

Escape the tourist hordes and discover Venice's scandalous past on a walking tour of the city's hidden

CORNERS WORDS GRAEME GREEN



The canal's dark waters provide haunting tales



Sex pest? Casanova

## Venice

ITALY

“V enice has been here for 1500 years, so you can imagine how many stories we have,” says tour guide Christina as we pass the city's famous Rialto Bridge.

It's swarming with tourists taking in the view of gondolas, vaporettos and other evening traffic on the Grand Canal. Within minutes, though, we've left the hordes behind and as the evening gloom descends on the city, Christina tells tales of the murders, mysteries, ghosts and legends from the city's past.

### THE VEGAS OF EUROPE

“When the salt that Venice produced ran out, it became the Las Vegas of Europe – a city of sin,” Christina says at a ‘last kissing point’, a gate at the end of one of many tunnels used by prostitutes to sneak customers out of ‘casinos’ when their wives came looking for them. In the 1500s, the city had more than 11,000 ladies

of the nights and more than 100 casinos. Casanova, the legendary lover (although, it turns out he was more of an aggressive sex pest) was known to frequent the Casino Venier dei Nobili brothel.

### GRISLY TALES

Silent alleyways beckon as darkness falls. “When you walk in the crowded parts of the city, you don't see the past – you see shops and other tourists,” Christina says. “We go to hidden corners, unknown places.”

She pauses to tell the grisly story of a butcher who made good use of the city's overcrowding problem by serving up children in his restaurant's beef stew and sausages.

### GHOSTS AND GHOULS

The brilliantly named Calle Dei Assassini (Street of the Assassins), where once only the fearless trod, leads to the dark waters of the canal for a tale about a jealous



## VENICE BY KAYAK

"Venice is not a beach," reminds kayaking guide Rene. "These canals are roads, these boats are traffic."

This makes a journey around the city in kayaks as close to a road trip as you can get in Venice. The Lido, across the water from the main Venice island itself, navigates a busy shipping lane to enter the city through the 'fish's tail' (the city on a map resembles a fish).

The peaceful, narrow, often-empty canals wind through parts of Venice most tourist never see; sharing the waterways with cargo ships, gondolas and other local 'road users' provides a real slice of daily Venetian life.

See: [venicekayak.com](http://venicekayak.com).



A water journey gets you away from the hordes



There's eeriness around each corner

Grigio and Valpolicella Ripasso.

The best is saved for last – a full-bodied red Amarone. It's served in a 1.5-litre glass, big enough to house a goldfish – a gimmick for tourists perhaps, but with practical benefits too. "No matter how much you drink you can go home and say you only had one glass of wine," Silvio laughs.



## NEED TO KNOW

### WHEN TO GO

April to October, and Carnival time (Feb 26-Mar 8 2011)

can be very busy with

crowds and long queues. If you don't mind cooler weather, moody mist or romantic snow (and fewer tourists), visit in the colder months of winter.

**GETTING THERE** EasyJet flies to Venice from Gatwick daily, from £29.99 one-way ([easyjet.com](http://easyjet.com)). British Airways flies to Venice three times a day from Gatwick and once daily from Heathrow from £98 return ([BA.com](http://BA.com)). Trains from King's Cross St Pancras leave daily and overnight with Eurostar ([internationalrail.com](http://internationalrail.com)).

**GETTING AROUND** Much of the city is easily walkable but you'll need an ACTV pass (£14 daily, £41 weekly) for water buses (also usable on some mainland local buses).

**VISAS** South Africans need a Schengen visa.

**CURRENCY** Euro. 1 GBP = 1.14 EUR.

**LANGUAGE** Italian.

**GOING OUT** A beer costs £3.20.

**ACCOMMODATION** Hostel beds start from £20 and double rooms from £65.

**SEE** [turismovenezia.it](http://turismovenezia.it)

## BACK FROM THE DEAD

Walking back to the hotel, happily heady from the wine, it's not only old buildings and alleyways that catch the eye, but statues and shrines warding off evil spirits; wells where murderous lovers disposed of their victims; and streets once filled with masked nobles, robbers and killers or haunted by headless corpses. It's strange how the dead can bring a city to life.

» Graeme Green went on the Murders & Mysteries Tour and Wine Tasting, bookable through [tours-venice-italy.com](http://tours-venice-italy.com)

nobleman who killed his young lover.

"People say they've seen him floating up river holding the head of the girl in his hands." Then Christina clarifies: "Most people are drunk – they see ghosts everywhere. What they saw or heard was maybe a seagull."

## LOCAL TIPPLE

The alcohol/ghost theory is tested the next day with a wine tasting at A La Valigia, a few minutes from Saint Mark's Square. Silvio, the knowledgeable owner, introduces five of the Veneto region's wines, each served with a small plate of Cicchetti (like tapas).

"In Italy, there are 100,000 winemakers, so there's wine everywhere. The most important areas are Veneto, Piedmont, Trivoli and Tuscany," Silvio says, as we work through a Prosecco, Soave, Pinot



Behind its smooth facade, Venice has a sinister past