

FOR A FAMILY BREAK WITH A DIFFERENCE, ROBIN MCKELVIE CLIMBED ABOARD A MOTORBOAT AND EXPLORED THE WATERWAYS IN AND AROUND VENICE

Water world

In a city that lives and breathes water, there really is only one way to get around. I've spent many trips exploring the Venetian Lagoon by ferry and gondola, but this adventure was different. I was at the helm of our own motorboat, chugging through the Divine Republic on a week-long voyage that brought out the best in Venice. It also revealed a surprising world of sleepy rivers, riotously-fun beach resorts and a swathe of wildlife, including egrets and otters.

We hired our vessel through Europe's largest boat rental company, Le Boat.

After a comprehensive briefing on possible routes and a hands-on boat-handling lesson from ultra-helpful Neil, one of Le Boat's expert staff, we were shipshape and ready to set off on

our Magnifique Class cruiser. We were armed with a crew of four adults, one teenager and three very excited small girls, two of them my daughters, 10-year-old Tara and seven-year-old Emma.

The Magnifique name proved an apt one as I'm used to the relative privations of a narrow yacht or longboat. This was a whole different kettle of Adriatic fish, as our aquatic chariot for exploring this corner of northern Italy came with lashings of space. She sported two helms, one below and one on the large sun deck that rippled across the hull, handily providing a place to sit during the day and to enjoy meals at in the evening. The latter were conjured up in the well-equipped galley, while four bedrooms and three bathrooms meant that we were never fighting for space.

Our first day saw us enjoy a short, stately amble down the sleepy River Sile in search of Casale sul Sile, an appositely-soporific village where we found more swans than people idling by the waterfront. This bountiful wildlife was something that became nigh ever-present as the week unfurled in a swathe of flora and fauna. Even moored in the heart of the city of Venice, it wasn't long before we spotted one of the ubiquitous shags – or was it a cormorant? Our group had fun disagreeing on which one it was each time and we were still none the wiser by the end of the week.

After mooring in Casale sul Sile, we headed straight for a pizzeria, which was handily just opening up. We were welcomed inside like old friends and soon the kids were content with massive topping-laden pizzas that easily





dwarfed their heads. The grown-ups enjoyed a superb meal, too, washed down with an excellent bottle of Veneto Merlot. Whether on board or on shore, we were determined to eat well – and we did. It's hard not to eat well cruising in this part of the world.

We rose with only swans for company the next day and eased ashore to fill up on supplies in the well-stocked local supermarket. We picked up local meats and cheeses, plus enough pasta to feed a small navy – handy, given our ravenous kids. There was also time – the beauty of a self-guided cruise is that there is always time – to visit the local church, a 14th-century affair whose ceiling was adorned with 18th-century frescoes by Venetian artist Giandomenico Tiepolo.

Artistic creation was on show as we explored further down the Sile. A necklace of grand mansions rose up along the river banks, the legacy of the days when well-to-do Venetians would fashion elegant summer escapes here in an effort to demonstrate their power and status. The kids were more impressed by the brilliant blue dragonflies and ivory-white butterflies who fluttered all around as we edged along at a princely speed of 5km/ph.

“Eventually, the voluminous, unmistakable bell tower of St Mark’s loomed large, and the waterways started to fill with traffic”

We decided to eschew the charms of Venice for a few days and slip around the fringes of her famous lagoon in search of the beach resort of Lido di Jesolo. You never really escape the overarching omnipresence of Venice in these parts, though. Passing through Jesolo town, we had fun negotiating a trio of bridges that were opened up for us. The first, a pontoon bridge, was bedecked with Venetian flags. Traffic here pays a toll, as it has for centuries, with funds funnelling their way back into the civic coffers.

The stunning beaches of this honky-tonk

beach resort – which stretch on for over 10km – attract millions of frozen northern and central Europeans every year. It was easy to see why Lido di Jesolo is so popular as we enjoyed a dip in the Adriatic. Handily, our base at the Marina del Faro was just five

minutes from the sands. This was another face of Venice that visitors who only stay in the city never see.

After two days of lotus-eating, beaches and waterparks, it was time to cut south and brave the busier waterways of the main Venetian Lagoon. I’d feared it would be stressfully busy, but our approach was a breeze. Following the advice of our instructor, Neil, we sought out the quieter channels where there were more striking white egrets than water taxis. Eventually, the voluminous, unmistakable bell tower of St Mark’s loomed large, and the waterways started to fill with traffic. But we quickly negotiated the well-marked lanes on our chart and made a safe arrival into the swish new marina of Santelena.

I’d recommend you learn a few words

Previous spread: Cruising on the River Sile; steering tuition on the River Sile This page, clockwise from top left: Approaching Casale sul Sile; the Venice skyline; St Mark’s Square Opposite, clockwise from left: Burano; Venissa; Emma in a Venetian mask with Burano in the background

of Italian to help when trying to grapple with staff at marinas – but it proved worth the effort as we were just a 20-minute walk from St Mark's Square. For two whole days and nights we enjoyed the luxury of our own floating Venetian home, which handily meant we could enjoy a siesta and come and go as we pleased.

The marina was tucked next to a leafy park, and we had a neighbourhood bar, grocer and baker on hand. This corner of Venice felt like a small Italian town, but we still had the myriad charms of one of the world's great cities right on our gangway steps, too.

