



Gondola in the Grand Canal in Venice

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beyond the beaten path in venice, bologna and rome

The sun was setting as we strolled along Fondamente Nove, where the Venetian Lagoon meets the edge of Canareggio. It was so quiet there, in that pocket of Venice, away from the tourists and pigeons and souvenir racks.

I was visiting Europe's grand historic capital with Denise, my partner of six years. We both fell hard for Venice on our last visits, well over a decade ago, when we knew less about the world, yet were drawn to Italy before so many other destinations. Back then, in the early aughts, we were short on travel savvy, and likely were counted among the bumbling throngs of map-flapping tourists.

These days we are more seasoned travelers, who sought to escape Italy's, and especially Venice's, notorious crowds. Happily, we succeeded. That day we spent much of our time in the northern district of Canareggio, where apartments outnumber hotel rooms and there's silence enough to hear gondola oars splashing in the canals.

Venice was part of our return-to-Italy adventure, which also featured Bologna and, Rome. We aimed to rediscover Italy as forty-somethings, and what we found were that Italian cities, whether new or familiar, never stop feeling magical.

VENICE

From the airport, we arrived at the Piazzale Roma bus terminal and boarded vaporetto 5.1 to the the southern neighborhood of Dorsoduro. Cruising on a crowded waterbus may not seem magical, except that in Venice the view from the canals includes glimpses of centuries-old buildings donning Gothic and Renaissance styles.

Our home for this visit was the newly opened **Axel Hotel Venezia** (Dorsoduro 222. Tel: 39-041-523-5404. www.axelhotels.com). It proved to be an instant delight of hospitality, as the city's first "hetero-friendly hotel" by the LGBTQ-centric Axel brand. In 2019, the property wrapped a full renovation of the pre-existing hotel, and now offers chic lodging with a fabulous breakfast, bar, lounge, and chic guestrooms.

Better still, the Axel had us residing in the southern neighborhood of Dorsoduro, a less-trafficked area that's home to a beautiful waterfront promenade lined with caf  s, pizzerias, and the enticing **Gelateria Nico** (Fondamenta Zattere al Ponte Longo 922. Tel: 39 041 522 5293. www.gelaterianico.com). It's strange how just across the Grand Canal crowds gather around the familiar tourist attractions, while a short walk away, they could be enjoying a quieter time at the fabulous **Peggy Guggenheim Collection** (Dorsoduro 701-704. Tel:

39 041 240 5411. www.guggenheim-venice.it). The heiress and legendary arts patron lived in her canalside villa surrounded by magnificent works, and at this compact home-turned-museum, we saw her personal collection of pieces from Dali and Calder, to Pollock and Warhol and Holzer, and so many more.

Our first foray into central Venice, however, was strategically built around food. We joined the **Walks of Italy** (www.walksofitaly.com) food and wine tour starting from the Rialto Market. Walks is a small but growing company founded by American Stephen Oddo, and whose team curates affordable, smaller group tours in Italy's (and other countries') busiest cities, each one specifically crafted to sidestep over-touristed sites and share exclusive travel experiences, in city or on rural day trips.

Among their roster of Venice tours is the "skip-the-line" tours of the Doge's Palace and St. Mark's Basilica; a luxury water-taxi cruise through the canals, with a visit to the top of San Giorgio Island's bell tower; and a full-day tour of four islands off of central Venice (including Murano and Burano).

On our food tour, Walks' native-Venetian guide Barbara introduced us to the city's *bacari*, or standing caf  s, where customers can buy wine or Aperol spritzes at the counter to sip with delicious small bites called *cicchetti* (like Spanish tapas). **Al Merca** (Campo Bella Vienna, 213. Tel: 39-346-8340-0660. www.osteriaalmerca.it) and **Al Volto** (Calle Cavalli 4081. Tel: 39-041-522-8945) were our first stops, and though both were crowded with people, I made my way to the counter to order two Aperol spritzes and a few cicchetti. We fell hard for the polpetta (meatballs of beef or tuna), savory codfish spread on sliced bread, and wee ham and truffle-cream-cheese sandwiches.

