

## 21: Venice

Monday, 4th October: my last day in Venice. After an excellent sleep, which I have badly needed, I get up at seven and eat breakfast just before eight. I eat some cheese with my bread roll and manage to nick another one when nobody is looking.

I leave the dreadful hostel at 8.30 and buy a hunk of Edam cheese in a shop nearby. As the vendor does not have sufficient small change, he gives me a sweet instead. I then struggle on board a *vaporetto* with my luggage and travel to the train station. It is a beautifully fresh, sunny morning, although it is rather cool. From the boat I have a wonderful view of the whole island of Venice, San Giorgio and Giudecca. Only now do I realize why various guide books have recommended approaching Venice by water; this morning I am doing the exact opposite. Although I will have the pleasure of staying the whole day here, I feel as though I am leaving already.

As the *vaporetto* sails westwards, between Giudecca and Venice, the scenery becomes ugly when we approach the docks. There is a cheer followed by laughter when the pilot misses his turn and travels on too far. Laughing himself – no doubt something has distracted him – he turns back and heads northwards up the Canale Scomenzera. This brings us up to the Grand Canal and the train station. What an anticlimax! I disembark and leave my two bags in the left luggage department of the station.

Unencumbered, I amble up the Lista di Spagna – now it is like arriving in Venice all over again! I stop at the market, where I buy a kilo of tiny tomatoes and lots of brown bread. I then take a look around this area, through which I have often walked briskly, and visit the Church of San Geremia, which looks out over the Grand Canal and has a very impressive and unusual layout. I also pop into the little Church of Santa Fosca, beside San Geremia, in the same square.

Next, I follow my familiar route down to and over the Rialto bridge. I now begin to explore the area around here, just south of the hotel I stayed in with Marta. This district is full of character: the buildings are old and somewhat tumbledown, the narrow streets are dark, and the area seems to be frequented only by Venetians. I eventually emerge at the south bank of the Grand Canal and find myself looking across to the wonderful Ca' d'Oro. This is the first time that I have observed it from this excellent vantage point. What a pity it is not open to the public! A little farther on is a fruit and vegetable market in full swing. I meet a German lad from the hostel; he is sitting on the canal bank eating grapes. I notice that there are some fine old buildings here, some with porticoes at ground level.

Once again I return to the narrow, quiet streets, many of them containing lines of washing, and amble lazily around. I find my way to the Ca' Pesaro, a Baroque marble palazzo facing the Grand Canal, which contains a museum of modern art, but discover that it is closed for restoration. This does not bother me, for I have already seen quite enough modern art yesterday!

I then stop at the Church of San Stae (an abbreviation of Eustachius). The exterior is impressive but the interior is rather stark. Nearby, I pass the locked-up Church of San Simeone Profeta, walk down by a lovely canal and find myself back at the familiar Scuola Grande di San Giovanni Evangelista, which is still closed. In a nearby *campo* or square I encounter some hefty men fighting each other and I quickly escape

down a narrow street. I emerge into the large Campo San Polo and walk down a street to a very quiet canal. Here I sit on the steps of a bridge, eat my lunch and relax. It is very pleasant looking up at the clear blue sky and enjoying the hot sunshine in this quaint little corner of the city.



Ca' Rezzonico, Venice (*Courtesy of Didier Descouens*)

Using a tap back in the Campo San Polo, I spruce myself up and slowly make my way towards the Ca' Rezzonico, stopping to look at some very pretty spots en route. Here the narrow streets zigzag confusingly and it is easy to get lost. Surprisingly, there are a number of trees in this district: they grow out of gaps in the cobblestones and look splendid in their autumnal colours.



Ballroom, Ca' Rezzonico, Venice (*Courtesy of Didier Descouens*)

I reach the Ca' Rezzonico, a fine eighteenth-century Venetian Baroque palazzo overlooking the Grand Canal, and pay 1,000 lire to enter. It is really splendid inside. The atmosphere is very pleasant and the décor is luxurious. First of all I go upstairs to the *piano nobile*, where I see a massive hall, the ballroom, which is absolutely

covered in frescoes. All the architectural details – columns, stucco, galleries with people looking down, a *trompe l'oeil* coffered ceiling – are painted on flat surfaces. It is so impressive that I spend a long time gazing at all the details. From here I make my way to a suite of luscious rooms with frescoed ceilings. There is some furniture to be seen, but not much.