As the week grew towards its denouement, we turned tail and steered our way back north, aiming at the famously-squint bell tower of Burano, for me easily the most picturesque island in the lagoon, with its narrow canals and brightly-coloured houses. Our mooring was on the

FACT FILE

Robin sailed the Le Boat Venetian Classic seven-night cruise in their Magnifique vessel, which sleeps up to 10. No boating licence nor previous experience is required.

WHERE TO STAY

Hotel Heureka

Slick new boutique bolthole in the Cannaregio that boasts just 10 palatial bedrooms. It has a lovely courtyard where you can enjoy breakfast al fresco, too.

www.hotel-heureka.com

Belmond Hotel Cipriani

The most famous hotel in Venice is one of Europe's most renowned luxury escapes. Catch the motor launch over and enjoy the delights of their acclaimed Michelin-starred Oro restaurant.

www.belmond.com

Hilton Molino Stucky

Venice is not a city of cheap hotels, but this striking landmark can be great value, especially for group bookings. As well as the rooftop pool, the boat trip over is a highlight.

www3.hilton.com

neighbouring island of Mazzorbo, with a footbridge connecting the two isles right in front of where we moored.

We split our time between the two. First we toured the reborn vineyard of Venissa (www.venissa.it) on Mazzorbo, learning about how award-winning wine is being created right here in the walled vineyard. We then enjoyed a real treat, a superb lunch in their Michelin-starred restaurant, where, refreshingly, kids are welcome. We dined on boat-fresh lagoon seafood and vegetables, plus wine cultivated in the green oasis that unfurled all around us.

Leaving Burano until last proved a sensible move as we found the tour boat crowds had fled as evening approached. We pretty much had the impossibly-pretty canals to ourselves, save for old ladies hanging out their washing. After the girls had picked up some souvenir Venetian masks, we dined on delicious risotto made by refining the flavours of the local seafood into the Arborio rice stock. A glass of chilled Prosecco on deck under the stars as a thunderstorm approached brought the curtain down on a day as dramatic and enjoyable as a performance at Teatro La Fenice opera house back in the city of Venice.

On our last day we made it through the lock at Portegrandi – mercifully, there are few locks around the lagoon and they are all automatic – and we were back on the River Sile. That was when the kids whooped with delight during 'otter hour'. Whatever climatic conditions led to it, I don't know,

but in quick succession we chanced upon three separate otters – proper sightings not just glimpses. This reminded us that despite the glorious imprint of man, nature is never far away in and around the Venetian Lagoon.

Our last mooring was handily near the Le Boat base at Casier. We savoured our last, top-notch pizzas after checking out the haunting Burci cemetery, where traditional wooden cargo boats that were abandoned in a protest 50 years ago now lie slumped and rotting, a reminder that these waterways were once not so blissfully quiet.

All too soon it was time to ease back on to Le Boat's pontoons the next morning. In a week we'd travelled not just down a river and across a lagoon, but through the rich traces of time on the same wildlife-rich waterways used by the Venetians for centuries.

Next time I visit Venice, I fear a vaporetto or gondola ride just won't be enough.

FLIGHT DETAILS

Flybe has flights to Venice from Cardiff.



5 THINGS NOT TO BE MISSED IN VENICE

1 A STROLL AND COFFEE IN ST MARK'S SQUARE

Napoleon once famously hailed Venice's St Mark's Square as 'Europe's drawing room' and it certainly has that grandeur. Over the centuries, this deeply-dramatic public space has been at the heart of Venetian power and also played host to myriad artistic and literary luminaries. At night, take a pew in one of the famous cafes that grace the square. None are cheap, of course, but to savour Venice in style, dine at Caffè Quadri's Michelin-star restaurant, or just enjoy the most expensive coffee of your life as you enjoy their live classical music.



2 BE AWESTRUCK AT ST MARK'S BASILICA

Few things in Venice are free, but handily its main attraction actually is. You often have to queue (try to book a slot in advance) to peek beyond the already-impressive exterior, but it's worth it. There lie the relics of the saint that the city famously spirited off from Constantinople. Its lavish interior is as impressive as any art gallery, a riot of gold and striking frescoes. The oldest parts remarkably date as far back as the 11th century.



3 WALK ACROSS THE RIALTO

Venice is a city of canals and bridges. The baleful Bridge of Sighs is renowned as it was where prisoners snatched their last view of the outside world as they were led to their cells. The Rialto, though, is much more striking and also much more uplifting, a dreamy affair that swishes across the Grand Canal in a serious architectural flourish. It's great for photos and for souvenir shopping, too, as it is lined with shops.

4 SAVOUR A GONDOLA RIDE

Yes, OK, I know it's a serious cliché, but when you are actually the couple on the gondola it stops being cheesy and becomes almost unbearably romantic. You cruise around the canals feeling like a million dollars, especially if you have paid extra to have a singer serenade you or a musician play your favourite love songs. These unique aquatic craft are an ideal setting for any proposals you may have been considering...



5 APERITIVO

A glorious Italian tradition in early evening sees the Venetian locals down tools and head to small bars for an aperitivo. A blood-red Aperol Spritz is the drink of choice (note, not the one made with fizzy Prosecco in the UK). It's accompanied by various *cicchetti*, a sort of Venetian tapas crossed with British finger sandwiches. Don't indulge too much as you still have dinner to head to afterwards.