

ORIENTATION

Length of This Walk: Allow about an hour for a leisurely walk (though the actual distance is short), including a stop inside the church.

Church of San Zaccaria: Free, €1 to enter crypt, €0.50 coin to illuminate Bellini's altarpiece, open Mon-Sat 10:00-12:00 & 16:00-18:00, Sun 16:00-18:00 only. Mass is held Mon-Sat at 18:30 and Sun at 10:00 and 12:00.



St. Mark's to San Zaccaria Walk

San Zaccaria, one of the oldest churches in Venice, is just a few minutes on foot from St. Mark's Square. The church features a Bellini altarpiece and a submerged crypt that might be the oldest place in Venice. This short walk gets you away from the bustle of St. Mark's, includes a stroll along the waterfront, and brings you right back to where you started.

THE WALK BEGINS

1 Start at St. Mark's—Piazzetta dei Leoni

Facing St. Mark's Basilica, start in the small square to the left of the church (Piazzetta dei Leoni), with the 18th-century stone lions that kids love to play on. See those drains in the pavement? You're standing on a cistern, fed by four drains.

Notice the nicely restored north side of the basilica, with fine 14th-century reliefs. Notice also the worship-only entrance below the exquisite Porta dei Fiori. To the left, high above the tomb of Daniele Manin, the great 19th-century Italian and Venetian patriot, is a statue with Baby Jesus on his shoulder. That's St. Christopher, patron saint of us travelers.

The white Neoclassical building at the far east end of the square (built in 1834, when Venice was under Austrian rule) houses the offices of Venice's "patriarch," the special title given to the local bishop. In the 1950s, this is where the future Pope John XXIII presided as Venice's patriarch and cardinal. The popular, warm-hearted cardinal went on to become the "Sixties Pope," who oversaw major reforms in the Catholic Church (Vatican II). You'll see a plaque dedicated to "Papa Giovanni XXIII," the man locals still refer to as "Il Papa Buono"—the good pope.

Head east along *Calle de la Canonica*, past a fine English-language bookstore, circling behind the basilica. Passing some of the sexiest gondoliers in town, you'll reach a bridge with a...

2 View of the Bridge of Sighs

This lesser-known view of the Bridge of Sighs also lets you see the tourists



The lions of Piazzetta dei Leoni



Bridge of Sighs with tourists in distance

could, upon sentencing, be escorted directly from the palace's secretive courtroom to prison, without being seen in public.

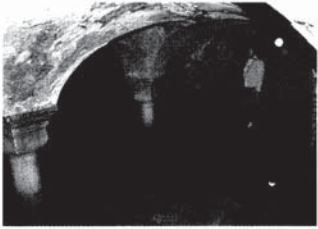
Notice the beefy bars on the prison. There were no windows, so throughout the year it would alternate between very hot and very cold. The top floor, below the lead roof, was nicknamed "The Oven." While designed for 300 people, the prison routinely held 500.

From this historic bridge (according to romantic legend), prisoners took one last look at Venice before entering the dark and unpleasant prisons. And sighed. Lord Byron picked up on the legend in the early 1800s and gave the bridge its famous nickname, making this sad little span a big stop on the Grand Tour. Look high up on your left—while that rogue Casanova wrote of the bridge in his memoirs, he was actually imprisoned here in the Doge's Palace.

Nowadays, while the bridge is a human traffic jam of gawking tourists during the day, it remains breathtakingly romantic in the lonely late-night hours.

► *Your tour's over. (By the way, if you need some quick cash, this is a great place to pick a pocket. There's lots of bumping, and everyone's distracted...)*





San Zaccaria crypt is often flooded.



Grand hotels along the Riva promenade

4 Riva

The waterfront promenade known as the "Riva" was built not for tourists but as part of the port of San Marco. Until recently, big ships tied up here. Today it's lined with some of the town's finest hotels and provides a great view of the Church of San Giorgio Maggiore (one stop away on vaporetto #2).

The big equestrian monument depicts Victor Emmanuel II, who helped lead Italy to unification and became the country's first king in 1861. Beyond that (over the bridge) is the four-columned La Pietà Church, where Antonio Vivaldi once directed the music. Five bridges farther along (not visible from here) are the Arsenale and Naval Museum (📍 described on page 147).

The Riva is lined with many of Venice's most famous luxury hotels. For a peek at the *most* famous and luxurious, turn right, cross over one bridge, and nip into the **Danieli Hotel**. Tuck in your shirt, stand tall and aristocratic, and (with all the confidence of a guest) be swept by the revolving door into the sumptuous interior of what was once the Gothic Palazzo Dandolo. As you check out the Danieli's restaurant menu (that's why you're there, isn't it?), admire the lobby, the old-style chandeliers, water-taxi drive-up entrance, and the occasional celebrity. Since 1820, the Neo-Gothic Danieli has been Venice's most exclusive hotel. Exquisite as all this is, it still gets flooded routinely in the winter.

Facing the water, turn right and head west toward St. Mark's Square. The commotion atop a little bridge marks the...

3 Famous View of the Bridge of Sighs

The Bridge of Sighs connects the Doge's Palace (left) with the doge's prison (right). The bridge let justice be very swift indeed, as convicted criminals

who are ogling it, with cameras cocked. You can just see the Lady Justice relief (centered above the windows), with her sword and scales—a reminder that the courts were to the right and the prison to the left.

