



CITY OF CANALS

Venice rich with historic treasures

TALES FROM THE ROAD



ARLENE & ROBIN KARPAN

Europe is chock-a-block with historic towns and cities, but Venice stands in a class by itself. No matter how many photos you see of this famous water-borne city, nothing prepares you for experiencing its stunning setting in person.

Built on a cluster of small marshy islands as a refuge against barbarian invasions, Venice rose over the centuries to become Europe's premier maritime power and key to trade with the Orient.

Its prominence is reflected in some of Italy's most magnificent churches, palaces and works of art. Chief among these is dazzling St. Mark's Basilica, believed to house the bones of the Apostle Mark himself.

Its history dates to the ninth century with about 8,000 sq. metres of mostly gold mosaics and treasures from the Crusades.

Next door is the extravagantly ornate Doge's Palace, seat of power for centuries.

Artwork and lavishly decorated rooms contrast with cramped and dank prison cells, connected by shadowy passageways, and the infamous walkway known as the Bridge of Sighs, where condemned prisoners sighed as they enjoyed their last glimpse of Venice's beauty.

The only way to get around is by foot or boat. Cars, motorcycles or even bicycles are not allowed.

The winding Grand Canal is the main thoroughfare, with a network of smaller canals crisscrossing the islands. You seldom go far without climbing steps on yet another bridge.

Central streets are a mind-boggling maze, with some so narrow

that if you stretch out your arms you can touch buildings on both sides.

Just when you think that you've hit a dead end, a street suddenly opens into a small square, dominated by yet another magnificent church. Simply wandering the ancient streets is an essential part of the experience.

The two main challenges in visiting Venice are contending with crowds and high prices, both of which can be overcome with some planning. This is among Europe's top tourist destinations, so going in mid-summer or during holiday periods such as Carnival, means hordes of people.

Instead, consider March when the weather is cool but still pleasant or hit the most popular spots early or late in the day to avoid tour groups.

Venice has the reputation as one of Europe's more expensive cities, but we found a comfortable guest house on the Grand Canal for 50 euros.

Gondolas cost 80 euros for half an hour and restaurants in the main tourist areas often add extra service charges and cover charges to their already inflated prices. Get slightly off the beaten path, and costs come down to earth.

Fairly close to our hotel was a grocery store with a deli that sold excellent take-out meals for affordable prices.

A museum pass, covering admission to several museums and historic sites, offers good value.

Tourist information offices around town can help you sort through ticket options and combinations. Ask about discounts if you're younger than 26 or older than 65.

The best deals are the day or multi-day passes for unlimited rides on the vaporetti, or water buses, which operate different routes throughout the islands.

While Venice has a few must-see historic sites, there are so many that you can easily get overwhelmed.

We enjoyed simply wandering around, hopping on and off the

water bus that runs the length of the Grand Canal and exploring different areas or heading to some smaller islands.

Arlene and Robin Karpan are well-travelled writers based in Saskatoon.
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LEFT: St. Mark's Basilica dates back to the ninth century.
TOP: This is one of many elaborate rooms in the Doge's Palace.
ABOVE: A water bus travels the Grand Canal.

| ROBIN AND ARLENE KARPAN PHOTOS

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