

GOING PLACES

JOHN COONEY



O SOLE MIO!

Getting lost in a big city is not normally a good idea. But Venice is one place where it doesn't hurt to forget your map and go AWOL for a while. In fact, one of the nicest things you can do

in this most romantic old town is go wandering, meandering, sauntering and strolling – down cobblestoned streets, over tiny stone bridges, past glittering shop-windows, across tranquil waterways, wherever the urge takes you and for as long as it feels good. Because Venice, you see, is unique in all the world ...



This ancient city, rising from the lagoon like a mirage, was built on stilts 1600 years ago. In its heyday it was a regional super-power, boasting a formidable navy (capable of turning out a warship a day), strong-arming its stropy neighbours, and playing host to VIPs. Marco Polo dreamed dreams here, Wagner composed here, Byron wrote here, Galileo tested his telescope here, Shakespeare penned 'Merchant of Venice' here, and Elvis Presley crooned "*It's now or never!*" from here. (Or maybe he didn't, but who cares?)

These days, the 120-plus islands that make up the main chunk of Venice are linked not by roads but by 400 criss-crossing canals. And the city is drowning, apparently, sinking slowly beneath the tides – thanks, I reckon, to the combined weight of tourists plus pigeons that, at any one time, swarm its length and breadth.



But, ah, what the heck? Another tourist or two wasn't gonna make any difference ...

Abandoning our coach on the mainland, we loaded bodies and bags into a *vaporetto* (water-taxi) and sped off down some alarmingly-narrow canals

to the back door of our lodgings: the Hotel Saturnia, a beautifully-restored 14th-century merchant's mansion, with ornately decorated rooms, period furnishings, and pinch-me-please views out the window by our four-poster bed!

We woke next morning to the sound of loud gongs echoing from the massive 15th-century bell-tower in the heart of Venice, and gondoliers shouting to



one another from the decks of their sleek black vessels. Then, following a tasty Italian breakfast, we found our way to the enormous St Mark's Square – with its magnificent pink-and-lacy Doges' Palace (the Palazzo Ducale, featuring gold-plated ceilings and vast oil paintings) ... its elaborate cathedral (the Basilica di San Marco, first built in 830 AD to house the body of St Mark) ... and its hungry pigeons.

We then engaged in some arm-in-arm wandering, meandering, sauntering and strolling ... pretending to know where we were going (like all the other tourists) ... pretending to shop (I nearly bought my wife an expensive glass ornament, two pure pink doves) ... and pretending we were on our honeymoon (hanging over the edge



of a cute little bridge called the 'Bridge of Sighs' while other couples drifted beneath us, their gondoliers leaning on long oars and singing sweet barcaroles. Sigh ...)

Finally, across another bridge (the legendary Rialto), we sat down at a table in Venice's oldest restaurant and pigged-out on pizza.

Day 2 saw us whistling up another *vaporetto* and heading off along the Guidecca Canal (once described as "the world's finest street with the world's finest houses") ... past

noble mansions built in the 13th-to-18th centuries, soaring churches thrusting spires at the sky, and gondolas bobbing at their moorings.

Our destination? Two of Venice's outer islands ...

The first, Murano, has been the Venetian glass-blowing centre since 1291, and tradesmen still practice their jealously-guarded craft today. We poked our noses inside one of the famous factories, saw a glass-blower doing his thing, and window-shopped in a showroom filled with exquisite crystal.

Then, on the equally famous island of Burano, we watched local women busy at their intricate lace-making (just a small piece of lace can take weeks to complete), explored streets lined with multi-coloured houses, and sampled yummy home-baked cookies.

It was a warm-and-balmy afternoon as we motored back



to the main island. The water was calm-as-a-millpond. And Venice was working its magic on us.

That night, “as the big red Italian sun lowered itself gently towards the horizon”, we ramped up the romance and had ourselves a Gondola Serenade: with us sitting like royalty in the proud, polished rowboat ... drifting through the picturesque canals, the darkened waters lapping against the sides ... our gondolier working his long pole, and an Italian tenor with a wheezy piano-accordion serenading us in the traditional fashion.

“O sole mio ...”

We departed Venice the following day aboard a wouldn't-it-be-luvely cruise-ship, gliding slowly down the bustling



Grand Canal. Ahead of us were other exotic destinations – Croatia, the Greek Isles, Turkey and beyond. But the midday sun was caressing that world-famous waterfront. And as we stood at the deck-rail waving “Arrivederci!” (goodbye) to the tourists who were waving to us from St Mark’s Square, the now-familiar archways and bridges, domes and palaces, fizz-boats and water-buses and graceful gondolas seemed to beckon us back.

Ahh, yes – that’s Venice. It’s hard to tear yourself away!

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