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Venice: a 'supremely special' City

by Bonnie Braendlin

"Built on water, it is an endless succession of reflections and echoes, a mirroring."
Mary McCarthy, *Venice Observed*, 1961

Last year I asked Hans, "Where shall we go to celebrate our forty-fifth wedding anniversary?"

"Where do you think?" he replied and then we both laughed.

Venice, Italy, of course, our favorite travel destination, a city we have visited once a year for almost twenty years. Our anniversary date dictates our being there in late May, early June, also fortuitously a time of off-season airplane and hotel prices and a favorable time for sightseeing when Venice has relatively few tourists, just a few French, Germans, Brits and maybe some Americans, but mostly Italians, eager to explore one of their own most beautiful and exotic cities. It's a season of the year when the air is generally cool, the sun warm, and the sea breezes fresh, perfect weather for exploring on foot or by boat, even on the occasional rainy days.

We are often asked why we return to the same city year after year and we reply that although Venice is in some respects always the same, it is also always changing. Exploring the maze of small streets along the small canals is for us every year a new adventure. Once we overheard a man say, "I've heard people in five languages looking at maps and saying, 'Where are we?'"

Getting lost is part of the fun and on every visit we discover something new, a narrow street between buildings so close together we can touch walls on either side by stretching out our arms, a group of school children drawing pictures of a statue or a frieze, several medieval houses tucked away behind San Marco, a fascinating shop filled with handmade masks and carnival costumes. In the days before Donna Leon's mystery novels were available in the States, I would buy the latest one in Venice and as I read it we would follow the trail of Commissario Brunetti around the city, seeing it through his eyes. Often we discover shops that weren't there before and a constant shifting of artistic exhibitions, even of visiting statuary on the docks along the Grand Canal.



Venice offers an amazing vista of water: a maze of small canals branching off the Grand Canal, which meets the Giudecca Canal in the Bacino, a basin linking San Marco, the tip of the Dorsoduro, San Giorgio Maggiore, and the Giudecca Island and the laguna, dotted with islands out to the Lido and to the Adriatic Sea beyond. One of our favorite activities, which we do at least twice a day, is to make a grand tour with the number 2 (express) vaporetto, or water bus, from San Marco up the Giudecca Canal, around the tip of Venice, and down the Grand Canal. At other times we ride the number 1 up and down the Grand Canal because it makes all the stops. We never tire of admiring the palazzi, the fish market, the Rialto Bridge (of which I've taken a gazillion photos!), the Accademia Bridge and, just before San Marco, the imposing Basilica of Santa Maria della Salute. Sometimes, when we're lucky, we can snag seats on the deck, a favorite spot if we're making the roundtrip, but when we're tired from walking through the city's mazes or if it's raining or if we're just catching the boat to ride a few stops to a restaurant, we sit inside.

When the vaporetto is packed with people, especially in the late afternoon, we enjoy watching various types, old and young, mostly locals wending their way home from work or school or shopping. At night excursions on the Grand Canal can be dark, quiet and peaceful or alive with chatter from party goers and singing gondoliers



READING THE MAP



Our first trip to this fabled city was in the early 1990s when we took our daughter, Nikki, with us. We still echo her first reaction upon seeing the Grand Canal from a bridge near the railroad station: “cool!” With her we visited the fabulous gold and jewel-encrusted Basilica, the Doge’s Palace and the San Marco campanile for a view of the city. For the most part we relished the beauty of that area, but we were appalled by the dismal wretchedness of the old dungeons



SAN MARCO CAMPANILE



SAN MARCO - DODGES PALACE

beyond the Bridge of Sighs and disappointed that the multitudinous canals disappeared from view atop the campanile, from where we could see only tiled rooftops.

On our next visit we discovered a much better view from the bell tower of the church of San Giorgio Maggiore on an island across from San Marco. Spread out below in all directions are the Giudecca Island, Venice in its fish-shape entirety, the laguna with its islands, especially the Lido, and beyond the city the islands of Burano and Torcello. Directly below in the laguna one sees a “flotilla” of vaporetti, swift water taxis ferrying wealthy tourists back and forth between San Marco and the Cipriani Hotel on the Giudecca, flat barges carrying luggage, stacks of water bottles, fresh fruits and vegetables and other food-stuffs to the hotels, restaurants and markets, occasional police and fire boats and often an ambulanza. And always the famous black gondolas, singly or in tandem, proudly commanding the laguna, in which they have the right-of-way, giving tourists romantic rides up the Grand Canal and into its tributaries.

Venice hosts several regattas every year. In May we often watch the Vogalonga, in which various types and sizes of non-motorized boats from several European countries compete in an eighteen-mile course. They start early in the morning at the San Marco basin, race to Burano, then return through the Cannaregio canal and down the Grand Canal, which is closed to motorized traffic from nine o’clock until about three. Long tapestry flags, many featuring the Venetian golden lion, swing in the breeze on poles out over the palazzi balconies. Boats of all sizes stream past, ranging from long, swift shells with six or eight rowers to small two- or three-person canoes and single-person kayaks. When the race is over, most of the brightly decorated watercraft cruise up and down the Grand Canal in a celebratory parade before the cheering onlookers, the rowers saluting by lifting up their long oars. One of our favorites was a huge wooden boat from Denmark, carved to resemble a dragon, head fore and tail aft, the twenty-person crew pulling their oars through the water to a booming rhythm set by a drummer in the prow. Last year we laughed to see a bicycle atop pontoons, its rider pumping hard all the way.

