

20: Venice

We both sleep very soundly and do not wake until eight o'clock. There has been a thunderstorm and rain – now it is fresh and the sun shines. However, by the time I pop out to buy some food, it is overcast again. After we have breakfasted together, Marta leaves for her day trip to Trieste and I wheel my bicycle to the train station. I make a few more enquiries and buy a ticket to Le Havre for 87,000 lire (about £46), which is less than I have expected to pay. In the luggage department I discover that I can send my bicycle not just to Paris-Lyon but all the way to Le Havre for just 7,500 lire (about £4). I am delighted with this arrangement; so long as everything goes as planned, I will not have to worry about collecting the bicycle in Paris.

I remove the pump and bottle from the bike, and leave the bike with the station official. As it looks as though it will rain again, I walk back to the hotel, where I will leave my things and collect my waterproof cycling cape. En route, I stop at a couple of churches – they are dark inside and not particularly interesting – and take a look at a few pretty little corners that I have not noticed before. It is quite pleasant in this area. The market is in full swing; the locals are crowded around the fish and vegetable stalls, and all of them are laughing, gesticulating and shouting.

Having collected my cape, I set off again. I stop to look inside the Church of Santi Apostoli and then venture down some hitherto unexplored streets, crossing some pretty canals on the way. I end up in the Campo Santa Maria Formosa, where I visit a handsome church of the same name built in 1492. It is quite pleasant inside and there are a few important paintings, though the names of the artists are unfamiliar to me.

I then look for the Pinacoteca Querini-Stampalia, a recommended art gallery and museum, but cannot find it immediately. I walk round in a circle, discovering some very quaint narrow streets on the way. On returning to the same spot, I discover that I have actually passed the gallery without realizing it! I am curious to visit this rather exclusive institution. Although the gallery is housed in a rather ordinary-looking palazzo – which may explain why I have walked past it – the ground floor interior is very modern. I pass the library and, following instructions, climb the stairs to the first floor. Here I buy a ticket for just 500 lire and begin my tour.

The palazzo turns out to be a wonderful place with a quiet, restful atmosphere; I almost have the gallery to myself. The rooms are old and retain their exquisite eighteenth-century décor, and the painted ceilings are all wonderfully bright and cheery. Most of the pictures are by obscure local artists and are not particularly interesting, but it is just nice to be here, surrounded by such elegance. Some of the paintings depict scenes of everyday life in Venice. There are also many portraits of unknown people and some interesting little genre paintings by Pietro Longhi. In the museum section, I stop to look at a few musical instruments, a few items of antique furniture, and some furnished rooms at the back of the building.

Glad to have visited the gallery, I leave at 12.30 p.m. and go off in search of a quiet canal. I soon find one and sit down for my lunch, which includes some of the ham that I have bought. Fortunately it is sunny and warm by now.

Afterwards I wander off to explore the area farther eastwards; I pass the large Church of San Francesco della Vigna, which is closed. The area, although rather dilapidated, is full of character: many of the houses have colourful flowerboxes and

even more colourful washing hanging out to dry over the narrow canals. All is quiet in this area. As I approach some warehouses, I begin to encounter modern concrete buildings, which look ghastly. I pass workshops and walk through peaceful squares where elderly people sit under the shade of the trees, which by now look quite autumnal.



Canal, and the Riva degli Schiavoni, Venice

As I work my way back to the waterfront, it begins to cloud over. Now it looks as though a storm is coming. When I reach the Riva degli Schiavoni, everything is bathed in a strange, unearthly light and looks totally different. Standing on a bridge, I photograph the scene looking across to the Church of Santa Maria della Salute, and straight into sunlight that shines from under a threatening bank of clouds.

In direct contrast to the area that I have just been exploring, I approach the grandeur of the Doge's Palace, which I enter just before the rain comes pouring down from the heavens. Here I buy a ticket to the exhibition of glassware, despite my general indifference to glass *objets d'art*. I am glad that I have made this decision, for not only is the glass well worth seeing, but I now have the opportunity of viewing the palace's smaller apartments, which are quite fine. The exhibition includes glassware from all over Europe, from early to Victorian. The early examples are rather crude, but quite interesting. I find some of the eighteenth and nineteenth-century glassware particularly ugly. Certainly the exhibition has been very well curated and mounted. In one of the rooms I stop to examine some historic maps of the world – or rather what was known of it at the time. When a crowd of well-dressed Italians leave, the rooms become silent and I almost have the place to myself. I finally leave the palace happy: I have now seen all the rooms that are open to the public and have learned a thing or two about antique glassware.