I next arrive at a central hall, also very impressive, where there is a staircase up to the next floor. Here the rooms are small and there are many of them. They all contain paintings and have frescoes painted in different styles on the ceilings or walls. Most of the paintings are of little interest; the décor of the rooms is more eye-catching. I stop to look at a few pictures by Pietro Longhi. A tiny room contains frescoes depicting satyrs and Bacchanalian orgies; in another I encounter a scene that looks familiar, as I remember that it was painted by Tiepolo in the *foresteria* of the Villa Valmarana in Vicenza. I discover an elaborate bedroom on this floor; the bed is surrounded by an intricately carved wooden partition. As I am in no hurry, I take my time, enjoying everything. There are some items on display: small painted boxes and the like. Standing in the main room on this level, I suddenly get the feeling that the building is swaying. I discover that the floor is not firm; it is so springy that when people walk on it, everything moves. When I jump up and down, the windows rattle.

I then go downstairs to take a look at the rooms that I have missed on the *piano nobile*. To get to them, I pass through a very dark library. In one of the rooms I find a very early and rather crude Italian harpsichord with a dark green case and the remains of some painted decorations. At this stage a group of very noisy American tourists arrive. I return to the breathtaking ballroom, gaze at it again, walk through the first set of rooms and finally leave at four o'clock, just as the palazzo is closing. I have greatly enjoyed my visit here – it is my last taste of Venetian luxury and splendour. I am glad that I have left this to the very last.

I sit down outside in the sun for a while, then walk down to the Accademia, where I sit at the water's edge and gaze down the Grand Canal. By now the sun is beginning to sink: it is a lovely time of the day. The view looking towards San Marco and Santa Maria della Salute is so tantalizing from the wooden bridge that I succumb to temptation and sit down at an outdoor café table and order a *caffè espresso*. The little dribble of coffee at the bottom of the tiny cup costs me 1,000 lire, but it is worth it just to sit here and admire the enchanting view. Soon a young English couple arrive, sit down and order drinks. I stay put until the light begins to fail and then, as it has turned so chilly, I decide to leave. However, I begin to chat to the couple. When they discover that I have cycled all the way here, they very kindly ask me to sit down and let them order something for me. As the lady has been drinking a small bottle of white wine, I decide to have the same, for I have been thinking of buying some cheap wine to knock myself out tonight.

We stay chatting – and shivering – until the café closes and then we leave. The husband takes some photographs from the bridge and then we head for the Piazza San Marco. I leave them half way, stop to look in some shop windows, and continue on my own. By now it is dark. In the Piazza the bands play, but in newly-erected shelters. As it is so bitterly cold and windy by now, I give up my idea of having a picnic meal on the steps, and go off in search of something hot and cheap to eat. As there are no cheap restaurants here and as the pizza and sandwich bars are closed, I am out of luck. What a let-down on my very last evening – I feel hungry and miserably cold. I have intended to leave in style by treating myself to a decent meal and a ride in a gondola to the station. There is no sense in travelling by gondola now as such a journey would be too expensive and the weather is against it.

Abandoning my grandiose plans, I decide on the next best thing: a journey to the station in a *vaporetto*. Once on it, I regret my decision. It is a dreadful journey, for I can see nothing through the grubby windows, the boat moves slowly, and by now I urgently need to pass water. It seems that I will never arrive at my destination. Also, I realize that time is running out and I will have no time to eat. As soon as the *vaporetto* finally arrives at the train station, I clamber out, make a dash for the men's room and relieve myself. This is how the journey comes to an abrupt end: it has certainly been a rushed and anticlimactic finish!

I collect my luggage, pay 1,200 lire for its storage, and in the restaurant try unsuccessfully to get a hot drink. I sit down at a table to eat a cheese and apple sandwich before hurrying off to the train at 8.30 p.m. I find an almost empty and very comfortable carriage at the back and settle down for the journey home. I wash my teeth and the train sets off at the advertised time of 8.45 p.m.

The first thing I do is write my diary. The train then stops for ages – carriages need to be shunted. We finally get going again at 9.30. The ticket collector comes and informs me that the carriage that I am in does not go all the way to Paris, and that I will have to move up the train. Accordingly, at the next station I grab my luggage, jump out and run up to the French SNCF section of the train. I manage to get in again at a *courette* carriage just before we move off and make my way to a standard carriage with seats. I settle down again in an empty compartment, only to learn that I am in first class when a ticket collector appears. So, for the second time I am obliged to move. At last I find a second class carriage, where I join some young people from South America, who speak in rapid Spanish. They are rather loud and talk non-stop. I soon become sleepy and try to doze, but without much success. At last they shut up and turn off the light.

