

VENICE. PART 1: A VOYAGE THROUGH THE GRAND CANAL

John Davis

The magical and romantic city of Venice is very dear to my heart. My wife and I honeymooned there in 1964. We befriended Bruna, an eleven year old Venetian girl and her family who lived on the island of Murano in the Venetian Lagoon. Bruna came to stay with us in 1971, and in 1981 with our two sons we went to Murano to stay with Bruna and her family. We returned for our Ruby wedding anniversary in 2004 and again for our Golden in 2014. God willing, we may go back again for our Diamond in four years time. The problem is that in 1964 there were very few tourists in Venice, which had more pigeons than people. Now, the city is heaving with tourists (you can't see the pigeons), with long queues to enter historic buildings and monuments. In 1964 the canals were full of the traditional Gondolas. Now there are fewer Gondolas and more motor speed boats to gratify the rich and famous. The tourists are four or five deep at the Ponte della Paglia on the Riva degli Schiavoni, and you have to strain yourself over their heads and shoulders to see the Bridge of Sighs. Huge cruise ships dwarf the city and endanger its further sinking with water displacement. The sheer weight of thousands of tourists converging on St Mark's Square also contribute to the slow sinking of Venice. Fortunately, plans are in progress to ban all cruise ships from Venetian waters. Sadly, visiting Venice during the summer months is now to be avoided at all costs.

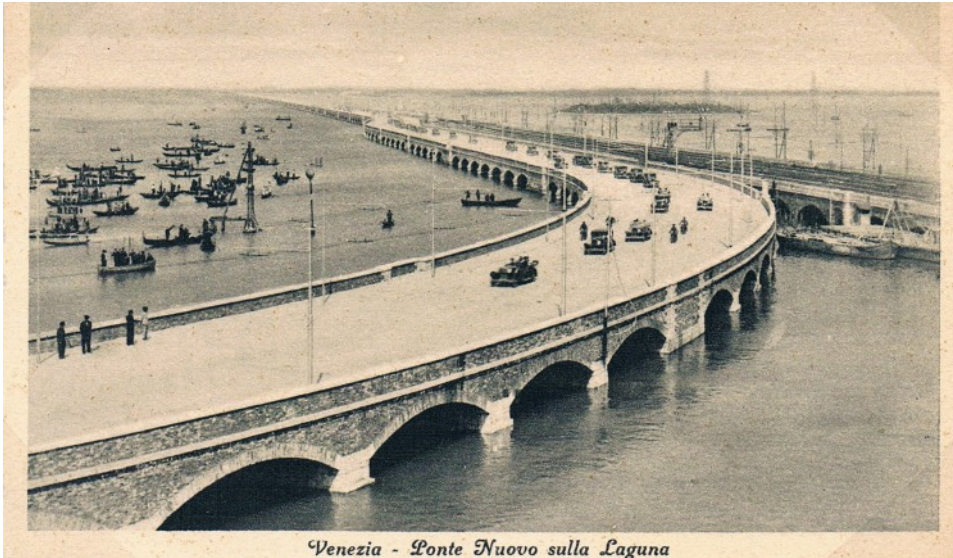
A few years ago, I was looking for a new collecting interest, and thought that Venice would be an interesting subject. Unfortunately, Venice never issued its own stamps except for a few municipal revenue stamps between 1871 and 1990 (and possibly beyond), and Cinderella stamps commemorating Art Biennales and other events.

I already had a lot of personal memorabilia collected from our visits to Venice, and a search on Ebay for Venice revealed over 2,000 items (stamps and postcards) from a multitude of countries. The material available was limitless. Many stamps were issued in the early 1970s to publicise Unesco's Save Venice campaign; there have been issues featuring famous painters who were either born in Venice, came to live in Venice, or who just visited Venice; there are issues commemorating Biennale Art exhibitions which have been held every two years (with a few exceptions) since 1895; and just stamps and postcards featuring various Venetian sights and historic buildings.

Further research took me back to the origins of Venice in 421 and the historic Venetian Republic 697-1797, the French revolution, Lombardy Venetia, the three Italian wars of independence, the Austro-Prussian wars, the divided Italy and its unification in 1866, and then Triveneto: the three Venices, a word coined by Graziadio Isaia Ascoli (1829-1907) to describe Venezia Tridentina, Venezia Euganea, and Friuli Venezia Giulia (which includes Trieste).

So where does one begin? I thought that initially I would start with the much-loved city of Venice situated in the north Adriatic lagoon, and a voyage through the Grand Canal and into St Mark's Basin. Future articles will cover other aspects of the city.

On arriving at Marco Polo airport on the Italian mainland, one could reach Venice by taking the water taxi through the lagoon to your hotel, which will cost about 120 euros for you and your family. It is cheaper to take the airport shuttle bus across the causeway Ponte della Liberta (fig 1) to Piazzale Roma, the tickets for which are eight euros each. Either



Venezia - Ponte Nuovo sulla Laguna
 fig 1: Ponte della Libertà



figs 2 - 3. Route of the Grand Canal

way, when you arrive, that will be last time you will see any cars and lorries, for the only way to get around Venice is either on foot, or on the canal by vaporetti (public water buses), water taxi or gondola.

The Grand Canal flows in the shape of a reversed 'S' skirting all six Sestieri (districts) of Venice into St Mark's Basin and terminating at Giardini (figs 2 and 3). We start our journey from the Piazzale Roma boat station (landing stage), where in 2008 the Ponte della Costituzione, the fourth bridge over the Grand Canal, was opened. It connects the sestieri of Cannaregio and Santa Croce. We take the vaporetto which zig-zags from one side of the Grand Canal to the other, stopping at or passing fourteen boat stations. After four kilometres we enter St Mark's Basin where we alight and continue our journey on foot.

