

# Venice in Focus

Marcia Vallance

After two years in pandemic lockdown now behind us, our first opportunity to travel was to the astonishing city of Venice, the jewel of the Adriatic. It has an amazing history dating back to 421 AD and is made up of 119 islands in the Venetian Lagoon. The original population learned to build on the marshy land by drilling closely spaced piles made from trunks of elder trees, noted for resisting water, into the mud and sand. Plates of Istrian limestone were then placed on the piles as foundations for all those amazing buildings. Scientists today are working hard to rescue Venice from the ravages of floods and climate change.

It is quite something to explore Venice on foot or take a Vaporetto ferry around its dense network of



*The famous Rialto Bridge*

canals, with over 400 bridges linking the islands. The most famous bridge is **Rialto Bridge** built at the end of the sixteenth century, taking four years to build. It was built from Pietra d'Istra, a rock of bright, white colour giving the bridge a distinctive appearance, along with the inclined ramps and rows of shops either side of a central walkway. It was the only crossing of the Grand Canal for some 300 years. Even today there are only four bridges crossing the Grand Canal, which weaves like the letter 'S' through the heart of Venice.

## Some of the best things to do in Venice (besides a gondola ride)

A gondola ride can be fascinating and is part of the history of the city, but this city is filled with many wonderful things to do and see. If you want to experience a ride in a gondola, it's possible to cross the Grand Canal in one at certain points for much less than the cost of a ride, but this option is definitely not as romantic!

### See the Bridge of Sighs

This bridge is unique for being enclosed and built in the bright, white limestone that was used to build Rialto Bridge. It connects Prigioni Nuove, a prison, to the Doge's Palace. It was used to transport prisoners between buildings and is definitely worth a visit.

### Try Venetian food

For a taste of the real Venice, avoid the tourist-trap restaurants around Piazza San Marco and head instead for some local places. We invested



*The Bridge of Sighs*

in a food tour with a guide to find some of these places and this opened up the delights of Cicchetti – the

Venetian answer to Spanish Tapas. These are small snacks enjoyed with a glass of wine and are a very important aspect of Venetian social life. There are so many different cicchetti but our favourite was creamy baccalà mantecato (creamed salty cod) and bite-size crostini.

Explore some local restaurants – ask your hotel to help you. Our tour guide gave us several places to go where only locals go. They have wonderful menus with seafood a specialty in Venice. There are now only 50,000 permanent local inhabitants of Venice so this is becoming a special thing to do.

### Get lost in Venice

One of the most pleasant things to do is to meander down the back streets along the canals, crossing picturesque bridges that make excellent photos until you need a rest at a local bar beside a canal where you can enjoy a spritz, one of the popular refreshing drinks enjoyed by Venetians. A spritz is a wine-based cocktail made with prosecco, a bitter liqueur such as Aperol, and sparkling soda water. It's typically served over ice in a wine glass, lowball glass, or martini glass with an orange wedge garnish and is delicious. After you're refreshed, you'll easily find your way back to the Grand Canal!

### See the special popular attractions

There are some places on every tourist list that are worth seeing. Just try to get to some of them early to avoid the crowds.

**The Doge's Palace** is a very interesting history lesson, and a combined entrance ticket can give you access to other museums.

**Basilica di San Marco** blends architectural styles of east and west and was consecrated in 832AD as a building to house the remains of St Mark. Make sure you go early as the queue can get quite long later in the day.

**Peggy Guggenheim Collection** occupies the old 17<sup>th</sup> Century Customs House and exhibits modern and contemporary works of art. It is easily accessed using a vaporetto (local ferry).

The **Cannaregio area** is a fabulous place to explore, with historic houses and the oldest Jewish ghetto in the world. It is close to the Venezia-Stazione Santa Lucia – the central train station in Venice. You may



*View of Venice's Piazza San Marco (St Mark's Square) from the ferry. The piazza is home to the Basilica di San Marco (St Marks' Basilica), with the Palazzo Ducale (Doge's Palace) next door. The Campanile (St Mark's Basilica bell tower) dominates the skyline.*



even choose to find a hotel in this area for your stay in Venice, as we did. There are lots of restaurants and easy access to Piazza San Marco.

Check with your hotel for other places you would like to visit, these are just a few interesting things to do.

### Visit some of the islands

A vaporetto (ferry) ride can take you to some of the islands that are really fascinating. A visit to Murano or Burano is well worth the effort. **Murano** is famous for glass making and there are demonstrations on the island of artisans performing their skill. Lots of shops display the best items and they are usually cheaper than the main city of Venice. After shopping there is no shortage of places to relax and have lunch. **Burano** was a fishing village, with brightly coloured houses lining the canals which are inviting to photograph. The island also has a history and tradition in the making of intricate, delicate lace with a tablecloth taking more than a year to make and quite expensive to buy. Once again there are lots of places to get a snack. Make sure you try the sardines and shrimp.

### Experience a musical concert

If you love music, there is no better place to see a live classical music concert. The performers wear Baroque costume and can transport you back to Vivaldi's days in Venice. There are many different concerts available and it is a fabulous evening of entertainment, especially if followed by dinner at a restaurant on the Grand Canal when crowds are thinning and it's not hard to find a place to enjoy some Venetian wine and food.



### Things to know before you go

#### Getting there

If you're flying into Venice, you're most likely going to land at Venice San Marco Airport. You can take the Alilaguna water bus for €15 and it takes about an hour and 15 minutes. Or you can take the ACTV bus which costs €10 one-way and runs every 15 minutes. The trip takes approximately 20 minutes and you will be taken to Piazzale Roma near the Venezia-Stazione Santa Lucia – the central train station in Venice. It is worthwhile to pay one of the many porters to take your luggage on their large trolleys to your hotel. They work very hard and charge reasonable prices – give them a tip! The Venetians do not like tourists dragging their bags across their little bridges so carrying them can be hard work. That's why we chose a hotel near the Stazione.

#### Getting around

If you're staying for a few days, it's worth it to purchase a Vaporetto pass for 24 or 36 hours. It must be validated each time you use it but they can be used as often as you like. This avoids long ticket lines and enables a trip to the Lagoon islands such as Murano.

#### Time to go

Peak tourist season is June-August which is also the hottest time. John and I visited Venice for the second time in September and found the weather to be just right without too many crowds. It's always much easier on the second visit to a city when everything is a little more familiar.

## Contributor details

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Marcia was Principal of Sunning Hill ETU (the Juvenile Justice Centre for Girls formally at Yasmar) from 1999-2009, and then Principal of Caringbah Public School from 2009-2016. She was an active member of the Student Welfare Reference Group during her time with SPC.