



Canaletto. View of the Doges Palace, 1737

Ah Venice..... La Serenissima (the Serene one)

After leaving the Costa Fascinosa cruise ship with its 4,000 passengers, I am ready for some time on my own. Since it is low season, Venice is not very crowded and that suits me fine.

So, walking distance from Pazzale Roma, where I am deposited by the People Mover (shuttle train from the docks to a transportation hub), I face crossing three bridges with my luggage. And no matter how small the bridge in Venice, each has steps. Haven't they heard of ramps here???? As a result it is murder to traipse around with luggage. Luckily enterprising young men station themselves at the Pazzale Roma and offer to transport your luggage to your destination. Not free, but certainly worth every penny.

I check in to the lovely Antiche Figure Hotel, with its better-than-perfect location across the Grand Canal from the train station and within steps of a vaporetto (water bus) stop. This hotel was recommended on Cruisecritic.com and it did not disappoint. More about the hotel later.



The beautiful Rialto Bridge

THE LOOK.....

I didn't look like a frump in Venice, only a very wrinkled traveler. The smart look here is a mini-skirt with leggings or skinny jeans and always high (probably waterproof) boots. It's not just for comfort or fashion either. The daily high tide and unpredictable late November weather often floods streets and plazas. There are temporary platforms stored everywhere, most about 3 feet high which can be quickly put into place as elevated walkways. Luckily, I didn't have to walk thru any watery mazes during my two day stay.

There is no doubt in my mind that Venice is the most beautiful city in the world. There are 400 picturesque bridges connecting 117 islands and going over the 150 canals. Some of the islands are as small as just a few buildings. But when you look close, you realize everything is so frail here. San Marco Plaza floods daily, the ground floor of many buildings are already permanently underwater, there is a housing crunch, and, like Florence, there isn't enough money in the world to pay for all the restoration the historic buildings and art collections need.

But never mind, it is here to enjoy now and I try my best.

OFF I GO.....

Habla Italiano?

So, armed with my Rick Steves Italian Phrasebook, and warmed by a complimentary cappuccino from the hotel, I set out to find the meeting point for my afternoon tour. Come to find out that I speak Italian -- or at least, the Italians understand me! My ability in Spanglish serves me well and I have no problems asking for directions or talking to people. I must add that because this is a heavily touristed city, many people speak English also.



Having only two full days on my own, I wanted an "orientation" tour right away and arranged with Italian Exclusive Vacations, which handles local operations for Road Scholar's Italy trips, for a walking tour and gondola ride. Our guide is excellent, taking us thru the back streets and small lanes of central Venice all the while bypassing the "tourist track." The most impressive structure we see is the Scala de Bovalo, the spiral staircase of the Palazzo Contarini.

The palace was built in the 15th century as the Venice home of the Contarini family. The staircase is currently being restored.

Come to find out, there is only ONE plaza in all of Venice - the Plaza San Marco. All the other little squares are called "campo." We pay special attention to street names and soon find "Rio" as part of a street name signifies that the walkway used to be a river and now is a filled-in canal; "Calle" isn't a street, it is a path; "Fondamenta" is a sidewalk along the edge of a canal. But in reality, none of this matters as maps here are just a suggestion. Venice is the best place in the world to let yourself get lost. We are given the advice to just keep on walking and sooner or later, we'll come across the Grand Canal and a convenient vaporetto stop



The Plaza San Marco. This is the view from the restaurant in the San Marco Museum, a great place for a light lunch and cappuccino.

Our guide gives us many suggestions, but the most significant tidbit she offers is to visit San Marco Basilica between 11:30 and 12:30 when they turn on special lights to let us see the 12th century gold mosaics shine and glitter. There is a small side chapel to sit for a bit to enjoy the ambience.

I love this walk in Venice -- thru small alleyways into leafy squares flanked with old palazzos and massive churches, and we peek into lovely gardens and walk past inviting museums. I could probably never find any of those streets again, but would love to. They are filled with interesting little shops way off the tourist track that deserve to be visited.

My tour ends with a gondola ride. It is not wonderful; and my advice for gondola-riding is: do not sit in the small black chair which is not anchored to anything-- it rolls around and if the boat pitches a bit, you will find yourself on the floor!

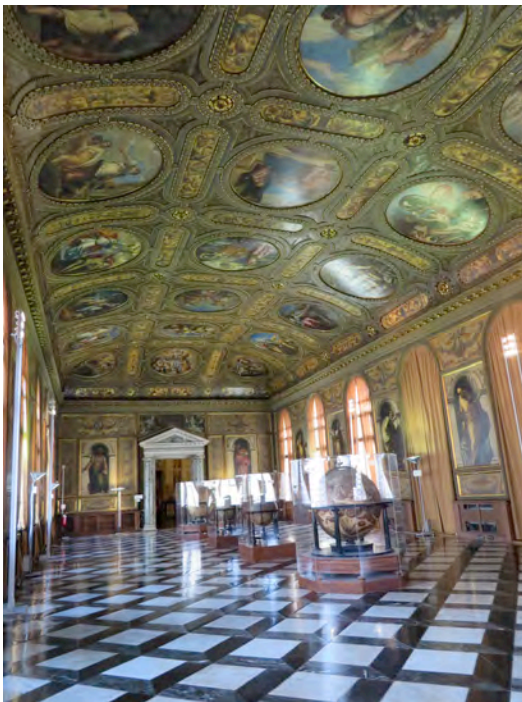
MUSEUMS

The next day, I decide to walk to St. Mark's Square. The hotel concierge says it will take 20 minutes. About three hours later (though I did stop to browse some shops) I arrive at the square and decide a cappuccino would be nice. When I stop at the famous Cafe Florian and find it is 8 euro for a teeny cup, I keep on walking! I soon discover The Museo Civico Correr, also known as the San Marco Museum has a lovely cafe on its second floor that overlooks the square and their food and beverages are much more reasonable and just as delicious. Nice bathroom too!



