

# ANTHONY HOROWITZ

*A window on the world of travel*



## My not so grand tour of the real Venice

I have a problem writing about Venice. How can I describe it with any originality when everyone is so familiar with it? Even if you've never been there, you probably know what to expect in the same way that everyone knows Stonehenge, or the *Mona Lisa*. Nor can I even advise you to visit this palazzo or that museum. Everywhere you go in Venice is jaw-droppingly beautiful: every square, every street, every bridge and every canal. It's a city where you could miss all the main tourist attractions and still have a wonderful stay.

But here are two words of advice that may justify this article. Off season. For years now I've been visiting between October and February. EasyJet has an excellent flight that leaves Gatwick at 8.40am, getting you in well before lunch.

This is when Venice is at its absolute best. Gone are the heaving crowds of tourists, the ridiculous selfie-sticks, the traffic jams of gondolas, the queues for the Doge's Palace and the Campanile (both, incidentally, unmissable). Yes, one or two restaurants may be closed and you have to wait longer for a water bus. But, trust me, Venice offers the perfect winter weekend.

You can be unlucky with the weather but I've often sat outside in the middle of January, sipping my Aperol cocktail and looking across the lagoon to Giudecca, a glorious view with the sunlight dazzling and the colours slightly muted, sometimes with a wintry mist that makes it more Monet than Canaletto. St Mark's Square is always astonishing, but try it at night when you walk through it alone with all the arcades lit up and the sky jet black. It's like starring in your own Fellini film. Gondolas may be expensive at €80 (£60) for half-an-hour, but they are more than worth it when there's not another boat in sight and shimmering reflections of the city all around you.

When I'm in Venice, I walk. I love the area around the Arsenale, once the biggest shipbuilding centre in the world, and from there I dip into Castello. Only about a quarter of a million people live in Venice but this area, with the washing hanging out over the narrow streets, feels truly inhabited but is surprisingly quiet, even in summer. I love the tiny canals and walkways in the Dorsoduro... where you'll find one of my favourite art galleries in the world, the Peggy Guggenheim



Collection with its modern paintings and lovely sculpture garden.

This year, for the first time, I went to the opera at La Fenice ([www.teatrolafenice.it](http://www.teatrolafenice.it)) – entirely rebuilt after it was destroyed by fire in 1996. I enjoyed everything about it, starting with the neoclassical façade which suddenly appeared at the end of a dark alleyway. That's one of the things I love about Venice, the way you are constantly being surprised. Turn a corner, cross a bridge and – bang! It hits you between the eyes. When I first stumbled across the church of San Moisè with its elaborate, white façade, the whole thing lit up at night, I was transfixed. Canova's tomb at the Santa Maria Gloriosa dei Frari is the same: you have to look twice just to believe what you're seeing.

Some critics have called La Fenice

kitsch but I wafted through, following the salmon-pink carpets and colonnades into an auditorium both majestic and intimate. Opera isn't for everyone and my wife did wonder about the two leads, Romeo and Juliet, both sung by quite epic women – but there's something special about seeing high art in such lovely surroundings, then stepping out into the city. Sensibly, the opera starts at 7pm, giving you time for dinner afterwards.

It's taken me many visits to work out how to eat in Venice. I'll stick my neck out and say that in my view almost all the restaurants are mediocre: bright lights, tables packed tightly together, food that is never more than so-so. But there are three or four places which never let me down. Osteria ai 4 Feri (0039 041 52 06 978) is small and shabby,

**Clockwise from above: the Arsenale district, which feels 'truly inhabited'; St Mark's Square and the Doges Palace at night; and ice cream at Gelateria Grom in Dorsoduro**

just off Campo San Barnaba, but the pasta's fantastic and the owner always welcoming. After lunch, I head to nearby Grom for the best ice cream in Italy.

I'm fond of Trattoria da Remigio (0039 041 2 30 089) in Castello as it's traditional and authentic. Next door, Osteria Oliva Nera (0039 041 522 2170) is a little pricier and more elegant for dinner: fantastic lasagne and don't miss the fried zucchini flowers with mozzarella. But my favourite place in Venice – I like it so much I'm tempted not to share it – is the *ini al Botteggon* (0039 041 523 0034) near the Guggenheim. It's not even a restaurant but a wine bar with no seats. You stand in two antique rooms or drift outside and sip prosecco accompanied by Venetian food. It's lovely.

Trovato opposite and Venice's oldest gondola factory just down the canal.

Where to stay? If you don't want to fork out for one of the grand hotels, there are plenty of smaller, attractive options. Pensione Accademia (0039 041 521 0188; [pensioneaccademia.it](http://pensioneaccademia.it)) in the Dorsoduro has a lovely, romantic courtyard on a corner where two canals meet though the rooms are small. La Calcina (0039 041 520 6466; [lascalcina.com](http://lascalcina.com)) is a charming, family-run hotel on the Giudecca Canal. It's quiet and has outstanding views. Both can be reached by water taxi – which you can pick up at the airport. The journey is pricey at €105 (£78) but worth it. And if you're coming for the first time, your first sight of Venice from the water will



rent your own apartment. Views on Venice ([viewsonvenice.com](http://viewsonvenice.com)) offers everything from studio flats to an entire palazzo. In the interests of full disclosure, I should tell you that the people there have become friends of mine and I also know one of the property owners. But I'm not doing this for a commission: I just think it's a great way to visit Venice... and it can be more economical, too.

Finally, two books that will tell you more than I ever could. Peter Ackroyd has written a superb history of the city – informative to the point of being exhausting. And, part of a series, *Secret Venice* by the French publisher Thomas Jonglez, is one to carry with you. From underwater crypts to the Nazi HQ, it makes Venice more fantastic than you can believe... and with