



## St. Mark's to Rialto Loop Walk

Two rights and a left (simple!) can get you from St. Mark's Square to the Rialto Bridge via a completely different route from the one most tourists take. Along the way, take in some lesser sights and appreciate the reality of Venice today.

Venice's population is half what it was just 30 years ago. Sad, yes, but imagine raising a family here: Apartments are small, high up, and expensive. Home-improvement projects involve miles of red tape. Running a simple errand can mean crossing arched bridges while pushing a child in a stroller and carrying a day's worth of groceries.

On the other hand, those who stay couldn't think of living anywhere else. This walk may help you understand why.

## ORIENTATION

**Length of This Walk:** Allow one hour for a leisurely walk.

**San Moisè Church:** Free, Mon-Sat 9:30-12:30, Sun Mass only at 11:00, tel. 041-296-0630.

**La Fenice Opera House:** €8 for dry 45-minute audioguide tour, generally open daily 9:30-13:30, theater box office open daily 9:30-18:00.

**Rialto Market:** The souvenir stalls are open daily; the produce market is closed on Sunday; and the fish market is closed on Sunday and Monday. The market is lively only in the morning.

## THE WALK BEGINS

### Start at St. Mark's Square

► *From the square, walk to the waterfront and turn right. You're walking on recently raised Venice—in 2006, the stones were taken up and six inches of extra sand put down, to minimize flooding. Continue along the water toward the white TI pavilion.*

Along the waterfront, you'll see the various boats that ply Venice's waters. Hiring a gondola here is often more expensive than elsewhere in Venice. Classic wooden motorboats operating as water taxis are pricey (about €60 from here to the train station), but they are a classy splurge if you split the fare with others. Hotel shuttle boats bring guests here from distant, \$700-a-night hotels.

Run the gauntlet of souvenir stands to the entrance to the Giardinetti Reali (Royal Gardens, once the site of a huge grain-storage depot that was destroyed by Napoleon). The grounds offer some precious greenery in a city built of stone on mud. Nearby is a TI in a cute 18th-century former coffeehouse pavilion. From atop the bridge by the TI, look across the mouth of the Grand Canal to view the big dome of La Salute Church, and the guy balancing a bronze ball on one foot on top of the old Customs House, which is now a contemporary art museum (the Punta della Dogana).

► *Twelve steps down and 20 yards ahead on the right is...*

### ① Harry's American Bar

Hemingway put this bar on the map by making it his hangout in the late 1940s. If Brad and Angelina are in town, this is where they'll be. If they're



The waterfront by St. Mark's Square



Harry's Bar—overpriced “celebrity” haunt

not, you'll see plenty of dressed-up Americans looking around for celebrities. The discreet (and overpriced) restaurant upstairs is where the glitterati hang out. The street-level bar is for gawkers. If you wear something a bit fancy (or artsy bohemian), you can pull up a stool at the tiny bar by the entrance and pay too much for a Bellini (Prosecco and peach puree), which was invented right here.

► *Head inland down Calle Vallaresso, one of Venice's most exclusive streets, past fancy boutiques such as Pucci, Gucci, and Roberto Cavalli. At the T intersection, turn left and head west on Salizada San Moisè (which becomes Calle Larga XXII Marzo). Continue to the first bridge and a square dominated by the fancy facade of a church. Climb the bridge, and against a soundtrack of tourists negotiating with hustling gondoliers, look back at the ornate...*

## ② San Moisè Church

This is the parish church for St Mark's; because of tourist crowds at the basilica, this is where the community actually worships. While it's one of Venice's oldest churches, dating from the 10th century (note the old tower on the right), its busy facade is 17th-century Baroque. The big shot who funded the project has his bust in the center of the facade, while Moses (Moisè) caps it.

Inside, the altarpiece depicts Mount Sinai, with Moses (kneeling) receiving the two tablets with the Ten Commandments. The alcove to the left of the altar has Tintoretto's 16th-century *Christ Washing the Disciples' Feet*.

The modern building nearby is the ritzy, five-star Bauer Hotel, originally an 18th-century palace. In the 1940s, the owners added this Fascist-deco

wing, defying Italian historical-preservation codes. Its facade still gives locals the Mussolini-creeps. You can take a few minutes to wander through the hotel for a James Bond-meets-Mussolini architectural experience.

• Continue past the bridge, down *Calle Larga XXII Marzo*, a big street that seems too wide and large for Venice. It was created during the 19th century by filling in a canal. You can make out the outline of the sidewalks that once flanked the now-gone canal. Pass by the Vivaldi look-alikes selling concert tickets and (mostly Senegalese) immigrants illegally selling knockoffs of Prada bags.

