

Off-Season Venice

Just beyond the crowds, there is a calmer, more authentic, and more affordable Venice.

FOR AT LEAST THE LAST THREE CENTURIES Venice has been the world's most foolproof destination: no other city has so perfectly geared itself to tourism. But that very success can work against Venice's appeal-- especially in summer. Although the city has only 85,000 permanent residents, it draws 10 million visitors a year. Conventional wisdom has it that Venice should be visited off-season, ironically causing the once quiet Christmas?New Year's holidays to become almost frenetic in recent years. Yet those who truly know Venice have no fear of visiting even in July or August. For beyond the twin epicenters of mass tourism-- the Piazza San Marco and the Rialto-- the city can be a place of remarkable calm and solitude, living up to its poetic nickname: La Serenissima, "the most serene one." Founded 1,300 years ago on a coastal Adriatic island, Venice was by the turn of the last millennium one of the Western world's richest cities, Europe's gateway to trade with the East. Its concentration of wealth, power, and civic pride created a dense collage of styles and civilizations. A stroll along a single calle (narrow street) can still yield treasures on a par with those found in whole quarters of larger cities. For the visitor who slips just past the outward layer of plastic gondola souvenirs and pigeon photo ops, Venezia segreta-- "secret Venice"-- will gladly reveal itself. Although the city has perhaps the most enjoyable public transportation system anywhere-- the vaporetti that ply the Grand Canal, circumnavigate the town, and drift across the lagoon-- it is only by walking through the lesser-known quarters that Venice's richness and complexity can be properly appreciated. Pressing into unfamiliar terrain offers a further dividend: prices-- whether for an espresso, a roll of film, or a hotel room-- drop remarkably. The permanent inhabitants can't afford to pay through the nose, so why should you?

Here are two walking-tour itineraries, each manageable in a single morning or afternoon. (For phone numbers, the country/ city code is 39/41.)

WALK I: DORSODURO

The lazy reverse S-curve of the Grand Canal divides Venice roughly in two, with the less-visited Dorsoduro section to the south and west. To reach the Dorsoduro, cross the Grand Canal on the **Accademia Bridge**. Bypass the long line waiting to get into the Accademia Gallery (go there early Sunday morning, when it's least crowded) and turn right onto Calle Contarini, then cross over Rio di San Trovaso.

Where Rio di San Trovaso meets Rio della Toletta, you can check out one of Venice's best lodging bargains, the **Pensione Accademia** (Fondamenta Bollani, Dorsoduro 1058; 521-0578 or 523-7846, fax 523-9152; doubles from \$106). Housed in the graceful old Villa Maravege and set amid an atmospheric walled garden, the hotel is a favorite of the Room with a View crowd of Brits and scholars; it's often booked months in advance.

Follow the meandering Calle Toletta west and then north until you reach Campo San Barnaba, a large dignified square free from the touristy trash of San Marco. Behind a newspaper stand at the plaza's southwest corner is **Enoteca Randon** (Dorsoduro 2850/2853; 522-4410), a shop that stocks wine, pasta, truffles, and the best olive oils in Venice, which are as sought-after as rare vintages. Try the Corte Sant'Alda, made from olives of the Veneto region (about \$15 a bottle). You might have lunch at the small, unassuming but superb **Trattoria La Furatola** (Calle lunga San Barnaba, Dorsoduro 2870; 520-8594; lunch for two \$88) on the narrow street running west from the enoteca. You'll want to reserve a table, but arrive promptly: the owner is famously impatient, and will give away your table even though Italy is hardly the homeland of punctuality. Try the astonishingly fresh seafood salad appetizer or the perfectly grilled bronzino (sea bass).

Farther west along Calle lunga San Barnaba you'll reach Calle della Pazienza. Turn right, cross the canal, and walk north until you reach the 17th-century **Scuola Grande dei Carmini** (Campo Carmini; 528-9420). The six great Venetian scuole were not schools but more like civic clubs. Most tourists will be familiar with the Scuola Grande di San Rocco and its famous Tintoretto's, but few know the Carmini and its stunning grisaille-painted stairway, its sumptuous Tiepolo ceilings, and some of the most magnificent boiserie in the city.

Directly across from the Carmini, **Vini Sfusi** (Calle della Chiesa, Dorsoduro 2897; 523-1979) offers cheap but quite decent wine from the cask. It's only about \$2 a liter, but you have to bring your own container.

Moving into the adjacent **Campo Santa Margherita**, stop and check out the small stone kiosk in the plaza. This 18th-century gem, now vacant, was once a fish market; the inscription on its side lists the minimum sizes for the kinds of fish that were brought here to be sold.

Backtrack to Calle della Pazienza, turn right at Calle lunga San Barnaba, cross the canal, and walk west along Calle Avogaria to the **Church of San Sebastiano** (Campo San Sebastiano). Its majestic ceiling, by Veronese, was the artist's first commission in Venice, and he is buried at the church. Across from the entrance is a rare modern masterpiece in this historic city: the façade of an old **University of Venice** building (Dorsoduro 1687) that was redesigned by Italy's greatest postwar architect, Carlo Scarpa. Using the same Istrian stone found on the Doge's Palace, he gave new life to a proud and ancient building tradition. The façade's powerful simplicity shows why, since his death in 1976, Scarpa has become a cult figure among his fellow architects.

