



The Number 1 way to navigate around Venice

Water buses are great but to find those really out of the way places, a tour guide is essential, reports **Tony Dawe**

Could there be a more enticing approach to any city than bouncing through the waves in a speeding launch? With wind in the hair, a sense of excitement and anticipation overwhelms the visitor as the innumerable pinnacles and imposing facades of Venice come into view.

As we reach the northern face of the city, my water taxi from the airport slows to enter a narrow canal offering glimpses of monumental churches, secretive alleyways and tiny palaces.

Suddenly we burst out into the lagoon and there, to the right, are the spine-tingling sights of the dome of St Mark's Basilica and its freestanding bell tower, while ahead, standing sentinel, is the grand church of San Giorgio Maggiore dominating an islet. All waiting to be explored with a sense of wonder.

If arriving in Venice by water is wonderful, then exploring it by water is equally satisfying. Water buses — *vaporettoni* — follow the many edges of the city, stopping at most of the sites.

Should you take just one *vaporetto* on your visit, it has to be the Number 1. This

Grand designs: the unmistakable wonder of the Grand Canal

chugs along the Grand Canal, between St Mark's and the railway station, passing many famous structures: the baroque church of Santa Maria della Salute at the entrance to the canal and containing paintings by Titian and Tintoretto; the beautiful Ca' Rezzonico Palace, home to a magnificent museum; the Rialto bridge and the 15th century Ca d'Oro, no longer encased in gold but mightily impressive with its three tiers of ornate arches and crosses on the parapet.

The journey provides an introduction to the city's grandeur but the only way to get under its skin and appreciate its finer points is to walk. And that is where Kirker Holidays will help.

The company not only offers to greet guests with a water taxi from the quay close to the airport and provide a Kirker concierge to book restaurants and museum and concert tickets, it has guides on hand to lead walking tours. And with Venice full of twisting canals bridged randomly, a guide is essential.

Without this introduction, making even the short journey from St Mark's Square to the Rialto bridge and markets beyond is nigh impossible. With it, Kirker's guests will find the Scuola Grande di San Rocco tucked away and housing a magnificent collection of Tintoretto paintings. They could even find the church of Angelo San Raffaele and its images telling the story of Tobias and the Archangel Raphael, which inspired Salley Vickers' popular novel, *Miss Garnet's Angel*.

And they will be shown delightful trattorias off the beaten track where they can lunch next to gondoliers or dine on some of the finest (and not exorbitantly priced) fish dishes available in the city.

The guide may also recommend a water bus trip to the neighbouring islands of Murano, for its glass factory, Burano for lace schools, or Torcello for the mosaics in the basilica and a romantic restaurant — a perfect combination that typifies the best of Venice.

Kirker Holidays
(020-7593 2283, kirkerholidays.com) offers a three-night break to Venice from £549 a person, with flights, water taxi transfers and B&B in a four-star hotel. Two-hour Venice walking tour in winter costs £10 a person; in summer, £20.



If living like an oligarch floats your boat...

Slip into a millionaire's deck shoes on your very own superyacht in the Greek Islands, writes **Laura Whateley**

Ever fancied a week on a superyacht (and who hasn't) but don't happen to have any oligarch's number in your address book? You don't have to be a transatlantic sailor, or Simon Cowell, to master your own 65 footer, as I discovered this summer, gliding around the Greek Ionian islands on the beautiful sailing yacht *Argentous*.

I'm not much of a yachting but it doesn't matter on *Argentous*, a new, unique type of holiday from Fleewinter, the travel company. From this spring, she will be joined in the islands by *Aurous*, a 52 ft twin-hulled catamaran.

They fill the gap in the market for a luxury but affordable sailing break for those who don't necessarily know much about handling boats, or those who want an activity holiday but would prefer not to compromise on creature comforts.

The 20 metre long *Argentous* can be



Life's a breeze: the *Argentous* can be your own floating villa, with a skipper and chef to keep everything on course

treated as a floating villa, which you can rent for a week as a family or group of friends and pretend she entirely belongs to you. There are no markings or adverts on her hull to suggest that she is anything other than privately owned, so you can expect envious looks when you moor up.