In one of my prouder moments, my Italian proved good enough that the bacari staff charged me the "local's prices," which are roughly about half off the listed menu prices (e.g. instead of paying eight euros for a spritz, I paid four). Denise and I toured and tasted our way through the area, absorbing Barbara's culinary history lessons as we snacked on traditional flavors and day drank our *aperitivi*.

The next evening, we dressed up for a luxurious dining experience at **Canova Restaurant** (www.baglionihotels.com/restaurants/canova-restaurant), inside the Baglioni Hotel Luna (San Marco 1243. Tel: 39-041-8520051. www.baglionihotels.com). From its prime spot beside Piazza San Marco, we tried traditional-Venetian dishes and local Veneto wines in 18th-century elegance, with impeccable service fit for a *doge*

Aperol Spritz



Photo: Natali Abza

Denise and Kelsy



Photo: Kelly Chavlin



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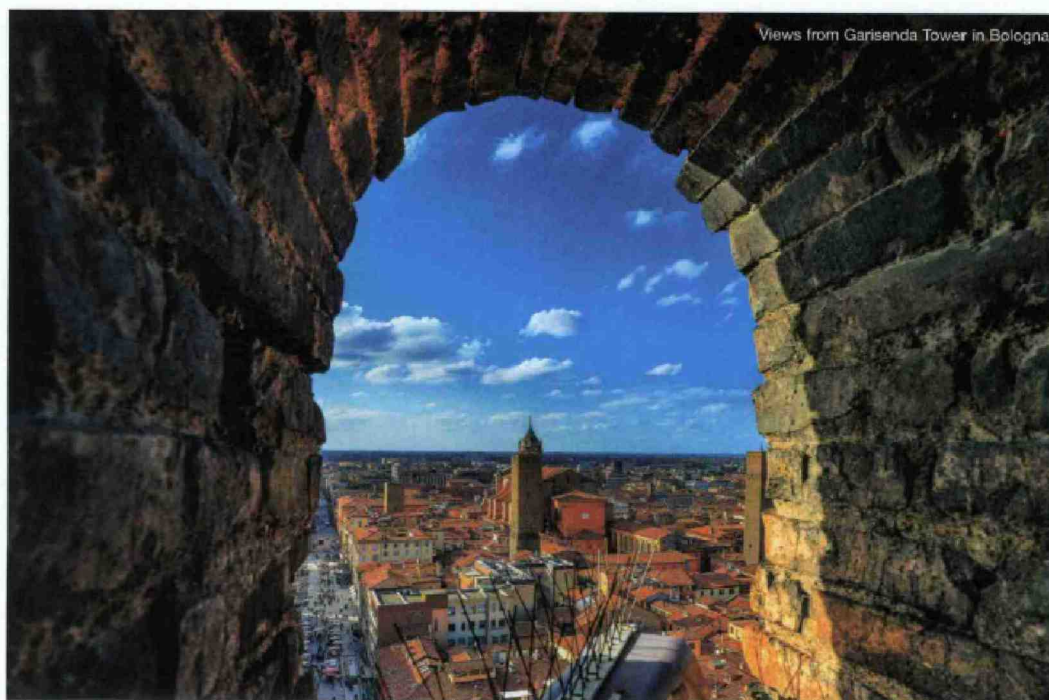


Photo: A drian Gerdon

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(pronounced "doe-jay," meaning "duke").

