

## Chapter IV - Venice

It's about a 2 hour drive from Bologna to Venice. As Venice has only one road in and out it's hard to make the wrong turn. Once we get there, however, confusion reigns for a while. We have a reservation for a hotel in the *Piazzale Roma*, which is where all the buses park to deliver or pick up passengers. There's supposed to be handicap parking at the hotel. We find the hotel but we don't see any parking. It's a madhouse here, lots of people walking about toting suitcases and many buses coming and going. When we are stopped in a bus zone trying to get our bearings one bus comes up behind us and the driver lays on the horn. The bastard could have easily gone around us. Dee is furious, what she calls "Melt-down #2" (Melt-down #1 was when we were lost in Milan at 3 a.m.). It stinks of diesel fumes and it's hot. Did we mention that we arrived in Italy at the beginning of a heat wave? Temperatures are in the 90s (F) and humidity is high. The A/C in the car can barely keep up.



The [Grand Canal](#) in the evening, looking from the hotel towards the *Ponte degli Scalzi*.

Eventually we get the information we need and get the car safely parked and the gear unloaded and in our room. It's a new hotel (or remodeled perhaps) right next to the main *vaporetto* (water bus) lines, just across the Grand Canal from the train station. After getting unloaded and unpacked it's late and we just want to eat and go to sleep. We ask where the closest restaurant is and the only ones the desk clerk can name are not on this islet. That means a canal crossing and very few of the old foot bridges are wheelchair friendly. This turns out to be a mixed blessing. We can't walk very far in Venice without passing over one canal or another, so we depend on the *vaporetto* instead of Dee's feet and Paul's arms.

Dee thinks she saw some sort of store on the far side of the now empty bus lot so we walk over there and find a small trattoria where some young folks are hanging out. We need to navigate a steep driveway to get there and there's a step to get in, but there are also four tables outside. It's finally cool enough to be comfy outdoors so we take a table. We order wine and spaghetti carbonara. But when the main dish appears it's *not* spaghetti, it's *linguini*! You would think that would matter to an Italian! Spaghetti, linguine, fettuccini, we don't care. It tastes good and we aren't about to send it back. Dinner accomplished even though Dee has to push Paul back up the steep driveway.



The Murano Glass [chandelier](#) in the hotel room

The room in this hotel is almost perfect for someone in a wheelchair. It's spacious, with enough room on both sides of the bed for the chair, a good bathroom with an easy-to-use roll in shower. It's also nicely appointed; Dee especially likes the chandelier. We ask the hotel if it's an example of Murano glass and they say it is.



Studying the [Vaporetto routes](#).



On board and [on the water](#)

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On day two we take the vaporetto about 2/3 of the way along the Grand Canal and get off at the San Toma dock to the Frari area. The architecture of some of the buildings along the G.C. is stunning. Here are some of the sights:



A [row of buildings](#) along the Grand Canal with a copper-covered dome of a church



The [Ponte degli Scalzi](#) (bridge of the barefoot)



[Nice boat!](#)



[Nice house!](#)



A required photo from Venice - [a gondola](#)



The [Rialto bridge](#) - Venice's oldest

We are heading for the *Scuola Grande di San Rocco*. We thought that meant the “grand school of St. Rocky” but that wasn’t quite correct. Scuola can translate as school, but in this context it refers to a “confraternity for worship and charity.” Inside the Scuola’s building is a cycle of paintings of biblical events by Tintoretto, done for the Scuola in the late 1500s. It’s fairly dark inside to protect the colors of the paintings and photos are forbidden. Downstairs are eight huge paintings, each about 25 feet tall, showing events in the life of Mary, mother of Jesus. There are many more paintings upstairs depicting both Old and New Testament scenes. Oh, yeah, it’s not Saint Rocky, it’s Saint Roch. (We’ve not heard of him either.)



Scuola Grande di San Rocco [main entry](#) is not accessible

This location is a pretty good example about how they are really trying to accommodate people in wheelchairs. The main entrance to the Scuola has four steps but there is a side entrance with only two. An attendant brings out a ramp, puts it over the steps and helps you in. Once inside the building the downstairs is all one level, but there are two flights of stairs to get to the 2<sup>nd</sup> floor where the bulk of the paintings are. The stairwell itself is full of paintings and sculptures worth seeing. There is no elevator; instead there is a “stair chair.” It’s got tracks like a tiny bulldozer, not wheels. They allow us to take pictures of that operation. Paul’s wheelchair is clamped to the frame of the stair chair, and then the attendant guides it up the steps. It’s powered by an

electric motor with a rechargeable battery that runs low about 5 steps short of the top! It gradually slows to a crawl. The attendant has to help it along by pulling Paul up the final few steps. While we look at the paintings the chair gets re-charged and we reverse the process to get down.



