

A historical Italian port, the city of Venice is now a tourist paradise, making visitors fall in love with not just its cruise-worthy waters but also the thoughtful architecture dotting its expanse.

■ BY GUSTASP AND JEROO IRANI



slipped down the smaller canals in a gondola, ducking under some of the historical and ornate 400-plus bridges.

Standing on 118 small islands in a marshy lagoon at the mouths of rivers Po and Piave, Venice is really vulnerable and has been sinking faster in the last 100 years than in the earlier centuries. It is also prone to flooding every winter (as it did last month), and the St. Mark's Square — where tourists

delight in having themselves photographed while feeding its resident pigeons — is covered by water when the tide is particularly high.

Indeed, Venice, which was founded in 421 AD, sits on millions of wooden pilings sunk in the water, and even though it has survived the centuries surprisingly well, time has taken a toll on it, for this UNESCO World Heritage Site's foundations have started to corrode and rot. Today, Venice is going through a slow and extensive restoration process in which the old pilings are being replaced with more durable modern material. Tourists cruising by in decked-out gondolas may not be aware of the efforts being undertaken for saving one of the most romantic cities in the world. The awesome monuments on the ground are all being restored.



All images by Gustasp and Jeroo Irani

It's a delicate and demanding task, ensuring that no harm comes to what was once a grand city-state and a great trading centre, whose merchants traded in gold, silver, jewels, spices, marble, mosaics, slaves, et al. In the process, Venice accumulated great art treasures and monuments to the Almighty, including the magnificent 17th-century Chiesa di Santa Maria della Salute (in honour of Virgin Mary, who is said to have saved the city from a deadly outbreak of plague) across the Grand Canal from St. Mark's Square.

This page and facing page, clockwise from above:

The Grand Canal in Venice. About two miles long, the Canal is shaped in the form of a reversed 'S'.

A gondola sailing through the Italian-Renaissance-style Bridge of Sighs, one of the more-than-400 bridges standing in Venice.

With its massive domes, the Chiesa di Santa Maria della Salute is a church devoted to Virgin Mary.

The forever touristy St. Mark's Square, with the St. Mark's Basilica seen on the right.

Our arrival in Venice, probably the most gorgeous of Italian cities, was exquisitely romantic. We steamed on the brand new Costa Fascinosa, the largest Italian-flagged cruise ship afloat. Unhurried and seemingly spellbound at that early hour, just after dawn, the city of canals shone like a mirage at the head of the Adriatic Sea — a magical stage set with the most magnificent props, golden domes, elaborate mosaics, glistening marble, peeling walls, and coloured glass.

On our very first trip to Venice by coach two decades earlier, our guide, Terry Morgan, had confided that to sail into the city of canals on a cruise ship is to be truly blessed. He was right:

Venice slowly unfolded like a veiled beauty reluctant to display all her charms at first sight. It was only when our water taxi cruised down the Grand Canal — a waterway about 3.5 km long which weaves through the city — that Venice took shape for us.

BRIDGING THEN AND NOW

All around us, the limpid waters of the canals fielded reflections of the grandest of architecture, yielding glimpses of some of the palazzi (the palaces and mansions of the nobility, which date from the 12th to 18th centuries), a lush garden, a Gothic window, flower-filled squares with an ancient church and fountain, and tables of a quiet café, draped with impeccable napery. Later, we



THE VENETIAN REPUBLIC WAS GOVERNED FROM THE DOGE'S PALACE, WHICH WAS ALSO THE RESIDENCE OF THE DOGES APART FROM BEING THE SEAT OF GOVERNMENT.



Clockwise from above:

St. Mark's Campanile, the bell tower of St. Mark's Basilica, and the Doge's Palace.

The exterior of St. Mark's Basilica, with a mosaic depicting The Last Judgment.

The St. Mark's Clocktower on St. Mark's Square.

