

ITALIA!

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DISCOVER ITALIA!

Venice Lagoon

If you're planning a holiday in Venice, consider staying on the water rather than finding a hotel on dry land. As **Jane Gifford** discovers, it offers the opportunity to see much of this magical city.

When it came to planning my first trip to Venice, I decided that the best way to make the most of my stay would be to view it from a perspective I anticipated would enable me to see as much as of the city as possible: from the very waters that make the place unique. Waterfront accommodation is particularly expensive in a city that's not overburdened with low-budget hotels anyway, so I determined that the views and intimate proximity afforded by a 'hotel boat' would more than return on equivalent expenditure in a regular hotel.

After doing some research, I opted to book a cruise aboard the MS Michelangelo, a purpose-built boat that accommodates up to 148 passengers and blends unobtrusively with the myriad other vessels plying the city's waterways. As well as every facility you'd expect of a well-equipped hotel, you get a priceless added bonus when you stay on a floating hotel: a continually changing cityscape that you'll never get from a stationary window.

From what I had read in various tour guides, I had expected Venice to be shrouded in fog given the time of year I was visiting, but as my plane crossed the Dolomites the sky was cloudless. Range upon range of snow-capped mountains bathed in afternoon sun fell away abruptly to the flat coastal plain. As the Lagoon and Venice came into view, I was struck by how the small the city is – and by just how much extraordinary architecture is packed into what is only a few tiny islands.

Photography © Jane Gifford



DISCOVER ITALIA!



Towards sunset I sat on one of the stone benches that line the Zattere, enjoying the company of Venetians taking the evening air with their dogs.



► The airport bus took me from the mainland to Venice across the ironically named Ponte della Libertà. Built by the Austrians in the 19th century, it put paid to the Venetian dream of returning to a state of independence. Venice has been in economic decline for several centuries now, but evidence of past trade and conquests – Crete and Cyprus, Turkey and Dalmatia, to name but a few – are visible everywhere in architecture studded with confiscated treasure. More recent decline is visible in the crumbling masonry; the place is steeped in the melancholy charm of elegant decay.

FIRST BERTH

The first night was spent moored next to the Zattere, a wide promenade located alongside the Canal della Giudecca (one of the few places in the city where you can walk for any distance at the water's edge). It runs the length of the Dorsoduro district from the harbour right around Punta della Dogana, where the roof of the customs house sports twin Atlases struggling under a large bronze globe. Balanced

on top is Fortune, who has been serving as a weathervane for the past 400 years. The walk ends with the Basilica Santa Maria della Salute at the mouth of the Grand Canal. This white marble fantasy, commissioned in 1630 in thanks to the Madonna for sparing two thirds of the population of Venice from the plague, is my favourite of the Venetian churches, along with Santa Maria dei Miracoli, another architectural dream of multi-coloured marble tucked away in Cannaregio. Towards sunset I sat on one of the stone benches that line the Zattere, enjoying the company of Venetians taking the evening air with their dogs, and watching the fading light on the dome of Palladio's vast 16th-century red-brick church Il Redentore across the water on the Giudecca.

The following morning we cruised between the customs point and the Island of San Giorgio Maggiore (where another of Palladio's massive churches dominates the water), then out into the San Marco Basin. After a morning's gentle sailing towards Burano – with its trademark leaning



bell tower – and Torcello, we returned to Venice and the Riva dei Sette Martire. When not sailing to the islands or Chioggia, this was our base for the rest of the trip. It's a very convenient spot, offering access along the water's edge to Saint Mark's Square in just 15 minutes. The district of Castello is also nearby, as well as two parks that offer welcome relief from the busy, narrow streets. The view from the boat takes in San Giorgio and the Salute, as well as the entrance to the Grand Canal and the Lido. It's a fantastic skyline, and the view changes with mood of the sea and the weather.

Where the Michelangelo could not take me, a water-bus (*vaporetto*) would. For only €12 I could buy a day ticket and blend in with the busy flow of passengers while I watched palace after palace go by. Bridges, churches, gondolas, yet more palaces and churches, each built to out-do the other in architectural opulence. Among the bustle of city life and as part of the busy traffic on the water, I found taking the bus a pleasure in Venice and a great way to get to know the place.

