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Venice for Valentines

by Mary Bergin

How do I love thee, Venice? Let me count the ways. Your labyrinth of narrow canals and winding walkways enthrall and confound. Your weathered complexion bespeaks endurance and elegance.

Floodwaters-aqua alta-occasionally test your resilience but they never drown your spirit for adventure and romance. It's fine to sip either a cup of cappuccino or glass of red wine at 10 a.m., or to steal a kiss while rounding a bend, lingering in a piazza, or sauntering along an Adriatic Sea lagoon.

Italy's quirky and classy waterfront city boasts a unique sense of heritage because at its heart are more than 100 islands hooked together by footbridges.

So forget vehicular transportation when exploring Venice. It's not an option. Stroll on foot or travel by water taxi or waterbus (a smooth and reliable way to get just about anywhere, even the airport).

Toting a tour map is crucial because streets weave, morph into alleys, end abruptly and change names every few blocks. This is the city's charm.

Venice is not designed to be navigated in an efficient manner, so tuck that map into a pocket and simply meander. Rewards are unexpected, discoveries abundant. Notice artisans at work, lovely churches, cats perched in windowsills, neighborhood trattoria. Exactly where you are doesn't matter, but street signs steer visitors toward major attractions.

Order pizza with paper-thin crust and roll up a slice-jellyroll style, from point to crust rim-before taking the first bite. That's acting like a native.

Take home a sparkly Venetian mask. Refuel with a scoop of freshly mixed gelato. Hop a waterbus to the quaint, small islands of Murano and Burano, to seek the world's finest (and most expensive) works of glass and lace, respectively, sold at the dozens of boutiques that line more canals. If prices seem extremely low, retailers say it's because the products are not authentic, so shop carefully.

Prudent travelers spend about \$20 for a 24- or 36-hour waterbus pass, which allows unlimited rides throughout Venice and to the islands. This is an excellent way to get acquainted with the Grand Canal, the thickest waterway to snake through Venice. The city's best-known bridge is the stone Rialto, straddling the Grand Canal since 1591, and a multitude of shops surround this iconic structure.

Also near the Rialto sits the 15th century, 42-room Hotel Ca' Sagredo, revered as a museum as well as fine lodging. This national monument houses rare artwork, and diners at the hotel's L'Alcova savor Mediterranean specialties by candlelight. Most rooms overlook Grand Canal.

Consider a sultry gondola ride as sunset nears. Valentines can cuddle while one of Venice's 450 gondoliers maneuvers a sleek, black, flat-bottomed boat along the narrowest of waterways. Expect to pay \$80 for a 40-minute ride, but bartering is commonplace and price quotes may begin at twice this amount. Playfully ask if the fee includes a love song.

The backwater routes that gondolas take will reveal how average people live in Venice, how reliant they are on boats to deliver everything from groceries to furniture-and how much their lifestyle is at the mercy of tidal changes.

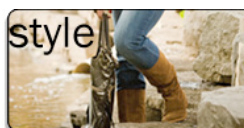
Although sunset is a popular sailing time, gondola activity ends at dark. The vessels operate from many locations, but a popular starting point is at the end of San Marco Square, which is flanked by an enormous basilica, palace and the waterfront. Doves of pigeons and tourists flock to San Marco Square for wandering and nibbling. Meal prices tend to drop noticeably when veering away from the water. Order just-caught seafood, from king prawns to baby cuttlefish.

Prepare for royal treatment at the nearby Boscolo Hotel Dei Dogi, luxurious lodging in a 17th century palace and the former French embassy. Some of the hotel's 76 rooms, rich with Venetian furnishings, overlook the waterfront and gardens.

Wherever you land, for the night or for a meal, expect to be smitten by the sense of mystery and intimacy that defines this endearing city.

Know Before You Go

Venice is 180 miles east of Milan, and is accessible by plane or train.



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