Fortunately the weather has cleared up by now. As it is nearly four o'clock, I walk back to the Church of San Zaccaria, which is now open. The façade of this fifteenth-

century former monastic church is rather unusual. The interior is pleasant enough, but not as good as I have expected it to be. The main attraction here is an excellent altarpiece painting by Giovanni Bellini depicting the Blessed Virgin with saints and angels playing music. As somebody conveniently places a coin into a slot, I am able to see it illuminated. I then manage to get into a wonderfully ornate side chapel, look around the treasury, and see a flooded crypt. In the treasury is a fantastic golden altarpiece that is simply breathtaking.

I then return to the Piazza San Marco (I still haven't tired of it!) and head for the Correr Museum for the second part of the glass exhibition, which I might as well see while I am in this area. At first the glassware is not particularly interesting – more ugly Victorian creations – but the rooms are splendid. This civic museum contains some very fine and impressive rooms. While here, I am also able to see the permanent exhibits, which add extra interest. As I proceed, the quality of the rooms begins to taper off and the glass improves – especially when I leave the *Art Nouveau* period and progress to the modern and ultra-modern. I find these pieces very attractive, with their simple yet graceful shapes.

I do not spend too long here, for I am beginning to feel tired. Outside I sit on the steps, then wander back to the hotel along some unexplored streets. This time I pass some very high-class boutiques, including several interesting antique shops; through the windows I can glimpse what seem to be important paintings. As usual, there are crowds of people out and about – most of them Italian.

By the time I return to the hotel I am exhausted and too tired to do shopping. My evening meal consists of my almost unchanging menu, finishing with some grapes and some wine. Afterwards, I feel a little tipsy and fall asleep on the bed. Marta arrives soon after eight o'clock, tired. Although her day in Trieste has been 'all right', she has not been exactly enchanted by the city. She has only gone there to see where her boyfriend grew up.

Later I rouse myself and amble back to the Piazza San Marco. A full moon hangs above the square, which is still crowded: people are either watching a couple of second-rate artists at work or viewing their rather ghastly paintings. I join them, take a look and listen to the bands playing. As the Caffè Florian is far too crowded (it was deserted last night), I sit on the steps nearby and listen to the music. By now it is quite chilly outdoors. A couple of English girls sitting and shivering not far away from me eventually pluck up enough courage to sit down awkwardly at an outdoor table and order coffee. The band now lays on the romantic music good and heavy, and some couples begin to waltz.

Finally, after ten o'clock, people begin to leave and so I enter one of the smaller and cosier rooms with its curious neo-baroque murals and mirrors. Although it is comfortable and full of character, the mirrors remind me of a barber's shop! I do not care very much for the members of staff: the waiter who serves me scowls. I order the cheapest item on the price list outside: a small *acqua minerale*, which costs 1,600 lire. This is served on a silver tray with ice and lemon – very exclusive!

I now do what I have come here to do: I sit back, relax, and write my diary to the accompaniment of the music being played outside. When I have the place to myself, it is most agreeable, though it is quite cool. Nearby, two French ladies drink numerous cups of coffee and then hot chocolate – I wonder how much their bill will come to!

Finally some wealthy Italians arrive: two young couples at first, then some immaculately-dressed people who look like art dealers. The women are particularly well attired in the latest fashions. One of the men lights up a cigar and sits back, then orders drinks. They all seem to be pleasant people and they speak well. We linger

until the staff begin to close the café, gathering up the chairs from outside and putting up the shutters. At midnight I ask for the bill: by now it has increased to 4,400 lire (£2.35). What a rip-off! It seems that customers are charged the price of the drink plus the amount of time spent in the café. However, I don't really care as it has been an enjoyable, albeit quirky, experience. Finally I walk back to the hotel, stopping in order to ring home, but with no success. At 12.30 a.m. I creep into the room and slip into my bed.

