

AIRMILES: A JOURNÉE



- 1. Introduction:**
the joy of being lost
- 2. Travelling deeper:**
under the skin of the city
- 3. Essential information:**
up-to-the-minute reconnaissance
- 4. Be there now:**
prepare for Venice
- 5. AIRMILES recommends:**
our hotels

1. Introduction

the joy of being lost

Venice has been so vigorously written about, and painted, and photographed, and filmed, that it has taken on a kind of parallel life as a literary construct, or an artistic backdrop. The problem with this other Venice is that, while it sometimes illuminates the real one, it also blocks it. This is such a magical city, and so unlike any other, that it is a shame to see it through the eyes, or words, of others. And a return to first principles can actually help us to understand the place better.

Take the most obvious detail: the fact that, as Browning once wrote, “the sea’s the street there.” This has an obvious effect on the look of the city, with its canals and bridges and grand palazzi with their imposing water entrances. But it also affects every aspect of Venetian life. Imagine moving house in Venice, or getting a fire put out, or having a fridge delivered, or – worse still – a piano. All of these things have to be done by boat, trolley or sheer physical effort, usually a combination of all three. The other direct consequence of the city’s watery position – adopted in desperation in the sixth century by mainlanders fleeing Barbarian invasions, then turned by their ancestors into the basis of a maritime empire – is that Venice has two entirely separate “road” networks: the one experienced by pedestrians and the one plied by gondoliers. The two coincide only occasionally, and these points of intersection – the bridges and the canalside walks and those dark lanes that debouche unexpectedly on the glittering, bustling Grand Canal – are charmed spaces. This is one of the reasons why it is such a pleasure to get lost in Venice, rather than simply ticking off the tourist sights: because the joy of the Serene Republic is as much in its fabric as in its single, significant monuments. The other reason is that tourists tend to stick to the main routes. That secret Venice of washing strung up between the houses and neighbourhood wine bars is often just around the corner.

2. Travelling deeper

under the skin of the city

Venice's best-kept secret

For the best part of a millennium, the Doge's Palace was the centre of secular power in Venice, the place from which the city's trading empire was administered and its diplomatic intrigues woven. Most visitors take the public tour of the palazzo, which takes in a series of vast and echoing halls decorated by artists such as Tiepolo and Veronese. But with a bit of forward-planning it's possible to go behind these bombastic reception and assembly spaces, designed to trumpet forth the majesty of Venice, and see the humbler rooms that housed the real machinery of the state. The Itinerari Segreti tour, which should be booked at least two days in advance on 00 39 041 520 9070, gives you access to the offices of the palace's army of clerks, the secret chamber to which the heads of the Republic's feared Council of Ten retired to consider their decisions, and the torture chambers beyond. It also takes in the prisons under the "leads" or eaves of the place from which Casanova staged his dramatic (at least in his own account) escape in 1755.

Inside intelligence

Michela Scibilia

A local author and graphic designer, Michela Scibilia is the leading authority on the Venetian eating and drinking scene. Her definitive guide, "Venezia Osterie e Dintorni", recently came out in English translation as "A Guide to the Eateries of Venice" (Vianello Libri, available in most Venetian bookshops). Since the guide went to press in September 2002, there have been few new openings, says Scibilia; but a couple of the more recent entries have confirmed their early promise. "Rioba (Fondamenta della Misericordia, Cannaregio 2553, tel 00 39 040 5244379, closed Mon) is a place I like very much. Though it's fairly new, the decor is traditional Venetian osteria-style, with wooden tables and paper tablecloths. The cuisine is local and seafood-based, but surprisingly refined considering the ambience. They have a handful of tables outside, on a square just back from the canal, in one of the few areas of Venice that stays quite lively in the evening." Another of Scibilia's favourites is a new wine bar, Al Prosecco, in pretty campo San Giacomo all'Orto (Santa Croce 1503, tel 00 39 041 524 0222, closed Sun). "This place is really on the up and up. They have a great wine list, a good selection of cheeses and cold meats, and – most important of all – tables outside in a square with a real neighbourhood vibe." Scibilia is a keen shopper too. She gives the thumbs up to Giovanna Zanella (see Shopping) but also points to another little gem: Gualti, a creative jewellers in rio terà Canal (Dorsoduro 3111, tel 00 39 041 520 1731), a wide street just south of campo Santa Margherita. "They make amazing, futuristic necklaces, earrings and brooches in here using a kind of resin that looks like glass but is far less fragile."

