

FASCINATING FACTS

25

VENICE

EVERY VISITOR

SHOULD

KNOW

Carnival
Masks

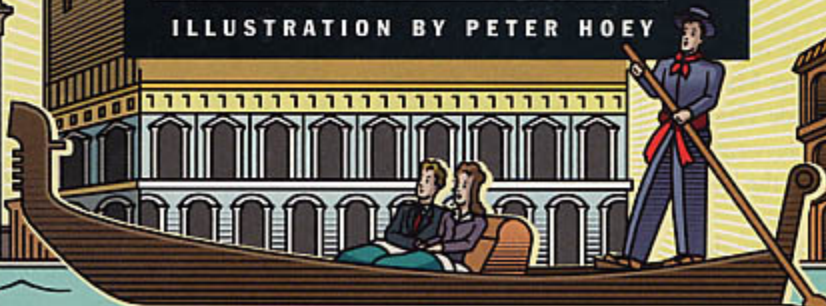
the Rialto Bridge

the Venice
Biennale

1. Many European countries boast one outstanding metropolis. But Italy, a nation of once-mighty city-states, has several: Turin for cars, Milan for business, Rome for ruins, Florence for art, and Venice for romance. 2. Flung like a necklace of pearls across the lagoon, Venice is named for Venus, the goddess of love. Every year since A.D. 1000, Venice is wed to the Adriatic Sea in a ceremony called *La Sensa*, Venetian dialect for Ascension. The ceremony takes place on the Sunday after Ascension Day, in mid- to late May. 3. The only city in the world with no cars, fish-shaped Venice is built on 117 islets connected by more than 400 foot-bridges. A pedestrian's paradise, this compact city—about 2 miles long by 1½ miles wide—is divided into six *sestieri*, or administrative districts, each with its own very distinct atmosphere. You can walk from one end to the other in about an hour and a half. 4. It is impossible to feel lukewarm about Venice. D.H. Lawrence called it an “abhorrent, green, slippery city.” Others love it dearly. Novelist Henry James observed that the “place seems to personify itself, to become →

the Venice
Film FestivalPalazzi
ON THE GRAND CANALPiazza
San Marco

ILLUSTRATION BY PETER HOEY

Travel in Style!
ON A GONDOLA

human and sentient, and conscious of your affection. You desire to embrace it, to caress it, to possess it; and finally, a soft sense of possession grows up, and your visit becomes a perpetual love affair."

5. Venice is at its most magical during Carnival, a vibrant, playful festival that peaks the week before Lent and lets the Venetian gift for intrigue come into its own. Join the local revelers in the sestieri of Cannaregio or Castello or the masked crowds in Piazza San Marco. To buy the best masks, go to Mondonovo or Ca' Macana in Dorsoduro. Martedì Grasso, or Mardi Gras, is February 16, 1999.

6. Though it may be quicker to get around on foot, Venice is meant to be seen from the water—most romantically of all from a gondola, the very soul and symbol of Venice. At the height of the Venetian Republic, in the 15th and 16th centuries, some 10,000 gondolas plied the lagoon; today there are about 400. Cost: a negotiable L120,000 (US\$70) for 50 minutes.

7. Visitors and Italians alike frequently and unfairly complain that you can eat well everywhere in Italy except Venice. They've obviously never tasted the eggplant pie at Harry's Dolci, the white chocolate mousse cake at Ai Gondolieri, the *fritto misto* (mixed fry) at Osteria da Fiore, or the *cicchetti* (little tastes) at Osteria ai 40 Ladroni.

8. The Grand Canal, the central artery of Venice, is 2 miles long, 40–76 yards wide, and an average of about 9 feet deep. In 1495, an ambassador sent by Charles VIII of France called it "the most beautiful street in the world." The other canals average 12 feet wide and 3 feet deep.

9. The most famous Venetian of all time is the explorer and trader Marco Polo. Other native sons include Vivaldi, the painter Canaletto, the playwright Goldoni, and, appropriately, the libertine Casanova.

10. For centuries, Venetians grew rich by trading with the East, and today the city is still a shopper's paradise. The best shops include glass at Salviati, Pauly, and Venini; antique lace and

table linen at Jesurum; fine fabrics at Venetia Studium; and marbled paper at Legatoria Piazzesi and Alberto Valse-Ebrù.

11. The first printing of the Koran was done in Venice around 1537 by Alessandro Paganino. But Paganino didn't know Arabic, so his text was full of mistakes. The only surviving copy is at Franciscan Monastery of San Michele and is viewable by appointment (Tel: 39-41-5224119).

12. During the winter of 1816, the English romantic poet Lord Byron rowed himself across the lagoon three times a week to study on the island of San Lazzaro, a repository of Armenian culture. Its art collection and library of 10th- and 11th-century illuminated manuscripts have attracted visitors since 1717. Take the No. 20 *vaporetto*, or waterbus, which departs every afternoon from Riva degli Schiavoni.

13. The Byzantine cathedral on the island of Torcello, founded in A.D. 639, is the oldest building in the Venetian lagoon.

