

Impressions of Venice, Italy

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Venice. The name stirs romantic thoughts of gondola rides steered by colorful gondoliers in striped shirts, singing "O Solo Mio". No other destination conjures such a vivid image of place at the mention of its name. A picture of a gondola with standing gondolier and an arched bridge in the background is iconic Venice. Every other destination wishes they were so lucky, as every one wishes they were in Venice!

I have a picture of Venice in my mind. While exploring the labyrinth of streets one afternoon I rounded a corner and came upon a curious sight. A stream of tourists flowed through the narrow 15th century street in front of me. It looked like a giant centipede moving over ancient arched bridges across narrow canals, pushing ever forward to Piazza San Marcos. bridges across narrow canals, pushing ever forward to Piazza San Marcos.



Iconic Venice (Source:Richard Frisbie)

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Venice - The Grande Dame

Five or six cruise ships a day disgorge thousands of such mindless foreigners to pursue this lemming-like quest. They set a fast pace, almost racing to check off the most famous destination in a city of famous destinations. I was advised to avoid them, to seek the winding untrod paths through a rarely visited Venice, a city of history and commerce and death.

Several times our paths crossed in my winding exploration of this most picturesque of cities. Armed with a good map and an unerring sense of direction, I walked miles to their blocks, and saw more in one glance than they saw on the whole journey.

In the end we both reached the same destination. They, ready to validate their arrival by purchasing trinkets from the many stalls before returning to their ship. I, however, was spent, fulfilled and infused with the essence of the Grande Dame that is Venice.

Venice - The Seductress

Venice is like a beautiful but aging dowager. Around every corner are glimpses of the handsome courtesan she once was, with glimmers of her promised treasures where the sunlight caresses the warm marble. Venice is a seductress, hiding all but the most obvious charms to the casual glance, rewarding more diligent scrutiny with mere hints of the pleasures to be found in her arms. As I walked, I let Venice embrace me.

Masks! Gaudy, elaborate, grotesque; whole storefronts of colorful masks, displays spilling out the door, startling me in a face-to-face confrontation upon turning a corner. There are so many mask shops! I can only conclude that Venice is a city of

concealment, or costume balls - maybe both - certainly a city where nothing is as it seems. The number of them is only exceeded by the many linen shops also lining the little alleys.



Venice - The Artisan

Lace! Delicate, silky and modestly hued, in all manner of shapes for arcane uses only your grandmother would remember. Each window display was more artful than the last, as intricate as the patterns and stitches of each piece, demanding more than a glance. I have no real interest in the seamstress' art, and no use for all that stunning linen and lingerie, but I couldn't take my eyes off it. I lingered at the storefronts in admiration, slowly shaking my head "no" at the hopeful proprietess while I soaked it all in. Venice is a city of artisans.

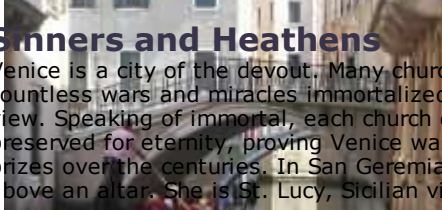


Venice - The Merchant

Venice is a city of six islands surrounded by water; dampness pervades every crevice, mold spreads beyond the shadows, staining the marble and drapes. When the breeze is right, a rich aroma of the sea, and of decay, permeates the air. In the impressive palazzos lining the grand canal, the "ground" floor was originally for commerce. Boats literally tied up at the door, water splashing in, cargoes from around the world loaded and unloaded as the tide ebbed and flowed. Today, water taxis abound, everyone owns a boat of some kind, and public water transportation follows regular routes and schedules. Venetians ride the water as we ride the roads. The lapping of waves on the buildings matches the hum of our tires on the pavement, each heralding progress and commerce. Venice is a city of merchants.

Venice for Lovers

Venice is for lovers. Engagements, honeymoons and second honeymoons occupy the thoughts of those walking hand-in-hand through the piazzas. The waterways are filled with black gondolas giving couples of all ages romantic memories to treasure. It is a city of dreams, of romance, and of sparkling sunlight glittering in a gondola's wake. I felt at times like a voyeur, looking away when the intimacy in the eyes of people engaged in the simple act of sharing a gelato, sipping espresso or even stealing a kiss on a secluded bridge made me feel as if I were invading their privacy. Venice is a destination of the heart.



