

# INTRODUCING VENICE



*Kings of the canal – a fleet of gondoliers makes its way down the Grand Canal*

Perhaps Turner captured its essence best. Elusive, floating, enigmatic, Venice rides in a misty middle distance of muted colours and sounds, a dreamlike place that defies definition and beggars description.

In this improbable city, built upon islets and platforms of countless pylons slammed over the centuries into the mud of the lagoon, people go about their business, traipsing along lanes and beside canals, up and down the countless bridges. The air hums to the sound of padding feet, chatter resonating off the walls along narrow, crooked streets and bustling, uneven squares.

Down the centuries, the city's builders seem to have delighted in variety: from the great mosaics of the Basilica di San Marco and Torcello to the sober Gothic majesty of the Chiesa di Santa Maria Gloriosa dei Frari, from the simplicity of Romanesque to the discipline of Palladio, from the sensuality of Veneto-Byzantine to the extremes of baroque, the concentration of architectural gems is astonishing. The same is true of its art – the parade of past greats from the Venetian school seems infinite. The number of masterpieces left behind by Tiepolo, Tintoretto, Veronese, Titian and others in the city adds up to the equivalent of death-by-chocolate for art lovers.

The roads of Venice are made of water. Fire engines, police, ambulances and taxis tootle about as wheeled vehicles would elsewhere, only here they are boats and the speed limit is 5km/h. Not that anyone seems to enforce the limit; suntanned taxi drivers pound about in their expensive, oak-panelled vessels, dodging exasperated gondoliers with their boatloads of enthralled visitors.

Used to the accumulation of natural and constructed beauty that surrounds them, and seemingly indifferent to the slow decay of that same beauty, Venetians sometimes seem unaware that Venice has long ceased to be one of the centres of the European universe. They go about their business like phantoms among the tourists. Although at times (especially on hot summer days) it seems impossible to move for the crowds, it is as though the locals don't even see the day-trippers. But how they wish the visitors would learn to walk in single file in narrower streets – allowing more purposeful individuals to move ahead!

Venice survives largely because of tourism, but the flip side is a constant run on local housing for use as hotel space and second homes. Buying is prohibitive and rents soar. When locals are evicted to make way for such development, they frequently throw in the towel and move to the mainland – less aesthetically pleasing but eminently more practical. Huge state funding would be required to provide the incentives to encourage people to stay. Shops that are useful to locals continue to close as more and more pizza-slice and cheap glass-bauble outlets open.

With around 61,500 permanent residents (268,700 in the whole municipality, which encompasses the other lagoon islands – totalling around 31,500 people – and Chioggia, Mestre, Marghera and other bits of the mainland), Venice is not what it was. Back in 1951, some 175,000 people were resident in the city itself. The downward demographic trend continues – since 1993 the historic city has lost on average about 1000 residents a year. Those who stay behind are ageing rapidly. The percentage of the population in primary school has dropped from 8% in 1951 to less than 3% today. There are more women aged over 80 than under 18. Some say the point of no return has been passed.

The city can be frustrating. You can't park your car outside the front gate (you can't park one anywhere!) and everything costs more because transport and distribution by boat is dearer than on land. How much shopping you can do is limited by what you can carry. Moving house involves hiring a removals boat. If you have a large enough window overlooking a canal, so much the better – it's easier to hoist things up from the boat than to drag furniture around to a street entrance. Living on the ground floor is a trial – humidity and dampness are constant companions. Work outside of tourism is virtually impossible to come by. If the haemorrhaging continues, the city could be empty by 2040 and perhaps really will turn into an open-air museum, a tacky shadow of its once proud and glorious self.

Still, walking around the city today, it is difficult to feel a sense of impending doom. The timelessness of the place, the uniqueness of the city on water that has survived more dramatic threats in centuries past, lend it an air of quiet self-assuredness. The canal tides flow this way and that in the course of the day, as they have always done. The essence of Venice is intact and its spirit indomitable.



