

Going ashore: (Venice, Italy)

VISITING ST. MARK'S

by

Richard H. Wagner

The square

St. Mark's Square can be called the heart of Venice. The Venetian Republic's ancient governmental buildings are here as is the city's cathedral from which the square takes its name. It was also the place Venetians came to to see and be seen. Napoleon described it as: "The most beautiful drawing room in Europe, for which it is only fitting that the heavens should serve as the ceiling." To see what he meant, just about every visitor to Venice comes here.

The area most visitors think of as St. Mark's Square is actually two squares that come together at a right angle.

First, there is the Piazza San Marco itself, which stretches out in front of St. Mark's Basilica. On three sides are arcades built between the 16th and 18th centuries. Today, they are home to famously expensive cafes and restaurants.

Near the cathedral on the northern side of the square is the Clock Tower. On

top of it are two bronze statues who strike the bell that stands between them to mark the hours.

The most visible feature of the square is the Campanile. This rectangular tower rises some 300 feet above the city. It can be seen far out to sea and helped guide ships home in the days before GPS. Originally built between the 10th through the 12th centuries, the Campanile collapsed in 1902. But it was re-built and re-opened in 1912.

The Campanile stands as the junction of St. Mark's Square and a second, smaller square, the Piazzeta. Open to the lagoon at one end, the Piazzeta connects the heart of Venice to the sea upon which the city was so dependent for its livelihood in the days of the Republic. On one side is the Doge's Palace while on the other is the Libreria Vecchia (Old Library). The latter is an ornate building that was considered a turning point in Venetian architecture when it was built in 1563. Inside are

works by artists such as Titian, Veronese and Tintoretto.

At the seaward end of the square are two granite columns. Perched on top of one is the winged lion of St. Mark, the symbol of Venice. On the other is a statue of St. Theodore.

St. Mark's Square can be crowded on a summer day. However, in the evening or in the rain, it takes on a different character with much fewer people. In addition, while it is quite pretty in the sunshine, it takes on mellower and more romantic looks both in the rain and around sunset.

The cathedral

In a city where several of the churches could be mistaken for cathedrals, the Basilica di San Marco is the foremost religious structure. However, while it has long been the spiritual center of the city, it has only been the city's cathedral since 1807. Originally, it was the palace chapel of the doge.

St. Mark's derives its importance because the remains of St. Mark, the patron saint of Venice, are interred there. How this came to pass is not the most noble of stories. Venice's original patron saint was St. Theodore. But as the city grew more wealthy and powerful, it was felt that the city needed a more important saint. Therefore, Venetian adventurers journeyed to Alexandria, Egypt, obtained the remains of St. Mark and smuggled them back to Venice.

The present cathedral dates to 1063. Over the centuries, it has grown and has been lavishly decorated. Indeed, a law enacted in 1075 required every ship

returning to Venice to bring something precious to decorate "the house of St. Mark." Since Venice became one of the world's preeminent maritime trading powers, a flow of magnificent objects for the cathedral followed.

Some of the most famous of the cathedral's decoration are outside the building. For example, over the main entrance are four large bronze horses. The originals (now in a museum) are believed to be Greek from the 3rd century B.C. Napoleon was so impressed by the horses that he took them to Paris after the Venetian Republic surrendered to him. (Before condemning him for such a theft, it should be noted that the Venetians had obtained the horses as booty when they sacked Constantinople in 1204).

St. Mark's does not look like a Western European cathedral. Rather, its style was inspired by the Eastern Church. Indeed, the original floor plan was based upon the Church of the Holy Apostles in Constantinople. Over the centuries, the eastern style was largely maintained although there are elements of other styles.

Inside, the cathedral is dominated by over 4,000 square yards of mosaics. Most of these are set in gold. Consequently, St. Mark's is popularly called the "Basilica d'Oro" (Golden Basilica).

Because St. Mark's taken as a whole is one of the world's great works of art, it attracts numerous visitors. During the day, visitors are channeled up one aisle, across the transept and down the next aisle to the door. Because of the crowds, there is no real freedom to wander or to pause for any length of time.

A much more satisfying way to see the interior of the cathedral is during the evening when it is open to small tour groups. It is a more relaxed experience and you can take in much more.

In addition, when you enter the cathedral it is dimly lit by the fading sun and a few electric lights. When the tour groups are seated, the lights are turned on section by section. As the golden mosaics are illuminated, they spring to life with shining radiance. Quite a few “oohs and ahs” follow.

The palace

Another must-see attraction in the St. Mark’s Square area is the Doge’s Palace. It was the seat of government during the Venetian Republic as well as the residence of the doge.

The doge (sometimes referred to as the duke) was not like a king or a president. Rather, he was a person elected head of state for life.

Today, when we hear that a leader has been elected for life, we think dictator. However, the Venetian constitution gave the real power to the Great Council (Consiglio Maggior), whose members came from the aristocracy. Through self-interest, they tended to be primarily interested in promoting trade. But when trade was going well, the state and the people prospered so the interests of the Council and the state coincided.

Nonetheless, the doge was the personification of the state. Indeed, the Venetians would hold a festival in which the doge would marry the sea,

symbolizing the importance of the relationship between Venice and the sea.

The first doge took office in 697 and in 1797 when Napoleon conquered the Republic, the last doge handed in his ceremonial cap saying: “It will not be needed anymore.”

During the intervening 1,000 years, Venice became a wealthy world power and the Doge’s Palace reflects the city’s good fortune. It is not a massive palace like Versailles but neither is it small. The architecture is eye-pleasing and the interior décor magnificent.

Built on the site of a medieval castle, the current palace dates from the 14th century. Its ground floor façade has 36 columns on top of which is the loggia with 71 more slender columns. Resting on this is a huge marble block with tall windows and a Gothic balcony. The whole arrangement is said to represent a city built upon piles (i.e., Venice).

After entering via the Porta del Frumento on the lagoon side of the palace, you come to an impressive courtyard built in 1483. The Giant Staircase at the far end was where each new doge was proclaimed.

You go into the interior of the palace by the Golden Staircase with its gilt and painted panels. Inside, you pass through a procession of rooms including the doge’s apartments and rooms that were used by the government of the Republic. Perhaps the most outstanding of these opulent chambers is the giant Hall of the Great Council with a vast painting by Tintoretto occupying the greater part of one wall.

Because it is a popular attraction, the Doge’s Palace can be crowded.

However, there is often space to spread out in its various chambers.

The doge's Palace reveals the glory of Venice at its height. Therefore, it is an essential element in understanding this city.

The bridge

Yet Another renowned attraction is the Bridge of Sighs (Ponte dei Sospiri). This graceful 17th century span over the Rio di Palazzio connects the doge's Palace with the first floor of the New Prison.

The bridge's romantic name is attributed to the English poet Lord Byron and is based upon the notion that prisoners condemned by the courts which sat in the

palace would see their last glimpse of Venice through the bridge's lattice windows before being taken to the cells of the prison. This sight would cause them to sigh with longing and regret.

Today, visitors to the Doge's Palace can follow in the footsteps of these legendary figures across the Bridge of Sighs, peep through its small windows and continue on to look at the decidedly unromantic prison.

Other visitors to Venice prefer to admire the delicate bridge from the embankment along the lagoon. Still others sail romantically beneath the bridge in a gondola. Legend has it that if a couple kisses beneath the bridge at sunset they will be granted eternal love.