Argentous sleeps up to eight in four air conditioned doubles, with ensuite bathrooms complete with Molton Brown toiletries, hot showers and — the greatest luxury — lavatories that flush. *Aurous*,

the luxury catamaran, will offer five cabins for up to 10 guests, all with ensuite bathrooms, and has a sundeck at the front and a helm station for king-of-the-sea views. Prices are identical for both yachts, from £990 per person for a week in the low season. At certain times of the year, singles or couples can book just a cabin rather than the whole yacht.

Guests do not have to lift a finger, unless they want to, as both vessels come with a skipper and a private chef; in my case both qualified instructors and

Call Fleewinter
(020-7112 0019, www.fleewinter.com)
Prices from £490 per person for 3 nights or £990pp for a week, based on exclusive use of yacht for 8 or 10 people, with half board.

Cabin rates from £1,050pp a week with half board, based on 2 sharing. Flights and transfers excluded.



experienced yachtsmen with thousands of nautical miles behind them, including five Atlantic crossings.

While I swim off the back of the boat in some of the Mediterranean's prettiest coves, with no one else about, the chef prepares breakfast. One of the benefits of having your own yacht is you can have a dip when the tourist boats have gone.

After freshening up in the evening, canapes and cocktails are served as the sun sets. The price also includes lunch, and you can ask for dinner, too, even a barbecue which you can eat under a blanket of stars.

On the other hand you might prefer to be whisked, wind in your hair, to shore in the 30-knot speedboats that are kept on board the yachts, to try a different taverna and local wine every night.

Argentous and *Aurous* also contain water sports equipment: stand up paddleboards, windsurfers and snorkelling gear. Both are suitable for landlubbers and enthusiastic sailors and sail from Corfu through islands including Kefalonia, Paxos, Levkas and Ithaca. Fleewinter is happy to offer flexibility over itineraries, whether your aim is to clock up as many miles as possible, or gently drift while topping up your tan.

On the beaten track but far from the crowds

Robin McKelvie loves his walking holidays — safe in the knowledge that an organised bus or taxi is never far away

The might of Mount Teide on Tenerife, Spain's highest peak, looms into view across the ocean as I reach the edge of the caldera. The Atlantic sparkles all around my vantage point but blocking my progress is a seemingly impenetrable sea of pine forest that hugs the volcanic slopes of one of the most spectacular islands in Europe.

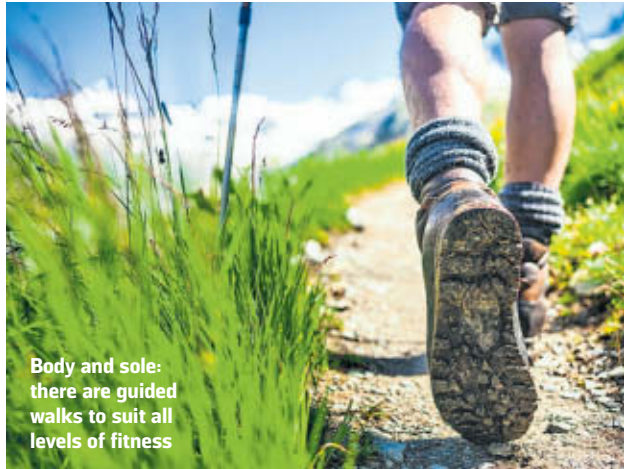
I don't know which way to turn, but help is at hand — not to mention company, camaraderie and safety — because I am on a walking holiday with Ramblers Worldwide Holidays.

The company offers some 250 healthy holiday options spread across more than 70 countries, many of them unusual destinations, with trips available year round. Different walking grades are offered to suit all levels.

I was on La Palma, an example of one of the less-heralded destinations. It is arguably the most beguiling of the seven Canary Islands, but gets nowhere near the tourist footfall of the likes of Tenerife. Instead, its volcanoes, thick native forests and sweeping coastline are left for walkers to discover on week-long holidays that pick off the best bits.

One of the advantages of being on a guided trip is that you don't have to worry about the vagaries of the weather, because the guide can tweak the itinerary. My week on La Palma was typically blue-skied, however, bringing out the best of this virginal Unesco biosphere reserve.