On the near side of the bridge is a common sight in neighborhood Venice: a street-side altarpiece and donation box. As the street signs tell you, the bridge you're on marks the boundary between two traditional neighborhoods, the *sestiere* (district) of San Marco and that of Castello. Throughout this walk, you'll pass relics of a fast-fading era: newspaper stands, public telephones, and a 24-hour cigarette vending machine.

► *Continue east. You'll cross another bridge with a view of a "Modern Bridge of Sighs," which connects two wings of the exclusive Danieli Hotel. Continue east another 50 yards, through the Gothic gate of what was once a cloistered Benedictine convent, and into a square where you see the...*

2 Church of San Zaccaria

Back in the ninth century, when Venice was just a collection of wooden houses and before there was a St. Mark's Basilica, a stone church and convent stood here. This is where the doges worshipped, public spectacles occurred, and sacred relics were kept. Today's structure dates mostly from the 15th century.

The tall facade by Mauro Codussi (who also did the Clock Tower in St. Mark's Square) and others is early Renaissance. The "vertical" effect produced by the four support pillars that rise up to an arched crown is tempered by the horizontal, many-layered stories and curved shoulders.

In the northwest corner of Campo San Zaccaria (near where you entered) is a plaque from 1620 listing all the things that were prohibited "in this square" (*in questo campo*), including games, obscenities, dishonesty, and robbery, all "under grave penalty" (*sotto gravis pene*).

► *Enter the church. The second chapel on the right holds the...*

Body of Zechariah (S. Zaccaria)

Of the two bodies in the chapel, the lower one in the glass case is the reputed body of Zechariah, the father of John the Baptist. Back when mortal remains were venerated and thought to bring miracles to the faithful, Venice was proud to own the bones of St. Zechariah ("San Zaccaria," also known as Zacharias).



Bellini's *Madonna* (center) sits in a fake niche that appears to be an extension of the church.

The church is blessed with fine art. On the opposite side of the nave (second chapel on the left), you'll find...

Giovanni Bellini—*Madonna and Child with Saints* (1505)

Mary and the baby, under a pavilion, are surrounded by various saints interacting in a so-called *Sacra Conversazione* (holy conversation), which in this painting is more like a quiet meditation. The saints' mood is melancholy, with lidded eyes and downturned faces. A violinist angel plays a sad solo at Mary's feet.

This is one of the last of Bellini's paintings in the *sacra conversazione* formula, the newer type of altarpiece that liberated the Virgin, Child, and saints from the separate cells of the older triptych style. Compare this to his other variations on this theme in the Accademia (📍 see page 135) and Frari Church (📍 see the Frari Church Tour). The life-size saints stand in an imaginary extension of the church—the pavilion's painted columns match those of the real church. We see a glimpse of trees and a cloudy sky beyond. Bellini establishes a 3-D effect using floor tiles. The four saints pose symmetrically, and there's a harmony in the big blocks of richly colored robes—blue, green, red, white, and yellow. A cool white light envelops the whole scene, creating a holy ambience.

The ever-innovative Bellini was productive until the end of his long life—he painted this masterpiece at age 75. The German artist Albrecht Dürer said of him: "He is very old, and still he is the best painter of them all."

On the right-hand side of the nave is the entrance (€1 entry fee) to the...

Crypt

Before you descend into the crypt, the first room (Chapel of Sant'Atanasio) contains **Tintoretto's *Birth of John the Baptist*** (c. 1560s, on the altar), which tells the backstory of Zechariah. In the background, old Zechariah's wife, Elizabeth, props herself up in bed while nurses hold and coo over her newborn son, little John the Baptist. The birth was a miracle, as she was past childbearing age. On the far right, Zechariah—the star of this church—witnesses the heavens opening up, bringing this miracle to earth.

The five **gold thrones** (displayed in this room or one of the next rooms) were once seats for doges. Every Easter, the current doge would walk from St. Mark's Square to this religious center and thank the nuns of San Zaccaria for giving the land for the square.

The small next room contains religious objects as well as an engraving of the doge parading into Campo San Zaccaria.

Next comes the Chapel of San Tarasio, dominated by an impressive 15th-century prickly gold altarpiece by Antonio Vivarini. The predella (seven small scenes beneath the altarpiece) may be by Paolo Veneziano, the 14th-century grandfather of Venetian painting. Look down through glass in the floor to see the 12th-century mosaic floor from the original church. In fact, these rooms were parts of the earlier churches.

Finally, go downstairs to the **crypt**—the foundation of a church built in the 10th century. The crypt is low and the water table high, so the room is often flooded, submerging the bases of the columns. Venice has battled rising water levels since the fifth century. It's a weird experience, calling up echoes of the Dark Ages.

Flooding (the *acqua alta*) affects parts of Venice about 100 times a year, usually in winter. It occurs when an unusually high tide combines with strong sirocco winds from Africa that push the water toward Venice, causing a surging storm tide. In 2003, the city began construction on a system of underwater gates near the Lido, hoping to block the tidal surge. Still, some worry that—with global warming and rising sea levels—Venice's battle against the sea is not over, and the water seems to be winning.

► *Emerge from the Church of San Zaccaria into the small campo. Before leaving the campo, check out the small art gallery on the left (free), the thirst-quenching water fountain, and the pink Carabinieri police station (a former convent), marked by the Italian flag. Then exit the square at the far end, and head south—past that cigarette machine—until you pop out at the waterfront, right on the...*