After a excellent night's sleep, I rise and leave quietly at 7.45 (Marta is still fast asleep). I do some shopping locally and return to discover that Marta is up and about. My breakfast this morning includes the remainder of Marta's tin of mackerel. We then spend some considerable time packing up our things as we are leaving the hotel today. (I have asked Cathy if she would care to share the room with me, but she has politely but firmly turned down my offer.) At last we are ready and go downstairs to pay the bill. For some reason the price has risen to 96,000 lire; we are gently insistent and finally pay the price that we were originally quoted: 84,000 lire (about £44 or £22 each). We are allowed to leave our luggage in the hall.

Outside, we prepare to say goodbye. I have enjoyed Marta's company and am sad to see her go. We have already exchanged addresses and I have invited her to Dublin; she says that she would love to come but does not know when or if a visit will be possible. I take a photograph of her and finally we kiss each other goodbye. She is certainly a brave girl: she has cycled over mountains into Switzerland, then back into France and on to Italy. She now plans to continue southwards through Italy, go by boat to Greece and from there to Egypt, then goodness knows where else.

I leave her with a heavy heart and make my way to the Fondamente Nove, where I catch a *vaporetto* to the island of Murano in order to see another part of the glass exhibition. It is a fine, fresh sunny morning, ideal for the trip. The boat is full of elderly Italians, mostly women, bearing huge bouquets of flowers. They are heading for the cemetery, one of the stops en route. It is quite a novel idea: an entire island given over to a cemetery! I am tempted to hop off and visit it, but resist the temptation. In the lagoon I notice a black and gold hearse boat bobbing on the water – I can see that it contains a coffin.



Murano

The journey to Murano takes about fifteen minutes. Although I know that there is a stop at the museum, I disembark at the first one and walk as it gives me an

opportunity to have a look around. This pretty little island has its own particular charm: the wider canals are full of colourful boats of all descriptions, the buildings are humbler and, although there are tourist shops everywhere, the place in general is quieter and more provincial. Although I quite like it, it lacks the grandeur of Venice.

Now and then I stumble across some interesting old buildings, some with typically Gothic windows and porticoes. I only encounter Italians walking briskly here – presumably they are out doing their morning shopping. I pass a small tower, cross a bridge to the other side of the canal, round a corner and arrive at the museum, which is situated in a fine old palazzo, just after ten o'clock. Already there are quite a lot of people here, most of them French tourists.

Just inside the entrance I notice that one can walk out to a portico and an enchanting back garden, but I go upstairs to a lovely painted room and begin to look at the glass on display. Once again, it ranges from early examples to ultra modern. Some items of the delicate classical style are outstanding. As before, I am quite taken by the sinuous shapes of the ultra-modern examples. Downstairs are display cases of very old Roman glass, which I find very interesting. The cases are suspended from the ceiling and sway when touched.

I finally leave at 10.45 a.m. and wander outside. I cross a bridge to the other side of the canal and walk into a glass-blowing workshop with some Italians to watch a demonstration, which I find quite fascinating. I hastily leave before being asked to pay for the spectacle or to look at the dreadful touristy creations in the showroom.



Basilica dei Santi Maria e Donato, Murano

I then walk to the fine Byzantine Basilica dei Santi Maria e Donato, close to the museum, and go inside to have a look at the architecture, mosaics and icons. As luck will have it, the English group with the professor arrives and once again I benefit from the expert's dissertation on the fine mosaics in the apse and the church in general. The professor points out the Venetian arches, held together with metal rods, and invites us to view some 'dragon bones' behind the altar. It is a splendid church; when I leave I take a photograph of its unusual exterior.

Afterwards I wander around the island. I walk towards the lagoon along a shady street lined by uninteresting modern concrete houses and then return to the canals. These streets are not so pretty, and here and there I come across some factories. I return to the *vaporetto* landing stage, find a quiet, shady spot overlooking a good view

and sit down for a bite to eat. School children, on their way home for lunch, pass me; they are all very smartly dressed in fashionable clothing and look charming. Some of them stop to stare at me.



Murano

Fed and rested, I walk back to the landing stage and accidentally board a wrong boat, which simply goes a little farther up the canal and stops. I am therefore obliged to retrace my steps and catch the next *vaporetto*. Even though there is a ticket seller on board, I manage to get away without paying. So far I have only bought two tickets, a single and a return, which I always keep handy. They seem to be very lax here and never check people's tickets, despite the warning notices posted everywhere.



