

FEATURES

Venice Adventure

Ruby Boukabou, Pictures by [Jim Tardio](#)



Venice. The land of smooth coffees, waiters who flip tea cups and pizzerias that mysteriously swallow hours upon end into their smoky, strangely 80s tuned interiors.

Budget flight got us there in 90 mins from London (49 pound return including taxes), then the number 5 bus to Bus Station in Venice where our artistic adventures in this city began.

Train tourist information for accommodation may be expensive but feel free to trust or at least listen to the much friendlier approach and better prices from solo hotel agents. 'Hotel Airone' (+41 5204800) on Grande Canale is simple but cheap and central (no breakfast but it's better to go exploring anyway).

Instead of workmen catcalling us, it is gondoliers and it's best to smile back as if anyone knows their canals it's them and when you need to ask 'dove' somewhere-or-other, they are your men.

For someone who first found navigating London tube tunnels challenging, this film-set-of-a-city offers hours, no days, of weaving. And weave we do.

Day One: Destination: Piazza San Marco; priority: coffee. With Italian coffee, time takes on a whole new dimension. The world becomes warm and smooth and homely, then there's a definite sexy quality before the real rush hits and things become sharper, framed and filmic. To try on masks in a theatrical sense will set you aside from tourists looking for nice wall hangings. Harlequins, devils, lovers, dolls, sleazy old men, experience them all and don't pass up the chance to meet the craftspeople behind the masks and learn the history of Commedia Del'Arte, traditional Italian history and the route of much modern comedy. Consider becoming a mask maker's assistant.

Seven hours later we stumble upon Saint Marco in the dark. This square has been referred to by Musset as "the drawing room of the world" and for centuries was the centre of the city's religious and political activity. Whether you wish to explore the now touristy square or to break into spontaneous performance in your newfound masked identity in tiny, rainy alleys, is up to you.

Vino Rosso' are two Italian words you'll need to know in order to embrace the spirit. We order two glasses from a little local outdoor drinkery with punk styled locals (apparently it's back). Then it's a jazz bar (Jazz Club Novocento S.Polo 900 Venizia Campiello del Sansosi tel: 0415226565) recommended by a mask maker- come- jazz singer who summoned us a rendition of 'Autumn Leaves' in French. Here we fall across two hilarious but harmless American tourists and successfully find more vino rosso and amazing pizza with eggplant, mozerella and the most tomatoey tomato sauce ever made.

Day Two is far more serious with mission to create some type of artwork or script. Of course we need copious amounts of cafe lattes to help devise a plan. Caffeine breeds excitement along with cute waiters with bizarre music taste (star trekking and a song translated to be 'marijuana- it's legal!') then, in what we assume must be a mafia café (where are all the women?) next to the smelly but buzzing fish market, we story board our post card series. Back to Hotel and gather props. Then off for shoot where we rise above the touisty status and get intrigue from travellers and locals alike.

It's a far more gritty, Shakespearian scenario that really happens that night. We stumble across Venetians in their natural habitat, dancing like muppets to a local band playing 'Quantanamera' in a Church Hall off a dark alley. This excels us to find more Venetians in non obvious places so we track back through the fog to the door in the wall we'd noticed earlier that afternoon. The 'Piccolo Piano Bar' is small, smoky and at time of entry, quite empty with just a dj, two locals dancing and a bar tender. The owner, Franco, appears and says we're early but feeds us strong spirits then proudly points to a photo board with the likes of Mick Jaggar, Liza Minelli an the girl who sings 'If this Aint Love' all in his bar. This excites Mo who orders more spirits.

By the time they're finished, more have been bought but this time by Venetian men who suddenly appear in gondola loads. I'm talking with a psychology student/ model and Mo with a tall shiny headed Alfonzo wearing lots of gold, who

starts introducing her as his fiancé. Marco, the psych/model is asking me out the next night for seafood and orchestra, totally bent on the idea that life together would be perfect. It seems he's performing a soliloquy to an invisible audience. I try telling him that I go back to London the next day but he's 'no London, Noo London' placing a hand to his heart and producing painful sounds and expressions. Then he's looking into my eyes and exclaiming 'oh Madonna'. Experience Italian men!

Meanwhile word has gotten out that Mo has a boyfriend and men are queuing up to verify the fact with me. I return from the toilet and Mo whispers 'Marco tried to kiss me!'. I approach Marco, shake my head and say 'ciao'. 'No. No.' He pulls me down to a table and tries to explain that Italian men are different and that it's me, it's me...

I feel like a Romeo and Juliet like brawl is brewing and so does Mo who I notice is getting a little wobbly on her bar stool. We try to leave but Franco insists on shouting a last drink. Not wanting to offend but with my own safety in mind, trip to bathroom to tip it down the squat toilet (reason for Italian women with good thighs). Then receive discounts for our bill as we've been 'good for business' (!) Collect coats and try to sneak out but Marco and Mo's admirer appear out the front, leaning casually against ancient facades. Have they been in too many fashion shoots or is this just Venice?

'Run' yells Mo and the dash through the city begins. 'Ciao' we call, 'ciao' reply the broken hearted in disbelief. We cross bridges we've never crossed before and come to dead ends that drop into canals. Stop to rethink strategy and it's 4:30am- the hotel had told us 2:30- 7 they wouldn't let us in.

Search for Gondolas that may be comfortable for a nap. We had overheard a tour guide earlier that day speaking about Gondolas, that the flat bottom allows it to float in very shallow water, that the most important characteristic of the gondola is its longitudinal asymmetry: that it weighs 400kg and build using eight different types of wood. He hadn't talked of the most important facts about gondolas, however, being how soft was that wood for laying a sleepy head when lost at 3am; and what the likely response of owners would be if finding two bleary eyed girls in their boats in the morning? We were about to find out, preferably in one with a 'felse'- a removable cabin to protect passengers (and lost tourists?) from cold and prying eyes.

At last moment, however, we remember we are here for artistic adventure, so decide instead on a spontaneous photo shoot on a bridge with a rose we've found to pass time as we try to find our way back to 'San Margherita'. 5:30 find Hotel and dance in joy, creep up stairs and find door ajar and out key- all alone on the rack.

Find cozy room. Gonzo! All there is to do the last day is sit and drink lattes, nursing our delicate states and slowly hype selves to do last necessary shot for post card series. Have one more pizza for the road then spend the last of our cash in the market by the bus station on gifts we had all but forgotten. (Note that this perhaps the only reason why you would part with money in this corner of Venice. Steeper in price than would encounter elsewhere for souvenirs of lesser authenticity.) If in doubt of anything else, ask the locals, they are proud of their city and generally love to chat and share.

Venice. Ahhh Madonna...