



Nothing beats the mystery and magic of walking the city streets on a misty morning, says  
**Angelina Villa Clarke**

# Winter in Venice? It will warm your heart

**E**ARLY in the year is not the most obvious time to go to Venice, but in my view it is the most unforgettable. Yes, seeing Piazza San Marco ablaze in the summer sunlight is glorious, but in winter the city is infused with a mystery and nostalgia that can't be beaten.

It stems back to my days as a student, living there in the early 1990s. After the twinkling lights of Christmas were boxed away, and the celebratory cheer disappeared, the city seemed to magically empty. It was as though it was taking a deep breath before the heady days of the Venice Carnival began in early February.

Finally, with many of the tourists gone, there was enough space to find a seat on the vaporetto (water taxi) I took from the Lido, where I lived, to San Toma, the nearest stop to the Università Ca' Foscari.

Chugging along on a frosty winter's morning, you could fully appreciate the spectacular views of Europe's most enchanting city. The obvious spots, such as the Rialto and the Doge's Palace, still had their throngs of hardy visitors, but while walking through the quiet city it would be a joy to come across an empty piazza where you could stop and truly take in the sheer opulence of a Renaissance palazzo.

They say that getting lost in Venice is essential to coming close to the heart of the place, and this is true. It used to fill me with a bittersweet melancholy to find myself walking alongside a lonely and unknown canal, often shrouded in mist, the lapping water echoing in time with my footsteps – it's something I'll never forget.

Not surprisingly, perhaps, I don't have many memories of my studies – I was simply too distracted by the sheer romance of living in such a show-stopping place.

'Go to Bologna – it's a fantastic student city,' my Italian dad had advised when I was planning what would be my second year away from the University of Warwick. 'Venice is too expensive and exclusive.'

He was right, of course. But, wow, it was beautiful.

These days, Venice – a Unesco World Heritage Site – is so crowded that it has

been suggested that tourists should be charged to enter. But a slower, more hidden Venice – a place steeped in history, community and tradition – can still be found.

Cantina do Mori, close to Rialto Bridge, was a favourite pitstop on the way home from classes. Founded in 1462, it is the oldest bacaro (or bar) in Venice and is known for its wide choice of delicious cicchetti – the Venetian equivalent to Span-

ish tapas. With copper pots hanging from the ceiling, a wooden bar and dark interior, it's a slightly forbidding spot that seems to quieten if you aren't one of the local crowd. But it's worth it for the tasty bites it offers and its surprisingly full wine list. Prop up the bar and order the house speciality, a francobollo – a tiny white-bread sandwich filled with meats or roasted vegetables. Just a two-minute walk from the campus,

the iconic Pasticceria Tonolo was another frequent haunt. The long counter full of freshly baked pastries and cakes meant that it was too tempting to bypass, so a flaky marsala cream pastry with a hot espresso became a regular morning tradition.

Judging by the queues on a recent visit, it's still just as popular.

Everywhere you turn in Venice there are tiny boutiques selling elaborate writ-

ing paper, colourful glassware or macabre masks. Many of these, of course, are over-priced tourist traps, although the city does still boast some authentic artisans if you know where to look.

For a true Venetian experience, head to Ca'Macana, one of the most exquisite mask-makers. Here you'll find everything from stunning decorative versions made with feathers and crystals to the more formula-

**WATER TABLE:** The dining view at the Hilton Molino Stucky hotel, above. Top left: A romantic evening in Venice Old Town

ble black-velvet moretta. Book on to one of the mask-painting workshops to create your own (camacana.com).

Mario Battiloro, meanwhile, is one of a dying breed – the last goldbeater in Venice, where once the trade employed hundreds.



**ALL THE FRILLS:** Elaborate masks made by Venetian artisans, above. Left: The soft glow of Grand Canal as the city wakes up

He makes handcrafted gold leaf for the building, food and beauty industries. Head to his workshop in Cannaregio to see him in action or try one of his creations with a lavish gold-leaf facial, offered at the San Clemente Palace Kempinski hotel, which uses 11 sheets of 24-carat gold to leave you looking radiant (kempinski.com).

Also in Cannaregio, stationer Gianni Basso is another artisan using age-old techniques. He has been hand-printing paper since he trained in a monastery aged 14 and is renowned for his letterpressing services, with celebrities, CEOs and royalty getting their stationery custom-made on his vintage presses, many of which are displayed in his windows.

**I**F THE weather turns, the Museo di Palazzo Mocenigo is perfect for escaping for an hour or two, taking you on a fascinating journey to explore the importance that Venice played in the history of perfume.

Carved out of a restored 16th Century palazzo, it delves into the city's role as the epicentre of the spice trade and its subsequent innovation with the first fragrances. It also houses the Study Centre of the History of Textiles, Costumes and Perfume, with many rare items and accessories on display.

Finally, for an intriguing and atmospheric part of town, go off the beaten track and head to the Jewish quarter, where you can tuck into Venetian-Jewish food at tiny hole-in-the-wall restaurants.

In this area, the rustic Osteria ai Quaranta Ladrone – or Forty Thieves – is as local as it comes, and holds many good memories of long nights soaking up bottles of wine with plates of frittomisto, squid ink pasta and gnocchi with crab. Its canal-side setting is quintessentially Venetian. Best of all, though, was the vaporetto ride home, when Venice's bridges, churches and resplendent buildings seemed even more impressive when lit up against the winter's night sky.



