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CLOSE UP: VENICE, ITALY

It's called La Serenissima, "the most serene," a reference to the majesty, wisdom, and monstrous power of this city that was for centuries the unrivaled mistress of trade between Europe and the Orient and the bulwark of Christendom against the tides of Ottoman expansion. Built entirely on water by men who defied the sea, Venice is unlike any other town. No matter how many times you've seen it in movies or on television, the real thing is more dreamlike than you could ever imagine. Its landmarks, the Basilica di San Marco and the Palazzo Ducale, are exotic mixes of Byzantine, Gothic, and Renaissance styles. Shimmering sunlight and silvery mist soften every perspective here, and you understand how the city became renowned in the Renaissance for its artists' rendering of color. It's full of secrets, inexpressibly romantic, and at times given over entirely to pleasure.

SIGHTS

There's no better introduction to Venice than a trip down the Grand Canal, or as Venetians refer to it, Canalazzo. It is, without a doubt, one of the world's great "avenues." For 4 km (2½ mi) it winds its way in a backward S, past 12th- to 18th-century palaces built by the city's richest families. There is a definite theatrical quality to the Grand Canal; it's as if each facade had been designed to steal your attention from its rival across the way. The most romantic—albeit expensive—way to see the canal is from a gondola. The next best thing—at a fraction of the cost—is to take in the view from vaporetto Line 1.

Gallerie dell'Accademia. (\$) Napoléon founded these galleries in 1807 on the site of a religious complex he'd suppressed, and what he initiated now amounts to the world's most extraordinary collection of Venetian art, with works by father and son Jacopo and Giovanni Bellini, Cima da Conegliano (circa 1459–1517), Vittore Carpaccio (circa 1455–1525), Veronese, and Titian among many others. ☒ *Campo della Carità, Dorsoduro 1050.* ☑ *Accademia.*

Madonna dell'Orto. (\$) From a campo elegantly parqu岸ed in red brick and white Istrian stone rises an Oriental-style campanile complete with its own cupola. There, captured between earth and sky, are the 12 apostles, hovering upon the facade of this 14th-century church. Madonna dell'Orto remains one of the most typical Gothic churches in Venice. Named for a miraculous state found in the nearby *orto* (garden) now displayed inside the Cappella di San Mauro.

Tintoretto lived nearby, and this, his parish church, contains some of his most powerful work. Lining the chancel are two huge (45 feet by 20 feet) canvases, *Adoration of the Golden Calf* and *Last Judgment*, in contrast to Tintoretto's *Presentation at the Temple* and the simple chapel where Tintoretto and his children, Marietta and Domenico, are buried. ☒ *Campo della Madonna dell'Orto, Cannaregio.* ☑ *Orto.*

Peggy Guggenheim Collection. (\$) A small but choice selection of 20th-century painting and sculpture is on display at this gallery in the heiress Guggenheim's former Grand Canal home. Her collection here in Palazzo Venier dei Leoni includes

works by Picasso, Kandinsky, Pollock, Motherwell, and Ernst (at one time her husband). ☒ *Fondamenta Venier dei Leoni, Dorsoduro 701.* ☑ *Accademia.*

Piazza San Marco. One of the world's most evocative squares, St. Mark's Square is the heart of Venice, a vast open space bordered by an orderly procession of arcades marching toward the fairy-tale cupolas and marble lacework of the Basilica di San Marco.

Piazzetta San Marco, the "little square" leading from Piazza San Marco to the waters of Bacino San Marco (St. Mark's Basin), is a *molo* (landing) that was once the grand entryway to the republic. It's distinguished by two columns towering above the waterfront. One is topped by the winged lion, a traditional emblem of St. Mark that became the symbol of Venice itself; the other supports St. Theodore, the city's first patron, along with his dragon.

An opulent synthesis of Byzantine and Romanesque styles, the **Basilica di San Marco** didn't become the cathedral of Venice until 1807, but its role as the Chiesa Ducale (the duke's private chapel) gave it kudos. The original church was built in 828 to house the body of St. Mark the Evangelist, filched from Alexandria by the duke's agents.

A 976 fire destroyed the original church. The replacement would serve as a symbol of Venetian wealth and power, endowed with all the riches of the Orient, to the point where it earned the nickname Chiesa d'Oro (golden church). The four bronze horses that prance over the doorway are copies of sculptures that victorious Venetians took from Constantinople in 1204 after the fourth crusade (the originals are in the Museo di San Marco).

The basilica is famous for its 43,055 square feet of mosaics, which run from floor to ceiling. The earliest mosaics are from the 11th and 12th centuries, and the last were added in the early 1700s. In the Santuario (\$; sanctuary), the main altar is built over the tomb of St. Mark. Perhaps even more impressive is the Pala d'Oro (\$), a dazzling gilt silver screen encrusted with 1,927 precious gems and 255 enameled panels. The Tesoro (\$; treasury), entered from the

KEY: \$ Admission charged ☒ Physical address ☑ Mailing address

right transept, contains many treasures carried home from conquests abroad.

