

DIFFERENT STROKES



Searching for freedom on Venice's famous canals, **Richard Asher** picks up a paddle.

Photography by **Stefano Montagner**

THERE'S NO LAND IN SIGHT, JUST THICK FOG. LIKE US, IT IS a reluctant morning riser. Soft yet firm, it nestles on the eerily calm Adriatic around our kayak. Only the trains roaring along the causeway to our right give us some assurance we aren't lost.

We just have to believe Venice is out there. Clearly rubbish paddlers, nothing we do stops the boat going left, towards Slovenia. Maybe we should have joined the gondola hordes after all?

Half an hour's hard exercise later, the mist lifts and our doubts vanish. As we twist clumsily into the glinting Rio di San Girolamo, I feel proud. We've made it into the soporific Monday morning waters of the Ghetto. Locals unloading goods from their boats stop and stare. Then the first tourist shutter clicks. Oh, it makes you feel smug.

What a wonderful, sun-bathed morning to be a traveller. There's an exhilarating freedom gliding across these ancient waters, taking whatever back stream we want. A wonderland of weatherworn masonry, mysterious windows and colourful vessels unfurls alongside us. We are masters of our ship.

We drift south, through the dank arteries of Rialto. We sneak the wrong way up a one-way canal to poke our noses into the Grand Canal. The traffic is scary, but we can soak up the scene from the sidelines, clutching onto one of those barber-shop mooring poles. We have no rope, after all, and can only guess at the parking rules.

Thus the relay-style refreshment stop that follows. I hold on to a rusty ring on the steps beneath the Ponte San Provolo while my paddling companion Susan sources a take-away plate of *cicchetti* (snacks) from Bacaro Risorto. Then we each run for a welcome drink at the public fountain on nearby Campo San Zaccaria.

Fortified, we tackle the open sea again. The *vaporetto* (water taxi) hub outside St Mark's makes paddling a perilous, iPhone-threatening game. We quickly salute the majestic piazza, and St Theodore and his crocodile, then plunge under the Bridge of Sighs into the water alleys behind the basilica. There, we earn a place in more Chinese holiday albums as we try not to bash and scratch the laden gondolas coming the other way.

But road rage is scarce. More likely a cheery ciao and smile. Only one gondolier gets stuck in, saying we simply aren't allowed. And maybe we aren't. My advice? Kayak Venice before the fun police move in. ✕

Kayaks can be hired (and paddled) from Canoa Club Mestre, three kilometres from Venice on the mainland. It costs about AU\$60 a day for a two-person kayak
canooclubmestre.it