Canal boats, Venice

After a brief stop at the cemetery, we arrive back at the island of Venice. I wander around the area near the Fondamente Nove, which is a little squalid and tumbledown, but very quiet and full of character. Here and there are the usual squares and interesting churches, but everything is closed at this hour of the day. Washing can be seen drying in the hot sun everywhere. Along the canals, local men work at boats and

chat to each other in the incomprehensible Venetian dialect. There is not a tourist or gondola to be seen in these parts. Although there is little of interest to see around here, it makes a welcome change from museums and high art. I find myself walking through the Jewish ghetto, one of the first of its type, instituted in 1516. I notice on a sign that the word is spelt with just one 't'. I pause to look at the tall apartment buildings, the synagogue, the bakery and Hebrew inscriptions on some of the buildings. In one of the squares a group of boys kick a football.

I then walk back to the Lista di Spagna, cross the familiar Ponte degli Scalzi near the train station and explore some of the area south of the Grand Canal. This area is definitely more sophisticated than the north. I stumble across the Scuola Grande di San Giovanni Evangelista and stop to admire its fine carved stone gateway. Originally one of the five confraternity buildings, it now appears to be used as some sort of community centre and is closed today.

Next I continue and arrive at the huge Basilica di Santa Maria Gloriosa dei Frari, an imposing edifice retaining its Venetian Gothic appearance and completed in 1492. A children's art exhibition is in full swing here and the church is full of youngsters, mums and dads. The noise inside is deafening. In the main body of the church, tourists mill around, shepherded by guides. I join an American group, whose guide – obviously a professor – is giving a running commentary on the fine Titian painting of the Assumption of the Virgin over the main altar. It is indeed a magnificent work, but the guide is a little too melodramatic for my liking – his flow of rhetoric never seems to end. I wander off to examine some of the other fine masterpieces in the church, including Titian's *The Pesaro Madonna*. I try listening to an Italian guide, but his English is very poor.

After I have seen everything of interest, I leave feeling very tired and thirsty. I walk towards the Rialto Bridge and stop in the Campo San Polo to buy a deliciously refreshing *menta* (mint) drink. I sit down to drink it, relax and watch some children playing. Some young men dressed in period costumes with swirling black capes appear, strumming guitars and mandolins. They attract everyone's attention, for nobody knows what they are up to. They certainly add a great dash of colour to an already lively scene.

Rested and refreshed, I continue walking, stopping at a couple of churches, Sant'Aponal and San Silvestro, but there is little of interest to be seen inside them. As the shops are all open again, there is a fair amount of bustle, especially at the Rialto Bridge, where I stop to admire the view from the parapet. As usual, dozens of boats roar up and down the canal.

I return to the hotel by 5.30 p.m., collect my two bags and struggle off to the Fondamente Nove yet again. As the huge Jesuit Church of Santa Maria Assunta nearby is open this time, I go in to have a look, but it is too dark to see anything properly. The décor is very rich. I then leave and catch the *vaporetto* to Giudecca Island, once again travelling free of charge. As we approach the little island of San Giorgio, we discover that a ceremony that involves a large crowd of people is in full swing. At last I arrive at Giudecca, tired, and walk the short distance to the youth hostel. I have no trouble getting in; I book for two nights and pay 13,000 lire (about £7), which includes breakfast. The dormitory is huge and almost full; the washroom is very swanky but is flooded thanks to the open showers. As the dining room is so inhospitable, I go outside and eat my evening meal by the water's edge, looking across to the lights of Venice. A German chap joins me; he speaks English fluently and tells me that he has been in Ireland.

Later, and feeling once again a little tipsy after the last of my wine, I jump on a *vaporetto* and nip across to the Piazza San Marco, since I have no inclination to spend the evening in such a nasty and impersonal youth hostel. As the bands are not playing, I sit on the steps in the Piazzetta and write my diary. When I am almost finished, a band appears and starts to play. The music immediately draws the crowds and a line of people forms, listening and yet hesitating. Slowly, one by one they pluck up enough courage to sit down outside one of the cafés and the waiters jump out to serve them. It is amusing to observe people being so gullible: the trick obviously works time and time again, night after night. It feels wonderful to be back in the square again – I have still not tired of its magic. I linger, listening to the music and watching the world go by.

