

Viva Venice!



by Mary Jo

Venice, Venezia, La Serenissima, the Queen of the Adriatic! There's a reason people rhapsodize about the city: Venice is as magical as it is improbable. We got our first sight of La Serenissima when roaring across the lagoon in a water taxi. Venice floated ahead of us in the morning mist like Brigadoon. *Way cool!*

Venice is a city of church bells and stone tunnels, hidden courtyards and alleys that end abruptly at water's edge. It hints at deep, ancient secrets. It's also a modern city that's a major cruise port, with ships large and small traveling through the lagoon to the open Adriatic.



The city was settled around the fifth century when Romanized locals fled to islands in the lagoon to escape invading Germanic tribes. Originally 117 islands, Venice was gradually built on millions of pine wood pilings driven deep into the clay and mud bottom of the lagoon. Under water without oxygen, the pilings petrified and were covered with planking and stone that provide the foundation for buildings.

Though now the city has only about 60,000 residents, its fame and romantic beauty



draw tourists from around the world. In its heyday, the Republic of Venice was one of the great Mediterranean trading powers with an empire that stretched from the Alps to the Levant. In the 13th Century, Venice was the wealthiest city in Europe.

Crusades were launched from Venice, and a couple of Venetians stole the body of St. Mark from Egypt because they wanted a high-powered patron saint for the city. <g> Now the winged lion symbol of St. Mark is everywhere in Venice.

We'd flown into the Marco Polo airport, and the water taxi was the most convenient (and expensive) way to get ourselves and our luggage to the flat we'd rented for the three days before our cruise began. We were dropped off at a coffee shop near the flat. (The flat has a courtyard that opened directly onto a minor canal which was, alas, too narrow for water taxis.)



Then we had to hump our bags along stone walkways and up and over a stepped bridge. I love the bridges, and the way people trot briskly up and over them. (The only place in the city where automotive type vehicles are found is at the end of the causeway from the mainland which allows trains and a few other vehicles to come over.)

There were a lot of tourists pulling their wheeled suitcases and looking somewhat disoriented. Plus, lots of dogs, mostly small and extremely well behaved. The Mayhem Consultant was a little startled when dogs trotted into the coffee shop with their owners, but as I

told him, this was Europe. They do things differently here. <G> Including eating breakfast—



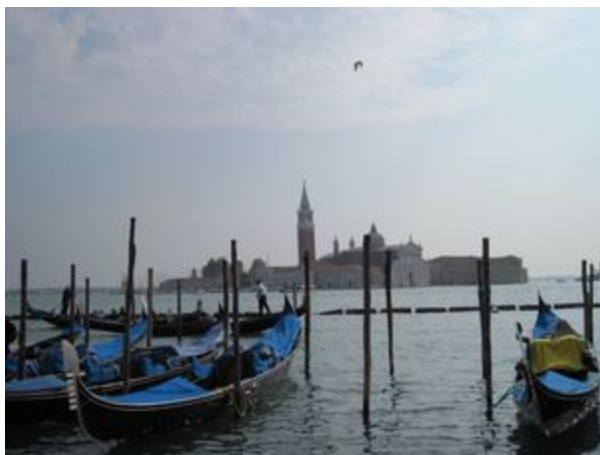
always some form of coffee and pastry—while standing at the counter.

Italian women wear scarves tied in complicated ways reminiscent of Regency dandies. And—this is Italy! Of course the food is good! <G>



It's fascinating to see how thoroughly adapted the people and the city are to their watery matrix. Instead of buses or subways, Venice had vaporettos (vaporetti) which scoot rapidly around the city and along the major canals.

On the advice of a resident, we rode the #1 vaporetto, which travels up and down the Grand Canal so you can see all the amazing (and crumbling) palazzos built in the days when Venice was a major maritime power. The #2 line took us to a more of the industrial side of the city. The vaporettos are a great way to travel, and we never had to wait longer than ten minutes for one.



Boats fill all the transportation niches. There were trash boats, boats that looked like pick up trucks, and even hearse boats carrying handsome coffins adorned with flowers as they made their way to San Michele, the cemetery island.

The gondolas are mostly for tourists and very expensive, but a very similar boat called a traghetto carries people across the Grand Canal at several points. Traditionally, passengers stand. If you saw them sitting, you knew they were tourists. <G>

Even “acqua alta,” the high waters that cause regular flooding of parts of the city such as St. Mark’s Square are treated with equanimity. People just put on their high



Wellington style boots and out come the duck boards—in this case, solid tables that are stacked out of the way until needed. Here’s a [blog](#) about one of the highest tides in several decades.

I loved Venice and want to go back, but I’m no expert on the city. For a better understanding, I asked Jaclyn Reding, a writer friend who is the owner of the flat where we stayed, [Ca' Venexiana](#), what she loves about the city. Jaclyn was actually in Venice on one of her regular visits to make sure that everything is kept in first class shape. Her reply:



"I love...

The church bells ringing through my window (as they are right now),

The improbability of the city being built as it is on water, and surviving for as long as it has.

There are no cars, no noise, no traffic, no hustle and bustle.

It is slower, quieter, peaceful...so restorative for me.

It is its own little world. You can walk without a map, you can wander at will without having to worry about getting hopelessly lost. No matter where you wander, you will always...always still be in Venice.

I love that progress has not marked Venice. The buildings have changed very little for centuries. You can imagine Casanova, or Henry James, or even Marco Polo as they were, each of them, when they lived here.

I love that the gondola is still made by hand, even if it takes almost a year to make just one, and not mass produced in some Fiat gondola factory.

I love that the traditions carry on...in the regattas, the festivals, the way the city still marries itself to the sea every year in a ceremony that has gone on for centuries.

I love that the fish market is set up each day near Rialto, as it has been for more than 500 years. That it hasn't been replaced by a dollar store, or a fast food place.

Last night, I went in to the little bakery around the corner. The owner was there, who had made the tortas and breads himself, and I love that he took the time to explain to the woman in front of me every ingredient he used in his products, and that they had a friendly conversation with her about foods and families.

I love that when I bought my own torta, the owner's daughter wrapped it in decorated paper, and tied it with a pink ribbon and even curled the end of the ribbon for me. Who does that anymore?

I love that I can sit at my window, watching the gondolas and other boats glide by, and write and that if whoever is passing by my window somehow catches my



eye, he will inevitably wave and wish me "buon giorno."

Just reading her comments makes me want to go back right now!

If you have dreams or experiences of Venice, please share.

Ciao for now!

Mary Jo

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