

HOW A FAMILY
OF TEN GRADUALLY
DISAPPEARED
INTO THE FLOATING
CITY'S HIDDEN
ALLEYWAYS AND
BYZANTINE
CANALS UNTIL
THEY FELT
RIGHT AT HOME



AVENUE



TAL

net and photographs by Oddur Thorisson

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“Do they have pizza in Venice?” Gail asked her mother as they tubed along the crooked jetty in the fading light to reach the gates of the ship terminal. Her mother didn’t answer, didn’t even acknowledge the question, focused as she was on the task of getting herself and her eight children, and at least some of the luggage, on board before the boat left for its four-night cruise around the Venetian Lagoon. An obstinate child of 7, Gail didn’t give up easily. “Do they have carbonara in Venice?” she prodded. Her mother didn’t have time to answer that question either. Now the man was picking up, and the family hastened their pace, except for Gail, who, like any child who knows her business, used the only tool available to her to get attention. She stopped. Some moments later her father turned, concerned but a little angry, and shouted, “Hurry up, G, we’re missing the boat!”

“Do they have pizza on the boat?” Gail shouted back.

They had spent three days in Venice already, and all she’d had were endless seafood lunches and dinners of opulent dishes like soft-shell crab and creamed cod, with all sorts of colorful fish-sounding wines that her father could talk about forever, some of them orange—which was apparently amusing but they hadn’t had anything like, to her, qualified as proper Italian food.

“Yes, I believe they do, and tonight we are having minestrone—I saw the menu. I bet they put

some pizza in that,” said her father, still willing to negotiate but one step away from loudly carrying her onto the boat.

The two of them quietly explored their floating digs in the twilight, descending in parties of two or three into the belly of the ship, looking for adventure. Scouring around like mice, feeling bowls of unbleached candles and filling their pockets. Hiding over cabin doors and roommates until the older children brought in the adults, in the form of parents, to conclude. After dinner, at last in her bed, her husband sleeping beside her, the mother succumbed to her overpowering maternal instinct and slipped unnoted into the younger children’s cabins, to make sure they were fine, and to make sure they were there. Then she gave in to the gentle rocking of the waves.

In the morning, the light was still gray, though a few shades brighter, and Hudson, 12, who was sharing a cabin with his older brother, jumped up excitedly from his bed. From the porthole of their compartment, just above sea level, Venice looked exactly as it had in a pencil drawing he had seen in the window of a gallery two days before. The one by the artist they had met twice, first at a restaurant and then again walking his two old cocker spaniels. That’s when the man had shown them his picture in the window. On both occasions he had been stylishly dressed, in two different styles of hats: a beret and a trilby. The boy liked men in hats, and he thought about how, when he was older, he’d be the sort of man who wears hats.

Hats were again food for thought later that morning when the whole family, chaperoned by a guide arranged by the boat, toured the Doge’s Palace, one of Venice’s most historic buildings. Previously a home to the supreme leaders of Venice, the palace also housed courts, prisons, and the senate. Gail’s father, at so the older daughter, marveled at the paintings of the various Doges from various times, all old, all terribly wrinkled and solemn, seemingly hunched and in ill health and wearing what looked, at best, like the hat of a clown—or the tip of a condom. Gail’s latest crown, Napoleon’s

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PHOTOS: SPAGNA; GAIL AND
LOUISA WALKING; PAUL WELLS FOR
BURBANK; OPPOSITE: CLAUDE WISE
FROM TOP LEFT: THEOBALD AND
STEPHEN AND MARY; TONY PERAZICHIN
FOR GAZA; GIAN MARCO LUCAL
FOR GINE AND GAILA; BRATTALLI FOR
THE STORIA; CALIFORNIA; ALAN
ALEXANDER FOR THE UNIVERSITY
OF CALIFORNIA; PLAYING; BOB BROWN
FOR HARRY POTTER; MANNING; A. MARRAS
FOR BLOOMINGDALE’S; LAMCOLOLLI







THE BOAT HEADED TO TWO ISLANDS WITH FAIRY-TALE NAMES

★
AUDREY AND HER MOTHER,
HERE, COOKING OUT
THEIR FAVORITE DISH
HEAD FOR ISLAND.

double-breasted overcoat and tricorne hat, those were costumes that inspired and evoked glory. But these golemlike figures, looking down from the walls of a dreary palace—they were harder to read. She decided to do some research.

Later, Audrey, 4, watched in excitement from her mother's lap as the boat took to the lagoon and headed for two islands with fairy-tale names: Murano, Burano—all the houses are different colors, and all of them have princesses in them, and all the princesses have window-dresses in as many colors," she told her imaginary friend. "And on one of the islands, I can't remember which, is a monster who blows multi-colored glass from his lips and sculpts it into crowns in all colors for all the princesses," she continued.

On Burano they walked past rows of brightly painted houses, past a few shops that were open or had opened when news of the ship reached the island. It had been a winter sailing, though the coldest was, Thom, 11, it was a colder day than he had expected, and when they got off the boat, Burano had felt deserted—the motley houses lining the canals resembling sad harelquins, or worse, prostitutes of old, with vivid makeup but no clients. It's probably a different place in summer, he thought, full of people and wine and perfume someone buying. It's probably better this way—cold and empty.

A couple of days later, off the boat for good, the father had a hard time finding his feet, as if their lodgings in San Marco were still ingraining on the waves. (The oracle on the Internet told him this could last for two weeks, a symptom possibly worsened by alcohol consumption.) Clearly, he thought as he raised his Negro to his laptop screen, Venice may be the finest city in the world for time travel, the best place there is for experiencing life as it would be lived in an old world. But to do that, you need to disappear, be incorporeal. To know a city, you need to be of it, not only in it.