**FIT FOR A KING:** A grand Molino suite in the converted flour mill hotel

## Explore canals and enjoy

By Sarah Hartley

TRAVEL EDITOR

**YOU** must visit Venice in winter, said a friend. Go when it snows, it's simply magical when flakes float down on to the boat as you speed into the city.

And so we did. To step off a train at the Santa Lucia railway station, then down the entrance steps and into a bobbing private water taxi on the Grand Canal, its backdrop pretty pink-bricked palazzi, is nothing short of Hollywood.

All of the Canaletto, Turner and renaissance paintings studied in history of art lessons could not have prepared me for how utterly captivating, how unreal and yet

how familiar Venice feels. The sharp breeze out on the open water hit us, the boat zooming to Giudecca Island, and the Hilton Molino Stucky, a handsome industrial landmark of Disney proportions and former flour mill and pasta factory.

The hotel is as square as it is tall, with epic, long hallways where you'll rarely encounter another being. If you like space and a well-oiled machine with armies of staff,

then this is your place. There's a spa, a roof-top pool (where the Obamas splashed on their summer visit) and a funky outdoor Skyline bar for soaking in those views.

Venetian flare is painted across the 379 super-comfy bedrooms and suites, with sleek monochrome and oyster greys – simple shades that don't compete with why guests are here. For the minute you throw down the room key, you'll fling the windows wide open, bewitched by that beguiling view across the lagoon.

In winter, make your way downstairs to the restaurant Aromi,

## the tasty food free from crowds

complete with watery-blues and bare brick walls for a warming retreat and a long dinner of Venetian delicacies.

In fine weather, the vast terrace calls (with none of those crowds milling past). Or try Barcaromi for a bustling, informal feast of little Venetian plates called cicchetti.

Hop aboard the hotel's private shuttle and you'll be in St Mark's Square in 20 minutes. It was flooded on our visit so we skirted lapping water and wrapped up, warmed by the Cafe Florian speciality – a deli-

cate ham and cheese toastie. The sky was blue and the scene unpeopled, though. How much more pleasant than coming up against the infamous crowds and summer stench, we mused. And to wander the almost empty rooms at the vast Accademia gallery, and view the masterpieces of Titian and Veronese without jostle, was bliss.

Giudecca has a calm presence – it's where real people live, the names of many nationalities on the bell plates of fine historic buildings. You can stroll past

the greengrocer, the fishmonger, say a prayer in the church of St Euphemia and peek into the kitchens and gardens of properties by the canal.

You'll need to look hard to find the family-run Trattoria Altanella, a simple restaurant with a canalside terrace – a favoured haunt of President Mitterand, where fresh fish from the lagoon and pasta are elegantly served.

For an expensive sip and see, you'll find much to amuse at the Hotel Cipriani with its glamorous gardens and history, so

order a bellini and take in the social scene.

It's funny to think of a mode of transport as exhilarating these days. Taking a private vaporetto to the airport before sunrise certainly comes close, with the thrill of the scud of the bow hitting the water at speed and little lights ahead in the darkness, as you hold fast to your hand luggage and loved ones.

● **B&B costs €180 per night based on two sharing. Molino suites from €450 per night (hilton.com).**



## Slope off to Italy for a real cosy deal

**NOW'S** the time to grab a half-term bargain in Italy, bask in a Tyrolean sauna cabin or sample late-season luxury at an idyllic Norwegian resort.

THERE'S a discounted deal in the stunning Monterosa ski region in Italy – and it's a real steal if you have children on a half-term break.

For a boutique ski area with a modest 28 miles of groomed pistes, mostly ego enhancing blues and reds, this area packs a huge culinary punch. It boasts 20 ski lifts and even more on-mountain restaurants, nearly all family-run with sun decks, excellent customer feedback and Italian charm.

A real must is a trip to Punta Helbronner at 11,370 feet on the revolving Skyway cable car, where views of Mont Blanc are so up close it feels as if you can touch the hallowed peak.

Seven nights half-board departs February 19 at the three star Hotel del Viale, costs £783pp based on two sharing. Includes flights and transfers and a £25pp discount from igliski.com.



**NOVICE RUNS:** The Kvittfjell resort

The Champoluc resort sits in the heart of what its avid followers call the Italian Three Valleys, flanked by the connected ski centres of Alagna and Gressoney. The region – far smaller and quieter than France's Three Valleys – has cosy mountain restaurants where congenial hosts put a complimentary treat on the table before you've even ordered a coffee.

Seven nights' half-board at the three-star Hotel de Champoluc from February 19, including flights from Gatwick or Edinburgh and transfers, costs £899pp (was £1,914pp??) based on two sharing (igliski.com). ???

Or combine hassle-free skiing on uncrowded, gentle slopes in Austria with the family-run Bio Hotel Grafenast in the Tyrolean village of Pöll. Beautiful valleys and winter walking routes complement the sumptuous spa facilities which include an outdoor solar-heated pool, steam room and sauna cabin set in private woods with a panoramic view.

Owner Peter Unterlechner describes his award-winning, eco-friendly hotel as 'the perfect winter retreat in which to slow down'. The Kellerjoch resort chairlift is only three minutes away and guests can ski back to the hotel.