

## *To Mary Kay & Ed, from Allan: Travel Notes on Rome & Venice*

### **Rome**

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Of all the places on earth I've ever visited, Rome is the sexiest, the messiest, the most disorganized, and the most energizing. You'll love it if you plan your time well; but if you don't, you'll still love it even though you won't have nearly enough time to see what should be seen.

Must-see historical sites include, but of course, the religious:

- **St. Peter's Basilica and Vatican Museums:** This place will give you the shivers. Allow yourself plenty of time—at least half a day—for St. Pete's and the Museums, the high point of which is the Sistine Chapel with Michelangelo's famous ceiling mural and wall mural of "The Last Judgment." *My strong suggestion is to get up early, get in line at the Vatican Museums early, and beat the crowds.* By 10 a.m., the line to get into the Museums can require a 2 hr wait. There is, however, no wait to get into to St. Pete's.
- **Climb the cupela:** Look for the signs to climb the cupela (central lookout) of St. Pete's. It's an incredible view of the Vatican and Rome beyond. Amazing! Take a marker with you and write your name up there; look carefully and you may find mine, along with a bunch of GBS kids from the 1990s—unless, of course, the authorities have banned that activity.
- **St. Pietro in Vincoli** ("St. Peter-in-Chains"): This is a small, yet famous, church that has as its claim to tourist traffic the reputed chains with which St. Peter—of Biblical fame, that St. Peter!—was imprisoned. Cool beans.

Then there are the ancient Roman sites:

- **The Coliseum** (allow a couple of hours here)
- **The Forum** (another couple of hours)
- **Circus Maximus** (where the chariot races happened)
- **The Pantheon** (the only ancient building still fully intact; amazing)

If you're intrigued with Mussolini's Fascist Italy:

- **Piazza Venezia:** Yes, it's a busy traffic intersection, but you can see the balcony from which Mussolini struck his "Big Man in Europe" pose and gave pompous speeches. Across the street, along a huge retaining wall, look for the stone maps of Italy beginning with the Roman Empire, created to inspire pride among Italians and desire for 20<sup>th</sup> century territorial conquest.

As for a few more great sites, close to the Pantheon:

- **Piazza Navona:** a great public square with artists, cafes, bars, musicians, stuff to buy; it will remind you of Paris and Florence
- **Spanish Steps:** a famous spot for lovers and college students to meet; everyone just gathers there to hang out. You may even see someone there you know.
- **Trevi Fountain:** “Two Coins in the Fountain,” crooned by Sinatra and others, claims that if you toss two coins over your shoulder you’ll be guaranteed a return to Rome later in your life. Be sure to do it, even though it’s cheesy. You’ll certainly see countless other people doing it and recording it on their smart phones!

And then, for a true taste of Rome:

- **Trastevere:** It means “the district across the Tiber”; in olden days it was the slave quarter. It is Rome’s equivalent of Paris’ Left Bank district, with winding streets and real people—natives, even! Great restaurants here. I still remember eating fantastic seafood with the Shellards here way back in the 1990s.

***And this really important piece of advice about distances and planning:***

- Rome will surprise you with its distances and winding streets; it’s far bigger in land mass than its population would suggest. Though it’s about the same size, perhaps a bit bigger, than Paris, it seems more like London in scale. *Advice:* Plan your daily activities with proximity in mind. For instance, the Vatican (St. Peter’s and Sistine Chapel) is relatively close to Trastevere; the Pantheon, Trevi Fountain, Spanish Steps, and Piazza Navona are all relatively close (but you’ll need to look at maps several times); and the Forum, the Colosseum, and Circus Maximus are all within walking distance. Three distinctly different areas of the city, three walking tours.

Finally, about Rome at night:

- Try to find a 1 or 2 hr bus tour of Rome by night. It will save your feet some wear and tear, but more important, it will enable you to see the Forum, Colosseum, and other sites all lit up. *Bellissimo!*

## Venice

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Venice is among Jill's and my very favorite places on earth. It evokes emotion as does no other place I've ever visited, and if I had the \$\$\$ I'd come here every year of my life. One of my not-so-short-term goals is to visit Venice in January some year.

