

# WEEKEND JOURNAL.

EUROPE



## Venice crossings

A traghetti-based tour reveals the city's other side

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# Venice crossings: A traghetto tour reveals the city's other side

By Cathryn Drake  
Special to *The Wall Street Journal*

**I**T IS EASY TO MISS the serene soul of Venice among the maddening crowds of tourists that clog its maze of narrow streets. Part of visiting the city is seeing such justifiably world-famous sights as Piazza San Marco and the Rialto Bridge, so those throngs must be braved. But Venice's real allure is revealed in the intimate interstices of daily life, a parallel world of secluded piazzas and obscure side streets. Exploring this labyrinth is key to discovering the true character behind Venice's mesmerizing, painterly façade. The best way to do that is on foot and across water.

Venice is a network of islands joined together by an elaborate water-transportation system. The Grand Canal, the main thoroughfare used originally by merchants on their way to and from the markets of the Rialto, is serviced by a fleet of vaporetti (water buses) and just four bridges—the newest of which was designed by Spanish architect Santiago Calatrava and completed just last year. But the vaporetti are costly, slow and often overcrowded. A cheaper and quicker alternative is the traghetto (“ferry” in Italian): one of the six gondolier crossings along the Grand Canal.

The service employs the same gondolas—stripped of the velvet seats and solicitous gondoliers—that offer touristy jaunts at exorbitant prices. But on a traghetto, for just 50 cents, you cross the canal in a boat rowed by two gondoliers.

A crossing takes only a few minutes (you just board the boat and pay one of the gondoliers—preferably with exact change), but allows you to experience the sights and sounds of the Grand Canal. What's more, walking tours that take strategic advantage of the traghetto crossings make it easy to avoid the main tourist thoroughfares. You can still see plenty of amazing cultural and historical sights, but you also stumble across quiet squares, and relax at affordable bars and restaurants frequented by locals. (You can even get the obligatory photo of yourself in a gondola without feeling like a sucker.)

Here's a guide—several itineraries, really—to using the traghetto to fashion walking tours into some of the unknown corners of Venice. This list starts at the geographical heart of the Venetian archipelago and zig-zags down the Grand Canal, roughly from one end to the other.

## Fondaco dei Turchi-San Marcuola

Start with a coffee on the Campo San Giacomo dell'Orto, behind the Byzantine church of that name. The morning scene here is a bustle of



A traghetto crossing the Grand Canal from Santa Sofia to the Rialto market.

children playing while their elders chat on benches.

Run by brothers Stefano and Davide Corò, Al Prosecco is a good spot from which to watch the choreography of the locals as they cross the piazza, stop briefly to exchange banter, and then disappear into a hidden street at the other end. The café also makes a good evening stop for the aperitif it is named after, or any wine from its 600-bottle list, along with assorted cheeses served with the owners' mother Maria's homemade mostarda, a pungent fruit conserve.

The tour begins with a look at how wealthy 18th-century Venetians lived at the Palazzo Mocenigo—just up the Calle Larga and then right on Calle Colombo until you reach Salizzada Carminati across a small bridge. The Palazzo's perfectly preserved interior is opu-

lently decorated with original furniture, brocaded walls, Murano glass chandeliers, and portraits of the seven Mocenigo family dogs.

The nearby Museum of Natural History features a complete skeleton of the Ouranosaurus Nigeriensis dinosaur, an aquarium with a display on local sea life and a tranquil courtyard with a fountain. The museum is in the colonnaded Venetian-Byzantine Palazzo Il Fontego dei Turchi—translated as “The Warehouse of the Turks,” one of the biggest palaces on the Grand Canal and the 17th-century base for Turkish merchants.

Just in front of the museum is the Fondaco dei Turchi traghetto stop, where you cross the canal to San Marcuola, not far from the train station (some of the traghetto don't operate in the afternoons or on Sundays; see map at right for details). This is the Cannaregio sestiere (dis-

trict), haunted by former residents such as Marco Polo, Wagner, Tintoretto and Titian. The name of this quarter is derived from the reeds (*canna*) that used to grow along the canals. (Most of the piazzas in Venice are called *campo*, meaning “field” in Italian, because they were originally planted with grass and trees.)

