



A mini in San Marco

I recall sitting near the Rialto Bridge, with my daughter, eating pasta and quaffing glasses of red wine. The month was January – mid-winter - yet we managed to find a sun-blessed spot on the South side of the Grand Canal; placing alternate orders, with the sole purpose of retaining the best table in town. Magical hours: vibrant, yet relaxed, with ferries docking then powering away and gondolas gliding by. We stayed until we ran out of sun, and it became January again.



Many years before, on a similar sunny winter's day, I had disgorged myself from one of those same ferries, then walked from the canal through narrow lanes to Piazza San Marco, only to be met with the sight of a car, bathed in sunlight, in the middle of the square. It was a white *Mini Cooper* to be exact: the first iconic model, not the flashy *BMW* upgrade of today!

“A car in Venice? I asked myself. “I paid my tourist lira to experience a car-less destination. What’s all this about?”



What it was all about was using one of the most iconic settings in the world to advertise a product. I sat behind dark glasses: under gothic arches, replenishing small but hit-the-taste-buds cappuccino: a secret agent, watching as they sprinkled seeds on the cobblestones in front of the car. Unsuspecting pigeons hang-glided in from the rooftops; their captors - the cameramen - lying in wait behind the car: soldiers ready to attack.

On a signal, the driver 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 back-drop it was a remarkable idea and a brilliant photograph, later seen everywhere across the media. In today's world, we would say: *'It went viral!'* A month later, I pulled up short at Piccadilly Station in London, to stare at the wide-angle, glorious colour-spread, facing me from the opposite platform. It was inspired advertising, not just for the mini, but for Venice too.

Apart from seeing gleaming-white Mini Coopers in Saint Mark's Square - a feat like spotting the *magic bunny* in the mountains of North West China - one of the fascinations of Venice is that the unexpected appears around every corner: even three locals in full Venetian regalia, on a water-side bench!



For the first few days it's like parachuting into a treasure trove. Start off down any small alleyway, then with a couple lefts and rights and two or three bridges, you begin to wonder where in heaven's name you are. You think it's straight ahead to the Grand Canal, when actually it's in the opposite direction; right to

San Marco, though it should be left! And it's better like this; throw away the guide map and wander unperturbed... to find the most Italian of local churches, or the best little trattoria in the universe.

The moral of the story might be that getting lost is often much more fun than knowing where you are ... and it's a maxim that could well have been motivated by the by-ways and intrigue of this unique fish-shaped island, known simply as Venice.

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Duncan Gregory

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Venice

*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.*

Duncan Gregory
Venice, January 2006

Out of many poems I have written over the years, **Venice** is one of the favourites. It seems simplicity itself, but manages to convey so much in just a few lines. **Venice** explores the somewhat morbid theme of mortality, commending the built environment for its longevity, but asking a rhetorical question regarding my own meagre expectations of life.
