

Viva Italia!: Adventures by Disney

by Dotti Saroufim, PassPorter Guest Contributor

[Note: Adventures by Disney is Disney's new guided vacation travel organization, currently offering a dozen different tours in North and Central America, and Europe. To learn more, visit <http://www.adventuresbydisney.com> or contact your Disney Specialist travel agent. - Ed.]

Day Seven: Venetian Fantasy

Ouch. My turn for the pained expression in the morning, but I deserved it. Poor Tony -- I made him talk very, very quietly. Our luggage was to be outside our door at 7:30 a.m. to be picked up and transported to Venice, and our motor coach pickup was at 8 a.m. for the ride back to Florence and the train station. I don't know what I expected, but I was surprised to see our luggage being loaded onto a truck. This, of course, meant stress-free traveling for us - for our first-class Eurostar train ride to Venice, we only had to worry about our backpacks and our bagged lunches, thoughtfully prepared by the hotel chef. Our luggage would be waiting at our hotel when we arrived!

I have taken many, many train trips from Boston to New York City. I don't know how trains in the rest of our country compare, but I have to say that the Eurostar ROCKS! Smooth, quiet and fast, this three-hour train ride passed by in no time at all. Our first class seating was luxurious - very large, comfortable seats with loads of legroom and with push button controls to recline. I felt like I was in a spa rather than a vehicle speeding through the countryside at 200 mph. We were fortunate enough to be seated with Beth and her husband, Mike, the "other" troublemaker of the group. I say that with great affection, since his partner-in-crime was my husband. We spent some of the trip reminiscing on the Italian words we learned while growing up. Funny how many of those words were the same - and most we wouldn't dare say in front of Cinzia!

The train arrived at the Santa Lucia station on the Grand Canal and it was just a short walk to where we would embark on our gondola tour of Venice. We paused for a group photo, waited a few minutes for Tina and Cinzia to work their magic, and soon we boarded our gondolas in groups of six.

I don't know how best to describe Venice without sounding trite. It was like a dream. A fairytale land set on water. There are no cars, no motorbikes, no trucks, and no "street noise" other than the sound of

people walking and talking. The only motors you hear are those of the waterbuses ferrying people between stops, or the barges delivering goods. To see this incredible city, hundreds of canals and tiny islands amid the tidal waters of the Adriatic Sea, was more moving to me than any cathedral or work of art -- this whole city is a work of the art of man. I could live in Venice. If someone gave me a ticket to anywhere on this planet at this moment, it would be to the Marco Polo airport.

Our gondola tour ended at Piazza Sant'Angelo, where our walking tour began. There we met Laura (pronounced L-ow-ra), who expertly guided us through the streets, over bridges, and up and down stairs to ultimately turn a corner into Piazza San Marco for our first view of the breathtaking beauty of Basilica di San Marco and Palazzo Ducale. And at least one million pigeons, maybe more. There were so many pigeons; they virtually carpeted the entire piazza. If you walked too fast, you'd step on them as they rarely moved too quickly. (Don't ask me how I know.)

Those of us who opted to were led into the Basilica for a tour with Laura, while others were free to head to the hotel, only a three minute walk away. Once adequately bedazzled by the amazing mosaics (and this structure deserves a long visit, as there is just too much to be taken in!), we made our way to the Bauer Venezia to pick up our keys and to sadly unpack for the final time in Italy.

The entryway to the Bauer is situated in a little square with a beautiful small church (relatively speaking) off to its side called Chiesa de San Moisè, and many designer shops across from its door. One can shop and then pray for a way to pay, or as our friends Mike and Dennis did, just pray that their wives found the shops only after they closed. The hotel itself is situated right on the Grand Canal and has its own water taxi stop. The views from the restaurant at breakfast were nothing less than stunning. Our room was in a second, older building next door, and was comprised of two separate areas, one with our bed and huge marble bath, and the other a sitting area with sofa, desk, table and two chairs. It also had a tiny kitchen area with sink, mini-fridge and microwave - quite nice and so much larger than we expected! One of the families on our tour had the room down the hall, which actually had an ornate winding metal staircase leading up to a loft.

I was on a mission to find the Venice Disney Store, and I'm happy to report that I now own a Venezia Mickey T-shirt. Searching for the store was a fun way to see other parts of the city, including the Rialto Bridge and the surrounding areas.

Since we didn't know where the name "Rocco" would find us a good

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meal, we wandered the streets, peering into windows to see if we could find Italians enjoying their food. We lucked upon a wonderful restaurant where we filled up on salad, pizza, pasta, and wine for a total of 15 Euro each - the bargain of the trip! We strolled along afterwards, finally making our way into Piazza San Marco (with not one pigeon to be seen in the evening!) to listen to the music at the outdoor cafes, and then back out again in search of gelato and coffee. We sipped our coffees and ate our dessert while listening to a street performer singing an aria -- an experience unlike any other.

Day Eight: Carnevale!