Because of the noise and motion of the train, sleep still eludes me. I lie down on a row of vacant seats, but it does not help. When I eventually begin to doze, we are constantly being woken by officials who need to check our passports or tickets. Outside it is raining. It is a long, tedious night.

After a few hours of sleep, I wake at 7.45 a.m., eat some bread and cheese, then wash. It is a nasty-looking day outside. I read my diary and correct some mistakes. It is not long before we arrive at Paris-Lyon, right on the dot of 10.09 a.m.

At the station I change all my remaining lire into francs and enquire about my bicycle. Satisfied that it is not here and has gone on to Le Havre, I then set about changing train stations. Down in the *métro* I familiarize myself with the various lines and buy a ticket. All of a sudden, the place is invaded by a great crowd of chanting students – what a din! They scramble through the gates, overrun the platform and somehow manage to fit themselves into a train. Everybody stands back to let them on. Once they have gone, the station returns to its usual peace and quiet.

I now journey along a line that is familiar to me from my holiday in Paris last year, and change at Concorde. Eventually I get off at the Gare St Lazare. I telephone home from the station for just five francs and speak to my mother, telling her what time I should arrive home. Again I make enquiries about my bicycle, which is not here, try unsuccessfully to buy a ferry ticket, and then repair to the waiting room.

Later I board the train bound for Le Havre, which leaves at 12.35 p.m. I share a compartment with a pleasant young American girl, a young Irish couple who are working in Germany, and a very conceited and talkative Israeli chap who insists on us looking at his appalling photographs and sketch book.

Once out of Paris, the scenery becomes quite pleasant. I feel tired after the lack of a good night's sleep. Later I make myself some ham and tomato sandwiches.

We finally arrive at Le Havre by 2.33 p.m. It is amazing to realize that the journey I have made over two months by bicycle only takes about eighteen hours by train! I say goodbye to my companions and make my way to the luggage department, where I am greeted by the welcome sight of my blue bicycle. I heave a sigh of relief, retrieve it and secure my bags to the rack. Soon I am off, pedalling towards the port. Fortunately the rain has eased off but the clouds look very threatening. On the way, the back wheel of my bike gets caught in a tram track and – wham! – I go flying off and land heavily on the cobblestones. I feel quite sore, but I am able to pick myself up and continue. The back wheel looks slightly twisted. This is my first accident during the three-month cycle run; I count myself lucky.

At the port I manage to buy a ticket for myself and the bicycle at the student rate of 350 francs (£35) by showing my youth hostel card; obviously the girl has not noticed that I am classified as 'senior'. While I am waiting at the approach with the other vehicles, the clouds darken even more, though sunshine peeks through and everything is bathed in an eerie light. A storm is definitely threatening. To while away the time, I chat to an English man with a motorbike. We are finally allowed to board at about 4.30 p.m.

As the French brochure has said, once in the ship you are in Ireland. This is certainly the case – suddenly I find myself surrounded by noisy, rough Irish people. What a culture shock! Everyone around me seems to be enquiring about the whereabouts of the bar, and there is frequent use of the 'f' word.

The ferry eventually sets sail, an hour late, at six o'clock. I kill time by working out some of my distances by studying my maps, then add them together. I discover that I have cycled about 2,630 miles (4,232 kilometres) en route from Dublin to Venice. Afterwards I read my diary, then eat some bread and cheese – I'll be glad to get back to proper food! – and, before I settle down for the night, I drink a Dubonnet *aperitif* at the bar in order to knock myself out.

I then stretch myself out on a couch in the cafeteria, but I am chucked out when it closes. I go down to where the cabins are and lie on the floor, but I feel sore on the side that I have fallen on. I return to the cafeteria, where I discover that a door has been left open, and return to the couch. Reasonably comfortable, although the area is cold, I lie down. By now the storm has blown up and the ship heaves and lurches in a slow manner that induces a unpleasant feeling of queasiness. Nevertheless, I soon drift off into an uneasy sleep.

