

# *Venice*

Halfway to Heaven



by  
**Tim Thurston**

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We've just returned from our tenth visit to Venice; our first was in February 2003. I think I can say that it was the most memorable holiday I have ever had. *La Serenissima* is the most astonishingly beautiful and utterly unique place, and few days have passed since when some aspect of the city – its art, its buildings or its music – has not come into my mind. My screensaver contains over five hundred photos. 2004 was spent waiting for a hip operation, and my 'prize' for doing just what the doctor ordered was another visit: this time a more prolonged one. Since then we have made eight further visits in February and March, and one in early May.

In spite of its beauty, the city has prompted a lot of negatives: the decadent and mysterious (personified in the film 'Don't Look Now' perhaps), the sense that it is nothing more than a decaying film set, that it is smelly, ridiculously crowded with tourists, grossly overpriced, that Venetians are rogues, and for the last thousand years or so they have specialized in fleecing tourists – the Crusaders had a very tough time passing through!

When we were last in Paris, I was challenged when I said that it was the most beautiful city I knew. I was asked, 'What about your beloved Venice?' Well, Venice is in a different category, not for comparison with any land bound place. Light on water and the glorious architecture (that's the magic), beauty at every turn, and the very special carless delight.



It was the art as much as the city itself that originally attracted us.

The location of Bellinis and Carpaccios (or the Titians and Tintoretos if you care for the more ornate), as well as the musical associations of Monteverdi, Vivaldi and the Gabrielis, helped us plan our tours, though the great delight (now we know it so well), is just 'being there'. The effect of the obvious places – the Grand Canal, San Marco and Rialto – are indeed overwhelming; not even Canaletto can prepare you for



the reality. The crowds really do put one off, though, if you're on foot or packed into a seatless *vaporetto*, yet fifty metres off the well beaten tourist track from the station via Rialto to San Marco will find you in fascinating peaceful corners, and there are so many *palazzi*, churches and squares well worth a visit. It is very easy to get lost in Venice and lose your sense of direction, but don't worry – it's great fun and you'll find yourself again quickly, for the Grand Canal is never far away.

It is very worthwhile doing a little homework, for the history of the place is of course quite fascinating. The BBC double DVD *Francesco's Venice* by Francesco da Mosto is good, though parental guidance is recommended! I spent my convalescence in the company of Jan Morris, John Julius Norwich and John Ruskin. The *Eyewitness* guide is good, but our personal favourite book on Venice is by J.G. Links and is called *Venice for Pleasure*. There are lots of films on YouTube too.

On one occasion we wanted to visit Padua to see the breathtaking Giotto Chapel. This was a very good preparatory step to a first visit to Venice. The train from Bologna is quick and Padua is a short ride from Venice. (There are various levels of train: the Eurostars are very quick and very expensive, but the local trains are slow but cheap.) On three occasions we went to Ravenna, which is equally unique; its mosaics, which predate Venice by many centuries, are astonishing. This small town has no fewer than eight UNESCO Heritage Sites. One year we had two lovely days in Verona, which is just an hour from Venice. Aer Lingus now flies direct there too.



We were told that the best way to approach Venice is by sea, but if you come by train it's hardly less dramatic. It's pretty exciting as the train crosses the causeway; it then draws into a perfectly ordinary station. Out you get; you walk out of the station down the white steps, and there it is: the canal, a baroque church, light on water, light on marble – let's face it, it *is* almost as though you'd stepped into a film set. Our second visit was by air, direct; two and a half hours from Dublin, so we took the Alilaguna boat from Marco Polo airport, which goes to a number of places around the lagoon in an hour or so, and so we did approach the city by sea. (There are three different lines stopping at different places.) It was indeed stunning, though sadly we were there an hour after what would have been a glorious sunset. Ryanair flies direct to Treviso, which is about a forty-five minute coach ride away. I took this route a

couple of years ago and was walking in the mist down a silent canal by 11 a.m. on a Sunday – well worth a ridiculously early rise. (We did it again this time and it was very easy.) There is a particular sort of Venetian silence which I find magical. It's also better to arrive in daylight, as finding your hotel in the dark can be a challenge!

As we don't care for the heat, the week before Lent (the Carnevale or 'farewell to meat') is a good time to go, as there are fewer tourists and therefore no queues to enter the museums, churches, and so forth. The hotel prices shoot up during the following week when Carnevale begins; do check the times for this, as they tend to extend it earlier and earlier – during Lent is good too (2016). The hotel prices can double in the summer months. We have been astonishingly lucky with the weather – lots of sun. But we did wake to a blizzard one morning, and so had the rare experience of snow in Venice, with lots of photo opportunities. We were amused to see that *The Irish Times* featured a snow-covered gondola in its pages while we were there. Our



photos of views from the Ca d'Oro (my favourite palazzo on the Grand Canal and a lovely museum – don't miss it) and the Campanile were wonderful.



