



VENICE

Romance is written into the very fabric of this famously exquisite city — from its many architectural wonders to its mesmerising canals.

Words JOSEPHINE MCKENNA Photography ALICIA TAYLOR

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ANY CONVERSATION REGARDING Venice has to begin at the water's edge. Whether it's the sound of the waves gently lapping against a sleek black gondola or a cruise along that breathtaking expanse of water so aptly named the Grand Canal, the city's identity is rooted in the ebb and flow of the tide.

Venice defies the imagination. And the odds. It's actually a floating city connected by a labyrinth of canals and waterways stretching across 118 islands. Steeped in history, the once mighty trading capital, which united Europe and the Orient for a thousand years, is an architectural and cultural wonder filled to the brim with grand palaces and churches that hide spectacular masterpieces by artists whose names get tangled on your tongue — Tiepolo, Tintoretto and Titian.

For centuries, fish, octopus and cuttlefish have been sold daily at the bustling Rialto Market on the edge of the canal. When the stalls are gone, delicious snacks called *cicchetti*, featuring stuffed calamari or creamy cod, can be paired with a prosecco at *osterias* such as Cantina Do Spade or Al Pesador.

Never mind the clichés — Venice does have the kind of magic that can transport you to another epoch in an instant. Plus, the lagoon city has a way of forcing you to slow down and

CLOCKWISE FROM RIGHT A well-dressed waiter serves coffee at Caffè Florian; the basilica of Santa Maria della Salute; even the seagulls appreciate Venice's statues; one of the many fish stalls at the Rialto Market; take a stroll through Piazza San Marco. **OPENER, FROM LEFT** Venetian mooring posts are famously often decorated with red and white stripes; the Bauer hotel overlooks the Grand Canal.



DO

Atelier Pietro Longhi Sestiere San Polo, 2608; www.pietrolonghi.com.
Basilica di San Marco Piazza San Marco, 328; www.basilicasanmarco.it.
Basilica di Santa Maria della Salute Fondamenta Salute; www.basilicasalutevenezia.it.
Basilica Santa dei Frari Parrocchia Santa Maria Gloriosa dei Frari, San Polo, 3072; www.basilica.deifrari.it.
Gallerie dell'Accademia Campo della Carità, 1050; www.gallerieaccademia.org.
Palazzo Ducale Piazza San Marco, 1; www.palazzo-ducale.visitmuve.it.
Peggy Guggenheim Collection Dorsoduro, 704; www.guggenheim-venice.it.

go with the flow whether you like it or not. "Venice is seduction at first sight," says hotelier and Venice native Francesca Bortolotto Possati. "The feelings that you experience here are like nothing else. The city is magic; it's like a drug."

Of course, the fact Venice attracts more than 20 million visitors a year means you'll have to share it, and cruising on a crammed *vaporetto* (water bus) as the driver barks at mesmerised tourists to get out of the way, can dampen the romance. Remedy this by using the early hours to stroll through Piazza San Marco, the city's beating heart. It's like stepping into a Renaissance painting. Here, you'll find its iconic landmarks, the Basilica di San Marco (which was completed in 1092) and Palazzo Ducale, a masterpiece of Gothic architecture. This was where the duke, or *doge*, ruled the one-time Venetian republic between the eighth and 18th centuries, while his enemies languished in the dank dungeons below; Casanova, the famous historical playboy, once escaped a prison cell here. ➤





The basilica next door is a gem of Byzantine architecture. Known as the *Chiesa d'Oro*, or 'Church of Gold', it's awash with golden mosaics spanning 8000 square metres and the church's treasury is filled with precious artefacts looted during the crusades of the 13th century. Outside, tourists are working their selfie sticks or perched at Caffè Florian, one of Europe's oldest cafes, where waiters in crisp white jackets serve cappuccinos at a premium.

FOR ART'S SAKE

Just a few steps away, and overlooking the Grand Canal, is the luxurious five-star hotel, the Bauer. On one side it has an 18th-century Neo-Gothic frontage, trompe l'oeil ceilings and sumptuous silk interiors, and, on the other, a stylish 1940s Art Deco wing. "Venice is about feelings. You feel things before you see them and your experience changes with every season," says Bortolotto Possati, the hotel's sophisticated owner.