After dinner we joined Walks unique "Alone in St. Mark's Basilica After Hours" tour, with exclusive, evening access to the marvelous 11th-century religious landmark. While tourists milled around the piazza outside, we privately visited the crypt of St. Mark himself, located in the cellar, but on a carved-stone riser to keep his enshrined remains safe from flooding. Our group was just 10 people, and apart from the guards, we were the only people inside for a half-hour. The basilica's lights were dim, and we were asked to sit in the pews to hear our guide's descriptions of the wall-to-wall biblical mosaics depicted in gilded tile across its enormous arched ceilings. There we found a precious few moments of serenity in the basilica's hallowed halls, and the lights were slowly brightened for an evening mass, bathing in golden light each devotional depiction.

BOLOGNA

Just a two-hour train ride south from Venice is Bologna, a city of unsung charms and a surprisingly progressive nature. The capital of the Emilia-Romagna province, Bologna is home to the world's very first university (founded in 1088), as well as ancient and medieval architecture marked by cobblestoned piazze, and the city's famous porticos (which are soon

expected to earn UNESCO world-heritage status).

In contrast to the city's magnificent antiquity is a decidedly modern character, especially in the realm of LGBTQ rights. In 1982, Bologna became the first Italian city to designate a municipal-advisory seat to the LGBTQ community; and to allot publicly owned space to the **Cassero LGBT Center** (Via Don Giovanni Minzoni 18. Tel: 39-051-095-7200. www.cassero.it), which also serves as the headquarters of Italy's national LGBTQ association, **Arcigay** (www.arcigay.it).

Located in a former storage tower within Bologna's medieval fort walls, today's Cassero serves as a multi-functional library, archive, and social-service center by day. The center hosts arts, performance, and cultural festivals that explore themes of gender and sexuality throughout the year. And as Denise and I soon learned, Cassero doubles as a late-night club venue with DJs that pack the house (and courtyard) each Wednesday through Saturday.

Bologna's liberal streak shows in its LGBTQ monuments and proud support of queer arts and businesses, many of them showcased on the city's handy website (www.bolognawelcome.com). One of our favorite spots was **IGOR Libreria** (www.facebook.com/igor.thegaybookshop), an LGBTQ bookstore that operates within the gay-operated retail and gallery collective



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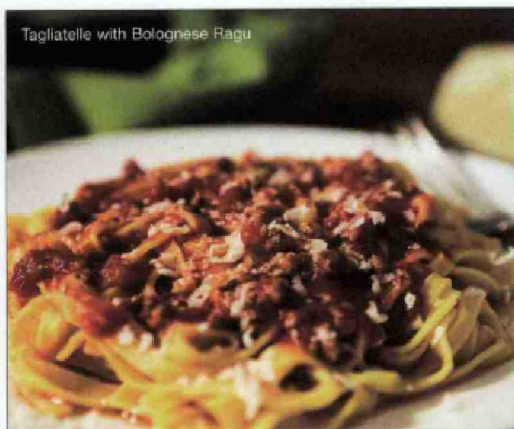


Photo: Luigi Moribelli

that is **Senape Urban Nursery** (Via Santa Croce 10/abc. Tel: 39-051-849-4530. www.senapevivaiourbano.com). We made fast friends with Senape's owner, Giovanni Roncaglia, and IGOR's founder, Raffaele Pancaldi (and his store's namesake dog, Igor), who quickly made us wonder if we'd planned enough time to enjoy all that **Bologna** has to offer.

In due course, dinnertime beckoned. We'd been tipped off to a popular lesbian-owned restaurant nearby called **Trattoria da Me** (Via S. Felice 50. Tel: 39-051-555-486. www.trattoriadame.it). There we learned that Chef Elisa Rusconi modernized her grandfather's long-running restaurant (originally opened in 1937), and today serves some of the city's best, inventive takes on Bolognese classics. That includes the city's famous meat-and-tomato sauce, which in Bologna is simply called "*ragu*." It is only served with tagliatelle, and, for carnivores, it is as good as pasta ever could be. But at Trattoria da Me, the Bolognese pasta is especially amazing, with the chef slow cooking her ragu for 12 hours before serving it over freshly made tagliatelle, thus redefining pasta as you know it.

