



Hidden Venice

Achingly beautiful and unfailingly romantic, *La Serenissima* attracts millions of tourists every year.

But, even in high season, it's possible to escape the crowds – you just need to know where to go.

KATHRYN TOMASETTI heads off the beaten track to reveal a secret side to this most magical of cities

As my husband and I neared the *vaporetto* stop of Fondamente Nove, a cluster of elderly Venetians, arms loaded with bouquets, stood chatting on the pier. We shadowed them onto the first passing ferry and soon overheard their destination: Cimitero di San Michele, or St Michael's Cemetery. As the *vaporetto* neared this brick-ringed island, we took a snap decision, hopping ashore too, then plunging through a gate and into the walled cemetery.

Like the rest of the city, Venice's cemetery sits on watery marshland. It came as no surprise that Venice has chosen to bury its dead in a spot well away from the living. What was a shock is how far I immediately felt from Venice proper. I heard none of my native Italian here. Instead, an incomprehensible cloud of Venetian dialect rang through the cemetery's willow trees. We strolled – alone – through the graveyards, to a petite walled garden in the northeast corner, where non-Catholics are buried. Wildflowers poked up between neglected tombstones. The sun warmed our faces as we read inscriptions marking the final resting places of composer Igor Stravinsky and author Ezra Pound.

Squinting my eyes as the sun crackled across the waves, I realised I'd been visiting Venice for more than three decades, yet had barely managed to scratch the surface of its nuanced neighbourhoods. Raised in Milan, just a couple of hours west of *La Serenissima*, I'd joined the throngs on Rialto Bridge, snapping sunny shots of gondolas on the Grand Canal, too many times to count. I'd hit St Mark's Square during the city's infamous *Carnevale*, or February Carnival. But I'd never really got off Venice's beaten track – and away from its 20 million annual tourists – until that day. How much more of the Most Serene Republic had I been missing? ▸





Clockwise, from top left: Delicious Venetian biscuits in a pastry shop; San Giorgio Maggiore as viewed from Sant'Elena gardens; beautifully crafted masks from the Venice Carnevale; the Peggy Guggenheim Collection as seen from the Grand Canal

Secret city sights

For visitors dedicated to ditching the crush at St Mark's Square, I discovered there is little better than meandering through Venice's labyrinthine alleyways and, quite simply, getting lost. If you're lucky, you may stumble upon the Church of San Zaccaria, a treasure trove of 15th- and 16th-century artworks tucked into Campo San Zaccaria, east of St Mark's Basilica; its walls are smothered with paintings by the likes of Giovanni Bellini and Tintoretto. You could stroll through the city's ancient Jewish Ghetto, a segregated neighbourhood in northern Venice, where Jews were forced to reside until the 18th century, and, from there, cross Ponte delle Guglie to Parco Savorgnan, a secret leafy oasis nestled behind Palazzo Venier. The garden is one of only six public parks within the city – and one of its best hidden. Or explore the 15th-century family home Querini Stampalia Foundation (www.querinistampalia.it), partially restored in the late 1940s by Venetian architect Carlo Scarpa. You won't find these spots in *Lonely Planet*.

If you missed Venice's *Carnevale* this February, the otherworldly Atelier Venetia (www.ilballodeldoge.com) offers a crash-course in sumptuous period costumes. Owned by designer Antonia Sautter, this workshop and costume-hire store is a whirlwind of feathers, lace and hand-painted fabrics. Skirts puff out at 90-degree angles, stiff with embroidered crystals. Decorative masks range from bold and flamboyant to chillingly featureless: it's hardly a surprise to discover Sautter supplied the masks for Stanley Kubrick's film *Eyes Wide Shut*.

Ever considered paddling your way around this fascinating city? Me neither, until I came across Venice Kayak (www.venicekayak.com), run by a Danish-Italian duo. As an ancient marine capital, Venice was built for boats and the company escorts adventurous paddlers



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through crooked neighbourhood canals, scooting under miniature bridges and past courtyard gardens, between old fishing vessels and tourist-toting gondolas.

Venetian nights

Cicheti are Venice's answer to Spanish *tapas*. To sample their authentic local flavours, including classics such as *sarde in saor* (sweet-and-sour sardines), *baccalà mantecato* (creamy salt cod), *nervèti* (veal tendons in



Venice's best festivities

Time your Venetian visit to coincide with one of these buzzing events:

★ **Vogalonga Boat Race (May)**

Since 1975, thousands of participants have been turning out for this traditional Venetian rowing race. The spectator-lined route loops past the islands of Burano and Murano, and finishes through Venice's Grand Canal. www.vogalonga.it

★ **San Pellegrino Cooking Cup (June)**

A wacky combination of yacht regatta and celebrity-chef cooking competition, with points given for sailing skills and mouthwatering dishes. www.compvela.com

★ **Festa del Redentore (July)**

Like fireflies on a summer's night, lantern-decked boats pour into St Mark's Basin and the Giudecca

Canal to await this impressive annual fireworks display – a modern celebration of the quelling of Venice's 16th-century plague.

