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VENIZIA!

BY CINDI COOK

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It has been called the Floating City, the City of Canals, the City of Water, the City of Bridges, and Queen of the Adriatic. I would call Venice simply magnificent. Situated amidst 117 small, separate islands in the middle of the Venetian Lagoon in the Adriatic Sea, it is unlike any other city in the world. Its strong yet detailed architecture is uniquely its own, with the city built on and around an intricate set of canals that has made it one of the most visually interesting cities on the map as well as one of the most desirable places to visit. Indeed, through the ages, Venice has used its seafaring locale to its advantage, as a major maritime power during the Middle Ages and Renaissance to today with gondolas and their instantly recognizable gondoliers steering visitors throughout the gorgeous mini-metropolis.

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ARRIVING IN STYLE

Taking the flight to this northern Italian city couldn't be simpler; as a place widely known for its beauty, its tourism has become widely popular as well. San Marco Airport is an easy 3-minute drive from the launch that takes you over to the main part of the city, and each boat that makes the trip is nicer than the last. Think sleek, polished wood with Italian styling rather than shiny man-made Chris Craft. If you are lucky enough, you'll have a tall, handsome driver named Giovanni like I did. A mere quarter million people—272,000 by the latest count—live here year-round, in both the city proper and the surrounding area. That leaves plenty of space for the rest of us to come and enjoy the immense riches, both physical and spiritual, that this ancient city offers.

Traveling by boat to Venice is one of the most glamorous ways to get there. The buildings in the distance come closer and closer into view, making a lasting imprint on one's memory. Venetian Gothic Architecture fascinates at every turn: a blend of Byzantine and Arab influences with the signature Gothic lancet arch, it takes multitudinous forms in churches, shops, and private homes throughout the capital. Strolling the boardwalks of Venice is one of the most pleasurable experiences, with grand houses from the 13th and 14th centuries still standing at attention, dating

from a time when Venice benefitted in spades from its immense wealth and commercial prosperity. Venice has historically been the center of many trades—silk, grain, spice, and, of course, art—and grew into a wealthy city as a result.

If one has to pick a place to stay, the Hotel Cipriani is—at the risk of sounding like an advertisement—the easy choice. These are five-star accommodations of the utmost beauty and luxury, but luxury that's not out of site. One pulls up to the dock in the Cipriani private boat, driven by a uniformed (and, yet again, attractive) driver to a smiling Paolo, the hotel's concierge there to receive you, extending his hand to help you off the boat and retrieving your suitcase after you've disembarked.

I couldn't have been more excited to be here, knowing that I'd be pampered like a princess. The hotel sits right on the water, with magnificent views of the lagoon and Doge's Palace beyond, and one that affords fabulous sunrises and sunsets. For all its luxury, and its membership in the prestigious parent company Orient-Express, the Hotel Cipriani is not intimidating: a small lobby with two desks and waiting area gives way to hallways that lead to the few shops, restaurants, lounges, and more rooms beyond. One hall leads to Cip's Club, the celebrated restaurant, one to the main dining room where meals—especially the

hotel's lavish breakfast—can be had, and one out back to the gardens, full of delicate statuary, flowers, and trees. A small stairway leads one to the rooms and suites upstairs, only 79 total. The hotel is linked through its beautiful courtyard to the Palazzo Vendramin, a charming 15th-Century residence that has 16 rooms and suites with many affording views of the historic St. Mark's Square.

My room was indeed fit for a princess, just as I thought it would be. Beautiful gilded sconces and furniture in the foyer gave way to a room decked in soft blues and silvers, melding perfectly into a hugely comforting space. Lamps fashioned from gorgeous yellow glass and local artwork completed the visual delight, as did the two balconies, where I would take my room service breakfast in the morning. The huge bathroom was enough to transport me to another universe of comfort, with two closets, a huge bathtub, shower room with Swedish shower, separate WC, and more towels and toiletries (courtesy of Penhaligon's and Bulgari) than I think I could possibly want or need on one trip. I couldn't wait to take a long bubble bath before dressing for dinner.

BUON GIORNO!

If one can say anything about the Italian people, it is that they are hugely warm and friendly by nature. Everywhere you go, a

happy, Buon Giorno! is emitted welcoming you to your locale. There's so much to do and see here, as the close to 3 million visitors and tourists each year can attest. The most interesting part about Venice though and why people come here: The canals, all 177 of them, and the bridges, all 407 of them. They wind through the entire city, making the need for a tour guide fairly unnecessary and the prospect of getting lost fairly possible, but almost enjoyable. Wherever you end up, you'll always find your way back, and there will always be a site to see.