We love...

...Watching the gondola makers and restorers at work in the last remaining squero (boatyard) in central Venice. You can gaze across a canal at this picturesque workshop from fondamenta Nani, just north of the Zattere vaporetto stop; but when the main gate is left ajar – a fairly frequent occurrence – there's an even closer view from campo San Trovaso, in front of the church of the same name.

AIR MILES: ::::: ::::: VENICE

What to see

Santa Maria dei Miracoli (open Mon-Sat 10am-5pm, Sun 1-5pm) appears like a vision when you're least expecting it. You turn a corner, or cross a bridge, and there it is: Venice's church of the miracles, a miracle itself in pale grey, white and pink marble. Built by the Lombardo family of sculptors and masons in the 1480s, this elaborate jewel-box of a church incorporates Byzantine fragments, left over from Venice's St Marks Cathedral, into its exquisite exterior. Inside are more examples of the consummate art of Pietro Lombardo and his two sons, this time in the form of delicate stone carvings on the steps, font and pilasters of the choir.

Nobody should miss the wealth of artistic treasures on show at the Gallerie dell'Accademia, or the smaller but no less worthwhile collections of the Museo Correr, Ca' d'Oro and the Museo Querini Stampalia. But make time also for the churches and Scuole (charitable foundations, like Renaissance Rotary Clubs) that allow one to see great art in its original setting. Of these "in situ" experiences, perhaps the most delightful is the Scuola di San Giorgio degli Schiavoni, the late fifteenth-century meeting house of Venice's Slav community. In 1502, Vittore Carpaccio was asked to illustrate the life of Dalmatian saints George, Tryphonus and Jerome; the result is a lively cycle of nine canvases that are packed with fascinating everyday details. The meeting hall upstairs is still used by the Slav charitable brotherhood in Venice.

It's worth trying to fit in Torcello, even if you're only in Venice for a long weekend. This semi-rural island in the northern lagoon, not far from Burano, gives one a real feel for what Venice must have looked like in the early days, when churches and houses were still surrounded by fields and orchards. Torcello was the first lagoon island to be colonised in the fifth century, by mainlanders fleeing Attila and his Huns. It was not always such a backwater: between the tenth and fourteenth centuries Torcello was quite a lagoon metropolis, and two splendid churches, tiny Byzantine Santa Fosca and more imposing Santa Maria Assunta, with its vivid mosaics, survive from this historical high-water mark. Torcello is served by Motonave number 13 from the Fondamenta Nuove stop.

Kids' days out

Venice can be both a joy and a trial if you have kids in tow. The canals, the bridges, the secret passageways, the stone lions, the gondolas, the fire-engine boats, the ambulance boats... all of these things can be guaranteed to delight children who haven't been spoiled by Game Boys or adolescence, or both. But at the same time all that walking, the lack of hands-on museums and the difficulty of manoeuvring a pushchair down narrow lanes and across bridges can be a major discouragement.

Most kids will enjoy racing up, and down, the Renaissance spiral staircase known as the Scala del Bovolo (follow signs from campo Manin; open 10am-6pm daily between April and October; 10am-4pm Sat & Sun the rest of the year), which affords a great view over the rooftops of Venice. And the Museo Storico Navale (campo San Biagio, Castello 2148, tel 00 39 041 520 0276, open 8.45-1pm Mon-Sat), though resolutely old-fashioned, has some wonderful models of the ships on which the maritime republic's naval supremacy was founded.

If they're getting fractious, try the lion game: one point (or appropriate monetary equivalent) for every lion they spot, five points if it's a stone lion with its paw on a book, and a hundred points if the book doesn't have any writing on it (there's only one of these; around the Arsenale might be a good place to look).

