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# International Travel: Opera, Luxurious Lodging and Great Food in Venice, Italy

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It had been nagging at us: Despite the pleasure we take in opera tourism, Jackie and I had never been to the [Teatro La Fenice](#) in Venice, except on a guided tour soon after the theater had been rebuilt following a disastrous arson fire in 1996. None of our handful of trips to the city had coincided with productions at the theater. Finally, though, the opera calendar and our travel calendar overlapped, and we spent three nights in Venice in the latter part of March. The show was Bizet's *Carmen*, in a riveting production by the Catalan director Calixto Bieito. We'd seen it before, five years ago in London, but were knocked out anew by its power and intelligence. The (mostly) gritty sets, costumes and staging were quite a contrast with the glittering gilt ornamentation covering every square centimeter of the auditorium, whose lively acoustics enhanced the musical experience: We nearly jumped out of our seats at the overture's opening cymbal crash. The Fenice is a blessedly small theater, and seats sell quickly, but anyone who's fond of opera should get on line, see what's playing and try to buy tickets – then, build a trip around the show.

## **Luxurious Accommodation**

Another of our unmet Venice wishes had been to stay at the [Hotel Danieli](#), centered on the fourteenth-century Palazzo Dandolo and sprawling over three buildings along the Riva degli Schiavoni, a one-minute walk from Piazza San Marco and convenient to several useful water-bus lines. The vast lobby, with its galleries and stone staircases, used to be the palazzo's internal courtyard; if you didn't know it was old, you could be forgiven for thinking it the fantasy of a well-traveled nineteenth-century robber baron. (At the moment, part of the lobby is under refurbishment, so the space is not as expansive as it normally is.)

We had a moment's disappointment when we were told that our room was to be in the newest part of the hotel – “newest” meaning it was built in the 1940s – but were gleeful when we saw our lodgings. Along with the rest of the hotel, they'd been redone by the French designer Jacques Garcia, the

author of some of our very favorite hotel décors, including at the Metropole in Monte Carlo and the Costes in Paris. Mr. Garcia has a way of making you feel bonelessly relaxed in his richly, deeply colored and finely detailed interiors, which fall somewhere along the path between a Parisian literary salon and a bordello de luxe. This part of the Danieli creates exactly that embracing feeling; the other, more traditionally decorated buildings do not moan “Garcia” quite so seductively. Whenever we got tuckered out with tourism, we’d spend a few minutes trying to figure out how the billowing draperies and extraordinarily complex tassels were conceived and manufactured.

Members of the Danieli staff – from receptionists to concierges to waiters – are friendly, knowledgeable and forthcoming; the bar makes good drinks and post-opera sandwiches; and breakfast is served on a top-floor terrace with perfect views of San Giorgio Maggiore and its Palladian church of the same name. We had a grand time there.

## **Dining**

Because one evening was filled with opera, we ate only two real dinners on this trip (plus our late-night sandwiches at the hotel bar). The first was at a restaurant I had read about in The New York Times: [Local](#). That brief [review](#) does a good job of conveying the background and spirit of the place, so I’ll limit myself to saying that we had a marvelous, interesting meal there, in which local produce was treated with skill, intelligence and respect. While combinations were innovative, with well-integrated hints of Asia (not really incongruous in Venice, much of whose wealth was long ago amassed through international trade), flavors were unfailingly clear and all that we ate was delicious, notably tortelli of artichoke with a light-handed accompaniment of capers and stracciatella (like a mixture of mozzarella and cream); and beautifully fatty, lightly smoked glazed eel from the Venetian lagoon with a mango-miso puree. Charming people work at Local, all of whom speak good English.

Our second dinner was at a restaurant we had visited – twice – during our last stay in Venice, in 2014: [Al Covo](#), which is not far from Local (or the Danieli), as it happens. It is operated by Cesare Benelli and his American wife, Diane Rankin, and its ample season-appropriate menu is always supplemented by treats from the market. On the night we were there,

these included spider crab meat removed from the shell and simply dressed with great olive oil to bring out its subtle oceanic flavor; monkfish wrapped in paper-thin slices of pancetta and grilled; and the tiny soft-shell crabs called moeche. We ate them all, plus a dish of burrata, salsa verde and anchovies, and one of rigatoni in a deceptively simple sauce based on shreds of salt cod. That sounds like a lot of food, doesn't it? And yes, it is unusual for us to order antipasti, pasta *and* a main course. But that's the beauty of Al Covo: we did have an antipasto apiece, but our rigatoni and our monkfish were shared, and the deep-fried moeche were a mere tasting portion to start with. Our waiter suggested this approach (and indeed, tried to stop the people at the next table from over-ordering, which they did anyway), and also made it clear that if we didn't like the wine we'd ordered, they'd swap it for something else. Good restaurants will often do that, no questions asked, but they don't usually advertise the fact.

For someone who's in Venice for only a few days, these two restaurants plus some stand-up cichetti and one simple, totally traditional restaurant/trattoria/osteria/bacaro will cover the ground: unreconstructed Venetian cooking at a bacaro; tradition combined with imagination, all in a Venetian context, at Al Covo; and a more international approach to tradition at Local.

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**Hotel Danieli.** Castello 4196, Venice; +39 041 522 6480; <http://www.danielihotelvenice.com/>. Depending on season and availability, you can find a double for as little as \$415, but typical rates are higher.

**Local.** Salizzada dei Greci 3303, Castello, Venice; +39 041 2411128; [info@ristorantelocal.com](mailto:info@ristorantelocal.com); <http://www.ristorantelocal.com>. Prix-fixe dinner, three dishes for €60; ordering à la carte is also possible. Closed Tuesday and at lunchtime on Wednesday.

**Al Covo.** Castello 3968, Venice 30122; +39 041 5223812; [info@ristorantealcovo.com](mailto:info@ristorantealcovo.com); <http://ristorantealcovo.com/>. Our meal cost €100 for two, including wine, with two antipasti, one pasta, one main dish and one dessert. Closed Wednesday and Thursday.

There are many options for cichetti and for traditional informal restaurants. I like **All'Arco** for morning or afternoon snacks (Sestiere San Polo 436, Venice, near the Rialto market; +39 041 520 5666) and have eaten well, both standing and sitting, at **Cà D'Oro alla Vedova** (Calle del Pistor, Cannaregio 3912; +39 041 5285324; reservations taken for dinner only). If you are looking for a cup of coffee or a drink on a canal-side terrace open to the water that is neither crowded nor expensive, try the café in the [Ca'Pesaro](#) art museum, well worth a visit and just beyond the area most heavily frequented by tour groups.