

Venice in winter

Venice is often outside the budget of all but the most well-healed travellers but **Rich Carriero** explores how, in today's economic climate, it's possible to have a great holiday at a fraction of last year's price.

In tough times, travel is an early casualty. The upside is if you have ready cash, deals abound. A year ago I would not have gone to Venice for Christmas, however, this season my wife and I could afford travel and accommodation in the most expensive district in Europe during the costliest travel season.

Our journey began with a Myair flight to Milan. After a delightful train ride through Italian farmland with the Alps forming a solid wall to the north, our train suddenly burst out over the water of the Venetian lagoon, crossing to St. Lucia terminal. We emerged from the station on a sunny afternoon; before us was the Grand Canal, across which rose palaces, villas and churches with steps descending into murky water.

Our hotel was on the other side of the city so we bought a three-day pass for the Amoretto (the city's water bus) and boarded the first #1. The green plastic seats bore old ladies in fur and young Italians clutching blackberries and shopping bags as the boat lurched from stop to stop and we stared out the window dumbstruck. The Grand Canal is by far the widest thoroughfare in the city, bisecting the largest groups of islands. To the Republic this was "Broadway" and as such it's lined with the most luxurious palaces, flung up since the Renaissance by the richest and most flamboyant families. Halfway is the Rialto, literally an arc-shaped shopping mall thrown over the water and the most famous bridge in the city. We disembarked at San Marco and made our way to our hotel.

San Marco has the distinction of being the only "piazza" in the city. From the canal, it appears as a long corridor bordered by the Doge's Palace on one side and the city's most recognizable landmark—the Campanile bell-tower—on the other. In the far right-hand corner is St. Mark's basilica—a wedding cake of domes, spires and gold. Napoleon once called St. Mark's Square the



San Marco Piazza



finest drawing room in Europe. For my wife and me it was a suitable introduction. Our strategy was not to dive right in, however and thus we spent our days combining one element from San Marco with another museum or church further afield and then enjoying all the wandering in between.

On the morning of our first full day in the city, we emerged from the narrow streets around our hotel into the square only to find a dense, salty fog had come in from the Adriatic and enveloped the city. It gave the

day an otherworldly experience as the mist muffled all sound like a snowstorm and made intimate every small square or alleyway. We forged ahead over bridges, around corners and through archways until we found our destination—the Accademia Art Museum. When Napoleon took the city in 1798, ending the thousand-year-old republic, he closed down half the churches and monasteries in the city. The Accademia—a who's-who of the Venetian Renaissance—is where he stashed all the art and treasure. Most

of the paintings are, understandably, religious in nature, so the museum is a bit like Art History and Christian Theology 101. Even after the museum, walking around Dursoduro was an aesthetic experience. Numerous small homes and shops dot the winding streets and squares, with small motorboats anchored outside. Glass and mask shops are particularly notable for their colourful wares. The masks, by turns humorous and frightening, peer out from many windows.

The next day we visited the Doge's palace, the Republic's seat of government. The palace tour begins with the "Golden Staircase," a two-tiered stairway lined with golden and plaster design. The first tier houses the Doge's apartments. The Venetian Doge, or Duke, was a powerful head of state but also something of a prisoner to the Venetian senate. The apartments are ornately decorated with paintings and frescoes. The outer chamber is covered in maps depicting the expanse of the Venetian economic empire. On the top floor of the palace are the government chambers.



Gondola rides are more enjoyable in warmer weather.

Venice had numerous councils that made laws, judged the accused and debated policy. All rooms bear the emblems of Venetian military, economic and religious importance. The senate chamber shows biblical scenes into which pious Doges have been inserted. The Grand Council Chamber-one of the largest rooms in Europe-is home to enormous paintings of military victories, as well the portrait of each Doge.

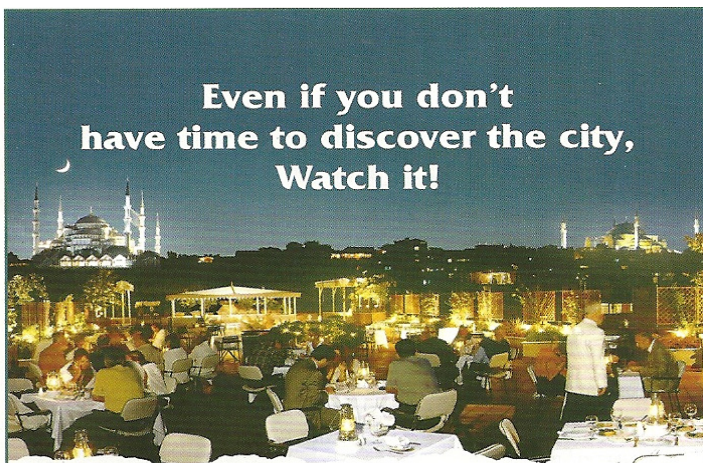
Naturally Christmas was an important part of our trip. In the preceding days, tourism actually died down and many of the shops were shuttered. On Christmas Eve, after dinner at Da Bruno, a small, homey Trattoria (they gave us a small piece of Venetian glass candy as a present), we arrived in St. Mark's Square at about eleven, just as people began to line up for Midnight Mass out front of the basilica. We spontaneously joined the line before it reached several hundred meters and after enduring an hour of chilly waiting, we were admitted. The service was a dazzling display of pageantry and solemnity, enhanced by the splendour of the church and the Christmas spirit of the visitors. After two hours of liturgy and

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chorale performances, the Patriarch of Venice wished the crowd 'Merry Christmas' in five different languages and we walked out into the dark Square on Christmas morning to the deep clanging of the bells from the Campanile. At midday we took an Amoretto out to Lido, the slender barrier island that separates the lagoon from the Adriatic. The view made up for the cold and we walked around on the beach collecting shells.

After Christmas the number of tourists doubled. We visited the Campanile, which in late December with a 40-kph wind in our faces, was a frigid experience. When the massive bells rang, it was worth it, though I could not help but remember that in 1902 the tower suddenly collapsed. We could see the whole city and all the islands in the lagoon as well as the Alps to the north and Slovenia across the Adriatic. After gratefully descending by elevator, we crossed over to the basilica. Much like Aya Sofya, the gold leaf on the ceiling and carefully placed windows lend the church a dreamy quality when the sun is shining. We took an avid interest in the treasury, as many of the artefacts were taken from Istanbul in 1204 (see Backward Glances).

Venice is a feast for the senses and a week was only a sampler. Seeing Venetian glass shaped by masters or negotiating the purchase of a carnival mask was but a molecule of the city's commercial soul. Local delicacies, like cuttle-fish sautéed in its own ink, evoked the ubiquitous sea. Wandering the streets-poking our heads down lanes or through tunnel like passages just to see where they lead and discovering small wine bars or craft shops not advertised in the books-imparted that stamp of authenticity to our experience that makes travel worth the expense.



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