



A CITY OF TWO TALES



Mary Stuart-Miller in Venice

Trade was brisk in Venice's red-light district. 3 men in orange jackets were staring into a hole they'd dug in the city's sub-strata of gravel and sand. 2 ancient workmen were re-aligning even older paving slabs in San Polo square. And a team of wheel-barrow bearing builders were popping out of a partially restored canal-side building like cuckoos out of a clock, pouring debris into a large barge waiting below.

Venetian shop and office workers, rushed headlong down narrow, brick lined alleys, weaving their way in and out of deserted squares, over bridges and along canals.

Old ladies stopped their shopping trolleys in pairs on street corners. 2 plumbers armed with yards of copper piping navigated the maze of streets and canals like professionals, not once stopping to check their way or re-trace their steps.



It is 7am.

All over Venice, throngs of sleepy tourists are hibernating in their hotels.

All over Venice, the locals are going about their business as the city awakes to another day as the world's tourism capital.

In the 15th century, Rio Terra Rampani in the San Polo district was the city's red light district. Now it's a bustling area right in the heart of one of the 118 islands that make up the city of Venice. Imagine Venice is a fish, this is its ear, the Grand Canal forms the line of its gills.



A few streets away, in the inner curve of the fish's gill, stallholders are unpacking every shade of grey fish and mollusc from ice filled boxes for the daily fish market. A couple of early, dazed tourists are uncertainly pointing video cameras.



Next door in the Rialto fruit and vegetable market traders are putting on a brilliant display of colour, arranging radicchio and artichokes, stacking courgettes and asparagus, balancing oranges, peppers, apples and aubergines.

For every mile the Venetians walked, I walked 2. Even with a map, it's impossible to keep a sense of direction. Streets double back on themselves, come to a dead end in 'campos', cross over canals or take you where you didn't want to be.

I followed the plumbers towards the fish's mouth, in search of Santa Maria Gloriosa dei Frari, a masterpiece of Venetian Gothic architecture, containing, among other treasures, priceless works by Bellini and Titian, buried here after the Plague of 1576, and a statue created for the church by Donatello. It was closed for a service, but I didn't mind. I'd found it.

The early morning magic of Venice vanished when I found myself on the vaporetto back to the hotel, seated next to a surly Chinese tourist, wearing a red and black velvet jester's hat.

11am, The Grand Canal. Huge cream painted Venetian vaporettos, the city's water buses, jostle for space on the wide waterway, forging past ballast-laden barges, sleek wooden water-taxis and impossibly jet black shiny gondolas.

The post-man manoeuvres his motor boat into a mooring next to the Rialto Bridge, alongside a long, flat boat delivering bottles and boxes to a canal-side café. Out in the middle of the water-course, a police boat, blue light flashing, is ploughing through the centre of the mele.

2 Japanese ladies in a satin-lined gondola chat through white surgical masks. At one time they'd have covered their heads to enter Venice's 200 or so churches, now they protect their faces against the polluted air that blackens the majestic buildings.



Half a mile down downstream, no more than a handful of inches above water level in St. Mark's Square, unhampered movement is impossible. The tide of tourists swells like a boiling sea. A Polish group wear bright yellow 'Solidarnosc' headscarves to identify themselves to their guide, a cluster of Japanese eagerly follow a giant plastic marigold, held aloft by theirs, and somewhere out there is our diminutive guide, Manuella.

No wonder the place is sinking, the entire world has gathered in this unique city.

Venice is a medieval time-warp, built on petrified wooden piles on marshland between the Adriatic sea and Italy's north east coastline. One million piles alone were used to support the massive, baroque church of S. Maria