The Casa Flora, where he had decided the family should stay a few extra days, is on Calle del Pestrin, a somewhat hidden side street, just five every street in Venice. The apartment is modern but warm and well designed, and Louise, 30, liked how it felt nothing like her own home, how it made her feel like a different person. So she dressed a little differently and started pretending to have an Italian accent. No one bought it; most of the family thought she sounded Scottish, but she didn't mind. She did mind that her brother and nephews had the better room, and that he couldn't stop bragging about it, but she kept it to herself, shrugged her shoulders, and called him *alvaro* and *beards*, but only when their parents couldn't hear.



THE FISH LOOK
LIKE THEY
WERE PAINTED ON
THE TABLES
BY OLD MASTERS

They spend their days walking and their evenings walking, and they liked taking boats in the dark. Venice looks so beautiful and quiet on nights like this, though the mother when they were all alone in a brightly lit terminal waiting for a boat, until they started dreading that it would ever come. The mother didn't care if it did, because she liked sitting in this station on a cold February evening with her family and her imagination.

In the mornings they would have coffee with Mr. Romanelli, the gentle and charming owner of Casa Elena and their new best friend in Venice. They would arrive early at the Rialto Market, where the light is always beautiful and the fish look like they were painted on the tables by Old Masters. Lunches were at restaurants, but in the evenings they cooked at home and played opera or jazz while they prepared their seafood suppers and drink delicious white wine. And Lucia, the baby, ran barefoot through the rooms with octopus sticking out of his mouth. Mia, too, attended the opera, listening to rap on her headphones, and though she liked the days wandering the canals, she preferred the nights when they were all together at home being normal.

Trattoria Card'Oro alla Veduggia is typical and busy little place in Cannaregio, in the northern part of Venice, and some say it has the best meatballs in the world. This, of course, is impossible to verify, but one night, toward the end of their

stay, they had a pleasant, inexpensive meal at a long table in a room so tiny that it felt more like a ship's cabin. Perhaps it was, because the father went again into the gentle rocking of the waves, and now Gaia, the girl with sea-bells in her eyes, had the "real" Italian food she craved. "I want to come back here tomorrow," she said. And her father said, "No way," and her mother said, "Let's not talk about this tonight." The father and the mother sat there in the cabin, in love with each other and with their children, satisfied by food, charmed by Venice, and knowing that they were right back where they started with Gaia and that they would never win. ■

OPPOSITE PAGE: JANELY WAITING TO GAECIA TAKE THEOT FROM THE RIALTO BRIDGE. ABOVE: AT THE DOGE'S PALACE WITH ADRIAN RUNNING.



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BELOW: FRESH PRODUCE
FROM THE BIELLI MARKET
RIGHT: A VISION OF THE
INTERIOR OF HIS WORK.







Venice by Sea and Land

SAILING THE LAGOON

We took Grand Canal's four-night *Game of Venice* cruise on the M.S. *Michelangelo*. It stops at Burano and Murano as well as Chioggia, with excursions to places like the Doge's Palace and the Basilica of St. Anthony in Padua, with similar savings all year long.

STAYING ON LAND

Hotel Flora is a charming, historic 1930s grand hotel with impeccable service, run for decades by the Rossini family. They recently opened the ultramodern Coas Flora next door, an apartment created for those who like thoughtful, inventive design, and who want to live at home in Venice, have their own kitchen, get to the market, enjoy all the amenities and service of a hotel.

EATING OUT AND IN

Among end-of-the-day choices, some of the best places for local seafood are Carlo Scattolon and El Cielo. Scattolon's classes draw from each other. *Art of the Table* also ticks all the bases of what you want in a classic, informal restaurant in Venice. That's there is *Da Biu*, described by a friend as "eye-wateringly expensive but worth it"—especially for those who have ventured beyond Modernist and would just like good food, good service, and the chance to rub into Giorgio Calchi. Pastorella Rosa Sabio (the original is in Campo San Giovanni) is a lovely place to drink the day. Caffè Florian is, though slightly, so damn beautiful and historical, everybody should go once. Finally, the Hotel Biu has a so generous a Terrace, and, across Venice, feel like a real city, so.

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Venice by Sea and Land

SAILING THE LAGOON

We took [CroisiEurope's](#) four-night Gems of Venice cruise on the M.S.

Michelangelo. It stops at Burano and Murano as well as Chioggia, with excursions to places like the [Doge's Palace](#) and the [Basilica of St. Anthony in Padua](#), with similar sailings all year long.

STAYING ON LAND

[Hotel Flora](#) is a charming, historical place—grand hotel meets pensione—with impeccable service, run for decades by the Romanelli family. They recently opened the ultramodern [Casa Flora](#) next door, an apartment created for those who like thoughtful, inventive design, and who want to feel at home in Venice, have their own kitchen, go to the market, yet enjoy all the amenities and service of a hotel.

EATING OUT AND IN

Among endless choices, some of the very best places for local seafood are [Corte Sconta](#) and [Al Covo](#), located a stone's throw from each other. [Antiche Carampane](#) ticks all the boxes of what you want in a classic, informal restaurant in Venice. Then there is [Da Ivo](#), described by a friend as “eye-wateringly expensive but worth it”—especially for those who have matured beyond Michelin stars and would just like good food, good service, and the chance to run into George Clooney. [Pasticceria Rosa Salva](#) (the original is in Campo San Giovanni) is a lovely place to start the day; [Caffè Florian](#) is, though cliché, so damn beautiful and historical, everybody should go once. Finally, the Rialto Market is as glorious as a Tintoretto, and makes Venice feel like a real city. o.t.