*Sweeping view of the lagoon city*

# GETTING STARTED

A trip to Venice can be a fairy-tale adventure. It also seems equally made for romantic couples, contemplative loners and families. The trick is getting certain things right. For the lowdown on digs and grub, see the Sleeping and Eating chapters to help ensure these aspects of your stay go off nicely. Take a look at the many festivals that take place and book accommodation well ahead in those key periods. You may want to book tables at certain restaurants too. Venice is never going to be cheap, so see [p19](#) for an idea of the kind of outlay you can expect to make.

## WHEN TO GO

Christmas, New Year and from Easter to September can all largely be considered high season, although local tourism drops in August, taking some of the pressure off. If you can manage it, timing your visit to coincide with one of the city's big shindigs (see Festivals, [below](#)) will add an extra festive dimension to your discovery of Venice. Otherwise, as a general rule, the best time of year to visit is spring, from about April to June (although Easter is busy with school groups). July and August can be unpleasantly hot and muggy; and late autumn to December, wet. If you don't mind the cold, you can get lucky in winter (around January and February) with crisp blue skies and a relative scarcity of tourists. See also [p252](#) for a list of holidays in Venice. For the latest on art and other fairs, have a look at [www.venezi afiere.it](#).

## FESTIVALS

Although there is always something going on in Venice, the main events (with the exception of Carnevale) are generally concentrated in the months of May to September. These events range from traditional festivities like the Festa del Redentore to more contemporary musical offerings. The art and architecture *biennali* bring several months of concentrated culture to the city every year. You can find out more about many of Venice's upcoming events at [Cultura & Spettacolo](#) ([www.culturaspettacolovenezia.it](#) in Italian).

## January

### REGATA DELLA BEFANA

The first of more than 100 regattas on the lagoon throughout the year is held on the day of the Epiphany (6 January), only this one features witches and broomsticks aboard the boats! In Italy, La Befana is a

## ADVANCE PLANNING

As a rule, it is best to book accommodation in advance. For apartments, start your search as far ahead as possible; see the Sleeping chapter, [p200](#). Better restaurants also frequently require reservation, although usually one or two days is sufficient (except in the early days of La Biennale in June and during the Mostra del Cinema – see Festivals, [left](#)). A handful of sights attract long queues – you can book ahead for some at [www.weekendavenezia.com](#) (see the boxed text, [p61](#)). For important theatre events, particularly opera at La Fenice, you should check the programme and book in advance online. There are several online booking sights; see [p196](#).

good, witchlike personage who, according to legend, accompanied the three wise men, distributing sweets to children everywhere, hoping that one would be Jesus. Italian children go to sleep on the night before (the night the three wise fellows, according to tradition, arrived with gifts for the Christ child) wondering what La Befana will bring them. Traditionally, good children got sweets and naughty ones a lump of coal. In more modern times the lump of coal became a sticky confectionary. This used to be the main gift-giving feast, rather than Christmas. Babbo Natale (Father Christmas) is a foreign import that has, sadly, largely supplanted the Italian tradition.

## February

### CARNEVALE

[www.carnevale-venezia.com](#)

This is the major event of the year, when some Venetians and many outsiders don spectacular masks and costumes for a week-long party in the run-up to Ash Wednesday (see the boxed text, [opposite](#)). The starting dates for Carnevale in the next

few years are 29 January 2008, 13 February 2009 and 5 February 2010.

## March

### SALONE NAUTICO DI VENEZIA

[www.festivaldelmare.com](#)

Since 2002 the Stazione Marittima (Ferry Terminal) has hosted the increasingly popular Venice International Boat Show. In 2007, the show was bigger and better than ever, with regattas at Stazione Marittima and the entire Arsenale opened to the public to view about 100 historic vessels and performances bringing back to life the Venice of the Serenissima.

## April

### FESTA DI SAN MARCO

The feast day of St Mark, the city's patron saint, when men give their beloved a bunch of roses, is on 25 April.

## May

### VOGALONGA

[www.vogalonga.com](#)

Meaning 'long row', this is a good-natured, long-distance rowing regatta, held in the

first half of the month. This event began in 1974 and has developed into a friendly free-for-all, with 3000 to 5000 participants and around 1000 boats of all descriptions (powered by human muscle) participating in the 32km jaunt from the Bacino di San Marco up to Burano via Sant'Erasmus and back down to the Grand Canal via Murano and Cannaregio.