It's just as good on foot – and walking brings its own rewards as far as sights and experiences are concerned. There are no cars, of course, but miles of narrow alleys and canals threading between ancient buildings of all descriptions. Modern regulations stipulate that new buildings should be no more than three storeys high for fear that the foundations simply won't support anything taller. But

DON'T MISS

CASINÒ DI VENEZIA
This is the world's oldest casino, founded in 1638 and still adhering to high-class, old-world traditions that set this place apart. Palazzo Vendramin-Calergi, Cannaregio.



WHERE TO EAT

DA ROMANO

Via Baldassare Galuppi 221, Burano
☎ 041 730 030

This is reputed to be one of the best fish restaurants in Venice, and is a popular meeting place for artists. Works of art line the walls inside, and its setting makes it the perfect venue for an evening meal.
Open 12–2.30pm, 6.30–9pm

TRATTORIA DAI TOSI

Secco Marina 738, Castello
☎ 041 523 7102

Situated between Via Garibaldi and the Biennale, this very reasonable and busy trattoria is close to the boat and serves excellent pizza.
Open 9.30am–11.30pm. Closed Wednesday.

HOSTERIA AL VECIO BRAGOSSO

Strada Nuova 4386, Cannaregio
☎ 041 523 7277

Small, intimate and traditional, this is a good place for lunch on a busy shopping street. It's slightly pricey, but the food – particularly the fish dishes – is superb.
Closed Monday.

CAFFÈ DEL DOGE

San Polo, Venice
☎ 041 522 7787

An excellent café set in a featureless back alley just off the Grand Canal and close to the Rialto Bridge. The young, friendly staff are helpful and engaging, making it a popular spot for locals, while the coffee is simply wonderful.

CHAT QUI RIT

Calle Tron, San Marco 1131, Venice
☎ 041 522 9086

A self-service-style restaurant offering great food and atmosphere for considerably less than you'll pay elsewhere. Highly recommended.





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► among the various structures there's so much to take in: churches in quiet squares and bridges with unexpected views towards distant snow-capped mountains; the market bobbing on barges at the end of Via Garibaldi in Castello; back-street cafés and bars, where everything is much less expensive and the intimate atmosphere far more enjoyable than that in larger places dotting the tourist trail. What's also striking is the air of normality and the sense that everyday life is ever-present: everyone had done their laundry, and the streets and canals were festooned with washing strung from window to window.

LIVING COLOUR

My cruise included optional guided tours of various art galleries and museums, but I confess to avoiding most of them in favour of exploring alone. Photography and group tours never go well together and there was far too much to see. The half-day cruises to Burano, Torcello and Chioggia, though, offer a detailed picture of life on the Lagoon. All three have canals, but they are very different from Venice. Burano was

more like Holland than Italy. Its small two-story houses are very plain, but each is painted a different, bold colour – indeed, every family has a unique colour, apparently so that they can easily identify their homes when returning from sea in dense fog. The reflections of those primary colours on the quiet canals are particularly special. The lace industry which made Burano a mecca for the fashionable in centuries gone by is little more than a museum piece today, its income replaced to a large extent by tourism, which is clearly thriving given the ever-increasing number of visitors.

Torcello, once the most populated island in the Lagoon, is now almost abandoned. Only a few families are left. A small group of us arrived as the sun was setting, but nobody else was about. The Cathedral of Santa Maria Assunta glowed in the last light, and birds called from the marshes. With few distractions, we were left to enjoy it at our leisure. There has been a cathedral here since the 7th century, and it's the oldest on the Lagoon. Isolated and massive, the unassuming exterior highlights the beauty ►





DISCOVER ITALIA!

WHERE TO GO

ST MARK'S BASILICA

If you can, try to attend a service. You won't be able to browse, of course, but the atmosphere is magical. It's also worth paying the few euros to go up the narrow stairs to the museum. You can look down inside the building from the balcony and go outside by the replica horses for a great view over the square.