★ **69th Venice Film Festival (August to September)**

Hollywood superstars – including, last year, George Clooney, Madonna and Kate Winslet – flock to Venice's Lido island to compete for this major international film festival's top prize, *Il Leone d'Oro* (The Golden Lion). www.labiennale.org

★ **13th International Architecture Biennale (August-November)**

Expect first peeks at major international projects, showcased in the city's Biennale Gardens and the Arsenale. In 2012, David Chipperfield will be the first British architect to curate the fair. www.labiennale.org

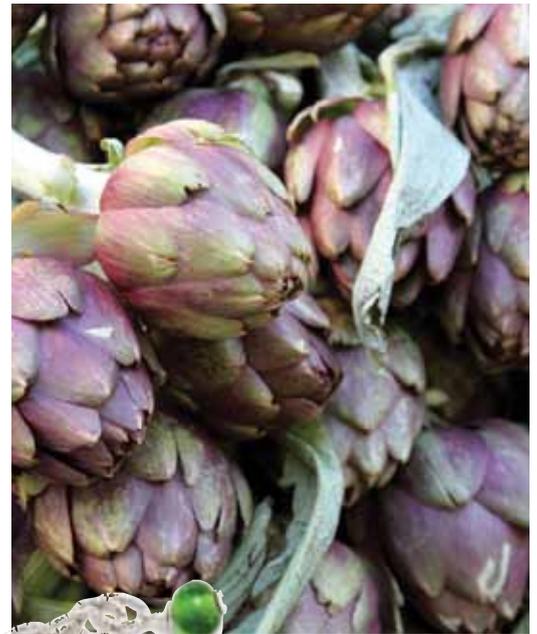
vinegar) and *folpeti* (baby octopus served whole), you'll need to head to Venice's backstreet *bacari* bars. Each one is patronised by locals quaffing wines from the Veneto and Friuli Venezia Giulia regions, including vintages from Amarone, Bardolino, Valpolicella and Raboso. Better still, each *bacaro* is about as far removed from the tourist-trodden spots surrounding St Mark's Square as an Italian *nonna's* cooking is from a laminated picture menu.

At a pinch, El Sbarlefo (Cannaregio 4556/C) could hold around eight patrons. That's not counting the pair of tables out front. Jazz (a pleasant change from Italy's ubiquitous love-ballad soundtrack) warms the bar's atmosphere as much as the generous glugs of wine. Bottles of red crowd onto the *bacaro's* marble countertop, while whites chill in a super-sized ice bucket alongside. Wedged behind the bar, and tantalisingly visible to passers-by, piles of tuna-stuffed chilli peppers, deep-fried *baccalà* (salt cod) bites, octopus salad and salami-stuffed *polenta* tempt hungry patrons, many of them simply popping in for a quick after-work nibble.

A naive visitor may give Marchini Time (www.pasticceriamarchini.com) a wide berth, believing it to be a simple pastry shop. Its pastries – sweet almond-topped *kranz*, savoury puffs spiked with poppy seeds or cheese – are, indeed, legendary. But Venetians also make a beeline here for a glass of neon-orange *spritz*. The most beloved of Venice's *aperitivi*, or pre-dinner drinks, *spritz* is a cocktail of bitter Aperol alcohol, Prosecco and sparkling water, garnished with a giant green olive and a slice of orange. Fancy drinkers may swap the Aperol for Campari or Cynar, the latter a popular local artichoke-based liqueur.

Located within what used to be a 12th-century merchants' bank, then a fruit warehouse at the heart of the Rialto district, Bancogiro (www.osteriabancogiro.it) is half-cosy *osteria* (family-style eatery),





Clockwise, from top left: Burano is a postcard-pretty retreat from busy central Venice; coveted *castraure* artichokes; a delicate and beautiful Murano glass bracelet; malvasia vineyards on Sant'Erasmus

half-hip *bacaro* bar. House *cicheti* are inspired by traditional Venetian cuisine, but chef Jacopo Scarso cranks up the flavours and sophistication. One arrives in a glass with layers of avocado mousse and pink shrimp, topped with a dice of hard-boiled egg. Calamari are lightly fried and served with purple radicchio from nearby Trevisiano. On a warm spring evening, grab a cool glass of white Inama Soave and relax under the bar's outdoor vaulted arcades.

Deserted islands

Central Venice is crowded year-round. Yet, like clockwork, as the spring temperatures begin to rise, so too do this city's incredible tourist numbers, which makes getting out of town – preferably to one of the lagoon's 117 breezy islands – all the more enticing. Public transport is well signposted and easy to navigate; *vaporetto* passes (www.actv.it) cover unlimited travel from 12 hours to seven days.

Downtown Venice may be dripping with glass chandeliers, intricate blown beads and delicate tea services, but, for variety and quality, discerning shoppers should head north to Murano's shores. Here, generations of artisans have been renowned for their glassmaking for more than 700 years. In business since 1933, Seguso Vetri d'Arte (www.segusovetridarte.com) is one of Murano's most established glassmakers, handcrafting jewel-toned goblets and tribal-inspired *objets d'art*. For visitors enchanted by the technique, the Scuola del Vetro Abate Zanetti (www.abatezanetti.it) runs two-day courses in traditional glass-blowing.

Foodies should head east to Sant'Erasmus, the largest of Venice's 'farm islands'. It supplies much of the produce – including the city's tiny, coveted *castraure* artichokes – at the Rialto Bridge Market. Paths crisscross the island's orchards and vineyards, and bikes are available

WHERE TO STAY

For further information and reservations, please visit www.SummitHotels.com

HOTEL MONACO & GRAND CANAL

Set within a 17th-century *palazzo*, the Hotel Monaco & Grand Canal is a two-minute stroll from St Mark's Square. Guestrooms are sumptuous, with marble baths, fine Italian linens and Murano-glass chandeliers.



to rent near the *vaporetto* stop. For a blast of *La Serenissima's* pretty past, nearby Lido is laced with leafy residential avenues, ornate Art Deco *palazzi*, and miles of sandy beach abutting the Adriatic.

Burano boasts a newly refurbished lace museum (Museo del Merletto, www.museociviveneziani.it). But it was the rows of hot-pink, brick-red and cobalt-blue façades that quickly made this island my favourite Venetian escape. A sleepy spot with fewer than 3,000 inhabitants, Burano offers the visitor little more than a postcard-perfect stroll, followed by a knock-your-socks-off espresso in the sun – which was exactly the seldom-visited side of Venice I had been seeking.