

from venice, with

love



Rachel Smith returns to Venice to find that the floating city is as romantic as ever.

There are two types of travellers in this world: those who always go back to the same old places, slipping into the familiar grooves of much-loved destinations; and those who would rather stay home than retrace their steps to places they've been. For the latter camp it's a waste of time and a bit of a bore not to explore somewhere fresh and new.

While I tend to fall into the latter camp, there is one place in the world to which I'm drawn time and again: Venice.

These days, the northern Italian city doesn't garner the best press as a tourist destination. It is higgledy-piggledy and sinking and perhaps a little too famous for its own good. It can be gaudy and full of tourists, and suffers from uninspired souvenirs and often disappointing food. But Venice's medieval history, jaw-dropping mix of architectural styles, galleries and winding waterways leaves me awestruck every time.

My love affair with the city began when, as a sulky teenager on a European trip with my family, I caught the eye of a hunky gondolier. Without warning, the young man leapt from his boat, grabbed my hand, kissed up and down my arm passionately and proceeded to serenade me in loud, operatic Italian, much to my parents' amusement – and that of the 20-odd people who stopped to watch the show. Even today, I like to think it was love at

GONE DADDY GONDOLA

In Venice, peak-hour traffic jams often involve gondolas, not cars



IT'S HIP TO BE SQUARE

Left: Pigeons outnumber tourists in the Piazza Saint Marco

Above: Bedside in the lovely Ca Maria Adele hotel

first sight and not his way of angling for a fare but hey, I'm a romantic.

Seven years later, as a lowly backpacker on a rowdy cut-price tour, I camped on the banks of the mainland and caught *vaporettos* (water taxis) into Venice each day. I was so broke I could barely afford a slice of pizza, much less a souvenir of Murano glass, but I still loved the city with an undiminished, dreamy passion.

So when I land, third time lucky, at Venice San Marco Airport with my future husband, I know I'm about to see Venice the way its painters, poets, writers, musicians and, yes, gondoliers intended: with a lover.

My guy has never been here before, which makes me feel like a kid keen to show off her favourite toys. It's August and crowded but we're basing ourselves off the beaten track in Dorsoduro, just a bridge or two over the Grand Canal from the city's main sights. Our hotel, the Ca Maria

Adele, is so opulent – from the rich gold furnishings of our room to the twinkling lanterns of the cosy alfresco bar – that it's tempting not to leave it at all. But as we fast discover, this chilled-out pocket of Venice isn't just for romantics, but art lovers, too.

We're not far from the Gallerie dell'Accademia, a former convent decorated with Venetian art dating from the 14th to 18th centuries. The Peggy Guggenheim Collection – a legacy from the legendary American art collector who lived for three decades at the Palazzo Venier dei Leoni until her death in 1979 – with works from Picasso, Klee, Magritte, Chagall, Dali and Pollock, among others, on display in a canal-side space, is also a must-see. Guggenheim herself is buried in the museum's sculpture garden, along with her pet dogs.

Dorsoduro's smaller galleries are just as interesting, with paintings and sculptures hand-crafted by local

artists. Window-shopping one day, we fall in love with a stunning blue pottery elephant and promise each other we'll return for it later that day. But sadly, like so many gems unearthed in the Venetian maze, we never find it again.

Naturally, we steal a kiss on the wooden Ponte dell'Accademia, a popular proposal spot where Greg Wise reportedly popped the question to actress Emma Thompson. If you can, visit at night: the views from here over the Grand Canal to the Salute are among the best in the city, and it beats the Ponte di Rialto for romance hands down – somehow all those souvenir shops and snap-happy tourists just kill the vibe.

We spend our second day in Venice exploring the city on foot. There are 150 canals and 410 bridges in Venice but we decide to go map-free – as long as you're wearing comfortable shoes, there's no better way to see the place than by losing yourself in

the labyrinthine muddle of tiny lanes, curved bridges, quiet canals and grimy squares.

It doesn't take me long to remember why I keep coming back. There's so much to see, so much to absorb, that you could live here the rest of your life and never uncover all the historical gems Venice has to offer. The stunning Vittore Carpaccio paintings in the unassuming Scuola di San Giorgio degli Schiavoni; the columns in Piazzetta di San Marco, bearing statues of The Lion of St. Mark and St. Theodore, the city's patron saints; the soaring dome of Dorsoduro's Chiesa di Santa Maria della Salute, built in the 17th century in honour of the Virgin Mary and believed by many to have halted a devastating outbreak of plague ...

