

Untold Italy Episode 177 - Budget friendly Venice

This is the Untold Italy Travel podcast, and you're listening to episode number 177.

Ciao a tutti and Benvenuti to Untold Italy, the travel podcast, where you go to the towns and villages, mountains and lakes, hills and coastlines of Bella Italia. Each week your host Katy Clarke takes you on a journey in search of magical landscapes of history, culture, wine, gelato, and, of course, a whole lot of pasta. If you're dreaming of Italy and planning future adventures there, you've come to the right place.

Katy

Ciao, welcome friends to another episode of Untold Italy, the podcast that aims to help you plan your dream trip to Italy. Today we're talking about perhaps my favorite city in the world. If you've been listening along for a while you'll know that it's Venice or Venezia as it is known in Italy

And why is it my favorite? Well, there is simply no other place like it. A city well over 1000 years old built on water and full of magic and mystery. I was there back in April and oh my goodness it's just so stunning and captures my imagination like no other city on earth. I spent hours wandering around its districts, soaking up the sea breezes and enjoying its unique beauty and I loved every last second of it. And I'll be back as soon as I can.

And while there's no denying that Venice is beautiful, it is also one of the most expensive cities in the world to visit. So today I thought I'd share with you some of my favorite free and low-cost options of things to do in Venice so you can stretch your vacation dollars further.

This is, after all, the city where a coffee can cost you upwards of €8 if you sit outside at one of the cafes in Piazza San Marco. Personally, I think that's actually not a bad deal given the atmosphere, live music and passing foot traffic to admire and you can sit there for quite some time - but it does put a marker in the sand in a country where you can get a coffee for €1.50 if you stand at the bar.

Katy

Without further ado, let's go through some of the ways that you can stretch your trip budget further, and we will make sure that you have plenty left over for maybe a splurge dinner or some amazing museum exhibition that you wanted to see.

Katy

So, first up, let's visit the main sites. I recommend doing this early in the morning or later in the evening when they are not crammed with day trippers. There are around 19 million day trippers a year to Venice, making up about 80 % of the visitors to the city. Most of these

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people come from nearby countries like Germany and Austria and places like that. It's not people/English-speaking travelers like us that are coming from all over the world. No, these are people that are fairly close by, and obviously, a lot of cruise passengers as well. Now, most of them wander in a very, very tiny area of the city between Piazzas San Marco and the Rialto Bridge. So the time to visit these locations is definitely they've arrived or after they've left. And as an added bonus, the light at that time is just magical.

Katy

So the first stop we're going to take is to do a stroll around Piazza San Marco, and this is one of the most famous squares in the world, and it's surrounded by the beautiful architecture and historic cafes. Now, while you can order a coffee or aperitivo here and enjoy the scene, which I do recommend actually, many people simply wonder and enjoy gazing up at the Byzantine domes and glittering golden mosaics of San Marco and wait for the 500 year old astronomical clock to toll each hour.

Katy

From here, you can walk to the Grand Canal past San Marco Bell Tower and admire the Doge's Palace, which is an incredible Gothic style building of white and pink marble. Make sure you look up and pay respects to the winged lion atop the pedestal, keeping watch over the city as well. Now, as an aside, the winged lion is a symbol of Venice representing its patron saint, San Marco. You'll see the winged lion all over Venice as statues and flags. If you're traveling with kids, it's a fun activity to get them to count how many they can see, and that will keep them occupied for quite some time as there are thousands of them.

Katy

Before continuing on, head left as you face the lagoon and walk a short distance before you reach the Ponte della Paglia Bridge that spans the Rio del Palazzo. It's from here that you can admire the Bridge of Sighs, relentlessly copied around the world but never matched in beauty. Get your camera ready here for an iconic Venice shot of a gondola gliding under the famous bridge.

Katy

Our next stop is a walk over the Rialto Bridge, and this is another of the iconic landmarks of Venice. It is made of white limestone and has an unmissable design with distinctive arches that we all associate with Venice. This is a great vantage point where you can gaze down the Grand Canal and get another hero Venice shot, complete with gondolas. If you go here in the morning, you can spend some time browsing the local market, which is full to the brim with seafood from the lagoon and fresh produce.

Katy

Another of the city's beautiful sites is the wooden Academia Bridge. One of only four bridges that span the Grand Canal, it's a great place for photos, especially at sunset. One of my

favorite views is from here, and you can admire the city up high on the bridge and enjoy the views of the Basilica di Santa Maria della Salute in the distance. It's a beautiful domed building that's really one of the iconic buildings of the Venetian skyline, and I love it.