THE BELL TOWER IL CAMPANILE

A tower of some description has stood on this site in Venice since the 8th century, when it was a watch tower for the dock which then occupied what is now the Piazzetta dei Leoncini. It was repeatedly rebuilt over the following centuries, reaching its present form in 1514. What you see today, however, is a reconstruction – the original collapsed in 1902. The reconstructed campanile was opened on April 25 (St Mark's Day), 1912.

SANTA MARIA DEI MIRACOLI

Built between 1481 and 1489 by Renaissance sculptor and architect Pietro Lombardo, this is one of the best examples of its kind in Venice. Inside you can see statues by Tullio Lombardo, Alessandro Vittoria and Nicolò di Pietro, while the vault is divided in fifty coffers decorated with prophets' faces.

WATER-BUS AND GONDOLA

You can see a great deal of Venice simply by taking the number 1 *vaporetto* and doing a complete circuit of the city (do this by night as well as day; Venice is truly beautiful after dark). A gondola ride is a much more personal way of seeing the sights, but it can cost as much as €100 for less than an hour, though you do get the benefit of considerable local knowledge.

TRAGHETTO DI SAN TOMÀ

If you don't want to pay the somewhat exorbitant fees for a gondola ride but still want to experience one, use the *traghetto*. You can cross the Grand Canal here for only a small fee (50 cents), standing up with business people and shoppers.

WALK THE ZATTERE

This is a rare, wide walkway popular with Venetians, and best enjoyed either in the early evening or morning.

RIALTO PESCARIA

Rebuilt in neo-Gothic style in 1907, Venetians have been selling fish here since 1300. If you get there before breakfast, you can witness for yourself the boats bringing in the day's catch. The bustling atmosphere and crowds of shoppers make it a great place to mingle and while away some time.

MS MICHELANGELO

Accommodating 148 passengers, the MS Michelangelo is modern and purpose-built for the shallow waters of the Venetian Lagoon. The boat is small enough to feel intimate, with room to chill out undisturbed. Sailing off-season between the end of November and the beginning of April, this five-day mini cruise allows you to take advantage of bargain rates and avoid the high season heat, mosquitoes and the usual tourist crowds. In summer the cruise is extended to take in the River Po.

The trip is full-board and the French cuisine (it's run by a French company) is excellent. Tell them if you decide to skip a meal to sample something Italian – they won't be offended. From the sundeck you can relax while still feeling a part of the city and there are good views of Venice from the dining room, bar and entertainment lounge as well as the cabins, which are comfortable and reasonably spacious. Unusually there is no single supplement. You will pay more for a top-deck cabin with extra-large windows. Evening entertainment includes classical music and burlesque from the Comedia dell'Arte, plus optional trips to concerts in town.

The multi-lingual crew of the Michelangelo are French and Italian. The captain is Dutch. They are happy for you to do your own thing as long as you let them know your plans and return on time.

► of the mosaics inside. The figure of the Virgin and Child, more than 1,000 years old, will remain forever in my memory, while Santa Maria Assunta is haunting simplicity to perfection. The floor is patterned with tiny marble tiles, each one different and worn smooth from centuries of worship.

Chioggia, on the mainland in the south of the Lagoon, is another contrast. It's been a busy fishing port since Roman times and that industry is still thriving. This is an unpretentious working town: it's inexpensive, traditional and very friendly. The fish market is its centrepiece, offering fantastically fresh sea fare. The traditional wooden fishing boat – the *bragozzo* – is still in use here, their prows decorated with angels and mythical beasts, complete with a painted eye to ward off evil.

For the uninitiated visitor like myself, seeing Venice for the first time from the waters out of which the very city rises more than met every preconception I had before my first contact with the Serene Republic. Venice can really only be fully appreciated only from its canals, and by combining your accommodation arrangements and itinerary you can be assured you'll sample everything this fabulous city has to offer. ■

DON'T MISS

PEGGY GUGGENHEIM COLLECTION

If 20th-century art is your thing, be sure to check out the collection displayed in Peggy Guggenheim's former home in Palazzo Venier dai Leoni. Most of the major movements and artists are represented, including Picasso, Georges Braque, Max Ernst and Kandinsky.