AN ARCHITECTURAL TREASURE TROVE

The centrepiece of the most celebrated piazza (described by Napoleon as the finest drawing room in Europe) is the iconic St. Mark's Basilica, an outstanding example of Byzantine architecture that incorporates Romanesque and Renaissance elements as well. It is also a mausoleum for Saint Mark, whose life is captured in the golden

mosaic art done on the walls. Consecrated in 1094, it was constructed on the plan of a Greek cross, with five bulbous domes, and inspired by the now-destroyed Church of the Holy Apostles in the city of Constantinople. For more than 500 years, the doges who ruled the city-state enlarged the church, which was their private chapel, and lavished it with love and care. They adorned it with treasures, carted away from the East — especially from Constantinople during the Crusades.

On entering the Doge's Palace, we found it unravelling like a dream. We ascended the Golden Staircase, decorated with extravagant frescoes and gilded stuccos. The Venetian Republic was governed from the Doge's Palace, which was also the residence of the doges apart from being the seat of government. As we walked through the rooms, oohing and aahing at the paintings and sculptures, we got a glimpse of the glory of the Venetian Republic. Indeed, the palace is said to be the highest expression of the Venetian Gothic style (a mix of Gothic, Byzantine, and Moorish styles).



ULTIMATELY, VENICE IS ALL ABOUT LIGHT, FLICKERING AND FICKLE, WHICH PAINTERS AND PHOTOGRAPHERS HAVE TRIED TO HOLD ONTO AND EVOKE IN THEIR ART.

The doges ruled the city-state from around the 7th century to 1797 when the last one handed the keys of the palace to Napoleon Bonaparte. Their decline, however, had set in earlier when the Turks captured Constantinople, thereby leading to the end of Venice's maritime supremacy in the region.

But they left behind a city studded with architectural gems — clock towers, palaces, museums, and churches studded with great art works. Indeed, Venice excels at the visual level by being a vivid backdrop with bold colours and bewitching light, inspiring man's creative spirit and raising it to stratospheric heights. And these edifices display centuries of history as casually as if they were window displays in vintage stores. To enhance the multi-sensory onslaught, stand at a street corner, and you may hear a house painter or a gondolier singing with operatic intensity.

LIGHT AND SHINE

Ultimately, Venice is all about light, flickering and fickle, which painters and photographers have tried to hold onto and evoke in their art. In Venice, light strums on palaces, churches, and mansions, has a quality that is almost flirtatious, and is the owner of blazing sunrises and sunsets on water. Come evening, and the outdoor cafés by the Grand Canal glimmer under bright awnings, and wavering candles cast a glow on the faces of diners.

AROUND VENICE

Venice's Marco Polo airport is well connected by air with major Indian cities. While there are good rail connections from a number of European cities, nothing beats arriving in Venice by water, a fact borne out by some of the great writers and lovers of this magical city.

Within this vehicle-free city, you can move around only on foot or by water. The train station is a few paces from the start of the Grand Canal, close to the bus terminal at Piazzale Roma. From here or any of the jetties along the canal, you can take a water bus or a water taxi to your hotel.

Apart from local sightseeing, much of which can be done on foot, visit the island of Murano, the centre of the flourishing glass-making industry. Burano, an active fishing village, is the centre of the lace-making industry, dating back to the 16th century. Near Burano is Torcello with its imposing cathedral.

For more information, contact ENIT, the Italian State Tourist Board (www.enit.it) or the official tourism website of Italy (www.italia.it).

From left to right:

An elaborate relief carved on a pillar that also carries the number of the house.

A café lit up at dusk. For enjoying true Venetian nightlife, dining at such cafés, especially those located on the city's piazzas, is highly recommended.

On our last night, we opted for an outdoor café near Rialto Bridge (the oldest in the city) by the Grand Canal and were lost in the rippling reflections on its glassy waters. After a feast of flavours, we raised a toast to Venice — that ultimate seductress! 