Climb the steep stairway to the Galleria and the Museo di San Marco (\$) for the best overview of the basilica's interior. From here you can step outdoors for a sweeping panorama of Piazza San Marco and out over the lagoon to San Giorgio. The displays focus mainly on the types of mosaic and how they have been restored over the years. But the highlight is a close-up view of the original gilt bronze horses that were once on the outer gallery.

Be aware that guards at the basilica door turn away anyone with bare shoulders or knees; no shorts, short skirts, or tank tops are allowed. ☒ *Piazza San Marco*. 📍 *Vallaresso/San Zaccaria*.

The **Campanile** (\$), Venice's famous brick bell tower (325 feet tall, plus the angel), had been standing nearly 1,000 years when in 1902, practically without warning, it collapsed. The new tower, rebuilt to the old plan, reopened in 1912. The stunning view from the tower on a clear day includes the Lido, the lagoon, and the mainland as far as the Alps but, strangely enough, none of the myriad Venetian canals. ☒ *Piazza San Marco*. 📍 *Vallaresso/San Zaccaria*.

Rising above the Piazzetta San Marco, the Gothic-Renaissance **Palazzo Ducale** (\$; *Duke's Palace*), a fantasia of pink-and-white marble, is a majestic expression of the prosperity and power attained during Venice's most glorious period. Always much more than a residence, the palace was Venice's White House, senate, torture chamber, and prison rolled into one. The palace's sumptuous chambers have walls and ceilings covered with works by Venice's greatest artists including Veronese and Tintoretto. The ceiling of the Sala del Senato (senate chamber), featuring *The Triumph of Venice* by Tintoretto, is magnificent, but it's dwarfed by his masterpiece *Paradise* in the Sala del Maggiore Consiglio (Great Council Hall). ☒ *Piazzetta San Marco*. 📍 *Vallaresso/San Zaccaria*.

Ponte di Rialto (*Rialto Bridge*). One of Venice's most famous sights, the bridge was built in the late 16th century. Along the railing you'll enjoy one of the city's most famous views: the Grand Canal vibrant with boat traffic. 📍 *Rialto*.

Santa Maria della Salute. Built to honor the Virgin Mary for saving Venice from a plague that killed 47,000 residents, this simple white octagon is adorned with a colossal cupola lined with snail-like buttresses and a Palladian-style facade. The Byzantine icon above the main altar has been venerated as the Madonna della Salute (of health) since 1670, when Francesco Morosini brought it here from Crete. The Sacrestia Maggiore (\$) contains a dozen works by Titian. You'll

also see Tintoretto's *The Wedding at Canaan*. ☒ *Punta della Dogana, Dorsoduro*. 📍 *Salute*.

Santa Maria Gloriosa dei Frari. (\$) This immense Gothic church, completed in the 1400s, is deliberately austere, befitting the Franciscan brothers' insistence on spirituality and poverty. However, *I Frari* (as it's known locally) contains some of the most brilliant paintings in any Venetian church including works by Titian, Giovanni Bellini, and sculptures by Antonion Canova and Jacopo Sansovino. ☒ *Campo dei Frari, San Polo*. 📍 *San Tomà*.

Scuola Grande di San Rocco. (\$) St. Rocco's popularity stemmed from his miraculous recovery from the plague and his care for fellow sufferers. Followers and donations abounded, including a series of more than 60 paintings by Tintoretto. ☒ *Campo San Rocco, San Polo 3052*. 📍 *San Tomà*.

Santa Maria dei Miracoli. (\$) Tiny yet perfectly proportioned, this early Renaissance gem is sheathed in marble and decorated inside with exquisite marble reliefs. The church was built in the 1480s to house *I Miracoli*, an image of the Virgin Mary that is said to perform miracles—look for it on the high altar. ☒ *Campo Santa Maria Nova, Cannaregio*. 📍 *Rialto*.

SHOPPING

Glass, most of it made on the separate island of Murano, is Venice's number one product, and you'll be confronted by mind-boggling displays of traditional and contemporary glassware, much of it kitsch. Carnival masks also make a unique souvenir. The finest ones are hand-crafted to fit the wearer, but inexpensive alternatives abound. The city also has a long history of supplying lace and luxury materials though many of the cheaper items on sale are now imported. Don't forget classic Italian design in clothing, shoes, and leather accessories such as purses and belts. All these can be found in the streets radiating out from St Mark's Square.

For chic, contemporary glassware, Carlo Moretti is a good choice; his designs are on display at **L'Isola** (☒ *Campo San Moisè, San Marco 1468*). **Il Merletto** (☒ *Sotoportego del Cavalletto, under the Procuratie Vecchie, Piazza San Marco 95*) sells the authentic, handmade lace kept in the drawers behind the counter. Guerrino Lovato, proprietor of **Mon-donovo** (☒ *Rio Terà Canal, Dorsoduro 3063*), is one of the most respected mask-makers in town. Go to **Lorenzo Rubelli** (☒ *Palazzo Corner Spinelli, San Marco 3877*) for the same brocades, damasks, and cut velvets used by the world's most prestigious decorators.

