

Upfront

December in Venice. It's quiet. The throngs of summer are long gone. Where voices once caromed through narrow alleyways coalescing into a dull and steady thrumb, the whisper of a crisp breeze off the lagoon provides the only sound. The light is perfect, a mellow glow for most of each day. When the weather is moody, the grey, rainy sky is operatic, not maudlin. The grand squares could accommodate football fields, but on certain nights you find yourself completely alone. The boats that shuttle you from one sestiere (neighborhood) to another or to and from lesser islands offer plenty of open seats, especially when you choose the invigorating air of an open deck. The seafood seems extra fresh.

By necessity, Venetians are logistics experts. Amazon delivers by barge. There isn't a forest among the ancient stone that provides pines ready for ornamentation. So, many locals choose artificial trees; and, in keeping with the Italian ethos, forestall summoning them from closets until the second week of December. Many stores and hotel lobbies decorate for the season in styles familiar to an American. But the essence of Christmas in Venice derives from the relative calm in a place that is often overwhelmed. It feels like you're waiting patiently for nothing. There is no reason to rush.

The prevailing spirit in the once-mighty former maritime republic is a useful meta-

phor for Christmas. The bustle associated with a global trading hub has been replaced by the crush of tourism, and both are hazy, unpleasant memories mostly forgotten in December. There's a sense of collective anticipation, but without anxiety attached. Good things are coming, but this moment is simply great, too.

Venice is a place of stubborn, enduring, staggering beauty. Every turn down the next tiny lane yields sensory magic. This, too, is a metaphor for Christmas: If you're open to wonder, you can find it in the simplest things, anywhere.

Sometimes, you think you're going where you intend, but you dead-end at a canal. Yet, you're not annoyed. You happily double back and try a different path. You have the privilege of twice experiencing a thing that you intended to pass by. Another metaphor? Why not?

"La Serenissima." The serene, truncated from an old, official name: The Most Serene Republic of Venice (translated from its original Italian, of course). Never is the moniker more apt than each December. The winds of winter coax the water that rings to city to lap against its ancient stone. A faint church bell politely interrupts your trance. Light dances on the rippled black water of an evening canal like strings on a Christmas tree. Peace on earth, indeed.

Scott A. Laurer



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*Merry Christmas and
Happy Hanukkah*

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315 Commercial Dr, Ste C1 | Savannah, GA 31406

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THE SKINNIE VOL 22 ISSUE 24 - 5

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