



GLIDE OF YOUR LIFE

PHOTO: AFP

Venice, also known as the city of water, the city of bridges and the city of light, is one of the most romanticised in the world.



Deepika Shetty

The entire city of Venice, a world heritage site, is a living, breathing museum with something for every whim and fancy

Venice, in northern Italy, isn't the sinking city it's made out to be, says Mr Huang Eu Chai. Having spent 10 years there, he returned to Singapore to work as an architect and a town planner.

But he has found it impossible to resist the Venetian charm.

This year, he returned to the city several times to develop a 13-day tour on the music and architecture of Venice and beyond. While the tour will take Singaporeans to various parts of Italy, Venice is where it all starts for Mr Huang.

In his opinion, Venice, which is also known as the city of water, the city of bridges and the city of light, is undoubtedly one of the most beautiful cities in the world.

In our new column Singaporean Abroad, he talks about the best ways to experience a place he calls his "second home".

GETTING AROUND VENICE

The best way to get around Venice is...

Walking

The best way to explore Venice is by...

Getting lost and then slowly finding your way around. You will be surprised how well you get to know the place after a couple of days of getting lost.

The best time to visit Venice is...

Spring, from mid-April to late May. Or else any other time of the year except in summer when it's crowded, expensive and sometimes even hotter than Singapore.

Which places in Venice excite you?

I'd suggest spending a morning walking in the woods, looking for mushrooms, drinking wine in a tavern as men break out in song or hiking up the Alps and standing on the border with one foot in Italy and the other in France – just make sure you have the requisite travel documents on you.

Must one know Italian to travel in Venice?

Oh, you'll be surprised. Just like the Chinese here, there are Italians in Italy who have trouble speaking Italian. I can say that with confidence because my landlord in Venice was one of them.

We know Venice as the water wonderland. Is a ride in a river taxi worth it?

Prices vary a lot. Some even go up to 50 euros but you get to see the city from the water, the way it should be seen. Gliding past the gondolas, street lamps and the accordion players is quite an experience. You should indulge in it at least once during your stay in the city.

FOOD & WINE

Does Venice offer anything that comes close to Singaporean food?

This is where it gets really interesting. Singaporeans are only just beginning to discover the huge variety of dishes with the number

SINGAPOREAN ABROAD IN VENICE WITH...



Huang Eu Chai

Age: 45
Occupation: Architect and Town Planner
Length of stay: 10 years

of authentic Italian restaurants here, but it still cannot be compared to eating in Italy itself. The humble spaghetti with tomato sauce was a complete revelation to me.

The local fare features a lot of rice. Singaporeans are familiar with risotto, which can take many different forms depending on the other ingredients used.

By now, risotto with squid ink is nothing new here, but what about strawberries? There's also a wild herb called bruscandoli which is collected and sold in markets for only two weeks a year in spring, and it makes a great risotto too. I've even tried a gelato made from rice.

Another common staple is polenta, a sort of cooked cornmeal which is a creamy porridge when freshly made.

When left to cool, it hardens and can be cut up into pieces like chye tau kueh, which can then either be eaten as is or grilled or fried.

One of my favourite dishes is grilled Venetian sausages with toasted polenta.

Your favourite breakfast is at...

Rosa Salva at Merceria San Salvador in San Marco.

It has a fabulous range of pastries and makes great espressos. Or try a classic Italian cafe breakfast – a piping hot cafe latte

served up with a simple toasty brioche.

Your favourite lunch haunt is...

El Cantinon at Dorsoduro 992. It offers typical Venetian cicchetti or finger food and wine. You eat standing up, along with everyone else. It's standing room only anyway since it's always packed.

Your favourite place to eat is...

La Zucca at Ponte de Megio 1762, San Polo. It has a very nice setting on the corner next to a canal and a bridge. Don't expect typical Venetian fare though – the chef does more experimental dishes using exotic spices and even dishes out curries.

The coolest places to chill out are...

Caffe Toppo, facing the Frari church, San Polo. This cafe has a mezzanine floor overlooking the bar, and it's great sitting above, savouring an espresso after lunch and enjoying a great conversation with friends. There's nothing more Italian than a good chat over an espresso after lunch.

The one place you always take your friends to is....

Nico's on the Zattere, which is a cafe and gelato place very famous for its Gianduotto – a chunk of chocolate and hazelnut gelato

shoved into a cup of, guess what, whipped cream. If you still have room for more, try an espresso topped with whipped dairy cream.

