

VENTURE TO VENICE

Discover an idyllic Italian escape in the City of Canals

BY SUSAN LANIER-GRAHAM



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Venice, Italy, is one of the most romantic destinations in the world. As the Northern Italian capital of Veneto, the city consists of more than 100 small islands in the Adriatic Sea and it's always been separated from the mainland.

Historic central Venice has no roads and no cars – only canals and more than 400 bridges. There are six districts: San Marco, Cannaregio, Castello, Dorsoduro, San Polo and Santa Croce. The Grand Canal runs in a giant “S” through Venice, a 2.5-mile passageway lined by grand palaces dating from the 12th through the 16th centuries.

The real charm of Venice, however, is that there are hundreds of smaller canals and passageways ideal for meandering. The city is filled with music, art, architecture and history at every turn. While it is the perfect city for walking, it is also great (and especially known) for a private water taxi or gondola ride.

Historical Highlights

To get a true insider's look at the city, book a walking and boat tour with The Roman Guy (www.theromanguy.com). You will have a local English-speaking guide meet you and walk you – without waiting in long lines – through St. Mark's Basilica, which dates back to about 1063. Known as the “Church of Gold” for the gold-infused glass mosaics lining the interior, the exterior is equally impressive and dominates St. Mark's Square, or Piazza San Marco as it's known by locals.

During your walking tour of St. Mark's Square, your guide will also point out The Doge's Palace, an ornate Gothic structure from the 14th century built on the foundations of a building dating back to 476 A.D. The museum there houses a variety of Italian exhibits.

Your tour with The Roman Guy continues through Venice by boat. As your water taxi moves along the Grand Canal and through smaller canals, you will glide under the Rialto Bridge, past the Basilica Santa Maria della Salute, and glimpse one of the last remaining gondola workshops in Venice. This tour is also a great opportunity to ask your guide about places to eat and spots frequented by locals.

The Glass of Murano

A half-day visit from Venice, Murano consists of seven small islands accessible by way of bridges and is world-renowned for its glass artisans. Venice's public waterbuses (known as vaporetto) travel every few minutes to Murano. The trip takes about 30 minutes depending on where you get on the bus, which is like a ferry. You can purchase a multi-day city pass that includes transportation on the ferry, discounts for various museums, and Wi-Fi access at www.venezianica.it.

Although the glass is more expensive in Murano than in Venice, simply exploring the shops and factories is worth the trip. And while you can take an organized tour, you can also save by exploring on your own.

Lodging and Dining

It's no secret that Italy is a gourmand's delight, and Venice lives up to that reputation. There are cafes everywhere and the campos – or city squares – are filled with culinary treasures. Try A Beccafico on the small, quiet Campo Santo Stefano. The Sicilian chef serves lunch and dinner daily and it's especially idyllic if you sit outside to enjoy the square. Just be sure to make reservations for dinner.

Finding a hotel that puts you in the midst of the Venetian treasures is important. Sina Hotels (www.sinahotels.com) offers two unique options in Venice, both on the Grand Canal. If you prefer a quaint, boutique stay, head to the 26-room Palazzo Sant'Angelo, a member of Small Luxury Hotels of the World. Book a traditional Venetian-style suite overlooking the Grand Canal. The breakfast room, though small, is welcoming. In the evening, head to the bar and be sure to start with a classic Italian Spritz, made with your choice of Aperol or Campari. The hotel is perfectly situated near the Rialto and Academia bridges and just steps from the Sant'Angelo Vaporetto stop.

While Palazzo Sant'Angelo doesn't have a restaurant, the concierge can arrange for a water taxi to meet you at the hotel's private dock to take you to its sister property, Sina Centurion Palace, for dinner at Antinoo's Lounge & Restaurant. There, the Venetian chef serves both traditional dishes and cutting-edge cuisine with flair. The canal-side terrace is ideal for warm months, or opt to sit inside the all-white restaurant. This modern take on traditional Venice is sure to add whimsy to your Venetian escape.

At Antinoo's, begin your meal with either a traditional peach bellini or try the Strawberry Rossini, both made tableside with Italian Prosecco and fresh puree. Be sure to try the local Scampi in Saor – shrimp in an onion and vinegar sour sauce – and the gnocchi with duck ragout, Granny Smith apples, pumpkin and sunflower seeds. Of course, the sommelier will pair everything with local wines for an unforgettable Italian feast.

Sina Centurion Palace is housed in the historical Palazzo Genovese in one of two cloisters of the San Gregorio convent overlooking the San Marco area. The hotel has 50 rooms and suites, including the presidential suite with floor-to-ceiling Grand Canal views.

Learn more about Venice at www.visit-venice-italy.com.