As you approach the bank, on the left you will see Palazzo Memmo-Martinengo, the residence of nobleman Andrea Memmo, whose descendant Andrea di Robilant recounted his forbidden affair with Giustina Wynne, aided by his friend Casanova, in the 2003 book “A Venetian Affair.” Farther to the right is Palazzo Vendramin-Calergi, where Richard Wagner lived and died. It's now the Casino.

By now it will be time for a lunch break, so take the little streets behind the church and the Casino to

Cantina Vecia Carbonera. This charming locale has a front bar frequented by jolly red-nosed men drinking the Venetian *spritz* (prosecco with Aperol, Select or Campari and a dash of seltzer) and eating cicchetti, the local version of tapas: mini sandwiches, crostini with leek-gorgonzola-walnut and radicchio-mascarpone-walnut creams, mussels with tomato and cheese sauce, and risotto allo scoglio, or shellfish. Two signs above the bar read: “Spritz €2 Pannini €2 Crostini €2” and “Ombra €1.” Ombra means “shadow,” but they aren't charging for shelter from the sun; it's a glass of house wine, served in a shot glass. The name comes from the wine vendors who in medieval times would set up in Saint Mark's Square under the bell tower, moving their kegs across the piazza along with the shade to

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Relaxing on Campo Santa Maria Formosa



Cantina Vecia Carbonera



Campo Santa Maria Formosa

## A traghetto tour

The way to discover Venice's real allure is on foot and across water, using the six traghetto crossings along the Grand Canal.



- 1 **San Marcuola-Fondaco dei Turchi**  
Winter 9 a.m. – 1 p.m.  
Summer 9 a.m. – 12:30 p.m.  
Closed Sunday and public holidays
- 2 **Pescheria-Santa Sofia**  
7:30 a.m. – 8 p.m.  
Sunday 8:45 a.m. – 7 p.m.
- 3 **Riva del Carbon-Fondamente del Vin**  
8 a.m. – 1 p.m.  
Closed Sunday and public holidays
- 4 **Sant'Angelo-San Toma**  
7:30 a.m. – 8 p.m.  
Sunday 8:30 a.m. – 7:30 p.m.
- 5 **San Samuele-Ca' Rezzonico**  
8:30 a.m. – 1:30 p.m.  
Closed Sunday and public holidays
- 6 **Campo del Traghetto-Calle Lanza**  
9 a.m. – 6 p.m. daily including public holidays

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Basilica Santa Maria della Salute



A traghetto crossing to San Samuele

# Venice crossings: A traghetto tour of the city

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keep cool.

After eating, head along the Strada Nova toward the train station and cross the Ponte Guglie bridge to take refuge in Parco Savorgnan, a shady public park full of chirping birds and towering trees. It's tucked away behind the Palazzo Venier, to your right, and is signposted from Campo San Geremia, down the little street in front of the bridge.

Back across the Cannaregio Canal, taking the Ponte Guglie again, is the Jewish Ghetto, the origin of the term "ghetto," a formerly gated area where Venetian Jews were confined until the arrival of Napoleon in 1797. Although only about one-third of Venice's roughly 1,000 Orthodox Jewish residents still live there, the neighborhood remains their spiritual center, with two of five historic synagogues still functioning: the breathtaking Byzantine-accented Schola Spagnola, used in summer; and the Baroque Schola Levantina, with a finely carved woodwork, for wintertime worship.

The Museo Ebraico (Jewish Museum), in Campo del Ghetto Nuovo, gives guided tours of three synagogues. On Friday evening the lilting prayers of Torah students emanating from the Chabad Ari Yeshiva are a reminder of Venice's history as an ancient cultural crossroads.

For dinner in the area try laid-back Anice Stellato, which offers canalside tables in summer and serves classic Venetian seafood dishes such as bigoi in salsa (fat spaghetti in anchovy and onion sauce), spaghetti con caprossoli (with clams), garusoli (sea-snails), and baccalà mantecato (creamed cod).

After dinner head over to the Fondamenta de la Misericordia to the popular hangout Il Paradiso Perduto, with live music and a mix of boisterous locals, including burly workmen who dock their colorfully painted wooden boats right in front.