Originally the private chapel of the Doge's and part of their palace, it became the city's cathedral in 1807. Because of its Byzantine design and its impressive gold mosaics, it is also known as the "Church of Gold."

After a nice lunch and a visit investigating the Basilica (the mosaics really do glitter), I return to the San Marco Museum. It is enormous as it is three museums in one: an Art Collection, an Archaeological Museum and the Royal Apartments. This is certainly enough for one afternoon, but the ticket also includes the 1100 year old Doges Palace (aka Palazzo Ducale - the palace belonging to the Chief of State). So I quickly cross the square and go thru the palace taking only few pictures. I still remember running past the frescoed ceilings and walls by Titian, Tintoretto and Veronese, and a blur of over-the-top gilding, statues and friezes - like a movie in fast-forward.



Sisi -- we meet again! The fabulous State Rooms, now part of the San Marco Museum, were the "true" home of Empress Elisabeth (above). I had visited her country home in Corfu, earlier on this month. She much preferred a simple life on the island, rather than the formality, pomp and intrigue of Venice.

I later learn there is a “Secret Itinerary Tour” of the palace that takes visitors thru concealed doors to hidden corners and passageways. Next time!

The smartest thing I do is buy a vaporetto pass. Whenever I am tired, I just hop on the first one to come by and ride past the architectural art gallery that is Venice until I am ready to hop off and discover another part of the city. And at the end of the day, it is no problem to find my hotel as just about every route has a stop at the train station, just across the Grand Canal from my hotel. And there is only one bridge to cross!

SHOPPING

Psst....Wanna buy a purse?? How could you resist these guys! They have great looking bags-- knockoffs and pleather -- and they sell them really cheap. I can't resist a red briefcase and start the bargaining dance. I walk away, he follows; I walk some more; he keeps bargaining. Two blocks from where we originally start, we come to an accord. Its beautiful and I don't see another like it in all of Italy.



Yes, its illegal but oh so much fun to bargain and buy a purse on the street.

HOTEL

The Antoche Figure Hotel is absolutely perfect and I would stay here again, especially if I were using the train to arrive and depart from Venice.



The Antoche Figure Hotel is the taller building to the right of the Church. The next photo is the view from my window.

This is the review I submitted to www.tripadvisor.com:

Excellent Choice.. Wonderful Location

(Posted November 25, 2014)

If I could live in room 412 for the rest of my life, I'd be happy. This room is on the top floor of the building with corner windows overlooking the canal. And if you open the window in the bathroom, it has a slight view also. It is beautifully furnished and every inch is sparkling clean.

Reception staff is exceptionally helpful, though one did steer me wrong by giving me good directions to the Peggy Guggenheim museum, but not mentioning that it was closed that day.

Breakfast is excellent and set in three different rooms, so be sure to look at all three buffets as each is different.

The hotel is across the Grand Canal from the train station, so there is only one bridge (lots of steps) to cross. It would also be convenient for before or after a cruise as it is walking distance to Plaza Roma and the People Mover that takes you to the dock. The hotel will call a porter to help carry your bag over the bridges. Cost is 5euro per bag which is one of the biggest bargains in Venice.

Wi-fi (free) is excellent and the room has good lighting for reading. I cannot think of one single negative thing to say about the hotel. My two night stay was wonderful

NEXT TIME

I would love to return to Venice for a week (maybe two!) and already have a plan for "next time":

Museums to visit:

1. l'Accademia de Venezia - which contains the world most complete 13th to 18th century collection of art
2. The Vittore Carpaccio Museum for its collection of Caravaggio and Canaletto paintings
3. The Peggy Guggenheim Museum (which was closed the day I wanted to visit) - both for its modern art collection and to see the house she lived in for 30 years.
4. Return to the Doge Palace and go thru it slowly, enjoying every painting, fresco, sculpture and engraving; also take the "Secret Itinerary Tour"

Other

1. day trips to Burano to see the lace-makers and Murano for its glass making factories

2. attend a performance at the Gran Teatro La Fenice which is a little jewel of architecture and style.

And, for sure I will buy a Venice Museum Pass and multi-day Vaporetto ticket!

All too soon, I am back on the train headed to Bologna to join an Overseas Adventure Travel tour of Tuscany and Umbria. It is hard to say goodbye to Venice; but..... I'll be back!



CONTACT INFORMATION

Local company for the walking tour/gondola ride:

Bucintoro Viaggi Tours and Transfers address: S.Marco, 4267/c - 30124 Venezia Tel. +39 041 5210.632 ext.1 (Plaza San Luca) <http://www.bucintoroviaggi.com/>

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