



Walking on water

Wander the back streets of Venice and expect the unexpected – colossal churches, stupendous palaces, and maybe the odd ghost or two

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UNMASKED ... Venice's Grand Canal, *opposite*; lamps in Piazza San Marco; an industrious Venetian in Cannaregio; an aged door; view from Palazzo Abadessa, and the writer's charming suite. **Photographs //** Kylie Lang

Majestic, mysterious and incredibly seductive, Venice will stir your every emotion. A labyrinth of narrow, soupy waterways with the Grand Canal at its heart, this most romantic of cities captures the essence of Italy – sumptuous art, ornate churches, stirring opera, fine food, fabulous fashion and time-worn facades in pretty pastel hues.

Tourists are thick on the ground, and in the gondolas, but venture far from the maddening crowd and you'll find the unspoiled Venice – quiet streets where old men lean on window sills and paint model ships, where schoolchildren skip home for lunch, fruiterers sell fat tomatoes from open-air stalls, and stooped grandmothers pray in otherwise deserted churches decorated by Titian.

Here, a scoop of cherry gelato is half what you'll pay near the Rialto Bridge or in Piazza San Marco, but Venice's most obvious drawcards should not be dismissed.

Meet on the Rialto, an architectural triumph which has defied predictions of collapse since its completion in stone in 1591, and take a night tour to see how hauntingly beautiful Venice can be.

Brisbane company Passion for Italy hooked us up with The Original Venice Ghost Walking Tour, and we explored the crooked streets trod by Marco Polo, who we were told had a Chinese wife who, outcast by narrow-minded 13th-century Venetians, plunged to her death in the canal outside their home. We didn't see her ghost but in a nearby waterway my eight year old swears he spotted the ghost of a man holding his daughter's severed head.

Walking past the home of Elena Lucrezia Cornaro Piscopia, the first woman in the world to be awarded a doctorate degree, in 1678, we came across Scala Contarini del Bovolo, a spiral staircase which rises improbably from the smallest of courtyards. Combining Renaissance, Gothic and Byzantine influences, it was built in 1499 by a nobleman who wanted to ride his horse up to his apartment. And, no doubt, enjoy the view. From the top you can see the campanile and domes of Basilica San Marco.

The basilica, nicknamed the church of gold in the 11th century as much for its gilded Byzantine mosaics as for its symbolism of Venetian power, demands hours of your time and, like so many of Italy's iconic churches, will leave you emotionally depleted.

A bellini (peach juice and sparkling wine) at the famed Harry's Bar, patronised over the years by the likes of Proust, Byron and Hemingway, should pep you up. It'd want to, at 15 euro (\$29) a pop. Of course, there is nothing wrong with lingering in the piazza for free and being revived by a little Puccini. Moved to tears by a violinist's rendition of *Nessun Dorma*, I communed with an elderly Italian who threw open his arms to me in a mock operatic performance.

No matter in which of the six districts of Venice you find yourself, there is always something to take your breath away.

In Cannaregio, it was Chiesa dei Gesuiti. Behind its formidable Baroque facade, this 18th-century Jesuit church boasts walls and twisted pillars of white marble wondrously inlaid with dark green marble, gilded stucco work, a lapis lazuli-encrusted tabernacle, and substantial works by Tintoretto, Titian and Balestra.

Another gem is Palazzo Abadessa, a 16th-century palace with original frescoes, exquisite antiques and wood-paneled ceilings with Murano chandeliers. Close to the ferry stop Ca' d'Oro, it has a sweeping marble staircase believed to be the only one of its type in Venice and its own docking station on the canal.

Palazzo Abadessa is one of many luxurious lodgings represented by Passion for Italy, and we spent two nights there, ensconced within its opulent damask-lined walls. It has a splendid garden and a stately entrance hall with complimentary liqueurs, perfect for an aperitivo.

The colourful Jewish Ghetto, with its array of restaurants and bars, is an easy stroll as is the Rialto Bridge, where nearby at Al Pesador we had tapas and bellinis as the full moon rose over the canal. We also ate well at Osteria Antico Dolo and heard that Casin Dei Nobili, in the Dorsoduro district, was worth a try.

The Dorsoduro is home to the Accademia (main art gallery), the Peggy Guggenheim Collection (modern art), and Santa Maria della Salute, a sombre church beside which one of Venice's newest and swishest hotels, Ca Maria Adele, is located.

The shopping can be frenetic but to deride Venice as "one big shopping mall", as a colleague did recently, is to drastically undersell this stylish city. Venice will test your patience and wear your soles thin, but take the time to explore and be open to its charms and it will reward you many times over.

THE WRITER WAS ASSISTED IN HER TRAVELS BY PASSION FOR ITALY, PH: 3262 1345. WWW.PASSIONFORITALY.COM.AU

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