I finally leave at 10.30 p.m. and cross back over to Giudecca by *vaporetto*. When I reach the dreaded youth hostel fifteen minutes later, I find that it has just closed. I ring the bell and am let in. Upstairs, I shift my belongings out of the crowded dormitory and install myself in the one next door, where there are far fewer people. My original bed had been on an upper bunk beside an open window, through which a cold wind was blowing. Here I am able to make myself comfortable. A group of Dutch youths are engrossed in reading comics, while others are reading books. I read until the lights are switched off at 11.30 p.m.

Relaxing in the dark I think of Marta and wonder where she is now; already I am missing her company. As I drift off 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 wake this morning at 6.30 after a good sleep, rise and have a tepid shower. The breakfast here consists of the usual meagre fare; in addition I eat some of my cheese and finish half a roll that somebody has left. I chat to a pleasant English lad against the noisy chatter of a large group of American students.

I escape from the hostel and take the *vaporetto* across to the Piazza San Marco. Even now, at 8.30 a.m., it is crowded – no doubt because it is Sunday. The hawkers are busy wheeling out their stalls. I stroll into the Basilica and find a congregation attending Mass. With so many people seated, the church somehow looks smaller.

I have planned to visit the Accademia again first thing this morning as admission is free, but having seen posters everywhere advertising an 'Art Treasures in Venice' exhibition in the nearby Palazzo Grassi, I decide to go to this first. I follow the arrows but, on the way, stop to look at a few churches. Some are quite good, such as the Baroque Church of San Moisè. In the Neoclassical Church of San Maurizio, the custodian advises me to go into the side chapels to see paintings by Rubens and Tintoretto. In one of them I find the treasury and the Rubens; the Tintoretto is behind the altar and above it is an interesting pipe organ.

Next I walk to the Campo Morosini and take a look inside the nearby Church of Santo Stefano. This is really unusual and spectacular inside: the side arches and ceiling are very elaborately decorated. To me it looks like the most Venetian church I have seen so far; the arches are round and are secured together by means of metal rods. There are also some very fine paintings here.

I soon find the Palazzo Grassi, but seeing some very well-dressed men in suits (probably art dealers) paying 5,000 lire for a ticket and being attended by smartly dressed members of the staff, I am put off. I feel that if I go in here in my scruffy clothes, I will not feel comfortable. It looks very tempting, but I leave and return to the Accademia through some hitherto unexplored quiet streets.

As the Accademia is crowded, I just head for the paintings that I want to see again: the early Veneziano polyptychs, the Bellinis and the Giorgione. This time I walk around in the opposite direction. It is nice to renew my acquaintance with these fine masterpieces, despite the crowds and the noise. I meet the American group with the melodramatic guide once again; today he is enthusing about the Tintoretos. In the small room containing Giorgione's 'Tempest' and 'Old Woman', a French lady guide is shouted down by him and so there is great competition.

I do not spend too long here – I escape after an hour or so. By now it is sunny outside. I amble along the Grand Canal towards the great Church of Santa Maria della Salute, stopping at a little English church on the way to listen to the small congregation singing hymns. It is strange to hear these Protestant hymns, sung in English, in the middle of Venice! A notice informs the visitor that there is a resident congregation of ten. The church is very simple but pleasing inside.



The Grand Canal and Santa Maria della Salute, Venice

In contrast, Santa Maria della Salute is huge, Baroque and rather impersonal inside. The central circular section is stark and empty; up at the main altar, Mass is in progress. Nonetheless, it is an impressive building and I am glad to have seen it. It certainly is one of the major landmarks here, positioned at the beginning of the Grand Canal and visible from everywhere nearby.

Outside, I sit on the steps by the water's edge and, despite the cold breeze, eat my lunch. All of a sudden there is a stir near the Doge's Palace: a fanfare of trumpets can be heard and some long rowing boats filled with men and women in striped teeshirts move off. Everybody nearby gets up to see what is happening. The boats are quickly rowed over to the other side of the church and I walk around the corner to take a look. Here boats are being lifted in and out of the water and people's names are being called over a loud-hailer. I discover that this is a boat club's one hundredth anniversary celebration. I mingle with the Italians, watching the bustle and excitement, though it is

difficult to make out what exactly is happening. Eventually some of the boats are rowed off in different directions and the crowd of people left on the quayside disperses. Presumably they are leaving for their lunch.



