

AUTUMN

WINTER

SPRING

SUMMER

V E N I C E



Neither cresting tides nor a wintry chill can put a dampener on the glorious canal city in low season, writes Lydia Bell.

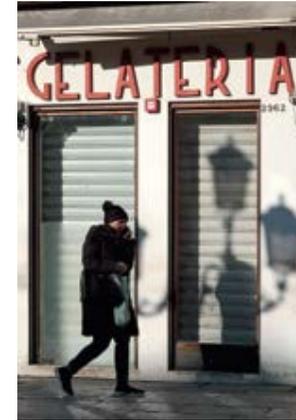
Photography by Colin Dutton

View of San Giorgio Maggiore from the Doge's Palace

In her excellent book, *Venice*, Jan Morris offers a deliriously dreary vignette of La Serenissima in winter. To paraphrase: “The nights are vaporous and tomb-like and the days dawn monotonously grey. The great hotels are closed or moribund, their echoing foyers haunted only by a handful of disillusioned millionaires and leathery ladies of intrigue. Not a fiddle plays in the Piazza.” If I’m alone in seeing the above account as a call to visit Venice in the off-season, it’s irrelevant. Morris wrote those words in 1959, when “only” a million-odd tourists visited Venice annually. Sixty years later, that number has risen to some 30 million and the city is more than just operational in the depths of winter. From the end of November to January, the weather is unpredictable and the shops and museums close earlier. The chance of the dreaded *acqua alta* (high water) is greater. But there are no crowds. I repeat – no crowds.



(From opposite) A gondola glides beneath the Rialto Bridge; Gelateria Paolin on Campo Santo Stefano; a sculpture of Jesus adorns a house in the Dorsoduro district



Venice has been daubed on thousands upon thousands of canvases and inspired libraries of poetry. Millions have been before you and will come after. This city could be as hackneyed as a Monet fridge magnet. But it's not.

It remains as shrouded in mystery and wonder as the soft mist that lifts off the Grand Canal in the late winter afternoon. It feels like a stage set for something – those gondola prows bobbing in the yellowing light, that turquoise water strangely still at times.

I visit Venice at the end of November, two weeks after it experienced the second highest flooding in recorded history as the water exceeded 1.5 metres. Three *vaporetti* (water buses) reportedly sank. Hotels suffered about 40 per cent cancellations. But the day we arrive, the waters and drama have subsided; Venice and her hotels are well-oiled machines adept at springing back. At The St. Regis,

with its contemporary-chic rooms and vast dove-grey marble bathrooms, I don't notice a thing. At The Gritti Palace hotel, where just a week before I watched on Instagram as guests waded through the lobby, a fantastical Christmas tree twinkles at me from the same spot. Probably benefiting from a cancellation, we're upgraded to the Hemingway Presidential Suite, which sits above the Grand Canal.

We walk around Venice's tightly packed mosaic of streets. On our first night, St Mark's Basilica is shrouded in fog, its colonnade picked out by the phantasmal glow of tiny fairy lights. The rest is a labyrinth, a maze of dead ends, alleyways that dart off to the right or left and endless bridges. In gloomy backstreets we chance upon stone cherubs on lintels, fragrant pasticcerias and sunlit squares with stupendous church façades that hide lonely frescoes. Long views down canals reveal lines of empty gondolas. It's all gloriously, claustrophobically beautiful.



(Clockwise from above left) Velvet is made by hand at Luigi Bevilacqua; the tools of the trade; CoVino's kitchen and its golden grey mullet with stewed pumpkin



Bellini Travel (bellinitravel.com), an Italy-specialist agency based in London, has waved a magic wand over our itinerary. Bellini's owner, Emily FitzRoy, treats you in a way that's anathema to traditional operators, from her personal take – hooking you up with friends of friends – to her tone, to the way she proffers dog-eared books from her shelves before you leave. I mention that I'm a big opera fan and find myself in a box at La Fenice, watching a brilliant performance of *Don Carlo*.

She sends us Cristina Gregorin, a writer and guide of 30 years, who slides us gently under the skin of the city. "Shakespeare wrote *The Merchant of Venice* in 1597, when the city was a more recognised metropolis than London," she says, as we gaze at the unreal view from the Rialto Bridge cast in the half-light of a late November afternoon.

On our shopping tour, Gregorin dismisses the Murano glass sellers that line the streets, homing in on a few that specialise in contemporary designs, such as the Sent sisters, or vintage pieces. She shows us where to buy Valse marbled paper and the best Venetian masks.

Of particular charm is the workshop of Saverio Pastor, a *fòrcola* and oar maker. The *fòrcola* is the ornate resting place of a gondolier's oar. "Its curve reflect the bends of the canals," says Gregorin. Pastor explains that the art has remained unchanged for half a millennia but business has slowed in his home city. "Venetians used to row across the lagoon and have a picnic on an island," he says. "But with more regulation, little by little the school runs by boat stopped and the husbands waiting patiently for their shopping wives disappeared."