Our favourite area is Dorsoduro to the south, away from the crowds and approached by the wooden Accademia bridge – one of the only three that cross the Grand Canal. Recently a new glass contraption by the Spanish architect Santiago Calatrava, which is much disliked by the Venetians, has been constructed near the

train station. Calatrava designed both the Samuel Beckett and James Joyce bridges across the River Liffey in Dublin. The view from the wooden bridge towards the Salute church is one of the iconic Venice views, and the wonderful Accademia Gallery is immediately facing you as you cross. If you have tired of early art, turn left and go on to the finest small collection of contemporary art in the Peggy Guggenheim gallery. Peggy's story is quite fascinating. South of Dorsoduro is the Zattere; it's always a joy to stroll down this lovely waterfront overlooking the Giudecca, which is the name of the widest canal and the island on the far side. In fact I can say that there is nowhere I would rather be. We've often sat in the warm sun there with the water looking like silk. There is a feeling of space and openness rare in Venice, which is so full of narrow winding claustrophobic passages; the width of the 'streets' as shown on the maps bears no relation to the actual width – many are less than ten feet wide. It's lovely when you come upon a nice open *campo* (square) on your travels, and there are plenty. The great advantage of Venice, though, is that it is very small – one can walk from north to south in less than an hour (if you don't get lost). It's one of the few cities where the distances seem much less than you expect; in London or Paris it's always the opposite! Along the Zattere you'll see the Venetians taking a stroll with their dogs, the women in their fur coats, even on the warmest days. Whole families also stroll; the Italians adore their children, and dress them with amazing style. It's always good to see a restaurant with Italian families eating there, as it's a very good sign of excellent cuisine, and it's a delight to watch as they go into serious detail discussing the food before ordering. Do avoid what they advertise as 'tourist menus'. It's great to see children in Venice; there's much talk of how it's too expensive to live there, but in Dorsoduro there are schools and there is plenty of family activity.



As far as gondolas are concerned there are several points along the Grand Canal where *traghetto*s cross from one side to another for €2 or so, though they'll expect you to remain standing! A private gondola trip is exorbitant, as it will cost a minimum of €100. (However, we have noticed much less expensive rides offered at Alilaguna stops, so check this out.)



Our art highpoints are the charming Carpaccio cycles in the Scuola di San Giorgio degli Sciaivoni. People often overlook this but it's so well worth tracking down; the Scuola is a five-minute walk eastwards from San Marco. There are other Carpaccios and a breathtaking new Bellini room in the Accademia. Don't miss the two finest Bellinis in the church of San Zaccaria and in the Frari. The Frari includes the composer Monteverdi's grave, Titian's *Assumption*, Bellini's sublime triptych, and some lovely carved choir stalls in the sacristy. There is Mass in the Sacristy at 08.30 and at 18.30. A hundred metres south, towards San Pantalon, is a great coffee shop called Tonolos – frequent stops for coffee are essential to balance all the culture! Another Bellini not to be missed is a *Presentation* in the Querini Stampalia, a gallery near Santa Maria Formosa, between San Marco and the Rialto. There's a nice shop and café there too, and free early evening concerts on Fridays and Saturdays. It is worth checking these things out beforehand as the times do change. Opening times of museums and churches vary – some are closed for long lunch breaks, and many places are closed on Mondays.



The San Marco Basilica is of course breathtaking. Like the city itself, some would say seriously OTT, and full of booty from Constantinople. The ceiling, being of mosaic, still glows magnificently even after nearly a thousand years, and the floor, undulating, is full of wonderful images. There is a sense of looking east rather than west – closer to Byzantium than Rome for sure. Do go up and see the horses; the original ones (again booty) are inside, and the ones outside are copies. From here you can see the astonishing golden cupolas from close up, and a fine view of the *campo*. Vespers in the main basilica at 6 p.m. on Sunday is wonderful, though not for musical reasons. However, sometimes there's an organ recital beforehand. You can do a little wandering before and after, and take a look at the ceiling. If you go in with the tourist hordes, you are pushed through in fifteen minutes. It's much better to go when it is 'working', for the ceiling is illuminated; it's often not so at general visiting times, which is disappointing. There are Masses early every morning, but only in a side chapel, and again the ceiling is not lit. The great tenor bell of San Marco is one of the most evocative sounds I know; it strikes one in the deepest bowels, and I have to sit down when I hear it. It's called the *Marangona* (the Carpenter) after a Cretan carpenter who built the original Campanile. (Don't get caught in the bell tower on the



hour!) The tower we went up was San Giorgio Maggiore – just a trip across the water from San Marco. There are quite stunning views, even better than from the one in San Marco. We actually saw the snow-capped Dolomites in the far distance. The San Marco *campo* is worth a number of visits, preferably first thing in the morning or last thing at night, when the crowds can better be avoided. Yes, it *is* worth while going inside Florian's to savour the most expensive coffee you'll ever drink.

The Venetians are not always particularly friendly, though most are civil enough; some are rude, and a few are warm and welcoming. (Our most recent visit was marked with some very friendly encounters – Venetians and Ryanair must have been on the same course!) A few Italian words of greeting and thanks are much appreciated. I've never quite mastered the rule about when *buongiorno* becomes *buonasera*. Don't expect to understand their Italian – the Venetian accent can be very strong, and there are some major differences in pronunciation. Everyone of course speaks English. The tourist will understandably pay more than the residents, officially on the *vaporettos* and unofficially elsewhere – street markets, and so forth. You can be sure of equal treatment in the supermarkets (very reasonable), and – usually – in the food shops, for things like meat, bread and cheese.