## Pescheria-Santa Sofia

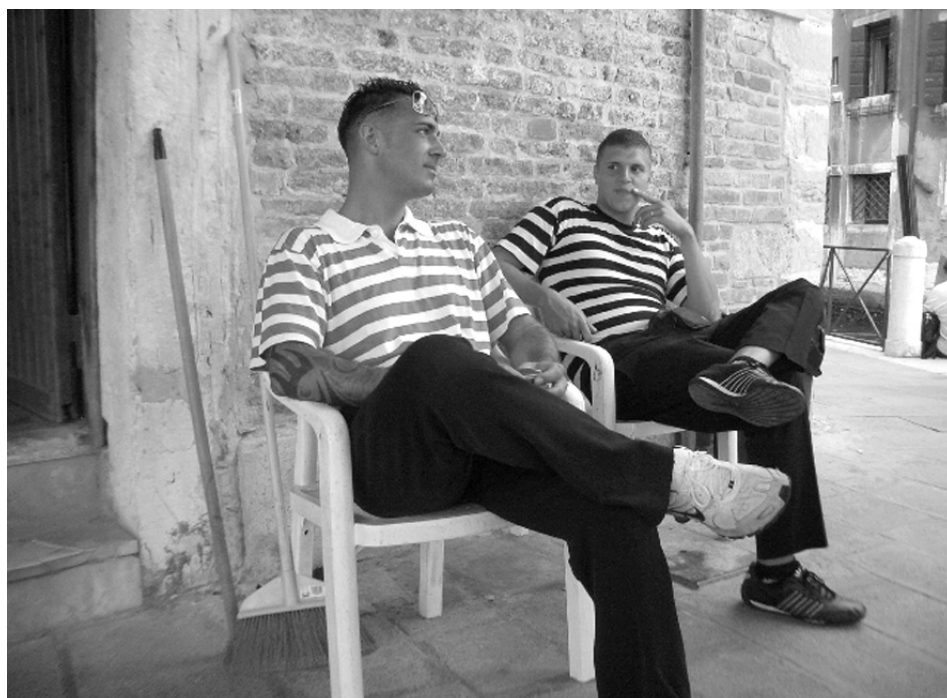
Get up early the next day and immerse yourself in the bustle and banter of the 1,000-year-old Rialto fish market, housed in a neo-Gothic arcade. Even if you speak Italian, you may have trouble with the Venetian dialect, spoken in abrupt sentences that end mid-crescendo. The dappled light coming through the arches transforms the aromatic goods into still lifes.

Perhaps it will help to fortify yourself, like the Venetians, with a midmorning ombra and a snack at Cantina Do Mori, Venice's oldest bacaro, a typical wine bar that has served local tradesmen since the 14th century. By noon you can escape the crowds swarming across the Rialto Bridge by catching the gondola at the Pescheria traghetto stop (near Ca' d'Oro).

Disembark in front of the Santa Sofia church. For sustenance head to the Osteria Al Bomba, hidden at the end of a passageway to the right of the church. "That is where we go to eat well and not spend much," says one of the gondoliers. Typical cicchetti here include the Venetian sarde in saor (sardines with onions and raisins), baccalà mantecato and polenta.

Down the Strada Nova—an unusually wide and straight thoroughfare built in the late 19th century that spans almost the length of Cannaregio—and beyond the Campo dei Santi Apostoli bridge is the exquisite Santa Maria dei Miracoli, a Renaissance jewel box faced with multicolored marble left over from the San Marco Basilica and tucked away on its own between two bridges. Have a coffee with a lovely view from one of the cozy booths at Bar Ai Miracoli, in the adjacent Campiello Santa Maria Nova, where there is a flea market on some weekends. On the piazza is the shop of bookbinder Paolo Olbi, where you can find elegant hand-bound journals.

Cross the Ponte del Piovan and take the Calle Larga Giacinto Gallina to the Osteria al Ponte, nestled next to the bridge leading onto the vast Campo San Zanipolo. By afternoon this cozy place will start filling up with an assortment of convivial Venetians sipping wine and savoring plates of seafood cicchetti, prosciutto and salumi, and pickled onions served



Traghetto **gondoliers** taking a break on the San Toma landing.