I wake at about eight o'clock feeling terrible – the storm is still raging. I feel too ill to sit up or eat, even though I am hungry. I am asked to leave, but I stay put. Eventually I have to when the cafeteria closes for the morning. I go down to the cabin area again and lie on the floor for the rest of the morning, dozing. The conditions are very rough and everybody is sick. However, some brave people are tackling breakfast. A group of boys with flat Dublin accents, formerly very noisy, are now very subdued.

The storm eases a little at around midday. I venture up to the toilets, which are in a most dreadful state, to shave and wash. Feeling better, but still in no mood for eating anything, I find a free Pullman seat and avail of it. I spend the remainder of the journey reading my diary and snoozing.

The ship eventually arrives at Rosslare four hours late and docks at 6 p.m. Much to my consternation, I discover that I have missed the last train to Dublin. There is a bus,

but I doubt that they can take my bicycle. By now I am in no fit state to cycle, for not having eaten, I have no energy.

I emerge from the customs area just before 6.30, not knowing what I will do. While looking around, a man asks me where I am going. I tell him that I need to go to Dublin. He then notices that I have a bicycle. I explain my predicament. He tells me that he is also bound for Dublin but he already has two bicycles to bring with him. I look at his Toyota minibus, which has a large roof rack. I ask him if he can take another bike. 'Ah, I suppose I can,' he says; 'throw it up there'. I quickly discover that he is a local man who runs a minibus service to Dublin for the likes of penniless students and hitch-hikers. The normal fare is £5; with a bike it costs £6. I am elected – it is a great stroke of luck. The man pushes in as many young people as he can take and off we bounce at top speed on the rocky road to Dublin.

The journey is uneventful save for the 6.30 News: members of the government have been trying to oust Charlie Haughey with a vote of no confidence, but unfortunately they have been outvoted. Listening to all these rough, uncultivated accents, both on the radio and in the minibus, I am left in no doubt that I am back in Ireland again!

We finally arrive at O'Connell Bridge at 9.30 p.m. and tumble out. I pay my £6, collect my bike and, as it is not raining, decide to cycle the rest of the way home and not bother my dad for a lift. I set off on a quick dash down the quays, but on the south side (the direction of the traffic has been changed because of the construction of the new Frank Sherwin bridge near Heuston Station) and pedal furiously up the Phoenix Park to Castleknock. It feels so strange to be back again. I am glad of the fresh air and exercise; I feel so much better and much more awake.

I knock at the door soon after ten o'clock and dad lets me in. It is great to see him and mum again after so long. The house is peaceful and welcoming after the long and tedious journey home. Over supper I spend a long time telling my parents about my experiences and they tell me about the latest happenings at home.

I eventually retire to bed, but stay awake until 3 a.m. reading all the correspondence that has been posted to me. I finally turn off the light and settle down in my comfortable little bed. Although I am glad to be home again, I begin to relive my extraordinary journey through England to the north of France, Burgundy, Provence and the sunny south of France, and across the Po valley in Italy to the city of my dreams, Venice. The voyage has been a wonderful experience and an education.

As sleep begins to overtake me, I roll over to my right, as is my wont, and imagine myself back in Venice with Marta beside me in the double bed, turned away from me. I snuggle up to her, wrap my arms around her and kiss her gently on the nape of her neck...

## Postscript

My little fantasy involving Marta in Venice lasted a good while after my return home on 6 October 1982, and I often thought of her. Unfortunately she never came to Dublin. I finally received a postcard from her and noticed that she had acquired a double-barrelled surname, which I assume meant that she was married. As far as I can remember, I wrote to her but never received a reply. I have never completely forgotten her and often wonder where she is and what she is doing now.

I wrote this account during the Covid-19 lockdown in 2020 as a means of keeping my brain active. It was a project that I had long been threatening to do, after having been encouraged by a dear friend whom I had met during a holiday in Sicily back in 2016. She is Janet Vesey, who is now in her 80s, and to whom I wish to dedicate this account. I met Janet in Catania airport at the beginning of the holiday; I learned that she had grown up in Harrow – the same part of London where my mother had lived. We became firm friends, and remain so to this day. Being on holiday, we naturally fell to talking about other holidays, and I mentioned my cycling trip to Venice. As I told her that I had written a couple of books, she said that she wished I would write a book about my journey to Venice – and so here it is at long last.

This description of my trip is based on what I wrote in my diary at the time, though with the addition of various snippets of information taken from the Internet. I have corrected some errors that I had made, and the entire text has been proofread by my friend Andrew Robinson, to whom I owe my gratitude.

Dublin, 5 May – 8 August, 2020