

# GOING, GOING GONDOLA

OK! FALLS IN LOVE WITH THE ROMANTIC ITALIAN CITY OF VENICE



Below: OK! stayed at the boutique Centurion Palace Hotel which offers stunning views of the Grand Canal (main). Below centre: Stars such as Vanessa Hudgens come to town for the annual film festival



Hidden behind its historic façade, the 50-room hotel, with a beautiful private garden, has ultra-chic interiors – we loved the white ship keel-shaped crystal chandelier in the lobby. The bedrooms are individually designed with funky furnishings. OK!'s room on the sixth floor was a minimalist white canvas, with wooden panel ceiling and a huge bathtub in the middle of the room guarded by two large Venetian vases. We also spied a tempting bottle of Collalto prosecco by the bath with two glasses! Another room highlight was the gorgeous views of the arty Dorsoduro, the oldest district in Venice, where you'll find the Peggy Guggenheim Collection. Before heading out at night, OK! enjoyed an aperitif at the hotel bar, next to the all-white Antinoo's restaurant, overlooking the Grand Canal.

## Which stars might I see?

Every September, the crème de la crème of Hollywood head to Venice for the annual film festival (August 28 to September 7). Last year, Vanessa Hudgens, Selena Gomez, Kate Hudson and Naomi Watts sashayed down the red carpet. Other festival regulars include Ben Affleck and George Clooney, while Gwyneth Paltrow and Beyoncé have both celebrated their birthdays in Venice. Angelina Jolie and Brad Pitt lived here for a while when she was filming *The Tourist*. Scenes from *Casino Royale*, starring Daniel Craig, and *The Italian Job*, with Mark Wahlberg, were also filmed here.

## Where can I stay?

Venice has some seriously grand hotels, but they've recently been joined by a clutch of stylish boutique stays. Formerly a merchant's mansion, the Centurion Palace Hotel is one such example and offers stunning views across the Grand Canal towards St Mark's Square. It's where Shakira and Al Pacino stayed during the film festival and OK! certainly arrived in style, boarding a sleek speedboat from the airport.



OK! enjoyed a gourmet feast at Caffé Quadri

## Where can I eat?

Venice prides itself on its local traditional cuisine and you'll find lots of seafood dishes on the menu. OK! enjoyed a candlelit dinner on the terrace of La Terrazza, one of the city's oldest restaurants. With soft jazz playing in the background, we tucked into lobster medallions and some Italian gelato. A heavenly gourmet experience!

Treat yourself to a blow-out dinner at Caffé Quadri – a plush fine dining restaurant where Naomi Campbell and Scarlett Johansson have eaten. With its subdued light and views of St Mark's Square, the ambiance is ultra-romantic – OK! was told it's a popular marriage proposal spot. While our other half didn't get down on one knee, we did enjoy the Bismarck beef with sautéed mushrooms and black truffle sauce and a divine white truffle crème brûlée.

For those on a smaller budget, try Bistrot de Venise. The menu at this

intimate restaurant takes a classical theatre theme and all dishes are based on recipes from 14th-century Venice with a modern twist. The highlight of our nine-course dinner were the squid-ink risotto and duck fillet with red peppers.

In total contrast, OK! couldn't resist popping into the Hard Rock Cafe, which has welcomed the likes of Alice Cooper and the Sex Pistols through its doors.

## Where can I drink?

Paying a visit to Harry's Bar, the famed birthplace of the Bellini, is a must. The tiny bar is very popular and always busy, so make sure you have a reservation. If you prefer your cocktail in more hip surrounds, the cool Centrale Lounge is the place to go. It has a New York vibe with exposed brick walls, dark woods and subdued lighting. OK! sipped a passion fruit Daiquiri and looked out for celebs such as Paris Hilton, Christina Aguilera and Sir Elton John, who've all been spotted here. If you're looking for a younger scene, try one of the many bars, such as Margaret Duchamp, on Campo Santa Margherita square, where OK! tried another Venetian speciality, a Spritz cocktail, comprising white wine, Campari and soda.



Below: Take a romantic gondola ride and see the sights of St Mark's Square (top right)

## Where can I shop?

The little alleyways that connect St Mark's Square and Rialto Bridge are lined with souvenir shops. Hand-crafted Venetian masks, stationery, bejewelled velvet slippers and leather purses make lovely mementos. You can buy the world-famous Murano glass at the Murano Atrium on St Mark's Square or at one of the workshops on Murano, one of the outlying islands. If you're looking for Italian labels, you'll find them on and around Salizxada San Moise and Calle Larga XXII Marzo, just behind St Mark's Square. Close to the Rialto Bridge is an excellent food market, where you can pick up some edible souvenirs such as Parmesan, Parma ham and olive oil.

## What else should I do?

If scandal and celebrity gossip is your idea of fun, book a Grand Canal tour with ArtViva ([www.italy.artviva.com](http://www.italy.artviva.com)). Jennifer, our English-speaking guide, took us on a speedboat trip along the canal, pointing out Sir Elton John's house and the property that Angelina Jolie and Brad Pitt rented. Our favourite story was the one about the ancient palace Cà Dario, which locals believe is cursed and whoever lives there is eventually killed or ruined!

Make sure you admire the beauty of the Basilica di San Marco on St Mark's Square and take the lift up the adjacent Campanile for wonderful panoramic views. Also on the square is the Doge's Palace, the former home of the Venetian rulers, where OK! discovered the history of Venice and

some of its deepest secrets. If you want to see the prison cell that famous Italian lothario Casanova famously escaped from, make you sure you book the two-hour Secret Itineraries tour with Tick Italy ([www.tickitaly.com](http://www.tickitaly.com)).

And you can't come to Venice without taking a romantic ride on a gondola. OK! pre-booked our excursion with Thomas Cook ([www.thomascook.com](http://www.thomascook.com)) to get a better deal – the gondoliers will offer a far higher price. As we meandered along the canal ways, serenaded by a classical Italian singer and an accordion player, OK! soaked in the romantic beauty of this stunning city.

## How do I get there?

Citalia (0844 415 1987; [www.citalia.com](http://www.citalia.com)), the leading Italian specialist, offers a three-night package, including return British Airways flights from London Gatwick to Venice and daily breakfast, staying at the five-star Centurion Palace Hotel from £319 per person. One free night and a saving of £300 per couple is included. Price based on March 4, 2013 departures.

VISIT THE ITALIAN TOURIST BOARD WEBSITE AT [WWW.ITALIA.IT/EN](http://WWW.ITALIA.IT/EN). FOR MORE ON THE CENTURION PALACE HOTEL, VISIT [WWW.CENTURIONPALACEVENEZIA.COM](http://WWW.CENTURIONPALACEVENEZIA.COM).

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