We strolled the main drag that is Via San Felice, and soon found a busy open-air social scene outside **Sensa Nome** (Via Belvedere 11. Tel: 39-392-516-2896), a restaurant and bar whose deaf owner employs and invites deaf patrons, and takes orders by lip reading or with small paper slips printed with drink names. The spot occupies a pedestrian-only square on Via Belvedere, and we returned there the next day to check out **Mercato delle Erbe** (Via Ugo Bassi 25. Tel: 39-335-597-1753. www.mercatodelleerbe.eu). The Mercato is a hip food hall housed in a historic market, where we lunched on outrageously good local mortadella and arugula sandwiches, Emilia-Romagna's famous parmigiana cheese, and the city's other iconic dish *toriellini en brodo* (ham-stuffed pasta rounds in clear broth).

Following the locals' advice, Denise and I found ourselves on a food walking tour of our own, which included baked delights at **Forno Briso** (Via Galliera 34d. Tel: 39-051-248-556. www.fornobrisa.it), a locally owned chain of bakeries that also supplies bread to dozens of restaurants. We also dropped by **Osteria del Sole** (Vicolo Ranocch 1. Tel: 39-347-968-0171. www.osteriadelsole.it), a bar founded in 1465, with a chalkboard listing the wine selection, and long shared tables with patrons bringing in their own food.

By dinner time, we landed at **Il Rovescio** (Via Pietralata 75. Tel: 39-051-523-545. www.rovescio.it), a cozy restaurant that sources ingredients exclusively from local farmers and purveyors. Its monthly menus include farm-

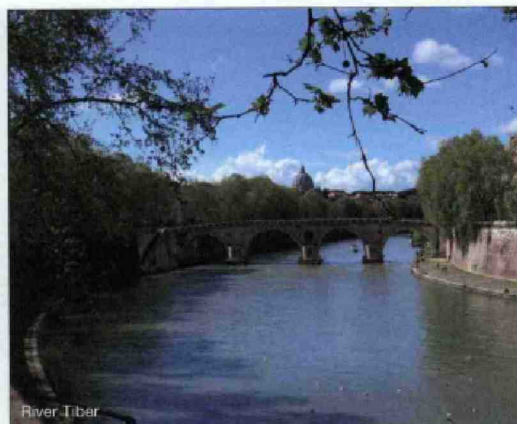


Photo: Kelley Chauvin

raised meat dishes, though most selections lean heavy on seasonal produce, including excellent vegan options.

Thankfully, after so many savories, we could appreciate Bologna's walkability, and each night got accustomed to *passeggiatas* (evening strolls). We found ourselves nightly enjoying the return home to our charming **Art Hotel Commercianti** (Via De Pignattari 11. Tel: 39-051-745-7511. www.art-hotel-commercianti.com) beside the city's central Piazza Maggiore, where street musicians conjure some of Bologna's jazz-loving nature. The family-owned boutique hotel's understated elegance is colorful and cozy, with original art in common areas and in its uniquely decorated guestrooms. The Medieval structure itself is landmarked for its storied history, including once serving as the office for wine regulations and transportation. The hotel is also nestled beside the giant, yet never completed, San Petronio Basilica, which is well worth touring to learn more about its peculiar backstory dating back to 1390.

ROME

I'll admit, I had a slightly ulterior motive for my return to Rome: I never got to see the Colosseum. So with that first priority, we headed to Palatine Hill and the Roman Forum, and at last got to behold the immensity of the first-century A.D. amphitheater, with VIP access to its underground and arena floors with **Walks of Rome** (www.walksofitaly.com/rome-tours). The Colosseum is impressive for its size alone, but the architecture lover in me was captivated by the ingenuity of its engineers, whose work has left this gigantic relic standing proudly in the heart of Rome since 70 A.D. Even as the wooden floor and canopies have disappeared, along with its decorative marble cladding, this amphitheater built of travertine and limestone (but without an ounce of mortar) lives on and welcomes 4.2 million visitors a year. For us, the Colosseum still holds the ghosts of antiquity, and now the residue of our spirits are there too.

