

Venice: City of Water & Glass

by Cheryl Pendry, PassPorter Featured Columnist

There really is nowhere else in the world like Venice, although many cities claim that they're the "Venice of the North" because of their reliance on water, but nowhere else will you find a city that is so dependent on canals for everyday life and that makes for a truly unique destination.

Legend claims that the city was first founded around the year 420 and grew in power over the next 1,000 years thanks to its location, which allowed it to trade with the major empires. But, as the old saying goes "what goes up must come down" and that was the case with Venice. Sea routes started to open up to the east and trade dwindled to the point where the city became virtually bankrupt. Although it's hard to believe looking at it today, many of the city's old buildings and palaces fell into disrepair for many years, before tourists re-discovered its beauty and gave it a new lease on life.

And what's not to love about this place? World famous for its amazing network of canals that connect the 118 islands that make up this city, Venice is peppered with arching bridges on most streets and stunning views around every corner. Those canals will become your way of life during your stay in Venice, either as you cross over them on foot or as you take the water transport that is the lifeblood of the city.

Of course, there are the famous gondolas, although if you've been to Las Vegas and thought the prices for a gondola ride at The Venetian were steep, you can be assured that those are merely in keeping with the real thing. Official fares are €80 (\$100) for a 40 minute daytime tour for up to six people and €100 (\$130) for the same tour at night. There's a simple rule for gondolas -- if the price is a problem, don't do it! We opted against it and didn't regret it, as there are so many other great ways to see the city from the water.

The "vaporetti" are motorized waterbuses, which may not give you the same great views you'd get from a gondola, but they are quick, reliable, easy to use and stop by most of the main sights. If you do want to say you've ridden a gondola without the cost, then there are gondola ferry crossings that link various parts of the two sides of the Grand Canal and these are regularly used by Venetians, as well as tourists -- not surprising, as they cost less than €1!

Although Venice is dominated by water, there's still plenty to do on dry land. The biggest attraction is undoubtedly St. Mark's Square with the

impressive Doge's Palace and the beautiful Campanile, both of which will be familiar to Disney visitors, so much so that when we first arrived by vaporetti in the city, I couldn't help but exclaim "it's just like Epcot!"

It isn't -- for starters, Disney's Campanile tower so far hasn't crumbled to dust and then been rebuilt. Around since 1514, Venetians got a rude awakening in July 1902 when the whole thing subsided into a heap of bricks and debris. Miraculously, none of the other historic buildings nearby were damaged and it was rebuilt over the next 10 years exactly as it had been. Today an elevator whisks you to the top of the tower for some superb views.

Part of that view is the rest of St. Mark's Square, home to the Basilica di San Marco, which must rank as one of the world's most intricate buildings. The longer you look at the mosaics on the exterior, the more you notice. Inside is just as impressive, with more mosaics covering the walls and domes. It's estimated these took around 600 years to put together. The interior of the neighboring Doge's Palace is just as stunning. This really is how the other half lived and the extravagance here has to be seen to be believed. It's almost impossible to tour this place and leave with your jaw intact!

Unfortunately, statistics suggest that this is the only part of Venice that most visitors see. Of the 14 million people who come here annually, around 80% stay for less than eight hours, which seems criminal when you consider everything else there is to see here.

Fancy a waterfront walk? Then head for the Riva degli Schiavoni. This will give you a superb view of the original Bridge of Sighs -- and although it's been reproduced around the world, the original is still the best! Another bridge not to miss is the Rialto Bridge - it's a great place to watch the world on the water below you go by. The nearby market is also well worth checking out with some superb locally produced food.

If you love art and want to see how life used to be in Venice, then the Ca' d'Oro -- the House of Gold -- should be on your list. Its elaborate facade is easy to spot from the Grand Canal, and inside you can visit an art gallery on the first and second floors and get a taste of life in an old palace on the ground floor.

Across the water from St. Mark's Square is San Giorgio Maggiore Island that's home to a beautiful church of the same name. Both the church and the vaporetti ride there and back offer stunning picture postcard views towards St. Mark's Square.

While in Venice, don't miss the Lagoon Islands and especially the glass

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making heart of this area, Murano. It's got its very own Grand Canal and a myriad of shops where you can buy world famous Murano glass. If you want to find out more about that industry, visit the Museo Vetrario (Glass Museum). Murano glass is an irresistible souvenir and you'll find it ranges in price from just a few Euros to hundreds. We ended up with a six inch high glass Christmas tree, complete with ornaments and a treat-laden "sweet tray," which we had great fun with over the next few months, inviting visitors to try them.

Shopping is really one of the great pastimes here. It's hard to resist the beautiful Venetian carnival masks you'll find everywhere, and again, if you shop carefully, you'll find something to match every budget. If you want to see the real thing, then head to Venice in late February for Carnevale, the city's counterpart to New Orleans' Mardi Gras.

Whatever time of year you do choose to go to Venice, it's unlikely you'll ever experience another city like it. A visit here truly is unique and might just make you think about how much better use we could all make of the water in our cities and towns for traveling around.

About The Author: Cheryl and husband Mark live in England and love to travel, particularly to America. They are in the process of visiting every Disney theme park around the world, having already been to Disneyland Resort Paris, Hong Kong Disneyland and both American Disney resorts. They are now planning for their trip to Japan in the spring to visit the Tokyo Disney Resort. [Click here to view more of Cheryl's articles!](#)

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