With a background in art, antiques and interior design, Bortolotto Possati inherited the stunning hotel from her grandfather, a Genoan shipping tycoon. Since then she has transformed both the old and modern sections of the building and added two further hotels across the water on the island of Giudecca.

"My grandfather moved his business here and fell in love with the city — as well as with my grandmother," she says. "[Venice] is an innovative city; a port that accepts new arrivals and welcomes new visitors. It is all about elegance. Venetians are elegantly dressed, they walk elegantly and they look at things like they have never seen them before."

From the hotel terrace, as fishermen and merchants fill the canal of an early morning, a shard of light illuminates the dome of the Basilica di Santa Maria della Salute that looms large on the opposite bank to the hotel. The 'Salute' was commissioned by plague survivors in the Dorsoduro district in 1630 after the disease had wiped out a third of the city's population, and there are tributes inside its sacristy, including 12 masterpieces by the Venetian artist Titian.

In search of more masterpieces, you'll find yourself winding through alleys and traversing deserted canals. Modern art



CLOCKWISE FROM RIGHT

The Bauer's grand stairwell; Covino's; Andrea Lorenzon;

cafes line the city's streets; a gondolier. **OPPOSITE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT** A colonnaded walkway at Piazza San Marco; seafood from Covino; the Venetian skyline; costume-designer Raffaele Dessi; fresh fare at Rialto Market.

lovers can dive into the 20th-century collection assembled by the American art curator Peggy Guggenheim at the museum that bears her name. And for a full throttle immersion into the Venetian art world, enthusiasts can visit the Gallerie dell'Accademia, where Renaissance artists have left tantalising images of the city that inspired them.

Meanwhile, at Atelier Pietro Longhi, Raffaele Dessi creates masterpieces of a different kind. He, and shop owner Francesco Braggi, make lavish period costumes spanning from the 14th to

20th centuries. "People come here to bring something out of themselves; they want to have a different kind of experience," says Dessi. "For us it's really important to understand their desires and make their dreams a reality."

Clients from around the world pay Dessi and his team anywhere between €2000 (\$3000) and €25,000 (\$37,000) for a made-to-measure costume in the finest silk and taffeta — de rigueur for the masked balls of the Carnevale di Venezia.

Dessi says it's all part of exploring a side of Venice that visitors rarely get to see. "Ninety per cent of life in Venice is hidden inside its palaces so there is a big part of the city you will never know unless you look," he says.

The same can be said for Venice's food and wine scene. There are plenty of quality seafood places beyond the tourist traps, if you take the time to find them. Since 1987, Cesare Benelli has been inspired by the flavours of the Venetian lagoon at his restaurant, Al Covo, and at his second bistro, Covino, which is run by the energetic Andrea Lorenzon. Located in the Castello district, it's a great spot and offers a chance to discover what Lorenzon calls 'contemporary Venice'. Here you can find 100 wines and a selection of craft beers, as well as the Rialto's catch of the day with seasonal ingredients, herbs and spices. "Venetian culinary tradition is the result of many invasions and philosophies that other cultures brought here so there's a mix of spices and tastes," says Lorenzon.

The wood-lined bistro features a set menu with succulent seafood specialties, such as *sarde in saor* (sweet and sour sardines, served with onions and pine nuts), or *lotregano con zucca* (local mullet served with pumpkin, endive and fish roe).

"We want visitors to understand that dishes should be eaten at the right time of the year," he says. "We are able to source the best ingredients and think carefully about the dishes."

Once you've had your fill, it's time to navigate the alleys, cross the canals and return to the 21st century. But Lorenzon has the final word for those dreaming of their first visit to the lagoon city — or those coming back for more. "Venice is an enchanting city that never fails to surprise you or move you in unexpected ways even when you live here," he says. "It's a city worth getting to know; then it opens itself up to you." 🍷

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EAT

Al Covo Castello, 3968; www.ristorantealcovo.com. **Al Pesador** San Polo, 125/126; www.alpesador.it. **Covino** Calle del Pestrin, Castello, 3829; www.covinovenetia.com. **Rialto Market** Campo della Pescheria, San Polo, 30125; +39 041 274 7981.

DRINK

Cantina Do Spade Calle delle Do Spade, San Polo 859/860; www.cantinadospade.com. **Enoteca Al Volto** Calle Cavalli, San Marco, 4081; www.enotecaalvolto.com.

STAY

Bauer Campo San Moisè, 1459; www.bauervenezia.com.