Rather than 'halfway to heaven', Venice has been described as 'halfway to hell' by someone who had struggled with so many tourists that there were one-way systems for pedestrians and this, combined with heat, smells and mosquitoes, was too much. You'll have none of that in early spring, and I guess in October and November too. The light in February is magical. And it *is* all about light – even the mist has its own strange beauty. One morning we noticed the water lapping up onto the paths – we were told that we had missed a real *acqua alta* by five centimetres. The levels had risen by 105 centimetres, which is above average. You'll see the duckboards stacked ready for such emergencies; they can happen at any time and are announced by a siren. (This happened eighteen times in 2011.)

I would stay in the city itself; seventy per cent of visitors come just for a day, and so the precious times are early in the morning and again at night. I would also recommend a visit to the fish and vegetable markets near the Rialto, which can be great fun (you can find some seriously weird fish), and you can buy fruit and vegetables there too and make a picnic by adding bread and cheese, though Italians rarely bake decent bread. It's not that easy to find good food. If you go into any of the bars in the early evening and buy a *Prosecco*, delicious little snacks called *cicchetti*

sometimes are provided 'gratis'. You pay much more to sit – Italians always seem to stand.

The *vaporetto* (waterbus) system is great, though very expensive – €7.50 per trip! Avoid rush hours and get to the front if you can for a better view and less engine noise and fumes, though this is only possible on some boats. We get a two- or three-day ticket from machines near the main *vaporetto* stops. This is to be recommended; €20 for 24 hours or €30 for 48, and it is very easy to use the machines. Plan all your trips up and down the canal, around Venice north and south, and out to the islands. I don't care to visit the Lido because there are cars there – horrid little things! The basilica in Torcello is one of the most strangely beautiful buildings I've ever been in; it was built long before Venice was begun. Burano, next to Torcello, is charming with many coloured houses. Give yourself four hours for a Torcello-Burano trip; it is well worth it if you have the time and the weather is pleasant, and again it is a nice break from the congestion of Venice. You'll see the city from the water and have a good stretch on the lagoon. The 'vaps' do stop and start *very* frequently on the Grand Canal, especially Route 1.



Murano is much closer to Venice. It takes fifteen minutes to get there. As there are many vap stops on the island, check beforehand on a map. It's lovely; avoid the glass touts, but visit the Glass Museum, as it is worth it. Don't miss San Donato, a really lovely twelfth-century basilica with a floor even finer than San Marco. See if you can find the grasshoppers! On your way across to Murano, it's worth visiting the cemetery on San Michele. There's a Russian corner; Stravinsky's grave isn't as impressive as his compatriot Diaghilev. It's a fascinating place. *Vaporetto* rides early in the morning or at sunset are wonderful; they are by far the best times to see the Grand Canal really, with the low light illuminating the *palazzi*. Our 'discovery' this year was the Museo Fortuny: a huge *palazzo* famous for the gorgeous luxury fabrics that adorn the rooms, and the story of the Fortuny family who invented the printing processes. We also went over to Giudecca to visit the showrooms – it's the first time I'd really wanted to win the Lottery!

Where to stay? Well, up to 2016 we have stayed in a number of places in Dorsoduro. Our recent B&B was by far the nicest: Corte 1231 in San Polo (which we



found via Alistair Sawday). Don't be put off by the approach. We had a pretty apartment, the staff were very kind, and it was good value for Venice. Check their website. In general space is at a premium and most hotel rooms are very small. If you're going between May and September, do check about the air-conditioning where you are staying, as there are rules about when it may be used, which seem pretty random. Also ask about plug-in anti-mosquito repellent – bring Antisan or the like.

Good food at reasonable prices is rare in Venice. It really is worth paying a little over the odds. We recommend the restaurants along the Campo San Barnaba; the best pizzas can be eaten at *Al Profeta*. There are a couple of good eating places in the Canareggio district: *Anice Stillato* and *Rioba*, though this area can be scarily quiet at night. In San Polo, our favourite restaurant, *La Zucca*, is a mainly vegetarian place as good as Paradiso in Cork. *Do Spade* is near Rialto, and *Estro* and *Impronta* are near San Pantalon. Tripadvisor is useful on this, and do always check your bills. *Pasticceria Rizzardini* in San Polo, very near Corte 1231, is wonderful for coffee and a pastry. Booking for restaurants is recommended. We find that a four-night stay is enough, though if it's your first time you may prefer to stay a week, with a day trip to Padua or Torcello in the middle maybe. Do pack *light*, as you'll have to carry your bags more than usual. There may not be steep hills but there are plenty of bridges, and so rucksacks are better than wheelies, which are an awful bore on stepped bridges, and very noisy too!

Maybe there is nothing new to be said about Venice as Pietro Casola said... in 1494 (according to Links), but you absolutely have to see it before it slips under the Adriatic!