14. Single rides on *vaporetti* are expensive at L4,500 (US\$2.50), but you can save money by purchasing long-term tickets—a 24-hour ticket for L15,000 (US\$8.50), 72-hour ticket for L30,000

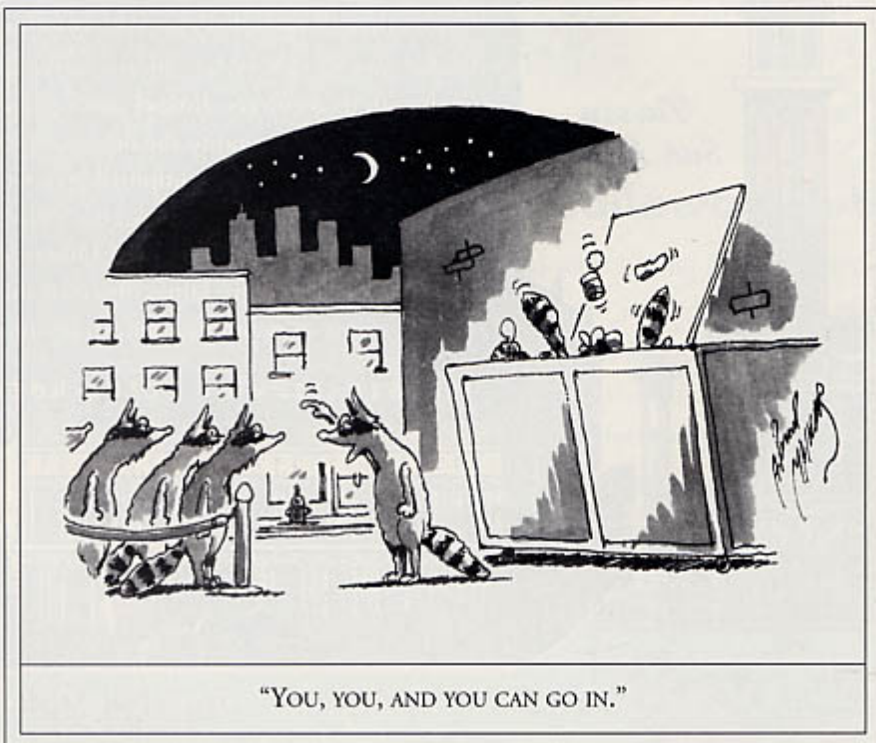
(US\$17), or a weeklong ticket for L55,000 (US\$31). Running from one end of the Grand Canal to the other, the No. 1 *vaporetto* offers a leisurely pace that lets you admire the magnificent Renaissance palaces on both banks.

15. On his first visit to Venice, humorist Robert Benchley cabled home: "Streets Full of Water Please Advise." Venice has some 177 canals with a combined length of 28 miles.

16. Less than a yard wide, Ramo Salizada Zusto, near the Byzantine church of San Giacomo dell'Orto, is the narrowest of Venice's thousands of twisting alleys.

17. Loquacious, know-it-all Venetians usually give singsong directions in relation to bridges, for example, "*do ponti da qui*" ("two bridges from here") or "*giù dal ponte, poi chiedi*" ("after you've crossed the bridge, ask again").

18. The Rialto was the only bridge across the Grand Canal until 1854, when another was built in front of the Accademia, which houses the world's most complete collection of Venetian paintings. A third bridge was built in 1934 near the railroad station and called *Scalzi* after the "shoeless" Carmelites who founded the nearby Santa Maria di Nazareth church. ➔



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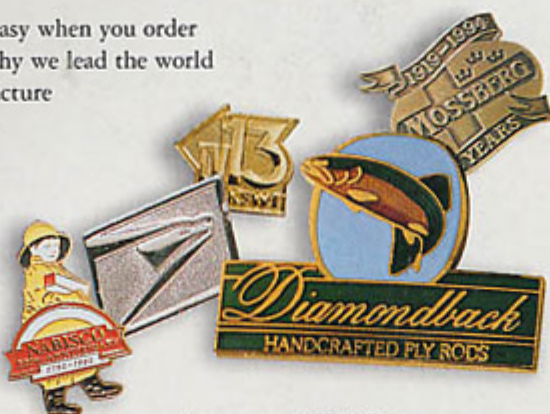


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ON LOCATION

Continued from Page 26

19. The patron saint of Venice is St. Mark the Evangelist from Alexandria, Egypt, whose symbol is the lion. On St. Mark's feast day, April 25, Venetian men give their wives or lovers a red rose, and everybody eats *risi e bisi*, a risotto made with fresh peas.

20. During the Festa del Redentore, on the third weekend in July, Venice commemorates its deliverance from the plague of 1576 with a magnificent fireworks display. An impressive bridge of boats is built across the Giudecca Canal so people can walk to the church of Il Redentore to attend mass.

21. Two other special summer events are the annual International Film Festival at the Lido, the city's seaside resort, that takes place during two weeks in late August or early September, and the Biennale, the largest modern art show in the world, held every other year.

22. The last privately owned gondola belonged to Peggy Guggenheim, the U.S. millionaire whose splendid collection of modern art is housed in the whitewashed, unfinished 18th-century Palazzo Venier dei Leoni. She left her gondola to the city. See it gleaming in dry dock at the Museo Storico Navale (Museum of Naval History).

23. According to local legend, gondoliers are born with webbed feet to help them walk on water. Their intimate knowledge of the city's waterways is passed down from father to son. There has never been a female gondolier.

24. Although more than 12 million tourists a year succumb to her magic, Venice is often called a dying city. In 1994 the population was 70,000, compared with 150,000 in 1950.

25. More than 280 pieces of nine different woods—beech, mahogany, cherry, elm, fir, larch, lime, oak, and walnut—go into handcrafting a new gondola. It takes three months and costs up to US\$30,000 to build a gondola at one of the three surviving *squeri* (boatyards).

Lucy Gordan is a Rome-based journalist and translator. Her love affair with Venice began when she was 9 years old.