

CRUISING VENICE

Locals tend to use gondolas only on special occasions, such as weddings and funerals. As a result, after 10 years of visiting Venice, I'd never taken one until one day we climbed into a gondola near Piazza San Marco and agreed to the suggested "special tour," for which we paid an astronomical 200,000 lire (\$114; I've since learned that the average price for a 50-minute ride is \$68). It was worth it. Our boatman—a fourth-generation gondolier—was charming, spoke perfect English, and pointed out all the important landmarks with great pride: Marco Polo's house, the Palladian church of San Giorgio Maggiore, Palazzo Molin (where Goethe stayed), palaces of Venetian nobles, the unfortunate Teatro La Fenice, the opera house destroyed two years ago by fire and awaiting restoration. The "ohaaaay" sound the gondoliers make to warn each other that they're about to round a corner.

By Vaporetto The water-bus is the way most of Venice gets around. It makes frequent stops along the Grand Canal. Tickets cost approximately \$3.50 and are sold at stops and in bars, shops, and tobacco stores displaying a sign reading ACTV. Don't be shy about asking for guidance; vaporetto drivers are used to offering directions.

By Traghetto Only three bridges cross the Grand Canal; if you don't want to walk a mile to get to one of them, catch a traghetto, one of hundreds of gondola ferries (they're actually retired gondolas) that traverse the canal at key points. The price of a ride is 40 cents. Most Venetians stand up, but feel free to sit—it's a lot better than falling into the canal and taking the rest of the boat with you.

By Motoscafo Water taxis can be hailed all over Venice, and will deliver you as close as possible to where you need to go. But they're expensive—a trip for four from the airport to Piazza San Marco costs \$80. A good thing to ask when renting an apartment: Will a *motoscafo* be able to deliver us right to it?

OUR FAVORITE SQUARES

Campo San Polo Once used for bullfights, masked balls, and mass sermons, Campo San Polo is one of the largest squares after San Marco. It's a good place to sit on a bench, rest your feet, and take in the crowd: mothers with babies, older people enjoying the sun, kids playing soccer, teenagers hanging out. If your crew is hungry, head to **La Patatina** (San Polo 2741), "the French Fry," which also has panini and fried vegetables; or **Osteria Enoteca Vivaldi** (San Polo 1457) for spaghetti with clams.

Campo Santa Margherita A spot we always gravitate toward, lured by its enchanted setting and pizza restaurants. Try **Al Sole di Napoli Pizzeria** (Dorsoduro 3023) or **Trattoria Antico Capon** (Dorsoduro 3004A). We love the outdoor cafés here too, among them **Il Caffè** (Dorsoduro 2963), and **Caffè Causin** (Dorsoduro 2996), celebrated for its gelato. In the mornings, there's a market selling fish, fruit, and vegetables. At night, send your teenagers for a slice at **Pizza al Volo** (Dorsoduro 2944), then to **Dolcevita** (Dorsoduro 2894A), a club frequented by young Italians.

Campo Santo Stefano This is the perfect place for a sightseeing break, since it's between the Accademia and Piazza San Marco. There are cafés on both sides of the square, and, for the price of an espresso or *limonata*—expect to pay a premium—you can watch Venice pass by as your kids play around the statue of 19th-century writer Niccolò Tommaseo. **Paolin** (San Marco 2962), on the northwest side, is considered by many to have the best gelato in the city: try the *bacio* (chocolate with hazelnuts) or *stracciatella* (chocolate chip) or pistachio. **Hostaria ai Morozi** (San Marco 2801) makes delicious curried scampi, as well as good salads and panini.

SIGHTS NOT TO MISS AND SOME DAY TRIPS

SIGHTS NOT TO MISS

Piazza San Marco I can't tell you how many bags of corn I've bought for Gianmarco and Anna to feed the healthiest pigeons I've ever seen. As they do this, live music drifts out of cafés, and it's nearly impossible not to take hundreds of pictures. For an overview, climb (or take the elevator) up the **Campanile**, the 16th-century lookout tower.

Basilica di San Marco Piazza San Marco's other highlight can be exhausting for children. Don't try to tour all of this incredible cathedral. Instead, walk through and point out the gold mosaics. Then go to the top floor to visit the four bronze horses of St. Mark.

Palazzo Ducale (San Marco 1; 39-041/522-4951) This extraordinary Gothic structure has housed Venetian offices of state for more than 1,000 years. Your kids may be inclined to move through quickly, but they'll stop when they get to the Sala del Maggior Consiglio with Tintoretto's *Paradiso*, one of the largest paintings in the world. They'll also love the armory room and crossing the **Bridge of Sighs** to the 17th-century prisons.

Outdoor Markets (Rialto Bridge and vicinity; mornings, Tuesday-Saturday) The streets leading to the Rialto Bridge are lined with vendors selling wooden toys, shoes, bags, and hats—a lot of it junk, but worth taking in for the exciting bustle. Just beyond the bridge is the **Pescheria**, the fish market.

Museo Storico Navale (Castello 2148; 39-041/520-0276) After seeing Venice by gondola, learn about its seafaring history—and check out the Doge's gilded barge.

Scuola Grande di San Rocco (Campo San Rocco 30125; 523-4864) Home to more than 50 works by Tintoretto. Fun factor: Use the museum-issued mirrors to look at ceiling details.

Gallerie Dell'Accademia (Campo della Carità; 39-041/522-2247) After you've taken in the amazing view from the Accademia Bridge, explore this art school, famous for its collection of Renaissance paintings. Kids love the dramatic scenes: People ascending to the heavens! Grinning camels! Executions!

TWO GREAT DAY TRIPS

Murano—a 10-minute boat ride from Venice—has been Italy's main glass-making center since 1291. That was the year all the furnaces were restricted to this island to prevent Venice from going up in a blaze. It's an ideal place to spend a day on foot, touring glass factories. A few worth checking out: **Domus Vetri d'Arte** (82 Fondamenta dei Vetrai; 39-041/739-215), **Sent Guglielmo** (8A Fondamenta dei Vetrai; 39-041/739-100), **Carlo Moretti** (3 Fondamenta D. Manin; 39-041/739-217), and **Barovier e Toso** (28 Fondamenta dei Vetrai; 39-041/527-4385). To get to Murano, catch the vaporetto that departs from Venice's Fondamenta Nuove, quays on the north side of Cannaregio, every 10 minutes. For lunch, try **Busa alla Torre** (3 Campo San Stefano; 39-041/739-662; lunch for four \$60), Murano's best seafood restaurant. Order the fritto misto of calamari, shrimp, soft-shell crabs, and turbot.