

Venice Part I: The One with Doogie's Palace

I have been fortunate enough to have visited Venice three times so far in my life. And frankly, even 300 would not be enough. To me, Venice is far and away the most beautiful city in the world. And before we move on, let's be clear—I mean [Venice, Italy](#), *not* Venice, California. BIG difference! While they both have equally infamous reputations for sexual deviance and saucy wardrobes, only one was founded before 1900 and therefore has historical significance.

Venice is unlike any other city in the world—full of romance, mystique, nostalgia and history. I am always swept away by the sensual charm, stunning architecture and (I'm sorry but there's no other word for it) *orgasmic* Italian food.

The first time I was in Venice was with a girl friend of mine when we were on spring holiday during my semester abroad in France. Despite the fact that I'd ran out of money, pulled a muscle schlepping my suitcase over every canal, and then got lost and had to hitchhike back to the city—even then, I was entranced.

Years later, I returned to Venice—only this time I arrived aboard a [luxurious cruise liner](#) and I had my special someone by my side. And because of that, it was even more magical than I'd remembered. It's a much different experience crossing over the Rialto Bridge strolling hand-in-hand with my husband-to-be listening to accordions as opposed to fighting off Italian waiters asking for a threesome. Having JP by my side only amplified the intense nostalgia I have for the city. The sail-in alone was enough to take my breath away. You can check out my blog on the [Best Sailaways in the World](#) for the full effect on that one.

Fortunately, Venice is so small that you can do a *ton* of stuff in a single day. If it's your first time, I would suggest hitting the major “Visions of Venice”:

[St. Mark's Square](#) is the primary heart of the city. It is here that they have beautiful cafés such as Caffé Aurora where my 11 euro cappuccino is offset by charming live music and the distant cooing of Venice's renowned flock of pigeons. At first I wondered why pigeons, of all birds, decided to make Venice their home. But then I looked around and decided that if I were a pigeon, what better place to be? I'd have endless water, infinite bagel crumbs and a beautiful view—what more does one need?

From St. Mark's Square, at least three of Venice's major monuments are within 100 yards of each other:

The [Doge's Palace](#) is the most beautiful building in Venice in my opinion (The Doge was the Chief Magistrate of Venice for over 1,100 years, from 697-1797). The palace has undergone several renovations over time due to multiple fires but like a phoenix from the ashes, the current pastel-colored, Gothic-style monument ignites a wonder and charm that is unmatched anywhere else in the world. In fact, I may set fire to my apartment when I get

home and build a mini-version with the insurance money. In the interest of complete honesty, I will admit that I have never actually been *inside* the Doge's Palace. The queues are always much too long for the amount of time we have and we're not allowed to film anyway. But I do hear it's spectacular; and if it's anything like the outside, I can't wait to see it. At least I don't have to have been on a tour to be able to pronounce it correctly as the "Doejes" Palace and not "Doogie's Palace" like I heard one lady say <<forehead slap!>>

[St. Mark's Basilica](#) is a one of the most beautiful Gothic cathedrals in the world. We were lucky once, to go on a day where it was not under construction so we had a clear view of the beautiful façade. The Byzantine artistry inside reminded me of the [Hagia Sophia](#) in Turkey and I found the golden mosaics on the ceilings to be the most impressive. You know that saying, "All that glitters is not gold"? Well, in here it is! Although not a religious person myself, I can still appreciate the incredible history—and I'm not talking about Dan Brown's *Inferno*. Just the volatile story of the famous [Horses of St. Mark](#) is enough for a Ridley Scott film. My other favorite part, though, is going outside on the upper balcony. This is one of the great views in Venice. To the south is an iconic portrait of Venetian power: the abundant sea framed by the trifecta of power: the Doge's Palace, St. Mark's Basilica and the Biblioteca Nazionale. To the west, beyond the famous square, is a city so tightly packed that the Grand Canal disappears in a sea of terra cotta roofs. I can also see our cruise ship from here looking very out of place—bright, modern and about 20% of the size of the entire city.

[The Campanile](#) is the Bell Tower of St. Mark's and the only vantage point that is even better than the Basilica. It was 8 euros a piece to go to the top. But what a stunning aerial view! It was almost like looking at Google Earth. People moving about St. Mark's Square look like ants and gondolas abound on the Canal, but it was only when I looked out to see that I was on the same plane as a flying pigeon that I really appreciated this view. As expected, there is fencing all around, but at least there are no windows, so I could still put my camera lens through the fence to get clean shots. Looking straight up, I saw the bells that still toll over Venice to this day. Thankfully, they didn't go off when we were there. If they had, I'm quite sure we would've missed our ship for not hearing the "all-aboard" horn on account of being deaf. Apparently, back in the day, each of the five bells had a unique purpose, from announcing the start of a Senate session to marking executions (as if they needed a bell for that!) The historic ambiance is ruined a bit by the tacky gift shop smack dab in the middle. But I did buy a calendar and a magnet so clearly they know what they're doing.

