

An introduction guide to Venice

by Antonio Marchesini

The main attractions are best viewed on board of a vaporetto (line n.1 stops at all quays), as the Grand Canal cuts the city in half. It starts its journey at Piazzale Roma and ends at Venezia Lido. This is part of the public transport network and a ticket is required. The trip takes approximately 40 minutes. Once you familiarise yourself with the city, you can explore it on foot, and remember, there are only three bridges crossing the Canal, Degli Scalzi, Rialto and Accademia.

From Piazzale Roma the first stop is at the railway station of Santa Lucia, the last link to the mainland. Next to the station you will find Santa Maria di Nazareth, where inside is the resting-place of Ludovico Manin, the last doge.

On the opposite side is the San Simeone Piccolo church, built in 1738, used for concerts. This church has a Sunday mass in Latin (11am). Sail under the Ponte (bridge) degli Scalzi and admire Palazzo Gritti, residence of one of the smartest doges, Andrea Gritti. At the other end, where the Canal splits in two, is the San Geremia Church (covered by scaffolding!), host of Saint Lucia bones. Still on the left side, by the quay bearing the same name, is San Marcuola, a church built in 1728-36 apart from its façade never completed.

Just opposite is the Fondaco (warehouse) dei Turchi, architecturally savaged last century and now housing the Museum of Natural History. Next to San Marcuola quay is Palazzo Vendramin-Calergi, the winter site for the Casino.

The next quay is San Stae; behind is a sumptuous building, normally hired by wealthy families for parties. Ca' d'Oro is the most famous gilt-covered gothic palace; it hosts a collection of paintings and sculptures given to the State by the baron Giorgio Franchetti. Less pompous is La Pescheria, a fish market for the last 600 years.

The vaporetto now passes underneath the Rialto Bridge, built in the twelfth century and modernised many times to its present state. The third and last bridge was built in 1854 and until then Rialto was the only Grand Canal's foot cross point. The bridge hosts a variety of shops and stalls for tourists and locals alike. Next to the Rialto quay is Palazzo dei Camerlenghi, originally the city exchequer and debtor's prison.

Opposite is Il Fondaco dei Tedeschi, originally a warehouse and hostel for German, Hungarian and Austrian traders. It is now the main regional Post Office. On the same bank there are a series of restaurants where no Venetian will ever dare to go... the food is substandard, the prices are sky-high (you pay for the view and anything else they can think of) and the waiters are indifferent, unless you are walking through!! We heartily wish to warn tourists about these traps as they discredit the city excellent gastronomy.

For a list of respectable establishments, check out our online food guide (www.stb.dircon.co.uk/food.htm).

The next stop is San Silvestro, which gives access to San Polo, the smallest of the six Venice sestiere (boroughs), but the one with the largest square apart from St. Mark's. Campo San Polo has been the centre of traditional events since the 15th century. Dancing and fighting between dogs and bulls were in vogue. The main event was the assassination of Lorenzo de' Medici in 1548, on orders by the Duke of Florence. Nowadays this square is a paradise for children wishing to bike, play football or skateboarding but, such activities, as a plaque on the church reminds, were prohibited in the 17th century. Such digressions were punished with jail sentences and even exile.

Between the Rialto and San Silvestro quays there are various palaces of little importance, with the exception of Ca' Farsetti and Palazzo Loredan (the Town Hall), where only Venetians and VIPs can get married. Further down, where the Canal turns swiftly, is Palazzo Balbi (now the headquarters of Regional Administration); from here Napoleon watched a regatta in his honour in 1807. Next to it is Ca' Foscari, built in 1437 for the doge Francesco Foscari. It is now part of the Venetian university.

On the other end is Palazzo Moro-Lin (also known as the 'thirteen windows' building). Next to it is Palazzo Grassi, built in 1749 and bought by Fiat (the Italian car manufacturer) in 1984 and ever since used as an art exhibition space.

Opposite is Ca' Rezzonico, the museum designed to reflect the décor and style of 18th century Venice. Apart from a few Tiepolo frescoes, the whole collection is third rate and tasteless.