Halfway down the street, turn right on tiny *Calle del Sartor da Veste*. Go straight, crossing a bridge. At the next square, you'll find...

### ③ La Fenice Opera House (Gran Teatro alla Fenice)

Venice's famed opera house, built in 1792 (read the *MDCXCII* on the facade), was started as a business venture by a group of nobles who recognized that Venice was short on entertainment opportunities for the well-heeled set.

La Fenice was reduced to a hollowed-out shell by a disastrous fire in 1996. After a vigorous restoration campaign, "The Phoenix"—true to its name—has risen again from the ashes. La Fenice resumed opera productions in 2004, opening with *La Traviata*. The theater is usually open daily to the public (for information, ★ see page 132).

Venice is one of the cradles of the multimedia art form known as opera. Some of the great operas were first performed here in this luxurious setting. Verdi's *Rigoletto* (1851) and *La Traviata* (1853) were actually commissioned by La Fenice. The man who put words to some of Mozart's



Church of Saint Moise and Bauer Hotel



"The Phoenix," a classic opera house



Playwright Carlo Goldoni



Stucco work adorns this casino.

once famous for selling umbrellas and handbags. From there, turn left and follow the crowds 100 yards more along the...

### Mercerie

The high-rent Mercerie (or "Marzarie," in Venetian dialect) is a string of connecting streets lined mostly with big-name chain and luxury stores. Much of the "Venetian" glass displayed here is actually made in China (always look for the Murano symbol). The Caputo shop—behind the Rolex shop, down an alley and on the left—is handy for phone and camera needs.

When you get to the yellow two-way arrow "directing" you to San Marco, head right and then follow the flow left another 100 yards until you reach a bridge, which makes for a fun gondola viewing perch. At the top of the bridge, belly up to the railing on the left. Above the arcade on your left is the fancy little balcony of the city's best-preserved...

### ⑩ Casino

If the windows are open, spy the lacy pastel and stucco ceilings inside. Though only a few of Venice's casinos still exist, the city once had several hundred of these "little houses"—city-center retreats for the palazzodwelling set. For many patricians, they served as 17th-century man caves, used for entertaining, gambling, and/or intimate encounters. For well-to-do women, casinos provided a different kind of escape: Inspired by Madame de Pompadour (Louis XV's mistress), ladies would hold court with writers, artists, and avant-garde types.

Cross the bridge and continue straight for 100 yards along *Marzaria San Zulian*. On the way, notice the metal two-foot-high flood barrier braces

at shop doors—and how merchandise is elevated in anticipation of high water (local insurance doesn't cover floods).

When you hit the next schizophrenic Per S. Marco arrow, go right a few steps, then left onto *Marzaria dell'Orologio*, a street named for where you're heading: the Clock Tower. The Renaissance **⑪ Clock Tower** was built when it was considered important that cities have a proper main gate with a grand clock. Pass through "Venice's front door" and into its grand courtyard—St. Mark's Square.

Venice was Europe's economic superpower, this was where bankers, brokers, and merchants conducted their daily business.

Rialto Bridge II was a 13th-century wooden drawbridge. It was replaced in 1588 by the current structure, with its bold single arch (spanning 160 feet) and arcades on top designed to strengthen the stone span. Its immense foundations stretch 650 feet on either side. Heavy buildings were then built atop the foundations to hold everything in place. The Rialto remained the only bridge crossing the Grand Canal until 1854.

Marking the geographical center of Venice (midway down the Grand Canal), the Rialto is the most sensible location for retail shops. The government built it with the (accurate) expectation that it'd soon pay for itself with rent from the shops built into it. Like the (older) Ponte Vecchio in Florence, the Rialto was originally lined with luxury gold and jewelry shops. The bridge is cleverly designed to generate maximum rent: three lanes, two rows of twelve shops each, with a warehouse area above each shop under the lead-and-timber roof.

Reliefs of the Venetian Republic's main mascots, St. Mark and St. Theodore, crown the arch. Barges and *vaporetti* run the busy waterways below, and merchants vie for tourists' attention on top.

The Rialto has long been a symbol of Venice. Aristocratic inhabitants built magnificent palaces just to be near it. The poetic Lord Byron swam to it all the way from Lido Island. And thousands of marriage proposals have been sealed right here, with a kiss, as the moon floated over La Serenissima.

► *From here, you could cross the bridge to check out the fish and produce market. Or continue even farther along my ★ Rialto to Frari Church Walk (the next chapter). But this walk returns along the main tourist route to St. Mark's Square. From the base of the Rialto Bridge (on the near side), go 100 yards directly to...*

### 9 Campo San Bartolomeo

This square is one of the city's main crossroads. Locals routinely meet at the statue of playwright Carlo Goldoni. The pharmacy on this square (marked by a green cross) keeps an electronic counter in its window, ticking down the population of Venice as it shrinks.

