

Image: askideas.com



A mini in Piazza San Marco

I remember sitting near the Rialto Bridge, with my younger daughter, eating calzone and quaffing numerous glasses of red wine. The month was January - middle of winter - yet we managed to find a sun-blest spot on the South side of the Grand Canal; placing alternate orders for food, with the sole purpose of retaining the best table in town. They were magical hours: vibrant, yet relaxed, with ferries docking then powering away and gondolas gliding by. We stayed until we ran out of sun and the month became January again.



Image: www.shutterstock.com

Many years before that, on a similar sunny winter's day, I had disgorged myself from one of those same ferries and walked from the canal through to Piazza San Marco, to be met with the sight of a car, bathed in sunlight, sitting in the middle of the square. It was a white Mini Cooper, to be exact; the first, sliding windows generation, not the later BMW upgrade. "A car in Venice? I paid my tourist lira to come to a car-less spot. What's all this about?"

What it turned out to be all about was using one of the most iconic settings in the world to advertise a product. I sat under the arches with a small, but hit-the-taste-buds cappuccino, and watched as they sprinkled seeds on the cobblestones in front of the car. Unsuspecting pigeons parachuted down from everywhere, their captors - the cameramen - lying in wait behind the car. On a signal, the pilot blew one loud note on the horn and a million birds flew up to the heavens: a fan-shaped tribute to San Marco. With the Basilica as the backdrop it was a remarkable idea and a brilliant photo, later seen everywhere across the media. In today's world, we would have said: *it went viral!* A month later, I pulled up short at Piccadilly Tube and stared at the wide-angle, glorious colour-spread, facing me from the opposite platform. It was a wonderful advert, not only for the mini, but for Venice too.

Apart from seeing gleaming-white Mini Coopers in St. Mark's Square - a feat a bit like spotting the *magic bunny* in the mountains of North West China (which last happened 20 years ago) - one of the fascinations of Venice is that the unexpected appears around every corner: even three locals in full Venetian regalia, sitting on a water-side bench! For the first few days at least, it's like Hampton Court Maze, but ten times more interesting. Start off down any small alleyway, then with a couple of lefts and rights, two or three bridges and a dark-tunnel pathway, you begin to wonder where, in heaven's name, you are.



You think it's straight ahead to the Grand Canal, but it's actually in the opposite direction; right to San Marco, when it should be left! And it's better like this: throw away the guide map and wander around ... to find the most Italian of local churches, or the best little trattoria in the universe. Getting lost is often much more fun than knowing where you are ... a metaphor that could have been inspired by the by-ways and intrigue of this unique, fish-shaped island.



Image: pixelstalk.net

There's something about a place with ferries, that conjures up thoughts of the never-ending process of life. Sydney and Venice are sister-cities in my mind, because of this. Trains and buses do the same, arriving and then departing on the hour, day after day, after day. But the element of the water, lapping against the wharf and the boat tethered momentarily, with loops around the dockside bollard, seems to act as an extra connector: there, all the time, come hell, fire, or climate change!



Image:ahmadalikarim.wordpress.com

But no, in fact climate change could be the one thing that might eventually disrupt the continuity of life in places like Venice, where all previous attempts have failed. Depending on just how fast the ice melts at the poles, both Sydney and Venice could suffer the same consequences, due to rising sea levels. Especially Venice, whose underwater ramparts have been crumbling for many decades; to now be faced with the prospect of having to hold back sea water that could rise above the water-level windows - the result of global warming - must be especially daunting.

A few years back, I wrote a poem with reference to the immortality of Venice, as opposed to the mortality of me. But maybe I was wrong, the tourist throng and the ever-departing canal ferries could indeed be silenced in time by climate change, though in all likelihood, not before I exhale my final breath.



Image: kirkerholidays.com

Venice, my friend

*The body of my life has passed
Since last we met
On winter's day in January,
So many years ago.
You smile at my ageing frame,
As I marvel your resilience
Against the range of elements
That threaten your demise.*

*Your cobbled streets have seen the worst
And sometimes best,
Pass their hallowed sanctuary;
But murmur not a word.
How many more times can we meet
To partake of a dalliance?
For mine is just a mortal shell
Beside your weathered halls.*

Venice, 2006

The last time I was in the neighbourhood, I shunned this long-time friend. With the same, younger daughter, now older by ten years, we arrived in Padova, a short train-ride inland from Venice. This time it was at the height of summer, when half of Italy, plus most of the rest of the world, descend on the attractions of Venice. This time, Padova seemed a rather sublime and peaceful choice.

And Padova was indeed fantastic, with indoor and outdoor markets, small, secluded piazzas, plus coffees and cakes to challenge the taste buds. On one occasion we sat at one of those tiny, shaded piazzas – pure Italian, under a grapevine, with four-story ochre walls, and shuttered windows all around – looking on from the sidelines, fascinated by the filming of an advert for ‘Apero Spritz’. It was then, watching the hubbub of activity, with the crew decked out in orange shirts and caps, along with fashionable shoes and dark shades, that my mind drifted back to that first time in St Mark’s Square, more than forty years before, when as a young man, I had sat to watch the filming of the Mini-Cooper advert. Like the docking and departing of ferries, some things never seem to change.

“Let’s not do Venice this time,” I said to my daughter, one day over lunch-time pasta and red wine. *“I can’t face the teaming hordes, and Padova is like heaven in comparison.”*

Perhaps I was showing my age, but the funny thing was that the bus which took me back to Marco Polo Airport went via the Venice train station to drop and pick up passengers, and from the bus stop I had a great, late-afternoon view, of those ‘teaming hordes’, riding the ferries on the Grand Canal. Then was the moment that I regretted not having passed by to say hello to my old friend, for just one day. The spacious streets and elegant bars of Padova were great, but nothing could match the nostalgia of Venice ... and the chance to confront my mortality, once again.

FOOTNOTE

Now in 2020, Venice, along with the rest of Italy has had to grapple with the tragedy of corona virus. Thus another (largely unanticipated) event has come to disrupt the continuity of the city and challenge the mortality of those ‘weathered halls’ ... even before the climate crisis brings more pressure to bear.

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Image: asisbiz.com