If St. Mark's Square is the heart of Venice, then the [Rialto Bridge](#) is the stomach—the core that's central to both excitement and hunger. If Venice has a "nightlife" this is where it's at. Twice we've eaten at Locanda Ca'Zose, a beautiful restaurant right along the Canal next to the Bridge. There is nothing closer to paradise than having a plateful of spaghetti, a glass of red wine and that stunning view. You can't go wrong with the Rialto Bridge as a backdrop, watching the golden light from the sunset crawl up the pastel buildings across the canal. There were several other restaurants on the row but we decided to start a family tradition here. Someday we will return with our own kids which will be completely surreal. As for the

bridge itself, this architectural icon has seen 425 years of life float by. The shops are no different than those within the city except for the view. And taking a photo with the canal in the background can be time-consuming if you wait for all of the people with selfie-sticks to move out of the way. But if this bridge could talk...

The physical points of interest in Venice are absolutely stunning in the bright light of day. But it's twilight in Venice that takes it from a feeling of charm to a feeling of nostalgia. The golden light of sunset, the gentle lapping of the water in the canals, and the dimly lit bridges is a feast for the senses. I truly feel a sense of peace that I'm convinced is inspired by something familiar in my soul. It's difficult to describe other than to say that as I stroll through the alleyways and over the canals, I feel pure serenity.

Doing a [Serenaded Gondola Ride](#), in my opinion, is the number one thing to do in Venice to evoke that pleasure principle. Yes, it's expensive. But if you're in Venice, you've already come this far, so you may as well do it right. We went on a gondola excursion arranged through the ship and we were lucky enough to be in the same boat as the musicians and the Italian opera singer. As we wound our way through the canals, the singer's strong, baritone voice bounced off of the brick buildings, reverberating in all directions. It was like having our own personal [Andrea Bocelli](#) in the gondola. And the smooth accordion that accompanied the song echoed romantically in unison with the gondolier's gentle strokes. Watching the gondolier deftly kick off the brick walls and duck under bridges gave me an appreciation for a cultural tradition that has been around for hundreds of years. It's estimated that in the 17th and 18th century, there were about 9,000 gondolas on the canals of Venice. Talk about a traffic jam! I wonder what percentage of them were missing teeth from not ducking in time to avoid the bridges?

I am so grateful to have had that legendary experience. An evening gondola ride is almost guaranteed to be one of the shore excursions that you can sign up for. But do so early! It's also the quickest one to sell out. But if you miss out on the shorex tour, not to worry. If you don't mind a bit of spontaneity, you can easily arrange for a gondola ride once you get to town. It's about the same price as the ship anyway, it's just less convenient than having it all arranged for you ahead of time. The popular places to catch a gondola are on the Grand Canal near the Rialto Bridge or at the south end of Calle Vallaresso, catty-corner to Santa Maria Basilica. But you can grab a gondola just about anywhere, and in fact, it may be a bit less crowded if you do so along one of the smaller canals in town.

Part of me wants to drop everything and move to Venice so that I can live in a cinematic paradise for the rest of my life. But I never want it to get old.

Stay tuned for more amazing Stories from Venice, Part 2!

Water Taxi or Gondola?

Hailing a cab in Venice is not quite the same as hailing a cab in New York. There are no cars and no roads—you literally have to walk, take a boat or swim get anywhere. The cruise line arranged a free ferry for passengers and crew to get to St. Mark's Square (I imagine that's the case for most cruise lines). That, by itself, was like an excursion. We sat in the back watching the beautiful city unfold on both sides like a pop-up book. Another time we decided not to wait for the ferry but instead took a water taxi. Often considered a poor man's gondola, water taxis are seriously underrated! They're cheap, they're frequent, and you still go down the heart of the Grand Canal. Maybe it's not quite as romantic since you're huddled up against 20 other people instead of just one. But it's a great, practical option to get around the most beautiful city in the world.

In a curious twist of fate, it just so happened that we were on a *double* overnight in Venice on our one-year wedding anniversary! (Lottery ticket, anyone?) So, we decided to do something special and we reserved a hotel room in town for a full two and a half days of complete ship-free bliss.

Venice:

- Telephone booth-sized hotel rooms
- Take a photo with a costumed street character
- Aerial view from top – red roofs, invisible canal
- Looking out of hotel window – local kids playing football on side of the wall
- Lightning storm
- Romantic Photo
- Color of the city unlike any other city in the world
- Hard rock Café (Basino Orseolo)
- “Casanova” movie
- Reflections in the water
- hotel – 1st anniversary (Locanda Ca'Zose)
- Water taxi vs. gondola
- Dinner on the Grand Canal (Café Saraceno) x2
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