

Travel & Outdoors

WISH YOU WERE HERE



Lost and found in Venice

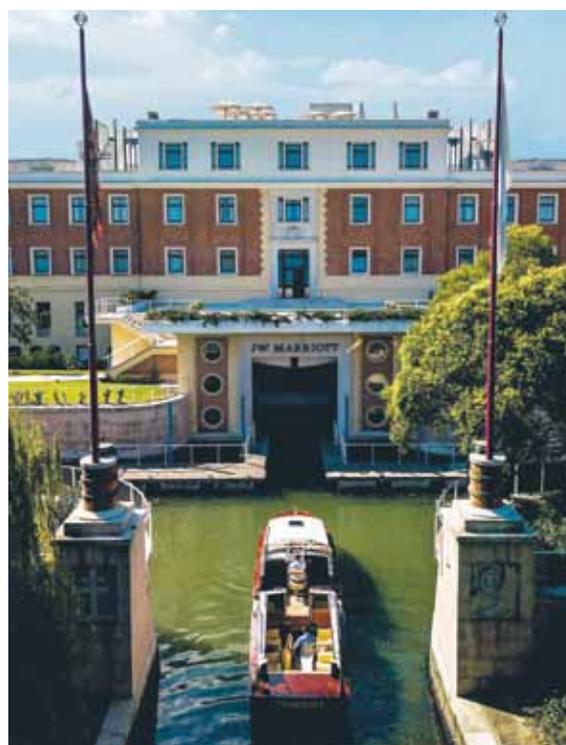
The trick with Italy's jewel, **Kate Wickers** discovers on a luxury break to the city, is to leave the tourist crowds behind and simply explore

There is something very Sofia Loren about catching a private speed boat taxi from Venice Airport to the private island of Isola delle Rosa, home to JW Marriott Resort and Spa. I wish I was wearing a silk headscarf. At least I have the dark shades. The boat cruises right in to the hotel's reception, via a kind of *James Bond/Thunderbirds* portal, where bell boys are waiting to whisk my luggage away. I know that JW Marriott is the luxury end of the Marriott empire, but I'm still surprised by how swish it is.

The island was once home to a sanatorium, where patients came to recoup from respiratory illness, and it remains an idyllic retreat away from Venice's crowds. In the 1980s it fell into a kind of fairy-tale ruin, during which rose briars flourished and olive

trees grew to giants. JW Marriott was the knight who came to the rescue, building a new hotel, simply known as The JW, and renovating the original 1920s buildings to create stylish residences. My spacious room, in light-reflecting natural tones, is located in L'Uliveto (Olive Grove), named for its view. I appreciate the Bulgari toiletries, however it's my private terrace, festooned with white roses that impresses the most, from which, beyond the olive grove, I can see a chapel glowing amber in the setting sun.

A complimentary shuttle boat operates every 30 minutes to and from Piazza San Marco and feels more like an indulgent excursion than a commute. Venice is film-set dazzling, best viewed from the water and each time I cross the lagoon goose bumps emerge. At Basilica San Marco, the secret is to pay the



San Francesco della Vigna church is one of the less visited in Venice, main; approaching the JW Marriott hotel, above

€5 entry to the museum, accessed up a narrow stone staircase from the atrium, as few visitors seem to know that it is there. Housed in the Gods, the up-close view of the Basilica's mosaic domed ceiling feels privileged, and from here you can also step out on to the Loggia dei Cavalli, the balcony that overlooks Piazza San Marco and the Doge Palace next door. The immense bronze horses are replicas of the 2nd century originals that are housed within the museum.

I steer away from the tourist jam on the Rialto Bridge, happy to wander, while heading roughly in the direction of Cannaregio, an area on the northern bank of the Grand Canal, home to the old Jewish Ghetto and some of Venice's narrowest backstreet alleys – Calle Varisco is just 23-inches wide. I call in at the church of Madonna dell'Orto for paintings by 16th century Venetian master Tintoretto, who lived close by at 3399 Campo dei Mori. The quayside Fondamenta della Misericordia has a laid-back neighbourhood

atmosphere, where locals come for cicchetti (Venetian tapas). Try pesto smeared bread with mozzarella and anchovy at the lovely Vino Vero Osterie (wine bar), washed down with a small glass of wine, colloquially known as an ombra (shadow).

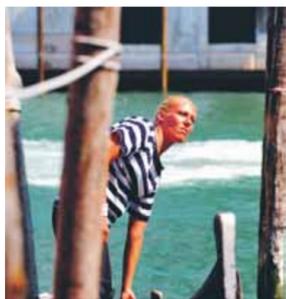
A ride in a gondola, if you pick a quiet location, is a magical experience. I am lucky enough to flag down the city's only female gondoliera, Giorgia Boscolo, who broke a millennium of tradition in 2010 to follow in her father's footsteps. No fear of Giorgia breaking in to the 'O Sole Mio', as she steers me expertly through Cannaregio's back canals, where old ladies tend to window boxes; and an opera singer can be heard at practice. His song wafts after us like perfume.

