

# Travel

## A sense of menace free in Venice

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Italy is a country so rich in sights, sounds, smells and history that being there is like trying to eat all the frosting off a cake in one sitting. The question of digestion, one learns, is a matter of time.

I learned this the hard way: I ran out of money in Venice on my way from Switzerland to Rome. (This, in my shoestring youth before credit cards and thinking there were banks in Italy I could do business with but couldn't.)

So, I had to extend my planned time in Venice by nearly a week for funds to arrive from a friend in Zurich.

Being forced to take extra time, as it turned out, was a big Italian gift. The Venetians, being the zesty free spirits that they are, gave me their city on a cracked pottery plate for practically nothing — even free, sometimes.

However, there can be a certain risk in accepting favors, and sometimes I wasn't sure whether or not I'd worked myself into a tight spot.

For example, there was the gondolier who gave me a free canal tour.

After stating that gondoliering is an art, that his father was a gondolier, that his grandfather was a gondolier, that his great-grandfather was a gondolier, that his uncle was a gondolier, that his brother was a gondolier, we set off from the brightly lit Grand Canal in our gondola, the oar dipping in canal water that threatened to kill if you slipped and fell in.

We made a left turn down some dark alley where historical patched and cracked buildings dropped straightaway into the water, and in the quiet of the deep, dark maze we were in, I noticed that the buildings dripped.

It became darker. And quieter. Except for the dipping of the oar, the only sound in that watery

labyrinth was from the dripping buildings. A wooden box drifted by, followed by a head of lettuce. I looked at that head of lettuce. I-I-I had visions of my own head floating by.

"HAY-OOOOO!" the gondolier yelled.

I almost jumped overboard to join the lettuce, and nearly capsized the gondola.

It turned out that the gondolier whose father and grandfather and great-grandfather were gondoliers had just beeped his horn, which was the yell, and he had done so because we were approaching an intersection.

After the intersection came Marco Polo's house.

Marco Polo's house! I looked up at the old building where the great explorer had been born, tried to imagine the Venice of the 1300s, and felt a certain awe. Here was the very house Marco Polo grew up, the front door he had walked through to explore the world.

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But that's the way it is with Italy. No matter where you go, you're in a place where great events have taken place, where people so historic as to be fiction have walked and gone about their daily business.

So it went for my free Venetian week: Free afternoons at the Piazza San Marco, where pigeons swarm like bees over the square in front of the ornate cathedral where Saint Mark is entombed; a look at the palace where the doges walked, talked and ruled, and a walk down a cobblestone path bordering a canal to the villa where the Robert and Elizabeth Barrett Brownings lived.

When my emergency funds arrived from Switzerland, I took a vaporetto ride to Lido, the beach resort on the Adriatic.

Here, I walked along the waterfront, thought about how Yugoslavia was just out there, somewhere, and I picked up a seashell.

I still have that seashell — as a souvenir to remind me of that rare free week in Venice, and also to remind me that sometimes the best things in life are not paid for.