the relaxing night-time atmosphere. I pass the Bridge of Sighs and, in the square, I discover the Caffè Florian, which I have read about in Evelyn Waugh's *Brideshead Revisited*. As its little painted rooms look so cosy and inviting, I promise myself a visit here tomorrow evening, no matter what it may cost. My theory is that I need to have at least one mad fling in Venice – even at the risk of getting ripped off – now that the attempt to take a trip in a gondola has come to nothing. Here, in the square, the bands are still serenading the tourists.

Finding my way back to the Rialto Bridge, I stumble across a gondola station where a large group of merry Italians are being ferried off into the night. A man in one of the gondolas starts to play an accordion and his companions begin to sing as they glide away. I see a man standing in one of the gondolas and, in a fine tenor voice he sings, '*O sole mio...*' As I negotiate the narrow deserted streets, the music follows me. The illuminated Rialto Bridge looks terrific and the nearby restaurants look very tempting. I slow down, reluctant to shatter my elated mood by returning to our cheap hotel room. I pause for a little while to dally in the dream-like atmosphere of this magical city and finally drag myself away.

Back at the hotel I meet Marta. She tells me that she has been to the Lido today, but the poor girl has had trouble with her stomach again. I sit down to bring my diary up to date from yesterday and eventually hit the sack.

Notes (licences):

1. [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Scuola\\_Grande\\_dei\\_Carmini\\_-\\_Cappella\\_della\\_Madonna\\_del\\_Carmelo.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Scuola_Grande_dei_Carmini_-_Cappella_della_Madonna_del_Carmelo.jpg)