Katy

If you're really on a tight budget, you may not want to enter the Doge's Palace, but I definitely recommend popping into the Basilica San Marco, which is a glittering golden masterpiece. Basic skip-the-line tickets are €6 for an adult at the time of recording, but I recommend paying the extra to visit the museum there as, apart from the museum, which showcases the original bronze horses that adorned the roof of the basilica, you also have the opportunity to admire the mosaics and church from above, and then also to step out onto the loggia for views of Piazza San Marco and beyond. That ticket is around €15 and it's really worth it because when you're walking through San Marco or you go in a circular circuit and it's very quick and very squishy. There's a lot of beautiful, beautiful mosaics, but you get a totally different perspective if you go up to the museum and then you get that view down into the church itself. It's absolutely stunning.

Katy

Now, of course, the main activity that people want to do in Venice is ride a gondola. I have to admit, I can never resist that. But at €80 for a 30 minute ride, it's not really a budget option. What I suggest is either waiting around to find some people to join you because the price is the same whether you have 2 or 5 people, or you could also go on the local gondola traghetto or the ferry gondola that takes people across the Grand Canal at seven spots, including one near the Rialto Bridge. This ride will cost you €2 per trip and you may need to stand up and it's not going to be fancy, but you can still say that you had the gondola ride. And there's no denying that seeing Venice from the water is something that you need to do at least once in your life.

Katy

You'll see lots of the romantic wooden Venetian speedboat taxi zipping around the canals, and I have to admit, that's a pretty special way to travel. But you can get an incredible experience riding on the Vaporetto water busses for a fraction of the cost. You just need to be a bit organized and know what to expect. My favorite trip is on Vaporetto number 1, which takes you right from Piazzale Roma and near the train station all the way down the Grand Canal to the Venice Lido or the beach area. What you should do is make your way to the back of the Vaporetto where it's not covered, so it's exposed to the elements, but you do have uninterrupted views from here and it's absolutely spectacular. If you stay inside the covered, enclosed area of the Vaporetto, it's a bit sad because you'll just see blurry palazzi in your views out of the grubby windows. Another option is to stand on the sides where it's open to the elements as well, but you'll only get one side. If you sit at the back, you get the not quite 360 degree view, but you get a pretty good view.

Katy

You can do all of that. You can ride that Vaporetto number 1 with a regular Vaporetto ticket that lasts for 75 minutes, which is €13.75. The Vaporettos, I have to tell you, are not that cheap. So if you're wondering whether the Vaporetto passes are worth investing in, well, take a good look at your plan for the days that you're in Venice, because at €33 for one day and €44 for two, they are pretty pricey and I would say not worth it if you just plan to explore the main islands. And there's plenty to do there for a week at least. So they're really only worth it if you want to go to Burano, Murano and some of the other islands outside of the main Venetian central area. They're the only option then, but you don't need to do that if you don't want to.

Katy

Now, we're onto my favorite thing to do in Venice, and that also happens to be free. That's simply wandering and exploring the various neighborhoods and districts, each with its own character and charm. Here, I'm going to encourage you to turn off your Google Maps because you know what Google Maps does? This is pretty much Google in its entirety. It pushes everyone down the same crowded path and you pretty much miss everything because you're so jam-packed into these tiny laneways. Personally, I find it quite boring. And if you're like me and can't stand crowds, it's pretty triggering. Even when I was there, the first week of April, it was absolutely chock a block. I think that's an Australian saying. But anyway, it was full and it's because everyone's going down these same pathways. And I had a great afternoon with my friend Monica, who's a local there, and she was just doing the whole Monica back streets moves, which was really fantastic. We just skipped through everywhere. Of course, she's a local and she knows how to get around. But if you've got a little bit of time and you're just happy to wander, there's such a better way to do it than following the herds with Google Maps.

Katy

Here's what you do. You pick an area and you just wander to your heart's content. You can stop for a gelato or a coffee. You can pick out the details of buildings, admire the beautiful architecture, pop your head into churches and check out the art and soak up everything about this magical city.

Katy

Here are some of my favorite places to do that. The first one is the Jewish Getto in Canareggio. This is one of the oldest ghettos in the world. I find it difficult to say the word ghetto, but it's actually where the word ghetto originated. That's what it's called so there you go. It is called the Jewish Ghetto. Here you can explore the narrow streets and compare the atmosphere of this really self-contained area of the city with the neighborhoods beyond. It's really quite quiet and gentile and it's got a more peaceful atmosphere. That's a beautiful area and it's not far from the Central Train Station and you can just pop your head in there. You

can do guided tours there as well. I think I would recommend that if you wanted to learn a little bit more about that area. It's really fascinating, actually.

Katy

The next place I really like to explore is Dorsoduro. Before heading into the neighborhood proper in all its little back streets, which is really fun, I like to take a stroll along the waterfront in front of the Basilica di Santa Maria della Salute. This is a beautiful domed church that was built in the 17th century, and it celebrates the end of the plague. You can visit the church for free, which is pretty spectacular. I know you can get a bit tired of churches in Italy, but sometimes add a few ones in. This one's worth popping your head in.

