

Anyone for Venice?

Sharon Feinstein takes a peek at the Italian city where the world's first ghetto was established 500 years ago



When Venice's only female gondolier, Alex Hai, rows through the meandering canals, she says she feels the buildings are moving away to give her space, everything is fluid and magic can happen at any moment.

After 30 years of being on the water in her sleek black gondola, she describes Venice as divided between boat people and walkers, known as Pilgrims.

"You are walking over the bridges, I pass under them, and so often the two never meet," she told me over plates of tortellini ricotta and spinach at Da Ivo, George Clooney's restaurant of choice.

You need the right sensibility for Venice, city of shadows and dreams, as you walk among its secrets. The light is soft, golden, glinting off the stone palaces and whispering water. The silence gives it a hypnotic charm, with just footfalls, the breeze, or the sound of oars slapping on water.

Venice became walkable only in the 18th century. It was just 122 little islands with 104 churches, until the Austrians built most of the bridges and made it walkable so people didn't need boats anymore.

I like to stay at Baglioni Hotel Luna, regarded as

Venice's first lodging, dating from the 12th century. It's steps from St Mark's Square, facing a small canal looking across to San Giorgio Maggiore church.

The hotel is decorated with that classic Venetian mix of creamy marble and elaborate brocades. As the mist lifted each morning, I left the side door, past Hemingway's haunt, Harry's Bar, on my daily run along the Grand Canal, over the bridges to St Elena.

From here, there are clear views to the Lido, setting for Mann's haunting novel *Death in Venice*. Round every corner of this city is a literary, cinematic or artistic reference. It has remained a great European outpost, magnificently untouched by the spread of brutal globalisation.

The lavish Baglioni breakfast is served beneath pink and gold ceiling frescoes from Tiepolo's school and serves a spread of delicious Venetian cakes like Zaletti and focaccia, typical sweet bread, as a starter.

This year is the 500th anniversary of the world's first ghetto, when the Doge enforced segregation of Venetian Jews in 1516. People here believe that conserving this site, with its five bijoux synagogues, is imperative as a physical reminder of Jewish persecution over centuries.

I found a wonderful public swimming pool in Sant Alvise near the ghetto, and pounded the lanes to work up an appetite for *cicchetti*, under the arches of the Rialto.

Often eaten standing up, these are small Venetian dishes like *baccalà* (cod puree) on toast, croquettes and fried artichokes, ideally washed down with a glass of Barolo.

My choices for lunch and dinner shifted between Do Forni, favoured by locals, politicians and Venetian nobles; Harry's Bar, and Da Ivo.

The elegant Do Forni is steered by Eligio Pates, revered in Venice, whose kitchen is one of the world's best and

whose wine collection is said to be worth millions. It's an enchanted place decked with alcoves, hidden spaces, serenading Peruvian musicians and, of course, impeccable service. I relished my baked sea bass with potatoes, cherry tomatoes and black olives, not to mention the speciality crepes.

Harry's Bar is a meeting place for the intelligentsia, an "in" club where you have to be, the atmosphere vibrant and intriguing. Its drink is the Bellini, white peach juice and sparkling Prosecco, and for me the delicate pasta with wild mushrooms reigned supreme.

Ernest Hemingway was a regular here for a while from 1949 onwards and set bar scenes here in his novel *Across the River and Into The Trees*.

Ristorante da Ivo is small, intimate and the kind of neighbourhood eating place to cherish. It's a relaxed, humming dining room with superb food, personal service and delectable offerings from the chef to nibble between courses.

I also discovered Local, a new and imaginative restaurant in Castello, with an interior built by Venetian artisans and young, idealistic owners who serve only local produce and organic wines. My tagliatelle with white truffles was delicious.

I took the boat to Burano, a tiny, peaceful island in the Venetian lagoon close to the supposedly-haunted island of Torcello, where buildings are painted like an array of pastel ice creams.

I was visiting Il Gatto Nero, the famous Black Cat restaurant. Rupert Everett had just left his corner table of the past ten years. Now I have mine, because after that meal I am going to need it each time I go back to Venice. It is run by a father and son, with traditional cooking handed down by the

old women of the island and a menu brimming with fresh fish straight from the lagoon.

Back in Venice, I walked for hours every day, visiting the Accademia, the great Tintoretto, Bellini in hidden chapels, buying handmade shoes from Daniela Ghezzi along with her more regular customers like Woody Allen and Bill Gates, designer clothes from Empresa, often lost in the intricately-woven web of streets and canals.

The last night I dined with Matteo Corvino, Venetian designer of Il Carnivale and grand weddings, at Piazza San Marco's only restaurant, the Quadri, which has three Michelin stars. Every detail is exquisite,

with red silk-draped walls, Murano chandeliers, stately old style service and food with tastes and textures verging on the sublime.

I left by boat with the Grand Canal panorama becoming more distant and the dreamy elusive city fading like a trick of light, which is, of course, Venice's enduring fascination.



The elegance of Venice captured in a room at the Baglioni Hotel Luna. Inset: Ancient signs pointing the way to the historic ghetto

Sharon's contacts...

Sharon flew with easyJet to Venice Marco Polo:
www.easyjet.com

Baglioni Hotel Luna: www.baglionihotels.com/category/luna-hotel-baglioni-venice/

Do Forni: www.doforni.it

Da Ivo: www.ristorantedaivo.it