## FESTA DELLA SENSA

[www.sevenonline.it/sensa](#)

This feast day falls on the second Sunday of May and marks the Feast of the Ascension (Sensa in Venetian). Already an important day in the Catholic calendar, it takes on a special significance in Venice. Every year since Ascension Day 998, when Venetian forces left to regain control of Dalmatia, the city has celebrated the Sposalizio del Mar (Wedding with the Sea). The ceremony, held off the Lido on the ducal galley, evolved after Pope Alexander III offered Doge Sebastiano Ziani a gold ring in 1177, to be used in a 'wedding with the sea' ritual to denote Venice's maritime mastery. The mastery is a distant memory, but the mayor stands in for the doge (leader, duke) each year to this day.

## RITES OF SPRING

Venetians have been celebrating the approach of spring with Carnevale since at least the 15th century. In those days private clubs organised masked balls, and popular entertainment included such fun as bull-baiting and firing live dogs from cannons. By the 18th century Venice was home to hedonism, and the licentious goings-on of Carnevale lasted two months.

Things quietened down after the city's fall to Napoleon in 1797, and Carnevale died when Mussolini banned the wearing of masks. Revived in 1979, it has become the world's best-known baroque fancy-dress party, as extravagant as Rio's Carnival is riotous.

The festivities begin on a Friday afternoon with La Festa delle Marie, a procession through the city. This is a precursor to the official opening on Saturday, when a masked procession leaves Piazza San Marco around 4pm and circulates through the *calli* (streets). The next day there are jousts and other mock-military tournaments.

The following Friday evening's highlight is the Gran Ballo delle Maschere (Grand Masked Ball), which takes place in different locations each year – usually a suitably grand palace is chosen for the event, otherwise known as the Doge's Ball. Anyone with proper costume and mask who is able to dance the quadrilles and other steps of a few centuries ago may join in. Tickets can cost in excess of €200, plus the outlay for costume hire.

Saturday and Sunday are given over to musical and theatrical performances in Piazza San Marco and other locations. *Calcio storico* (a medieval approximation of football in period costume) matches are played on Piazza San Marco, also the scene for a parade of the best costumes in town (and they can be extraordinarily ornate). That parade is repeated on the following Tuesday. Also on the Sunday a beautiful procession of decorated boats and gondolas bearing masked passengers wends its way serenely down the Grand Canal.

During the course of the festivities plenty goes on outside the main events. Street performers fill the main thoroughfares and squares. An ice-skating rink is sometimes set up in Campo San Polo. Whatever you do, make sure to pop into a pastry shop and stock up on *frittelle veneziane* (scrumptious sugar-coated deep-fried balls of dough made with raisins, rum and, depending on the cook's whim, other goodies).

## Late May–Early June

### PALIO DELLE QUATTRO ANTICHE REPUBBLICHE MARINARE

The former maritime republics of Amalfi, Genoa, Pisa and Venice take turns to host the colourful historic Regatta of the Four Ancient Maritime Republics, in which four galleons, crewed by eight oarsmen and one at the tiller, compete for line honours. The challenge will be held in Venice again in 2011.

## June

### VENEZIA SUONA

[www.veneziasuona.it](http://www.veneziasuona.it) in Italian

The streets and squares of Venice burst into musical life during Venice Plays, an annual music fest. Mostly local bands of all descriptions fill the evening air with good musical cheer on the third or final Sunday of the month. Performances run from 4pm to 10pm.

### VENICE VIDEOART FAIR

[www.veneziafiere.it](http://www.veneziafiere.it) in Italian

Held on the Isola di San Servolo over two days in early June, this brings the latest in video art to the ancient city of art.

### CORNICE VENICE INTERNATIONAL ART FAIR

[www.corniceartfair.com](http://www.corniceartfair.com)

A more money-down businesslike contemporary art fair held to coincide with the first few days of La Biennale.

### SAGRA DI SAN PIETRO DI CASTELLO

The busy Festival of St Peter of Castello takes place on the last weekend of June with music, drinking and eating at the steps of the church that was once the city's cathedral. It is one of the city's longest-standing and most traditional festivals.