In a city full of culinary treats, Fiola At Dopolavoro Venezia, is the city's newest fine-dining experience and notches up the luxury factor for the JW Marriott Resort. Michelin-starred chef Fabio Trabocchi is all about fresh local produce. On his menu you'll find soft-shell crabs from the Venice lagoon, white asparagus from

"Stop shopping and look around. Venice is one big museum"

the famous Rialto market, and Isola delle Rosa home-produced olive oil, with its distinct flavour of the sea. One glance up to the restaurant's mirrored ceiling gives me a glimpse of how much I'm enjoying the signature dish of lobster ravioli with ginger and chives.

Next morning, I do laps in the roof-top infinity pool of The JW, while enjoying views of the Venice skyline, and then seek out Vittorio, the concierge. He grew up in Venice and knows every nook and cranny, so he sends me off to explore the back alleys of Castello – the fishtail of Venice. I spend a happy hour at Libreria Aqua Alta (High Water Bookshop), which has plenty of Venetian-inspired literature (Casanova's biography costs just €8), and where books are



Photograph: Andrea Pattaro/AFP/Getty Images

kept in boats in case of floods and those already water-logged have been stacked to create papier-mâché walls. The further north I go, the fewer tourists I encounter, until I find myself blissfully alone gazing up at Veronese's painting *Virgin and Child with Saints* in the church of San Francesco della Vigna. This may not be Venice's most celebrated church, but void of tour groups it feels very special.

For classical Venetian cooking I head to Osteria Oliva Nera, run by Isabella and her daughter. Their speciality is deep-fried zucchini flowers, which are worth every calorie. I also order the squid ink pasta with prawns and ask Isabella what advice she'd give to tourists. "Stop shopping and look around. Venice is one big museum. So, get lost..." she says with a wink.

"Happy to," I tell her. "But not before I've tried your homemade tiramisu." I think Ms Loren would approve. ■

Easyjet (www.easyjet.com) fly direct from Glasgow and Edinburgh on selected days. Return fares start at around £65 including taxes. To reach The JW Marriott Resort and Spa take the public ferry from the airport to St Mark's Square, where you can board the complimentary shuttle boat. A return trip costs €28. Alternatively, splurge on a private water taxi for €140. Rooms at JW Marriott Resort & Spa (www.jwvenice.com) start at €395, based on two people sharing a deluxe room, including buffet breakfast, and shuttle boat service.



View from the roof-top infinity pool at the JW Marriott, above; Giorgia Boscolo, the first woman gondolier in Venice, top

STAYCATION



Clockwise from main: the exterior of the Simply Healing retreat; one of the bedrooms; a hanging swing

Fast fix with a detox break

A weekend juice retreat in Sussex sets Bernadette Fallon up for better eating habits

I'm not a huge fan of detoxing. There – I've said it. Despite this I've tried all sorts of detox diets in the interests of research and journalism, including a liquid booster programme that involved drinking three litres of water a day for three weeks, leaving me feeling bloated, fat, miserable and tired. Plus, I once ended up in A&E after taking Chinese herbs on a prescribed seven-day detox programme.

So why, then, am I standing at the door of the Simply Healing retreat in Sussex, about to put myself through a detox weekend? It was the promise of meeting a shaman that did it.

The Simply Healing retreat offers detox juice diets and weight-loss programmes over five, seven and 10-day stays, as well as two-night weekend taster sessions. The programme includes juice five times a day, vegetable soup in the evening, cleansing herbs, daily meditation, holistic treatments and colonic hydrotherapy.

It's run by Vivien Kay, a trained British healer and shaman who has worked all over the world, starting in California where she introduced her juice retreats 30 years ago after using the approach to heal her own health issues. She's run healing clinics around the UK and Ireland,

led pilgrimages to sacred sites in Peru, Egypt and Mexico and still takes tours to meet the shamans of Machu Picchu every year.

While shamans are said to treat illness by healing the soul and traditionally have a connection to the spirit world, there's nothing "other-worldly" about Vivien's no-nonsense approach to health. Working to cleanse the gut with her programme of treatments, juices and herbs, she explains that without a healthy gut, we can't have a healthy mind.

The retreat has a 68 per cent visitor return rate and regularly hosts celebrities and royalty. Guests can book a one-to-one session with Vivien during their visit and the nurturing support of all the staff is frequently mentioned in comments in the visitors' book. Groups are kept small, 12 guests are the maximum the house can hold but 10 is the average – the weekend I visit, there are just eight of us.

It's a lovely red-bricked house in rolling countryside, there are sun-loungers in the garden and a hanging swing under the trees. Juice is served in the communal dining room and we have afternoon (herbal) tea every day in reception, a quiet peaceful space with couches. Bedrooms are large and light-filled with beautiful

views. It's fine to pad around between treatments in your robe, hang out in the book-filled sitting room or return to your room – stocked with magazines, a DVD player and cosy throws and cushions – for a nap. Two of my fellow-guests say they did nothing but sleep for their first retreat day and I think, good on you.

