



### VENICE

He who is tired of Venice must indeed be tired of life. She ('La Serenissima' and very feminine) never bores, never fails to deliver more than the highest expectations might envisage. Vain she may be, extravagant, moody and way over the top, but we accept all these characteristics, like those of a beautiful mistress!

However familiar may be the Grand Canal, St Mark's Square, Doge's Palace, the reality is never a cliché and the only proper reaction is a gasp of sheer wonder. Part of the charm are the surprises. Take an unfamiliar turning, cross a new bridge (there are over 400 of them) and the chances are you will be lost. Almost better not to bury the head in a map but to wander at whim down whichever lane in the maze seems most appealing, through squares

where children kick a football, mothers gossip, old men soak up the sun, each piazza with its church full of treasures. The locals are used to being asked for directions from bemused tourists. Not that their answer is much help. "Tutto diretto" they will say, pointing down a dark alley. Their little joke since nowhere in Venice is diretto.

Even the most obvious attractions are mind-blowing. The most obvious of all is St Mark's Square, where the effect of battalions of tourists following umbrella-brandishing guides, messy pigeon infestations, rubbish bins overflowing with tins and plastic, is puny alongside the all-powerful impact of square and basilica. Enter if you can from the western side, where Napoleon added the Ala Napoleonica and surmounted the imposing wing with statues of the greatest generals, leaving a space in the centre for a statue of the man he considered to be the greatest general of



*Photo by James Martin*

all—Napoleon. It was never completed but his memorial—a gap—is still there.

Straight ahead looms the gleaming basilica of St Mark's. The most theatrical building in this most theatrical city seems more two-dimensional canvas than solid stone, marble, porphyry and alabaster. Gilt and gold glitter, huge mediaeval banners flutter, East meets West, Byzantine contrasts with Gothic and Renaissance, four famous bronze horses prance on high, umpteen minarets and countless crosses soar between five domes, a glorious hotchpotch of religious convictions, architectural styles, geographic influences, historical circumstances, all on a larger than life scale.

One requirement necessary to enjoy Venice is the acceptance that it is going to be very, very expensive. The Euro and the Italian economy may fluctuate but Venice makes its own rules. The only answer is to lie back and enjoy every moment of the rape on your wallet. Not to order a Bellini at one of the famous cafés in the square, Quadris or Florians, is unimaginable, but so will be the bill. Forget the refreshments and regard the money as the

entrance to a non-stop cabaret, with a seat in ‘the finest drawing room in Europe’, a bargain if ever there were one. I tend to favour Florians, the oldest café in Italy, opened in 1720. Mark Twain, Hemingway, Goethe and Proust may well have sat on one of those seats in its intimate and elaborately decorated interior.

For photo opportunities take the lift 324ft up to the top of the campanile. In 1903 the original bell tower slowly and discreetly collapsed, miraculously hurting no one, but so beloved was this centuries-old landmark that by popular demand it was rebuilt exactly to the original design, stone by stone. The view from its summit extends over the domes of St Mark’s, across to the clock tower where two giant Moors raise their hammers every hour to strike the massive bells, and in the other direction, on past the lovely peach-coloured Doge’s Palace to the glittering Grand Canal, whose surface is always in motion, thanks to the incessant water traffic that is the leitmotif of Venice. Dozens of gondolas are tied up at the Piazzetta landing stage. In the sixteenth century there were 10,000 gondoliers, now there are only 400. Although many of them favour tee shirts and jeans rather than the traditional blue and white striped top and red-streamered boater, little has changed about their craft for the last 1,000 years. The art of propelling the 36ft boat through the narrow labyrinth owes nothing to modern technology and everything to the ten-year apprenticeship that the recruits are required to serve.

The price for a ride is outrageous but it would be unthinkable to visit Venice and not experience the unique gently rocking progression through quiet backwaters, lolling on gaudy cushions, the object of envy from the less privileged who lean over the bridges to watch and share the schmalzy strains of ‘O Sole Mio’. Is it a requirement for every gondolier to have a powerful tenor voice, I wonder?

More crucial to the tourists’ exploration are the vaporetti. The best bargain to be found anywhere in Venice is to take the No.1 boat, misleadingly known as *accelerato*, which zigzags laboriously all the way round the huge reversed s-bend from St Mark’s to the road and rail terminals at the Piazza Roma. Edge your way to the bow and settle down for a visual treat. Fairy-tale palazzi follow fairy tale palazzi on either bank, so that tourist heads turn like Wimbledon viewers. The buildings exemplify Venice’s extraordinary status, power and wealth throughout the centuries; the thought of losing them forever is appalling.

The first of the Canal’s three bridges is the wooden Japanese-style *Accademia*, named after the famous picture gallery—not to be missed. Get there early in the day, to make the most of the Venetian painters’ work on show.

The next bridge spans the Canal at the Rivo Alto, the point where Venice was born. The area, known as the Rialto, is still its commercial core. Cupboard-sized shops line the elegant curved marble arch; nowadays they sell cheap leather bags, jewellery and carnival masks.

These are tourist-fodder, but nearby at the colonnaded *Pescheria*, the fish market, and at the *Erberia*, for fruit and veg, the Venetians get on with their daily purchases, the fishermen unload their catch, and housewives pick out the best produce

The final bridge is the newest, serving the railway station, and here the dream abruptly ends. Tranquillity, elegance, time-warp, give way to *furore*, diesel fumes and functionalism. Hundreds of coaches disgorge thousands of tourists in the Piazza Roma, surly porters charge ten times what the confused customer had expected to pay to trundle their suitcases a few hundred cobbled yards, fast food stands and their detritus add to the ugliness. This is most people’s first impression of *La Serenissima*. Let’s turn our backs on the 20th century chaos and head back to St Mark’s to do some shopping.

From the Piazza, the tangle of alleys known as I Mercerie are lined with an eclectic range of shops, some international labels, some esoteric specialists. Food shops are neighbours to jewellers, handmade shoes are shown next to a cutler's display. Murano glass of course is ubiquitous, some of it very covetable, some hideous. The number of outlets for elaborate hand-painted masks and headdresses indicates the importance of the February carnival, when Venice's inherent theatricality is given full rein and mysterious strangers, masked and cloaked, haunt the misty alleys.

Whatever time of year you visit (well, perhaps exclude August), you cannot fail to be overwhelmed by the unique phenomenon that is Venice. Long may she survive.

*Patricia Fenn*