## June–November

### BIENNALE INTERNAZIONALE D'ARTE

[www.labiennale.org](http://www.labiennale.org)

This major international exhibition of visual arts started in 1895 and was held every even-numbered year from the early 20th century. The 1992 festival was postponed until 1993 so that there would be a festival on the Biennale's 100th anniversary in 1995. It is held in permanent pavilions in the Giar-

dini Pubblici, and at other locations in Venice, including parts of the Arsenale, Palazzo Grassi and Palazzo Correr. In alternate years the Biennale Internazionale d'Architettura (Biennial International Architecture Exhibition) is staged. In 2003 a new element was added with the Festival Internazionale di Danza Contemporanea (International Festival of Contemporary Dance), held annually from mid-June for about six weeks.

## July

### FESTA DEL REDENTORE

The Feast of the Redeemer is marked by yet another regatta on the Grand Canal. The main celebrations, however, take place at the Chiesa del Redentore on Giudecca on the third weekend of the month. The Senato (Senate) ordered the construction of this church in 1577 in thanksgiving for the end of a bout of the plague. Every year thereafter, the doge, members of the Senato, other VIPs and sundry citizens celebrated by crossing the canal over a provisional pontoon bridge to give thanks. The doge is no more, but the tradition has continued. All sorts of boats fill the Canale della Giudecca to join in the festivities, as the city folk wander to and fro across the pontoon. The highlight is an extraordinary (and extraordinarily long) fireworks display above the Bacino di San Marco.

## July–September

### D'ESTATE IN CAMPO

[www.destateincampo.it](http://www.destateincampo.it) in Italian

Throughout the summer months, theatre, music and other events are played out in the *campi* (squares) of Venice and elsewhere too (such as the Forte Marghera on the mainland). Pick up programmes from tourist offices.

## August–September

### MOSTRA DEL CINEMA DI VENEZIA

[www.labiennale.org](http://www.labiennale.org)

The Venice International Film Festival is organised by the Biennale committee and held annually at the Palazzo della Mostra del Cinema on the Lido. Along with Cannes, Berlin and Locarno, it is one of Europe's big showcases for the annual crop of new releases around the world. International stardom descends on the city, hotels and restaurants are booked out and locals

immerse themselves in a welter of original-language films that throughout the rest of the year they get little chance to see.

## September

### REGATA STORICA

This historic series of rowing races along the Grand Canal is preceded by a multifarious parade of boats, many decorated in 15th-century style and powered by crews in period costume. Venetians first organised a rowing race in 1274 and have been doing it ever since. This regatta, one of the most important, is held on the first Sunday of the month. The parade is followed by a series of four races in different categories. The races start at Castello and proceed west up the canal to the former convent of Santa Chiara, where the boats turn around a *bricola* (pylon) to pound back down to the finishing line at Ca' Foscari, cheered on by the locals. The main event is the men's *caorline* (broad, snub-nosed lagoon vessels) race, where participants use all their muscle power to make these seaborne beasts surge ahead.

### SAGRA DEL PESCE

The island of Burano comes truly alive for a weekend in September (dates vary) for this annual Fish Festival. Stands sell fish and polenta, which is washed down with white wine and accompanied by traditional music. In the afternoon the city's only mixed men's and women's rowing regatta takes place off the island.

## October

### FESTA DEL MOSTO

On the island of Sant'Erasmo, northeast of the city, where wine grapes are still grown – although the final product is hardly world-class – the grape harvest is celebrated in October (dates vary) with this Grape Juice Festival dedicated to the fruit of the vine. Food, music and wine (fermented grape juice after all!) are part of the day's fun on Venice's 'garden island'.

## November

### FESTA DELLA MADONNA DELLA SALUTE

This procession over a pontoon bridge across the Grand Canal to the Chiesa di Santa Maria della Salute on 21 November

## HOW MUCH?

40-minute gondola ride €80

Afternoon spritz (prosecco-based drink) €2 to €3

1L mineral water in a bar €2 to €3

Coffee at the bar €0.90 to €1

Large beer (0.4L) €4

Large panino (sandwich roll) €3

12-hour vaporetto ticket €13

Souvenir T-shirt €15 to €25

Public toilet €1

Bicycle hire on the Lido (per day) €10

is to give thanks for the city's deliverance from the plague in 1630.