First on the list should be St. Mark's Basilica, the official cathedral church of the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Venice. To say it is spectacular is an understatement. It was built in October of 1071 and is exemplary of the Byzantine and Romanesque architecture that pervaded the city in the beginning of the last millennium. Over time, the building grew, an amalgam of the centuries' artistic, and thus architectural influences, and continued to be adorned by myriad elements, such as mosaics, gilded domes, gold, marble columns, and bronze doors. On the exterior of the basilica in the center of the balcony facing the square are the Horses of Saint Mark, which were claimed from the Hippodrome of Constantinople, but returned to Venice in 1204 as part of the loot sacked during the Fourth Crusade from Constantinople. After being taken to Paris by Napoleon in 1797, the horses were returned to Venice in 1815 and have stood at the Basilica ever since.

St. Mark's Basilica lies on the Piazza San Marco, or St. Mark's Square as it's more commonly known, a tourist destination in and of itself with its breathtaking appearance that serves as a gathering spot for all who live and visit here, especially, as one might assume, for the religious. It has for centuries been the center of spirituality, with the Basilica as its centerpiece and its majestic expanse stretching beyond. Café culture is in full force on the Piazza, the small tables framed by myriad arches making for the perfect place to enjoy a cup of espresso and sfogliatella.

Any trip to Venice isn't complete without a visit to Harry's Bar, the almost 80-year-old institution that serves the crème de la crème of society. The likes of Toscanini, Noel Coward, Charlie Chaplin, Peggy Guggenheim, and Truman Capote have all graced this gracious establishment. Housed in the Hotel Cipriani's other location since 1931, on a canal just off Piazza San Marco, it looks out on the lagoon and has as its best asset impeccable service and the typically welcoming spirit found throughout Venice.

DAYTRIPPING

Seeing the sites is easy in Venice, with its long history of accomplishments now serving as tourist attractions i.e., boating, fashion, hospitality, and textiles. Italy is renowned for the latter, with many of the best linens still fashioned in Venice. No one exemplifies finer workmanship in this sphere than the storied Italian linen company, Sferra. Started in 1891 by Gennaro Sferra in a modest house in the old part of the city, the company now serves more than 500 luxury specialty linen and home accent stores worldwide with its pieces for bed, bath, and table. They are known for their impeccable weave and unerring adherence to quality. Sferra makes 11 collections total, from their basic, to 1891, a fun, more lighthearted collection, to a collection by the well-known interior designer Kelly Wearstler, to a collection by Peter Som that debuts this month. The company's latest campaign, *Lose Count*, started under the direction of just-former Creative Director Aaron Stewart, professes that it is not in the thread count—as is the assumption of many—that one finds the extreme comfort of a sheet or blanket but in the exacting nature of its weave. It's all in the technique, in other words.

Being a linens junkie (I have a closet full of the stuff), I ventured out of the city proper one day to the mill that Sferra uses to witness firsthand how the legendary linens are made. This is where it all comes to pass, in an unprepossessing building about an hour's drive from downtown Venice. If one were driving down the road, taking in the glorious Italian countryside in the distance, one might drive right past it, the mill is that unobtrusive. Nonetheless, press members like me curious about the process of such a time-honored tradition are more than welcome to set a date for a tour. My host for the tour was Giovanni, whose family has owned the mill for decades and knows his linens inside and out. In the grand Italian

tradition, a proper lunch was had first, four courses strong. The modest restaurant Giovanni chose overlooked a valley below where much of the Prosecco in the region—the Italian bubbly that is the rival to champagne—is made. A table draped with the American and the Italian flags served up delicacies that would be tough to find in the States: Cicada de la Mer, a shrimp-like beast that was part of the antipasto, was simple and roasted to the right finish. It is longer than its curvy cousin and more tender, and delicious. Rombo, an oversized white fish similar to our tile fish, came on a huge platter adorned with nothing but roasted potatoes and exquisite olive oil. Also delicious. Dessert came in two forms: A milky Limon cello—which was out of this world—and a frozen cube of chocolate ice cream, imported by the owners of the restaurant who thought its unique taste and minute shape brought just the right end to a four-course meal.