Last year I headed to an Algarve I thought I knew from various lazy beach holidays. This trip was a real eye opener:



Body and sole: there are guided walks to suit all levels of fitness

Ramblers Worldwide Holidays
(01707 386671, ramblersholidays.co.uk) is offering one prize of a £1,000 voucher to use towards any RWH Holiday next summer. To enter, go to www.ramblersholidays.co.uk/page/aitotimes with the answer to this question: On what Ramblers Holiday will you walk the 'Great Ocean Walk'? Competition ends February 29, 2016.



it followed the Via Algarviana, a 200-mile walking trail that snakes from the Spanish border west through long forgotten villages and thick forest.

As I ambled along, the resorts felt distant in every way and a totally different side of the Algarve opened up, with far more birds than tourists. But organised taxis and buses were on hand to make sure we cherry-picked the best walking options throughout the week.

The highlight came at walk's end at rugged Cape St. Vincent, where the southwestern tip of mainland Europe meets the expanse of the Atlantic Ocean.

Ramblers Worldwide Holidays is always adding new walking experiences to suit all skill levels across the globe. In 2016 it is stretching its walking boots to new holidays in the UK, Europe and also in more exotic climes like Australia, South Korea and even Zimbabwe.



Bask in the alpenglow where two cultures happily collide

The mix of Italian and Austrian influences with beautiful scenery make South Tyrol very special, writes **Norman Miller**

When both the Unesco World Heritage team and Michelin guide sing the praises of a place, take note. Step forward the South Tyrolean Dolomites, a northern Italian enclave blending breathtaking scenery and superb gastronomy with a unique cultural mix of Austrian past and Italian present, plus a sprinkle of local Ladin influences.

South Tyrol, known as Alto Adige to Italians, has long been popular with winter sports fans, with ski meccas such as Cortina. But it offers much more as a year-round destination.

Its jagged, red-rock peaks, lush mountain valleys and dazzling plateaux fully merit Unesco's recognition of uniqueness, most famously the fiery red glow — *enrosadira* or alpenglow — when evening sun kisses Dolomite summits.

D.H. Lawrence was awed by this "strange radiance" when he visited just before the First World War, which led to the Austrian territory being handed over to Italian rule.

Locals toast their glowing mountains with appropriately colourful sundowner cocktails in the cobble squares and

Perfect panorama: The mountains and lush valleys of the South Tyrol have earned a Unesco World Heritage listing

lanes of historic towns such as Bolzano, the regional capital, where ravishing architecture unites with fine museums and restaurants in an undiscovered Italian city gem. Don't miss the chance to meet Ötzi, the 5,300-year-old mummified body found preserved in a Tyrol glacier and now residing in Bolzano's museum of archaeology.

Classic Collection Holidays organises breaks all over the region. There's plenty for savvy sophisticates to enjoy. Cultural offerings include summertime jazz, chamber and folk music festivals in venues from streets to castles, plus autumn's Vire les Dolomites celebration of Ladin culture. Add choral recitals from June to September outside the Tyrol mountain huts (*refugios*) serving gourmet dishes by local Michelin-starred chefs.

Whether you eat in haute cuisine huts, historic city inns or lively village street markets, you'll discover a justified pride in local produce: foraged berries and mushrooms; traditional hams and cheeses; intriguing Austria-meets-Italy food pairings. The region also boasts one of Italy's finest wine routes. Autumn's Torgellen festival celebrates the harvest with vineyard walks fortified by *knödel* (dumplings) and grilled pork, alongside *süßer* (grape must) with roast chestnuts.

Eating fine food is also a perfect way to round off a mountain walk through areas of outstanding beauty, such as the Fanes-Senes-Braies nature reserve. The South Tyrol heartland of Alta Badia alone offers more than 250 miles of well-marked trails at different challenge levels, with themed paths exploring topics like Ladin legends or farming traditions.

If your legs get tired, cable cars — including the world's oldest — help take the strain. Wonderful spas provide a restorative treat, including free outdoor hydrotherapy baths in mountain spots like Piz La Ila.

The South Tyrol really is a classic collection of distinctive wonders — a perfect place to please body and soul.

Classic Collection Holidays (0800 2949323, classiccollection.co.uk) offers a week at the Relais & Chateaux Rosa Alpina Hotel & Spa from £1,116 per person based on 2 sharing, with B&B, flights from Gatwick and transfers.