Venice was first inhabited by an ancient people whose name I've forgotten, known for their military prowess and ferocity. They built their settlement on marshy islands and connected those islands, unbelievably, by piling hardwood into the sea. True story: So much of Venice is built on soggy wood! Small wonder my GBS students used to say, "Wow! It's just like Disneyworld." (I wanted to respond, "No, Disneyworld is just like Venice.")

There are three sections of Venice: Venice Maestre, or mainland, where the train station dumps you out and where the ships dock; Venice "proper," with canals; and Venice-Lido, the slender island about a mile from Venice "proper," which was the fashionable tourist destination of the late 1800s and earlier 1900s, complete with Casinos, night clubs, etc.

To visit Venice is to wander about and get lost in its streets. Once you're there, you'll understand: It's a maze. There should be a TV series filmed here. Probably have been, actually. But know that when you're lost, you need to look on building corners for one of two signs: **Rialto**, for Rialto Bridge (a landmark over the Grand Canal); and **San Marco** (for Piazza San Marco, the public square near St. Mark's Cathedral).

What to see:

- **San Marco** (St. Mark's Cathedral): It's spooky inside, even musty. Note the uneven floor, due to the swamp beneath. This place floods nearly every year!
- **Campanile**: The bell tower next to St. Mark's is climbable but typically there's a huge line waiting. The view must be spectacular, but I wouldn't know about that: I've never had the patience to do it. You would like it, I bet.
- **Doge's Palace**: The Doge was the elected ruler of Venice, a/k/a "The Serene Republic of Venice," back in the day when Venetian boats ruled the waters (and Italy was not yet unified). This is rather like the Mayor's home, but with secret passage ways and other cool features. The tour takes about an hour and is well worth it.
- **Gondola Ride**: Whether you're there alone or with someone, be sure to take a gondola ride through the smaller canals. It's fascinating to see the city from sea/canal level, especially to see how the "Palazzos" (palaces) manage to stay standing by leaning on each other. You'll get my drift when you see them! You can board a gondola at many points. I'd recommend boarding at the Grand Canal.
- **Bridge of Sighs**: Read about it. Heartbreaking and beautiful. We've got a painting of it in our bedroom.
- **Harry's Bar**: It's utterly famous. Ernest Hemingway, F. Scott Fitzgerald, all that. If memory serves, there's even a Cornell College banner posted on the walls.
- **Walk over the bridge**: Not so far from St. Mark's is Accademia bridge. Walk over this and you'll suddenly be apart from the hordes of tourists. It's magical. Actual, real-life

Venetians live in this area of the city. (Many, if not most, of the venerable “palazzos” are uninhabited because they are *unhabitable*.)

Finally, a magical “vaporetto” (water taxi) tour:

- By all means allow yourself time for a 2-3 hour tour to “The Islands” outside Venice. These are the places where Venice really began. The first island out is Murano, famous for its blown glass. The merchants almost help you off the boat, eager for you to visit their showrooms; I’d suggest staying on the boat. The next island out is Burano, captured on watercolors and oil paintings because of its brightly colored fishing cottages. Worth a walk and perhaps lunch or a drink, if you have the time; otherwise, stay on the boat as I did, take pictures, and admire from a distance. The third and final island out is Torcello, once thriving and home to tens of thousands who took refuge there when Venice itself came under attack from Huns and the like. Torcello today is truly haunted, with only a few homes left and just two restaurants—one of which served me a really good lunch in 2006. Walk the path from the boat landing to the ancient (11<sup>th</sup> century?) Cathedral of Santa Maria Assunta. Compared to St. Mark’s in Venice, this church is austere and serene. But for true serenity, climb the *campanile*, or bell tower. At its top, the breezes, the birds, and the views are heavenly.

And as for shopping:

- If you see something you really like, buy it. But beware: Everything sold on Venice, including Murano glass, must be shipped there. As a result, prices are exorbitant. On at least two occasions, Jill and I found Murano glass in Venice that we really liked but bought in Florence because it was cheaper.