## COSTS & MONEY

Venice is the most expensive city in Italy (although Rome and Milan do their best to keep up). Hotel prices can swing enormously depending on the season. In more popular periods (which is much of the year), a basic double is hard to find for less than €80 or €90 a night. Regardless of the time of year, a full sit-down meal (three courses, with dessert and house wine) will rarely come in under €25 to €30. You can snack your way around this, with pizzas costing about €6 to €12 and *panini* (sandwiches) and similar snacks costing €3 to €5. A handful of cheap eateries and the occasional set-lunch menu, even if not great, will keep body and soul together. Public transport is expensive for non-residents and is thought of by town authorities as a sort of virtual tourism tax.

A backpacker sticking religiously to youth hostels or other similar accommodation, walking rather than taking vaporetto, eating sandwiches by day and simple meals at night and keeping sights to about one a day could scrape by on about €50 per day, a little more if you want to throw in a couple of drinks. A midrange budget, depending largely on your choice of accommodation, could easily run from €100 to €250 a day.

## INTERNET RESOURCES

Many websites are dedicated to all things Venetian. Some of the more useful sites:

Azienda Promozione Turistica di Venezia (APT); [www.turismovenetia.it](http://www.turismovenetia.it) The tourist office's website has a search

function for tracking down addresses and phone numbers, information on sights and hotels, and a cultural-events agenda.

**Comune di Venezia** ([www.comune.venezia.it](http://www.comune.venezia.it)) The city's town hall site has links to museum sites and other useful information, including resources for those who wish to be married in Palazzo Cavalli on the Grand Canal (search under Tourism/Wedding in Venice).

**Ente Nazionale Italiano per il Turismo** (ENIT; [www.enit.it](http://www.enit.it)) The Italian national tourist body's website has lots of general information.

**Raixe Venete** ([www.raixevenete.net](http://www.raixevenete.net)) An online newspaper in Venet (the language of the Veneto region) with games, news and miscellany from the Veneto community throughout the world.

**Rialto: the Venice Marketplace** ([www.rialto.com](http://www.rialto.com)) Want to shop in Venice without going there? This could be the site for you. Many of the city's prestigious stores (and some perhaps not so prestigious) have contributed to this site. You can see catalogues and order online.

**Sal.Ve** ([www.salve.it](http://www.salve.it)) This site, prepared by the Italian Ministero delle Infrastrutture e dei Trasporti (Ministry of Infrastructure and Transport), is dedicated to Venice's complex urban and environmental problems.

**Veneto** ([www.veneto.org](http://www.veneto.org)) Information about the Veneto region, of which Venice is the capital, can be found here, including history, language and local news. In Venet or English.

**Venice Blog** (<http://veniceblog.typepad.com>) A blog site for people who love Venice.

**Venice Explorer** ([www.veniceexplorer.net](http://www.veniceexplorer.net)) This site is bursting with information, but what makes it special is the interactive map, allowing you to zoom in on the precise location of the item you are researching.

**Venice for Visitors** (<http://europeforvisitors.com/venice>) Reviews, articles and links.

## VENETIAN ETIQUETTE

Walk single file (right side) along narrow streets to let people pass in either direction – do not walk two abreast, as you annoy the hell out of locals trying to get about their daily business. Obviously you'll want to stop and look at shops and sights as you wander along, but be considerate when you do. Avoid clogging streets if you are in a group. Remember that while you are blocking and gawking, residents around you are trying to get to work, make an appointment, get home after a long day...

On the vaporetti, if you're near the exit, get off at intermediate stops to let other passengers off. Better still, just move inside. ('Down the back of the vaporetto' might be the conductor's cry!)

**Venice Guide** ([www.veniceguide.net](http://www.veniceguide.net) in Italian & French) Practical info and curiosities from the lagoon city.

**Venice in Peril** ([www.veniceinperil.org](http://www.veniceinperil.org)) News on restoration and the dangers facing the city.

**Vogaveneta.it** ([www.vogaveneta.it](http://www.vogaveneta.it) in Italian) Everything you ever wanted to know about the Venetian way of rowing – standing up!