We awoke to a gorgeous warm and sunny day, and the breakfast buffet, and wonderful coffee, were enjoyed and appreciated. We weren't scheduled to depart that morning for our next adventure until 9 a.m. - a late morning! Good thing I was still half on Boston time or I never would have survived these wake-up calls. We met in the hotel lobby for our trip to Tragicomica, the mask store and workshop, where we would be making our own Carnevale masks.

I have to say that this morning was one of the highlights of the entire trip. Visiting the store alone would have been fascinating, but to be brought into the workshop and supervised by a master mask maker and her assistants in the creation of our own masks was great fun! We were asked to choose from a number of pre-made mask styles - the initial Plaster of Paris process had already been performed for us. Masks chosen, we were asked to think of an original design for our masks and sketch it out, if possible, on the paper supplied. From there, we were to choose colors, both for the base and for decoration, and also the glitter, jewels, or other embellishments that we might want added.

Our teacher and her assistants were always close by to give advice, supply the paints, blow-dry our creations, and give a hand in any way needed. What we all came up with was indeed both creative and clever, and this was quite the "souvenir" to take back home! Since our next stop was a water taxi for our trip to the island of Murano, the masks were packaged up and sent back to our hotel, and were in our rooms when we returned later that evening.

Our busy day continued with a tour of the Marco Polo Glass Factory on the beautiful island of Murano. We watched glass being blown and then were able to see the many elaborate creations made in the factory. We then had lunch at an outdoor trattoria, the Busa alla Torre, where we met the owner - a large, jovial man who visits the states often and gives much of his time and energy to raise scholarship money for orphans of fireman who perished in the 9/11 tragedy. He was deservedly given a

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rousing round of applause, both for his generosity and for his very good food!

We headed back to our hotel with a few free hours before our farewell dinner, and we decided to take one last walk around the city. We weren't looking for anything special but managed to buy some Limoncello to take home, and some delicious biscotti and chocolate to eat on our voyage back.

At 6:15 p.m., we met in the hotel lobby for the walk to dinner, this one held on a 16-galleon pirate ship! We were met by pirates as we boarded the ship, while music from the Pirates of the Caribbean movie soundtrack played in the background. Well, what did I expect? Drinks were passed around (champagne, wine, Bellini), hors d'oeuvres were served, and everyone got into the party mood - for this bunch, it didn't take long at all. Dinner was as delicious as expected, more wine was consumed, and even more surprises were unveiled. It was a bittersweet evening - everyone saying their goodbyes as we sailed up and down the Grand Canal, the sun setting in the distance. All said they could not imagine a more perfect ending to a perfect trip. Day Nine: Arrivederci

Based on our flight times, each of us had a different meeting time to take the water taxi to the airport. (A few wiser travelers added on a day or two in Venice or Rome!) In true Disney fashion, one of our guides (Tina) was putting us and our luggage into the taxi at the hotel, while the other (Cinzia) was waiting for us at the airport to send us in the right direction. From start to finish, there was not one stressful moment for us on this trip -- they truly thought of every little thing.

We had our final breakfast on the patio overlooking Santa Maria della Salute, and sadly bid farewell to our new friends enjoying breakfast on the patio. Four of us had the same flight time, so we boarded our water taxi together. As we pulled away from the dock and began our trip to the airport, we looked back at the patio - and one by one, we saw them all stand up - Beth and Mike, Marilyn and Dennis, Robbin and Marc, Kathy and Amy and Len, and more - and there they stayed, standing and waving, until we were only small specks in the distance.

Until we meet again….

Final Thoughts:

Our Adventure Guides: I cannot say enough about Tina and Cinzia, and how they looked after us for nine wonderful days. They were not only highly efficient and capable, but were truly caring, patient and compassionate people. And they were fun! That the 36 of us became

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such a "famiglia" during this trip was due in large part to the personalities of our guides.

Our Group: We ranged in age from mid-30's to one incredibly energetic woman of 85! (Katie, our collective hats were all off to you -- you are one amazing "young woman!") We had doctors, lawyers, teachers, business analysts, nurses, real-estate agents, CIO's, CEO's, stay-at-home parents, a chaplain, and a travel agent who writes trip reports that are way too long, among others. The majority were big enough fans of Disney that they didn't laugh when I found a Hidden Mickey in the Pantheon. Over 30 of our group have exchanged email addresses and are sharing stories and photos. As I said at our farewell dinner, there isn't one person in this group who I wouldn't eagerly share another trip with.

Would I recommend this tour to others? Well, yeah… y'think? In all seriousness, when Tony and I first signed on, we were a little wary of the price. When we finished, we said that we got our money's worth and so much more. I'm more than ready for my next Adventure by Disney!

About The Author: Dotti Saroufim is a CruisingCo.com/MouseEarVacations.com travel agent. She recently returned from Epcot's Food and Wine Festival and is looking forward to meeting some of you on land or at sea in December for MouseFest 2006.

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