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The Masque-tique of Venice



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THE “Masque-tique” OF VENICE

By Lexye Aversa

IT’S AN EVER-UNFOLDING PAGEANTRY OF MAGIC, MYSTERY, MYSTIQUE!

I board a *vaporetto* and motor through the canals, crossing that invisible veil into a fairytale dimension. Each visit to Venice reveals a new fantasy production, where the stage is the city itself. This is never as true as during *Carnevale di Venezia*, when living theater commandeers residents and tourists, granting them license to cavort in costume and sending them “dancing and prancing” through days and evenings of parades, Renaissance balls, fireworks and endless moments of revelry!

Carnival festivities take place behind the imposing doors of exclusive *palazzi*, in the ballrooms of hotels that were once the villas of the aristocracy, and in the vast open plaza of *Piazza San Marco*. A controlled frenzy, this is not “madness in the street,” but a tasteful tip of the hat to the grandeur of former centuries.

Visitors from all over the world arrive laden with costumes for the various balls and parties. Others send their measurements to the ateliers, whose magnificent period creations grace the stages of opera, theater and film the rest of the year. Imagine yourself in a Renaissance costume plucked from *La Traviata* or *Don Giovanni*!

Arguably the most famous masked ball in the world, the *Ballo del Doge* is themed differently each year and offers outrageous entertainment at the 15th century *Palazzo Pisani Moretta*. But some of the most stunning events of Carnival occur within St. Mark’s Square. There, a theater is constructed, and on opening and closing weekends, the ceremonial “Flight of the Angel” and “Flight of the Eagle” are presented. In these fantastical “flights,” a brave celebrity glides above the masses on a sky-high zipline, “flying” from the pinnacle of the Doges Palace across the Square.

The vitality of Venice rings out with the pealing of the church bells, struck by the Clock Tower’s mechanical figures, it floats on the gentle waves alongside the gondolas on the Grand Canal and glides along intricate waterways under low-hanging bridges connecting the city’s mosaic of neighborhoods.

To visit Venice is to yearn for a gondola ride. Settle in to listen to the song of your gondolier as his pole gracefully steers you along a maze of canals, navigating tiny waterways effortlessly. In fact, one of the most surreal sights of the Venice skyline is that of a massive cruise

ship inching along the Grand Canal, carving a swath as it sails past monuments, basilicas and rooftops of centuries past.

From April through October, many tourists alight in Venice for just a night or two, pre- or post-cruise voyage or as one stop on a tour through Italy. But Venice offers centuries of art and history, making it worth more than a quick glance. Ancient Roman pillars and arches rub elbows with architecture bearing a distinct Byzantine flair garnered from early Venetians voyages to the Far East.

When Venice was a thriving republic, before 19th century unification, it virtually ruled the seas. Today, that history is commemorated during the annual *Regata Storica*, when Venice’s long-boats compete with other maritime republics of the time: Genoa, Pisa and Amalfi. Each city takes a turn hosting the event, a day-long festival of period costumes and a processional of decorated 13th century boats, which culminates in the *Regata*, another fantasy in 21st century living color!

Venice is alive with history. Visiting a friend’s palazzo, I stepped off the boat into the open courtyard decorated with priceless, classic statuary, then ascended the stairs to the living quarters (most Venetians reside on the floor above sea level, as waters rise during certain periods of the year). There, I found one of the owners on a mobile scaffold, restoring her *Tiepolo* frescoes along the ceiling!

Historical architecture abounds in Venice. Visit the *Basilica*, Doges Palace, Bridge of Sighs and *Campanile*. Discover art around every corner, housed in ancient buildings such as the *Correr* Museum and *Marciana* National Library, the *Ca D’Oro*, *Accademia* and Guggenheim Collection. This makes exploring Venice easy. Just keep walking. You’ll find your way to the Jewish Ghetto, the *Rialto* Bridge, the *Dorsoduro* neighborhood, and unexpected niches of local ambiance!



PHOTOS COURTESY OF LEXYE AVERSA

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Venice offers equally infinite shopping possibilities. Top Italian designers have established boutiques, and Carnival costumes, marionettes, and masks are mainstays, creating an animated aura as they stare at you from shop windows and kiosks! On the island of *Murano*, the crafting of hand-blown glass dates back centuries, and the shops are dazzling. Find magnificent jewelry, the famed Venetian chandeliers, and imaginative frames for mirrors. *Burano* boasts hand-made lace.

And the *Lido*? Well, if it's beach and casino you seek, you've found it. Lido's exquisite Excelsior Hotel is just one of the magnificent hotels in Venice. The uber-exclusive *Cipriani* on *Giudecca* Island is secluded on its own island—but is just a quick jaunt by boat from the center of Venice. The Hotel *Bonvecchiati* is a little jewel situated on its own canal and boasts the wonderful *La Terrazza* restaurant whose focal point is a fountain created from blown *Murano* glass, and displays paintings by artists of the past, who traded their work in exchange for room and sustenance!

Starwood has recently welcomed several properties into its brand, including The *Danieli*, for decades one of the most beloved hotels in Venice. The newly-renovated *Gritti Palace*, in Starwood's Luxury Collection, is a retreat fit for royalty. The *Europa Regina*, now a Westin, retains its charm and warmth. Stay there, and you'll feel as if you are residing in your own private palazzo.



Dining in Venice is a glorious palate-pleasing pastime. Venetians call their cuisine (and themselves!) “Venetian,” not “Italian,” and the food is sublime—and so imaginatively presented. Seafood and fish are king and queen in Venice. Try the intriguing spider crab in its pink-tinged shell or the ultimate aphrodisiac, *capesante*, which is scallops still in the shell, dusted with parmesan and baked to tantalizing perfection!

Dine in *Do Forni's* renowned Orient Express salon on sumptuous, yet affordable, delights. *Caffe Centrale* offers a trendy approach, while *Acqua Pazza* serves the best pizza, *stuzzichini* (fried hors d'oeuvres), seafood, and frozen *gelati* in the shape of little fruits!

After hours? Have a cappuccino at *Café Florian* or get a Limoncello or Amaro.

Concerts offered in churches and little theaters feature music by great Venetian composers such as Vivaldi, Albinoni, and the upbeat “Rondo Veneziano”! And, one of the greatest testaments to opera is the precious *Teatro Fenice*, whose interior rivals the most magnificent set on its own stage. [W](#)

Rather a reflection of Venice itself!

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Lexye Aversa, global guru, is President of Professional Touch International, a worldwide travel planning and special event company that orchestrates meetings, incentive programs and upscale travel experiences for individuals and corporations. She is media host of LEX TRAVEL and was featured as “Best Global Event Planner” on FOX TV's Best of South Florida. For customized travel arrangements in Venice, throughout Italy, or anywhere on the planet, contact Lexye: **561 512-7333** * Lex@LexTravelWorld.com



Above: **BALLO DEL DOGE**

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CARNEVALE **di Venezia**

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Italy@LexTravelWorld.com