There's a nice social aspect to the retreat but it's also easy to have as much time as you want to yourself, as everybody has their own schedule of timed treatments. There's an exercise room with power plates and a chi machine, which works by moving the legs gently from side to side to circulate blood efficiently around the

lymphatic drainage massage that is so relaxing it practically sends me into a coma and reflexology that leaves me looking "blissed out" according to a fellow guest.

By the end of the weekend I feel lighter and more relaxed and my skin looks better. But mainly I'm very happy to be able to eat again. Strict detox diets might not suit me, but I come back to my everyday life with a renewed sense of healthy purpose. Keeping up my retreat routine, I carry a bottle of water with me to drink from throughout the day. I make fresh juice every morning and introduce more fresh vegetables into my dinners. I cut back on bread, avoid caffeine and get back into herbal tea.

I also become more mindful. I'm certainly more mindful of what I am putting into my body and more grateful for it. I'm grateful I can eat when I want and grateful to have access to fresh healthy food. Of all the things I've taken from the weekend, this is the one that stays with me. ■ *Bernadette Fallon is a travel writer and editor; you can read her travel stories at Travellingwell.net*

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body, helping cells absorb oxygen and remove toxins.

I can't say I'm not hungry during my three-day stay but nobody else appears to be affected, claiming the cleansing herbs – mixed with juice or water to produce a dense, cloudy liquid – make them feel full. But I enjoy the daily juices – all freshly made to a different recipe each time. I love our guided meditations in the evening, followed by tasty soup. And my treatments are great; a deep detox massage and a body scrub, a manual

Simply Healing is in Rudgwick, West Sussex; prices start from £1,475 for the five-day Simply Healing juice detox retreat, Monday to Friday, Simplyhealingcentre.com, 01403 822117 or info@simplyhealingcentre.com

48 HOURS IN

Tallinn, Estonia

Friday, midday Check into the deeply historic Hotel Schloesse (doubles from £119, www.schloessehotel.com), a luxury bolthole at the heart of the old town set in impressively restored townhouses.

1pm The landmark Old Town Square is the city's heart in every way. Settle into a pavement café for lunch with a view of the vaulting town hall and one of Europe's finest medieval centres.

2pm Strike up the cobbles to the Toompea Castle district, which sits above the old town with a series of viewpoints unveiling the grandeur of this mini Prague and its Baltic Sea location.

3pm Also up in Toompea is the Alexander Nevsky Cathedral, which dates from 1900. It is Tallinn's most dramatic orthodox building and flags up the city's strong Russian connections and is crowned by striking black onion-shaped domes.

8pm Vanaema Juures (Grandma's Place) is an authentic old school restaurant in the old town that dishes up the sort of hearty dishes served up in villages outside the capital. It's charmingly cosy too with its basement setting and candle-lit tables.

Saturday, 9am Head out of the centre to Kadriorg Palace, which was commissioned by Peter the Great in honour of his wife, Catherine. This lavish baroque palace is home to an art gallery and is surrounded by immaculately laid out gardens.

BARGAIN BREAKS

Space for six in Majorca

Jet2Villas is offering seven nights' self catering at Villa El Cortijo in Majorca as well as flights from Glasgow on 26 October, all from £339pp based on six sharing, including a 22kg baggage allowance and car hire. **Call 0800 408 5594 or see www.jet2holidays.com**

A Bonnie time

Take advantage of The Bonnie Badger's Badger Package, available Sunday to Thursday until the end of March 2020. From £295 per couple per night in one of this Gullane hotel's



1pm With mercurial chef Heidi Pinnak at the helm Sume is a New Nordic gem that takes local classics and reinvents them with a playful twist.

2:30pm The Estonian capital boasts a fascinatingly rich history – learn more at the Tallinn City Museum. Housed in a 14th-century building it sweeps from Soviet times on to the country's independence in 1991.

7pm Stenhus is a hotel restaurant worth staying in for. The country's rich culinary larder is explored with smooth service and fine wines completing the beguiling mix. Settle in for a long night of perfectly cooked game dishes and Baltic seafood.

Sunday, 8am Get up early to stroll through the old town without the crowds. The centuries peel back at every turn as you ease back up to Toompea. From its lofty heights you can watch Tallinn blinking awake. ■ **Robin McKelvie**

Ryanair (www.ryanair.com) fly from Edinburgh to Tallinn from £62.98 return.

Double Rooms, it includes overnight accommodation, a welcome drink and sweet treats, a three course meal and a bottle of house wine in Tom Kitchin's restaurant and breakfast. **Call 01620 621 111 or see www.bonniebadger.com**

Romance in Paris

Stay at the three star Monterosa Astotel in Paris for three nights on a bed and breakfast basis from £237pp including flights from Glasgow on 10 November. **Call 020 3499 5232 or see www.easyjet.com/holidays**