

THE BIG WEEKEND

VENICE

FRIDAY

Evening

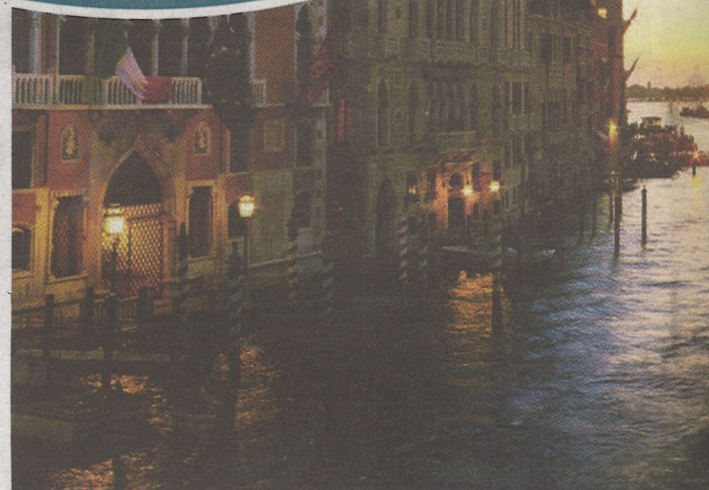
Venice in winter? It's when she's at her best. Prices are low, crowds nonexistent, and the crumbling palazzi, misty waterways, ornate bridges and golden mosaics are all bathed in a hazy chill that rises from the lagoon. You'll get lost here, repeatedly. Just accept it. That's when the magic happens.

Do the locals' thing and arrive by boat. Alilaguna's orange line, from the airport, will transport you down the Grand Canal in state, as dusk is falling — a fittingly dramatic entrance (£19 return; alilaguna.it).

First stop: an *aperitivo* at **Estro Vino e Cucina**, where the districts of clever Dorsoduro and lively San Polo collide. An old-school watering hole has become a gourmet pit stop where you can sample 500 wines by the glass (from £5.50). Matteo Bisol's **Dorona di Venissa** is our favourite (estrovenezia.com).

Take your first gondola to dinner. But rather than forking out £70 for a 40-minute ride, hop on the *traghetto*, as Venetians do, from San Toma to Sant'Angelo. These super-gondolas, rowed by two, carry a maximum of 14, at seven strategic points across the Grand Canal (£1.40).

Tonight, dinner is at **Alle Testiere**. Booking is essential in this Castello institution with only 22 covers — it serves the best seafood in Italy. Try the scallops with orange and leek, followed by gnocchi with baby squid and cinnamon (mains from £15.50; www.osteriaaltestiere.it).



There's no better time of year to get lost by a misty canal. Here's how to have the city to yourself. By **Mia Aimaro Ogdén**

SATURDAY

Morning

The **Mercato di Rialto** can be a bit of a shock to the system, but get there while the locals are still bargaining for the catch of the day and you'll see Venice in the raw. The smells (fresh fish, wild basil, ageing horsemeat, bitter coffee), colours (scarlet tomatoes, lumpy yellow *cedri*, blood-red swordfish steaks, purple radicchio) and ear-splitting noise (mostly traders shouting in impenetrable dialect) will stay with you long after you've left Campo della Pescheria and taken refuge in the chilled **Goppion Caffè** for a quick espresso at the bar (80p). Try the dark-chocolate tools in the window; the pincers are particularly delicious (goppioncaffè.it).



St Mark's Square, and, above, the Rialto market

Afternoon

The traders like to break for *un'ombra* (slang for a swift tittle) just before lunch at **Do Mori**, a dark little bar round the back of the market, with copper pots hanging from the ceiling. Join them for a glass of prosecco, followed by a few *cicchetti* — Venetian snacks that include fried tuna, courgette and aubergine patties, mini meatballs, salt cod on crispy bread and scallops in bacon (from £1.20).

San Polo's barn of a church, **Santa Maria Gloriosa dei Frari**, is one of the best galleries in Venice. If you can navigate your way here by Mass time, it's free; otherwise you'll pay £2 to see Titian's *Assumption of the Virgin* (chorusvenezia.org).

Explore the narrow streets of studenty

Santa Croce that lead up into cool Cannaregio, where you can hop on *vaporetto* No 2 from Ferrovia, along the Grand Canal and down to **Accademia** (£5; actv.it). Here, the shallow canalsides are crammed with charming galleries and antiques shops, but your destination is the **Peggy Guggenheim Collection**, the hottest trove of 20th-century art — Picasso, Braque, Duchamp, Mondrian, Dali — this side of the Apennines. Book a 5pm slot online and you'll be untroubled by crowds (£11; www.guggenheim-venice.it).

Evening

Ready for a quick cocktail? Head to the bar at **Palazzina G**, Philippe Starck's discreet hotel of sexy leather, velvet chandeliers and animal skins, where the fashionable crowd drink *Rossinis*, a fruity mix of strawberries and prosecco,

until dinnertime (from £9; palazzinag.com).