Cathryn Drake/The Wall Street Journal

from the glass bar.

Across the bridge you'll see the Gothic façade of the enormous Dominican basilica of Santi Giovanni e Paolo, where 25 doges are buried; there is a grand funerary monument to Pietro Mocenigo, an altar by Giovanni Bellini and several paintings by Veronese.

You are now in Castello sestiere. Exit the piazza via Calle Bressana and head to the Campo Santa Maria Formosa, one of the largest in the city, framed by perhaps the finest collection of palazzos displaying Venice's unique architectural styles. At one end the Querini-Stampalia Foundation house museum exhibits original furnishings and artwork owned by the family of Niccolò Querini, who was banished to Greece for treason in the 14th century, along with periodic contemporary-art exhibitions. Of note here are paintings by Pietro Longhi and Gabriele Bella illustrating the daily life of 18th-century Venice. Behind the bookstore there is café and a courtyard garden designed by Carlo Scarpa.

## Riva del Carbon-Fondamente del Vin

It is a short walk from there to the next traghetto stop, Riva del Carbon, within sight of the Rialto bridge. Here, take the boat across to the Fondamente del Vin in the San Polo quarter.

You arrive in the secluded Campo San Silvestro, a perfect example of the deserted little piazzas that pop up unexpectedly as you turn a corner, seemingly into the past. Here are nondescript decaying palazzos—one pink, one saffron, many worn of paint—and the ubiquitous covered medieval wellhead. The neoclassical towered church features Tintoretto's Baptism of Christ. On the corner is the contemporary Altrove 360° Bar, one of the few that serves all day, from breakfast to after-dinner cocktails.

Next, head along the shopping street Campiello dei Meloni and stop on the way toward the Rialto at no. 1415. Pasticceria Rizzardini, sells candy from jars and traditional Venetian pastries such as pear cake and apple strudel in a lovely dark wood interior.

Avoid the Rialto throngs by ducking in among the porticoes opposite the bridge, where you will find one of Venice's more interesting new restaurants. Run by brother and sister Sara and Valerio Silvestri, the tiny Osteria Sacro e Profano serves a mix of traditional recipes such as baccalà mantecato served with slabs of polenta and inventive variations like pumpkin ravioli with poppy seeds, and shrimp with apples and curry. Then take dessert on the only real terrace on the Grand Canal, at either Bancogiro or Naranzaria restaurants, in the former Rialto market storehouse, where you can watch the hectic boat traffic swerve past.

## Campo del Traghetto-Calle Lanza

Start a new day in Castello with an atmospheric mass invoking the exotic Eastern influence of Venice's past at San Giorgio dei Greci, the oldest and most important church of the Orthodox diaspora. The church's tower teeters a bit. Suffused with heady incense, its splendid interior features dark wood stalls, awe-inspiring iconography accented with gold, fine post-Byzantine mosaics, and a frescoed cupola painted under the supervision of Tintoretto.

Afterward head down the little canal to the Scuola di San Giorgio degli Schiavoni to see Carpaccio's great Venetian cycle illustrating the lives of Dalmatian saints, including the celebrated St. George and the Dragon. The paintings were made specifically for this building, which has a mysterious and hushed ambience. Next door to the church the Museo dell'Istituto Ellenico displays an impressive collection of Byzantine icons.

On a dim and narrow street behind the Doge's palace, the pasticceria-bar Da Bonifacio serves the best pizzette in Venice, as well as freshly made cakes and, at the bar, some of the juiciest neighborhood gossip.

Next, cross the Piazza San Marco through the arcade at the other end to Campo Santa Maria Zobenigo, and turn left on the Campo

## Tours that take advantage of the traghetto crossings make it easy to avoid the main thoroughfares.

del Traghetto for the ride across to the Dorsoduro quarter.

You will disembark not far from the magnificent octagonal Basilica Santa Maria della Salute, built in thanksgiving for the end of the plague in the early 17th century. The Baroque church, with more than 100 figures gesturing from atop its soaring buttresses, contains several Titians, as well as Tintoretto's great "Marriage at Cana" (1551) in the sacristy.