We visit Luigi Bevilacqua, which produces rich *soprarizzo* velvets on pre-Napoleonic looms (sample clientele: Mariah Carey, the White House and Valentino). The family's been in the business for a while: in the 1499 painting *The Arrest of Saint Mark in the Synagogue* by Giovanni Mansueti, the purchasers' names are seen on a scroll, including "Giacomo Bevilacqua, weaver".

As I hear tales of old Venice in the time of the Republic, I get the sense that its past is as gripping and of-the-moment as current reality. Venice's glory days seem to live so vividly in the mind of its citizens that they become mental time travellers of sorts.

Medieval, mercantile Venice was a grandiose city-state poised on an incredibly lucrative point between East and West. It was privileged with the sort of ludicrous wealth that engendered a certain maverick hauteur. “All the gold in Christendom,” one commentator wrote, “passes through the hands of the Venetians.” The town had the most immense shipyard in the world and its inhabitants were multicultural and worldly-wise.

Our eating is loosely planned around recommendations and we adore the informal, winter-cosy trattorie and osterie. Our favourite is the €40 (about \$65) menu at CoVino, in the dark back lanes near San Marco, which serves imaginative modern dishes (Jerusalem artichoke sauce, Paolo Parisi egg, seasonal mushrooms, salsify root and truffles) from a tiny open kitchen. We snack on cicchetti (small snacks), around

the produce market at Rialto Bridge, visiting Al Mercà to enjoy panini sfilacci di cavallo – a shredded horsemeat sandwich – at the owner’s insistence.

Beyond the many churches, the artistic highlight is the Gallerie dell’Accademia. There are more Canalettos in other places but there’s something right about viewing Venice-inspired Titians, Tintoretos, Bellinis and Carpaccios in situ.

We end our worshipping of Venetian finery at the Doge’s Palace, the governing base and home to the oligarchy that ruled until Napoleon. As Venice edged towards the end of her republic, she embraced decadence even as she lost wealth. When Napoleon arrived in 1797, the 120th doge, Ludovico Manin, put up little resistance.

The city’s famous flamboyancy, brocade, gold cloth and Rococo style come from the doges. Liberace, eat your heart out. By the

time we get to the palace, it’s an overcast, ethereal late afternoon and few tourists’ footsteps echo across the inner courtyard. This could be the most ornamented place I’ve ever seen (bar Versailles) and offers physical proof that the digital era didn’t invent information overload – Venice did. Gentile da Fabriano, Pisanello, Alvise Vivarini, Vittore Carpaccio, Giovanni Bellini, Titian and the gang jostle for your attention, while the concealed passageways, note-passing nooks and cubbyholes suggest just how precarious courtiers’ power really was.

Lost in beauty for the nth time, we realise we’re late to leave. We rush back to The Gritti and quick as a flash we’re bundled onto a boat. We fizz off into the black waters, grandiose and smug (there’s no other way to be in Venice), and dock at the airport still awed by the ridiculous glory of this luscious wintry island haven. ●



The Gritti Palace’s lavish Hemingway Presidential Suite

Stay

Built in 1475 for the doge of Venice, **The Gritti Palace** (hotel.qantas.com.au/grittipalace) is magic in hotel form. Set on an alluring bend of the Grand Canal, it has views of the Basilica Santa Maria della Salute. The top suites overlook the canal but even the smallest room is laden with Murano glass, marble bathrooms and fine Venetian silk upholstery. Down the road, **The St. Regis Venice** (hotel.qantas.com.au/stregisvenice) has been refurbished with a modern, pastel-hued look: think Art-Deco-meets-21st-century boudoir. More than a third of the 169 rooms and suites overlook the gardens or Grand Canal and all are opulent.

Eat

CoVino (covinovenetia.com) specialises in seasonal menus. Unpretentious family-owned

Osteria Enoteca ai Artisti

(enotecaartisti.com) has a menu that changes daily according to what’s at the market (no fish on Monday when the market is closed). Everything at **Nevodi** (Via Giuseppe Garibaldi; +39 041 241 1136), especially the truffle ravioli, is delicious. **Da Fiore** (dafiore.it) does perfect Venetian dishes such as fritto misto and seppie al nero. The best eatery on Murano island is **Acquastanca** (acquastanca.it), which serves excellent gnocchi with scallops and zucchini. In the middle of the Venetian lagoon, on Torcello island, **Locanda Cipriani** (locandacipriani.com) serves dishes created by former owner Giuseppe Cipriani, including carpaccio. Cosy, gruff and real, it doesn’t get more local than **Dalla Marisa** (Fondamenta San Giobbe 652b; +39 041 720 211), which offers a set lunch of fish, meat or game.