

# SLEUTHING VENICE

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Last time I visited Venice I hated it. I was twenty-five, on a weekend package tour, fully expecting a once-in-a-lifetime experience of charm, romance and adventure. Instead, I found a tired, dirty city, where I waited endlessly in queues to see the famous art works or shuffled with hordes of fellow tourists along the narrow *calles* from San Marco to the Rialto bridge, exhorted from all sides to buy, buy, buy. It felt like a cross between a tawdry theme park and the Showbags Hall at the Melbourne Show, and I decided: never again.

But recently I lucked on the best-selling mystery novels of Donna Leon, an American ex-pat, whose books are set in Venice and feature the wonderful Commissario Brunetti. Although hamstrung by the idiocy and corruption of Italian bureaucracy, Brunetti still manages to conduct his criminal investigations with intelligence and humanity. And despite its many flaws, he is adamant that his native city is the only place to live. My resolve began to waver. I decided Venice deserved a second chance - particularly if I could see it through Brunetti's eyes.

This was no easy assignment. Even Donna Leon, who has lived in Venice for over twenty years, is still seen as an 'outsider'. As for tourists, Venetians may need us, but they don't have to like us. Brunetti describes tourists as an 'alien life form', and jokes that Harry's Bar, a tourist icon, would collapse if a local set foot inside. Venetians cope by striding through the dithering masses like Moses

parting the Red Sea, avoiding eye contact at all cost. As long as we stay where we belong, on the beaten track, we are (just) tolerable until the weather turns and the city is reclaimed by its rightful occupants. But staying on the beaten track was what made me dislike Venice in the first place, so I was determined to deviate.

With its numerous tiny bridges – more than 300 in an area roughly the size of the Melbourne or Sydney CBD - Venice has never been suitable for carriages or cars. When they're not in boats, people have always walked. Brunetti's commentary on the streetscape and the eccentricities and intrigues of his fellow citizens as he traverses the city in the line of duty, is one of the delights of Leon's books. With my detective's hat firmly in place, I deduced that following in the footsteps of the locals might be the best way to discover the non-tourist Venice. But how to identify locals was the first quandary.

Venetians seem to have no trouble recognising each other. On the *vaporettos* (water buses) or in the streets you notice them giving each other discrete nods or waves as they pass. This is not surprising because with a population of less than 70,000, even where people do not know each other personally, they are likely to have family connections. When Brunetti needs information about a suspect or victim, his first inclination is always to ring around, and inevitably, as in any country town, somebody knows somebody.

Men in suits carrying brief cases, women with shopping jeeps (all impeccably dressed and coiffed), and groups of children playing together are almost certainly locals. And people with dogs are unlikely to have come from too far away. Wandering behind them, we discovered deserted squares and canals, and ancient alley ways with washing strung on high from houses that appeared to

lean inwards, nearly touching. We glimpsed exquisite internal gardens with geraniums in terracotta pots and cats sleeping in the sunshine.

In case you're becoming concerned that we were veering towards the other side of the law and turning into stalkers, let me reassure you, our surveillance was always discrete. Once or twice we were even able to perform a public service, as when we lifted the jeep of an elderly shopper over several hump-backed bridges, and were rewarded with eye contact and a warm 'grazie'.

This reminds me of another theme from Leon's books - a disproportionate number of murder victims are elderly women, sometimes the custodians of inherited art works, who are housebound. The downside of a town intersected by bridges is that it can be hard on aging knees. Venice is not necessarily a good place to get old in.

It's not necessarily a good place to be a poor stranger in either. Another particularly vulnerable group are immigrant workers, who often arrive from Eastern Europe, Africa and elsewhere, with insufficient or no papers. In one of Leon's books, a Bulgarian worker, abused and exploited by her boss, is murdered. In another, a young Senegalese man, who sells handbags on the streets for a living, ends up dead. You see African men like him all over Venice, their counterfeit designer handbags laid out meticulously on the footpaths in front of them, patiently waiting for a customer.

But back to the bridges – even today, foot power is the predominant mode of goods transportation for the myriad shops that line the narrow streets. Everywhere you look you see men moving through the crowds with hand carts,

exactly as they would have in medieval times. In the right light and with a little imagination, it's easy to catch a glimpse of doublets and hose.

The unique topography of Venice necessitates some other creative adjustments as well. In a city weighty with history, it is virtually impossible to obtain planning permission for structural changes to buildings. Of course, this makes the whole planning and construction area rife with corruption – something that Brunetti just takes for granted.

Even though structural change may be rare, we awoke every morning to the sound of hammering. There seems to be an extraordinary amount of building going on. No doubt the impact of the tides makes constant conservation and restoration a must. But many of the winding streets are too small and congested to lay out building materials horizontally. We spent an hour one day watching in fascination as workmen on scaffolding leaned backwards way out over the street to manhandle flooring timber through a second storey window, in what looked exactly like a giant game of aerial pick-up-sticks.

A city of boating and walking has the benefit of slowing you down. I can't imagine myself, in Australia, lingering for so long to watch men at work. As we know, Brunetti spends lots of time walking and observing. And one of the things he loves to observe are details. In fact, the commissario sets himself the challenge of spotting one previously undiscovered feature, every single week. Detail is what Venice is all about, and why it provides such a refreshing contrast to the many cities more suited to viewing by people speeding along in cars. One day we spent several satisfying hours examining the tiny statuettes, gargoyles and plaques adorning the gates and doorways in the streets near our hotel.

Brunetti, his intriguing wife, Paola, and their two children are all foodies. What they cook and where they eat provide an intimate insight into Venetian cuisine, so we were determined to try some of their favourite dishes, *sarde in saor*, risotto marinara and sole with porcini mushrooms, in the restaurants the family favour. Sadly, this is where our sleuthing let us down, for although we know those places really do exist, we couldn't find them. The labyrinth that is Venice defeated us.

Brunetti asserts that all Venetians have an intricate map of their city in their heads. We tourists are more likely to be found, scratching our heads and slowly rotating our maps, before throwing them, in disgust, into the nearest bin.

I would not like to leave you with the impression that our investigations into the sites mentioned by Leon were entirely unsuccessful. We located Brunetti's neighbourhood in San Polo and Campo San Luca, one of his favourite squares. We discovered the hospital, in what appeared to be a deconsecrated church, with its ambulances moored in the canal outside. We found the old *Questura* (police headquarters). And we even, very nearly, created our own crime scene:

One morning, we were walking along the path near the Arsenale, the ancient fortified dry docks right on the lagoon, where Brunetti once found a body. The island of Murano, where exquisite glassware is manufactured, and the cemetery island of San Michele shimmered in the distance across the laguna. We passed so few people it was easy to imagine we had Venice to ourselves.

Leaving the path, we turned right at a derelict church. Against its external walls we were surprised to see a row of twenty or more little houses made from

Styrofoam boxes, roofed with carpet squares. Then we noticed an elderly lady, surrounded by cats, and it all made sense. We greeted her as we passed and headed towards a ramshackle metal gate just beyond the church precinct. As we opened it, she started shouting 'compagno, compagna'. At first we thought she was calling the cats. Eventually, she was able to make us understand that the gate was the entrance to a restricted military zone.

Thanking her, we shut the gate carefully and began retracing our steps. I thought, how 'Venetian' that security for a key government facility should be left in the hands of one old lady and the paws of her cats. Such ready acceptance of the inevitability of Venetian eccentricity comes naturally to Brunetti. I realised then I was thinking just like him. Maybe that's why I've also fallen in love with Venice.