At **Ai Mercanti**, a *gastrosteria* on a tiny square behind San Marco, **Nadia Locatello** is cooking up a storm. It's a twinkly space for winter nights. Try the crispy egg with potato foam and anchovies, and cod ravioli with beetroot cream (mains from £8; aimercanti.it).

SUNDAY

Morning

You need to get a shimmy on if you're going to make sung Mass at 10.30am in the **Basilica di San Marco**. The most exotic of Europe's great cathedrals, it's a gorgeous potted history of the Venetian city-state, and you can check it out from a front-row seat. After, nip up to the loggia. Now you're right under the wonderful 13th-century Old Testament mosaics, beside the

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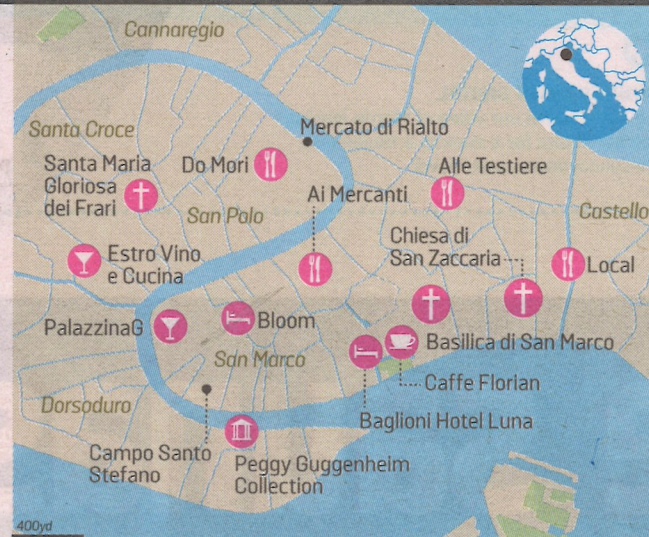
pistachio. Venetians eat gelato even when it's freezing outside (from £1.40; Santa Croce 1910).

WHERE TO STAY

Baglioni Hotel Luna is a proper San Marco *grande dame* – with reasonable rates, in winter at least. It's all marble bathrooms, flocked walls, elegant antiques and great service (doubles from £177, B&B; baglionihotels.com). In Santo Stefano, try **Bloom**, a super-snug B&B with six cool rooms, a prosecco bar and a roof terrace offering views across the city (doubles from £64, B&B; bloom-venice.com).

GETTING THERE

Mia Aimaro Ogden was a guest of Baglioni Hotel Luna, Bloom and British Airways, which has returns from Gatwick to Venice Marco Polo from £107 (ba.com). Or try Monarch or easyJet.



top choice on the three-course set lunch menu (menu £21; ristorantelocal.com).

Now, get lost. Wandering up and down *calle* and along canals is the only way to get a handle on the city. Castello's lovely **Chiesa di San Zaccaria** is a great place to start: from here, you can spend a gorgeous couple of hours heading (vaguely) towards **Campo Santo Stefano**, taking in the narrow back lanes of San Marco, the bridges of Rio dei Barcaroli, a startling view of the **Ponte dei Sospiri** (Bridge of Sighs) and a quick peek into the opulent **Teatro La Fenice**. Along the way, you'll catch gothic windows, marbled facades, *fondamenti* full of singing gondoliers and palazzi

that look as if they're about to tumble into the drink.

Alternatively, go shopping: the best independent boutiques are all open on Sunday afternoon. **Marina e Susanna Sent** make gorgeously kooky jewels with Murano glass (marinaesusanna.com), while **Maliparmi** has offbeat Marni-style clothes and shoes (maliparmi.com). **Il Baule Blu** offers antique glassware, midcentury furniture and collectors' toys (San Polo 2916A), and **L'Offico Fabbrikatore** has a range of chic specs, sunglasses and great fashion labels from the Veneto (San Marco 4773). Stop off for ice cream at **San Stae** – the best flavours are coffee and star anise, pear and walnut, and caramelised

Twilight saga The Grand Canal at its moodiest. Left, Titian's *Assumption of the Virgin*. Far left, prosecco with the locals in Do Mori

Getty; Stefano Amantini/4Corners

Afternoon

Book ahead for **Local**, Castello's coolest new restaurant, where even chefs in the neighbourhood are clamouring for a table. Octopus with green beans and ginger potatoes is our

Caffè Florian, on **Piazza San Marco**. It's a little gilt-and-velvet piece of glam from 1720, and if you prop up the bar at the back, you'll pay only stand-up rates. The tiny cups of thick hot chocolate are divine (from £4; caffeflorian.com).

horses of San Marco – and with access to the Loggia dei Cavalli, the most dramatic balcony view in Venice (Mass free, loggia £3.50; basilicasanmarco.it).

If you visit only one blow-the-budget coffee shop while you're here, make it