Down the street on a corner across from Saint George's Anglican church is Al Vecio Forner, a cozy dark-wood osteria specializing in seafood, where you can also order snacks from the cicchetti bar.

After dinner you can walk across the wooden Accademia Bridge to visit the Piazza San Marco when it is empty of pigeons and other tourists. Late at night the famous square is magical, with the lights from colonnade throwing a painterly sheen on the pave-

ment. The Caffé Aurora serves up cocktails, dance music, and a cool vibe under the portico until 2 a.m.

## San Samuele-Ca' Rezzonico

Start the next morning with an espresso among the hipsters at the red Caffé on Campo Santa Margherita while Venetians stroll by with their dogs or shop at the open-air market in the piazza. Then walk over the bridge and through Campo San Barnaba—along the canal that Katharine Hepburn fell into in the movie "Summertime"—and take a left past the church on the Calle del Traghetto to the gondola stop.

Once across the canal you will disembark next to the Palazzo Grassi, the contemporary-art museum opened in 2006 to showcase the collection of French billionaire François Pinault.

A twisting route of back streets starting at the Calle delle Carozze will take you to the eccentric Fortuny Museum, where you can see the former studio of textile designer Mariano Fortuny in a dark and dusty Gothic palace, which also hosts changing exhibitions. Afterward take a drink from the fountain in the desolate little Campo San Benedetto.

Nearby, off Campo Santo Stefano on the Calle dell Botteghe, the deservedly famous bacaro Trattoria Da Fiore is certainly no longer a secret, but its casual cicchetti bar is still great for a lunch of the classics: slices of eggplant, tomato and mozzarella with giant capers on top; sardines in saor, fried calamari and sea snails; baccalà mantecato spread on a bread slice; fried tuna balls or green peppers. Afterward go to Igloo, on Calle della Mandola, for an excellent fig or pistachio gelato.

## Sant'Angelo-San Toma

Back down Calle delle Botteghe past the restaurant is the Sant'Angelo traghetto stop, where you cross to the San Toma landing, in the San Polo quarter.

A short walk away are the Santa Maria Gloriosa dei Frari church and the Scuola di San Rocco, the richest of six medieval Venetian "schools," or guilds, founded between the 13th and 16th centuries. These two sites hold a veritable pantheon of the city's glories, with the greatest concentration of significant art outside of the Accademia. The impressive interior of the Scuola is decorated entirely by Tintoretto and became his epic masterpiece, with more than 50 paintings produced over 23 years. The cavernous Franciscan church contains masterpieces by Titian and Bellini and the tombs of Titian and Canova, the latter with an urn holding the sculptor's mummified heart.

After such an overwhelming experience, you may need a gelato. Take one of the little streets behind the Scuola di San Rocco to Campo Santa Margherita. At the far end of the piazza is Il Doge Gelateria (not to be mistaken for the newer one on the corner).

Continue toward the Accademia Bridge via Campo San Barnaba. On Calle della Toletta you will find Canestrelli, a small shop selling elegant handcrafted frames with convex mirrors by architect Stefano Coluccio, who learned the family trade from his grandfather.

Farther down the winding street, cross a bridge and head to the right. In the evenings a devoted crowd of regulars spills out onto the Fondamenta Priuli to drink at Enoteca Gia Schiavi, where there's also a delicious array of cicchetti: crostini with gorgonzola, apple, and aceto or pistachio-cheese cream as well as the classics, for only €1 each. For dinner, the bustling Osteria ai 4 Feri, just off the Campo San Barnaba, serves simply grilled fish and seafood pastas in a rustic setting.

Back across the Ponte dei Pugni bridge, toward Campo Santa Margherita, the cool and sleek Imagina Café shows contemporary art and serves cocktails until 2 a.m. Nearby the Venice Jazz Club features live music starting at 9 p.m. And near the Accademia, the tiny after-hours disco dive Piccolo Mondo attracts lots of students with a colorful, rough-around-the-edges ambience.

Or, if the night life isn't your thing, just wander the city some more. You'll have the streets practically to yourself.