

# Star Holiday

DHAKA SUNDAY MARCH 20, 2005

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## Mysterious Venice



**V**ENICE the very name stirs up a sense of something wonderful, almost magical. The city was founded over 1500 years ago, but time has done little to diminish the city's allure if anything, it has raised it to almost legendary status as one of the most beautiful cities in the world, and truly, my trip to Venice lived up to its promise.

The tourist Venice is Venice: the gondolas, the sunsets, the changing light, Murano, the pigeons, the vaporetto and the glass beads. During my few days' stay there, I can recall having seen little else. Except for the shopkeepers, gondoliers and artisans, the "ordinary Venetian" is just another face in another winding alley, or in the crowd on a narrow bridge. It is difficult for the passing tourist to grasp the concept of an "ordinary" life in this city or at least, it was for me. You wonder, do people really read the newspapers, drink coffee and work in offices? Honestly, I don't know but I can tell you that I would have loved the chance to stay longer and find out. Maybe it was just the fact that the city is almost entirely pedestrianised. Italians call it the serenissima ("the most serene") because the absence of buses and cars makes it a peaceful contrast to other cities. Getting around is done mostly

on foot, or by the vaporetto (water-buses) or motoscafi (water-taxis), and a ride on either of the last two is a great way to see the city. The reason is, of course, that Venice is built on over a hundred islands connected by a series of canals, so you can go practically anywhere by water. This unique feature is the main part of the city's charm and I was enchanted by the city from the moment I arrived.

The first time I stood on a bridge overlooking the Canal Grande (the Grand Canal, often called "the most beautiful street in Venice") was a breath-taking experience. The Canal is lined by palaces and churches: some creamy white and black, some orange-tawny, others a dull red or half-pink, but all, in build and ornamentation, unique. Light and shade were playing hide and seek on the surface, reflections colored the dark blue-green water, and innumerable boats drifted below us beneath a rose and opal sky. Soon afterwards, I also rode my first vaporetto as we made our way to our hotel on the neighboring island of Lido. Lido was once a luxurious retreat for the rich and famous, but is now only a shadow of that magnificent past. The famous beach of Lido is a drained stretch of sand on the shores of

the Adriatic, and the town's inhabitants lead simple lives. We did not have the opportunity to spend much time on Lido, since we would catch the vaporetto to Venice right after breakfast and return after dinner. However, we managed to put in a short walk here and there, and our gregarious red-haired hotel manager informed us of the rest.

The most vivid memories I have of Venice are mostly strolls through the narrow, serpentine streets, winding in and out of squares, over canals and under bridges. There are canals to fit every size and description in Venice, and some are definitely more clean than others!! I was chagrined to find that more than a few stank of rotten fish...so much for romance! Nevertheless, Venice is a very romantic city to begin with, there is something rather romantic in the very idea of an entire city practically floating on water, then there are the numerous couples holding hands and of course, romance novels have done their part. The cobblestone streets, the beige and dusty pink buildings with ornate wrought iron rails, the flowers hanging out of each window are all part of Venice's magic. But what is less publicized is that Venice is also a very sad city; it is as if every gondola hides under its hood a pair of lovers in hushed conference, or a party of mourners escorting a corpse. Even the crowds of tourists milling around the city cannot upset the relaxed pace or disperse the quiet, mysterious aura cloaking the city.

Naturally many areas have become designated "tourist" spots, towards which all the crowds gravitate. Most notable among these is the Piazza San Marco or San Marco's Square. Situated at the heart of the city, this vast square (which is in fact the only proper square in the city) was affectionately labeled "the finest drawing room in Europe" by none other than

Napoleon himself. The impressive facade of the Basilica San Marco dominates the scenario, but the real show-stoppers are the pigeons. Literally hundreds of these pearly grey beauties flock to the square to bask in the adulation of the visiting tourists. The pigeons are quite tame, being accustomed to seeing people around, and will sit on your shoulder or arm if you offer them some grain. An old lady there makes her living from selling packets of birdfeed to the tourists, and at all times you will see someone or the other scattering grains. I saw one child who was absolutely covered with pigeons striving for the grain in her lap. No wonder the pigeons do not like to leave the square!!!

Besides gondolas, Venice is also famous for the stunning murano glass, produced on the nearby island of Murano. The ride to Murano was memorable in itself it was my first time on a speedboat; everytime the boat bounced on a wave, my heart leaped with joy. I was giddy with the excitement of speeding across open water, tasting the spray in my mouth, having my hair blown in every direction by the wild wind...even the too-tight safety jacket which made me feel inflated could not dim my spirits. The glass factory was an interesting experience too. I was amazed at how much work goes into making even the tiniest piece of glass. You walk through the whole process step by step, and then when you see the outcome, it is really hard to believe that such a dainty, rainbow-hued piece of artistry has emerged from this blackened furnace before you. The factory has an adjoining showroom with every advantage in terms of quality and style of display, to charm liras from the visitors' pockets. When you open the door, it takes a while for your eyes to adjust to the dazzling brilliance. There was glass absolutely everywhere. Glass

chandeliers provide the light, while glass tables and shelves display glass decorations pieces and ornaments of every shape, size and hue. Vases in shades of emerald green and royal purple holding amber and golden flowers with delicate jade stems, herds of wild mustang in translucent colors, ruby red bowls and sapphire blue bottles, and elegant chessmen with glassy stares. I felt as if I had somehow walked into Aladdin's Cave of Wonders! Alas, the pieces were as precious as jewels, so the only thing I brought back from there is a small but stunning vase in hues of dusky mauve.

It was one of the few things I purchased in Venice, and the only one of any noteworthy size the trip in itself was extremely expensive, and we were already way over budget without any shopping! With all due respect, the Italian currency is just ridiculous: you actually have 1,000,000 lira notes! So when you see things, they're priced in tens of thousands of liras, and of course you immediately think, "Gosh, I can't afford that!", or "So much for such a little thing, no way!" and so we ended up just looking around without buying much. Like there are these handmade masks which are a Venetian specialty, and they are simply gorgeous in all sorts of contorted faces and shapes with glitters and glass "jewels" and intricate painting. I wanted to buy every single one, which would have left me bankrupt and in debt for life; we did however get some lovely miniatures. And then there was the gondola. Everyone was dying for a ride, but we were a big group and 1,200,000 liras (approximately \$80 USD then) per person stood in front of us like a wall.

To this day I sincerely regret, I did not ride a gondola. I know right now everyone's probably gasping, "Went to Venice and didn't ride a gondola!", but my optimistic family has persuaded

me that I had to leave something for next time...will there be a next time? I certainly hope so. But regardless of the missed gondola ride, I have wonderful memories, plus a lifetime's worth of bragging rights for having seen the substance of dreams Venice.

Story: **FIDA-E-TASHFIA**  
Photo: **INTERNET**