Eventually the vaporetto reaches the Gallerie dell'Accademia, an ex-church monastery and school, now hosting the world largest collection of Venetian paintings. The imposing sight of the Accademia Bridge, the third and last one to connect the two sides of the city, is unrivalled on this part of the Grand Canal. The bridge was built in the 19th century by the Austrians and replaced (in wood) in 1932 on popular demand.

The vaporetto then reaches Palazzo Venier, site of the Peggy Guggenheim modern art collection.

Opposite is Casina delle Rose, one of the smallest houses on the Canal, famous for hosting the Italian poet Gabriele D'Annunzio during World War One. Just past the Santa Maria del Giglio quay is Palazzo Gritti, better known as the luxurious five-star Hotel Gritti. In front is Palazzo Salviati, site of the Salviati glass makers. The building is easily recognisable by its glass mosaic on the front.

Where the Canal ends and the San Marco basin begins, is the imposing site of the Santa Maria della Salute, the monumental church built to celebrate the end of the plague in 1630. It took 52 years to complete it and is supported by over one million woodpiles.

Each year, on November 21st, a pontoon of boats is drawn across the Canal to allow the faithful to cross over. On the very corner is La Dogana del Mar, the old custom house, identified by its bronze globe. This is the best spot to view the most memorable site of Venice, with the Giudecca island on the right (mainly a residential area with a few places like the Hotel Cipriani and Harry's Dolce) and, on the left, Saint Mark's Square with the Royal Gardens (created by Napoleon), the Doge's Palace, the Campanile, the Clock Tower, the Basilica and the Zecca, the old mint.

From here on, all the buildings are on the left bank (Riva degli Schiavoni); on the right stands San Giorgio Maggiore Island, which, apart from the imposing church, has become a conference centre for international conferences and exhibitions.

Past the Doge's Palace, is the Bridge of Sighs; reputedly it took its name by the sighs of condemned prisoners glancing at Venice for their last time while led to the dungeons. Tourists can walk the prisoners walk through the 'Itinerari Segreti', the palace's excellent guided tour. Number restrictions apply, so tours must be booked two days in advance on 041/522 4951. Each one lasts 90 minutes but the commentary is in Italian only.

The vaporetto continues its ride alongside the embankment, stopping at San Zaccaria, by the pink-coloured Hotel Danieli (one of the best known in Europe), Arsenale (for centuries the world's largest shipyard) and Sant'Elena (the largest public garden in Venice), before departing for the Lido, the Venetian beach resort. Not all the museums, churches, galleries and shops can be seen from the vaporetto and some walking is necessary.

Not to be missed are various churches (Santa Maria Gloriosa dei Frari, San Tom , very sizeable church holding paintings and statues from Tiziano, Bellini and Donatello), San Mois  (just before Saint Mark's Square), Santi Giovanni e Paolo (also known as San Zanipolo, located at Fondamenta Nuova), possibly the largest gothic church of the city. Inside are the resting places of various doges (governors). One more church worth a visit is Il Redentore, on the Giudecca island. Particularly recommended if you are in Venice on the third weekend of July, during the Redentore celebrations.

Art lovers should pause and admire the newly rebuilt Fenice theatre and admire the treasures at the Gallerie dell'Accademia. Founded in 1750 as the city's art school, it is now the largest collection of art from churches and other religious houses. Only 180 visitors are allowed at any time, so please try to avoid Sundays.

Those who love glass masterpieces should head for Palazzo Trevisan-Cappello. From Ponte della Paglia (the one opposite the Bridge of Sighs, turn left into Calle degli Albanesi. At Campo Ss Filippo e Giacomo, turn left, cross the small bridge and walk right to the next bridge.

And finally, for those curious about Jews and racial discrimination, the ghetto is the place to go. Located next to the Cá d'Oro quay, it was created in 1516 to keep the Jews under control. The small island was sealed by large canals and Christian guards. Before 1516, Jews were allowed to trade but not to reside in Venice. Take a look at the Hebraic Museum, hosting a collection of silverware and religious items. Very interesting are the guided tours of the local synagogues.