Not surprisingly, eating followed. Denise and I explored the trattorias of Rome's old Jewish Ghetto with Walks guide and trained chef Marta, who introduced us to the fried artichokes that are considered one of the neighborhood's prized delicacies. I'm already a big fan of artichokes, but the crispy purity of "*carciofi alla Giudia*" (literally, "Jewish style artichokes") was new to me. They're prepared using the hearts and only the soft outer leaves, soaked in lemon water, then seasoned and deep fried in olive oil, before appearing on a plate like crunchy-leaved sunflowers.

Marta also introduced us to the fine points of Roman pizza at **Orig-**



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ano (Largo dei Chiavari 84. Tel: 39-06-6880-8074. www.origanocampodeffiori.com), noting that it must be a thin crust, and the fewer toppings the better.

At **Fatamorgana Chiavari** (Via dei Chiavari 37A. Tel: 39 06 8881 8437. www.gelateriafatamorgana.com) we discovered that truly great gelato may come in uncommon flavors, be it acai, sesame, wasabi, or all sorts of variations on traditional flavors. A steal at €2.50 for two scoops (up to €5 for five scoops), I couldn't resist a cone of classic pistachio with Venezuelan chocolate, and I thought about it for days.

Denise and I picked up morsels of history along the route to Piazza Navona, passing the famous Campo de Fiori market square, and the awe striking domed Pantheon. Then, just before sunset, we ascended to a private rooftop for a Pasta-Making Class with Local Chefs (www.walksofitaly.com/rome-tours/rome-cooking-class), one of Walks' signature experiences. Chefs Denyse and Julia earned immediate points by pouring our small group glasses of prosecco and sharing cheese, prosciutto, and other Roman appetizers.

Then my inner chef got answers to every question about homemade pasta, satisfying my curiosities along with my appetite. We learned how to mix flour and egg just right, how to properly set a pasta press for thickness, and how to fill ravioli. Most importantly, we learned that of Italy's hundreds of types of pasta, each one is paired only with one particular sauce, which is why Bolognese ragu is served with tagliatelle, carbonara with spaghetti, cinghiale (wild boar) with pappardelle, linguini with arrabiata, etc. And FYI, meatballs remain a standalone dish, and lasagna should be served only on Sundays.

The next morning we meandered through Rome, revisiting sites from our more youthful days. Walking is always the best way to explore a city, but Rome felt especially lovely in those quiet early hours. We covered much ground by following the promenade of the River Tiber, where musicians, artists, and lovers sat perched along the way. We discovered the cobblestoned streets of Isola Tiberina, the river's only island. Then we drifted into the cool district of Trastevere, where by midday, the cafés had come alive with patrons sipping espresso under ivy-covered awnings.

We headed up to lovely Parco di Gianicolo, to take in views from its lush hilltop, and visit the fountains, monuments, and small botanical garden (which once served as the pope's private medicinal garden). Along the way, we discovered another gem in **Villa Farnesina** (Via della Lungara 230. Tel: 39-06-6802-7268. www.villafarnesina.it), a marvelous Renaissance villa-turned-museum. Built in 1510 by a papal treasurer, the villa is home to frescoes by Raphael and other famous artists of the era. It felt a little more magical as a place we stumbled upon, and better still, had few enough visitors that we could simply absorb its beauty.

Later that day, as we wound up in the thick of the tourist crowds by the Trevi Fountain and Spanish steps, I began to appreciate more deeply how even in the busiest cities, there's always a way to wander apart from the masses. A unique experience can be a gift from a smart tour company or guide; a destination-free passeggiata (a leisurely walk); or an insider's tip shared over spontaneous *aperitivi*. As travelers, we just have to heed locals' advice, and dare to venture beyond the beaten path. ■



Photo: Kaley Chavrin