Your favourite drink is...

This might disappoint you, but it's not a wine. It's a soft drink called the Chinotto. It's like a root beer but has a bitterness to it which I really enjoy. It goes really well with pizza.

When it comes to nightlife, can one find a Clarke Quay equivalent there? Also, is there a local version of Singapore Sling?

Venice is not exactly known for its hip and progressive nightlife but being a university town, there are bars opening late into the night for wine and good conversation, as well as places with live music.

I recommend Paradiso Perduto at Fondamenta della Misericordia 2540 in Cannaregio which has a live band playing jazz and blues. For an after-dinner drink, go for a sgropino which is a whipped concoction of lemon sorbet with prosecco and vodka.

Which is the one place one must visit?

Campo Santa Margherita, Dorsoduro, which is very popular with students as it's right in the midst of the university faculty buildings. It is full of restaurants, shops, cafes and even some market stalls and, until a few years ago, had a tiny little shop selling eggs.

CULTURE FIX

What are some of the key cultural attractions in and around the city?

So many, I don't even know where to begin. The entire city of Venice plus the surrounding lagoon is a Unesco World Heritage Site, so this is one giant museum. You could effectively stay in Venice for a whole month and still not be able to see everything it has to offer.

Your favourite cultural art stop is...

Carlo Moretti. He makes some of the most spectacular contemporary works in glass I have ever seen, using classic Venetian techniques. Head to Campo San Moise near St Mark's for this.

FESTIVAL TOWN

Any key festivals which could be worked into one's travel plans?

One of the most spectacular festivals in Venice is on the third Saturday of July. It's called the Festa del Redentore and it celebrates the end of the plague in 1576. Andrea Palladio, one of Europe's greatest architects, was commissioned to design a church for this occasion, and now during the festival a bridge made of boats tied together lets people walk across the waters to the church on Giudecca island.

Venetians spend the evening in their boats, watching fireworks over the St Mark's Basin, eating a special dish called Sarde in Saor which is made with raw sardines pickled with onion and vinegar. You do need strong taste buds to stomach this.

This year is the 500th anniversary of Palladio's birth, so there are major events held in his hometown in Vicenza.

Another really big festival in Venice is the Carnevale, which takes place during the 10 days leading up to Lent just before spring. It's all fun and games in costume, and apparently in the old days, this was your last opportunity to chill out before getting serious for Lent.

SHOPPING

What sort of shopping experiences can one expect?

There is no shortage of shops carrying all the major Italian brands, along with the usual endless array of souvenir shops. But there's much more to Venice than Prada and those plastic gondolas with flashing lights. Seek out the various artisan shops dotting the town. The local artisans make and sell great masks, glass objects and ceramic wares.

I also like the contemporary designs of Murano glass. Some of these are so beautiful, they should be kept in museums instead of in shop windows.

A LITTLE FURTHER

What is the one thing you must do while in Venice?

You need to get away from Venice a little bit and catch Chiamata di Marzo or March From The Past, a festival held in a small village called Recoaro Terme. This spring ritual is held on the last Sunday of February and is repeated only on even-numbered years. Farmers and villagers celebrate the end of winter by going out to the fields and making lots of noise to wake the ground up for the next year's crops to germinate.

Any other sights which would appeal to Singaporeans?

There's an area called the Euganean Hills just 40 minutes away from Venice by train. This is a major tourist destination for Germans and Italians but is largely unknown to Asians. The volcanic soil makes this a great place for vineyards and there are Roman ruins, small mediaeval hill towns, renaissance villas and restaurants surrounded by forests all over.

There's even a Benedictine monastery where you can hear the monks holding their rituals with a Gregorian chant. It's also a major spa area famous for its mud treatments and thermal waters, and the prices for treatments are surprisingly low. With the growing Singaporean indulgence in spa treatments, there couldn't be a better treat on holiday than in a spa in Italy.

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PHOTOS: COURTESY OF HUANG EU CHAI

Go marketing in the Rialto food market (above) which offers the freshest fish, vegetables, fruit and other foodstuff.

Get lost in the little lanes and bylanes of Venice and get a glimpse of the famous Euganean Hills (left), which have been celebrated for their picturesque beauty and their hot springs.

The village of Recoaro Terme (right) hosts the spring festival of Chiamata di Marzo or March From The Past.