Katy

What you do after you've had a look inside the church is you follow the little street or the laneway called the Fondamenta Salute to the very tip of the island of the Dorsoduro district for stupendous views across the Grand Canal to San Marco. I like to then follow the path along the seafront, keeping the island of Guidecca on my left in the distance. It's just a beautiful seaside stroll. It was a little bit breezy when I was there, but it was really nice to get that fresh sea breeze on my face. I loved it.

Katy

The next place that I'm going to recommend that you visit might be a little bit surprising because most people don't know about the beautiful gardens of Venice, but the Biennale Gardens and the Park of Remembrance are two wonderful places to explore with great views across the lagoon. You get there by keeping the lagoon on your right if you're walking away from San Marco, and you keep walking and walking and walking until you can't go any further. The gardens are beautiful and they're a peaceful respite from the crowds. It's something a little bit unexpected in Venice. We don't really expect to see gardens, but there they are, the Venetians ever ingenious and keeping so many different traditions alive despite the environment that they live in.

Katy

The last place I wanted to mention was the Castello district, which is probably the most local of all the city's districts, and here you're going to find the city's Arsenale or historic shipbuilding yards, and interesting churches like San Francesco della Vigna - church in the Castello district of Venice. But I mainly like watching the locals go about their business. Sometimes you'll see a wedding or local celebration, and this is lovely and another reason to respectfully duck into churches, even if you're not into religious art. Just stay quietly at the back and enjoy soaking up another culture.

Katy

The last thing that I really want to mention is that Venice is full of quirky and curiosity and quirky little things that just make you just go, "Oh, wow, that's amazing". The best thing to do is stumble upon them. But here are some of my favorites that you might like to seek out.

Katy

The first one is called Libreria Acqua Alta, which is a wonderful bookshop. I have to admit, it's a little bit overrun with influencers these days and people posing for Instagram, but it's still worth poking your head in to see all the gondolas piled high with books and cats lounging in little nooks. It's really quite a fantastic site. It's one that you'll only find in Venice.

Katy

The next one is Palazzo Contarini del Bovolo. This is a palace with an external spiral staircase. It's a beautiful example of Venetian architecture. You'll find that in the San Marco district. You don't need to go inside. You can just admire it from outside down below.

Katy

Another really fun thing to see is the Ponte di Chiodo. This is only one of two bridges with no parapets, so no handrails in Venice. This one's in the Cannareggio district, and it leads right into someone's house. Actually, I think it might be an Airbnb these days, but let's make sure we don't disturb these people.

Katy

Next, we have the squero of San Trovaso, which is a gondola workshop in the Dorsoduro district. It's here that the vessels are repaired and cared for. You can watch the goings on from the other side of the canal where there's a handy bar where you can get a spritz and some snacks to enjoy while you admire the view. Because as you can imagine, with these boats that are so beautiful and so ornate, they need a lot, a lot of maintenance. This is where they go to get their maintenance done. It's like the garage for gondolas.

Katy

The last thing I wanted to mention, which is a quirk and curiosity, is the daily life of Venetians. Everything here is done on water. Ambulances, trash collection, cranes for building works. How do they do it so the city runs smoothly? I don't know, but they've been doing this for centuries, and it's absolutely fascinating.

Katy

There are endless opportunities to explore Venice and discover fun things like this. I'm toying up spending a few months there at some stage because I could never get tired of watching

and wandering and admiring its unique beauty and the ingenuity of its citizens. Most of it, all the things that I've mentioned, are either free or at a very low cost. If you want to visit Venice and you're on a budget, the good news is that you can have fun doing lots of things for free. I would make sure to choose accommodation far away from the Grand Canal in the San Marco district, as this is where the prices skyrocket.

Katy

If you use your feet for transport and avoid the Vaporetto water busses, you'll save a lot too. It just requires a little planning and forethought, including, if possible, avoiding the busiest months of the year, which is now really starting from the beginning of April to the end of October, and of course, February during Carnevale.

Katy

I hope you enjoyed these tips today. Of course, you'll find details on all the places mentioned in our podcast show notes at untolditaly.com/177.

Grazie mille. Thank you to all our wonderful listeners for your ongoing support of Untold Italy. I do hope you enjoyed today's show. If you did, then it would be amazing if you gave us a rating or review in your favorite podcast app. If you're using Apple podcast, then you need to go to the show page for Untold Italy, not the episode page, and you'll scroll down until you see ratings and reviews. We just get such a thrill every week when the reviews roll in and it just makes me smile every time to read that we're helping people plan amazing trips to Italy. So please leave us a review because apart from anything else, it gives us a big smile.

On next week's episode, I'm chatting with a mum and daughter who successfully navigated a study abroad opportunity in Milan together - and it comes with a great sequel too.

But until then it's "ciao for now".