► *Head to the right 100 yards, down Via 2 Aprile, setting your sights on the green-and-red umbrellas on the corner. They mark a stretch of town*

opera tunes was a Venetian, Lorenzo da Ponte, who drew inspiration from the city's libertine ways and *joie de vivre*. In recent years, La Fenice's musical standing was overshadowed by its reputation as a place for the wealthy to parade in furs and jewels.

◦ *Continue north along the same street (though its name is now Calle de la Verona), to a small bridge over a quiet canal.*

### 4 Ponte de la Verona

Pause atop this bridge, where reflections can make you wonder which end is up. Looking above you, see bridges of stone propping up leaning buildings, and there's a view of the "Leaning Tower" of San Stefano.

People actually live in Venice. Notice their rooftop gardens, their laundry, their plumbing, electricity lines snaking into their apartments, and the rusted iron bars and bolts that hold their crumbling homes together. On one building, find centuries-old relief carvings—a bearded face and a panel of an eagle with its prey. People once swam freely in the canals. Find the sign that reads *Divieto di Nuoto* ("swimming not allowed").

You may see some private boats. Italian law stipulates that a luxury tax is levied on all boats—except in Venice, where they're considered a necessity. Calling a taxi? A boat comes. Going to the hospital to have a baby? Take an ambulance boat. Garbage day? You put your bag on the canal edge, and a garbage boat mashes it and takes it away. While many Venetians own (and love) their own boats, parking is a huge problem. If you take your boat to run errands, you either know a friend nearby with a grandfathered parking space, or your partner has to "circle the block" while you shop.

While many Venetians own a car for driving on the isle of Lido or the mainland, they admit, "We're not very much beloved on the road."

◦ *Continue north. At the T intersection, turn right on Calle de la Mandola. You'll cross over a bridge into a spacious square dominated by a statue and an out-of-place modern building.*

### 3 Campo Manin

The centerpiece of the square is a statue of Daniele Manin (1804-1857), Venice's fiery leader in the battle for freedom from Austria and eventually a united Italy (the Risorgimento). The statue faces the red house Manin lived in.

► *Scala Contarini del Bovolo is a block south of here, with yellow signs pointing the way. Facing the Manin statue, turn right and exit the square down an alley. Follow yellow signs to the left, then immediately to the right, into a courtyard with one of Venice's hidden treasures...*

### 6 Scala Contarini del Bovolo

The Scala is a cylindrical brick tower with five floors of spiral staircases faced with white marble banisters (probably closed for renovation during your visit).

Built in 1499, it was the external staircase of a palace (external stairs saved interior space for rooms). Architecture buffs admire the successful blend of a Gothic building with a Renaissance staircase.

If the tower is open, you can pay a small fee to wind your way up the "snail shell" (*bovolo* in the local dialect). It's 113 steps to the top, where you're rewarded with views of the Venetian skyline.

► *Unwind and return to the Manin statue. Continue east, circling around the big Cassa di Risparmio bank, marveling at its Modernist ugliness. At Campo San Luca, turn left (north) on Calle del Forno. Note the 24-hour pharmacy vending machine that dispenses shower gel, Band-Aids, bug repellent, toothbrushes, condoms, and other after-hours necessities. Heading north, glance 20 yards down the street to the right at the flag-bedecked...*

### 7 Teatro Goldoni

Though this theater dates from the 1930s, there's been a theater here since the 1500s, when Venice was at the forefront of secular entertainment.



Daniele Manin, 19th-century patriot



The photogenic Scala Contarini del Bovolo

Many of Carlo Goldoni's (1707-1793) groundbreaking comedies—featuring real-life situations of the new middle class—got their first performances here. Today, Teatro Goldoni is still a working theater of mainly Italian productions.

► *Continue north on Calle del Forno. You're very close to the Grand Canal. Keep going north, jogging to the right at the small square (Corte del Teatro), then left down a teeny-tiny alleyway. Pop! You emerge on the Grand Canal, about 150 yards downstream from the...*

### 8 Rialto Bridge

Of Venice's more than 400 bridges, only four cross the Grand Canal. Rialto was the first among these four.

The original Rialto Bridge, dating from 1180, was a platform supported by boats tied together. It linked the political side (Palazzo Ducale) of Venice with the economic center (Rialto). Rialto, which takes its name from *riva alto* (high bank), was one of the earliest Venetian settlements. When



The Rialto Bridge, lined with shops, is the geographic "heart" of fish-shaped Venice.