In the early days we visited many churches and art galleries to view paintings and murals by the Bellinis, Gior-

gione, Tiepolo, Tintoretto, Titian, and a host of other artists. Then we could photograph inside the churches but that is no longer allowed. Since then we have revisited the Accademia Gallery and especially the Peggy Guggenheim to view her collection of European and American art of the first half of the 20th century—Max Ernst, Pablo Picasso, Jackson Pollock, Alexander Calder—and special exhibitions. The sculpture garden also features a cemetery where Peggy lies buried next to 13 of her “beloved [canine] babies.”

Although we have occasionally splurged on a meal in an expensive Venetian restaurant (and I once peeked into Harry’s Bar, one of Hemmingway’s favorites), we routinely head for smaller places we have discovered over the years. We frequently order pizza, salad and beer at an outdoor table at Pier Dickens, a pub in the Dorsoduro neighborhood (sestiere) with a view of the busy Campo Margherita. (The best pizza, however, is to be had on the Lido because, as we learned from a local man, wood burning stoves are allowed there but not in the city.) In earlier times we ate a variety of dishes at a small restaurant in the Cannaregio sestiere called Alle Lanterna, where we became friendly with the owner/cook and his staff. It was fun to go there on weekend nights when a couple of long tables of locals provided entertainment with their animated chatter and laughter. We were saddened one year to find the name of the restaurant changed and to learn that our padrone and his family had moved to Naples. Fortunately we soon discovered the La Colonna, also in the Cannaregio, run by a young local man and his helper from Bangladesh. Their delicious dinners end with the best tiramisù we have ever eaten. And, like the people at Alle Lanterna used to do, the staff at La Colonna helps us celebrate our wedding anniversaries with complimentary wine or grappa.





Of course, since we're in Italy, we often enjoy gelati in a variety of flavors in several shops around town, the most famous being Nico's on the Zattere, where we can sit outside and watch the traffic on the Giudecca Canal. Now and then we see an immense Minoan cruise ship being towed down past San Marco toward the Lido and on out to the Adriatic, dwarfing the palazzi along the way.

Two of our other favorite spots to sit and soak up the scenery and local color are the Campo Santa Margherita and the Parco delle Rimembranze, both offering us glimpses into the lives of Venetians: children playing soccer against the walls of a fifteenth-century fish market; teens chatting one another up around an ancient, elaborately carved well; adults returning from work or walking dogs or helping small children ride scooters or tricycles; runners and fisher folk along the quay bordering the laguna. And occasionally there are special sights like young women on stilts passing out pamphlets or a politician expounding from a booth or a parade of workers protesting low wages.

Despite the growing number of mystery novels set in Venice, there is very little crime there, mostly thefts by pickpockets in the most crowded tourist areas. Once when we were sitting along the quay outside the Naval Museum our attention was diverted by a couple of men arguing. In that instant someone plucked our backpack from the seat beside us and disappeared into a side street. When we reported it to a Carabinieri officer, he dutifully recorded the information and then promised to send the bag to Florida when they recovered it. By that time of course it was undoubtedly already on its way to a flea market in Rome or Milan. On one trip, as we were traveling from Switzerland by train, we were crossing the laguna from Mestre to Venice, looking out the windows for glimpses of the islands and the city in the distance, when a man sat on the arm rest of the seat next to me, where I had laid my purse. When I reached for it to get it out of his way, I saw his hand under his jacket which was draped over my purse already unzipping it and reaching in. I grabbed it

away and he just calmly walked away as if nothing had happened. Despite these small crimes we feel safe when we walk, even at night when, except for the area around the Grand Canal and on the broad Strada Nova street (a paved-over canal), almost no one is out and about. Most people are at dinner or in the few bars and clubs. Night is also a special time for riding the vaporetti on the Grand Canal, slipping through the darkness, noting the lighted windows and wondering what it would be like to live there.



Not every year but very often we take one of the bigger boats to the islands of Murano, where we've seen glass-blowing exhibitions and have shopped for crystal and jewelry; Burano, where we admire the various colored houses (painted, according to legend, so returning sailors could identify their own among the others); and Torcello, where Ernest Hemingway wrote parts of *Over the River and through the Trees*. There we've visited the Cathedral of Santa Maria Assunta (dating back to 639) to view the earliest remaining mosaics in the region. At one end is a huge representation of the Virgin Mary against a stunning gold background; at the other end a depiction of the harrowing of hell, complete with naked sinners writhing in anguish and snakes entangled in skulls.

Both Hans and I have written about our beloved Venice. My book is a mystery now in the final editing stage, while his novel, *Through a Venetian Looking Glass*, was published this year by Fithian Press. Reviewers call it "a most enjoyable read," "an intriguing palimpsest," "an original and nuanced evocation of Venice." One of his characters beautifully sums up our reason for visiting Venice so often: "That spectacular city, resplendent, iridescent 'Daughter of Byzantium,' overpowered us with her seductiveness on our first visit . . . Each time with her has been an infinitely generous and invigorating gift of discovery and rediscovery, of seeing new things and seeing things in new ways. Venice is supremely special . . ."