Naturally, we gravitate toward the touristy Piazza San Marco (St. Mark's Square), where not much has changed since I was a backpacker: the price of coffee is still astronomical and

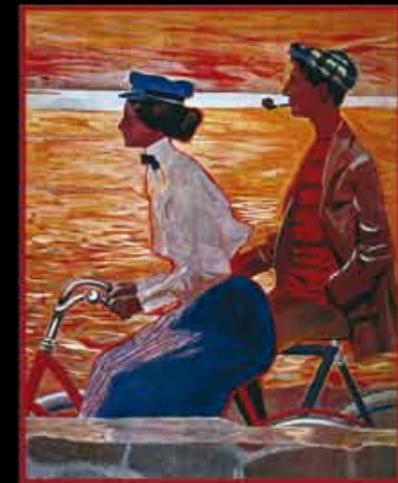
flocks of cheeky pigeons still lie in wait for breadcrumbs to be tossed their way. The queues to enter the square's Basilica di San Marco are inevitably long – it's almost worth the wait to see the dazzling 12th- and 13th-century mosaics – as they are to climb the stairs of the 99-metre-tall Campanile, the Basilica's bell-tower, for a breathtaking bird's-eye view over the entire city.

Nearby lies the Palazzo Ducale (Doge's Palace) and the small, enclosed Ponte dei Sospiri, or Bridge of Sighs, a white limestone construction that passes over the Rio di Palazzo. According to legend, lovers will be granted everlasting happiness if they kiss on a gondola at sunset under the bridge – though visitors seem a little reluctant to put the legend to the test when we visit, thanks to a web of unsightly scaffolding clinging to the bridge and nearby buildings.

Off the square, it's hard to miss

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WATER VIEWS
Left: Many hotels in Venice overlook canals

San Marco's designer stores, which are bound to conjure your inner Patsy or Edina. It's all names, names here, with boutiques from the likes of Versace, Louis Vuitton and Hermès alongside pricy shops stocked with Murano glass. We opt to potter for less obvious treasures and meander hand in hand through Santa Croce, buying Venetian jewellery at Riflessi Veneziani and running our fingers through buckets of vintage glass beads.

In San Polo, we gather with chocolate aficionados at VizioVirtù, a shop with such delicious aromas it makes our heads spin. Noisy, lively Castello is next, where we buy a pretty watercolour by local artist Monica Martin, who operates out of the Itaca Art Studio. The Libreria Acqua Alta bookstore also beckons, its sign, boasting "The most beautiful bookstore in the world," coaxing a grin out of passersby, who stop to pat the sleepy cats holding court outside.

Without warning, we find ourselves on the Ponte Rialto overlooking the Grand Canal, the 3.5-kilometre-long watery boulevard that snakes through the city. It's a breath-catching sight, lined with rows of historic palazzi (palaces). Gondola men in striped shirts push their tourist cargo forward and vaporettos groaning with

passengers chug from stop to stop.

After battling crowds, it's hard to believe you can find a spot to be alone in Venice. But simply slip into the back streets and you'll find tiny deserted trattorias and neighbourhood bars in which you can sip spritz (a refreshing local tippale that pairs Campari and Prosecco with a slice of orange or lemon) accompanied by hearty panini or cicchetti, small tapas-like bites.

Venice is probably at its most alluring at night, when the crowds disperse and many of the churches and monuments are illuminated.

But it's cocktail hour and we make a beeline for Harry's Bar, birthplace of the Bellini, before enjoying a late dinner at Ristorante Lineadombra. The intimate terrace of this out-of-the-way Dorsoduro restaurant overlooks the Guidecca Canal. We dine on steak and home-made seafood pasta with lashings of lobster. It's our best meal yet.

Too soon, it's time to leave the city, but now I'm not the only one in the grip of a Venetian love affair. As we glide to the airport on a speedboat, I glance at my fiancé and know it's not a matter of if, but when we'll be back in Venice. •

Photography by Rachel Smith.

travelfacts

gettingthere

Emirates flies from a number of Australian cities to Venice via Dubai. 1300-303-777; emirates.com/au

Qantas operates daily flights from Sydney and Melbourne to Venice via London. 131-313; qantas.com.au

gettingaround

Walking is the best way to soak up the Venice vibe. *Vaporettos* (water taxis) are like taking buses, Venice-style: they're slow, often packed and tickets cost around AU\$9 per trip. If you're staying more than three days, invest in a Blue Card, which offers unlimited travel. A pre-paid Venice Connected pass can also be purchased online up to four days before you arrive, offering savings on public transport and at museums. veniceconnected.com

ATI Tours offers interesting excursions around Italy and Europe. 1300-888-997; atitours.com.au

whentogo

Crowded from June through September and in February during Carnevale di Venezia, Venice is best visited between October and April. The city falls prey to high tides during the winter months but raised walkways are set up in the major tourist areas.

wheretostay

Luxurious rooms and outstanding service make Ca Maria Adele in Dorsoduro a good choice. 39-41/520-3078; camariaadele.it

Also in Dorsoduro, Design Hotel Ca' Pisani oozes Art-Deco glamour. capisanihotel.it

If you're looking to sleep in style on the doorstep of the Grand Canal, check in to the Palazzo Barbarigo Sul Canal Grande Venezia, San Polo; 39-41/740-1772; palazzobarbarigo.com



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