San Giorgio from Santa Maria della Salute, Venice

I return to the tip of this narrow strip of land, the Punta della Dogana, sit in the sun and relax. Before me is a spectacular view of San Marco and the island of San Giorgio. Once again, I notice a large crowd of people outside the church on San Giorgio – it turns out that a wedding is in progress. Very soon an elaborate and beautifully-decorated gondola, in which the wedding couple are seated, comes bumping over the choppy waters. It is propelled by two gondoliers in elaborate costumes. The vessel docks at a smart hotel on the other side of the Grand Canal, close to where I am sitting. There is certainly a great festive atmosphere here today. Everybody I see is well dressed, especially the Italian girls, some of whom look really fabulous. Many look as if they are dressed for a party.

At two o'clock I finally bestir myself and walk the short distance to the Peggy Guggenheim Collection, on this side of the canal. Although I am not particularly eager to see this collection of modern art (which I realize is important), I decide to visit it since I am here. I find the gallery, situated in the Palazzo Venier dei Leoni, pay 2,000 lire for a ticket and go inside. The gallery is pleasant and looks out over the Grand Canal. The visitors, mostly Americans, are very well dressed. The paintings displayed here do not please me; only two of them, one by Marc Chagall and another by Picasso, make some sort of an impression on me. I find Max Ernst's work quite revolting. As I am not familiar with most of the artists' names and their works, I quickly become bored.

The little palazzo, on the other hand, is pleasant and contains large comfortable white sofas, into which one can sink and relax. In the basement are photographs of the famous (and very rich) Peggy Guggenheim, born in New York in 1898. I am interested to discover that Samuel Beckett urged her to take an interest in contemporary art, which he described as 'a living thing'. Her bedroom is very strange: here one is transported into a realm of fantasy. Afterwards I retire to a peaceful garden, full of modern sculpture. A stone throne of the Byzantine era catches my attention. There is a pleasantly relaxed atmosphere here; people stroll around in a leisurely manner and I feel quite reluctant to leave.

At four o'clock I wander off and make my way back to the Accademia, where I buy a refreshing glass of iced tea. I walk on to the Palazzo Rezzonico, but find it closed. Instead, I spend some time wandering around the back streets and canals. I finally walk to the Piazza San Marco (still full of crowds) and join a long queue for the *vaporetto* to San Giorgio. Amazingly, everybody manages to fit on board.

I get off when we reach the island and sit at the water's edge for a while, watching another magnificent sunset. At 5.40 I take a seat in the church for this evening's free organ recital. As I have seen posters for it here and there, I have decided to attend it. As usual, the church is very dark and it is almost impossible to see anything clearly. The recital is very well attended but very dull. A fidgety audience sits through a programme of obscure early music by Gabrieli, Frescobaldi, Scheidt, Pachelbel, Bach (in one of his academic moods) and Handel. The organ has a most uninteresting sound, quite unsuitable for the early works, and is wildly out of tune when certain stops are used. I am glad that I have not bothered to go to any of the other organ recitals during the week, as I have become very wary of church organs here in Venice. The audience is clearly bored stiff; people continually walk about and fidget. A group of giddy teenagers in front of me whisper and shift about on their creaky chairs. I am glad to leave at the end, before the encore.

Outside, I catch the next *vaporetto* to Giudecca, walk to the hostel and very reluctantly eat the evening meal, only because I am hungry and have been unable to buy bread today. For 4,000 lire I receive a tray containing food of questionable quality. The pasta is reasonable, but the meat tastes very peculiar. It is accompanied by what I presume is some very watery instant mashed potato and a rock-hard white bread roll. Dessert consists of a slice of cake that tastes as though it has been made of sawdust. There are no vegetables or fruit. I wash down this disgusting meal with a small bottle of red wine that costs 500 lire. As soon as I have finished, I escape and sit outside, writing my diary. At least I have a pleasant view of Venice from here. I have taken quite a dislike to this hostel and am very glad that I have not stayed here all the time.

Later I take a brisk walk around the uninteresting island, but do not stay out for long because of the cold wind that blows from the lagoon. Exhausted, I retire to bed by ten o'clock.