Sinners and Heathens

Venice is a city of the devout. Many churches and cathedrals, with the history of countless wars and miracles immortalized in their paintings and tile work, are open to view. Speaking of immortal, each church displays the relics of a saint or saints preserved for eternity, proving Venice was victorious in capturing and keeping these prizes over the centuries. In San Geremia the diminutive body of a woman reclines above an altar. She is St. Lucy, Sicilian virgin and martyr, the patron saint of sight.

While I was there, pilgrims approached the glass case and, genuflecting, kissed it, or kissed their hands and touched it, then crossed themselves and left. San Geremia is an active church filled with people. While many were tourists and art historians, some were the devout, praying to their saints in various languages. The juxtaposition of the "heathens" and the "faithful" (the tourists and the pious) within the consecrated halls was startling in its disparity.

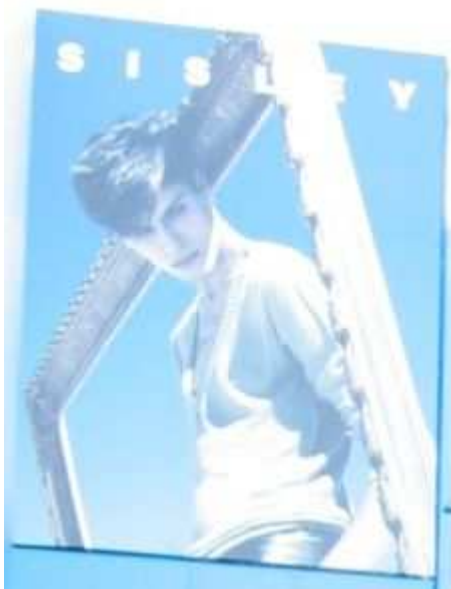


Pious and Devout

In Piazza San Marcos, St. Mark the Evangelist, (whose body was spirited from Alexandria in 828 AD) is buried under the altar of the Cathedral named for him. There is also a whole room of relics of other saints on display. At first glance some look like ornate chalices or incense containers, but on closer examination they are clearly holding a hand, foot, finger, or countless bones of different sizes. Others are ornamental boots or gloves, the precious relics they contain hidden behind the artistry of ancient goldsmiths. They are all talismans in Venice's largest reliquary, a grand house of worship and a resting place for the dead.

Taken as a whole, these relics are a testament to the devout Christian roots of Venice, and the military might Venice employed to "collect" them. Wars were waged in the name of God, whole crusades were embarked upon, and ferocious battles fought, so that what was at one time

the most powerful city in the world could claim the devotion and prestige the saintly remains bestowed.



Gay Venice

Porto da Mar at 41/43 Via delle Macchine, is the only gay bar in Venice. The bars and baths of nearby Padua are popular destinations, but when you are in Venice, the Porto da Mar is where it's at. I don't know what it is about Italian men, but as I looked at any one of them their hands strayed to their crotch. While I watched they adjusted themselves - every time - sometimes keeping eye contact, sometimes not. This happened on the streets, in the markets, on the docks, certainly in the bar, as if the swelling of excitement at seeing a man forced a repositioning. I don't think it was me. Italian men are just HOT!

Being There

Vaporetti (waterbuses) run on eight different routes around the islands of Venice, and are a very convenient way to get around. They offer the best views of Venice. Tickets can be purchased at the main docks. One dock, Vallarosso, located on the western edge of Piazza San Marco, is also a place to stop for some Prosecco and a bite to eat at the famous Harry's Bar.

Da Vinco Prosecco and Spumante is available in the US.

The Moby Sticky Hilton (rooms from \$200) is in a beautifully restored 100 year old brick flour mill occupying its own island across the Canale della Giudecca from Venice.

With 380 rooms, many retaining the architectural details of the original mill, and a rooftop bar with views over the bay and the skyline of Venice, it is a convenient, high profile place to stay. Their Aromi Restaurante serves American fare and Veneto specialties both inside and on the expansive waterfront landing. The Molino Sticky Hilton also provides a free shuttle boat to St. Mark's Square every half hour. It is a 25 minute boat ride from Venice's Marco Polo Airport.

Piazza San Marcos as Andrea Bocelli rehearses for an evening concert

Motorboat tour of the Grand Canal in Venice

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