We will see the four bridges that traverse the Grand Canal, sailing under three of them, and seeing many beautiful building and palaces, before arriving at St Marks' Square, the centrepiece of Venice.

The first bridge we sail under is the Ponte degli Scalzi, which is a stone bridge completed in 1934, replacing the Austrian iron bridge constructed in 1857. On the right we see the Palazzo Ca'Foscarini (fig 4) next to which is the Palazzo Ca'Pesaro, now a gallery of modern art (fig 5), and on the left there is the Palazzo Ca'D'oro, a 15th century Gothic Palace. We approach the most well-known Venetian bridge, the Rialto (fig 6), which is a stone bridge completed in 1591, after the first 1181 bridge had been replaced five times. The Rialto houses many rows of shops, all packed with tourists. Here is a good place to take a gondola trip which might set you back another 80 euros or so for you and your family, or just the two of you. Venice is not cheap!

We then sail under the Ponte dell'Accademia at the southern end of the Grand Canal. The original steel bridge was opened on 20th November 1854. In 1933 it was demolished and replaced by a wooden bridge. This in turn was demolished in 1985 and replaced by another wooden bridge. On the right is the Palazzo Barbarigo, noted for its mosaics and fresco paintings, and is next door to the Peggy Guggenheim collection of modern art.

When we reach the point where the Grand Canal enters St Mark's Basin, on the right we pass the Santa Maria della Salute (fig 7), a church that was built in thanksgiving for Venice's deliverance from the 1630 plague. Construction took 37 years from 1630 to 1687.

On the left we arrive at St Mark's Square, which features the Doges' Palace, St Mark's Basilica (fig 8), the Bell Tower (fig 9), and the Clock Tower (fig 10), where there are now long queues for those wishing to purchase entrance tickets.

Standing with your back to St Mark's Basilica, at the far right corner of St Marks's Square there is a stamp shop, or at least there was six years ago when I last visited Venice.

On the left of St Mark's Square is the famous Florian Café, established in 1720 and the oldest café in the world. On our last visit, a cup of coffee cost nine euros, and for the music supplement, another six euros. So for ourselves two cups of coffee and the music set me back 30 euros. I said that Venice is not cheap! But for this price you can sit for hours, even after you have finished your coffee.

Now on foot we walk along the Riva degli Schiavoni to the Ponte della Paglia, where looking along the Rio del Palazzo canal, we see the iconic 1600 Ponte dei Sospiri (fig 11). It was given the name 'Bridge of Sighs' by Lord Byron, as it is was the place whence convicts last saw Venice before their imprisonment.

As we walk on, across the Basin on the right is the small island of San Giorgio. We pass the Chiesa della Pietà, which started its life as a Foundling home for orphans. It was Vivaldi's Church, and is now used for concerts, and is also a Foundling Museum (fig 12).

We pass the Arsenale (figs 13-15) and Marina, the heart of Venice's former maritime power, and finally arrive at our destination – Giardini/Biennale, the gardens where the Biennale International Art Exhibitions are held every two years (fig 16).



Fig 4 Palazzo Ca' Foscari



Fig 5 Palazzo Ca' Pesaro



Fig 6 Rialto Bridge



Fig 7 Church of Santa Maria della Salute



Fig 8 Basilica of St. Mark



Fig 9 Bell Tower



Venezia - 62 - Torre dell'Orologio
Fig 10 Clock Tower



Fig 11 Bridge of Sighs

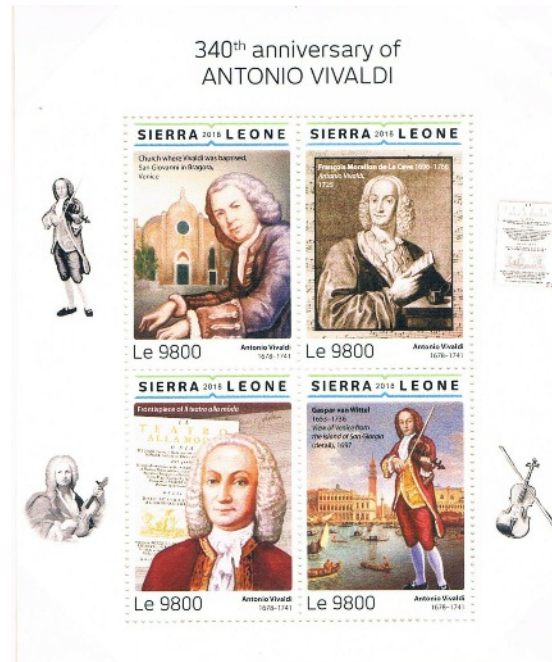


Fig 12 Vivaldi, 340th anniversary of his birth



Fig 13 The Arsenale by J M W Turner



Fig 14 The Arsenale by Darascu



Fig 15 Arsenale Military Naval School



Fig 16 poster stamp of the very first Venice International Art Biennale held in 1895

That concludes my article about my introduction to Venice and a voyage along the Grand Canal.

As I said in my introduction, I will be continuing my interest in Venice with an article about the history of Venice from its origins up to the fall of the Republic in 1797 and its unification with Italy 1866; the history of Venice post Italian unification up to the present day; and concluding with the history of the three Venices – Triveneto. 📖



Miniature sheet illustrating various Venice landmarks issued in 1932 to commemorate the 18th Biennale