Putting the [ramp](#) down at the side entry



Riding the [stair chair](#) up

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The paintings are pretty amazing, well worth the trouble. Like many places we will see this trip there are paintings on the ceiling as well as the walls. Here they have a collection of wood-framed mirrors, each about 1x2 feet in size. These allow you to look at the ceiling paintings without straining your neck, a nice benefit for Dee with the problem neck. Very thoughtful. When you are done you leave the mirror on a bench or table for the next person.

After the Scuola we head for the hotel room to rest up and cool off. We make one wrong turn and go down an alley that dead-ends into a canal. A row of gondolas are passing by, when Dee spots one gondolier talking on his cell phone and she snaps some shots.



This modern [gondolier](#) uses his cell phone to keep in touch with somebody; his mom, lover, wife, bookie or ? ...



...and he bumps into a [building](#), having to push away with his foot. Cell phones are dangerous on the water, too!

In the evening we get off at a vaporetto stop and go down a narrow alleyway to find what is for Venice a major boulevard. It's as wide as a 2-lane street and straight for several blocks. There are two restaurants with outdoor tables nearly opposite each other. We pick one and watch people walk past while we eat. We make our single culinary error here – Dee orders *Calamari Nere Alla Veneziana*, which turns out to be squid cooked in its own ink. It comes with a side of some sort of mashed starch – potatoes or puréed rice – and is stark black and white. It is actually tasty but very strong flavored and after a few bites Dee says 'enough.' She will need gelato to make up for this.



[Calamari Nere Alla Veneziana](#) sounds good but looks, um, pretty black.



A shop display of [Murano glass](#) objects

The next day we board a special, larger vaporetto and go out on the open lagoon to the island of Murano, a “suburb” of Venice. Murano is like a miniature Venice, with its own Grand Canal and assorted minor canals. We want to visit the glass museum, see a glass blowing demo and perhaps buy some stuff. Some background: in the 13<sup>th</sup> century Venice was famous for hand-blown glass. The glass makers had learned techniques from their trading partners in the Middle East and combined them with European methods, and nobody knew how to make glass like the Venetians.

In 1291 all the glassmakers were forced to relocate their foundries to the island of Murano because they were a fire hazard in Venice, where most of the buildings were of wood. In spite of this “banishment” glassmakers were highly regarded for their skills. There was one catch, though; glassmakers were not allowed to leave the Republic! That’s how seriously the Venetians guarded their trade secrets.



On the [open lagoon](#) looking back at Venice

We get off at the *Museo* vaporetto stop but have trouble finding the museum. It is not well marked, but it doesn’t really matter – we find little shops selling Murano glass items and we check them out. Some of the wares are cute, some are elegant, and most are just amazing. We buy a few things.

Eventually we get directed to the museum only to discover that it is upstairs! No wheelchair access at all. We’ll go see a glass-blowing demo instead. However, the places that

give demos are at the *Colonna* stop, and there are canals between where we are and where the demos are, and all the foot bridges have steps. We have to wait for a vaporetto to get across the Grand Canal. Then we have a really nice stroll along a small canal to our objective. We’re in no hurry and there are some interesting sights along the way – centuries old towers next to modern art glass sculptures – and more shops selling glass, and gelato (yum!). It’s really pleasant not to have cars and scooters and buses roaring around. It is hard to appreciate how obnoxious the motor vehicles can be until you’ve had a chance to experience life without them. It’s a refreshing change.

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[Murano](#) is like a smaller version of Venice with its own Grand Canal, bridges and shops



Modern glass [sculpture](#) next to old clock tower



Lots of [trinkets](#)



A [vase](#) through a glass window gives multiple reflections.



Artistic [glassworks](#).

However, as a result of our leisurely pace we find that all the demos are over by the time we get there. They only have them in the morning and the early afternoon. Another activity to put on our list for the next visit. Oh well, we have a very nice walk.

We ride the “big” boat back to the main dock then switch to a smaller one that is destined for *Piazza San Marco*, the “downtown” of Venice. The sun is going down and it will be dark by the time we get there. According to the guidebook there is a “facilitated” bridge, the *Ponte della Paglia*, between the square and the vaporetto stop. When we get off the

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boat we discover that this particular vaporetto stop has *two* docks, and there is a canal between them. We are let out at the dock that has *two* bridges between it and the piazza and only one of them is modified for wheelchairs. Other tourists come to our rescue and a couple of chaps haul Paul up the steps of the first bridge and down the other side. The facilitated bridge is good – the steps are wide and shallow enough that a small ramp placed at each step makes it wheelchair friendly.

The *Basilica di San Marco* is an amazing building even in the dark. It is illuminated with an almost unearthly light. The other two main features in the piazza are the Campanile tower and the *Doge's* palace (the Doge was the mayor of Venice in the Republic times). Neither is lit up but we got some detail of the door to the Doge's digs. We couldn't get any decent photos of the Campanile.



A corner of the [Basilica di San Marco](#) at night



The Basilica [entry door](#)



Lots of nighttime activity in [Piazza San Marco](#)



The Doge's Palace [Door](#)