## SUSTAINABLE VENICE

Depending on the time available and where you are coming from, consider getting the train to Venice. From within northern Italy it is more time and cost efficient anyway. From neighbouring countries like Austria, Slovenia and Switzerland it is perhaps marginally slower and sometimes more expensive, but it's generally more convenient getting a point-to-point train.

Huge cruise ships (apart from creating problems for city foundations with massive waves) create an enormous problem with sulphur emissions that are literally eating away the city's stonework. Since the late 1990s, the number of such megacruise vessels calling in to Venice has multiplied exponentially, and the damage they cause is beyond calculation. In just one decade, much sculptural decoration in Venetian buildings has been eaten away. Marble and stone are turning to powder. Clumps of balcony fall away and there is a danger that sooner or later even greater chunks of buildings will collapse. The Venice city council has convinced most of these cruise lines to use a less damaging fuel (emitting less sulphur) when entering port, but the problem is far from solved. They dock for days with their motors kept running to power the ships' services, spewing smoke into the air.

Venice is under assault by land too. Of the 20 million annual estimated visitors (set to rise to more than 25 million in coming years with the growth in Chinese tourism), two-thirds are day-trippers. The latter generally spend little, but the city still has to deal with the litter and traffic generated. On an individual level, there's not much you can do to lighten your impact apart from common courtesy. Don't litter the city and follow etiquette rules to keep tension with the small resident population to a minimum (imagine your hometown inundated with 400 times the local population every year).

# THE AUTHOR

## DAMIEN SIMONIS



As a young backpacker with not a word of Italian and barely two brass *lire* to rub together, Damien first landed in Venice back in his Dark Age. Enchanted by his first encounter with the city on water, he took away a treasure

of confused and colourful images: majestic churches and palaces, twisting canals and narrow blind alleys, countless quaint bridges, ebullient produce markets, and an inescapable sense of romance and mystery. But what did it all mean? He finally returned years later, having lived for years elsewhere in Italy, on assignment for Lonely Planet. Like an old flame never quite forgotten, the charming if aged queen of the sea again worked her mysterious magic, and our besotted man in Venice just keeps coming back for more. Even when at home across the Mediterranean in that other sparkling city-on-the-sea, Barcelona, he can still taste that slightly bitter afternoon *spritz* as the Adriatic sun goes down.

### DAMIEN'S TOP VENICE DAY

It's a glorious early spring day in Venice. The tourist season is not yet in full swing, the winter bite has almost left the air and there is a lightness in everyone's step. Fortunate not to have to work today, I like to wander along to a café on Campo Santo Stefano, where I sit

for a frothy cappuccino, a *brioche* (croissant) and a read of the papers. Suitably confused by the day's parliamentary shenanigans down in Rome, I saunter off down the square and cross the Ponte dell'Accademia (p74), pausing to take in the postcard scenes up and down the Grand Canal. I must have taken this view in thousands of times, but I never tire of it. For a culture hit, I spend the rest of the morning immersed in the masterpieces of the Venetian Renaissance in the Gallerie dell'Accademia (p75). On emerging, I set off straight down the broad Rio Terà Antonio Foscarini for Fondamenta Zattere, where I turn westward and stroll until I find a nice spot to sit on a bench. Contemplating the low shadow of La Giudecca (p109) across the eponymous canal, I settle into a daydream and submit to a little natural ray treatment (they call the Zattere 'Venice's beach' after all!). Satisfied by the show – an unending parade of boats of all shapes and sizes, from megacruise liners through to brave and precarious rowboats. From there I turn north again and wind my way up towards San Polo and the warren of lanes and shops leading to the Rialto (p84). Lunch at one of the *osterie* (bar-restaurants) with a table near the Ponte di Rialto and looking on to the Grand Canal is a feast for the eyes as much as the palate. An afternoon of shop browsing on both sides of the bridge brings on a thirst, especially when the throng is in full flood. Wanting to escape the Rialto crowds, I head for the Fondamente Nuove in Cannaregio for an early evening *aperitivo* at Algiubagiò (p192). Ahhh! From the jetties here, vaporetta scoot out towards Murano and heftier ferries steam off for Burano and beyond. There is a sense that Venice is an entire, private universe.

### LONELY PLANET AUTHORS

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