Good dining choices nearby include **Trattoria Anzolo Raffael** (Campo Angelo Raffaele, Dorsoduro 1722; 523-7456; lunch for two \$42), an inexpensive fish restaurant; and **Ristorante Riviera** (Zattere, Dorsoduro 1473; 522-7621; lunch for two \$82), with some of the best pasta in Venice--unlike many other restaurants, they make their own. If you're too tired to walk back to your hotel, there are two convenient vaporetto stops near Ristorante Riviera.

WALK 2: CASTELLO

To the north and east of the teeming Piazza San Marco is the Castello section, which takes its name from the ancient fortifications that defended the island city. Here, the contrast between the mob scene at San Marco and the tranquillity that reigns only yards away is most dramatic.

From the front of the **Basilica of San Marco**, follow Calle Canonica around the church's north side and cross Rio Canonica o Palazzo. Just south of the bridge (toward the Canal of San Marco) you can visit the soothing Romanesque **cloister of Sant'Apollonia** (Chiostro Sant'Apollonia, Castello 4312; 522-9166), which is rarely intruded upon by sightseers. Walk east one block to Calle degli Albanesi and you'll find

Bonifacio (Castello 4237; 522-7507), a bar that may well make the best Americano (sweet vermouth, bitters, and soda) in the city that invented this refreshing drink; they cost far less than at the bars on San Marco.

Back up the block, at the eastern corner of Campo Santi Filippo e Giacomo, is a building made of thin, Roman-style bricks (circa 1755) that was Venice's first speculative rental apartment house, a landmark in the emergence of the middle class. On the north side of the plaza, hidden by a kiosk crammed with souvenirs, is **Aciughetta** (Castello 4357; 522-4292), a snack bar whose name-- "little anchovy"-- modestly underplays the fact that some fine servings of that savory fish can be found here.

Walking east out of the plaza, you'll pass the cramped **Corte Nuova**, delicately renamed from its more graphic original tag, Calle Vespasiani, or "street of pissoirs." Straight ahead, under a beautiful carved-stone Gothic archway, is the **Church of San Zaccaria** (Campo San Zaccaria). It was the first Renaissance-style sanctuary to be built in the city, begun in 1444 and completed in 1515. Its geometric marble cladding does not conceal the older Gothic apse, and the still earlier Romanesque floor plan remains obvious, making the church a veritable palimpsest of architectural styles. In front of the church, turn right and head up Fondamenta dell'Osmarin, along Rio di San Provolo. Directly across the canal from number 4972 is the Palazzo Priuli, where Henry James set his evocative Venetian novella *The Aspern Papers*. Continue east until you reach Rio dei Greci; cross the bridge here and turn right. The **Museo delle Icone** (Fondamenta dei Greci, Castello 3412; 522-6581) is a trove of Byzantine icons housed in the Scuola di San Nicol  dei Greci, designed by Baldassare Longhena, architect of the renowned Church of Santa Maria della Salute on the Grand Canal. Returning to the bridge, turn right onto Calle della Madonna. Down the street that angles off to the right, a simple, inexpensive pasta lunch can be had at **Trattoria Da Remigio** (Salizzada dei Greci, Castello 3416; 523-0089; lunch for two \$60). After crossing over the next canal (Rio della Piet ), turn left onto Fondamenta dei Furlani, then right onto Calle dei Furlani. Here is the **Scuola di San Giorgio degli Schiavoni** (Castello 3259A; 522-8828), with its justly celebrated murals by Vittore Carpaccio. Though hardly undiscovered, they are simply too wonderful to pass by. Turn right outside the scuola, then right again at the end of the block, and you'll find **Arcimboldo** (Calle dei Furlani, Castello 3219; 528-6569; dinner for two \$90), a stylish restaurant named for the 16th-century artist who painted surrealistic fantasies of fruits and vegetables in human forms.

Now proceed north up Ramo San Francesco, crossing the canal, until you reach Campo della Chiesa and the larger Campo della Confraternità beyond it. The pink-stucco structure crossing the square is a 19th-century passageway that allowed monks to move from one cloistered building to another without encountering worldly temptations.

Directly above the Campo della Confraternità, with an influential façade by Andrea Palladio, is the majestic yet seldom visited **Church of San Francesco della Vigna**. Pay special attention to the limpid marble bas-reliefs in the chapel, just to the left of the high altar; these are the work of the Lombardo family, the city's greatest Renaissance sculptors. And in a chapel through a doorway farther to the left is Giovanni Bellini's deeply moving painting *Madonna and Child with Saints*, a 1507 masterpiece equal to any of the Bellinis in the Accademia. The church's cloisters are among the quietest spots in Venice.