Weaving a sheet is a high science, but one that is perfected after years and years of skill put to the test. It is all they do here, and they do it well. Weaving these sheets used to be done by hand of course; now, the best machines do so all day long, fashioning 1,000-thread-count Celeste, the company's premiere product. The mill is fronted by a shop where both finished product and bolts of fabric—as well as the treasured remnants—are sold to everyday consumers. Exit out the back, cross 100 feet, and one enters the workroom and then the mill, where 20 of the best machines make the magic happen. It is loud, to be sure, but not deafening, and I just love seeing the weave come to life. The fabric churns along and the detritus comes out the end—made into what, I wonder? Every sheet is made from Egyptian cotton and finished off with an exacting stitch, with no detail overlooked. As a company, it's of the utmost importance to Sferra that each product that rolls off their line is as well made as the last. I love being in the presence of such craftsmanship and find it comforting to be in a place that makes, well, comfort.

Venetian lace is celebrated the world over, its exquisite workmanship long the choice of European royalty and nobility for both official and daytime dress. One of the birthplaces of lace making, and now a premiere showplace for it, is the tiny island of Burano, situated in the middle of the Venetian Lagoon. A short boat ride takes one there, its petite landscape dotted with brightly colored houses, rumored to be painted that way as a result of the fisherman's need to see through the fog that occasionally



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Hotel Cipriani Room



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covers the island. Burano has shop after shop of lace everything tablecloths, coasters, runners, and napkins, as one would assume, clothing and accessories such as handkerchiefs, christening gowns for babies, and lace collars and exquisite blouses for women; and then offbeat items, like framed lace creations of everyday scenes, figurines, and bookmarks. The real attraction, besides the goods sold here, are the women who make them: elderly ladies, in their 80s and 90s, sitting on stools in or out front of shops, stitching everything by hand as they have for decades. At first, I felt like I was gawking, but that's what they're there for, proud as they are to show off what might be called a dying tradition if their daughters and granddaughters don't follow in their footsteps.

MANGIA, MANGIA

Like any other major world city, there is no shortage of fabulous eateries in Venice. The city is covered with classic Italian restaurants, bistros, cafes, and finer establishments, and each meal is accompanied by great wine, always with a glass of Prosecco beforehand. It's an indulgence that I will gladly make any day of the week.

Osteria Oliva Nera was our choice for

dining on the first night out. Two locations are placed side by side on a completely out-of-the-way street hidden deep in the center of Venice.

The restaurant's owner, Dino, was at our side throughout the meal, a man very proud of the Venetian delicacies he serves in his fine establishment. As one is wont to describe many places in Europe, it was very charming and very warm. And the food was very good. He steered us through the menu: Salt cod mousse was my choice for an appetizer; one of my dining companions chose sardines with onions, others fresh salads with locally picked ingredients. Entrees in the form of baccala (cod) with polenta or squid ink pasta with sauteed shrimp were outstanding. Our table of ten got silly as we sipped and supped and Dino kept the bottles of Italian Cabernet opening.

Our trip wouldn't have been complete had we not eaten at Cip's Club at the Hotel Cipriani. This we did on our last night and it was, in a word, superb. The hotel is, after all, known throughout the world and the restaurant relaxed yet proper at the same time—follows suit. Cip's 48-seat dining room faces the water and in the warmer months one can sit outside and take in the

panorama of the nearby St. Mark's Square. As one can assume, there is an abundance of seafood on the menu, everything from baby shrimp from nearby Lake Garda served with seasonal salad to Venetian-style cuttlefish with fresh peas. Our table saw it all: Sfogi in Saor - fried, marinated sole with raisins, pine nuts, sweet onion in a white wine sauce and topped with croutons made of polenta; a mix of Adriatic seafood and zucchini topped with horseradish sauce, and sliced calves liver with sauteed onions served with creamy polenta. I indulged in the sea bass which was simply made with lemon and fennel, and paired it with a glass of 2008 Collio Shiapetto Barolo, as well as the Prosecco served before the meal even started. How could I resist? As they say, when in Rome, do as the Romans do. I say ditto for Venice, the Queen of the Adriatic who serves up the royal treatment for all those who come to her shores.

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and the locales mentioned in this
article please visit**
www.hotelcipriani.com
www.sferra.com
www.harrysbarvenezia.com
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